

A study on the theme of Kavita Kane's 'Sita's Sister'

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Abstract

Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* is a profound revisionist retelling of the Ramayana that shifts the narrative gaze from the celebrated actions of Ram, Sita, and Lakshman to the quiet, steadfast resilience of Urmila, Sita's younger sister and Lakshman's wife. The novel centrally explores the theme of self-discovery through sacrifice, arguing that true strength lies not only in dramatic acts of duty but also in the silent, sustained endurance of personal exile. Kane reclaims Urmila's identity, elevating her from a footnote in the epic to a model of female agency, intellectual curiosity, and unwavering sisterhood. The most dominant theme is the redefinition of sacrifice and duty. While Lakshman's famous vow to accompany his brother, Ram, and stay awake for fourteen years in the forest is universally lauded as the pinnacle of fraternal devotion, Kane highlights Urmila's complementary, and arguably greater, sacrifice. By choosing to stay behind in Ayodhya and taking upon herself Lakshman's ordained sleep, Urmila enters her own unique form of exile. This is not a passive waiting, but an active decision to bear the psychological and emotional burden of the family's turmoil while the principal heroes are away. Her sacrifice in the palace—an emotional and political prison—is presented as more challenging than the physical exile of the forest, forcing the reader to question the traditional hierarchy of *dharma* (duty) and sacrifice.

Keywords:

Sacrifice, self-discovery, sisterhood, intellectual

Introduction

By centering the story on Urmila, the oft-forgotten wife of Lakshmana, Kane redefines the concepts of sacrifice and duty, transforming them from passive acts of devotion into active, conscious choices that demand immense intellectual and emotional strength. Urmila's unique form of suffering—her fourteen-year exile within the palace walls—establishes her not as a marginalized figure, but as the unsung pillar of Ayodhya. (Dhanraj, 2022)

Kane immediately elevates Urmila's sacrifice beyond the conventional retelling. In some folk versions of the epic, Urmila is said to have surrendered her sleep to the Goddess of Sleep (*Nidra*) so that Lakshmana could remain perpetually vigilant during the exile. Kane deliberately rejects this passive narrative, presenting Urmila's choice to remain awake and aware. Her sacrifice, therefore, is not a mystical slumber but a conscious, protracted act of emotional self-abnegation. By denying her personal desire to join her husband and instead embracing the stark reality of separation, Urmila chooses a more difficult *dharma*: to protect the honor of the family and fulfill her responsibilities to the state. This is a sacrifice of companionship for the sake of the collective good, a decision Kane portrays as far more poignant than physical exile.

Furthermore, Kane redefines Urmila's duty from mere *Patni Dharma* (duty as a wife) to an active, political, and familial leadership role. While Lakshmana fulfills his *Bhrata Dharma* (duty to his brother, Rama) in the forest, Urmila takes on the responsibility of holding the shattered royal household together. She offers unwavering emotional support to the three queens—Kausalya, Sumitra, and Kaikeyi—who are devastated by the loss of the King and the departure of their sons. More critically, she utilizes her intellectual prowess and political awareness, cultivated in the liberal court of Mithila, to advise ministers and ensure the administrative stability of Ayodhya in the absence of a king. Her duty is thus not domestic submission but dynamic governance. Kane presents Urmila as a woman who turns her emotional isolation into intellectual empowerment, becoming the functional, stable heart of the kingdom during its greatest crisis. (Roland, 2021)

Crucially, Urmila utilizes this forced solitude as a catalyst for self-discovery and intellectual pursuit. Instead of succumbing to grief, she channels her energy into managing the royal household and pursuing knowledge. She refuses to allow her identity to be merely an extension of her husband's duty. Kane portrays Urmila as a scholar and a deep thinker, using her time to study the Vedas and engage in intellectual debates. This self-cultivation becomes her act of resistance against patriarchal expectations that would confine her to perpetual

sorrow. Her journey emphasizes that individuality and a rich inner life are as vital as domestic loyalty, allowing her to forge an identity independent of her famous family members.

