

Urmila: Revealing the Power of an Exceptional Woman in Kavita Kane's 'Sita's Sister'

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Abstract

The study explores the marginalization of women in Indian epics, particularly focusing on Urmila in the *Ramayana*. Traditionally, epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* depict women as subjugated in a patriarchal society, influencing both individual and societal values. The 20th century, marked by advances in science and technology, allowed women to break free from traditional domestic roles and assume prominent societal positions. Female authors began reinterpreting these ancient texts, reshaping stories to emphasize women's empowerment and responsibilities. This paper specifically examines Urmila's overlooked role in the *Ramayana*, and how feminist perspectives, like those in Kane's reinterpretation, shed light on the potential for redefining women's roles in contemporary adaptations of these myths.

Key Words: Empowerment, Feminism, Marginalisation, Patriarchy, Reinterpretation

Introduction

Mythological representations have become a popular approach to exploring the cultural myths of India. The ongoing debate across various contemporary platforms revolves around how to reintroduce and celebrate Indian culture, offering valuable insights into how modern society responds to age-old societal structures. In an interview with R. Krithika (2020, n.p.), a reporter from *The Hindu*, the student of literature shares her perspective on mythology, which is worth referencing here:

"If myths reflect the socio-cultural ethos of earlier times, they can also be reinterpreted to address those same issues in today's world. In reality, nothing has changed. Love, rivalry, disappointment, war, anger, greed—these emotions still persist. By examining the epics through the lens of women and minor characters, there is an opportunity to offer an alternative perspective." (n.p.)

Contemporary authors' representations of myths aim to explore these myths' nature and societal functions by deconstructing them through fictional content. The primary objective of these reimagined myths is to uncover the connotative meanings behind the issues embedded

in the mythological narratives. Therefore, the study of myths involves delving into the intricate nuances that attract significant critical attention from diverse sectors of society.

Indian culture and traditional values remain central to the lifestyle of the subcontinent, profoundly influencing individual identity and shaping the country's core. Epics like the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and others significantly define how people perceive how life should be lived. In particular, the *Ramayana* contains numerous anecdotes that represent the cultural and traditional myths behind its many characters. According to author Kavita Kane, mythology is a potent tool for writers to bring contemporary issues and sensibilities into the spotlight. She skillfully employs this tool in her literary works to create compelling narratives with a unique and insightful touch.

The epic narratives of the *Ramayana* primarily revolve around prominent characters such as Rama, Sita, Ravana, Bharata, Kaikeyi, Mandhara, and others. While much of the literature in the subcontinent has extensively explored the virtues and flaws of these central figures, a few writers have sought to shed light on the often unnoticed, neglected, and overlooked characters. By delving into their inner psyches, these authors aim to expose the emotions and perspectives of these marginalized figures, offering a fresh lens through which to view the epics. Kavita Kane, a contemporary writer, stands out in this regard, bringing innovative and creative interpretations to the lesser-known characters of Indian mythology. She believes Indian mythology is deeply rooted in philosophical richness, which sets it apart from other traditions.

Kane argues that minor characters are often sidelined in the grand narrative, receiving little attention or depth. These characters are frequently defined through the perspectives and descriptions of the significant figures, leaving their own stories untold. Through her works, Kane seeks to rectify this imbalance by giving voice to these neglected characters. In *Lanka's Princess*, Kane reimagines the character of Shurpanakha, presenting her not as a malevolent figure but as one who is more misunderstood. This approach allows readers to experience familiar events from a perspective that has traditionally been vilified. Similarly, in *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, Kane shifts the focus to the matriarch of the Kuru family, highlighting the pivotal role of women in setting off the chain of events that culminated in the catastrophic battle of Kurukshetra.

Her other works, such as *Karna's Wife* and *Sita's Sister*, further exemplify her commitment to reinterpreting women's roles in Indian epics, offering a nuanced and empowering portrayal of these often-overlooked figures. In an interview, Yashika Bisht (2019, p. 8) captures Kavita Kane's perspective on the representation of women in

mythology. Kane asserts, “If women have not been portrayed in a proper light, it’s because of misogyny and chauvinism, which made us all myopic and did not allow us to see these women for their enormous strength and conviction.” Through her writings, Kane challenges these biases, bringing to the forefront the resilience and depth of women who have long been relegated to the shadows of epic narratives.

