

DEMYSTIFYING URMILA: A FEMINIST READING OF *SITA'S SISTER*

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Abstract

The mythical tales are often male-centric and there is a constant glorification of male characters. Only a handful of female characters are glorified to suit the needs of the male-dominated world. Rewriting Indian mythology is a tool handled by modern female writers to throw light upon the lesser-known female characters and their perspectives. *Sita's Sisters* speaks about Urmila who is misunderstood and suppressed in the *Ramayana*. Urmila not only voices for herself but also for other women around her thereby proving her scholarship. The present paper carries out a meticulous exploration of the voyage of Urmila from a sheltered princess to a scholar.

Keywords: Female perspective, Indian mythology, rewriting mythology, Kavita Kane, Urmila

The *Ramayana* is one of the greatest epics penned by Valmiki and it is an integral part of the Indian culture for ages. It has been stated in a book that “*Ramayana* holds different meanings for different audiences” (Bose 2004:3). The story of the *Ramayana* propagates the conquest of good over evil. The ideologies mentioned are revered even in modern times. For a long time both the Indian epics were used as a tool to educate the own community. Because the epics offer different insights about the social norms and moral order to be followed. Moreover, almost all the epics have interlinked narratives within thereby offering a great canvas of the story to be woven.

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Speaking of the epics, certain characters are presented in high esteem like – Ram, Lakshman, Krishna, Arjun, etc.

The Indian epics are praised for their grand narratives which include war techniques and episodes of battles leaving no space for the female figures. Apart from the male heroes, only Sita and Draupadi are glorified in the ballads and verses for many centuries. Even their episodes are confined to the duties that are supposed to be performed by an ideal wife. Moreover, it is rightly pointed out that the female characters are given passive roles such as “dutiful daughters, obedient wives, who should always be completely devoted to husbands and stand by them in every situation” (Mohanty & Das 2016:1621). Both Draupadi and Sita are praised but at times are considered as *casus belli* for which they are even criticised brutally.

The female characters in the epics were suppressed, blamed, abducted, raped or discriminated in one way or the other. The female voices are repressed and there is ultimately no space to voice their opinions. Majority of the female characters are forgotten as time passes by. Writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anuja Chandramouli and Kavita Kane render a re-writing of the epics that appears to be a modern technique. Their novels put forth the views of women characters that were trampled under the feet of patriarchy. The above-mentioned writers present the contemporary issues like gender discrimination, violence against women, and feminism through the stories written in the past century.

Kavita Kane is a novelist who is best known for her feministic writings. She began her career as a columnist, screenplay writer and orator. She extended her writing career by penning novels based on lesser-known characters from the legendary tales. Her novels revolve around feministic ideals and modern concepts. Kavita Kane sculpts the characters whose troubles and turmoil were barely recorded due to the space occupied by the male characters in the original epics. Rewriting mythical tales through different perspectives gave rise to healthy discussion and she made sure that the limelight falls on the neglected characters too. “The story of mythical characters is no more that of Gods and Goddesses, Kane portrays them as flesh and blood human beings” (Mondal & Lavanya 2019: 295).

Kavita Kane renders her fictions based on the marginalised characters in the epic. The grand narrative is spun through the marginalised characters who register their personal opinion and experience. Kavita Kane has condensed the epics through the lens of Urmila, Menaka, Surpanaka, Ahalya, Satyawati and Uruvi so far. The harsh reality of the society is presented through her protagonists

without any filters. Two researchers mention the protagonists of Kavita Kane as those, “who encountered all the odds and came out as a self-willed and boisterous woman giving an execrable time to her antagonists” (Bisht & Saxena 2020: 5172).

Kavita Kane in her second novel, *Sita's Sister* (2014) gives voice to Urmila who is either ignored or misunderstood. Urmila is often chided as a wife who decided to stay in a luxurious palace and as a wife who failed to accompany her husband during exile. Kavita Kane revisits the *Ramayana* from the perspective of Urmila thereby clearing an aura of misunderstanding revolving around her. Kavita's work emits the views of women who exist in a patriarchal society and those who pay the price of it as well. In a fiction titled, *Urmila* there is a special mention about the protagonist as “An Urmila everyone knew but no one remembered” (Saket 2016: 43). Though everyone identifies Urmila as Sita's sister no one remembers her journey which is why Kavita dedicates an entire book to voice out her agonies.

