

Rediscovering Urmila: A Feminist Retelling of a Forgotten Heroine with Reference to Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*

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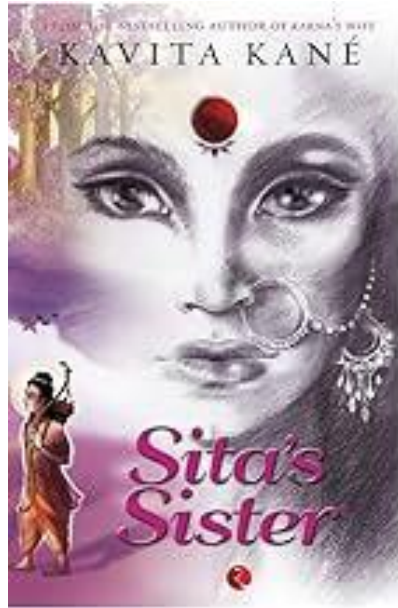
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Abstract

Traditional mythological narratives often marginalize female characters, reducing them to secondary roles that emphasize sacrifice and obedience. Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* reclaims the voice of Urmila, a character largely overlooked in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, granting her

narrative agency and intellectual depth. This paper explores how Kane's reinterpretation challenges patriarchal constructs by portraying Urmila as a woman of resilience, wisdom, and emotional strength. Unlike traditional depictions that render her passive, *Sita's Sister* presents Urmila as a silent yet powerful figure who exercises personal autonomy in the face of adversity. Through an analysis of her intellectual and emotional agency, this study highlights how Urmila's choices serve as an act of resistance against the societal norms imposed upon women. Additionally, the paper draws parallels between Urmila and other silenced mythological women such as Draupadi's forgotten daughters, Mandodari, and Ahalya, emphasizing the importance of feminist revisionist mythology in reclaiming lost voices. By centring Urmila's narrative, *Sita's Sister* subverts traditional gender roles, presenting a nuanced portrayal of feminine strength that redefines the role of women in mythology.

Keywords: Kavita Kane, *Sita's Sister*, Feminist Revisionist Mythology, Urmila, Narrative Agency, Silent Resistance, Mythological Women

Throughout history, mythology has played a pivotal role in shaping cultural perspectives on gender roles, often reinforcing patriarchal ideals that dictate the behaviour and status of women in society. *The Ramayana*, an important epic in Hindu literature, primarily focuses on the heroic journey of its male protagonist, Rama, and his devoted wife, Sita. While Sita embodies the virtues of loyalty and sacrifice, the narrative largely sidelines other female characters, relegating them to the background and limiting their agency. This portrayal has historically contributed to a narrow understanding of femininity, one that glorifies subservience and highlights the importance of women only in relation to their male counterparts.

However, in recent years, women writers such as Kavita Kane, Chitra Banerji Divakaruni, and Sarah Joseph have emerged as powerful voices in the literary landscape, employing a framework of feminist reinterpretation of these ancient myths. By revisiting and reimagining the narratives of these characters, they challenge and rectify the entrenched patriarchal views that have long defined femininity within these stories. Their work promotes gender consciousness, actively confronting and dismantling gender stereotypes that have persisted through centuries of storytelling. According to literary critic Alicia Ostriker, employing revisionist mythmaking serves as a potent method for redefining women's

identity, allowing for a reclaiming of agency that has often been stripped away in traditional narratives. This facet of feminism is crucial in re-examining the portrayals of women who have faced collective and historical struggles, providing a platform for their voices to be heard and respected.

‘Revision’, as defined by Adrienne Rich, is ‘the act of looking back’ to an already existing text to construct a reality which has been deliberately ignored in patriarchal narratives. It inevitably involves a re-reading and re-writing of earlier texts from a feminist perspective. By becoming a ‘resisting reader rather than an assenting reader’ women writers and critics undertake to revise male assumptions through subversion of androcentric ideology in male writings. Thus revisionist mythmaking enables writers across the globe to re-write myths and fairy tales which serve to perpetuate and promote an asymmetrical relationship between men and women. (96)

For instance, Urmila, the wife of Lakshmana, is a character who is frequently overlooked in conventional retellings of the Ramayana. Her sacrifices, loyalty, and inner strength often go unnoticed, yet they hold significant value in understanding the broader narrative of womanhood in the epic. In her novel, *Sita’s Sister*, Kavita Kane takes a bold step to re-examine Urmila’s character, granting her a voice that was once muted and an identity that extends beyond mere association with her husband. Through Kane’s portrayal, Urmila is depicted as a multifaceted individual with her own desires, aspirations, and struggles. This nuanced representation challenges the prevailing patriarchal narratives, emphasizing her intellectual, emotional, and personal autonomy as a form of subtle resistance against the constraints imposed upon her by society.

