
**Revealing Urmila: An Outlook Resonating With The Contemporary
Indian Woman In Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*.**

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Abstract

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are two eternal epics that created a lasting impression on Indian culture. These stories have been repeatedly told throughout the decades and embody timeless virtues like righteousness, duty, and compassion. The *Ramayana* highlights values like obedience, brotherhood, empathy, and self-sacrifice that are inextricably woven into the fabric of Indian ethos and show the triumph of goodness over evil. Female characters have frequently been consigned to the background, even though these topics are primarily explored through the journeys of male characters. Notably, Urmila, Lakshmana's wife, has been a background figure, overshadowed by the attention she abundantly deserves. Kavita Kane's literary work, *Sita's Sister*, serves to rectify this imbalance. Kane draws Urmila out from the shadows of traditional *Ramayana* renditions, positioning her at the center of the narrative stage. This retelling offers a bold and resolute perspective through Urmila's eyes and outlook, which resonates with the contemporary Indian woman. This study delves into Kane's portrayal of Urmila, examining its distinctive stance by analyzing her proximity to contemporary viewpoints.

Keywords: *Ramayana*, culture, resolute, self-sacrifice, retelling, contemporary.

Introduction

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are the two monumental epics in Indian literature that are significant in the cultural landscape. The *Ramayana* places a strong emphasis on the concept of dharma, showcasing characters like Ram, epitomizing Putra Dharma, Sita embodying the Patni Dharma as Ram's dutiful wife, and Lakshmana and Bharata upholding their respective Bharata Dharma. These characters exemplify virtuous living. However, Urmila's character, often identified as *Sita's Sister* or Lakshmana's spouse, remains in the shadows. Despite her adherence to Patni Dharma and her sacrifices, Urmila's presence and contributions are marginalized in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, obscuring the depth of her support and significance within the narrative.

It is often thought that this has not been talked about enough for being Lakshmana's brave and self-sacrificing wife, who upheld dharma as much as Ram did. If Rama went on an exile to fulfill the promise given by his father to Kaikeyi, citing it to be his dharma to fulfill his father's wishes, Urmila exiled herself in the palace so that Lakshmana could fulfill his promise of always protecting his brother (Shekha, 2015).

Kavita Kane, a writer of mythology fiction, has given a new approach to the *Ramayana* by giving insights from lesser-known female protagonists such as Urmila, Ahalaya, and Surpanakha. Kane discusses her motivation for portraying these female characters in an interview:

Mythology should make you think, not judge. Moreover, that is how I portray my women without bias, be it a dark character like Surpanakha in *Lanka's Princess*, the treacherous Menaka of *Menaka's Choice*, or a strong, positive character like Urmila. I tell the unheard story of a Surpanakha or Menaka and a Satyavati. I am not interested in painting white, black, or black-white (Interview by Chakravarthy, 2018).

Monika Khanna Jhalani, In her work "Revisioning Indian Mythology," demonstrates how patriarchy has utilized mythology as a weapon to further a carefully crafted perception of women in Indian culture. Jhalani demonstrates that mythology not only presents idealized role models for women but also outlines the consequences of crossing traditional boundaries of society for a woman by closely examining five significant female figures from Hindu mythology: Sita, Gandhari, Draupadi, Ahalya, and Surpanakha. Despite this, several literary works have taken the risk of giving these mythical figures a new interpretation. She delves into the way contemporary writers have challenged and "re-envisioned" these patriarchal representations of women in Hindu mythology. This procedure entails the initial stories' "de-mythification" and later "re-mythification." Jhalani adds a fresh perspective to modifying mythology through her analysis. This article examines Kavita Kane's book *Sita's Sister* (2014), emphasizing Urmila's character, which was frequently disregarded in the myth's initial versions. It examines the tireless efforts made by Kavita Kane to address this omission and clarify Urmila's place in the legendary saga. Simone de Beauvoir (1989) was also concerned with the minimal consideration given to women in myths. She clarified: The mystique of women has long benefitted the ruling class, enabling them to violate their rights and legitimizing them significantly. Analyzing it from the perspective of female critique, Tyson comments that it "examines how literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (83).

