
**Reconstructing *Ramayana* character Urmila: A Jungian Archetypal Study on
Kavita Kane's Novel *Sita's Sister***

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Abstract:

'*Ramyana*' is a living epic, not dead literature. It has been constantly reinvented and reinterpreted by performers and writers of all genres across the world. Throughout Indian history, *Ramyana* has been reproduced with diverse retellings of the story of the exiled prince Ram, who rescues his abducted wife Sita by battling the asura king Ravan. There have been many versions of *Ramyana*, but Valmiki's *Ramyana* seems to be the primary text. Urmila is one of the neglected characters in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. She is one of the four daughters of King Janak, sister of Sita, wife of Lakshman, and one among the four daughters-in-law of King Dasharath, but Urmila is not a significant character in Valmiki's epic.

Kavita Kane, an acclaimed Indian author and advocate for gender equality, delves into the realm of Indian mythology by reimagining female characters from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharatha* in her novels. This study focuses on the character Urmila from Kane's novel *Sita's Sister*, a character often neglected in traditional narratives. This novel sheds light on Urmila's experiences that have remained unseen by the outer world. Through the lens of Carl Jung's theory of Individuation, the analysis aims to analyze Kane's effective portrayal of Urmila's suppressed emotions, her bond of sisterhood, the hidden sufferings and sacrifices she endures, and her empowerment.

Keywords: Feminism, retelling, mythology, empowerment, sisterhood, *Ramyana*

Introduction:

Urmila, a character in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, is often overlooked and neglected within the epic. Despite being one of King Janaka's four daughters and the four daughters-in-law of King Dasharatha, Urmila does not hold much significance in Valmiki's narrative. She is commonly referred to as the forgotten heroine due to the lack of references to her in the *Ramayana*. In one instance, when Lakshman decides to accompany Ram and Sita into exile, he bids farewell to Urmila. However, when Urmila expresses her desire to join them in the forest, Lakshman denies her request, stating that his attention would be solely focused on protecting Ram and Sita. Instead, he advises her to stay at home and care for the three mothers-in-law. Valmiki's account of Urmila abruptly ends here, leaving her story untold and leaving us unaware of how she endured the agonizing fourteen years of separation from her husband. Urmila's absence from the limelight has led Rabindranath Tagore to classify her as one of the forgotten heroines of Indian literature. However, author Kavita Kane takes up the challenge of resurrecting Urmila's story in her novel "*Sita's Sister*," ensuring that Urmila's name is no longer lost in the depths of time but rather becomes a source of inspiration and storytelling.

Kavita Kane is an Indian novelist whose area of interest is Indian mythology. She was born in Mumbai and brought up in Patna and Delhi. Having studied and lived in Pune for many years, she considers herself as good as married to the city, where she now lives with her married husband, Prakash, and two daughters, Kimaya and Amiya. She completed her post-graduation in Literature and Mass Communication at the University of Pune. She began her career as a senior journalist and then worked as an assistant editor for the *Times of India* and *Daily News and Analysis*. Later, she resigned from her job to dedicate her life to becoming a writer. She is an expert in retelling mythology. Most of her novels are retellings of the mythical marginalized female characters of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharatha*. Her novel *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* made her famous, and it is her bestselling book. Most of her novels are in the form of a bildungsroman, which means that the novel moves from the childhood to adulthood of the protagonist.

This paper deals with the novel *Sita's Sister*. This novel narrates the story of the neglected mythical character Urmila in the *Ramayana*, who is seen as Sita's sister, King Janak's daughter, and Lakshman's wife, but never as an individual character called Urmila. In the novel *Sita's Sister*, the author retells the story of the epic *Ramayana* from the perspective of the minor, marginalized, and voiceless character Urmila. In that, author Kavita Kane reconstructs the character Urmila.

Methodology:

Following the textual interpretation method, this study delves into the analysis of Urmila, a character from the novel *Sita's Sister*, through the lens of C.G. Jung's theory of

Individuation. The objective of the study is to explore the character Urmila, who undergoes the process of Individuation to discover herself.

Psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung is recognized as one of the pioneers of archetypal theory. According to Jung, archetypes are inherent frameworks within the human mind (Knox 12). He further posits that there exist two distinct forms of unconsciousness: the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. The personal unconscious is shaped by individual experiences, while the collective unconscious is not limited to individuals but rather universal, with shared images and structures (Jung 3-4). These shared images and structures are now referred to as archetypes. In *The Handbook of Jungian Psychology Theory, Practice, and Application* by Anthony Stevens, it is also noted that Jung believed these archetypal images and structures could be observed not only in the collective unconscious but also in myths, religion, and fairy tales (75).