This paper focuses on Kavita Kane’s novel *Sita’s Sister*, which reimagines the character of Urmila, Sita’s sister, and highlights her contributions as one of the most ignored and neglected figures in the *Ramayana*. Urmila, often overshadowed by the central characters, is brought to the forefront in this narrative, showcasing her multifaceted roles as a daughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law, scholar, and artist. Through Urmila’s story, Kane explores how she extended her support to unite the family while navigating the complexities of her own life. Urmila emerges as a woman of immense strength, handling every situation with grace, confidence, persuasion, and care, even as she confronts patriarchal prejudices. In an interview with *The Hindu* reporter R. Krithika (2020), titled "Through Another Pair of Eyes: A Chat with Author Kavita Kane," Kane shared her thoughts on her works. When asked about her favorite book among her creations, she expressed affection for all of them, noting that each holds a special place for different reasons. Speaking about *Sita’s Sister*, she explained, “I come from a family that has lots of girls. Sita also had four sisters, and I wondered if things changed once they became sisters-in-law.” She further reflected on the interconnectedness of characters across myths, adding, “And then Satyavati...the seeds of discontent actually start with Yayati, Sarmishta, and Devyani and find their apogee with Satyavati and Shantanu” (n.p.).

In *Sita’s Sister*, Kane skilfully interweaves Urmila's story, portraying her as Lakshman's wife and one of the strongest women in the epic. The novel highlights how Urmila triumphed over tears and tragedy with dignity and strength, as noted in an interview on Sruit's Blog. Urmila fulfills her duties and raises her voice against the injustices perpetrated by Lakshman and Rama, challenging the patriarchal norms of her time. This narrative gives Kane a fresh perspective on Urmila, emphasizing her resilience and agency in adversity.

Kane's works consistently focus on mythology and women characters, particularly those who have been less vocal or overlooked in traditional narratives. Her artistic achievement lies in her ability to give voice to these marginalized figures, blending mythology with contemporary relevance. According to Kane, retelling mythological stories ensures the survival of the original texts across generations. She believes revisiting, revising,

and reimagining these tales makes them more relatable, dynamic, and identifiable in global literature.

Kavita Kane's choice to focus on minor characters stems from her belief that they play a pivotal role in the overarching narrative. By exploring their perspectives, she provides an alternative lens to view the epics, enriching the stories with new dimensions. She intends to delve deeper into the intricate and often overlooked characters, uncovering their hidden complexities and contributions. Through her unique storytelling, Kane breathes new life into Indian mythology, offering readers a nuanced and empowering understanding of its lesser-known figures.

In *Sita's Sister*, Urmila, one of the daughters of the great King Janak and Queen Sunaina of Mithila, is portrayed as a vibrant, effervescent, vivacious, and warm-hearted woman with a quick temper and an easy-going nature (pp. 7–8). Despite her dynamic personality, Urmila is often overlooked in traditional retellings of the *Ramayana*, particularly by her husband, Lakshman. However, in Kane's reimagining, Urmila emerges as an outspoken and courageous woman who boldly expresses her feelings and convictions, challenging the patriarchal norms of her time.

One of the most striking aspects of Urmila's character is her relationship with her elder sister, Sita. While Sita is not the biological daughter of King Janak, Urmila, as his actual daughter, is the rightful bearer of the name *Janaki*. Despite this, Sita is often hailed as *Janaki*, while Urmila's identity is overshadowed. However, Urmila's kind and generous nature leads her to shower Sita with love and affection, enduring her emotional struggles with a brave smile and a trembling chin. This highlights Urmila's resilience and selflessness, even in the face of personal neglect.

