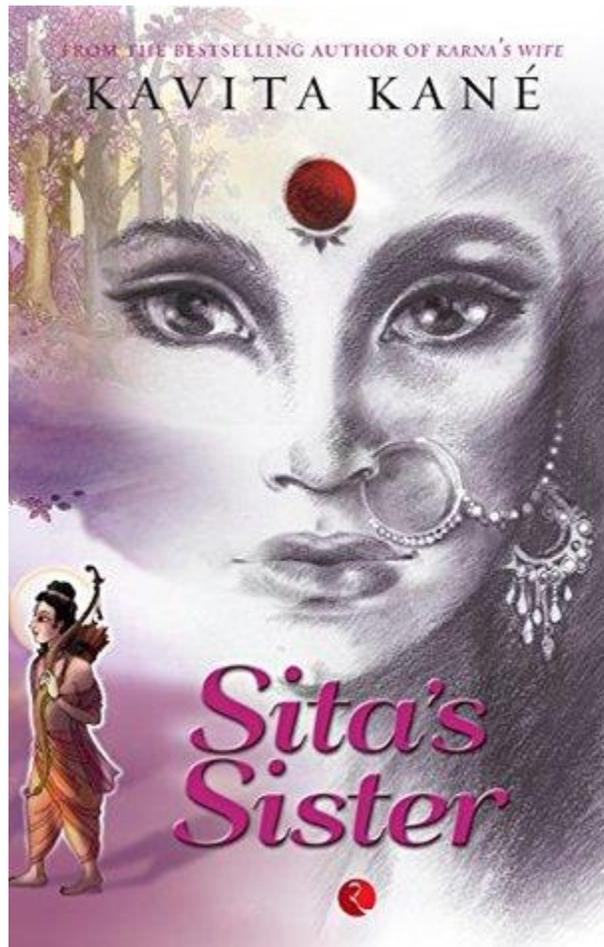


Marking a Muffled Murmur in Mythology: A Feministic Approach to Kané's *Sita's Sister*

Dr. S. Rema Devi



Abstract

As per the Hindu mythology, the intention of God creating a woman is to support a man and to procreate. She has to be a facilitator of his progeny. Other than the lead roles of continuing his lineage and supporting him in his obligatory duties, the power bestowed in a woman does not sound significant. These ideas face conflicts when the divine roles of Goddesses

are analysed in these myths. However, the women are bestowed with secondary roles where men take the lead roles. The Ramayana is one of the two great epics of India. Sita is the central female character of the Ramayana. People worship Sita, who is supposed to be the daughter of Mother Earth and this may be the reason that she is portrayed as a silent sufferer. Nevertheless, there are other silent sufferers too, who had been muted under the web of love. *Sita's Sister* by Kavita Kane voices such a noteworthy character Urmila, Sita's sister and wife of Lakshmana. The present paper traces put the elements of feminism in the voice of the voiceless Urmila.

Key Words: Kavita Kane, *Sita's Sister*, Mythology-fiction, Feminism, Urmila.

Patriarchal Notions

As per the Hindu mythology, the intention of God creating a woman is to support a man and to procreate. She has to be a facilitator of his progeny. Other than the lead roles of continuing his lineage and supporting him in his obligatory duties, the power bestowed in a woman does not sound significant. These ideas face conflicts when the divine roles of Goddesses are analysed in these myths. However, the women are bestowed with secondary roles where men take the lead roles.

In the system of patriarchy, a woman has been pictured as an embodiment of submissiveness. She has to bear the burdens of obligations of her husband. A woman has to play multifaceted roles of a daughter, a sister, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother and the like. She has to succumb to the orders of all the members of the family. As the sources from the web advocates, "It's interesting to look at what Indian mythology holds as signs of strength and morality in women. These are women who always listen to what they're told, never protest and they're only recourse to expressing anger is renunciation of everything, even asceticism." (<https://www.dailyo.in /politics/indian-mythology-rape-women-patriarchy/story/1/17120.html>)

The position of women has always been controversial. A range of position is visible in the Indian mythology. The range is from a dumb muted wife to the position of a goddess. "The various myths too represent these women as per these doctrines of the earlier days. Sure, there

have been hundreds of retellings and reinterpretations through the centuries in which our female protagonists have been recast in new moulds. But these stories have remained confined to their niche, and their reach has been limited in terms of popularity as a frame of reference.”

(<https://scroll.in/article/828515/indian-mythology-is-a-new-medium-of-choice-for-feminist-narratives-and-its-working>).



