
Urmila of Kavita Kane's Sita's Sister: A Paradigm of a Contemporary Indian Women

Poonam Sharma¹, Nitin Bhatnagar²

¹*Research Scholar, Department of English, GLA University, Mathura.
E-mail: poonamsharmafeb253@gmail.com*

²*Professor, Department of English, GLA University, Mathura.
E-mail: nitin.bhatnagar@gla.ac.in*

Abstract

The epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have always remained the integral part of the Indian cultural tradition. They have been told or retold several times, getting communicated from one generation to another. The Ramayana celebrates the victory of goodness over evil, obedience, call of duty, brotherhood, compassion, sacrifice – all looped into the thread of Indian culture. These issues are depicted mainly through male characters, while most of the females have been kept on the margins. In this very stream is Urmila (Laxmana's wife), who has not received the lime light she deserves. Kavita Kane, in her novel Sita's Sister, has lifted the Urmila of the traditional versions of the Ramayana, from the periphery and placed her on the centre stage of the fabric. She has reiterated the myth from a daring and unwavering Urmila's perspective – a standpoint that is not dissimilar to that of the modern Indian woman. The present paper explores this particular stand of Kane's Urmila and studies her proximity from this contemporary angle.

Keywords: Ramayana, Mahabharata, Indian women, margin, Indian culture

1. INTRODUCTION

Ramayana and Mahabharata are one of the two great epics which are milestones in Indian Literature. The Ramayana, especially, emphasizes on the very value of dharma. Ram known as, Maryada Purushottama fulfills his Putra Dharma, Sita, Ram's wife becomes the epitome of traditional Indian wife by following her Patni Dharma, while Lakshman and Bharat fulfill their Bhrata dharma. All become the epitome of dharma hood. But what happens to Urmila, who is either known as Sita's sister or Laxman's wife. She follows Patni dharma and sacrifices her happiness. In Valmiki's Ramayana, the character of Urmila is neglected and remains on the periphery. The greatness and the support that she lends, is overlooked and lost between the lines of the epic.

One often wonders why is there so little said about the brave and self-sacrificing wife of Lakshman, who upheld *dharma* as much as Rama did. If Rama went on an exile to fulfil the promise given by his father to Kaikeyi, citing it to be his *dharma* to fulfil his father's wishes, Urmila exiled herself in the palace, so that Lakshman could fulfil his promise of always protecting his brother (Shekha, 2015).

Kavita Kane, the mythology fiction writer has retold the Ramayana from the perspective of unsung female characters like Urmila, Ahalya, Surpanakha and so on. In her Interview, Kane clarifies her portrayal of female characters. She makes it clear that her characters are unbiased as she says:

Mythology, I believe, should make you think, not judge. And that's how I portray my women – without any bias, be it a dark character like Surpanakha in Lanka's Princess or the treacherous Menaka of Menaka's Choice. Or be it a strong positive character like Urmila. I am simply telling the unheard story of a Surpanakha or Menaka and a Satyavati. I am not interested in painting the white black or the black white (Interview by Chakravarthy, 2018).

2. MODERN INDIAN WOMAN

A drastic change can be noticed in the role of women from the ancient society to the 21st century due to the continuous changes in socio-economic and psycho-cultural aspects of human living. Women like Sita, Ahalya, Kunti, Draupadi, Parvati, Tara and so many other goddesses or women from Hindu mythology remained the idols for *nari jati* due to their sacrifices and high moral values. Women played a major role in every era. They have not only been added in the social and political development of India but also contributed in the transformation of the contemporary Indian society.

...women have played a silent, self-effacing role to sustain Indian civilization down the ages. They have made their influence felt in all walks of life but retained the feminine graces-motherliness, wife's fidelity, kinship bonds, cultural norms and the cherished "home sweet home" instinct (Mishra, 2017).

