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Reconstruction of Women in Contemporary Myth: A Study of *Sita's Sister* by Kavita Kane

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Abstract

Mythology has been an indispensable source and subject of study in literature down the Ages. The main reason of writing mythical theme in contemporary Indian English novels is to figure out the meaning in relation to ancient past. The mythical characters are the symbolic representation of the traditional values and are viewed as a cultural beacon of the nation. On one hand, in Hinduism woman plays a significant role as 'Shakti' assuming the power of creation, as a kind-hearted daughter, as an ideal wife, as an honourable queen and as the divine mother. While on the other hand, myths are created in the patriarchal society to conquer women describing them as the 'Other'.

The male dominated religious scriptures have portrait women to be mute and obedient, sometimes they are not even entitled in the epics or given the adequate position for their sacrifices. Contemporary novels reconstruct the pictures of the characters like Sita, Urmila, Surpankha and so on different from the myths, which suppress them in the male dominated society.

Sita's Sister by Kavita Kane pictures Urmila, a sister of Sita and a wife of Lakshman, giving her a new identity. In *The Valmiki Ramayana*, Urmila portraits as 'Other', while the contemporary novelist Kavita Kane portraits her as a 'Shakti'. The author renders the novel through Urmila's viewpoints, who has remained in the shadow and one doesn't much talk about in the *Ramayana*. She depicts Urmila as an enigmatic, fearless, and outspoken and gentle who looks after the whole kingdom of Ayodhya, and round the clock gathered all the members of the family who are deformed by heart after the exile of Ram, Sita and Lakshman to Dandak forest.

The paper focuses on the depiction of the most overlooked character of the *Ramayana*, Urmila who here gains a positive position in the male dominated society and also reconstructs to touch every human's heart.

Keywords: Reconstruction, Ramayana, Myth, Patriarchal

Society is convoluted by bunch of myths which articulates women as inferior to men. Women characters are seen as an essence of sensuality and desires. Thus, the need arises to construct them again as they really are. So, women writers write to secure female's position in the society by highlighting the role played by the silent and pitiable sufferings of women in the myth.

Valmiki, in the *Ramayana* doesn't provide a proper identity to Urmila. She is known only as Sita's Sister and Lakshman's wife, which wipe out her conversance as a woman. Urmila's silent sacrifices are not acknowledged anywhere in the epic, *Ramayana* and so she remained to the far and backstage. Lakshman chooses Ram not Urmila as his first priority and so leaves her for fourteen years in the palace of Ayodhya to protect them (Ram and Sita) in the mysterious forest. It is Urmila who leaves in the doomed palace of Ayodhya for fourteen years.

In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, the character of Urmila has failed to attain justice as her rights, requests, and sacrifices are never back a bill. This most neglected character gains a new identity by Kavita Kane. Kavita Kane manifests Urmila as a multifaceted individuality. Urmila's character is different from the ancient epic of



Ramayana as she is an obedient daughter, a loving sister, a dutiful wife, peculiar Indian daughter in law, a scholar and an agile ruler makes her acquaintance apparently unique. Kavita Kane cultivates her as courageous and candid to express her thoughts and feelings. The very first clue of her heroism is expressed when Ravan, the king of Lanka has failed to pick up the Shiv dhanush and that angry, young man told her father king Janak that he wants to marry Urmila instead of Sita. At that moment Kavita Kane gives a way to explicit Urmila's inner and powerful voice.

“Urmila felt his lascivious gaze on her. His eyes glittering wolfishly in his cruel, dark face. His open, blatant look made Urmila cringe but she lifted up her chin fiercely. She looked squarely up at him, her eyes sparkling with unsuppressed fury and loathing.” (Kane- 32)

Indian society expects woman to be silent listener in such situations but here, Kavita Kane provides Urmila a platform to play as she really is. Another example shows how she reacts when her the most loveable sister, Sita puts into troubles. She is bold enough to kill anyone who treacherous to her.

