

The Forgotten Feminine: Urmila's Plight and the Effects of Patriarchal Feminism in Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*

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Abstract

This article explores the neglected character of Urmila in Sita's Sister by Kavita Kane, analyzing her plight in the context of patriarchal feminism. While Indian scriptures such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata glorify female figures like Sita and Draupadi, they simultaneously silence secondary women whose sacrifices are no less significant. The study begins by situating women's status in Indian cultural and religious traditions, where goddess worship and the Panchakanya hymn present an image of inclusivity. Yet, this veneration often masks the deeper mechanisms of patriarchy that celebrate only those women who conform to its norms. The paper uses Kavita Kane's retelling of Urmila's narrative as a lens to re-examine these cultural constructs and foreground the silenced voices.

The analysis applies feminist literary criticism to highlight the contrast between the limited representation of Urmila in Valmiki's Ramayana and the fuller, resistant portrayal in Kane's novel. The findings suggest that Urmila embodies resilience, wisdom, and selflessness, yet remains marginalized because she questions patriarchal norms, unlike the canonized Panchakanyas whose sanctity is rooted in submission. By juxtaposing Urmila's silencing with examples like Surpanakha's demonization, the paper demonstrates how patriarchal feminism operates as a subtle but powerful tool of control. The discussion concludes that Kane's narrative challenges these silences, reclaiming Urmila's voice and revealing the contradictions within cultural respect for women—where reverence often conceals oppression.

Keywords: Resilient Patriarchy, Feminism, Gender and Mythology, Silenced voices

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India is renowned for the diversity of its cultures. This country is home to several thriving cultures. One of the world's earliest civilizations is found in India. Indian culture is admired for its inclusiveness. One society that takes more pride in inclusivity from an early age is Indian culture. While the rest of the world continues to strive hard to escape the clutches of patriarchy, India is a nation that takes pride in the respect it has extended to women over centuries. In India, women are revered and venerated as representations of gods, rivers, regions, etc.

The world continues to acknowledge India's oldest and most celebrated culture, *Sanatan Dharma*, for the high standards of morality it upholds. Because of its rock-solid foundations in inclusivity, non-violence, and peace, it is embraced and felicitated by numerous nations. The promotion of inclusivity is evident in the writings that uphold Sanatan Dharma. The world still has a hard time understanding and accepting weak and minority groups, like women and transgender individuals, but if we look at Indian culture, we see that these minority groups are celebrated. In Indian culture, transgender people are represented by deities. One such instance is the god Arthanarishwara, who is the union of Shiva and Parvathi.

Women have been worshipped in India since very early times. Indians who adhere to Sanatan dharma frequently worship many goddesses, including Parvathi, Lakshmi, Saraswathi, Kali, and others. Additionally, these goddesses are associated with certain fields, and those who aspire to succeed in those fields devote their faith and devotion to them. For instance, because Lakshmi is the goddess of prosperity, people worship her in order to increase their wealth. In the same manner, ten days of the year are set aside to celebrate Vijayadashami where various forms of womanhood are celebrated. This is the extent to which Indian culture values and honours women.

Indian scriptures also reflect the country's cultural character. The significance placed on female characters in Indian texts like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* is evident. One could even argue that without its female characters, the plot of these texts would not advance even a single step. The *Mahabharata* would not have a plot without Kunthi and Draupadi, and the *Ramayana* would not have a plot without Sita. In India, even these female figures are revered for their selfless deeds and sacrifices. For instance, married women in India worship *Panchakanyas* for successful, happy, and healthy marriages. Here, five female deities Ahalya, Draupadi, Sita, Tara and Mandodari are revered who are renowned for their sacrifices and high moral standards.

Ahalya Draupadi Sita Tara Mandodari tatha /

Panchakanyah smarennityam

Mahapatakanasinihm // (Panchakanya)

(Ahalya, Draupadi, Sita, Tara and Mandodari. One should forever remember the Panchakanya who are destroyers of great sins).

There is a variant of the same hymn in *Brahma Purana* which replaces Sita with

Kunti. That hymn goes as

Ahalya Draupadi Kunti Tara Mandodari tatha /

Panchakanyah smarennityam

Mahapatakanasinihm // (Panchakanya)

This was the assumed status of women in Indian culture. But is this the reality? Are the women as respected as mentioned in these scriptures. If the answer is a yes, then why were the other women characters rejected by the society that has huge value for women. This paper attempts to analyse the disparity and expose the true reasons of the respect these ladies gained which other women did not.