The contemporary modern women are not only independent and loyal but also confident and graceful. They are passionate, well-educated and ambitious. They believe in their intellectual upbringing. The modern Indian women, Pooja Bedi comments, "is a great blend of Western emancipation and Indian warmth, compassion, family values and traditions" (2014). The modern woman is a perfect balance of compassion for the victims and aggression against the authority if they are wrong. She never hesitates to raise her voice for justice. "The modern woman has the balance of being able to show a soft and supportive side, while at the same time, demonstrating strength – she is resilient, knows what she wants and speaks her mind" (Mat McCabe, 2018). Not only she has the ability to give birth or let it be taken away but also to revolt and to supplicate.

Kane has portrayed Urmila's character showcasing in her feminine power traits of modern women. She is not only independent and loyal but also confident and graceful. If She is bold, outspoken then she is a dutiful, caring, a learned scholar, a good Indian daughter in law, and a great ruler. She is compassionate and kind to others. She has all the qualities of a modern woman. Shekha comments:

And among all these women, it is Urmila who comes out as the most influential character – outspoken yet respectful, head strong yet calm, strong in the face of adversity, a learned scholar, with an ability to forgive, forget and look at the bigger picture, the tapasvi who has achieved understanding (2015).

In her interview with NAW, Kavita Kane has talked about the character of Urmila, “It is her untold story, her personal exile, her travails, trials and tribulations as she waited for him, but yet lived her life without tears and self-sympathy.” Kane further adds, “She was a strong woman but not much is known about her as she unfortunately is one of the most overlooked character in the epic” (2014).

The *Ramayana* has been the subject of multiple interpretations from different perspectives of modern writers. The modern retellings like *Asura* by Anand Neelakantan, *Sita's Ramayana* by Samhita Arni & Moyna Chitrakar, *The Queen's Play* by Aashish Kaul, *Hanuman's Ramayan and Sita* by Devdutt Pattanaik, *Sita's Ascent* by Vayu Naidu, *Scion of Ikshvaku* and *Sita* by Amish Tripathi and so on, have been retold in modern context that make the morals more relatable from 21st century dimensions. The multiple interpretations of the *Ramayana* make its teachings more relevant to the ongoing generation. ‘The Death of the Author’, a concept propounded by Roland Barthes, takes position, i.e., the author dies and reader originates. The reading and rereading of works and its various interpretations tend to establish certain ideas and ideologies in society (Lavanya, 2018. p 6).

Kavita Kane has taken out the minor and neglected female characters from the *Ramayana* and written novels like *Sita's Sister*, *Lanka's Princess*, *Ahalya's Awakening* on their perspectives. In *Sita's Sister*, Kavita Kane has given voice to the muted character of Urmila and portrayed her character with the traits of a modern woman who does not accept the traditional secondary status, but displays a demeanor that is akin to that of men. Simon De Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, advocated a similar type of image of today's woman, who will be equivalent to men, reason and act like men, but in spite of lamenting her inferiority to them, she would pronounce herself their equal (1997, p149).

However, some critics have considered Kane's *Urmila*, a little beyond reality:

This account of Sita's talented sister who is shown as outspoken and smart, critical of Ram (the *maryadapurshottam*) in some cases, highly supportive of her sisters, resolver of all misunderstandings in the household and scholar of great repute, appears to be very utopian and hard to believe. (Indian folk book review, 2017).

Urmila, Sita's younger sister, biological daughter of King Janaka and Queen Sunaina of Mithila, and Lakshmana's wife comes forward after breaking the walls of marginality that is imposed upon her by the male-centric society. Since childhood, she was deprived of what was hers. As "Sita had been hailed as Janaki, Janak's daughter when it was Urmila who was his daughter and the sole proprietor of that name. Sita was Maithili, the princess of Mithila, when it was Urmila who should have been crowned with that title" (*Sita's Sister* 23). But Urmila never takes it negatively although Sita is not her biological sister. Instead she becomes the strength for her loved ones. "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" (Vibha, 2015).