“She saw a dagger hanging at his waist as he still grappled with her, and snatching it with her right hand, she trailed to thrust it in his neck, his shoulders, his back- anywhere she could reach...” (Kane, 49)

The above mentioned incidents reflect Urmila's courage in male dominated society which also bring transformation in the matter of Indian women to raise their voice in patriarchy. Kavita Kane portrays her the most outspoken and self-reliant girl as Urmila puts her opinions boldly and makes others also soothe. An incident when her mother Sunaina refuses to marry four sisters in the same family because Sunaina knew that it is very troublesome to sister in law. It may create many domestic problems, the sisters are a little fearful through firm in their decisions. At that point of time, Urmila speaks:

“What is to happen, shall unfold. She sighed. Without intension, we are powerless in directing or determining what is to come. But in the present, let's not analyse and doubt the intensity of our love. I simply pray that we have the strength and convictions to make the right choice were such a situation forced upon us. And if it does, let us be brave enough to face the consequences!” (Kane, 57)

Kavita Kane reconstruct Urmila as an intimate beloved also, who is in love with Lakshman. But Lakshman is not ready to marry Urmila as he knew that he shall never love her as passionately as she loves him. Because his first priority is Ram so he feels injustice in the side of Urmila's dedication towards him. But it is Urmila who convinces him with her soft, wise and true philosophical words. She says to Lakshman:

“Loving is also giving; you are not ready to give yourself to me. But don't you see I don't want your complete surrender. I love you but that does not mean I possess you, your beliefs and your loyalties. I assure you that I shall never come between your loyalty to your brothers and your family.” (Kane, 67)

Urmila, a real born daughter of king Janak and righteously princess of Mithila never urges for her



justice and her own place in the palace. She quietly knows that Sita is not her real sister but she is an adopted child by her father. Though she never minds for Sita's grand and princely treatments from childhood to young hood. She never ever argues with her parents for making and putting her their 'second' daughter. Sita is called Janki and Maithili as being the first daughter of king Janak and princess of Mithila but actually she is not. The judicious and legitimate child is Urmila not Sita, though she never asks for her rights and never feels envy from her loving sister Sita. After marriage when four sisters' welcome by the queen mother Kaikeyi and when she tells Urmila that she is Janki, daughter of king Janak and Maithili, princess of Mithila she politely corrects the sentences by saying Kaikeyi that:

"I am neither. It is Sita who is called Janaki and Maithili, mother." (Kane, 93)

Kavita Kane's treatment for her lively character, Urmila possesses so much goodness that it reflects in the above mentioned dialogues. In the modern age when no one is ready to come off from their own rights, here Urmila renounces her own self for the sake of her parents decisions and happiness. It is actually princely merits. In Ayodhya also she never puts aside her mind's awareness and her keen sight. She always observes the atmosphere, listen to everybody but never quickly takes any decisions without thinking. From the very first day she doesn't feel comfort in the presence of Manthara, queen Kaikeyi's favourite handmaid, who is like her mistress Kaikeyi "arrogant and petty in the limited power they wielded." (Kane, 94) Urmila has doubt on her from the very beginning, and her doubts convert into reality when four sisters' talk to each other and within the conversation, she finds that Manthara has plotted many things into the minds of Sita and Mandavi, her cousin sister.

"Sita, like Mandavi, Manthara has worked on you too, do you realize? By ingratiating herself to both of you, she has played one against the other." (Kane, 111)

Being a nice couple, Urmila and Lakshman both spend their time with each other and talk so long about each and every matters either court or domestic. Lakshman is very much affectionate with Urmila's every actions either it is painting or studying. Both are in love with care, genuine, jolly, lively and genial. Lakshman always meets Urmila in their private chambers and he used to remove hairpin from her 'coiled coil' hair. There is a romantic conversation between them.

"You know that I cannot roam around with my hair loose, it's socially unacceptable. She sighed."