The classical version of the *Ramayana* presents Urmila as someone who was married to Lakshman just because her parents arranged it for political reasons. Moreover, when she wanted to accompany her husband during the exile, she was denied by her husband. Lakshman gives her the task to take care of his family during his absence which is obeyed by Urmila just as a dutiful wife. When the trio was in exile, the God of sleep approached Lakshman as he needs to keep an eye on Ram and Sita without rest. Goddess of sleep being impressed by his devotion stated that someone has to sleep instead of him so as to balance the law of nature. The original epic states that Urmila agrees to sleep for fourteen years so that her husband can stay awake and guard Ram and Sita. After which Urmila goes into a deep slumber for fourteen years and there is no description about her until Lakshman returns to the palace to wake her up when Ram is crowned as the King.

The modern female writers, especially Kavita Kane feels that Urmila has a major role to play in the epic but then she was pushed aside so that others are glorified. If Urmila was taken to the forest or if Lakshman stayed in the palace then the entire storyline would have turned out differently. Instead of treating the characters like Urmila and Kaikeyi as pawns, the modern writers wanted to give them the space to express themselves. Urmila suppressed her pain and stays in the palace without accompanying her husband. Urmila stayed in the palace living a life of a celibate. A researcher suggests about the plight of female community as that “the woman has a passive role in choosing her life decisions” (Devi 2020: 263). Unfortunately, her

glory is spoken of rarely and her sacrifice is not even mentioned.

Therefore, Kavita sculpts Urmila in such a manner that she voices her rights in the male-dominated Ayodhya. Urmila grabs the opportunity to voice up her opinions and performs a pivotal role equal to Ram in the epic. Urmila is presented as a powerful character who is daring enough to question the entire system laid by the male community which benefits only a particular gender. Urmila was born in Mithila and lives with Sita, Mandavi and Kirti. Even though the four sisters grew up together, they have different perspectives about themselves and life. Urmila in her childhood is already well versed in politics, music and arts. Urmila also appears to be an overprotective sister. Her love and devotion towards Sita remain strong though her parents treat Sita as a godly figure in their household. Urmila though begins her life as a cloistered princess, she does not seek acknowledgement for her acts. This makes her unique from her other three sisters.

There is a transformation within her when she sees Lakshman for the first time with Ram. Ram has visited the *swayamvar* in order to win Sita as per the instructions from a reverend sage. Lakshman has escorted him and he often meets Urmila who accompanies Sita. Though Urmila loves Lakshman her affection towards Sita remains strong. There is one incident where a monster in the guise of Sita enters the palace but luckily Lakshman kills it. Urmila who witnessed the scene thought Lakshman has murdered her dearest sister and was ready to kill him that instant. Urmila loves her sisters and considers them as her pillars of strength. Urmila remains loyal to all her sisters even after marriage and she indeed holds them together which their husbands couldn't achieve. Mandavi credits Urmila in the novel as a "binding spirit" (Kane 2014: 238).

Though everyone stayed in the palace of Ayodhya for years, it was only Urmila who finds the crooked attitude and behaviour of the maid Manthara who has been poisoning the mind of Queen Kaikeyi for a long time. Urmila's observant nature deserves appreciation and she dodges the bullet when Manthara tries to poison her mind. Urmila expresses her concern about the maid, "In such a short time, she was able to poison the mind of both Sita and Mandavi, so I cannot imagine the damage she must have done in all these years" (Kane 2014: 118). The entire palace and people in Ayodhya pointed their finger at Kaikeyi for manipulating King Dasrath but fails to identify the root cause. Urmila finds that Kaikeyi's distrust of men was widely utilised by Manthara who predominantly used her as a pawn to separate the four brothers- Ram, Lakshman, Bharat and Shatrughna.

