

ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



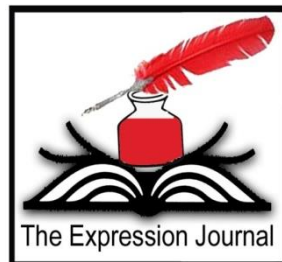
Impact Factor 3.9

Vol. 8 Issue 1 February 2022

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com



UNSOLVED ASPECTS OF URMILA IN KAVITA KANE'S *SITA'S SISTER*

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Abstract

Indian myths are largely patriarchal, where we find the female characters playing marginal roles even though the entire epic centers on the actions caused by these women characters of these epics. One such powerful revisiting of the *Ramayana* is the Amish Tripathi's Ram Chandra series. The first novel in the series titled *Scion of Ikshvaku* deals with the story of Ram and it is followed by *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* which deals with the story of the Ram Chandra series. Today one can find several retellings of these ancient epics from the viewpoints of different characters. One such narrative, written by the best-selling author Kavita Kane, recounts this great epic through the eyes of Urmila, usually known as Lakshman's wife or Sita's sister. This epic has always been used to focus on the feminine virtues of Sita, i.e. the females should be dutiful daughters and obedient wives should stand by them in every situation. However, Kavita Kane's novel *Sita's Sister* gives Urmila a feminist voice allowing the readers to view the epic from a new angle that has never been thought of. This paper aims at exploring the feminist thoughts of Urmila in *Sita's Sister* and how she fulfilled all her duties and at the same time took a stance against what she thought was wrong and injustice women. Ours is a country whose value system is largely dominated by the epics. Right from our childhood, our grandparents narrate before us the glorious tales of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* the *Jataka* tales to teach us moral values. As we grow up, our values and mindset develop according to the values taught by these epics. The *Ramayana* is one of the first two ancient Indian epics which build the foundation of the religious beliefs, cultural system, and moral value system of the Hindus.

Keywords

Feminism, *Sita's Sister*, Urmila, Indian Mythology, Gender Discourse,
Mythological Tales, Ancient Epics.

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Introduction:

As per Hindu mythology, God creating women intends to support a man and to procreate; she has to be a facilitator of his progeny. These ideas face conflicts when the divine roles of Goddesses are analysed in these myths. However, the women are bestowed with secondary roles where men take the lead roles.

In the system of patriarchy, a woman has been pictured as an embodiment of submissiveness. She has to bear the burdens of obligations of her husband. A woman has to play multifaceted roles of a daughter-in-law, a sister, a wife, a daughter, a mother, and the like. She has to succumb to the orders of all the members of the family. Dr. Kalaiselvi R.H. writes that "Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* is one of the classic examples of Feminist revisionist mythology" (5961).

Our Hindu society bases its cultural tradition, morals, and values on great epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. These epics influence and mold our personality to a great extent. Whenever we talk of the great epic *Ramayana*, we cite examples of Lord Rama, who was the epitome of a good son, a great king, and a responsible elder brother. He is always referred to as "Maryada Purushottama," literally meaning the perfect man or the lord of self-control or lord of virtue. We also talk about Devi Sita, who is considered to be one of the best women or the most chaste women. She is the epitome of an ideal traditional Indian woman possessing all feminine virtues expected from an Indian woman — good daughter, obedient and chaste wife, devoted mother, righteous, principles, and sacrificing. We also talk about Lakshmana, an ideal and selfless brother, who sacrificed everything in his life to serve his elder brother. We even talk about Bharat's love for his elder brother as well as how evil intentions, jealousy, power-hunger, and ego led to the downfall of the Lanka king Ravan, queen Kaikeyi of Ayodhya, and her maid-servant Manthra.

But we rarely hear anything about Urmila who played a major role in the *Ramayana*. She is the most neglected character and even sage Valmiki mentioned only two to four lines about her in his text. But the role she played and the sacrifices she made were unparalleled.

Kavita Kane is the bestselling author of the book, *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. In it, Kane narrates the story of Urmila in her novel *Sita's Sister*. In this novel, Kavita Kane has presented the epic from Urmila's point of view. The most overlooked character has been presented in her full might. Urmila has been given a dominant feminist voice. She questions the patriarchy that subdues women. She fulfills all her duties but at the same time takes a stand against the injustice done to her and her sisters by their husbands.

The Portrayal of Women in Mythology:

The epics and myths portray women as subordinate because they are written by men of the patriarchal society. Moreover, the men enjoyed the pleasure of subjugating women and the reason of subservience did not allow chances of exposure of women to the written scriptures.

