

## Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*: An Unsung Heroine of *Ramayana*

**Shivani**

Research Scholar  
Department of English,  
Gurukul Kangri (Deemed to be University)  
Haridwar, 249404 Uttarakhand  
Email: [Shivi95bhgn@gmail.com](mailto:Shivi95bhgn@gmail.com)

**Dr. Shrawan K Sharma**

Professor  
Department of English,  
Gurukul Kangri (Deemed to be University)  
Haridwar, 249404 Uttarakhand  
Email: [drshrawan@gmail.com](mailto:drshrawan@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*Ramayana* has been a perennial source for creative writers in India and abroad. While the earlier writers were attracted towards the major characters of *Ramayana*, the contemporary writers are writing with a focus on minor/subordinated characters, particularly the minor women characters. Among the contemporary writers, Kavita Kane is one of such writers, who in order to re-create the female-centric version of *Ramayana*, renovates minor women characters for her writing. Many overshadowed female characters in *Ramayana* have not received adequate space in the original text. Kane has picked up these peripheral characters and provides them with due space in her writing and makes them the most assertive and outspoken women in the contemporary world. The present paper is an attempt to study Kane's novel, *Sita's Sister*, in which she explores the attitudinal shift in Urmila's personality showing how she is transformed into a perfect woman, moving from sensitive to sensible, from silent and subdued person to a strong questioner and how she seeks her individuality in the androcentric society and establishes herself as a contemporary modern woman.

**Keywords:** subdued character, androcentric society, attitudinal shift, female-centric version.

In the Indian epics, there are many female figures whose identities and sacrifices are eclipsed in the shadow of the major female protagonist and Urmila is one of them who remains unsung so far in Indian text. In *Ramayana*, Urmila, the true-born heiress of Mithila and the only legitimate daughter of King Seeradhvaj Janak (King Janak) and Queen Sunaina, is a highly lesser known character in Valmiki's *Ramayana* where she is mentioned in her marriage in the entire episode of Balakanda and her sacrifices have been conveniently ignored and forgotten. She is not only the subordinated and neglected character of our ancient epic but also in those of Kamban and Tulasi Das. Rabindranath Tagore is also considered Urmila, one of the forgotten heroines of Indian Literature. Kavita Kane realizes that ancient mythology is also the victim of patriarchy. In her Interview with The New Indian Express, she asserts:

If women have not been portrayed in a proper light, it's because of mythology and chauvinism which made us all myopic and did not allow us to see these women for their enormous strength and conviction. We need to return them into their original self by again using mythology as a tool to show what they originally were (2017).

Moreover, there are several versions of *Ramayana* where she remains in the periphery of the time and the authors. But at present, some retellings and translations have placed her on the highest pedestal. V. Narayan Rao's article *The Song of the Urmila's Separation: The Andhra Women's Ballad* highlights the most overlooked character of Urmila when she comes to the centre of the stage. *The Liberation of Sita* by Volga (translated from Telugu by T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree) also focuses on the self-centred

attitudes of Urmila, who explores the truth by meditating during the long separation from her husband. Moreover, Devdutt Pattanaik also highlights Urmila's character in his article *Lakshman's Wife Goes to Sleep*. In addition, *Saket* is another remarkable work of Hindi Literature also based on the Ramayana written by Maithili Saran Gupt. His epic narration is based on the painful separation of Urmila and Lakshman where Urmila is the protagonist and the poem is narrated from her point of view. In the series of retellings of the epics, Kavita Kané is the most revolutionary author who renovates the marginal characters and gives them adequate space in her creative writing.

Kavita Kané brings her personality to the limelight and presents her as equal to the male-centred version of *Ramayana*. As it is clear in the title, she is noticed as the sister of Sita and the wife of Lakshaman but her peculiarity has been completely wiped off in the ancient text. Kané brings her sacrifices into the limelight and justifies her role as a modern woman who is more courageous and outspoken and this quality makes her a strong-willed woman. This novel seems to be a response to Lakshaman's burning question – "O Urmila! Will the world ever know of your inner suffering, your divine sacrifice?" (158) In one of her interviews with *New Asian Writing*, Kané talks about Urmila and says: "It is her untold story, her personal exile, her travails, trials and tribulations as she waited for him, but yet lived her life without tears and self-sympathy. She further adds she was a strong woman but not much is known about her as she unfortunately is one of the most overlooked characters in the epic" (NAW, 2014 <http://www.new-asian-writing.com>).