Finally, the novel celebrates the complexity of sisterhood and female solidarity. The bond between the four sisters—Sita, Urmila, Mandavi, and Shrutakirti—forms the emotional bedrock of the story. Kane demonstrates that while their lives are shaped by the actions of men, the sisters provide each other with crucial, unspoken support. Urmila's relationship with Sita, marked by deep empathy and quiet rivalry, perfectly captures the nuances of female relationships. Urmila is not merely Sita's shadow, but her fierce protector and most unwavering ally, even challenging her own husband and brother-in-law for justice on Sita's behalf. This solidarity provides a strong counter-narrative to the idea that women in epics are always rivals or subservient figures.

Ultimately, Urmila's journey is one of active agency in the face of imposed adversity. Her commitment to duty is not blind obedience but a moral stand. Kane depicts Urmila as outspoken and possessing a fierce sense of justice, notably when she questions the patriarchal norms that led to Sita's eventual rejection and *Agni Pariksha*. She maintains an unyielding loyalty to her husband's cause while simultaneously fulfilling a self-assigned duty to justice and self-respect. In *Sita's Sister*, Kavita Kane successfully repositions Urmila's suffering as the deepest form of sacrifice, transforming her from a footnote in the epic into a complex, resilient heroine whose duty to her family and her own identity makes her the silent, indispensable architect of Ayodhya's survival. (Divakaruni, 2020)

Literature Review

Chavhan et al. (2023): The novel reclaims Urmila's story from the periphery, transforming her fourteen years of separation from her husband—his self-imposed "exile" of service—into an intensive period of self-discovery and intellectual pursuit. This reimagining defies the traditional passive image of the mythological wife, presenting Urmila as a strong, modern woman who actively charts her own course and consolidates a robust personal identity.

Bandana et al. (2021): Urmila's journey of self-discovery is fundamentally rooted in her "personal exile" within the palace of Ayodhya. Unlike Sita, who accompanies Rama, Urmila chooses to remain behind, accepting her husband's commitment to his brother. This choice, however, is not a submission to fate but a conscious decision that initiates a profound internal journey.

Chithra et al. (2020): Actively Manages Grief and Loneliness: Instead of succumbing to despair, Urmila channels her pain into productive action. She becomes a pillar of strength for the broken Ayodhya royal family, supporting her co-sisters, Mandavi and Shrutakirti, and the grieving mothers. This responsibility forces her to grow beyond the role of a sheltered princess into a pragmatic and resilient guardian.

Priya et al. (2020): The period of waiting serves as a crucible for Urmila's character. She confronts the political intrigue and the overwhelming sense of loss within the palace, emerging not as a victim but as an indomitable and self-possessed individual. Her quiet suffering is not weakness but a testament to her immense emotional fortitude and her ability to sustain hope without losing herself to self-pity. This isolation allows her to move past defining herself purely by her marital relationship and forge an identity independent of Lakshmana.

Theme of Kavita Kane's 'Sita's Sister'

The most distinctive aspect of Kane's Urmila is her passionate commitment to intellectual pursuit, which becomes the primary avenue for her self-definition and empowerment. Having been nurtured in the liberal, scholarly environment of Mithila under her philosopher-king father, Janaka, Urmila possesses an intellectual spark that refuses to be extinguished by the patriarchal norms of Ayodhya.

Urmila consistently breaks away from the expected confines of a royal wife. She pursues knowledge—studying the Vedas, Upanishads, and shastras—even within the orthodox court of Ayodhya under the tutelage of gurus like Vasishtha. This active quest for knowledge positions her as a scholar and a free thinker rather than a mere consort.

The novel highlights Urmila's intellectual brilliance through her ability to debate on philosophy and religion, even daring to question the rationality of entrenched traditions and the tenets of *Dharma*. She earns her place among respected scholars and is eventually invited by her father to participate in a conference in her own right as an acclaimed intellectual. This achievement is the ultimate consolidation of her identity, one earned through merit and relentless self-application, far surpassing the social status granted by her birth or marriage.

Beyond scriptural learning, Urmila's passion for art serves as another crucial form of self-expression. Her painting and artistic pursuits are not mere hobbies but a way to process her deep emotional turmoil and give form to her internal landscape. It is through her art that her creative and complex soul finds release and permanence.