Another pivotal moment in the narrative occurs during Sita's swayamvar, when Ravana, the king of Lanka, attempts to defeat Urmila and Sita by demanding Urmila as a condition set by King Janak. However, Rama steps forward, seeks blessings from Vishwamitra, and lifts the divine bow, which breaks into two as he attempts to string it. Amid the celebrations, the fearsome sage Parashurama arrives, enraged by the breaking of the bow. When he learns that Rama is responsible, he seeks to punish him. Lakshman's intervention further angers Parashurama, who raises his axe to attack. Urmila feels fear gripping her at this critical moment but quickly steps forward to seek Parashurama's blessings. Her intervention and Lakshman's earlier act of saving her reveal their deep love for each other—a love they had long denied, even to themselves (pp. 38–41). Parashurama, realizing Rama's divine

nature, departs, and the weddings are arranged, with Dasarath agreeing to marry his sons to Janak's daughters.

However, Urmila's heartache deepens when she overhears a conversation between Rama and Lakshman. Lakshman confesses that while his love for Urmila is genuine, his life is dedicated to serving Rama. He tells Rama that he will always choose Rama if he ever chooses Urmila and his brother. This revelation relegates Urmila to second place in Lakshman's priorities, leaving her stunned and heartbroken. However, Urmila's initial anger and shock give way to pity and concern for Lakshman's predicament. She reassures him, saying, "Loving is also giving; you are not ready to give yourself to me. However, don't you see, I do not want your complete surrender. I love you, but that does not mean I possess you, your beliefs, or your loyalties. I assure you that I shall never come between your loyalty to your brothers and your family. Likewise, I shall not allow my love for you to be threatened by my love for my sisters and parents. By loving you, my love for them will never falter, nor should yours" (p. 67). This poignant moment underscores Urmila's maturity, selflessness, and unwavering strength.

As the wedding festivities proceed, a moment of gloom arises when the royal priest utters an ominous prophecy. Urmila, ever the pillar of strength, comforts her grief-stricken mother with wise words, assuring her that she will take care of her sisters and face any challenges that come their way. This scene further cements Urmila's role as a resilient and compassionate figure who navigates personal and familial trials gracefully and determinedly.

Through *Sita's Sister*, Kavita Kane breathes new life into Urmila's character, portraying her as a woman of immense strength, dignity, and emotional depth. By revisiting Urmila's story, Kane challenges the traditional narrative and offers a fresh perspective on a character long relegated to the shadows of the *Ramayana*. Urmila's journey, marked by love, sacrifice, and resilience, is a powerful reminder of the often-overlooked contributions of women in mythology.

When the four sisters and their husbands arrive in Ayodhya, they are warmly welcomed at the palace entrance by King Dasarath's three queens. However, Sita is snubbed by Kaikeyi, while Urmila is left shocked and disbelieving at this biased reception. This moment highlights the underlying tensions within the royal household (p. 93). As excitement builds for Rama's coronation as the crown prince, the atmosphere in the palace is charged with anticipation. However, in a dramatic turn, Rama announces that he will not ascend the throne and that Bharata will be crowned instead. This decision sets off a chain of events that profoundly impacts Urmila.

Lakshman, resolute in his devotion to Rama, declares that he will accompany him to the forest, as he cannot bear to live apart from his brother. Embodying her dharma as a wife, Sita insists on joining Rama, saying, "As a wife, let me repeat my dharma to you. I have to be where my husband is; I have the right to share your love and happiness, unhappiness, duties, and misfortunes. I am to share everything with you—a wife is first and foremost her husband's companion, always at his side, loving, supporting, and guiding him. I am your wife, and I am with you wherever you go. Parting from you will be crueler than death" (p. 141).

Urmila, however, is struck with horror at this unfolding situation. She realizes that she has been excluded from the decision-making process, left behind without consideration, and feels deeply abandoned by the two people she loves most—Lakshman and Sita. Though about to protest, she holds back her words, enduring the pain in silence. Acknowledging Urmila's strength and sacrifice, Rama expresses his gratitude: "I leave my old parents under your care, and I know they could not have been in kinder hands. You are a remarkable woman—courageous and strong. However, I am depriving you of your husband's company, your happiness, for which I cannot be absolved" (p. 154).