This research is an attempt to answer why Urmila gets ready to become the second fiddle not only in the Mithila but also in Ayodhya? Why does she stay back in the doomed palace and follow the orders of Lakshaman? How does she manage her completely shattered family and court affairs? How does she break the stereotypical image of Indian society and argue about Dharma? How does she contribute to her better half in the war, even while living in Ayodhya?

Urmila's personality can be divided into two parts; one, as a traditional Hindu woman and the other as a contemporary Indian woman. As a traditional Hindu woman, she is famous for her fourteen years long sleep also known as *Urmila Nidra*, performing *Pativratra Dharma* in which she shares her husband's sleep during expulsion so that he can perform his duty to protect Ram and Sita. As a contemporary Indian woman, she prefers to move on from the pangs of sorrow and escalates her passion towards studying Vedas and Upanishad and becomes a renowned scholar and painter. This is what Kané has focussed on for her creative response to Urmila. Poonam Sharma and Nitin Bhatnagar examine the character of Urmila and say that "In *Sita's Sister*, Kavita Kané has given voice to the muted character of Urmila and portrayed her character with the traits of a modern woman who does not accept the traditional secondary status but displays a demeanour that is akin to that of men" (JCIBG: 2480).

In *Sita's Sister*, Kané wonderfully portrays Urmila's personality as a caring sister, sensible caretaker, responsible wife, a great learner and a critical critic. She is the younger sister of Sita and the only biological daughter of King Janak. Since her childhood, she has never been a prominent state in her family. Though she knew that her elder sister Sita was adopted by her parents, she never argued with them. Being a legitimate heiress of Mithila, Urmila never gets any princely treatment from her parents because the place is always reserved for Sita who "have been hailed as Janki, Janka's daughter when it is Urmila who is 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). However, Urmila never feels any resentment towards her loving sister rather than venerates her most. Even when mother Kaikeyi addresses her with the same name, she corrects her immediately, "I am neither...It is Sita who is called Janaki and Maithili, Mother" (93). Here, Kané depicted them as soul mates and revealed their sisterhood beautifully. She says, "Two cradles had rocked in perfect harmony since childhood as smooth and strong as the bond that was to blossom between the two girls" (11).

In her novel, Kané gives adequate space to women in the androcentric society. She provides a contemporary outlook for a woman who deconstructs the conventional stereotype and weaves a complex web of identities. Here, Urmila grows up in a learning-centric environment of Mithila, where she gets all kinds of freedom and is allowed to make her decisions independently. As author renders the modern

surroundings of Mithila where the “all princesses were well versed in the Vedas and the Upanishads, politics, music, art and literature...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” (9). Like her father, Urmila is a knowledge-seeking girl and does not follow stereotypical social customs. Her longing to acquire more knowledge shifts her attitude towards matrimony and makes her unique in the patriarchal world.

Kané easels her image on the dais and delineates her as a pillar of strength among all the sisters. Her first heroic trait can be noticed in the episode of Swayamwar, when Ravan, the king of demons fails to string Rudra’s bow; roars in anger and utters outrageous words for Sita. Urmila, who is supposed to be a voiceless and mild-mannered girl, “looked squarely up at him, her eyes sparkling with unsuppressed fury and loathing” (32). She is not a silent listener rather raises questions, argues, and fights for the wrong. She is a very sharp observer. On the occasion of the customary aarti, she detects the sardonic behaviour of Mother Kaikeyi towards Sita, but when she gets to know that Mother Kaikeyi is looking for another bride for Ram, she flares up in anger and reacts furiously for Sita:

How dare they do this to you?... You shall not take it silently anymore, Sita!... They have the audacity to think of remarriage dismissing you as if you were a trophy to be replaced! I won’t have it, Sita... She further added ‘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)

Urmila is a very liberal-minded woman and possessed of striking beauty and goodness. She is bold enough to eradicate the orthodox idealism of society, where a woman could not meet her fiancé; she decides to meet him alone before the pre-wedding events to learn about his feelings for her. Though she becomes immobile to overhear the burning discourse of the two brothers, when Lakshman discloses the reasons behind his abnegation for marriage and accepts his love for her, she makes sure that she will never be an intruder in his life. She says adamantly: “Loving is also giving; you are not ready to give yourself to me. But don’t you see, I don’t want your complete surrender? I love you but that does not mean I possess you, your beliefs and your loyalties. I assure you that I shall never come between your loyalty to your brothers and your families”(67).