"Don't. Whenever I get time to catch a glimpse of you through the rushed day, I'd like to see you with your hair wild and flowing. That is when I get my Mila back, not the Urmila of the world." (Kane, 128)

Kavita Kane nicely describes the private moments of this newly married couple. It shows that each women is very much happy and excited when her husband is in too much love with her. Kane depicts her as a woman of not only words but action also. To almost fourteen years alone without her husband in the palace of Ayodhya is very much panic giving action. After listening the words from Lakshman that he will accompany his



elder brother Ram in exile, she becomes horrified. When Lakshman comes to meet her last time in their chambers, he directly tells Urmila not to hate him because it is his duty towards his parents like Ram and Sita to protect them. In that painful time she knows how to handle the situations.

“There was no time for anger and rancour, for pain and regret, for hatred or forgiveness. All she could do was love him.”

“I love you.” She breathed softly. “Go.” (Kane, 143)

Urmila is always in presence of mind and she never loses her heart in a critical time. The situation arises when king Dashrath dies, Ram, Sita and Lakshman go to exile and Bharat and Shatrughna are also not present in the palace, she presumes that Ayodhya is in danger as Guru Vasistha worries and tells her to take some decisions. Because enemies are ready to attack on Ayodhya as no one is on the throne.

“Urmila shook her head firmly. We are emotionally vulnerable right now but let us not be unprepared for war. Keep the army ready.” (Kane, 180)

Kavita Kane constructs Urmila’s character with such a high spirit and impulse that she becomes an inspirational source for every women. When queen Sunaina and king Janak come to Ayodhya she talks to Urmila about Lakshman’s decision, she tells her mother the words which reflects her maturity.

“As a wife? I did. And I stood by his decision. Staying behind wasn’t giving up my rights, Ma, it was accepting a reality, a responsibility.” (Kane, 183)

The high and saluted qualities of Urmila are revealed through the other characters also. The palace is now a dry desert and in that barren atmosphere, Urmila stands firm and blossoms like a flower. Days pass but Urmila’s peaceful nature never wipes out with time. Once three sisters’ talk about the dull and hard atmosphere in the palace through Mandavi’s words one can notice Urmila’s static inner world.

“You were there all alone taking it all in... the horror, the strain, the trauma and the awfulness of it all! And Urmi, how could you bear to part with the two people whom you loved the most? Both Lakshman and Sita! And yet you appear so calm and stoic... how can you do it, Urmi?”
“Grief demands answers but one doesn’t always get them. We just face it.” (Kane, 201-202)

Years pass and Urmila’s merits and intellects gradually increase. Her calm realization, her inner world and her static peace shapes her to grow from a wilful girl to a woman of wisdom and sagacity. As her father king Seeradhvaj Janak organises the philosophical conference every year in the Mithila, she receives an unexpected invitation from her father to take part in the prestigious *brahmanyagna*.

“Urmila felt a glow of pride. Her father, the most respected of all scholars had graciously acknowledged her as a peer though he did not always agree with her as a theologian.” (Kane, 265)

“The conference was as grand as it used to be in her childhood days. But twenty-seven years later, today, it held a new meaning for Urmila.” (Kane, 267)



After the critical and sensitive news of Lakshman's faintness, his new life and at last the war's completion when Satrugna comes to palace to reveal the news, he says Urmila about her contribution to convert their palace into a beautiful and peaceful home.

"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 it a home one wants to return to every single day." (Kane, 290)

Kavita Kane pictures her as a devoted wife without her husband and as she is a typical Indian daughter in law who shapes and modify a distorted palace into a living home. She possesses all qualities of an eminent Indian housewife. The long mournful fourteen years are ended now and they arrive home from exile. Urmila and Lakshman meet after fourteen years, as she performs ritual *arti*. She is not in a fair condition to speak anything as her mind, heart and body trembling with burning unshed tears and anguish. Recognises the situation of Urmila, Lakshman says in soft words.

"I lived for you. The meaning of my life is you. You got me home, Mila." (Kane, 297)

Kavita Kane's vision for the novel *Sita's Sister* is highly admirable. She reconstructs her character Urmila in such a magnificent manner that after reading the novel every women shake from within. One must want to be like Urmil as she travels from a little girl to a woman of wisdom. The author has given her a new voice and identity which is different from the myths. This reformation of myths attributes to the forefront the silent character that was expelled to the margins in the patriarchal society and also the reconstruction inspires for a change among the women world.

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