

Recovering the Unspoken: Urmila and Narrative Silence in Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*

Mrs. K. Jayabharathi

Research Scholar (F.T)
Department of Languages
Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science and Technology (Deemed to be University)
Vallam, Thanjavur-613403.
Jayabharathi959@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3091-0523>

Dr. R. Kumarabalaji

Assistant Professor
Department of Languages
Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science and Technology (Deemed to be University)
Vallam, Thanjavur-613403.
kumarabalaji@pmu.edu
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3744-0988>

Abstract

This study revisits the marginalised figure of Urmila—who endures fourteen years of separation during her husband's exile—through the lens of narrative silence and gendered exclusion in Indian epic traditions. In Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*, Urmila, largely eclipsed within canonical *Ramayana* narratives, is brought to the centre of narrative and critical attention. While epic traditions privilege masculine action, exile, and heroism, women's emotional endurance and ethical labour remain largely unrecorded. Kane's retelling intervenes in this narrative hierarchy by foregrounding Urmila's interior life, ethical reflection, and sustained endurance as meaningful forms of agency. Drawing on feminist criticism and postcolonial perspectives, particularly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interrogation of silencing, this paper examines how dominant narrative structures marginalise women while claiming to represent them. Through close textual analysis, the study argues that Urmila's articulation in *Sita's Sister* constitutes a mediated recovery of suppressed subjectivity rather than a purely modern or anachronistic reimagining. By re-signifying silence as a historically produced narrative condition, the paper demonstrates how feminist

retellings reclaim ethical and narrative space for marginalised women within Indian epic traditions.

Keywords: Kavita Kane, Urmila, Ramayana retellings, feminist criticism, narrative silence, Indian mythology

Introduction

Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* intervenes in the *Ramayana* tradition by foregrounding Urmila, a figure whose prolonged absence from the epic's narrative centre reveals the gendered logic of canonical storytelling. Across authoritative tellings of the *Ramayana*, women's experiences are selectively narrated, with priority accorded to masculine action, exile, and heroism, while female endurance remains largely unrecorded. This pattern is evident in canonical versions such as Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Kamban's *Iramavataram*, where Urmila appears only fleetingly and without narrative access to her emotional or ethical labour. Her silence in these texts is not incidental but structurally produced through epic conventions that privilege public action over private endurance.

By re-centring Urmila, Kane's retelling exposes how patriarchal narrative authority renders certain forms of suffering and ethical labour invisible. *Sita's Sister* does not merely supplement the epic with an omitted character; rather, it reconfigures narrative focus by treating Urmila's waiting, restraint, and interior conflict as ethically significant forms of experience. In doing so, the novel makes legible what canonical tellings systematically exclude. Urmila's articulation emerges not as a rupture from tradition but as a mediated recovery of suppressed subjectivity, revealing how epic silence functions as a mechanism of gendered marginalisation rather than as an inherent feminine virtue.

This paper examines *Sita's Sister* as a feminist reinterpretation of epic silence that interrogates the gendered hierarchies embedded in *Ramayana* traditions. Rather than treating myth as a static cultural inheritance, Kane's retelling engages critically with the epic as a dynamic narrative tradition shaped by historical, social, and ideological forces. Read within this framework, feminist retellings do not disrupt epic authority but participate in its ongoing reconfiguration by foregrounding marginalised perspectives that canonical narration renders peripheral.

Scholarly work on the *Ramayana* has consistently emphasised its plural and non-monolithic nature, shaped by multiple tellings across regions, languages, and historical moments. Within such a tradition, narrative silences are not accidental gaps but structurally produced absences that reflect dominant ideological priorities. Kane's intervention operates within this narrative plurality by reorienting attention toward Urmila, whose marginalisation exemplifies how women's emotional endurance and ethical labour are excluded from epic remembrance. The novel thus reinterprets epic authority itself by treating silence as a critical site of feminist inquiry.