Here, Urmila shows her intellectual upbringing and her belief in the eternity of love and its connection to the soul. She is an enchantress for Lankshman, “one where the hearts meet” (145) He also loves her unconditionally but cannot devote himself completely to his Mila. Their relationship never surfaced; buried under the duties of dharma but Kané provides enough space to groom their relationship. It is also heart-wrenching for Lakshman to be separated from his beloved; therefore requests her, “Make it easier for me, Mila” (145). He also acknowledges her strength and says, “You are so strong – the strongest woman I have ever known” (144). Urmila knows very well that “he would go to the forest, with or without her consent” (141) therefore, she adopts the *theory of detachment* that helps him and her too, on their journey to exile; so speaks ruthlessly to hurt him but succeed to lead the forthcoming fourteen years. She says:

You cannot stay back for me because your brother is more precious than your wife. You are not like your father to listen to his wife, are you? She taunted will deserting your wife and serving your brother make you more noble? Then let me hate you for that. Let me hate you for the forthcoming fourteen years... Let me hate you as passionately as I loved you (147).

At this juncture, her journey starts to be a *Second*; not only in the parental house but also in her in-laws. Here, the delineation of Urmila seems to be a response to Lakshman’s burning question – “O Urmila! Will the world ever know of your inner suffering, your divine sacrifice?” (158). According to Vibha Sharma, “She comes across as an individual who acknowledges and accepts her situations gracefully – whether it is by 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” (Rev. Feb. 22, 2015).

As we know that in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, Urmila’s portrayal is meek and submissive and her sacrifices are confined to a few verses while Kané renovates her personality and describes her sacrifices during the

period of exile. The author manifests her versatile personality and sets her image in contemporary society. During the long fourteen years, she accomplishes her shattered family and manages the court affairs in the absence of Bharata and Shatrughana. She recalls the lesson of her parents, that “If you can run your home well, you can conquer the world” (182) and takes charge as a warrior and says firmly, “We are emotionally vulnerable right now but let us not be unprepared for war. Keep the army ready”(180). Therefore, she justifies the criminals; punishes the evil soul and establishes the ideal monarchy.

Kané craves out the candid personality of Urmila who is bold enough to questions about dharma. Now, she is more practical and parallel to the man who raises her voice against wrong. When Bharat decides to move on for Nandigram until Ram’s return she questions him about his duty/dharma towards his wife, saying “Bharat, like your brothers, Ram and Lakshman, you too shall live a life of an ascetic, free from the bond of love and worldly care. Who cares about whatever happens to your wife and family? (219) She further questions vehemently:

Today, in this room, we have talked about all sorts of dharma of the father and the sons, of the king and the princes, of the Brahmin 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 brothers? (219)

Urmila also asks the same questions to Ram and Gurus “What is the dharma of the man for his wife, the dharma of a man for his mother? Please give me an answer” (220). Not only once but also in several places she raises her voice from time to time. In the whole narration, Urmila is the only one who encounters male supremacy and questions vehemently to elders. She knew that ‘society has always been hypocritical’ but wondered to see Ram’s acknowledgement of the fire ordeal to prove Sita’s chastity. She questions, “What crime had she committed for him to cover up and prove to the world her innocence?... Ram stood up for all those women vilified by society- Tara, Mandodari, Ahalya- then why could he not protect Sita from social censure?” (294) Vidhya Vijayan finds Urmila an audacious heroine of *Ramayana*. He says, “Like a combatant, she fights against all the malevolence that exists in society and also questions the injustices and atrocities shown towards the submissive category of society, especially to Sita” (Vijian, 2018, 141).

During the long fourteen years, Urmila throws light on her *Self* and polishes her skills passionately. She used to paint in her free time and paid more attention to acquiring knowledge. She breaks the gender stereotype mindset in Indian society by becoming the tutelage of Guru Vasishtha and Guru Kashyap who acknowledges her as a brilliant questioning mind. Through her logical arguments, she enters the highly prerogative authority in a society where she is admitted as a pandit; a learned scholar who has the mastery of Vedas, Upanishads and Philosophy. It is a very proud moment for Urmila when she receives an invitation from her father to join a prestigious philosophical conference *Brahmanyagna*; not as a daughter but as an acclaimed scholar. Sometimes, her arguments are different from her father’s way of thinking; therefore, “She questioned the rationality of religion and its influence on the nature of religious truth rather than seeking the divinity in religion as he did” (265).

