

Research Article

Kane's Urmila: A Relevant Feminist Myth Creation

Poonam Sharma,

Research Scholar, Department of English, GLA University, Mathura.

E-mail: poonamsharmafeb253@gmail.com

Nitin Bhatnagar,

Professor, Department of English, GLA University, Mathura.

E-mail: nitin.bhatnagar@gla.ac.in

ABSTRACT

The epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have been an integral part of the Indian cultural tradition. Since centuries, they have been told and reinterpreted several times and handed down from one generation to another. The *Ramayana* is based on the morals such as the triumph of goodness over evil, obedience, brotherhood, love, compassion, sacrifice – all looped into the thread of Indian cultural tradition with an emphasizes on the value of *dharma*. However, there are some female characters that have been left on the margin in this epic and have been portrayed as upholders of male honour. They are devoid of the proper attention for their roles and sacrifices they deserve. Kavita Kane in her novel, *Sita's Sister* has revisited the *Ramayana* from the daring and unwavering Urmila's (Laxmana's wife) perspective – a marginalized character who has never received the responsiveness she is worthy of. Kane has given voice to the muted character of Urmila. The present paper studies the contemporary relevance of *Sita's Sister* from feminist-revisionist myth-making point of view.

Key Words: *Ramayana; Re-vision; margin; Indian culture; feminist- revisionist myth-making.*

Introduction

Kavita Kane, an Indian writer, known for her mythology-fiction, has written books based on retellings of Indian myths. Kane has written six books on the genre of mythology-fiction and has grasped the attention of readers through her analytical depiction of minor female characters of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The readers of these epics are acquainted with the noticeable female protagonists such as Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, and so on. Kane's *Sita's Sister* (2014), *Lanka's Princess* (2017) and *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019) are the retellings of the *Ramayana* from the perspective of minor female characters. Kane has given voice to the muted characters such as Urmila (Sita's Sister), Surpanakha (Ravan's sister), Ahalya (Gautam Rishi's wife) and so on, who were overshadowed by the leading protagonists in the original works. The epic has come across several reinterpretations and retellings, and in most of them the women characters on the margin have been portrayed as upholders of male honour and have been devoid of proper attention for their roles and sacrifices.

Kane has given a dominant feminist voice to most of the overlooked characters who are relatable to a modern Indian Woman. In the retellings, such women have been depicted to take bold stands against the injustice done to them and others, as well as question the patriarchal dominance that subdues women, but not at the cost of their household responsibilities. They appear to openly protest against the age old dictum of *Manusmriti*, "Pitaa Rakshati Kaumaree, Bharata Rakshati Yauvane; Putroo Rakshati Vardhakyee, Na Stri Swatantryam Arhati" (IX, 3). These lines bring to light that a woman has to be under the control of a male always – she has to be under the control of her father in her childhood, of her husband in her youth and of her son in her old age.

Feminist Revisionist Mythology

The retellings of Kavita Kane can be called to be based on the concept of Feminist revisionist mythology that engages with the earlier written narratives like myths, stories, poems, fairy tales etc., where women have been kept on the periphery. It plays a significant role by putting forward wide variety of contemporary female experiences by challenging the patriarchal narratives. Rich considers revision an existential activity: "Re-vision, - the act of looking back, seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival" (1972, p.18). Ostriker, in her article "*The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking*," describes feminist revisionist mythology as "the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth" (1982, p.73). Ostriker further suggests that revisionist mythmaking is an effective strategy to re-define female identity, and to make "corrections" to constructed "images of what women have collectively and historically suffered" (73). In her book *Stealing the Language*, she remarks "the motivating force behind women writers' revisionist myths is the subversion of the dominant ideology's hidden male bias" (1986, p.214). Simone de Beauvoir was also conscious about the negligence of women in myths. She explained: "Few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling class than the myth of woman: it justifies all privileges and even authorizes their abuse" (1989, p.285). Interpreting it from the point of view of feminist criticism, Tyson expresses that it "examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (2006, p.83). Rozells argues that the retellings of myths depict that they should now be shown in a new light (2020, p. 5).