The *Ramayana* is one of the two great epics of India. Sita is the central female character of the *Ramayana*.

Sita's Sister: (Urmila)

Sita's Sister by Kavita Kane voices such a noteworthy character Sita's sister and the wife of Lakshman. This novel gives a new feminist perspective to the epic story of the *Ramayana*. Strong, feminist characters have long been the hallmark of Indian mythology. Kavita Kane is in the limelight, discussing the unnoticed characters in Indian mythology. Her area of interest being mythology-fiction, she throws light upon the characters which people have failed to notice, or which people have given a biased dimension.

In the select novel, Kane retells the epic *Ramayana* in a new dimension as to how Urmila, the sister of Sita and wife of Lakshmana, sees it. This paper attempts to highlight the feministic approach that Kane has bestowed Urmila with, concerning the traces of feminism in the voice of voiceless Urmila. Urmila was the youngest daughter of King Janak and queen Sunaina of Mithila. Sita (Janak's elder daughter), Urmila, and their cousins Mandvi and Shrutkeerti were very close to each other since childhood. The four princesses were "well-versed in the Vedas and the Upanishads, politics, music, arts and literature". (*Sita's Sister* 9) Urmila was the pillar of strength for her sisters. She was brave, fierce, and protective of her sisters, especially for Sita. "For Sita, she was her anchor who secured her to a comforting veracity of her existence. Urmila was her lifeline". (*Sita's Sister* 22)

Sita was the adopted daughter of the childless parents Janak and Sunaina. They got a wailing baby while plowing the fields which was a part of the yagna they were performing. The baby touched a chord in their heart and they took her as their first child named her Sita. After some time, Urmila was born to them. Sita was generally referred to as Janaki (Janak's daughter) and Maithili (Princess of Mithila), but actually, it was Urmila who should have got these titles. Sita got all the love of their parents and Urmila had to tolerate their anger and scolding. "But never had Sita seen Urmila resentful about all the favours showered upon her, when she was deprived of them". (*Sita's Sister* 13)

The Nature of Urmila:

Urmila is Sita's sister and the biological daughter to King Janaka, the foster father of the site. Urmila is given in marriage to Lakshmana, Rama's brother.

The story states that Meghnath could be killed by only a man who has not slept for fourteen years and since Urmila shares her husband's sleep, evidently Lakshmana kills

Meghnath. Hence, it is clear that Urmila is given a passive role in the epic as the prime role Sita eclipses her sister Urmila. Here Urmila is portrayed as a delicately beautiful, spirited young princess who knows her mind and has no qualms in voicing it too. She is not the one who wants to live in illusion or any make-believe world. She comes across as an individual who acknowledges and accepts her situations gracefully- whether it is of being second fiddle to the adopted elder sister Sita or submitting to the fact that her husband would remain committed to his brotherly duties over and above her. But this does not push her down rather she reciprocates the favor by being a source of strength for her loved ones.

Swayamvar of Sita: (Janaki)

When Ram and Lakshmana, the two princes of Ayodhya, came to Mithila with their guru Vishwa Mitra, Urmila was attracted towards the frowning younger prince Lakshmana while Sita fell for the elder one Ram. During Sita's swayamvar, Urmila's wit saved Lakshman from the wrath and anger of Rishi Parshuram. When the marriage of the four sisters was fixed with the four princes of Ayodhya, Lakshman made it clear to Urmila that for him Ram was everything. Ram was and will always be his priority and if circumstances will need him to choose any one of them, he would choose his brother over her. But Urmila's love for Lakshman gave her the strength to accept this second place in his life. After their marriage when they arrived at Ayodhya, to insult Sita, queen Kaikeyi favoured Urmila more and ignored Sita. Ram was her favourite among the princes and she could not accept the fact that Ram married Sita, who was an orphan and not a real princess. She even suggested Ram remarry. All these incidents made Urmila furious and she took a stand for Sita. She started furiously, "How dare they do this to you? 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 won't have it, Sita". (*Sita's Sister* 100). She further said:

Do they seriously take us to be such tame girls who will scurry to obey? Haven't they realized yet that we are the daughter of Janak and Sunaina, who have been taught to uphold their bride and be courageous? They are so used to being obeyed without and questions that this palace seems to revel in some sort of a benign autocracy. The king said to marry the four princesses, and the sons obediently did, without a murmur of protest. Now the king decrees Ram to marry again! This is tyranny! (*Sita's Sister* 101)