Whenever the *Ramyana* is analysed or scrutinized people are always tempted to go after Rama and Sita, the protagonists. Only their actions, emotions and life experiences are given great importance for a long time. The consequences of their actions on secondary characters or the sacrifices made by them are always ignored as their duties. In fact the fate of secondary female characters is more pathetic than the male ones. They are double marginalised throughout the plot. The decision of Sita to accompany Rama during exile was celebrated while the decision of Lakshmana to accompany them was recognised. But nobody recognised or praised Urmila, the wife of Lakshmana for letting her husband go. Even surprising is that nobody even sympathised her fate of being separated from her husband for 14 years and staying with her in-laws.

On a closer inspection on the character Urmila, one could understand that it takes greater courage than Rama, Sita and Lakshmana to be Urmila. She was neglected for ages. But the modern writers today are trying to bring new means to these secondary characters and trying to give them a voice to tell their stories. Kavita Kane is one such writer who focuses on these secondary characters from scriptures especially the *Ramyana* and the *Mahabharata* and tries to voice out their plights and give them characters. Her novels *Sita's Sister*, *Karna's Wife*, *Lanka's Princess*, *Ahalya's Awakening* etc. focuses on forgotten female figures of the scriptures who are worthy even to be the protagonist of those scriptures. *Valmikiramayana* gave only few details of Urmila as she is the daughter of King Janaka, sister of Sita and wife of Lakshmana. No other details regarding her character were provided in the scripture. Without that one could never understand the emotions of Urmila while she was separated from her husband.

But Kavita Kane through the novel *Sita's Sister* has given a wonderful illustration of Urmila so that everyone could see how strong, determined and wise she is. Urmila is one among the most selfless characters in the history. She was the real daughter of King Janaka yet all the love and affection of the parents went for the adopted one Sita. Urmila has all the rights to rebel against this, yet she never complained. Even when Sita was addressed by the names Janaki, Maithili which means daughter of Janaka and Princess of Mithila respectively which are rightfully the names that belong to Urmila; she never fought. One cannot see any such instances in *Valmikiramayana* too. But these good qualities of Urmila are never

even recognised in the scripture.

In contrast, Kavita Kane emphasizes these subtle personality traits. She constructed Urmila's character in such a way that it felt so natural, when she allowed Lakshmana to part with her. Urmila from her childhood cared for her elder sister Sita and her cousins Mandavi and Shruthakeerthi. The girls grew together and were inseparable. Though Sita was the elder one, Urmila was the wise and practical one among them. She took care of her sisters both in her home and their husband's home. She was the one who was interested in politics. She was a genius and also an artist. Only because she understood the nuances of politics, she could let her husband leave her for political reasons.

Though Urmila was ready to sacrifice her happiness for the people around her, she was not ready to tolerate such injustices done to her beloved ones. She would argue or fight with anyone in such situations. One such instance is when Kaikeyi showed her dislikes for an adopted one to become the wife of Rama. When Kaikeyi proposed that Rama should marry a real princess again, Urmila couldn't contain her anger. Urmila hated that her sister is being objectified and she raised her voice against this injustice.

How dare they do this to you?' started Urmila furiously. 'You shall not take it silently anymore, Sita! The barbs were mean enough and should have stopped. They have the audacity to think of the remarriage dismissing you as if you were some trophy to be replaced! I won't have it, Sita. (Kane 100)

Another such instance is the exile scene. She agreed for Lakshmana to accompany Rama with a stone heart, but when Bharata decided to leave his wife Mandavi to stay on the outskirts as an ascetic till the return of Rama, she was furious. She questions him and all forms of dharma that is basically inclined to patriarchy.

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?---. 'Today, in this room, we have talked about all forms of *dharmā*- 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 *dharmā* of the husband for his wife? No *dharmā* of the son for his mother? It is always about the father, sons and brothers? (Kane 219)

Urmila was asked to shut up as it was not a place for a woman to raise her voice. But this didn't stop her from raising her voice for her voiceless sisters. She considered herself strong enough to accept all the hardships that life threw in her path. But she couldn't accept the same fate for her sisters. So she fought with all her might to break the clutches of patriarchy that destroys the souls of her sisters and convert them into walking objects.

This is one among the most touching scenes of *Sita's Sister*. This shows the wisdom of Urmila as she asked the right questions which even the elders and Gurus stumbled upon. They couldn't give her a satisfactory explanation, so they tried to shut her up. But this didn't break the courage of Urmila. She stood alone as the sisters for whom she was fighting for also asked her to stop it. Still she questioned every norms of patriarchy as she knew she was right. Finally Kashyap stopped her saying that it is a family matter where she has no voice, she retorts, "This royal family is famous for the justness when it comes to its people and the state, but it is cruellest to its own family members. Justice here is not just blind- it is deaf and mute" (Kane 222).