As Rama, Sita, and Lakshman prepare to leave, Lakshman reassures Urmila of his love and pride in her, declaring that their bond will remain strong despite the separation. In a heartfelt moment, he addresses the gathered crowd, acknowledging Urmila's immense sacrifice: "O Urmila, will the world ever know of your inner suffering, your divine sacrifice? But my heart, full of shame and gratitude, knows what you are doing in silence, through your brave smile, your generous heart. Eternally, your Lakshman will be grateful to you and be proud of you. I go now and leave you alone, but I leave my soul, my heart, here with you" (p. 158). This poignant scene underscores Urmila's silent suffering and extraordinary strength in the face of abandonment and neglect. Though her sacrifice goes unnoticed by the world, her resilience and selflessness shine through, making her one of the epic's most compelling and overlooked figures.

Kavita Kane's retelling brings Urmila's inner turmoil and unwavering dignity to the forefront, offering a fresh perspective on her role and her profound sacrifices. As Urmila and her family embark on their journey to the forest, she can hardly believe the drastic transformation in Kaikeyi. The warm, cheerful woman she once knew has become an ambitious, cold-hearted figure. Meanwhile, King Dashrath's health rapidly declines, and in desperation, he asks for forgiveness, attributing his condition to a curse. He recounts the

tragic story of how he unknowingly shot a young man, Shravan, who was gathering water for his blind parents.

Urmila, deeply distressed by the situation, rushes to Kaikeyi's chamber to inform her of the king's worsening health. As she speaks, news arrives of King Dashrath's death. Ayodhya is filled with fear and uncertainty as the city finds itself without a leader. Sage Vasishta expresses concern about the kingdom's future, fearing this could lead to an external attack. In a surprising turn, Urmila steps forward, demonstrating extraordinary composure and offering wise counsel. She is quickly urged to take on the responsibility of ruling Ayodhya. Though taken aback, Urmila accepts the challenge and performs admirably in her new role.

Her mother, Sunaina, arrives soon after, and Urmila feels relieved. However, Sunaina regrets allowing Urmila to marry Lakshman, whom she sees as weak-minded. She questions how Urmila could meekly accept such injustice. Urmila responds with unwavering strength: "As a wife? I did. And I stood by his decision." She explains that it is her dharma to support her husband, just as Lakshman's dharma was to follow his brother. Despite the hardship, Urmila has never felt the burden of this sacrifice and conveys her feelings with quiet dignity.

As Bharath and Shatrughna arrive in Ayodhya, they are struck by the eerie silence in the city. Urmila calls an assembly of ministers and advisors, where Bharath insists that he is not interested in ruling and should not be made king. The royal family soon prepares to head into the forest to join Ram, Lakshman, and Sita. Upon reaching the forest, they deliver the heartbreaking news of King Dashrath's death, which devastates Ram, Lakshman, and Sita. Per Sage Vasishta's advice, Ram performs his father's final rites with his brothers.

Lakshman, ever loyal, meets Urmila and commends her for managing the affairs of the palace so effectively during this time of crisis. He praises her strength, claiming he is unworthy of her. In another meeting with the family, Bharath pleads with Ram to return to Ayodhya and rule the kingdom. After much discussion, they agree to a compromise: Bharath will govern as a deputy for Ram, though he resolves to live as an ascetic, ruling from the banks of the River Sarayu instead of the palace. Urmila is furious and unable to accept this. She questions how everyone can disregard the dharma of the husband towards his wife and the son towards his mother, asking, "Is it always about the father, sons, and brothers?" Urmila spends her days painting and reflecting on her life with Lakshman. She calls the royal family together to share a meal to restore some normalcy, as they once did. Slowly, the atmosphere lightens, and Kaikeyi, in particular, expresses gratitude for the gesture.