Contemporary Indian Woman

Spanning prehistoric times to the twenty-first century, the evolution of women's roles demonstrates significant transformations caused by ongoing changes in the socioeconomic and psycho-cultural components of human existence. Whether deities or women, figures from Hindu mythology, such as Sita, Ahalaya, Kunti, Draupadi, Parvati, and Tara, have been role models for women owing to their selfless

sacrifices and solid moral ideals. Women have wielded significant power throughout history, actively participating in different eras. Their influence extends not only to India's social and political advancement but also to the development of contemporary Indian society.

Throughout history, women have performed an often unseen but critical role in upholding Indian civilization. Their influence pervades all aspects of life while keeping intrinsic features such as caring motherhood, resilient marital commitment, kindred links, devotion to cultural expectations, and the treasured essence of home and family. As aptly stated by Mishra (2017), women's contributions have been understated but enduring, shaping the very fabric of Indian society.

Contemporary modern women embody Independence, loyalty, confidence, and grace. They exhibit passion, possess vital education, and hold ambitious aspirations. They place value on their intellectual development. Pooja Bedi, a commentator, describes the modern Indian woman as a harmonious fusion of Indo-Western autonomy and ethics, including love, affection, empathy, familial ethics, and customs. This contemporary woman strikes a harmonious balance between aggressiveness against oppressive authority and sympathy for victims, readily raising her voice for justice; Mat McCabe (2018) observes that she adeptly showcases both a tender, supportive demeanor strength and a resilient, outspoken strength. This modern woman possesses the capacity for childbirth, nurturing, rebellion, and submission. In the novel *Sita's Sister*, Kane reveals the hidden facets of the *Ramayana's* lesser-known female figures. Kane portrays Urmila, Lakshmana's wife, as having an intriguing existence regarding her emotions, intelligence, and sentiments. Kane carefully raises Urmila to a critical role and reimagines the story from her perspective. This contrasts with Valmiki's *Ramayana*, in which Urmila remains on the story's periphery. Kane's version highlights her great traits, unwavering support, and selfless efforts, which were veiled in the original epic. Kane expertly develops Urmila's character through a creative method of mythmaking, endowing her with a rich feminine identity that bravely defies male-dominated cultural standards. Shekha comments:

Among all these women, Urmila emerges as the most influential character—outspoken yet respectful, headstrong yet calm, strong in the face of adversity, and a learned scholar who can forgive, forget, and look at the bigger picture. These tapas have achieved understanding (Shekha, 2015).

Numerous readings of the *Ramayana* from diverse perspectives have been the topic of recent writing. The modern retellings like *Asura* by Anand Neelakantan, The "Queen's Play" by Aashish Kaul, *Ram-Scion of Ikshvaku* and *Sita -The Warrior of Mithila* by Amish Tripathi, and so on, have been revisited in a contemporary context to render ethics more accessible from modern aspects. *Ramayana's* teachings are more applicable to the current age because of their many interpretations. According to Roland Barthes' notion, "The Death of the Author," the author dies, and the reader originates". In her writings, Kane gives life to the much underappreciated female characters from the *Ramayana*. She particularly emphasizes Urmila in *Sita's Sister*, a figure neglected in the original epic. Kane challenges the usual secondary

role given to a woman in traditional storytelling by giving Urmila a contemporary attribute and portraying her as a powerful, self-assertive with traits traditionally associated with males.