Kane’s work not only enriches the understanding of Urmila but also invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of women’s roles in mythology and how these roles can be redefined. By bringing forth the stories of women like Urmila, these writers encourage a more inclusive understanding of gender that recognizes the complexities and richness of female experience. As such, this research delves into how Kane’s portrayal of Urmila not only serves as a critique of traditional narratives but also contributes to a larger movement towards gender equality and empowerment in literature and beyond, fostering a cultural shift that prioritizes the voices and stories of women. Urmila’s agency is evident in her intellectual

pursuits and emotional fortitude. She does not passively lament her fate but rather embraces her solitude as an opportunity for growth. As Kane writes, “She had not merely waited; she had lived, she had thrived” (Kane 215). This redefinition of patience as power reframes Urmila’s story from one of victimhood to one of quiet resistance.

Urmila’s independence on both an academic and emotional level is the foundation of her resilience. While Urmila stays inside the palace, she fights against loneliness and expectations, in contrast to Sita, whose loyalty is put to the test through exile and incarceration. This stark difference in their experiences underscores the complexities of womanhood within their societal context. Urmila’s statement that “my life is not merely an extension of my husband’s duty” (Kane 178) demonstrates her refusal to be defined exclusively by her connection with Lakshmana. In making this declaration, she asserts her individuality and underscores the importance of self-identity in a world where women are often relegated to the role of mere supporters of their husbands. This assertion contradicts the *pativrata* ideal, which holds that a wife’s identity is completely absorbed by her husband’s path, reducing her existence to an appendage rather than recognizing her as a full-fledged individual with her own desires and ambitions.

Rather than conforming to gender norms, Urmila creates her own identity by being independent, carving out a space where her intellect and emotional strength can flourish. “She was not a mere shadow, but a woman who thought, who dreamed, who lived on her own terms,” as Kane highlights (Kane 189). This vivid characterization illustrates her vibrant spirit and courage, traits that empower her to navigate the challenges of her life with grace and determination. Urmila’s journey becomes not only a testament to her personal growth but also a broader commentary on the potential for women to redefine their roles and assert their agency within patriarchal structures.

As she grapples with the solitude of palace life, Urmila immerses herself in literature and the arts, finding solace in the written word and the power of storytelling. This pursuit not only enriches her mind but also fortifies her resolve, allowing her to envision a future where she is not just a figure in the background but a key player in her own narrative. Her intellectual pursuits become a means of liberation, enabling her to engage with ideas that challenge the status quo and inspire her to advocate for her own place in the world. In the quiet moments of reflection, she often contemplates the nature of sacrifice and loyalty,

questioning the societal expectations that dictate how a woman should behave. Urmila understands that true strength lies not in blind adherence to tradition but in the courage to carve out one's own path, even in the face of overwhelming pressure to conform. This realization further fuels her determination to live authentically, embracing her passions and aspirations with fervour.

Through her journey, Urmila emerges as a symbol of empowerment, representing the struggles of countless women who seek to assert their identities in a world that often seeks to diminish them. Her story resonates with those who challenge the confines of societal norms, inspiring a new generation to embrace their independence and pursue their dreams unapologetically. Ultimately, Urmila's resilience serves as a powerful reminder that the quest for self-identity is a vital and transformative journey, one that can lead to profound personal and collective change. Urmila's wisdom and understanding of dharma further showcase her intellectual strength. She acknowledges the necessity of Lakshmana's duty but refuses to let it define her suffering: "Dharma is not just duty to others; it is duty to oneself" (Kane 204). This nuanced perspective allows her to endure her separation with dignity and personal growth rather than passive submission.