Kavita Kané

Courtesy: <https://www.hydlitfest.org/interview-with-kavita-kane/>

Portrayal of Women in Mythology

The epics and myths portray women as subordinate because they are written by men of the patriarchal society. Moreover, the men enjoyed the pleasure of subjugating women and the reason of subservience did not allow chances of exposure of women to the written scriptures. Hence, the women were denied chances of voicing their grievances, even if things were emphasized in the wrong way. The Ramayana is one of the two great epics of India. Sita is the central female character of the Ramayana. People worship Sita, who is supposed to be the

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:2 February 2018
Ms. T. Vembu, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., (Ph.D.), Editor: *English Language, Literature & Culture*

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daughter of Mother Earth and this may be the reason that she is portrayed as a silent sufferer. Nevertheless, there are other silent sufferers too, who had been muted under the web of love. Many authors, at present, have turned towards mythology-fiction. The words from the web are evident to this fact. “Many writers of modern mythological fiction are taking up feminist cudgels, often turning familiar tropes on their head. With easy choices in digital and self-publishing, there are more new voices than ever before.”(<https://scroll.in/article/828515/indian-mythology-is-a-new-medium-of-choice-for-feminist-narratives-and-its-working>).

Sita’s Sister

Sita’s Sister by Kavita Kane voices such a noteworthy character Urmila, Sita’s sister and wife of Lakshmana. “Neither feminism nor mythology is a modern construct. Strong, feminist characters have long been the hallmark of Indian mythology.” (<https://scroll.in/article/828515/indian-mythology-is-a-new-medium-of-choice-for-feminist-narratives-and-its-working>). Kavita Kane is in the limelight, discussing the unnoticed characters in Indian mythology. Her area of interest being mythology-fiction, she throws light upon the characters which people have failed to notice, or which people have given a biased dimension. Her other famous books are *The Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, *Sita's Sister*, *Menaka's Choice* and *Lanka's Princess*. In the select novel, Kane retells the epic Ramayana in a new dimension as how Urmila, the sister of Sita and wife of Lakshmana, sees it. To be precise, a princess who is supposed to be bashful, speaks out her mind when she crosses situations in which she ought to voice her feelings. This paper attempts to highlight the feministic approach that Kane has bestowed Urmila with, with respect to the traces of feminism in the voice of the voiceless Urmila.

The Nature of Urmila

Urmila is Sita’s sister and the biological daughter to King Janaka, the foster father of Sita. Urmila is given in marriage to Lakshmana, Rama’s brother. 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. As the sources from the web state,

Here Urmila is portrayed as a delicately beautiful, spirited young princess who knows her mind and has no qualms in voicing it too. She is not the one who wants to live in illusion or any make-believe world. She comes across as an individual who acknowledges and accepts her situations gracefully - whether it is of being a 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. But this does not push her down rather she reciprocates the favour by being a source of strength for her loved ones. (<http://literarysojourn.blogspot.in/2015/01/book-review-sitas-sister.html>)

Though feminism is portrayed as a principle of equality between men and women, it throws light on how a woman pays attention to her 'self' and her own likes and dislikes. A woman always yearns to be in a domain where her thoughts are reciprocated. In the era of Ramayana, though women are supposed to be silent, especially in the presence of men, Urmila is outspoken and bold enough to express her thoughts and feelings. The first hint of the feminist trait in Urmila comes out when the demon king Ravan roars in anger in Sita's Swayamvar that he wished to marry Urmila as he failed to string the Rudra bow and marry Sita. On hearing the vicious words of Ravan, Urmila, who is supposed to be a dumb listener, stares back at him with hatred and anger. Kane writes, "She looked squarely up at him, her eyes sparkling with unsuppressed fury and loathing." (23)

Urmila does not remain bashful when she feels that she has to save the life of Lakshman from the furious Parashuram who is about to fling his axe on the former for having advocated his brother's action of breaking the Rudra bow. At this juncture, Urmila goes to the rishi, with an intention to soften his anger. She speaks soft words of praise and bends before him for his blessings. However, her action of intervening the scene is considered as one which is for the sake of the man for whom she nurses a secret love and is not expected of a woman. The author gives a

clear picture of the scene in her words, “Her heart beating wildly, Urmila knew she was ready to face the full fury of the rishi – anything to save Lakshman from the bloody fight from which he would never escape alive.” (27)

Urmila is portrayed as a girl who has the potential to hide her inner conflicts with a strained smile. Though she is good at masking feelings, the importance for her ‘self’ pops out when necessity arises. The palace is filled with talks of the nuptial knot of the four princes of Ayodhya with the four princesses of Mithila. It is at this juncture, Urmila discloses her feelings regarding her marriage. She is not sure if Lakshman would give his consent to marry her. Nevertheless, Urmila is eager to be given in marriage to Lakshman, which shows that her purpose is to live a life of her choice rather than to exist or survive. In Kane’s words, the feel of Urmila when she thinks of Lakshman’s hot look is, “It was like a wave: drowning and drenching her in its passionate whirl and leaving her bereft in anticipation as it ebbed. She was still unsure about him.” (32)