Within this context, decolonising gender does not imply rejecting tradition but critically examining how gendered meanings are produced through intersecting structures of patriarchy and historical power. In this study, "decolonising gender" does not refer to a nationalist return to a pure precolonial past, nor to the rejection of Western feminist thought. Rather, it refers to examining how colonial modernity and indigenous patriarchy together shaped interpretations of epic womanhood. The term is used here to advocate culturally situated readings of gendered subjectivity within Indian narrative traditions rather than universalised feminist frameworks. Rather than imposing universal feminist models, this approach foregrounds culturally situated forms of subjectivity shaped by kinship, dharma, and ethical obligation. In *Sita's Sister*, silence is not represented as a feminine ideal but as a structurally imposed condition that regulates women's visibility within epic narratives.

Positioned within this framework, the paper analyses how Urmila's marginalisation in canonical *Ramayana* tellings reflects patriarchal narrative authority that privileges heroic masculinity while rendering women's ethical labour invisible. Kane's retelling intervenes in this hierarchy by foregrounding Urmila's interior life and moral reflection, transforming silence into a site of critical inquiry. Rather than presenting Urmila as a liberated subject outside tradition, the novel constructs her agency within the constraints of kinship and dharma, revealing how gendered subjectivity is negotiated rather than freely articulated. In this sense, *Sita's Sister* functions as a feminist narrative intervention that reclaims indigenous narrative space for marginalised women while remaining grounded in epic tradition.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with the *Ramayana* has long recognised the epic as a foundational cultural text shaping social ethics, gender norms, and moral imagination in

South Asia. Early Indological and nationalist scholarship often treated the *Ramayana* as a unified and authoritative narrative, privileging Sanskritic versions while marginalising regional, oral, and vernacular tellings. Such approaches reinforced a masculinist narrative focus centred on kingship, exile, and heroic action, confining women largely to idealised archetypes of devotion, chastity, and sacrifice, while rendering their experiential realities narratively insignificant.

Feminist historiography has challenged these interpretive frameworks by foregrounding the systematic exclusion of women's experiences from historical and literary archives. Scholars such as Gerda Lerner and Uma Chakravarti have demonstrated how patriarchal kinship structures shaped women's social roles, obscuring their emotional, ethical, and intellectual labour. Chakravarti's critique of nationalist historiography, in particular, exposes how claims regarding women's "high status" in ancient India often rely on symbolic representation while masking lived inequalities. These insights are especially relevant to epic narratives, where women are frequently elevated as moral ideals even as their subjective experiences remain unarticulated.

Within literary studies, feminist interventions into mythological narratives have increasingly focused on retellings as critical sites of reinterpretation rather than derivative adaptations. K. Ramanujan's articulation of the *Ramayana* as a plural and evolving tradition destabilises the notion of a singular epic authority, opening interpretive space for marginalised perspectives. Paula Richman further emphasises the legitimacy of diverse renderings across languages, genres, and audiences, situating retellings as integral to the epic tradition rather than as deviations from an "original" text.

Postcolonial feminist theorists have cautioned against universalising feminist frameworks that erase cultural specificity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interrogation of subalternity reveals how women's voices are often mediated or rendered non-narratable within dominant discursive systems, while Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques Western feminist constructions of "Third World women" as homogeneous victims, calling instead for historically grounded and culturally situated analyses of agency. Together, these perspectives underscore the need to examine how gendered subjectivity is negotiated within specific social and ethical frameworks rather than through universalised models of resistance.

Recent feminist mythological fiction, including works by Kavita Kane, participates in this critical landscape by revisiting epic silences through culturally embedded narratives. However, existing scholarship has often approached such retellings descriptively, focusing on themes of recovery or empowerment without sustained theoretical engagement with how silence, narrative authority, and gendered exclusion operate within epic traditions. In particular, *Sita's Sister* has received limited critical attention as a postcolonial feminist intervention grounded in indigenous ethical frameworks.

While figures such as Sita and Draupadi have been widely examined in feminist epic studies, secondary women characters positioned outside the epic's central moral economy remain critically underexplored. This imbalance reflects a broader tendency to privilege overt resistance and visible transgression while overlooking forms of endurance, ethical negotiation, and interior reflection. A focused engagement with Urmila therefore offers an important opportunity to extend feminist readings of the *Ramayana* beyond recovery narratives, enabling a deeper interrogation of how silence functions as a historically produced narrative condition that regulates women's visibility within indigenous storytelling traditions.