Urmila's Feminist Relevance in *Sita's Sister*

Kavita Kane, in her novel *Sita's Sister*, has unfurled the suppressed personality and feminine sensibilities of the marginal female figures of the Ramayana. She portrays Urmila (Laxmana's wife) as energetically alive in terms of sentiments, acumen and feelings. She has been placed on the center stage and the tale has been revised from her view point. One can notice that in the Valmiki's *Ramayana*, she remains unhighlighted on the periphery. Her greatness, support and sacrifice have been overlooked and lost between the lines of the epic. Through a re-visioned myth making technique, Kane has portrayed Urmila's character with a well-built feminine identity who takes bold stands in the male dominated society. Devi comments:

She is left unnoticed in mythology except for the term Urmila Nidhra which refers to the fourteen-year long sleep of her in order to fulfill her husband's vow to guard Rama and Sita day and night during their fourteen-year exile in the forest of Dandaka. Moreover, in killing of Meghnath, the son of the demon king Ravana of Lanka, Urmila's name gets mentioned. 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 (2018 p.139).

Kane has reinterpreted the mythology from a daring and unwavering Urmila's perspective and portrayed her character with the traits of a modern Indian woman. Simon De Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, advocated a similar type of image of today's woman, who will be equivalent to men, reason and act like men, but in spite of lamenting her inferiority to them, she would pronounce herself their equal (1997, p149).

The *Ramayana* is not only based on the morals such as the triumph of goodness over evil, obedience, brotherhood, love, compassion, sacrifice – all looped into the thread of Indian cultural society, but it also lays emphasizes on the value of *dharma* (code of conduct compatible to one's duty) in Indian mythology. As in *Ramayana*, Ram is known as Maryada Purushottama who fulfills his *Putra Dharma*, Ram's wife, Sita is also known as the epitome of traditional Indian wife for following her *Patni Dharma*, while Lakshman, Bharat and Satrugna fulfill their *Bhrata dharma*. They all become the epitome of dharma hood. But what happens to Urmila, who is either known as Sita's sister or Laxman's wife. Like Sita, she also follows *Patni dharma* and sacrifices her happiness and welcomes pain.

One often wonders why is there so little said about the brave and self-sacrificing wife of Lakshman, who upheld dharma as much as Rama did. If Rama went on an exile to fulfil the promise given by his father to Kaikeyi, citing it to be his dharma to fulfil his father's wishes, Urmila exiled herself in the palace, so that Lakshman could fulfil his promise of always protecting his brother (Shekha, 2015).

Urmila's sacrifice is harder than Sita's. Both are newly married. Sita has the satisfaction of staying with her husband during the exile period which Urmila hasn't. Sita is acclaimed for her sacrifice. What about Urmila's? She, herself a new bride, stays away from her husband for fourteen years so that others are able to fulfill their *dharmas*. Her staying away from her husband Laxman for fourteen years was no way less than an exile. In *Sita's Sister*, 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” (153).

The continuous changes in socio-economic and psycho-cultural aspects of human living have been the reason behind a great change in the role of Indian women from ancient to present contemporary society. Some female figures like Sita, Urmila, Ahalya, Kunti, Draupadi, Tara, and Parvati from the Hindu mythology are considered ideals due to their high moral values. They are the epitome of womanhood, who have given their contribution to the socio-cultural development of Indian society.

“...women have played a silent, self- effacing role to sustain Indian civilization down the ages. They have made their influence felt in all walks of life but retained the feminine graces-motherliness, wife's fidelity, kinship bonds, cultural norms and the cherished 'home sweet home' instinct” (Mishra, 2017).

Kane has portrayed Uruvi as independent and loyal women, who is not only confident and graceful but also passionate and ambitious. These traits bring her very close to the contemporary modern Indian women. They are the combination of Western emancipation and Indian warmth, compassion, family values and traditions. Uruvi is a perfect blend of compassion and aggression. She has soft corner for the victims and fury for the authority who attempts to do anything wrong. She raises her voice not only for her rights but also for other female characters like Shrutikirti and Sita. "The modern woman has the balance of being able to show a soft and supportive side, while at the same time, demonstrating strength – she is resilient, knows what she wants and speaks her mind" (Mat McCabe, 2018).

Kane has characterized Urmila as a modern Indian woman in contemporary society, who is bold, outspoken, dutiful, caring wife, a learned scholar, a good Indian daughter in law, and a great administrator. She has all the traits of a modern Indian woman. Shekha comments: "it is Urmila who 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" (2015). Beena rightly states: "Her intellectual 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).

