

Giving a Face to a Name – Urmila’s Identity Quest in Kavita Kane’s *Sita’s Sister*



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Abstract

Though the great epic *Ramayana* has been one of the most favoured sources for retelling and revisionist writing, it is interesting to note that not all characters in the epic have received adequate attention or space. One of the characters in the epic who has suffered the most from this neglect and critical invisibility is Urmila, always known either as “*Sita’s sister*” or “Lakshman’s wife”. As a consequence, Urmila has always remained at the periphery never once even having been let into the limelight. It is in this context that Kavita Kane’s novel ‘*Sita’s Sister*’ assumes significance. The narrative moves away from both the Ram-centric and the Sita-centric versions of the *Ramyana* to focus on Urmila creating a compelling feminist narrative for her and voicing her concerns and questions. The objective of this paper is two-fold, one to trace Urmila’s emergence from the shadows to the limelight, and second to show how she battles and resists patriarchal prejudices of her times as also the subsequent critical neglect.

Keywords: Urmila, Margins, Indian Feminism, Revisionist Writing.

Introduction

The mythological epic ‘*Ramyana*’ is one of the most widely adapted works in literature. Epics have been told retold and reinterpreted several times by various authors. Re-vision of myths in the Indian society has been a subject of keen interest for several writers because multiple renderings of texts bring in multiple perspectives and dimensions making the original and the revisionist versions richer. Kavita Kane brings to fore Urmila, a character from the *Ramyana* who has never appeared in the centre stage of Valmiki’s version of the epic. She exists only on the periphery, more as a name than as a person in the conventional renderings. She has been unheard and overshadowed in the earlier versions and if at all, is remembered only as *Sita’s sister* and Lakshman’s wife- a name without a face. Urmila’s identity has been eclipsed by the other prime characters such as Ram, Sita, Lakshman and Bharat who are towering embodiments of certain ideals. Kavita Kane gives a voice and a face to Urmila, reclaims her from the margins and places her in the centre. The very act of writing about Urmila who lay forgotten, unheard and unsung under reams of demigods makes for a fascinating exploration.

Aim of Study

The aim of the study is to understand the course of events from Urmila’s perspective so as to trace her emergence from the margins to the centre-stage. In addition to this, the study also explores the patriarchal prejudices of her times and how Urmila resists and fights them. It is important to understand how Urmila, an Indian woman negotiates her way through out life to live her life with a clear purpose. It is an attempt to listen to the firm feminist voice of Urmila.

In ‘*Sita’s Sister*’, Urmila adorns various roles – a sister, a daughter, a wife, daughter-in-law, and so on. However, what stands out, irrespective of the various roles is her strength and an ability to handle every situation with finesse and aplomb. Urmila’s journey from Mithila to Ayodhya is in fact an allegorical and tenacious search for an individual identity aimed at going beyond being merely *Sita’s sister* or Lakshman’s wife.

In the novel, Urmila is represented as a woman of many dimensions: she is a scholar, an artist, and most importantly a woman who is a pivot, holding everyone together. She traverses her journey “triumphed tears and tragedy with dignity and strength”. (Author interview: “Kavita Kane” author of “*Sita’s Sister*”. Sruti’s Book Blog). Kavita Kane re-creates Urmila and re-presents her as a woman with immense strength and conviction, a distinct identity, a sharp thinking mind and a loving heart. The

myth gets contemporised with Urmila questioning the order of patriarchy and accepted conventions. The author lends a feminist undertone to the hitherto unheard voice of Urmila and rearticulates her position. In order to respond to feminist appropriations, Kavita Kane takes certain fictional liberties. For instance the portrayal of Kaushalya as a cynical character with an overbearing motherly concern is a novelty. This novel is the representation of Urmila's side of the story.