In his book *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Jung frequently refers to the concept of the Individuation process. According to Jung, this process entails the transformation of an individual into a psychological 'individual,' representing a distinct and inseparable unity or 'whole' (275). Furthermore, Jung describes it as a process that brings the unconscious ego into alignment with what we perceive as reality. He also emphasizes the potential dangers of suppressing the contents of the inner unconscious ego. Although Jung does not provide a specific enumeration of the stages involved in the Individuation process, he consistently mentions this process in his works on the collective unconscious. Additionally, certain phrases and archetypes, such as the persona, the shadow, the anima, and the self, are repeatedly referenced, suggesting their significance as fundamental archetypes and symbols that aid individuals in discovering their identities. These archetypes serve as the foundation of Jung's Individuation process.

In this paper, the analysis will be structured by the four phases of the individuation process. Each phase will deal with the character of Urmila Ka, vita Kane's *Sita's Sister*, and the way she encounters the archetype. This analysis will help to paint a clear picture of Urmila's successful journey through Individuation, ultimately leading her to self-discovery.

The Persona

Jung (1977) defines the persona as the outward mask individuals wear (20), which acts as a shield to mask their true essence. Unveiling one's persona requires a willingness to face one's inner self. Jung compares this experience to looking into a mirror and recognizing a reflection. Initially, one sees the superficial persona, but upon confronting this image, the authentic self beneath the persona is revealed.

The novel *Sita's Sister* commences by highlighting Urmila's deep affection and concern for her sisters since their early years. During their childhood, the girls engage in a game of hide and seek, where Urmila successfully finds Mandavi and Kirti but fails to locate Sita. Despite this setback, Urmila refuses to accept defeat and embarks on a search for her

missing sister. The weight of her responsibility and worry for Sita's safety weigh heavily on her. "Urmila's aching feet remind her" that "she was digressing and she had still not found her hiding sister," but Urmila is one who was not "going to accept defeat" (Kane 2). Urmila's determination to not give up is evident, as she is unwilling to succumb to defeat. In the midst of this, Kirti becomes frightened and begins to cry, while Mandavi contemplates informing their father and playfully teases Kirti about her reaction. Urmila, however, provides solace and reassurance to both her sisters, instilling hope within them, and eventually succeeds in locating Sita. Urmila's character is further described as warm, vibrant, and charismatic, possessing a quicksilver temper and an effortless, easy-going demeanor that makes her highly agreeable (Kane 7). Additionally, her strong moral character is demonstrated when she admonishes Mandavi for eavesdropping on the maids' gossip: "How many times I told you not to overhear maids gossip?" (7), despite having obtained information about Ram and Lakshman's visit to Mithila through this means.

Urmila expresses concern for her mother's well-being as all her sisters get married. However, before departing from Mithila, Sunaina, her mother, reassures Urmila by placing a gentle kiss on her forehead and urging her not to worry. "Don't worry about me. With you there to look after your sisters, I have no reason to fret" (89). Sunaina acknowledges Urmila's role as a caregiver for her sisters and expresses confidence in her ability to take care of them. She emphasizes Urmila's strength and nurturing nature, likening her to a mother figure not only to her sisters but also to herself. "You are their strength and guiding force. You have mothered me as often as you have your sisters" (90).

Urmila is taken aback upon learning that Lakshman and Sita will be accompanying Ram into exile, as they are the two individuals she holds dearest. Her disappointment is directed more towards Lakshman than Sita, questioning the necessity of his presence alongside Ram. Lakshman, understanding Urmila's feelings, explains Ram is the future king of Ayodhya, and it is his duty to protect Ram and ensure the kingdom's well-being. He clarifies that as a soldier, he must accompany Ram to the forest, leaving behind his wife. Despite Urmila's distress, Lakshman appeals to her sense of responsibility and unity, urging her to continue being the pillar that holds their family together. "It is you who binds all the sisters together with your patience and wisdom. Please do it for me now" (145). He implores Urmila to stay in the palace and maintain the bond among the sisters in his absence.

After the exile, the family members no longer share meals together in the palace. Urmila takes the initiative to gather her sisters and mothers-in-law in the fore-room of her palace at noon for a communal lunch. Mandavi, feeling resentful towards her mother-in-law Kaikeyi due to her husband's departure from the palace, refuses to attend the gathering. Kaikeyi, in turn, praises Urmila for successfully bringing the family together for a meal after many years, acknowledging her efforts by stating, "Bravo, dear girl... you smartly achieved what I could not manage for the past twenty-five years! The family eats together... and it is

a sight to behold" (231).