As we know, Kaikeyi has been castigated only for her evilness in Ayodhya Kanda and she is a crooked woman just like Manthara. But in *Sita’s Sister* Kané adds some unspoken facts of her life and enhances her personality beyond it. Urmila also fights for Mother Kaikeyi and discloses her great sacrifices to save the future of Raghuvamsa. Urmila also jerked the conscience of mother Kausalya, making her feel how their (Kausalya and Kaikeyi) insecurity for royal position and their jealousy make them rival each other. She asks, “When Ram returns and the brothers are reunited, will that animosity between the two of you again ruin things for them?” (245).

Moreover, Kané also brings out the character of Urmila through Sumitra, the mother of Lakshman. For Urmila, she is the motherly figure who admits her sacrifices and feels apologies to her, “Did he deserve you? I often wonder...Did we deserve you?... You showed us the mirror to the real us, not a reflection of what the world and we ourselves believed about us...So, don’t thank me, dear. I thank you. We thank you for making us happier, better people” (291). Urmila’s character is also elevated through Rama who shows his gratefulness to Urmila and admits to her as an extraordinary woman. He says, “I am deeply

grateful, Urmila... I leave my old parents under your care, and I know they could not have been in kinder hands. You are a remarkable woman – extraordinarily brave and strong” (154). Similarly, Shatrughna admits Urmila’s selfless dedication and practices that tied up the whole family together. He salutes her everlasting hope, patience and endeavour; and says fervently:

You saved my brother... You saved us! 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).

Even her mother Sunaina is also astonished to see her transformation and says, “What I also see is my little girl grown into this fine woman who stands elegantly brave even in her despair and desolation, who sees not the darkness but the light ahead. Who appreciates the now for the never”(187). Apart from these, her father also acknowledges her exile and calls her *tapasvi*. He says, “The exile made you understand the meaning of *tapasya* and thus made you a *tapasvi*.” He applauds his daughter and feels proud by saying, “As a wife of Lakshman, it was an exile for you as well—an exile from attachment... Your separation was your meditation, your spiritual rebirth and your love for your husband became your salvation” (271).

Thus, Urmila is the backbone of the family and binds all the family in a single rope. She manages not only her household responsibilities but also state affairs. She raises her voice against the injustice and the patriarchal norms objectively and sensibly. By questioning the dharma, she thresholds the conventional image of a woman and presents her as an empowered and independent woman. Her fourteen years of self-imposed exile helped her for quest her individual identity in which she would be able to establish herself as a learned scholar. Urmila’s quest for knowledge and the power of self-consideration brings an attitudinal shift in her personality and transforms her into a contemporary woman. As per the law of *Manusmriti*, Sita has been considered the idol of *Pativrata Stri* (Ideal woman) from epochs but according to contemporary studies, the title of *Ideal Wife* or *The Epitome of Sacrifice* should be given to Urmila because she completely devotes herself to protect her family and manages her household responsibility rather than relishes the luxury of life. In this novel, Kané successfully associates her role with the mainstream of *Ramayana*; unfolds her life in a new light and traces her sacrifices meticulously through the contemporary lens.

### Work Cited

Kané, Kavita. *Sita’s Sister*. New Delhi: Rupa Publicatio, 2014.Print.

Kané, Kavita. *NAW interview with Kavita Kané*. <http://www.new-asian-writing.com> December25, 2014. Web. April7, 2023.

Kaushik, Tushar. *The Kavita Kané Interview: Why Feminism in Indian Mythology Matters Today*. <https://www.edexlive.com> November4, 2017. Web. June30. 2022.

Sharma, Poonam and Nitin Bhatnagar. *Urmila of Kavita Kané’s Sita’s Sister: A Paradigm of a Contemporary Indian Women*. Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business and Government. <https://cibg.org.au/> Vol.27,No. 2,2021 P-ISSN: 2204-1990; E-ISSN: 123-6903 Web. July24,2021.

Sharma, Vibha. Rev. of *Sita’s Sister* by Kavita Kane. Web. April22, 2020.

Vijayan, Vidhya. *Unveiling the Doubly Marginalised: A Feminist Reading of Kavita Kané’s Karna’s Wife and Sita’s Sister*. Literary Endeavour. [www.literaryendeavour.org](http://www.literaryendeavour.org) Vol.IX: Issue.4 (October, 2018) ISSN: 0976-299X Web. September20, 2022.