The novel can be read as an answer to the question asked by Lakshman – “O Urmila will the world ever know of your inner suffering, your divine sacrifice?” (Kane, 2014: 158). Urmila is the true born, biological daughter of king Janak of Mithila. Though Valmiki's version mentions Urmila's sacrifice, only a few verses are spared for her. The sacrifice of Urmila is referred to in a Telugu ballad titled ‘Urmila Devi Nidra’ (Urmila's sleep) where she asks Nidra, the Goddess of sleep to take away Lakshman's sleep so that he could stay alert and protect Ram and Sita in the forest while she would sleep on his behalf during the entire period of fourteen years of exile. Devdutt Pattanaik too mentions this version in his article “Lakshman's wife goes to sleep” (Sunday Middy, 2011). Kane breaks away from this version and adopts another version wherein Urmila studies and establishes herself as a scholar of repute. In Kane's rendering Urmila's sacrifice is not represented as a passive one. Kane's Urmila does not allow herself to be made passive at all. She very actively takes charge of her life and moves forward. She shuts her eyes only to be oblivious to the pain of separation and moves on (Kane, 2014: 224). Kavita Kane herself expresses the active role of her protagonist thus – “Urmila was to have slept for fourteen years when her husband was away on exile... It was metaphorical... Instead I looked her beyond being Sita's sister or Lakshman's wife or Janak's daughter. A scholar, an artist, and a woman who held the fort at Ayodhya when the three went on their exile” (Author interview ;Kavita Kane, Sruti's Book Blog). Kane's Urmila goes through her life being alive to and involved with everything within and around herself. Every decision made and action taken are well thought of and analysed by her and hence she does not drift through life at all. She charts a clear course and directs her life ahead.

The Urmila that Kane creates is a strikingly strong and modern woman with a mind of her own. She is learned, sensitive and loving. Her propensity for intellectual pursuits and quest for knowledge is presented thus – “marriage did not hold much interest for Urmila but it was a social discipline she would have to conform to. She would rather seek knowledge instead of a suitor.” (Kane 2014: 9). Having been nurtured by king Janak who was himself a renowned *rajarishi*, well versed in Vedas and shastras, Urmila grew up reciting vedic verses. The four sisters were exposed to the Vedas, Upanishads, politics, music art and literature. They had accompanied king Janak to all the conferences and religious ceremonies across the countries, experiencing a world no princess had been allowed to visit (Kane, 2014: 9).

Traditionally all intellectual engagements were the prerogative of men. Women in Kavita Kane's novel aspire to break the bastion and Urmila does this

most tellingly. Though all the sisters grow up in the same liberal environment yet it is only Urmila who is always a step ahead. It is she who nurtures an intellectual spark inside her. She breaks gender stereotypes and pursues knowledge even in Ayodhya's royal court under the tutelage of Vasishtha and other gurus. Guru Kashyap acknowledges her brilliant questioning mind (Kane, 2014: 264). Mandavi calls her ‘the free thinker who doesn't believe in rituals and rites’ (Kane, 2014: 17). She not only enters into the male bastion to acquire knowledge but also consolidates her identity as a scholar. Janak invites her to participate in a conference not as his daughter but in her own right as an acclaimed scholar who gains mastery over Vedas and Upanishads and could debate on religion and philosophy. In his arguments as a theologian, king Janak did not always agree with her but Urmila continued questioning the rationality of religion. (Kane, 2014: 265) She participates in the conference where the most intense intellectual conversations among respected *rishis* take place. Reciting, arguing and debating succinctly, she holds forth. ‘She was Urmila... one whose heart and mind come together in intellectual and spiritual enrichment’ (Kane, 2014: 268-269). She leaves her mark as a woman with a fertile mind. A passionate artist Urmila “was like the colours she was blending...warm vibrant and sparkling, her quicksilver temper included.” (Kane, Kavita, “Sita's Sister, 2014, 7). It is her yearning to know more, to learn more that fires her with a sense of purpose in life.