3. KNOWLEDGE SEEKER WITH INTELLECTUAL UPBRINGING

Like a modern woman, Urmila and her three sisters named Sita, Mandavi and Shrutakriti are well educated. "They were well-versed in the Vedas and the Upanishads, politics, music, art and literature" (*Sita's Sister* 9). In Mithila, They got a learning centric environment where they all were allowed to get knowledge as "they accompanied their father to all the conferences and religious seminars across the country, experiencing a world no princess had been allowed to visit"(9). She wants to explore new places and get knowledge but she knows her family customs very well that after Sita's wedlock, she would also be married off. She prefers knowledge as "Marriage did not hold much interest for Urmila but it was a social discipline she would have to conform to. She would rather seek knowledge instead of suitor" (9). Urmila was criticized by Manthra for not helping in kitchen as it is a duty of a woman in the palace to cook the food. Instead of following the custom of cooking, she decides to paint. She does not want to be kept behind the walls. She believes in gaining knowledge and intellectual upbringing.

4. INDEPENDENT ATTITUDE

Urmila has independent attitude that is one of the strengths of a modern woman. She takes bold stands. She is responsible for her actions and is not afraid to take well- thought out risks. Yashika Bisht writes, "Urmila can be categorized in Elaine Showalter's female phase which is ongoing since 1920. It was the third stage of the period of evolution in which the 'women show more independent attitude'" (9).

Urmila is bold and outspoken enough to raise her voice against the wrong or injustice done to other female characters in the novels. She fights for the rights of women in the royal family. "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" (Vijyan, 2018. p141).

When Urmila comes to know that Maa Kaikeyi does not accept Sita as Ram's bride, instead She wants the best one for him. She is flabbergasted and rushes to Sita and to find out that Sita is still silent. Urmila does not tolerate it. She starts furiously, "you shall not take it silently anymore Sita.... They have the audacity to think of remarriage dismissing you as if you

were some trophy to be replaced! I won't have it Sita..." (*Sita's Sister* 100). Urmila gets to know that her sister, Mandavi is also going to face the same fate as hers and Sita's. As Ram, Sita and Lakshman are embarking on exile for fourteen years while, Bharat decides to administer the kingdom from Nandigram at the outskirts of the city, Urmila becomes furious and asks Bharat, "So be it, Bharat, like your brothers, Ram and Lakshman, you too live a life of ascetic, free from the bond of love and worldly care. Who cares whatever happens to your wife and your family?"(219).

5. ADAPTABILITY

Urmila's logical adaptability with a stand taking attitude can be observed in today's women. One can notice the difference between the unbiased and learning-centric Mithila to the patriarchy ridden Ayodhya. Adapting to the new environment is a big challenge for Urmila. She follows her dharma of *kulvadhu* of *Raghukul* without tolerating wrong done to her as well as to others. She respects the elders, but when she finds something unjustifiable, she poses some pertinent questions to the authority. Urmila never hesitates in raising her voice against wrong done with women in the royal family, as she asks in front of all:

...we have talked about all shots of dharma- of the father and the sons, of king and The Princes, of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya, even of 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? (219).

After hearing Urmila's pointed questions regarding dharma of a father, sons and brothers, *Guru Kashyap* challenges her furiously, "Princess, how dare you speak such outrageous words?"(*Sita's Sister* 219) He further adds, "Do you think this is your father, King Janak's court that encourages free thinking woman like that philosopher Gargi to debate and argue shamelessly? This is not so! This is the assembly of the greatest minds of Ayodhya" (219). She replies by saying, "You are right, *Guru Kashyap*, Ayodhya is not Mithila. Mithila does not treat her women so shabbily" (223).

6. CONFIDENT AND COURAGEOUS

Urmila is confident and courageous. She further asks the same question, why didn't they object when King Dashrath accepts Queen Kaikeyi's wish of embarking Ram on exile for fourteen years and Bharat's coronation? Why always women have to suffer and follow their dharma. Why they have to bear the consequences of others' promises. She addresses Ram "...dharma of the wife is to follow and help her husband in his duties. Sita did it by following you to the forest, I did it by staying at the palace and not following my husband for fear of distracting him from his duties and service to you..."(220-221).

Urmila receives her husband's admiration for her bold stand. He praises her, "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 pacemaker

simultaneously...” (214). Here one may agree, that the confident and courageous Indian woman of today will surely identify herself with Kane’s Urmilla.