Sacrifice- Patni Dharma

On the other hand, Urmila's sacrifice is frequently shown as a minor yet crucial component of the *Ramayana*. Urmila is Rama's younger brother and Lakshmana's wife. While Rama and Lakshmana are exiled, Urmila remains in Ayodhya to look after her in-laws and household obligations. Her sacrifice is her readiness to support her husband's obligations to his elder brother while fulfilling her obligations, even if it means being apart from him for fourteen years. Acknowledging her sacrifice, Sita utters:-

You make my exile a simple task compared to what you are doing. Not only will you be separated from your husband for the next fourteen years, but you do not want your husband to even think of you lest he detract from his goal of serving his brother. I bow to you, sister, for canvas. Your exile here in the palace shall be more complicated than mine in the forest. Give me your strength, and I know I shall succeed, too (Kane 153).

Urmila, the younger sister of Sita and the firstborn child of King Janaka and Queen Sunaina of Mithila, emerges from the constraints imposed on her by a male-dominated society. As Sita was hailed as Janaki, Janak's daughter when Urmila was his daughter and the sole Propetier of that name. Sita was Maithili, the princess of Mithila when Urmila should have been crowned with that title. However, Sita never saw Urmila resentful about all the favors showered upon her when she was deprived of them (Kane 23).

Throughout her life, she was denied what rightfully belonged to her. Urmila was the rightful bearer of the name "Janaki," but Sita was celebrated as such. Similarly, while Urmila should have rightfully held the title of the "princess of Mithila," Sita was known by that name. Despite Sita not being her biological sister, Urmila does not harbor resentment. Instead, she becomes a pillar of strength for her loved ones. She handles her circumstances gracefully, whether accepting a secondary role to her adopted elder sister, Sita or understanding that her husband's devotion to his duties as a brother surpasses his commitment to her. Urmila serves as Sita's confidante, and her courage, self-assurance, and supportive nature make her sisters rely on her encouragement. She continuously contributes to their lives in a good way. When Sita develops an affection towards Ram and worries about the fate of the Swayamvar, Urmila reassures her that Ram will be the one "who will break the bow" to succeed in the challenge and marry her. Urmila's words provide Sita with a sense of calmness.

Urmila might have been the younger sister, younger just by a year, but for Sita, she was her anchor who secured her to a comforting veracity of her existence. Urmila was her lifeline; she was her soulmate (Kane 22).

Despite experiencing profound devastation upon learning that :

The two persons whom she loved the most had left her without a moment's hesitation. Suddenly, she had had enough of the scene in front of her. Her heart was

constricting painfully with conflicting emotions, and she felt suddenly unwanted and bereft. Urmila silently slipped out of the room, but not unnoticed as she had thought she would (Kane 142).

Urmila handles the situation with remarkable maturity and acknowledges the harsh reality. She takes on the responsibility of caring for the royal family. Following the passing of King Dusharatha, Ayodhya faces the looming threat of war. Unexpectedly, Urmila adeptly manages the challenges, earning her mother's words, "If you can run your home well, you can conquer the world!" (Kane182), who recognizes the significance of effective home management as a stepping stone to conquering the broader world. Shatrughna expresses gratitude and admiration for Urmila's selfless service to the extended realm. He emphasizes,

All these years, Bharat and I might have looked after Ayodhya and the people, but you looked after us, kept his family together, and saved it from a living hell. It is not how it was when Rama left, And it will not be when Ram returns with Sita and Lakshmana. You made this palace a better place. You made it a home one wants to return to every single day. You blessed it with your patient love, indomitable spirit, and everlasting hope for peace (Kane 290).

Quest For Knowledge Nurtured By Intellectual Upbringing

Resembling a contemporary woman, Urmila, along with her three sisters, is well educated.

They were mainly that, although they were well-versed in the Vedas and the Upanishads, politics, music, art, and literature. They had journeyed fabulous worlds, traversing unknown frontiers. However, all in mind, sitting in the verandahs and chambers of the palace of Mithila, which overlooked the distant horizon of an undiscovered world. However, they had accompanied their father to all the conferences and religious seminars across the country, experiencing a world no princess had been allowed to visit (Kane 9).