Kane's Urmila exhibits a masculine assertiveness throughout while retaining her essential femininity. Her courage and fearlessness have a physical manifestation in the novel. This is seen in several instances where she becomes fiercely protective of people – be it Sita, Lakshman, or her sisters. In the chapter ‘The Swayamvar’, Ravan insults king Janak and Sita. Things turn unruly leading to an uproar. Urmila senses the growing anger, understands that she needs to protect herself and others – “She knew she would have to battle it alone – for herself and her sisters.” (Kane, 2014: 34). After the *shiv dhanush* is broken the *raj sabha* is engulfed in sage Parshuram's wrath. Lakshman's remark of the bow being broken by Ram infuriates sage Parshuram who does not hesitate to kill Lakshman. Urmila intervenes and saves Lakshman from death. (Kane, 2014: 41) These events clearly pronounce her courage and loyalty to the people she loved. Interestingly, the same Urmila attacks Lakshman with a dagger when he kills a demon, who is in the guise of Sita. Fiercely protective of Sita, she could kill anyone, even Lakshman (Kane, 2014: 52). She dons the male role of being a protector of people she loves. Sunaina acknowledges her faith in Urmila thus – “with you there to look after your sisters, I have no reason to fret... Urmila... you are their strength.” (Kane, 2014: 89-90). She is warrior-like in her courage and loyalty manifesting a feminist identity which makes Lakshman claim her as his “warrior wife!” (Kane, 2014: 224) or queen Kaikeyi complimenting Urmila as a “blood-thirsty, knife-brandishing warrior...” (Kane, 2014: 103). Contrary to merely being Sita's shadow, ‘Urmila had always been the veritable older sister... strong, fiercely protective like a tigress, shielding her

(Sita) from everything... (Kane, 2014: 24). Both Urmila and Lakshman are similar in their roles as protectors. Urmila's fiery contentious nature and Lakshman's stiff hauteur... both shared a common affliction – the prickly egotism (Kane, 2014: 46). Both address each other as warriors. Urmila exhibits the ruthlessness of a warrior and the quickness of a shrewd decision maker in the way she orders Manthra to be thrown into the darkest, smallest prison cell for fourteen years. She orders Manthra – “I don't waste time doing idle talk with subordinates...” (Kane, 2014: 200). She takes part in the affairs of the state and takes crucial decisions in the absence of Bharat. She clearly breaks gender stereotypes and ventures into male spaces taking on male roles with ease.

Urmila fights every fear and insecurity within and around her to marry Lakshman. This contemporizes her, in the sense that a modern woman wouldn't mind adhering to a patriarchal rider provided that she is given a reason, for that acknowledges her being accepted intellectually. Thus, she assures her mother Sunaina of her choice and convinces her. The final battle is with none other than Lakshman himself who refuses to marry her for fear of losing her because of his devotion to Ram. His conflict and anguish is expressed in the clear decision that Ram will always be his first choice.... “If I were faced with...dilemma, I shall choose my brother each time” (Kane, 2014: 68). He is afraid because he cannot forsake her happiness for his principles. Urmila is able to put his anxieties to rest and expresses her decision to marry him. She is unafraid to face uncomfortable truths and consequences of her conscious and active choices. Here too as a modern woman Urmila must be in the know of things so as to make her choices within those parameters. She clearly understands and accepts her role as a second – both in her parental and marital homes. Though Urmila is actually entitled to the titles ‘Janaki’ (Janak's daughter) and ‘Maithili’ (Princess of Mithila) yet it is Sita who gets these titles. She has never been resentful about it. She is also aware of Lakshman's unflinching loyalty to his brother, but she herself also chooses Sita over Lakshman when she attacks him. She could not wipe away that tearing troubling thought – had she elected her sister over him? (Kane, 2014: 52). Urmila accepts to stay back during the exile too. Her intellectual quest and control over self pity help her rise beyond the trying circumstances. “There was no place for maudlin self-pity or wasted sentimentality” (Kane, 2014:157). She consoles and reassures a worried Sunaina that she (Urmila) was not giving up her rights but was accepting a reality and a responsibility.

