

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****Revealing Urmila: an Outlook reasoning 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 are the stories, which have been repeatedly told through the decades and which embody timeless virtues like righteousness, duty, and compassion. The *Ramayana* in particular highlights values like obedience, brotherhood, empathy, and self-sacrifice that are inextricably woven into the fabric of Indian ethos and shows 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 centre of the narrative stage. This retelling offers a bold and resolute perspective through Urmila's eyes-an outlook resonating 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 the Indian literature which hold the significant place 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, the character of Urmila, often identified as *Sita's Sister* or Lakshmana's spouse, remains in the shadows. Despite her adherence to Patni Dharma and her personal sacrifices, Urmila's presence and contributions are marginalized in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, obscuring the depth of her support and significance within the narrative.

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It is often thought upon that why she has not enough been talked about for being a brave and self-sacrificing wife of Lakshmana, 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 like as Urmila, Ahalaya, and Surpanakha. Kane discusses her motivation for portraying these female characters in an interview:

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

Monika Khanna Jhalani In her work "Revisioning Indian Mythology," demonstrates how patriarchy has utilised 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 at the way contemporary writers have challenged and "re-envisioned" these patriarchal representations of women in Hindu mythology. This procedure entails both the initial stories' "de-mythification" and later "re-mythification." Jhalani adds a fresh perspective to the process of modifying mythology through her analysis. This article examines Kavita Kane's book *Sita's Sister* (2014) with an emphasis on Urmila's character, who has been 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 that was given to the women in myths. She clarified: The mystique of women has long benefitted the ruling class, enabling them to significantly violate their rights and legitimizing them. Analyzing it from the perspective of female critique, Tyson comments that it, "examines the ways in which 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. Figures from Hindu mythology such as Sita, Ahalaya, Kunti, Draupadi, Parvati, and Tara, whether deities or women, have served as role models for women owing to their selfless sacrifices and strong moral ideals. Women have wielded significant

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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 for 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 traits of Independence, loyalty, confidence, and grace. They exhibit passion, possess strong education, and hold ambitious aspirations. They place value in 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 not only possesses the capacity for childbirth and nurturing, but also for 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 in terms of her emotions, intelligence, and sentiments. Kane carefully raises Urmila to a key role and reimagines the story from her perspective. This contrasts with Valmiki's *Ramayana*, in which Urmila remains on the periphery of the story. 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 the male-dominated Cultural standards. Shekha comments:

Among all these women, Urmila comes out as the most influential character – outspoken yet respectful, head strong yet calm, strong in the face of adversity, a learned scholar, with an ability to forgive, forget and look at the bigger picture, the tapasvi who has 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. The *Ramayana's* teachings are more applicable to the current age because of its many interpretations. According to Roland Barthes' notion, "The Death of the Author," the author dies and reader originates". In her writings Kane has given life to the much underappreciated female characters from the *Ramayana*. She emphasizes particularly on Urmila in *Sita's Sister*, a figure who has been neglected from the original epic. Kane challenges the usual secondary role given to a woman in

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traditional storytelling by giving Urmila a contemporary attribute and portraying her as a powerful, self-assertive with traits traditionally associated with the males.

**Sacrifice- Patni Dharma**

Urmila's sacrifice, on the other hand, is frequently shown as a minor yet crucial component of the *Ramayana*. Urmila is Rama's younger brother Lakshmana's wife. While Rama and Lakshmana go for exile, 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 also fulfilling her own 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 you are going to be separated from your husband for the next fourteen years, but you don't want your husband to even think of you lest he distresses from his goal to serve his brother. I bow to you, sister for vanvas, your exile here in the palace shall be way harder 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 first born child of King Janaka and Queen Sunaina of Mithila, emerges from the constraints imposed on her by a society dominated by men. As

Sita had been hailed as Janaki, Janak's daughter when it was Urmila who was his daughter and the sole propetier of that name. Sita was Maithili, the princess of Mithila, when it was Urmila who should have been crowned with that title. But never had Sita seen Urmila resentful about all the favours 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 it was Sita who was celebrated as such. Similarly, while Urmila should have rightfully held the title of the "princess of Mithila," it was Sita who was known by that name. Despite Sita not being her biological sister, Urmila doesn't harbor resentment. Instead, she becomes a pillar of strength for her loved ones. She handles her circumstances with grace, whether it's 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, with her courage, self assurance, and supportive nature making her sister's 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" succeed in the challenge and marry her. Urmila's words provide Sita with the 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 own 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 constricting painfully

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with conflicting emotions, feeling suddenly unwanted and bereft, Urmila silently slipped out of the room, but not unnoticed as she has 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 it was you who 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 is not going to 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, your indomitable spirit and your 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 largely 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-but all in the 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, providing them with an ability to discover unfamiliar subjects. She has a tremendous drive to enlarge her skills and discover new things. She accepts that her own 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 over failing to assist her in the kitchen, which was traditionally the responsibility of a woman in the palace. Urmila, however, decides against adhering to the norms and instead chooses to go after her interest for painting. She is committed of acquiring knowledge and expanding her mind; she refuses to remain beneath 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 enable her to oppose the narrative's female characters' unjust treatment and injustices. She is a staunch advocate of women's

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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 is not in a favor of Sita as she wants Rama to find the suitable companion for him, 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 have the audacity to think of remarriage dismissing you as if you were some trophy to be replaced! I won't have it, Sita...' (Kane 100).

Upon discovering the fact that the misfortune which happened with 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, 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 a 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 in order 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*, the character of Urmila closely aligns with this ideal. Beena G accurately, attributes her achievements:

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

The writer has elevated the character of Urmila which is typically represented in the *Ramayana* from the periphery to the centre of the story. She has recreated the narrative through

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Urmila's courageous and steadfast stance- a position that closely resembles that of 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 empowerment.

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