Research Gap

While existing scholarship has extensively examined the plurality of the *Ramayana* and the rise of feminist retellings, there remains a significant gap in sustained analysis of silence as a narrative and structural mechanism within epic traditions. Studies of feminist mythological fiction often emphasise themes of empowerment, recovery, or resistance without sufficiently interrogating the conditions that render women's experiences marginal in the first place. In particular, *Sita's Sister* has received limited critical attention as a postcolonial feminist intervention grounded in indigenous ethical frameworks. Where the novel is discussed, Urmila is frequently treated as a recovered or empowered figure rather than as a site through which patriarchal narrative authority and gendered exclusion can be critically examined. The absence of focused analysis on Urmila's silence—understood not as passivity but as a historically produced condition—marks a clear gap in existing research.

Furthermore, readings of contemporary mythological retellings rarely engage Indian feminist historiography in sustained dialogue with literary texts. Feminist frameworks developed by scholars such as Chakravarti, Lerner, Spivak, and Mohanty are seldom integrated to examine how gendered subjectivity is negotiated within indigenous cultural

systems rather than in opposition to them. This study addresses these gaps by offering a theoretically grounded reading of *Sita's Sister* that foregrounds silence, ethical labour, and narrative marginalisation as central analytical concerns.

By reframing silence as a structural and epistemic condition rather than a narrative absence, the study moves beyond celebratory readings of empowerment to examine how women's agency is shaped within kinship, dharma, and narrative authority. In doing so, it contributes to postcolonial feminist literary studies by demonstrating how indigenous feminist interventions operate through ethical negotiation from within tradition, positioning Urmila as a culturally situated subject whose experience complicates dominant models of resistance.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology grounded in close textual analysis and feminist criticism. The primary text, *Sita's Sister* by Kavita Kane, is examined through a postcolonial feminist perspective informed by feminist historiography, subaltern studies, and narrative theory. Rather than approaching the novel as a simple act of recovery or revision, the analysis focuses on how narrative silence, ethical endurance, and emotional labour are constructed and re-signified within the text.

The methodological framework draws on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subalternity to examine the limits of articulation and the mediation of women's voices within patriarchal narrative structures. Postcolonial feminist critiques of universalised feminist categories inform the study's emphasis on culturally situated forms of agency, while insights from Indian feminist historiography, particularly Uma Chakravarti's work, provide a historical grounding for analysing gendered exclusion within epic traditions.

Close textual analysis is conducted by examining key narrative moments in which Urmila reflects, questions, or negotiates her ethical position. These moments are read in relation to canonical *Ramayana* traditions to identify shifts in narrative focus, authority, and ethical emphasis. The study does not seek to establish authorial intent or historical authenticity but instead examines how contemporary retellings participate in the ongoing reconfiguration of epic meaning.

In addition, a comparative narrative approach is employed to analyse how omission, brevity, and silence function differently across epic tellings. Feminist narrative theory is used to examine how interiority, ethical reflection, and emotional endurance are represented as meaningful forms of action, challenging epic hierarchies that privilege heroic mobility over restrained endurance. By situating Kane's retelling within the *Ramayana's* plural storytelling tradition, this methodology treats feminist reinterpretation as an integral mode of cultural production rather than as a corrective to an "original" text. The approach thus enables a culturally grounded analysis of gendered silence without reducing indigenous narratives to universal feminist models.

Analysis and Discussion

Epic Silence and the Gendered Economy of Narration

Women in the Itihasas are predominantly represented through idealised tropes of chastity, devotion, and obedience, while figures who do not directly advance the epic's heroic trajectory remain marginal to its narrative economy. Canonical epic structures privilege masculine action—exile, warfare, kingship, and renunciation—while rendering women's emotional endurance and ethical labour narratively insignificant. Characters such as Sita are elevated as moral exemplars of sacrifice, whereas others, including Mandodari and Kaikeyi, are positioned within restrictive binaries of virtue and transgression. This narrative logic produces a hierarchy in which women's value is measured by their proximity to male protagonists rather than by autonomous subjectivity.