The incidents mentioned above highlight Urmila's resolute character. She remains composed in challenging situations and prioritizes the well-being of her family over her own interests. Urmila not only provides guidance to her sisters and family members but also stands up for them when needed. Mandavi's statement to Urmila, "Don't defend Kaikeyi, as you always do all those whom you love so fiercely and loyally" (235), underscores Urmila's unwavering loyalty and selflessness towards her loved ones. By putting others before herself, Urmila emerges as a unifying force within her family. Embodying selflessness is Urmila's archetypal persona.

The Shadow

Jung explains that the initial encounter with one's true self involves unveiling the mask and the persona. This unveiling reveals the authentic essence of the individual. The subsequent phase in the process of Individuation is the acknowledgment of the shadow. Even after the persona's mask is removed, the individual is not only faced with their true self but also with the shadow aspect. This shadow can either be embraced, facilitating progress in the individuation journey, or rejected by projecting negative aspects onto the external environment. Vogler similarly characterizes the archetypal shadow as an adversary or suppressed distressing emotions like guilt or traumas of the hero.

Urmila embodies the epitome of selflessness, a characteristic that she displays outwardly to the world, enabling her to foster unity among her sisters and family. However, beneath this facade, she suppresses her own personal emotions and desires in order to maintain her selfless persona. Urmila willingly makes numerous sacrifices for the sake of her loved ones, yet unfortunately, she is met with abandonment by these very individuals. This mistreatment dates back to Urmila's childhood, when her parents, preoccupied with caring for her motherless sisters, neglected her own needs and attention. Despite being the biological daughter of King Janak and rightfully entitled to the position of princess in Mithila, Urmila graciously accepts that her sister Sita, as the eldest, is bestowed with the names of Mithila's inheritance, namely "Janaki" and "Maithili." Urmila's love for her sister surpasses any desire for personal recognition or entitlement.

In a different scenario, Mandavi playfully mocks Urmila for her sudden interest in visiting the temple. "How did you get religious suddenly? You are more the freethinker who doesn't believe in rituals and rites, or it is that you have caught Sita's fever of searching for a groom" (17). The text suggests that Urmila does not hold strong religious beliefs, as she is typically portrayed as a freethinker who does not adhere to rituals or rites. Mandavi's comment insinuates that Urmila's newfound interest in the temple may be due to her desire to find a suitable groom, akin to Sita's quest. Despite her lack of religious conviction, Urmila accompanies Sita to the temple to help her meet Ram, with whom she falls in love. Urmila's willingness to set aside her personal beliefs in order to support her sister exemplifies her

selfless nature and dedication to maintaining strong relationships with her loved ones. However, Urmila repeatedly experiences abandonment from those closest to her. Sita leaves Urmila behind when Ram is exiled for 14 years, a situation that Urmila finds difficult to accept. Later, Urmila faces another instance of abandonment when her husband, Lakshman, joins Ram in exile without consulting her, viewing it as his duty. Only after the fact does Lakshman realize the impact of his actions on Urmila and expresses his regret, acknowledging the hardship she has endured by saying, "This is so difficult for us. Make it easier for me, Mila. Make it easier" (145).

Urmila finds herself forsaken by both her sister and her husband, who expect her to comply with their wishes without any objections. Despite having the option to accompany Lakshman to the forest, just like Sita, she chooses to remain behind solely because she comprehends her husband's responsibilities. However, this decision may pose a hindrance to fulfilling Lakshman's duties as a younger brother and brother-in-law, which involve safeguarding Ram and Sita during their period of exile. Beneath Urmila's iconic selfless image lies a multitude of sacrifices in her life. She has relinquished her own interests, her rightful inheritance, her social standing, and her personal desires, all for the sake of her loved ones. Yet, all she receives in return is abandonment. Abandonment serves as the shadow of her archetypal persona of selflessness.

The Anima and Animus

The third phase of the individuation process is the meeting with the anima and animus. Jung describes the encounter with the anima as a test of courage (29). Jung describes the archetype of the anima by referring to the water imagery he used when describing the persona archetype. The anima archetype can be found in the water as a nixie, a female half-human fish who sometimes ends up in a fisherman's net (24). The anima can also be seen in sirens, mermaids, succubuses, and other mythical creatures who, as Jung explains it, "[...] [infatuate] young men and suck the life out of them" (25). From this definition, one might see the anima as solely evil, but she can also appear as an angel of light (Jung 29). But when the man is with his anima, his character becomes soft; he becomes moody, vain, jealous, and touchy (Jung 70). The anima is often represented by the opposite sex (Jung 124). In a man, the archetype is called anima and is projected as female, but in a woman, the projection is called animus and is projected as male.