Kaikeyi creates chaos every time she meets Sita and throws a tantrum that Ram was supposed to marry someone else. Sita on hearing this appears to be calm and remains submissive to accept the decision of her husband. Urmila loses her patience and motivates Sita to stand up for herself. Urmila rightly points out that Ram would never remarry due to his love for Sita but his other roles might demand him to comply. Eventually, the observation of Urmila comes true when Ram chooses his kingly role and does not stand in favour of Sita when a chastity trial was conducted for her. It is one of the most heart-breaking moments in the epic but the society finds its own ways and means to glorify it. Urmila sees what others fail to notice.

When Urmila realises that Lakshman has made up his mind to go on an exile with Ram, she feels rejected by her husband. Her sister Sita was arguing with Ram so that he agrees to take her with him but she failed to think about the plight of Urmila. Even Lakshman was thinking about the preparations to be done for their fourteen years of exile and never asked for any opinion or suggestions from his wife. Urmila does not want to present herself as a nagging wife and so she hardens her heart to face reality. Urmila bids farewell to her husband just like a warrior princess. Not even a single soul in the palace tries to convince Lakshman to either stay or to take Urmila along. Urmila has suffered the most by the decision of Sita and Lakshman yet she decides not to interfere in their discussion:

Urmila's first instinctive reaction had been a flood of hurt for being rejected by both her husband and sister, followed by a deep and bitter anger. They had not considered her at all, each intent on getting what they wanted. She felt betrayed, left out and let down. Her grievance was more against Lakshman than Sita. For Sita, there was reserved envy-another unfamiliar feeling- that she could accompany her husband to the forest; Urmila could not. Her husband had rejected the option outright. There was the guilt for harbouring such disagreeable scepticism towards the people she treasured the most. (Kane 2014: 142)

Bharat on his return realises the treacherous game played by his mother to crown him as the next King of Ayodhya. Bharat fails to convince Ram to return to the palace and so he himself takes a crucial decision which might affect Mandavi's life as well. Being a loyal brother, he decides to serve Nandigram as a hermit for fourteen years in order to attain penance. Urmila is shocked that her sister Mandavi is about to meet a similar fate as hers. Urmila lets out her anger by questioning the *dharma* of a husband to her wife. In a research article it is noted, "Ramayana regards dharma, one's duty as

more important than one's emotions" (Mahulikar 2003: 3). Everyone in Ayodhya was glorifying Ram for fulfilling the dharma to his father and Sita for fulfilling her dharma to her husband but nobody speaks about the dharma of a husband to his wife.

The royal mother and the priest did their level best to silence her but Urmila lashes out at them all. She argues that nobody dared to stop Kaikeyi, when she received those manipulative boons from Dasrath or when Sita decided to go on an exile because the royal house concentrates only on the public image. Urmila confronts the patriarchal society that sees women as submissive and thinks it is normal for the female community to undergo the pains inflicted by their spouse. The audience around her began to suppress her and threw glares upon her. It is pointed out that Ayodhya treats women badly which is why Urmila in the novel states, "Mithila does not treat women shabbily" (Kane 2014: 223). The plight of women is that they, "were not only deprived of education and financial independence, they also had to struggle against a male ideology condemning them to virtual silence and obedience" (Habib 2015: 667).

Kaushalya appears to be the unhappiest person in the palace who did not miss the chance to complain about her plight of losing her dearest Ram. Though nobody pays attention to her cries or hues, it is Urmila who tries to comfort her. Kaushalya has suicidal thoughts but Urmila makes her understand that it is not solely Kaikeyi's fault but it is the fault of everyone who dare not intervene when Manthara ruined the peace or when there was initial strife between the three queens in the palace. They have failed to heal the small wounds which have become a visible scar thereby disrupting everyone's life. Urmila makes the people in the palace understand that instead of blaming others it is better to think and act rationally. A study mentions that unlike Urmila's other sisters, she never threw hatred upon anybody; instead, she "expressed great patience and understanding and accepted things as they were" (Yadav 2018: 30).

The contrasting nature of Urmila and Mandavi becomes evident once their respective spouses went into exile. Mandavi who was jovial and light-hearted eventually turned into someone who was consumed by hatred. Mandavi finds it complicated to divert her mind and fails to do something productive with her life. Instead, she hated Bharat for bestowing such a tormenting life upon her. The conversation between Urmila and Mandavi reveals that Mandavi regrets her decision to marry Bharat and blames her ambition to become the queen. Mandavi's innermost tormented thoughts baffled Urmila. Urmila is empathetic towards Mandavi but at the same time she acknowledges the unjust treatment of fate. Eventually, Urmila frees

her from the “maddening pain” (Kane2014: 237) by asking Mandavi to invest her time in something else.