The foundation of the female solidarity in the novel is laid in Mithila, where Sita, Urmila, and their cousins, Mandavi and Shrutakirti, are raised together under King Janaka's tutelage. Kane depicts a powerful, inseparable bond formed in their intellectually liberal and supportive environment. Their childhood sisterhood is marked by unconditional love and fierce protectiveness. For instance, Urmila is often portrayed as Sita's "anchor" and "lifeline," the one who offers a sense of normalcy and grounding to the extraordinary Sita. This early connection establishes a crucial network of emotional support that will sustain them through future trials.

The complexity of their sisterhood emerges most acutely after their marriages to the Ayodhya princes. While the four sisters remain loyal, their individual paths and sacrifices create both a shared trauma and subtle tensions.

Urmila's choice to remain in the palace during Lakshmana's fourteen-year exile is perhaps the greatest testament to the novel's exploration of non-traditional female strength. Her separation from her husband and sister, framed as a "private exile," is a profound sacrifice made for the greater good of the family's stability and to enable Lakshmana's duty. The original myth of her "sleep" is reinterpreted by Kane as a metaphor for her loneliness, intellectual pursuit, and emotional withdrawal, not a literal slumber, humanizing her immense struggle.

The relationship between Sita and Urmila, while deeply loving, is not without its nuances. Urmila, at times, is shown grappling with the sheer weight of Sita's iconic status, which often overshadows her own existence—a subtle note of rivalry or resentment rooted in a sense of personal marginalization. Yet, this never fractures their bond; instead, it reinforces Urmila's agency as she strives for an identity beyond being just "Sita's sister."

Once in Ayodhya, the sisters-in-law face the crushing weight of royal politics and patriarchal expectations. Here, their female solidarity becomes an act of quiet resistance.

Mutual Support: When Ram, Lakshmana, and Sita leave, Urmila, Mandavi (Bharat's wife), and Shrutakirti (Shatrughna's wife) and their mothers-in-law form an unlikely, yet necessary, alliance. Urmila steps up as the pillar of the household, using her wit, strength, and intellect to manage the situation and challenge injustice.

Questioning Patriarchy: The sisters' solidarity allows them to collectively critique the patriarchal *dharma* that governs their lives. Urmila, in particular, raises powerful questions regarding the double standards of duty, challenging the male-centric focus of the *dharma* that prioritizes a son's duty to his father and brother over his duty to his wife. Their collective suffering under the yoke of Kaikeyi's boon and the men's resulting choices solidifies a shared understanding of their constrained existence.

Advocacy for Sita: Throughout Sita's trials—her exile, abduction, and the eventual *Agni Pariksha* (ordeal of fire)—Urmila is her most vociferous champion. Her refusal to be silenced and her open denunciation of the injustice done to Sita highlight the active, defiant side of female solidarity that stands up against societal and even familial prejudice.

Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* is a rich and sensitive study of female relationships. By centring Urmila's perspective, the novel successfully unpacks the complexity of sisterhood, showing it as a tapestry woven with threads of selfless love, necessary sacrifice, submerged resentment, and ultimately, an indomitable female solidarity. This bond is not passive but a dynamic, resilient force that enables the women to navigate tragedy, assert their individual identities, and resist the restrictive conventions of their world, making a compelling case for the crucial, yet often unsung, importance of female camaraderie in epic narratives.

Conclusion

Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* is a profound exploration of how a life seemingly placed on hold—an imposed personal exile—can be transformed into a vibrant period of self-actualization. Urmila's journey underscores the novel's central theme: true strength lies not in passive sacrifice but in the active pursuit of one's mind and self. By focusing her energy on intellectual growth and emotional resilience, Urmila transcends the tragic limitations placed upon her by circumstance. She emerges as a beacon of female strength, proving that an individual's worth and identity can be forged through knowledge and inner resolve, making her an inspirational figure whose story resonates powerfully with the contemporary Indian woman. In conclusion, Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* is a feminist tapestry woven with threads of quiet endurance and intellectual liberation. By placing Urmila's untold story at the center, the novel successfully reframes the Ramayana, arguing that true heroism resides in the choice to live, thrive, and seek selfhood even when fate has prescribed isolation and secondary status.

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