This study deals with the female protagonist Urmila from the novel *Sita's Sister*. Considering this, the focus is on the archetype animus and not the anima. The animus, "the man within," is the personification of all male psychological tendencies in women. It, too, exhibits both good and bad aspects. Majorly, two traits of Urmila act as an archetype animus and bring out the masculine quality from her. They are her assertiveness and her higher self-esteem. The following instances help to analyze those masculine qualities in Urmila.

In her childhood, Urmila engages in a game of hide and seek with her sisters, Mandavi, Kirti, and Sita. While she successfully finds Mandavi and Kirti, she struggles to locate Sita. Concerned for her missing sister's safety, Urmila perseveres in her search. Kirti becomes anxious and starts crying while Mandavi contemplates informing their father. Amidst the chaos, Urmila consoles her sisters, instilling hope and continuing her quest to find Sita until she succeeds. Following her marriage, Urmila and her sisters have a discussion at the Ayodhya palace, during which Mandavi asserts that Bharat, not Ram, will become king. This statement shocks Urmila and the other sisters, leading to a heated argument. Urmila recognizes the negative influence of Manthara on Mandavi and steps in to inquire about the cause of their dispute. Her intervention, coupled with a heartfelt plea, brings an end to the quarrel. "What are we fighting for – who'll be queen, who is superior, who ups who? How does it matter? Do we ever think this way? We are always sisters, never cousins, never queens and princesses. What's wrong with us?" (120). Urmila emphasizes the importance of sisterhood over titles and positions, reminding them that they are family first and foremost.

Based on the definition provided by the Oxford dictionary, being assertive involves expressing one's opinions in a clear and firm manner in order to be heard and potentially influence others. The instances highlighted earlier serve to illustrate Urmila's assertive nature. In the initial scenario, Urmila confidently articulates her conviction regarding the search for Sita, effectively persuading her sisters to join her in the quest. Similarly, in the subsequent situation where her sisters engage in a dispute over kingship and kingdom, Urmila intervenes assertively, communicating her perspective decisively and successfully resolving the conflict among her siblings.

After Ram's exile, King Dhasarat's health deteriorates, and he passes away, leaving the kingdom without a ruler. The ministers and wise men in the court propose that Urmila should assume the responsibility of governing until Bharat and Satrugna return from Kekaya. Sumantra's counsel reinforces this decision, "O daughter of the wise Rajrishi Janak, please look into the matters of the royal court, for we do not want to be accused of power play or otherwise" (181). Urmila, being the daughter of the esteemed Rajrishi Janak, is urged to oversee the affairs of the royal court in order to avoid any accusations of power struggles. Consequently, Urmila is left with no time to mourn Lakshman's absence as she must attend to court matters. Juggling both court duties and family responsibilities, Urmila also makes crucial decisions within the court. Instructing the court to keep the army prepared for war, Urmila emphasizes the importance of being emotionally resilient yet prepared for any challenges that may arise. "We are emotionally vulnerable right now, but let us not be unprepared for war. Keep the army ready" (180).

Urmila is cognizant of her actions and is prepared to confront the repercussions. This led her to accompany Bharat to the forest in order to implore Ram to return from exile and

govern Ayodhya. However, Ram adamantly refuses the request in the forest, despite the efforts of elderly head priest Vasishtha, Guru Kashyap, and others to persuade him otherwise. Bharat declares that if Ram does not return to the palace, he will also reside in a hermitage on the banks of the River Sarayu at Nandigram. Urmila is incensed by this ultimatum, fearing that Mandavi will suffer a similar fate. She questions the group about Dharma, pointing out that while they discuss the duties of a father, son, and brother, they neglect the responsibilities towards their wives and mothers. Guru Kashyap rebukes Urmila for her inquiry, expressing disbelief at her audacity. Urmila never feared to face them and replies,

"It is a family tradition to be silent when someone screams for justice. This royal family is famous for its justness when it comes to its people and the state, but it is cruelest to its own family members. Justice here is not just blind – it is deaf and mute... What were all the elders doing – the other two queens, the ministers, the royal priest, and you gurus?... Did anyone stop ram from leaving home? Or did anyone try to stop Sita, knowing that the forest would be an unsafe place for her?" (222).

