

GIVING VOICE TO URMILA: 'A STUDY OF KAVITA KANE'S NOVEL SITA'S SISTER'

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ABSTRACT:

Mythology has always been part of our collective unconscious. It has and always will rule our values and belief system. As Roland Barthes says in his *Mythologies*, a myth is a special form of myth told with intent. The famous epics of India, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are always used to portray the typical woman in order to maintain patriarchal norms. However, rewriting mythology has been an effective tool for feminists to subvert notions of the ideal woman. In this regard, the article will study Sita's sister Kavita Kane. Urmila, is the most unheard of character in the Ramayana. She is always blamed for not accompanying her husband, unlike Sita. Sita's sister presents the Ramayana from Urmila's perspective. The article compares Sita and Urmila and shows how the patriarchy rejects characters like Urmila who do not follow its rules. The rewrite gives voice to the unheard and marginalized Urmila and presents her in a completely different perspective.

Key words: Mythology, Rewriting, Feminism, Marginalisation

Re-vision –the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival.

Adrienne Rich.

The myths are an integral part of our Indian psyche. All our values, ideas and beliefs are drawn from these epics. These mythological stories are always male-centric. Women, though the catalyst of the story, are present in the margins, often masked due to the emphasis is given to valour and chivalry. Therefore both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have been constantly retold and revisited.

Myths are the most powerful tools used by patriarchy to subordinate women in the use of language. Myths attribute to women a gender identity built on the binary logic and a sexual identity submerged within the phallic system. Women poets revise myths to present their perspective so far ignored. The myth is a complex form of language and women poets steal the language in which they are humiliated and refashion it to tell their story. Re-vision of the myths is an appropriation of male space for female ends. From the feminist perspective, the Ramayana depicts woman as a non-entity, totally subservient to man. The epic provides women writers with the context to challenge the patriarchal point of view which moulds our realities, fixes our values and limits our vision of individual possibilities. Therefore re-visioning and retelling the mythology from female perspective has been an effective tool of feminism. They give voice to the unheard and marginalised. It is in this light I study Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*.

Kavita Kane in her *Sita's Sister* gives voice to the most neglected and misunderstood character of the Ramayana- Urmila. Urmila is always Sita's sister or Lakshman's wife or the one who did not follow her husband in exile and chose the luxury of the palace. Valmiki's Ramayana or the later versions of it never talk about Urmila as a strong female figure. This may be because she

did not adhere to the patriarchal norms like the quintessential Sita. Therefore Kavita Kane revisits the Ramayana from Urmila's perspective and gives her a voice.

The story begins with Urmila's childhood and talks about how she was overshadowed by Sita. Sita is the adopted daughter of king Janak and queen Sunaina. After they adopt Sita they give birth to Urmila. Therefore it is Urmila who should be called Janaki and Maithili but, these respects are reserved for Sita. What makes Urmila a wonderful character is that she is never jealous of Sita. Instead, Sita is her world. Even when her mother Sunaina confesses that she did neglect Urmila, she does not criticise her mother. Sunaina says that she took Urmila for granted as she was her own daughter while Sita was adopted, Mandavi and Shritakirti were daughters of her sister in law, who didn't have a mother. Urmila here instead of complaining empathises her mother. She is sensitive to the least changes in her loved one's expressions. She is the first one to know whether Sita is sad or is Lakshman happy or her mother apprehensive. This is what helps her manage her family when Ram, Lakshman and Sita are in exile for fourteen years.

The opening scene of the book shows the love Urmila has for Sita. Even during the swayamvar, Urmila is apprehensive for Sita. Before the swayamvar when Lakshman attacks a demon disguised as Sita, Urmila thinks that he has killed her Sister. She snatches his dagger and tries to kill Lakshman, the love of her life. Such is the love Urmila has for Sita. Her love for Sita surpasses her love for Lakshman. Later when Kaikeyi does not receive Sita with respect, Urmila is upset. Kaikeyi calls Urmila the real Janaki and Maithili. As a daughter, Urmila was always secondary to Sita. Therefore Kaikeyi calling her Janaki should have made her happy. On the other hand, Urmila is quick in her response and corrects Kaikeyi. " 'I am neither,' Urmila corrected emphatically. 'It is Sita who is called Janaki and Maithili, Mother.' Her tone was almost defiant." (Sita's Sister-61). Even when Urmila gets to know that Kaikeyi wants Ram to remarry, Urmila is flabbergasted. She opposes it loudly: " 'Do they seriously take us to be such tame girls who will scurry to obey?' scoffed Urmila in grim agreement." (Sita's Sister-61).

Later when Lakshman and Sita decide to accompany Ram in exile, Urmila is more worried about her sister. She knows that Sita is naive and hence worries about the dangers she will be exposed to in the forest. She doesn't complain when Lakshman leaves her. But She protests when she fears that Mandavi's fate is going to be similar to her. When Bharath announces that he will spend fourteen years in Nandigram doing penance Urmila questions him. He loves her sisters too much to let them suffer what she is going through. She is fearless. she questions everyone including Guru Kashyapa and Vishwamitra on what dharma is it that wives are left by their husbands.