Urmila exemplifies this structural marginalisation. Despite enduring the same temporal span of exile as the epic's male heroes, her experience remains largely unarticulated within canonical *Ramayana* traditions. She is remembered primarily through relational identity—as Lakshmana's wife and Sita's Sister—rather than as a narrative subject in her own right. Such erasure is not accidental but reflects the epistemic priorities of epic storytelling, where waiting, restraint, and emotional labour are normalised as feminine duty rather than recognised as historically meaningful experience. Epic silence thus functions not as absence, but as a narrative mechanism that regulates which forms of suffering and endurance are deemed worthy of remembrance.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, this absence reflects what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies as the structural silencing of the subaltern, wherein marginalised subjects are spoken about but rarely permitted narrative agency. Women in classical epics do not simply lack voice; rather, their interior lives are rendered non-narratable within dominant frameworks of meaning. Silence, in this sense, operates as a form of narrative exclusion rather than as an inherent feminine trait.

Experiential Focalisation and the Ethics of Endurance

Crucially, *Sita's Sister* does not approach marginalised women merely as subjects whose viewpoints are retrospectively inserted into an already established epic framework. Instead, the narrative itself evolves from within the experiential interiority of characters who remain peripheral in canonical tellings. In traditional epic narration, figures such as Urmila are rendered narratively distant and emotionally opaque, making it difficult for readers to access their lived realities. Kane's retelling reconfigures this distance by shifting narrative focalisation toward women's experience, allowing the epic world to be mediated through Urmila's endurance, ethical reflection, and emotional negotiation.

The reader does not observe Urmila from an external or evaluative standpoint; rather, the narrative unfolds through the affective and ethical consequences of epic events on her interior life. This shift from action-centred narration to experiential focalisation transforms silence from narrative absence into a meaningful site of interpretation, enabling a reading of the epic that foregrounds women's lived experience rather than heroic spectacle.

Sita's Sister intervenes in this narrative economy by reconfiguring epic focalisation. Rather than approaching Urmila as a supplementary figure whose perspective is retrospectively inserted into an established epic framework, the novel allows the narrative itself to evolve from within her lived experience. In canonical narration, Urmila remains narratively distant and emotionally opaque; Kane's retelling collapses this distance by anchoring the epic world in her interiority. The reader does not observe Urmila from an external or evaluative standpoint; instead, the epic is mediated through her endurance, ethical reflection, and emotional negotiation.

This shift foregrounds the asymmetry between Lakshmana's mobility and Urmila's enforced immobility. While Lakshmana's decision to accompany Rama into exile is

narrativised as ethical action grounded in dharma, Urmila's remaining behind is neither framed as sacrifice nor recognised as moral labour. Epic ethics thus privilege visible action over invisible endurance: Lakshmana's movement becomes heroic, while Urmila's waiting is rendered narratively inconsequential. Kane's retelling exposes the ethical cost of this idealised masculinity on women's lives by presenting Urmila's waiting as a parallel form of exile.

Urmila's questioning does not reject dharma itself but interrogates its uneven application. As she articulates to Mandavi, "Mandavi, of course, it is unjust! ... We are women, we are wives, we are creatures of circumstance... We do not have the power to change anything but ourselves" (Kane 235). Rather than signalling resignation, this articulation exposes how injustice is normalised through gendered expectation. Urmila's plea to "give back my old Sister" captures the psychic fragmentation produced by enforced conformity, revealing how women's identities erode when ethical choice is continually subordinated to duty. Silence here becomes a constrained mode of articulation—legible yet mediated—rather than passive submission.