Urmila's confidence in her own abilities is clearly demonstrated by her assertive behaviour in the royal court and her bold questioning of higher-ranking individuals in Ayodhya. These instances serve as clear indicators of her strong self-esteem. Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that Urmila embodies qualities typically associated with masculinity, such as assertiveness and high self-esteem, which serve as driving forces in her actions.

The Self

The final goal of the individuation process is to achieve the archetypal self, the meeting of the unconscious and the conscious. One could see this as the creation of awareness. The analysis has presented how the protagonist in Kavita Kane's novel *Sita's Sister* uses persona to hide and disguise their true self. During this phase, the persona should be removed, and the actual self should be presented and accepted.

The exile of Ram proves to be a catalyst for Urmila's personal growth and self-discovery. Ram, at the behest of his father, is forced to leave Ayodhya for a period of fourteen years. Urmila's sister, Sita, and her husband, Lakshman, choose to accompany Ram in his exile. This decision is deeply distressing for Urmila, as Sita and Lakshman are the two individuals she loves most dearly. Following their exile, Bharath, Ram's brother, refuses to assume the role of king and instead visits the forest to meet Ram, accompanied by other members of the court. It is during this encounter in the forest that Urmila raises a thought-provoking question about the concept of dharma (duty/righteousness) at the assembly of Ayodhya's most esteemed intellectuals. Specifically, she inquires about the husband's duty towards his wife and the son's duty towards his mother. Surprisingly, no one is able to provide a satisfactory answer, including the revered guru Vasishtha and Ram himself, who

is left speechless and visibly affected by the question. Urmila's poignant statement, "I asked one question – what is the dharma of the husband to his wife – and I did not get an answer" (220), highlights the significance of this incident in her journey towards self-realization.

The abandonment she experiences during the exile, as her loved ones leave her behind, deeply impacts Urmila. Overcoming this emotional turmoil requires immense strength and energy. It is through this process of overcoming that Urmila's conscious mind begins to connect with her unconscious, leading her toward a realization of her true self. "Urmila shut her eyes, seeing her hopeless future descend into darkness. Her long sleep had begun..." (225). As she shuts her eyes, symbolizing her surrender to the darkness of her uncertain future, Urmila's transformative journey commences.

Throughout this process, Urmila comes to the realization that neither Dharma, her husband, nor her sister will be able to assist her in navigating life. She comprehends that she must rely on herself and her own strength. This understanding leads her to prepare herself to face life independently. Consequently, following the exile, Urmila successfully reunites her family for a meal by inspiring her mother-in-law and sisters. Urmila emphasizes the importance of not dwelling in sorrow indefinitely, questioning whether perpetual mourning is truly beneficial. "No, we can't mope and mourn forever, can we? And should we?" reposted Urmila" (231). In a conversation with Mandavi, Urmila advises her to acknowledge the circumstances and accept that they cannot control external events. Instead, she encourages Mandavi to focus on self-care and well-being. "Mandavi, just try to accept it. We do not have the power to change anything but ourselves; see what has become of you. Oh, please, dear, give me back old sister, that Mandavi – charming, witty and clever..." (235). Urmila highlights the significance of cherishing small moments as they add depth and joy to life.

The incidents mentioned above contribute to Urmila's achievement of her true self. Following Ram's exile, her self-discovery enables her to gain a deeper understanding of herself, become self-reliant, and focus on personal growth. This is why Urmila advises Mandavi to prioritize self-care, cherish moments, and engage in learning and reading.

Conclusion:

Kavita Kane's exploration of Urmila's journey towards self-realization and empowerment aligns with Jung's theory of Individuation, which emphasizes the process of integrating the conscious and unconscious aspects of the self to achieve wholeness and fulfillment. Urmila's character development in the novel *Sita's Sister* reflects this journey as she navigates through her own desires, emotions, and experiences to discover her true identity and purpose. Urmila's story serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of women's agency and autonomy in a patriarchal society. Through her struggles and triumphs, Kane highlights the resilience, strength, and wisdom that women possess, urging them to embrace their inner selves and break free from societal expectations and limitations. By delving into Urmila's inner world and showcasing her inner conflicts and growth, Kane

encourages women to prioritize their own self-discovery and self-empowerment. Urmila's journey serves as a beacon of hope and inspiration for women to embrace their uniqueness, assert their voices, and pursue their dreams with confidence and determination.

In essence, Kane's portrayal of Urmila in the *Ramayana* not only sheds light on a previously overlooked character but also serves as a powerful narrative of women's empowerment and self-realization. Through Urmila's story, Kane invites readers to reflect on their own journeys toward self-actualization and to recognize the inherent strength and potential within themselves to create a more fulfilling and empowered life.

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