What the book tries to talk about is the hypocrisy of the patriarchal society. The love Lakshman has for his brother Ram is always celebrated. However, the love Urmila has for her sister Sita is not. The book is called "Sita's Sister" and not Urmila. This is perhaps because Urmila always put her sister beyond everything, sometimes even beyond Lakshman. The patriarchy and the concept of heterosexual marriage expects a woman to dedicate herself to her husband's family and detach herself from her maternal relations. The love between brothers is appreciated and

used as an example. Ram-Lakshman's relation is the epitome of brotherhood. However, the relation between sisters is never appreciated and talked about.

Urmila's love for Lakshman is actually the epitome of love. It is unconditional. During Sita's swayamvar, Urmila realises that she loves Lakshman. When Rishi Parashuram is angry on Lakshman as he misunderstands that it is Lakshman who broke the Shiva Dhanush, Urmila jumps in to save Lakshman. In the swayamvar filled with princes, including the bravest ones like Ram, no one dares face Parashuram's anger but Urmila. Urmila's wit saves Lakshman from Parashuram wrath. Urmila's love for Lakshman is such that she agrees to marry him even though she knows she will always be secondary to Ram. Lakshman confesses that if he has to choose between Ram and Urmila, he will always choose Ram. In spite of that Urmila agrees to marry him. She loves him so much that she agrees to be secondary in his life instead of not being a part at all. She promises him that she will never put him in a situation where he will even have to choose.

When Lakshman decides to accompany his brother in exile Urmila though feels rejected, doesn't fight with her husband. She doesn't even ask him to take her with him as she realises that that would jeopardise his duty towards Ram. When her mother asks her about how she feels about Lakshman not being with her she replies :

'As a wife? I did. And I stood by his decision,' replied Urmila. 'Staying behind wasn't giving up my rights, Ma, it was accepting a reality, a responsibility. Sita and I followed the same principle though the outcome and experience are so different—we followed our dharma. Ram had to go to the forest and she went with him. Lakshman considered his dharma to serve his brother so he went with his brother and I agreed to stay back, however much it broke my heart.

Urmila took her mother's hand, 'I supported him in this decision. By going with him, I would have simply imposed myself on him; I would have been a distraction. I helped him follow his heart and his greater good.' (Sita's Siter: 118)

Urmila even asks Sita not to talk about her in exile. She doesn't want Lakshman to miss her thus making his exile more difficult. Lakshman asks her not to cry when he leaves. Urmila keeps this promise and when he comes back after fourteen years she begs that she be allowed to cry. As an ideal wife she supports her husband, never complains though questions.

Urmila is also an ideal daughter-in-law. She takes care of the entire family in absence of her husband. She could have returned to Mithila when Lakshman is in exile. However, she remains in Ayodha. She takes care of everyone including Kaikeyi. She handles the outraged Bharath, lost Mandavi and the Ayodhya itself. We all talk about what happened to Ram, Lakshman and Sita in their exile. This book, on the other hand, talks about what happened to Ayodhya in those fourteen years. It is Urmila who keeps the Raghu vamsha from breaking. When Bharath, after knowing his mother's treachery, says that he too will go to the forest, it is Urmila who will bring him to senses.

'And who'll rule the kingdom, Bharat?' Urmila reminded him gently. 'There is already fear of anarchy in the state. As the crown prince, you now have a duty toward your kingdom first. You

cannot leave it like an orphan. If you go, Shatrughna won't remain here either. So how will it turn out if the four princes of Kosala reside in the forest as hermits while the kingdom is headless, at the mercy of enemies and chaos? You have to be here, Bharat, as your father commanded, and rule the kingdom.' (Sita's Sister:120)

She tries to resolve the rift between Kaikeyi and Kausalya. She tries to cheer Mandavi who is separated from her husband. She tries to include Kaikeyi, who is despised by everyone, in the family. She tries to keep them together. She introduces the tradition of eating together. Hence Urmila becomes the son of the family.

Both Urmila and Sita are daughters of king Janak and queen Sunaina. Both love each other too much. However, they are very different from each other. Sita accepts everything without questioning. While Urmila does question. Sita supports her husband without being critical. Urmila supports her husband only after analysing his decision.

Sita's Sister brings out the valor of Urmila. In swayamvar, while the princes are afraid to face Parashuram's wrath, Urmila bravely jumps in to save Lakshmana. While Kaikeyi's reception of Sita is not questioned by anyone, Urmila is critical about it. All the woman characters: Sita, Mandavi, Kirti and even Kaikeyi are unable to understand the evil intentions of Manthara. It is Urmila who warns her sisters of this evil woman. No female character questions any male character in the story. Only Urmila does. She is the feminist voice-one who truly believes that men and woman are equal, one who believes that like the wife, husband too has a duty towards his wife. She is bold enough to criticise the male hypocrisy when Bharath announces that he will stay in Nandigram for fourteen years. She says

So be it, 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 whatever happens to your wife and your family?' she asked, each word mouthed with cold deliberation. '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?'What is the dharma of the man for his wife, the dharma of a man for his mother? Please give me an answer.'