Negotiated Agency and Indigenous Feminist Reclamation

Kane further develops this mediated agency by portraying Urmila as intellectually engaged and ethically reflective even within restrictive gender norms. Her artistic pursuits, questioning of elders, and refusal to accept permanent secondary status reveal a consciousness shaped by, yet not fully contained within, patriarchal expectation. Mandavi's incredulous challenge "In this prioritization of his emotions, you are always going to be second place, is that it? And you accepted?" (Kane 66)—exposes how women are conditioned to subordinate their emotional lives to masculine ideals of duty.

Rather than positioning Urmila as either a victim or a liberated subject, the novel presents her agency as negotiated—formed through tension between compliance and critique. This challenges feminist paradigms that equate resistance solely with vocal dissent or radical transgression. Within indigenous ethical systems shaped by dharma and relational obligation, agency often manifests through endurance, ethical reasoning, and emotional self-regulation. Such forms of agency are frequently misread as passivity within Western feminist frameworks that privilege individual autonomy over rupture.

Kane's retelling thus operates as a decolonial feminist intervention that resists both patriarchal erasure and colonial generalisation. Urmila emerges not as a universal emblem of oppression but as a culturally situated subject whose agency is articulated within kinship, dharma, and moral responsibility. By foregrounding experiential interiority rather than heroic spectacle, *Sita's Sister* reclaims narrative legitimacy for marginalised women while remaining embedded within the plural and adaptive *Ramayana* tradition. Silence, re-signified as ethical endurance, becomes a critical site through which indigenous feminist subjectivity is articulated from within tradition rather than imposed from outside.

Kane's engagement with epic silence may also be situated within a broader postcolonial literary practice that turns to myth not to recover origins, but to interrogate the exclusions produced by authoritative narration. In this context, *Sita's Sister* demonstrates how myth functions as a narrative archive in which omissions are as significant as events. By foregrounding Urmila's experiential interiority, Kane reveals how feminist retellings recover not forgotten stories, but the affective and ethical residues left unrecorded by canonical narration. Such recovery does not overwrite tradition but exposes the narrative conditions under which silence itself is produced.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how *Sita's Sister* opens up critical possibilities for feminist and postcolonial re-readings of classical Indian epics by interrogating the structural silences that marginalise women such as Urmila. Rather than approaching the *Ramayana* as a fixed cultural inheritance, the novel engages with it as a dynamic and plural narrative tradition shaped by historical, ideological, and ethical negotiations. Kane's retelling operates from within this tradition, revealing how women's emotional endurance and ethical labour have been normalised yet excluded from epic remembrance.

By centring Urmila's interior life, Kane does not reject the epic but reanimates it through a gender-conscious lens that exposes the patriarchal priorities embedded in canonical narration. Urmila's repositioning is not presented as a deviation from tradition but as a legitimate continuation of the *Ramayana's* adaptive and dialogic nature. Each retelling reflects the social concerns of its historical moment, and Kane's reimagining contributes to this continuum by foregrounding a marginalised figure whose silence is structurally produced rather than naturally given.

The study has further shown that silence in *Sita's Sister* is not an absence of voice but a historically produced narrative condition that regulates women's visibility within epic discourse. Through a shift in narrative focalisation, the novel transforms silence into a meaningful site of interpretation, allowing the epic to be read through women's lived experience rather than heroic spectacle. Urmila's endurance emerges as ethical labour, challenging dominant narrative hierarchies that equate agency solely with action, mobility, and masculine heroism.

Importantly, Kane's intervention affirms the significance of indigenous storytelling traditions in reconstructing cultural memory. Writing in English while remaining rooted in vernacular imagination and ethical frameworks, *Sita's Sister* demonstrates how postcolonial literature can function as a space of cultural reclamation rather than displacement. The novel exemplifies how feminist retellings can interrogate power, silence, and narrative authority without abandoning cultural continuity.

In foregrounding Urmila's long-silenced experience, this study underscores the enduring relevance of plural, gender-conscious readings of Indian epics in contemporary discourse. By recovering the unspoken, *Sita's Sister* invites a rethinking of whose experiences are remembered and whose labour remains unacknowledged, reaffirming the importance of indigenous feminist inquiry in reshaping how epics are read, remembered, and reimagined in postcolonial contexts.

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