Urmila in Kane's *Sita's Sister* is a fighter. She argues, questions, and fights even if the outcome may not be what she wants. However, she never lets her voice be unheard. She questions vehemently the notions of *dharma* when she confronts the elders and ministers in Ram's hut in the forest. She fights for the sake of Mandavi when Bharat decides to abandon all and become an ascetic. Urmila breathes fire when she questions the patriarchal notions of duty and loyalty – “we have talked about all sorts of *dharma* of the father and sons, of the king and the princes, of the Brahmins and the Kshatriya, even of the 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 brother?” (Kane, 2014: 219). These are fundamental questions that she asks which shake the structure of patriarchy. Similarly, when Ram makes Sita undergo the chastity test, Urmila says forcefully – “it was a dilemma of a husband versus the king-who is higher is the moral question” (Kane, 2014: 294). She minces no words to question and criticise Ram for the *Agnipariksha* event. In Ayodhya, things take an unpleasant turn with an illogical proposal to get Ram remarried when Urmila furiously questions the same and fights for Sita, “they have the audacity to think of remarriage dismissing you as if you are some trophy to be replaced! I won't have it, Sita... (Kane, 2014: 100). She vehemently questions the royal family too and thereby questions power and patriarchy. As an insider of the family she accuses that the royal family is cruellest to its own family members. “What were all the elders doing – the other two queens, the ministers, the royal priests and you gurus? Did anyone refute the king's decision?” (Kane, 2014: 222). Her voice of resistance is loud and clear in the cloistered silence of the palace of Ayodhya.

The circumstances of exile and separation are the same for Urmila and Mandavi. However, it is Urmila who defines her life more positively. Both of them handle the situations differently and as a result Urmila finds a clear direction and purpose to her life while Mandavi remains trapped, frustrated and bitter. Urmila, like Sunaina favoured a personal philosophy of individual progress, private freedom and choice. In spite of circumstances that are stereotypical and subjugating, Urmila rises above each of them through her clear choices. Mandavi on the other hand nurtures ambitions of becoming a queen which is the sole reason for which she marries Bharat. The separation and Bharat's decision to give up the throne frustrates her making her feel “like a mad caged animal” (Kane, 2014: 237). Mandavi is angry and hurt which corrodes into her very soul. She lives in her island, surrounded by pain, bitterness and disillusionment... while Urmila's unshakable self-belief had made her bloom and blossom, weathering the worst of times (Kane, 2014: 288-289). Urmila never allows circumstances to overpower her and being a fighter shies above all limiting and trying circumstances. Her artistic and intellectual aspirations are far more important to her than any titles or positions. This quest defines her life and choices positively giving her a higher purpose.

Urmila is central to the events in the novel and displays the mettle and the fortitude to provide anchorage to her family (both paternal and marital). This again is traditionally the duty of a son that she performs. The novel is an account of her journey at various levels- physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual. Urmila registers an acknowledgment of her roles and identities within the larger patriarchal and male dominated order of the day. She asks relevant questions, demands answers, puts forth her firm point of view and ensures that her voice is heard and listened to. Her life with Lakshman has striking parallels – both are fiercely protective of their elder siblings, the physical description of the two are similar with their explosive tempers, warrior like alertness and

the sacrifice each has to make suggest that Kane's Urmila is making a feminist claim to be considered on an equal footing with men. 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 to stake her claim as a feminist with a distinct voice. Female bonding through Urmila is a source of strength for the other women to counter and mount a defence against the institution of patriarchy.

Conclusion

Kavita Kane reclaims this forgotten, unsung, and unheard character and presents her quest for an identity. Urmila holds forth various roles and binds everyone together. She is the medium through which Kane asks certain relevant and contemporary questions that clearly present a feminist perspective. Her search for an identity and exploration of the intellectual self in the world of patriarchy reincarnates Urmila as a real woman. She is real in contemporary terms negotiating her way through circumstances to achieve what she wants rather than be passivized as a woman who makes glorious sacrifices. The quest

for knowledge defines her and she achieves this in her remarkable journey of fortitude. Her decision to move forward in her life without the two people she loved most – Sita and Lakshman sets her apart. Her journey is truly a quest for a voice, an identity and personal progress. Kane presents a layered representation of Urmila's identity as an intelligent, assertive, uncomplicated, and sensible woman who loves passionately and also defines and expands herself with intellectual pursuits and achievements. She luminously stands out with her courage and conviction. Her dominant mode of resistance is persistent questioning which approximates to the voice of Western first wave Feminist Movement.

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