Everything, Gurudev, has been personal here, every single political decision. It's about the father, the brother, the sons; but pray, what about the mothers, the wives? But yes, it is their dharma to follow their husbands' decisions and duties.' (Sita's sister:138)

When the Gurus tells her that she has no right to talk about family affairs she reminds them she is family too. She openly criticises the four brothers that they may be good sons but not good husbands.

If you could not keep the vows you made to your wives, why did you brothers marry? You may be the best of the princes, the perfect sons, the ideal brothers, probably the ideal king too, but never the good husband!' (Sita's Sister: 140)

Later when she learns about Sita's agnipariksha, she outrightly criticizes Ram. Sita, Mandavi and Kirti have internalized patriarchy and hence do not question Ram. Instead, they all agree with him. However, Urmila argues against it. She says as a husband he should have protected his wife from the humiliation. She wonders how could Ram doubt a wife who followed him into exile. When Mandavi and Kirti argue that he followed his duty of a King and did what his citizens expected out of him, Urmila calls it hypocrisy. She asks why Ram who did not listen to his citizens who begged him to stay in Ayodhya in order to follow the duty of a son, paid heed to the same citizens. Between his duty towards people and father, he chose his Putra dharma., but when it comes to people and wife, he doesn't choose Pati dharma. Though Sita blindly accepts this, Urmila doesn't.

When it comes to following the husband, Urmila has always been criticized for not following Lakshman during exile. Sita is the epitome of wifely duties because she followed Ram. But why didn't Urmila follow her husband? According to Kavita Kane, it's because she didn't want to impose herself on Lakshman. Letting him go with his brother, not imposing herself on him and managing his family and kingdom in his absence is Urmila's way of supporting and loving her husband. Sita followed her husband's actions whereas Urmila followed her husband's intentions and duty. She allows him to fulfil his dharma.

Everyone talks about Sita's sacrifice, no one talks about Urmila's. This book is like an answer to Lakshman's question "*O Urmila will the world ever know of your inner suffering, your divine sacrifice?*" (Sita's Sister: 102)

Urmila's sacrifice is way harder than Sita's. Both Sita and Urmila are newly married. Though exiled, Sita has the satisfaction of staying with her husband which Urmila hasn't. Everybody praised Sita for her sacrifice. What about Urmila's? She, a new bride, stayed away from her husband for fourteen years so that others could fulfil their dharma. Her stay in the palace was no way less than an exile. Sita says:

'You make my exile a simple task compared to what you are doing. Not only are you going to be separated from your husband for the next fourteen years, but you don't want your husband to even think of you lest he digresses from his goal to serve his brother. I bow to you, sister, for your vanvaas, your exile here in the palace shall be way harder than mine in the forest. Give me your strength and I know I shall succeed too.' (Sita's sister: 99)

Shatrughna acknowledges Urmila's pain and says

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.' (Sita's Sister: 182)

Even Sumitra appreciates Urmila's selfless sacrifice. She says

'We were blind and mute to your pain, your hopelessness. And yet you gave us your all. For years, we were being torn apart by mutual distrust and resentment but all of us pretended that

all was well, that denial was the best policy, except you. You made us face the truth. You showed us the mirror to the real us, not a reflection of what the world—and we ourselves—believed about us. We thank you for making us happier, better people.' (Sita's sister: 19)

The Ramayana and its characters like Ram, Lakshman, Bharath and Sita are always talked about. These characters are treated as the epitome of goodness and selflessness. Why is it that Urmila, though a character from the same epic is not talked about? This is because our patriarchal society talks about only those characters which will conform to its rules and regulations. Urmila questions patriarchy. She questions the hypocrisy of dharma which always talks about all duties especially those of a woman. It talks about the duty of a wife but not that of a husband. It talks about the duty a son has to the father but not to the mother. What kind of Putra Dharma is it to follow a dead father's command at the cost of abandoning widowed mother. Urmila is a feminist. She is a warrior in her own terms. In absence of Bharath, she involves in state affairs and takes much decision. She ruthlessly punishes Manthara. She quests for knowledge. Mandavi calls her "the free thinker who doesn't believe in rituals and rites" (Sita's sister, 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. She uses her knowledge to judge what is right and wrong. She is critical. She enters the male venture and breaks the gender stereotypes. Patriarchy never talks about Urmila because it doesn't want any woman to question but to blindly follow like Sita. Hence the quintessential woman is always Sita, not Urmila.

Kavita Kane's "Sita's Sister" gives voice to the unheard character of the Ramayana- Urmila. She uses reinventing technique to present Urmila as a modern contemporary woman who negotiates her way through circumstances to achieve what she wants rather than be passivised as a woman who makes glorious sacrifices. Her dominant way of resistance is to question. She suffers of course, but mainly because of her decision- her decision to marry Lakshman in spite of knowing his priorities and her decision to stay back in the palace. Unlike Sita, she does not have the privilege of being with her husband. Urmila is an intelligent, assertive, critical, sensitive and passionate woman.

"She was Urmila, not just the woman of passion as her name so defined her but one whose heart and mind had come together in intellectual and spiritual enrichment."

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