It was Kirti out of the four sisters who was with her husband but even she could not be entirely happy because of Shatrunghna’s responsibilities. But Mandavi alerts Urmila saying that even Kirti has her share of grief, pain and humiliation. Even Kirti’s husband has to stay in the court for longer hours to look at the state affairs for it was his duty to prevent anarchy. Rarely he visited the chambers of his wife and they maintained distance so that the other princess will not remember the absence of their husbands. Urmila invested her time in reading the Vedas, Upanishads, music, arts and literature. Urmila fills the void of marital bliss with that of arts and tries to instil the same thoughts to others in the palace so that they can patiently wait for Ram’s return.

Urmila wanted to pursue knowledge even before she met Lakshman. It was the age-old tradition that prevented her from travelling to different places to pursue knowledge. Her father made it mandatory to take her to seminars and conferences so that she could gain something she wished for. Her belief in intellectual thirst helped her to preserve her sanity during the absence of her loved ones. Urmila does her best to be the peacemaker in her house and she succeeds as well. Her bold stand helps to reunite the broken family. It was her tremendous efforts and decisions that help the family to hold together. Urmila knew the importance of family which is why despite the hardships; she works for the welfare of her devastated family.

Urmila proves herself as a dutiful daughter-in-law and also a good administrator in Ayodhya. Her active participation in the state affairs during tough times is noteworthy. Shatrunghna himself wishes for her direct assistance when it comes to managing the financial affairs of Ayodhya. As the Gurus were a bit indifferent to her when she opposed Bharat’s decision to live like a hermit, they eventually acknowledged her intellectual capability. Though Ayodhya was not cordial to her in the beginning, they began to welcome her as she was the only solace for the commoners too. Urmila’s adaptability to take up the role of a modern administrator where she manages both political and state affair gains her a wide range of respect amongst the public. She manages to simplify certain tasks for Shatrunghna so that he can spend some quality time with Kirti.

Finally, all her tears and troubles are paid back when she receives an invitation from her father to attend a conference. The best part is that Urmila was not invited as an audience but as an “acclaimed scholar” (Kane 2014: 264) so that she can meet and interact with the

renowned scholars from various part of the country. It was definitely her multitasking ability which made her focus on learning despite the hardships in her personal life. This enriched learning experience has made her a scholar who got the opportunity to indulge in healthy debates and discussions with the learned men all around the world. The growth of Kavita's protagonist:

Urmila had grown from being a curious student to an exemplary one to be finally acknowledged as a pandit, a learned scholar, who by long, perseverant study had gained mastery over the Vedas and Upanishads and could proficiently debate on religion and philosophy with the most learned sages. (Kane 2014:265)

It is evident that women being a part of a political or learned discussion were something that developed after the waves of feminism. But Kavita Kane has lifted Urmila above all the traditional versions which caged her as a cloistered princess. Kavita's rendition has brought forth the suppressed voice of minor characters like Kaikeyi, Mandavi and Koushalya who are given the platform to speak their heartfelt sorrows as well. Throughout the novel, the male characters dismiss almost all the women in their lives without an iota of remorse. It is Urmila who interacts with everyone and tries to balm their tormented soul with her rationality and affection. The hidden voice and life of Urmila are brought to the stage by adding contemporary circumstances to make her emerge as a stronger woman. Additionally, Urmila addresses contemporary issues and paves a path for the emancipation of women in the longer run.