Urmila's feminist peculiarity comes out for the first time in the novel, when the demon king Ravana, on getting unsuccessful to string the *Rudra* bow in Sita's *Swayamvar* (a ceremonial opportunity for women to select their husband from the aspiring males), shouts in fury, "I have no time now ... and watch till infinity for your daughter Sita to get married I would not mind marrying your other daughter; she is as ravishingly beautiful as the world claims her to be" (32). On watching Ravana's obnoxious behavior and opportunism, Urmila stares at him with hatred and fury. Kane writes, "She looked squarely up at him, her eyes sparkling with unsuppressed fury and loathing" (32).

The pre-marital royal dignity of Urmila has also been sidelined in the earlier versions of the *Ramayana*. The myth unfolds that Urmila was the biological daughter of King Janaka and Queen Sunaina of Mithila, while Sita was the adopted one tilled out of the earth. Urmila was denied the pedestal that was hers. In spite of being the biological daughter of Janak and sole inheritor of his name, Sita was referred to as Janaki (Janak's daughter) and not Urmila. Kane writes, "Sita had been hailed as Janaki, Janak's daughter when it was Urmila who was his daughter and the sole proprietor of that name. Sita was Maithili, the princess of Mithila, when it was Urmila who should have been crowned with that title" (23). But Urmila sacrificed what was hers since childhood and accepts the fact open heartedly for her sister. So, Kane, by her presentation, glorifies Urmila by removing her from the margins and placing her at the center stage.

Urmila is the one who is Sita's confidante. It is because of Urmila's courage, self-confidence and supporting nature, her sisters look upon her for backing. She always remained a positive catalyst in their lives. After falling in love with Ram, when Sita gets anxious about the fate of the *Swayamvar*, Urmila reassurs Sita that he would be the one "who will break that bow" and win her over and get marry him. Urmila's such words helped Sita in getting calm down but for Sita, she was her anchor who secured her to a comforting veracity of her own existence. Urmila was her life line; she was her soulmate" (22).

Urmila believes in intellectual upbringing of men and women alike. She is well educated, "well-versed in the Vedas and the Upanishads, politics, music, art and literature" (9). She, along with her sisters Sita, Mandavi and Shrutakriti, have been given a learning centric environment in Mithila where she

accompanied her father "to all the conferences and religious seminars across the country, experiencing a world no princess had been allowed to visit" (9). Unlike other women, she takes bold stands to pursue her passions of painting and studying Vedantic verses.

Although Urmila is strongly devastated when she comes to know that "The two persons whom she loved the most had left her, without a moment's hesitation" (142), she maturely accepts the reality and starts taking care of the royal family. After the death of king Dasharath, Ayodhya is in danger of war. Surprisingly, Urmila manages everything quite well as her mother appreciates her "if you can run your home well, you can conquer the world!" (183). Shatrughna thanks and appreciates Urmila for all she has done for the family and kingdom. He mentions,

All these years, Bharat and I might have looked after Ayodhya and the people, but it was you who looked after us, kept the family together and saved it from a living hell 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 (290).

In addition, she provides an effective contribution in managing the administrative and political affairs of Ayodhya in the absence of Ram, Lakshman and Bharat. The courtesans recognize her intellectual capability and take her advice. "O, daughter of the wise Raj rishi Janak, please look into the matters of the royal court for we do not want to be accused of power play or otherwise" (181). Thus, Urmila has also been portrayed as an able administrator. Kane writes about Urmila's character.

"The woman of passion as her name so defined her but one whose heart and mind had come together in intellectual and spiritual enrichment. In this long quest, she had delimited her persona both as a daughter and a wife suitably, not just complementing but supplementing both the male figures in her life" (Kane 2014 p. 269).

Urmila has independent attitude which resembles her to a modern Indian woman. She is outspoken and bold enough to raise her voice for any wrong doing. She takes the responsibility for her all deeds and never feels afraid to take well- thought-out risks. Yashika Bisht writes, "Urmila can be categorized in Elaine Showalter's female phase which is ongoing since 1920. It was the third stage of the period of evolution in which the „women show more independent attitude" (9). In the novel, Urmila not only takes courageous steps against the wrong done to other females but like a true activist, also fights for their rights. When Urmila gets to know mother Kaikeyi's desire for Ram's wife as she does not want Sita as Ram's bride as She wants the better one for him. She is shocked and does not tolerate it. She says furiously, "you shall not take it silently anymore Sita.... They have the audacity to think of remarriage dismissing you as if you were some trophies to be replaced! I won't have it Sita..." (Kane 2014 p.100). Kane gives voice to Urmila's feelings saying, "Do they seriously take us to be such tame girls who will scurry to obey?" ... "Haven't they realized yet that we are the daughters of Janak and Sunaina, who have been taught to uphold their pride and be courageous?" (100).