While Lakshmana, Rama, and Bharata are absent from Ayodhya, Urmila assumes a crucial role in maintaining the kingdom's stability. Kane's reinterpretation presents Urmila not just as a grieving wife but as a capable leader who steps into governance, offering counsel and ensuring the palace remains functional. She is actively involved in political and administrative affairs, ensuring that Ayodhya does not fall into disarray. Kane notes, "Urmila did not just endure; she ruled in her own quiet way" (Kane 230). Her governance extends beyond mere survival. Urmila ensures that law, ethics, and dharma are upheld in Ayodhya, demonstrating an astute political mind. She collaborates with elder advisors, upholds justice, and subtly influences the kingdom's affairs, proving that women are not just caretakers but active participants in governance. This feminist reinterpretation showcases women's ability to lead, even when removed from direct power.

In her role, Urmila cultivates a network of trusted allies within the court, fostering a sense of unity among the nobles and commoners alike. She organizes meetings to address the pressing issues of the day, from agricultural concerns to trade agreements, and ensures that

the voices of the people are heard. Her ability to listen and empathize creates an atmosphere where citizens feel valued, allowing her to enact policies that promote welfare and prosperity throughout the realm. Moreover, Urmila's leadership is marked by her commitment to education and the empowerment of women in Ayodhya. She establishes initiatives that encourage girls to receive an education, believing firmly that knowledge is the foundation of true strength. By advocating for women's rights to participate in societal matters, she lays the groundwork for future generations of female leaders. As the seasons change and the challenges of governance become more complex, Urmila faces opposition from those who are skeptical of her authority. Yet, through her unwavering dedication and strategic acumen, she navigates these obstacles with grace, proving that her intellect and compassion are more formidable than any sword. As she builds alliances and fosters goodwill, Ayodhya flourishes under her stewardship, a testament to her remarkable ability to lead during turbulent times.

In this new light, Kane's portrayal of Urmila as a central figure in the Ramayana not only redefines her character but also challenges traditional narratives that often sideline women's contributions. Through Urmila's story, readers are invited to reconsider the roles women have played throughout history, recognizing that their influence often extends far beyond the domestic sphere. In the end, Urmila's legacy becomes a beacon of inspiration, illuminating the path for future leaders and reminding all that true power often lies in the quiet determination to uphold justice and harmony in society.

Kane's novel emphasizes the profound bond shared between Urmila, Sita, Mandavi, and Shrutakirti. In spite of their diverse circumstances, the four sisters encapsulate a collective strength that opposes patriarchal desires. Their relationship is built on shared understanding, passionate bolster, and immovable dependability.

We get a glimpse of strong heartfelt conversation between the four sisters at the event of Sita's swayamwara. As Mandavi and Kirti (Shrutikirti) are excited for Sita, Urmila is concerned about her sister. The author paints their lively connection in the novel:

The four young girls engaged in such banter all the time. There was no malice in it, not a shred of meanness. They were simply disarmingly frank with each other; brutally blunt sometimes. And why wouldn't they? They were sisters, after all, and there was no need to be nice and good all the time. (8)

Sita endures exile, whereas Urmila perseveres passionate confinement. Their memories and recollections support them, making a bond that rises above physical remove. Sita's quality rouses Urmila, and Urmila's continuance serves as a passionate grapple for Sita. Mandavi speaks to a more routine adherence to obligation, however she gives Urmila with calm solidarity. In spite of the fact that their adapting components vary, they share a shared regard for each other's strength. The most youthful sister, Shrutakirti, is frequently ignored, however she offers warmth and viewpoint. Her delicacy complements the quality of the others, displaying the shifted shapes of ladylike versatility.

They are delighted as the four sisters will be future sister-in-laws. When Sunaina was against the proposal of all four girls getting married in same family, Sita questions her-"How could our staying together harm us? Will marriage lessen our love for each other? No, Ma, it shall strengthen it further, as no one knows us better. We love each other too much for anything or anyone to come between us."(55)

Through their sisterhood, Kane subverts the idea that ladies in mythology exist as it were in connection to the men in their lives. They are always shielding each other, they stand prepared to safeguard one another's happiness Instep, and she presents them as independent people who draw quality from one another. This women's activist reinterpretation highlights the significance of women's collective solidarity in exploring abuse and misfortune.

Sita's Sister redefines feminine strength beyond the conventional notions of sacrifice and devotion by taking back Urmila's voice and challenging the erasure of women in mythology. The way that women are viewed in epics is altered by Urmila's leadership, emotional independence, intellectual fortitude, and quiet defiance. In addition to reconstructing Urmila's story, Kavita Kane's feminist revisionist method advances the larger conversation about reclaiming marginalized voices in literature.

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