Urmila on hearing about Sita's abduction felt distressed for her and tried to send search party for rescue. When Ram successfully manages to bring her back, she was devastated to hear that Sita humiliated Lakshman when he stopped her from leaving the *ashram*. Urmila readily forgives Sita knowing that she herself was suffering from guilt and embarrassment. Urmila appears to be a true soul bereft of selfishness. Though certain characters appear to express their jealousy, grudges and their evil self, it is Urmila who remains the same and makes the most out of any situation and assists other to reach their destination. A unique perspective is provided about the forgotten princess:

Urmila's loss and sacrifice were never acknowledged. A woman neither celibate nor a widow but forced to live like both while being a married woman. Destined to spend fourteen years of her youth, a large part of her grihastha life, childless and without a grihastha. When streamlined into a solitary perspective, it sounded like the biggest tragedy of the Ramayana. (Dewan 2021: 408)

Urmila's feminism echoes louder when she opposes Ram for conducting *agnipariksha*. Urmila is also angered when Sita blindly follows the impositions of Ram. Though Mandavi and Kirti try to pacify her by reminding her of Ram's duties to the citizens, Urmila condemns Ram's actions as heights of hypocrisy. Urmila goes to the extent of proving that Ram did not obey his citizens when they wanted him to cancel the exile but when the same citizens demanded chastity test for her sister, he has obliged without considering the plight of Sita. This is one of the major reasons Urmila openly condemns all the four brothers, "If you could not keep the vows you made to your wives, why did you brothers marry? You may be the best of the princes, the perfect sons, the ideal brothers, probably the ideal king too, but never the good husband!" (Kane 2014: 140).

The modern writers acknowledge the strife and sufferings of the forgotten female characters. Instead of portraying these characters as a victim or villain, they choose to present them as a leader. Kavita Kane could easily write a tragic tale that could showcase Urmila as a lamenting figure. Instead, the modern female writers prefer to pen the politics of each character and the decision taken by them in times of turmoil (Dewan 2021: 411). As a result, Urmila towers as a personality who stood for sisterhood rather than romantic love. There is much emphasis on women writing, "when as women we start owning these stories of other women, it is then they start becoming our own" (Dewan 2021:411).

Though the original epic does not highlight Urmila as a great personality the modern Indian writers claim that her sacrifice needs recognition. The invaluable deeds of the characters have to be voiced so that they receive due respect which was denied in the original epics. Though the old story is retained the change in perspective and narration proves to be an ultimate game changer in the case of Urmila and Sita. Few of them have recorded their opinion about the marvellous transformation of the old story:

It is like looking at the same mountain from a different angle of vision- the whole appearance, the stature and the elegance, the pinnacles touching the sky, the foam- like clouds floating around and even the play of light and shade on the peaks, alter and change. It is the same mountains in the very same setting but an amazing transformation of view occurs. (Nair 2015: 70- 71)

Moreover, it was Urmila's selfless nature that assisted the frontline characters to achieve their dharma positively. The sacrifice of Urmila is incomparable and unattainable. Urmila proves herself to be a silent warrior in the epic who supported the central characters like Ram,

Sita and Lakshman to win their battles. Her dedication and love are noteworthy but Kavita Kane gives her a larger platform to fly high and paint her portrait which was denied in the past. The concept of rewriting is approved by researchers as, “Using mythology as a background, foregrounding the condition of women in a patriarchal social order, the novelist Kavita Kane highlights the quest of women for their identity as a dominant theme of this novel” (Mondal & Lavanya 2019: 295). Thus, using the canvas of mythology, Kavita has painted Urmila as a strong-willed warrior.

Therefore, the paper successfully explores the pivotal role played by the protagonist Urmila in shaping the plot and the subsequent turn of events and incidents in the novel. Various incidents in the fiction portray Urmila as the unsung hero of the epic, which is contrary to what the traditional epic has painted her. She is not a passive princess; instead, she is a scholar who is learned and skilful to have conversations even with the learned sages. The sacrifices of Urmila and the support she lend in Ayodhya are forgotten and unacknowledged. Kavita Kane has done a herculean task of giving voice to the marginalised characters and also uses them as her mouthpiece to raise questions against the patriarchal norms. Almost all the female characters like Urmila, Sita, Kaikeyi, Kaushalya, Mandavi and Kirti receive what is given to them and not what is sown. This shows how the female characters were kept within the margins and the sufferings endured by them. The current study clears the aura of misunderstanding around Urmila which presents her as a single and strong-willed woman even after being forsaken by her two beloved souls. Thus, the revisionist mythmaking technique has presented Urmila in a better light so that it suits the modern requirements.

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