When Ram decided to fulfill his father's boons to queen Kaikeyi and go to exile for fourteen years, Lakshman and Sita decided to accompany him. Urmila also asked to accompany them but Lakshman rejected the idea and asked her to stay back in the palace to take care of the family. He said that he was going to the forest to protect his brother like a soldier or a bodyguard and he cannot take her as he is not sure whether he will be able to protect her or not. She felt devastated as the two persons whom she loved the most will not be there with her for the next fourteen long years while leaving the palace Lakshman said to Urmila:

"If I am being praised so profusely for being the devoted brother, I fail as a good husband, who is leaving behind his bride. O Urmila, will the world ever know of your inner suffering, your divine sacrifice? But heart, full of shame and gratitude, knows what you are doing in silence." (*Sita's Sister* 158).

It was Urmila who helped the family in coping with the death of king Dashrath. It was she who unmasked the real culprit Manthara who was the mastermind behind Ram's exile. When Bharat came to know about his mother Kaikey's evil intentions, he was heartbroken. Urmila helped Shatrughan in managing the palace as well as the state affairs. When Kaikeyi

realised her mistake, all the three queens, Bharat, Shatrughan, Mandvi, Urmila, Kirti, ministers, guru Vasishtha and many soldiers of Ayodhya went in search of Ram, Lakshman, and Sita to bring them back to Ayodhya. When Ram denied returning, Bharat decided to keep Ram's sandal on the throne and "administrate the kingdom from Nandigram at the outskirts of the city". (*Sita's Sister* 219)

Mary Wollstonecraft held that under the pressure of male domination women themselves added to their subservience and destruction by accepting that satisfying men was their fundamental commitment. They accepted a secondary status and degenerated themselves. In the words of Wollstonecraft, "Gentleness, docility and spaniel like affection are consistently recommended as their cardinal virtues...she was created to be the toy of man, his rattle and it must jingle in his ears whenever he chooses to be amused" (38). This internalization of patriarchy is imparted right from birth of a woman as a part of her socialization. Kavita Kane debunks this androcentric view in all her works. Helen Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa* appeals for a feminine mood of composition which she calls as "white ink" and "écriture feminine". Kavita Kane achieves this "white ink" literature, brings in female subjectivity by extending the limits of writing.

Conclusion:

In short, Urmila is depicted as a girl who has the potency to cover her internal conflicts with a strained smile. Though she is good at covering feelings, the importance of her 'self' pops out when the necessity arises.

When the people were talked about the spousal knot of the four princes of Ayodhya with the four princesses of Mithila, it is at this juncture, Urmila exposes her feelings regarding her marriage. Urmila is not sure if Lakshman would give his consent to marry her. Nevertheless, Urmila is eager to be given in marriage to Lakshman, which shows that her purpose is to live a life of her choice rather than to exist or survive. In my article, the feeling of Urmila when she thinks of Lakshman's liberal look is like a wave: drowning and sousing her in its passionate whirl around and leaving her bereft in anticipation ebbed. She was still unsure about him. In my article Urmila has never been allowed to sit idle thinking about her miseries; instead, she overcomes her melancholic situation by reviving her passions. She studies and interacts with philosophical minds, attains knowledge and wisdom through her passions. Urmila develops her artistic skills and continues her waiting for Lakshman. Marriage for Urmila was a way to prove herself as a woman of knowledge and understanding in male dominated society. Who supports her in-laws all alone with her wit, instead of the tame or weak girl. She can face all bad situations bravely.

Urmila started a fight against age-old patriarchy long before these theories of feminisms came into motion. She stood for the rights of women of royal families without caring about the outcome and the consequences. If we analyse her arguments from a feminist lens, she was a strong, brave, and intelligent woman, with a broad outlook who fought for the right of women and took a stance against patriarchy in her times. This perspective of the epic, as presented by Kavita Kane, gives the readers a new outlook and a new lens for viewing the great epic Ramayana. Dr. Hitesh D. Raviya and Ms. Parul Malviya write about this novel:

Therefore, we can regard the novel as an exemplar of sisterhood. There is no excessive idealization of the theme, nor does the author blame brotherhood, instead she draws our attention to the question of equality. Her novel *Sita's Sister* is one such work of fiction which inculcates the lesser emphasized notion of sisterly love. (29)

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(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 3.9)

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ISSN: 2395-4132

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