Since childhood, they were raised in a society that valued education, allowing them to discover unfamiliar subjects. She has a tremendous drive to enlarge her skills and discover new things. She accepts that her marriage would be awaited following Sita's marriage, while she is fully aware of her family's customs. Nevertheless, she appreciates knowledge above all other pursuits. Although Urmila has no interest in marriage, she recognizes it as a social obligation she must uphold. She would rather spend her time learning than looking for a companion. Manthara chastised Urmila for failing to assist her in the kitchen, traditionally a woman's responsibility in the palace. Urmila, however, decides against adhering to the norms and instead chooses to go after her interest in painting. She is committed to acquiring knowledge and expanding her mind; she refuses to remain beneath the societal domain.

Self-Reliant

Urmila has a strong sense of Independence, which is distinctive of a modern woman. She demonstrates bravery by taking firm stands and accepting responsibility for her opinions. She takes calculated possibilities without fear. Urmila's daring and outspoken nature enables her to oppose the narrative's female characters' unjust

treatment and injustices. She is a staunch advocate of women's rights inside the royal family. She tackles social malevolence as a fighter and critically evaluates injustices and violence inflicted against marginalized groups of society, notably Sita. Upon learning that Mother Kaikeyi does not favor Sita as she wants Rama to find a suitable companion, Urmila refuses to accept this silence and becomes increasingly agitated.

You shall not take it silently anymore, Sita! The barbs were mean enough and should have been stopped. They dare to think of remarriage, dismissing you as if you were some trophy to be replaced! I will not have it, Sita...' (Kane 100).

Upon discovering that the misfortune that happened to her and Sita will also be followed by her sister Mandavi, Urmila learns about Ram, Sita, and Lakshmana's fourteen-year exile. Simultaneously, Bharat chooses to govern the kingdom from Nandigram, situated on the city's outskirts. Fueled by anger, Urmila confronts Bharat and raises her concerns. Urmila has an independent personality, which is characteristic of a modern Indian woman. Her outspoken demeanor and boldness in challenging injustices show her contemporary outlook. She accepts responsibility for her actions and takes measured risks without hesitation. Throughout the story, Urmila develops not just as an advocate for other women's abuse but also as an activist striving for their rights. Similar to a modern Indian woman, Urmila demonstrates the ability to adjust to new and demanding surroundings. Despite facing the challenge of adapting to the patriarchal setting of Ayodhya, she wholeheartedly carries out the responsibilities expected of a royal household wife. Urmila treats everyone with respect, yet when she witnesses wrongdoing towards herself or others within the palace, she fearlessly challenges those in authority without hesitation. As she inquires:

we have talked about all shots of dharma- of the father and the sons, of the king and the princess, of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya, even of wife for her husband. But is there no dharma of the husband for his wife? No dharma of the son for her mother? Is it always about the father, sons and brothers? (Kane 219).

Conclusion

By employing the modern perspective of Feminist revisionist mythology, Instead of portraying Urmila as someone who only makes sacrifices, Kane portrays her as a woman who strives to overcome challenges to accomplish her desires. Urmila emerges as a character who exemplifies intelligence, assertiveness, critical thinking, sensitivity, passion, directness, wisdom, duty, resolve, and empathy. Her portrayal corresponds to the traits of a contemporary and competent Indian lady. In Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*, Urmila's character closely aligns with this ideal. Beena G accurately attributes her achievements:

Her intellect pursuits, her vehement questioning of the patriarchal power structure, her active participation in the affairs of the state, her resistance, and her role as an anchor keeping the family together during the exile all indicate that Urmila breaks into the male bastion...(2015, p. 83).

The writer has elevated the character of Urmila, typically represented in the *Ramayana*, from the periphery to the center of the story. She has recreated the narrative through Urmila's courageous and steadfast stance- a position closely resembling the present-day Indian woman. As a result, Urmila in *Sita's Sister* acts as an inspiration for modern Indian women who can easily empathize with this mythical character. Such reinterpretations of mythology deserve appreciation since they play a crucial part in claiming against and supporting women's empowerment.

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