After the departure of the brothers and their entourage, Urmila was left with a load of mourning and weak family members to take care of. The queens were moaning the death of king Dasharatha and Mandavi the departure of her husband. On the other hand, without proper rulers, the country was vulnerable to the attack of enemies who were waiting for an opportunity. Urmila who helped her father in political matters took the matters to her hand and advised the ministers of the tactics to prevent the attack of the enemies. She also took care of the three mourning mothers who were devastated after the tragic death of Dasharatha. "Like a combatant, she fights against all the malevolence that exists in the society and also questions the injustices and atrocities show towards the submissive category of society, especially to Sita" (Vijayan 141).

Urmila acted as a catalyst in mending the relationship between Bharath and Kaikeyi after the tragic events. She understood the manipulation on Manthara in this regard and requested Bharath to forgive her as she realised her mistake and is repenting it. She also brought together the family members who were separated after the tragedy. She also took care of her depressed sister Mandavi. Amid all these, she even forgot to process her grief. She behaved like a true queen in such an emergency situation and held the fort until the return of her husband.

Urmila was shocked on hearing the abduction of Sita. She felt herself responsible for her sister's plight as it was her duty to protect her sister. She was finally relieved after hearing the news that Sita was saved by Rama. But the most shocking news for her was when Rama questioned the chastity of Sita and asked her to prove it. Her sisters assumed that Rama was trying save Sita's reputation but Urmila was furious at this news.

If that was the case, Ram should have renounced his throne and his status as a king to protect her rather than be answerable to his people who dared to point fingers at his wife, the queen, for not being "chaste" enough,' said Urmila forcefully. 'it was a dilemma of a husband versus king -who is higher, is the moral question?' she added bitterly. '...This to a wife who chose to go in exile with him to the forest than stay in the protective luxury of the palace. (Kane 294)

This was the character of Urmila. She is strong, independent, selfless, determined- all the necessary qualities for a true queen. Then why was she neglected as a mere name and a few titles as the daughter of someone and wife of someone. This is because of the effects of patriarchal feminism. Patriarchal feminism is nothing but giving high regards for women who accepts the norms of patriarchy. They will be strong, independent, determined but would never cross the line drawn by the patriarchal society. On the surface, one could see greater respect given to such women, but once looked closely will find the clutches of patriarchy that binds them.

Patriarchal societies and cultures with patriarchal feminism would boast on their consideration and respect for womanhood in general. Patriarchy provides certain status and position for women who are ready to respect its norms but it will taint the character of women who raises their voice against it. One such example is Surpanakha from the *Ramayana*. Women according to patriarchy should not express their sexual desires publically. They should always behave modest and shy. But Surpanakha was not such a woman. She expressed her desire to two handsome men and for that mistake she was insulted and mutilated. She was even painted as a monster. Similar was the case of Urmila. She raised her voice against the unethical practices of patriarchy. Thus patriarchy silenced her for ages without proper characterisation and recognition.

Patriarchal feminism is the silent but most dangerous tools of patriarchy. It not only destroyed the once who fought against it but also trained other women to behave as per its norms by creating examples. The *Panchakanya* worship mentioned earlier is one such tricks of patriarchal feminism. The Panchakanyas, Ahalya, Draupadi, Tara, Mandodari and Sita are characters of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Ahalya was the wife of Sage Gautama, Draupadi was the wife of Pandavas and their queen, Tara was the wife of Bali, the Vanara king, Mandodari was the wife of Ravana and Sita was the wife of Rama and the female protagonist of the *Ramayana*.

Ahalya was tricked by Indra into adultery which infuriated her husband Gauthama who cursed her to turn into a stone. Ahalya has to atone to this sin for so long until she was purified by the feet of Rama during his exile. Here one can see a woman who was tricked by a man, cursed by another man for no fault of her own and her atonement lies on the feet of another man. Only after accepting all these rules of patriarchy could she attain the holy status. Similar is the condition of other women in the hymn. Draupadi was forced to marry her husband's brothers too by patriarchy. Draupadi had to spend her life with five men in a society that views women who do so with two men as unchaste. But still she attained the holy status and is worshipped even today because that was the need of patriarchy. The rest of the women also had to suffer in silence yet accept all the blows of patriarchy to gain a reputation in the society and history. This was the strength of patriarchal feminism, a hidden but deadly instrument that ruined a woman's personality and emotions by providing her a pretend social equality that, in practice, ripped off her

wings. Womanhood fell victim to it, either by embracing it and becoming walking corpses or by resisting it and becoming extinct.

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