**Retelling Myths the Most Accepted Trait of Humanity : A Critical Study of Kavita Kane’s *Sita’s Sister***

**Abstract**

Though Hindu mythology continues to remain a favored genre in popular fiction, yet, contemporary interest in Hindu mythology has adopted a different approach and has consumed in different ways unique to times. Contemporary writers like Amish Tripathi, Ashok Banker, Ashwin Sanghi, Chitra Banerjee Divakruni and many others do not treat it as sacrosanct; there are interesting and creative interpretations and the stories are analyzed, dissected, delved into ambiguous areas and derived meanings are corroborated by discussions and dialogues of readers, thinkers and academicians. The narrative of the myths has changed as universal journeys of characters, and are retold from individuals or humanistic viewpoint. These bring out the human side of the gods and have made it possible for readers to relate them with the latest ways. The characters are critiqued, scrutinized; story and plots are questioned and connected with contemporary ideologies and issues which are based on humanistic approach. For example, the Indian epics are being reinterpreted in a way that makes them less godly and more humanistic. The protagonists of these writers possess all humanistic traits or emotions including weaker ones. Their struggles may not always seen driven by higher purposes. Kavita Kane is also one such writer who have done a great job by retelling mythology with perspectives different from the main course. The present paper is a modest attempt to gauge how Kane in *Sita’s Sister*, has treated Urmila, wife of Lakshman, not as godly but as a good human being. So, this study is just a way to have a glance of the untold story of the epic *Ramayana* with different outlook that is about Urmila, the younger sister of Sita.

**Key-Words**: Humanistic trait, Connotations, Retelling mythology, Egalitarian truth, Experimenting mythology and Legendary heroes.

Kavita Kane in her second novel *Sita's Sister*, brings to fore one of those characters of the epic *Ramayana* who have extremely been ignored from center stage lights. Urmila is often remembered as one of King Janak's daughters, Sita's younger sister and Lakshman's wife. This book is about the sacrifices of the prime characters of the *Ramayana* in whose shadow many characters have been eclipsed or ignored. Lord Ram renounced his right on the throne of Ayodhya to follow the promise that his father gave to one of his wives. His worldly consort Sita gave a glimpse of her fortitude by choosing the same path for herself as was destined for her husband. Lakshman chose to let her course get automatically sealed as he could not think of not being with his elder brother during the exile period of fourteen years. Bharat decided to spend the fourteen years of Ram's exile in complete abstinence of all royal pleasures as a way of his penance. These are the towering embodiments of ideals in the epic story, but often the larger than life sagas end up neglecting the contributions of some, who silently bear the consequences of other's decisions and promises. Their greatness lies in invisibly supporting the main characters. Urmila is such a character. In the words of Dr. S. Rema Devi, “Kane retells the epic Ramayana in a new dimension as how Urmila, the sister of Sita and wife of Lakshman, sees it” (138). But this does not push her down rather she reciprocates the favour by being a source of strength for her loved ones. In the words of Solomon Manoj, "The story is woven wonderfully around her and depicts the emotions of Urmila as a sister, new bride, responsible wife, sensible caretaker and a critical critic." (Rev. 23 Feb. 2017)

Urmila the true-born daughter of King Janak of Mithila had suffered as much as anyone else during Ram's exile. Even though Valmiki has described Urmila's sacrifice of not going along with Lakshman who accompanied Ram and Sita in fourteen years of exile, as an unparallel sacrifice in his book, he had spared only a few verses to Urmila's story. Kane on the other hand, gives dimensions to Urmila that has yet been unknown. Though saying that Urmila's life was all about her sacrifice makes her look like a docile feeble woman who was asked to stay home when her husband had to go to protect his brother while she stayed home. In the meantime, by using her time, fourteen long years in studying or sleeping (there are two versions, one that says she studied and became a highly respected scholar of the scriptures which Kane has adopted in her book, and the other where she has asked 'Nindra' the goddess of sleep to take away Lakshman's sleep so that he may perform his duty to protect Ram and Sita while Urmila herself would sleep in the entire period of the exile. Above all Urmila of Kane is learned and loving, sensitive yet strong, hot headed but mature. Though the book is based on mythology and religious scriptures, yet Urmila on occasions is mentioned as non-religious and practical. Urmila of this book loves Sita a lot knowing that Sita is adopted and yet more favoured by her parents. Without being ardent and jealous, Urmila understands and at some points even forgives her parents for their injustice. Even she chooses brooding Lakshman knowing that she will always come second to him, his first priority being his brother. Beena G. a scholar states, “Kane’s Urmila exhibits a masculine assertiveness throughout while retaining her essential feminity.” (81)