Akin to a contemporary Indian woman, adaptability to new and challenging environment can also be observed in Urmila's nature. Although it is a challenge for Urmila to adapt to the new environment of patriarchy ridden Ayodhya, she fulfils all the *dharmas* of a house-wife of the royal family. She respects one and all, but when she finds something wrong done to her or others in the palace, she never hesitates to question the authority. As she asks:

...we have talked about all shots of dharma- of the father and the sons, of king and The Princes, 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 his mother? Is it always about the father, sons and brothers? (219).

Urmila truly believes in the equality of sexes. She is the one who strongly supports the reciprocity between a wife and a husband. She audaciously criticizes the prevailing male dominance in all types of social affairs. Urmila asserts, "Everything, Gurudev, has been personal here, every single political decision. It's about the father, the brother, the sons; but pray, what about the mothers, the wives?" (220).

Urmila possesses the modern skill of multi-tasking too. She is able to strike a perfect balance between her desire for knowledge and academic pursuits, a quest that she has been nurturing since her pre-marital days, with her administrative and family duties. Surely, the young woman of today will not find it difficult to identify with Urmila. Sharma's comment on a modern Indian woman seem to be perfectly appropriate for Urmila also, "The modern Indian women have entered into all corners of life. She is a knowledge seeker, self-dependent, assertive and a vigorous challenger of negative social stigmas; but adaptive and an efficient multi-tasker" (Sharma p.3373).

Conclusion

If one observes the tendencies of a contemporary professional Indian woman, one can find Kane's Urmila going very close to them. Urmila questions not only the patriarchal dominance in the Indian society, but also the hypocrisy of the edicts of a woman's *dharma*. It is about the duties of a wife but not that of a husband. It is about the duties of a son for his father but not towards his mother. What kind of *Putra Dharma* (son's duty) is it to follow a father's command at the cost of abandoning his widowed mother? The novel *Sita's Wife* is a frank and direct challenge to such injustices shown in the traditional versions of the *Ramanyana*, while the mythical silent Urmila has been presented as the torch bearer of women's emancipation. Through the post-modern practice of Feminist Revisionist Mythology, Kavita Kane has depicted Urmila as a woman who negotiates her way through circumstances to get what she wants rather than be passivized as a one who makes sacrifices. She is intelligent, assertive, critical, sensitive, passionate, straight-forward, prudent, duty-bound, head strong and understanding, easily identifiable by a modern Indian proficient woman.

References

1. Bisht, Yashika. (2019). "Assertion of Individuality and Emancipation of Urmila in Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*." *International Journal of English Language*. vol.7: Issue: 7, Pp. 8- 22.
2. De Beauvoir, Simone. (1997). *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage.
3. Devi, S. Rema. (2018). Marking a Muffled Murmur in Mythology: A Feministic Approach to Kane's *Sita's Sister*. *Language in India* www.languageinindia.com. Vol. 18.p.135-146.
4. Beena, G. (2015). Giving Face to a Name – Urmil's Identity Quest in Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*. *Remarkings*, vol. II: Issue: VI. Pp. 80-83.
5. Kane, Kavita. (2014). *Sita's Sister*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications.
6. *Manusmriti*. Trans. Sir William Jones, 1794.
7. Mishra, Pushparaj. (2017). "Modern Indian woman educated empowered and emancipated." wordpress.com.

8. Maccabe, Mat. (2018). "The top 30 traits of the modern women". *News Anyway*.
9. Ostriker, Alicia. (1982). "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking." *Signs*, vol. 8, no. 1. Pp. 68-90.
10. --- . (1986). *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. Boston: Beacon Press.
11. Rich, Adrienne. (1972). "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision." *College English* 34.1, 18-30. <https://www.jstor.org/>
12. Rozells, Madison. (2020). "At the Heart of Legend: Feminist Revisionist Mythology in Twentieth-Century Poetry." <https://scarab.bates.edu/honorstheses/330>
13. Shekha, Arunima. (2015). "Sita's Sister: Book Review." Womensweb.in.
14. Sharma, Poonam & Nitin Bhatnagar. (2021). "Urmila of Kavita Kane's Sita's Sister: A Paradigm of a Contemporary Indian Women." *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business and Government*. Vol. 27, No. 1, 2021. <https://cibg.org.au/>
15. Tyson, Lois. (2006). "Feminist Criticism". *Critical Theory Today*, New York: Routledge, , Pp. 83-133.