Urmila is a girl of individuality. She does not want to be hurt by others. She always wants to love and to be loved, which reveals a sense of belonging. This attitude of her comes out when she overhears a conversation between Ram and Lakshman, in which the latter discloses to his brother that he is not interested to marry. A woman with a feminine attitude will never want to be neglected. Hence the negligence of Lakshmana hurts her. To rewrite Kane’s words,

He didn’t want to marry her – the rejection stung. And his repudiated words kept ringing feverishly, searing her mind, her soul, her very being. She felt discarded, thrown away in distaste and contempt... Through her brimming tears, she could not see what was hurting her most – his rejection, her lost love, her shattered trust, her anguish or the humiliation... And the fact that she couldn’t have him and, bitterly still, that he did not want her, burned her with a mortification more consuming than the licking flames of disillusionment. (45)

When her pride is questioned, Urmila is hurt. Lakshman meets her before marriage to tell that she would always remain a princess, if she marries him and can never be a queen. Moreover, he informs her that his love and respect for his brother Ram may deviate him from the responsibilities of a husband. She tells him that her pride is hurt and is so outspoken to him that Kane writes, “But you do have a choice – either break off the wedding and leave me to my fate or marry me, your loyalty to your brother notwithstanding. I accept you as my husband, do you?” (50)

Urmila’s outburst is highlighted when she receives a news that Kaikeyi, one of the three queens of King Dhasarath, is not satisfied with Sita as Ram’s bride and that she has a plan to get Ram remarried, Urmila cannot withstand the suffering that is to befall her sister. She wants her sister to voice her grievances when plans were knit for Ram’s remarriage. She furiously hauls words at her sister. “How dare they do this to you”, started Urmila furiously. “You shall not take it silently anymore, Sita!” (Kane 72) She ushers Sita to protest and is full of scornful resentment. Kane gives life 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?” (73)

Marriage Psyche in Patriarchy

The marriage psyche expected of a couple is that they are supposed to imitate the culture of Ardha Narishwar – Prakriti and Purush. The male half is incomplete without the female half. Nevertheless, Ram is blessed to be with his wife, even when in exile. However, Urmila’s silent wails go muffled when Lakshman wants to leave her in the palace. She feels dejected and neglected when the two persons whom she loved the most – Lakshman and Sita – make up their minds to leave for the forest. Kane describes her pain saying,

Urmila’s first instinctive reaction had been a flood of hurt for being rejected by both her husband and sister, followed by a deep and bitter anger. They had not considered her at all, each intent on getting what they wanted. She felt betrayed, left out and let down. (103)

However, Urmila is a girl with a strong nature so as to convert her grief into an attitude. When Lakshman bids her farewell, she pleads to him to be taken with him to the forest. She is clever enough to realize that her pleas fall on deaf ears. So, she takes the courage to blame her husband for his inefficiency in taking his bride with him, unlike his brother Ram. She spits words of pain at him telling, “I knew you would refuse me, again” ... “That is what your love is – hurtful and rejecting. You don’t love at all, Lakshman, you cannot love!” (Kane 107) Though tormented and tortured with the grief of separation, she wants to make it lighter on the part of her husband and praises herself showing the silk clothes and gems she I adorned with saying, “I am a princess, born in leisure and luxury. Would you expect me to spurn this to chase you in your misguided, wild adventure with your brother eating berries, walking barefoot and cooking meals for the two of you?” (107) Though a sharp stab of sorrow pierces her heart, she does not want her husband to feel guilty of his action of unfulfilling her wish and so she establishes a mental balance. This is revealed when she says to herself at the sight of her husband leaving for the forest. Kane echoes Urmila’s words. “You can hate for all I just said. I hope I have made it easier for you now, she thought bleakly, made it easier for us, to hate rather than to love each other for the next fourteen years of separation.” (108)

Urmila’s plead to be taken along with her husband to the forest is not a sign of subservience. She needs to be the wife with the sense of obligation in order to experience the sense of belonging that she loves much. The patriarchal society has designed a frame for women. The frame designed by the men are narrow for the women folk because she has to confine herself in the small frame, paying attention not only to her husband, but also the members of his family. This patriarchal notion is not an exception for Lakshman because he wants his wife to remain at the palace, to take care of his aged parents and to look into the stately affairs till the arrival of Bharatha, the younger brother of Ram. Evidences trace back the roots of these obligations and commitments to the earlier days of Hindu mythology. Parva cites a passage from *The Mahabharata*, which demonstrates a conversation between Lord Shiva and his wife Goddess Parvati, on the duties of a wife. The words are:

A woman's duties include physical and emotional nourishment, reverence and fulfillment of her husband and her children. Their happiness is her

happiness, she observes the same vows as those that are observed by her husband, her duty is to be cheerful even when her husband or her children are angry, be there for them in adversity or sickness, is regarded as truly righteous in her conduct. Beyond her husband and family, her duty is to be cheerful of heart and humble with friends and relatives, do the best she can for friends and guests. Her family life and her home is her heaven, tells goddess Parvati to Shiva. (667-72)

Hence, Urmila too is expected to be a victim to these confined commitments. Nevertheless, she sticks to her duties and helps in reuniting the family. Her role in the reunion of the family is pivotal. A bashful bride and succumbing daughter-in-law is not supposed to raise her voice against the elders of the household. On such occasions, a woman earns the ire of the entire family. She takes to questioning Kaikeyi, for having sent Ram, Sita and Lakshman in an exile for fourteen years. She scorns the elderly queen for her mean action. However, she is able to handle all adverse situations in a smooth manner. When Bharath and his troupe, along with the three mothers, visit Ram and Lakshman in the forest, the latter tells Urmila of her strength. He is in praises for his courageous wife, who has been instrumental in managing situations with ease, during his absence. Urmila, in the eyes of Lakshman too, has been shown as a girl with an individuality. Lakshman says, “How you stood brave through the tragedies – strong, stable and dependable like a fierce lioness protecting her family. Playing the roles of the dutiful daughter, shrewd administrator, wise peacemaker simultaneously...” (Kane 158)

The passionate outburst of Urmila is in the hut of Ram and Lakshman when Ram declines his offer as the king and advocates the rule of Bharath. Ram wants to fulfill his last promise to his father. Hence, he tells Bharath to rule Ayodhya, to which the dutiful brother disagrees. Later, Bharath comes to a conclusion that he would rule the kingdom as a deputy of Ram, by placing Ram’s sandals on the throne as a token. Ram gives his consent to this after a long thought. When Ram utters a positive reply, Urmila is shattered because the ray of hope in her vanishes. Kane writes, “There was a murmur of approval and the matter seemed to have been

finally settled. That murmur was like a scream for Urmila, the brief remark arousing her wrath.”
(161)

If Ram had accepted Bharath’s invitation and had changed his mind, she would lead a happy life with Lakshman. In spite of the place and the gathering of the Gurus and other elders, Urmila speaks her mind out. As per the script in *Manusmriti*, “Pitaa Rakshati Kaumaree, Bharata Rakshati Yauvaneer; Putroo Rakshati Vardhakyeer, Na Stri Swatantryam Arhati (IX, 3). These lines show that a woman is to be under the control of a man always – she is obliged 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. It is at this juncture of Ram’s words, Urmila asks the elder Guru of Dharma. She asks:

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? (Kane 161).

Though Urmila receives jibes from the Guru commenting on the liberty women take in her father’s kingdom, she is concerned about her life which she would lose living with Lakshman if he does not return to the kingdom. The patriarchy abuses a woman when she thinks of her wellbeing, branding it to be selfishness. A woman is always expected to be selfless and has oblige to the words of her husband, irrespective of her likes and dislikes. An ordinary woman, who accepts subservience, would be taken aback by such a critical comment of Guru Kashyap. Nevertheless, Urmila’s voice regains its space when she demands an answer for her question from the Guru saying:

I am not doubting the great minds, Gurudev; I, as the daughter-in-law of the famous Raghu dynasty of the Ikshvaaku race – and not merely as the daughter of King Janak – ask a very simple question. What is the dharma of the man for his wife, the dharma of a man for his mother? Please give me an answer. (Kane 162)

Questions arise when the success of her outburst is analysed. However, she does not remain dumb and is strong enough to voice her feelings and demands. As the concepts from the

web proclaim, Hinduism considers the connection, interdependence, and complementary nature of these two concepts – Prakriti and Purusha, female and male – as the basis of all existence, which is a starting point of the position of women in Hindu traditions. Ancient and medieval era Hindu texts, and epics, discuss a woman's position and role in society over a spectrum, such as one who is a self-sufficient, marriage-eschewing powerful Goddess, to one who is subordinate and whose identity is defined by men rather than her, and to one who sees herself as a human being and spiritual person while being neither feminine nor masculine. It is on this ground, Kane highlights the character of Urmila with a feministic shade. Web source states, “The Ramayana takes scant notice of her, and when it does, consigns her to what is essentially a 14-year long coma. But Kané imagined her as a living, breathing heroine who holds the fort when everything is crumbling and everyone important has left.” (<https://scroll.in/article/828515/indian-mythology-is-a-new-medium-of-choice-for-feminist-narratives-and-its-working>)

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:2 February 2018

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<http://literarysojourn.blogspot.in/2015/01/book-review-sitas-sister.html>

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