As the celebrations unfold, word comes that King Aswapathi has passed away. A letter arrives for Kaikeyi from her father, but Urmila and Keerti hesitate to open it. Eventually, they read the letter, which reveals shocking truths. Ten years have passed since Urmila's separation from Lakshman, and her heart has hardened with resentment. She now believes that when Bharath returns, he will restore her happiness. Meanwhile, Ram, Lakshman, and Sita have moved from Chitrakoot to Dandaka forest and are settling near the Godavari river.

Urmila receives an invitation from her father, King Janak, to attend a Philosophical Conference in Mithila, not as his daughter but as a scholar in her own right. This recognition fills her with pride. She reflects on how, while Sita always received the love and admiration of their parents, she never felt jealousy. Instead, Urmila worked diligently to earn respect and recognition, which ultimately brought her this invitation. When she arrives in Mithila, her parents warmly welcome her, acknowledging her growth and accomplishments.

As the completion of the exile draws near, Urmila feels the growing anticipation of reuniting with Lakshman after so many years. However, the atmosphere soon shifts with troubling news. Bharath arrives at the palace, his face grave, and informs everyone that Sita has been kidnapped. Shocked and horrified, the listeners hear Bharath's account of how Ravana abducted Sita while Ram and Lakshman were chasing a deer. The bird king, Jatayu, who attempted to stop Ravana, is severely wounded but tells them that Sita has been taken to Ashok Van. With the help of the Vanaras, Ram, and Lakshman, they are pursuing her rescue of her.

Urmila is devastated by the news, unable to comprehend how Sita could have been taken while Ram and Lakshman were near. Her anger surges, and she blames herself for not stopping Sita from accompanying her husband. She is filled with emotional turmoil, her grief turning to self-reproach, but Mandavi tries to console her, reminding her that Sita would not have listened to anyone, not even Urmila. However, Urmila is inconsolable and lost in her thoughts.

That night, Urmila is jolted from her sleep by a nightmare in which she sees Lakshman gravely injured on the battlefield. She tries to shake it off as nothing but a bad dream, but the fear lingers. Her worst fears are confirmed when Bharath arrives with the grim news that Lakshman is severely wounded and fighting for his life. Overcome with grief and memories of Lakshman, Urmila struggles to stay composed. Despite the intense emotional turmoil, she gathers the strength to go to Sumitra and offer her support, comforting the devastated mother.

Shatrughna, witnessing Urmila's strength, expresses his heartfelt gratitude: "You saved us! All these years, Bharat and I might have looked after Ayodhya and its people, but it was you who kept us together, who saved the family from a living hell. It's not the same as when Ram left, and it won't be the same when Ram returns with Sita and Lakshman. You made this palace a better place. You made it a home, a place to return to, day after day. You blessed it with your patient love, your indomitable spirit, and your everlasting hope for peace."

Keerti and Mandavi are awestruck by Urmila's calmness, especially as they wonder how she can remain so composed in the face of such devastation.

Conclusion

Kavita Kane's work is genuinely remarkable, mainly when seen through Hindu mythology, especially in her portrayal of Urmila, who emerges as a shining example of strength, loyalty, and resilience. Urmila embodies traits such as determination, duty, intelligence, self-will, and unwavering commitment, presenting a woman of immense resolve whose feelings often go unnoticed or unrespected by others. Fully aware of the challenges and sacrifices ahead when Lakshman leaves for the forest with Ram, she remains steadfast, never wavering in her devotion and finding peace in knowing that their bond transcends words. Her patience is unmatched as she endures the separation without questioning Lakshman's love or doubting his intentions. Urmila's maturity and contentment set her apart, as she never feels jealousy toward Sita or envy toward Uruvi. She is a dutiful wife and a heroic figure who assumes responsibility for caring for her family and the kingdom when no one else does. In *Sita's Sister*, Urmila is a genuinely astonishing woman—loyal, selfless, and dedicated to her duties. Through Kane's literary creation, Urmila's often overlooked role in the *Ramayana* is brought to the forefront, shedding light on her significant yet silent contributions. Her story of endurance and devotion highlights a woman who, despite her sacrifices, remains steadfast in her love, loyalty, and commitment to her family.

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