7. A GOOD ADMINISTRATOR

Urmila not only looks after the royal family, but also actively participates in the affairs of the court. When Ram, Lakshman and Sita were on fourteen years exile and Bharat was in Nandigram, she takes interest in affairs of the palace and political issues. The courtesans recognize her intellectual capability and seek her advice. “O, daughter of the wise Raj rishi Janak, please look into the matters of the royal court for we do not want to be accused of power play or otherwise” (*Sita’s Sister* 181). Urmila proves herself and fits into the role of a modern administrator, who not only manages her personal affairs but also political affairs. Kane comments, “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” (269).

8. A VIRTUOUS WIFE

Finally, one cannot miss the modern quality of multi-tasking in the character of Urmila. In addition to her love for knowledge and desire for academic pursuits, she is honest towards her wifely duties. She balances her bold, confident and stand taking attitude with her sincere devotion to Lakshman. Urmila’s love for her husband is very deep. She loves him a lot as a true modern woman. Although she knows it very well that she is the second priority to him. In the Swayamwar of Sita, when Ram broke the Shiv dhanush, and Rishi Parsuram came to know about this incident. He became very furious with Ram for doing so. Lakshman interrupted to explain the situation. But his explanation made Rishi Parshuram more infuriated. Urmila understood the situation and consoled Rishi Parshuram to save the person whom she loved heartedly. “Urmila knew that 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” (*Sita’s Sister* 38). It was not only she who saved Lakshman from the fury of Rishi Parshuram, Lakshman also saved her. “And while Lakshman had saved her from a violent predicament, so had she, snatching Lakshman from death” (41). They both love each other. Lakshman accepts his love for her. “I have been in love with you from that beautiful moment when I saw you looking at me haughtily in the garden with that pooja thali in your hand” (65). But when it comes to their marriage, Lakshman refuses to marry Urmila. He tells her, “...Ram is my God and the purpose that justifies my existence is serving him, protecting him” (66). Lakshman is completely committed to his brotherly duties first all through his life. Still Urmila loves him a lot. She reveals her feelings, “No, I am yours. You are not mine” (67). She further says, “I Love you that does not mean that I possess you, your beliefs and your loyalties. I assure you that I shall never come between your loyalties to your brothers and your family” (67). Urmila is a woman of high value that she loves a man, Lakshman and she determines to spend her life for him. Lakshman shows his faith for her and he knows it very well that in his absence, she will look after his family. He says, “And you are so

strong- the strongest women I have ever known. You are Urmila, one where the hearts meet...” (144-145). He further adds, “You are my strength but also my weakness” (145).

9. CONCLUSION

It can be noticed that the Indian social, political, professional and sports scene is not bereft of active participation of women. From Savitri Bai Phule in the second half of the 19th century and Sarojini Naidu in the 20th century; we have many leading women from the contemporary scene who truly represent the modern India. Womenfolk like Nirmala Sitharaman, Minister of Finance and Corporate Affairs of India; Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, MD, Biocon; Indra Nooyi, Former CEO, PepsiCo and present Board Member of Amazon; Arundhati Roy, Man-Booker Award winner; Sania Mirza, an International Lawn-Tennis player and Chitra Ramakrishnan, MD, National Stock Exchange are some of the prominent ones (Pant, 2020). The modern Indian women have entered into all corners of life. She is a knowledge seeker, self-dependent, assertive and a vigorous challenger of negative social stigmas; but adaptive and an efficient multi-tasker.

Kane’s Urmila in *Sita’s Sister* comes quite close to this stature. Beena rightly designates her feats:

Her intellectual pursuits, her vehement questioning the patriarchal power structure, her active participation in the affairs of the state, her resistance, her role as an anchor keeping the family together during the exile- all these clearly indicate that Urmila breaks into the male bastion ... (2015. P 83).

Kane has lifted the Urmila of the traditional versions of the *Ramayana*, from the periphery and placed her on the centre stage of the fabric. She has retold the myth from an audacious and unflinching Urmila’s perspective – a standpoint that is not dissimilar to that of the modern Indian woman. Hence, the Urmila of *Sita’s Sister* comes forward as a stimulus for the contemporary Indian women who can now well relate themselves with this mythical character. Such mythological retellings are also worthy of praise, because through their approach, they have become encouraging promoters in the field of women’s emancipation.

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