Even after the fourteen years of exile as suggested she breaks down only for a moment in utter despair but brings herself together just as quickly understanding Lakshman's priorities. And the beauty of this Urmila is that she argues, she fights and even if she does not win all the time she lets her voice be heard. As I earlier told, she fights for Mandavi's sake at Chitrakoot. She lashes out at the sages, and scholars and questions her husband and her brother-in-law's duties towards the women in their family. She takes royal decisions while the princes are away, she tries to bring peace to family. When Ram, Sita and Lakshman are in exile Urmila becomes a respected scholar. It is also interesting that Kane's book has its own brand of humanism in guise of feminism where Urmila breaks the barriers of being just a wife. Here Kane proves that self is not gendered. And the mind is the great leveller, the great egalitarian truth. Urmila is a painter and a scholar, she calls a spade, a spade and not once has she cowered down because of circumstances. Lakshman loves her not because she is docile but because she isn't. And here one can see the great difference that is between her and Sita. While Sita is the perfect daughter, the perfect wife, one cannot help but be impressed with Urmila and her hot headedness. Urmila openly criticises Ram for letting Sita questioning her chastity after her rescue from Lanka. She fights with Lakshman, debates with the learned sages and even stands upto Kaikeyi and Manthra.

Here, in *Sita's Sister* Kane has lent that missing voice to Urmila. The title of the novel is extremely well thought out true to the life spent over-shadowed and outshone. Urmila in this book is portrayed as a delicately beautiful spirited young princess who knows her mind and has no qualms in voicing it too. She is not the one who wants to live in illusion or any make believe world. She comes across 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.

Urmila displays the courage and the fortitude to provide the anchorage to her family whether it was her parental one or later her marital kinship. Throughout the book “She stood for the rights of women of royal families without caring about the outcome and the consequencies” (Mohanty and Das, 1623). She tries her best to sew the relationships and while doing so, she poses some very pertinent questions from time to time. Her voiced displeasure on Bharat's decision of spending the next fourteen years in Nandigram is clear example of her confident and intrepid nerve. She questions his 'Dharma' towards his wife Mandavi, "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 Kshtriya, even of the wife for the husband. But is there not dharma of the husband for his wife" (*Sita's Sister* : 219). There cannot be any surprise on the plot front yet the narrative from the perspective of Urmila makes it appear so very uniquely distinct. Some other characters that make their presence felt significantly in the story are that of mother Sunaina and Lakshman. Though a queen, Sunaina is a mother first and wants happiness of her daughters even if it means disregarding the political findings. The words of Sunaina when she confesses her conduct in front of Urmila would surely touch readers inner chords, "possibly, because I expected too much from you. Or, because I felt you were mine, the daughter of my flesh and blood, unlike Sita or the motherless Mandavi and Kirti. And that's why I was over protective about them, and harsher to you. I assumed I had this unspoken right over you which I did not have on them." (185)

Lakshman has always given an impression of being a person who is devoutly committed to his brotherly duties all through his life and his personal relationships and bonds never surface in prominence. But in *Sita's Sister,* he comes across a person who is equally vulnerable and emotional as is any other individual or human being. He also needs someone from whom he could derive his treasure of strength. To deliver on his lofty ideals, he depends on two women in his life-his mother and his wife. Separation from his wife is no less torturous for him either but he wants his 'Mila' to make it easier for him because he acknowledges what she is, in his life, he states "You are my strength but also my weakness"(145).

To conclude, Kane has made sure that hitherto unknown character of Urmila shines bright throughout the book. In the true sense *Sita’s Sister* is a book that analyses Urmila’s relationship with all the characters of the epic *Ramayana* and delineates them as ordinary human beings. The book wavers a lot from the popular storyline of the *Ramayana* and thus comparing them is meaningless.

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