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RESEARCH ARTICLE

URMILA'S FEMINIST STANCE AGAINST PATRIARCHY IN SITA'S SISTER.

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Abstract

Ours is a country whose value system is largely dominated by the epics. Right from our childhood, our grandparents narrates before us the glorious tales of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Jataka tales to teach us the moral values. As we grow up, our values and mindset develops according to the values taught by these epics. The Ramayana is one of the first two ancient Indian epics which build the foundation of the religious beliefs, cultural system and the moral value system of the Hindus. Today one can find a number of retellings of this ancient epic from the viewpoints of different characters. One such narrative, written by the best-selling author Kavita Kane, recounts this great epic through the eyes of Urmila, usually known as Lakshman's wife or Sita's sister. This epic has always been used to focus on the feminine virtues of Sita, i.e. the females should be dutiful daughters and obedient wives, should always be completely devoted to their husbands and should stand by them in every situation. However Kavita Kane's novel *Sita's Sister* gives Urmila a feminist voice allowing the readers to view the epic from a new angle that has never been thought of. This paper aims at exploring the feminist thoughts of Urmila in *Sita's Sister* and how she fulfilled all her duties and at the same time took a stance against what she thought was wrong and injustice to women.

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Introduction:-

Our Hindu society bases its culture, tradition, morals and values on great epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These epics influences and moulds our personality to a great extent. Whenever we talk of the great epic Ramayana, we cite examples of Lord Rama, who was the epitome of a good son, a great king and a responsible elder brother. He is always referred to as "Maryada Purushottama", literally meaning the Perfect Man or the Lord of Self-Control or Lord of Virtue (wikipedia.org). We also talk about Devi Sita, who is considered to be one of the Sreshta Nari or the most chaste women (dollsofindia.com). She is the epitome of an ideal traditional Indian woman possessing all feminine virtues expected from an Indian woman- good daughter, obedient and chaste wife, devoted mother, righteous, principled and sacrificing. We also talk about Lakshman, an ideal and selfless brother, who sacrificed everything in his life to serve his elder brother. We even talk about Bharat's love for his elder brother as well as how evil intentions, jealousy, power-hunger and ego led to the downfall of the Lanka king Ravan, queen Kaikeyi of Ayodhya and her servant Manthara.

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But we rarely hear anything about Urmila who played a major role in Ramayana. She is the most neglected character and even Sage Valmiki mentioned only two to four lines about her in his text. But the role she played and the sacrifices she made was an unparalleled one.

Kavita Kane is the bestselling author of the book, *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. Kavita Kane narrates the story of Urmila in her novel *Sita's Sister*. In this novel, Kavita has presented the epic from Urmila's point of view. The most overlooked character has been presented in her full might. Urmila has been given a dominant feminist voice. She questions patriarchy that subdues women. She fulfils all her duties but at the same time takes a stand against the injustice done to her and her sisters by their husbands. The novel is "a scathing critique of the subservient role women were expected to play, even in royal families" (www.purba-ray.com). This novel gives a new feminist perspective to the epic story of the Ramayana.

Urmila was the youngest daughter of King Janak and Queen Sunaina of Mithila. Sita (Janak's elder daughter), Urmila and their cousins Mandvi and Shrutakeerti (simply known as Kirti) were very close to each other since childhood. The four princess were "well-versed in the Vedas and the Upanishads, politics, music, art and literature" (*Sita's Sister*, 9). Mithila gave freedom to the women allowing them to think independently. "They had accompanied their father to all the conferences and religious seminars across the country, experiencing a world no princess has been allowed to visit" (*Sita's Sister*, 9). But Urmila was not satisfied with this. She wished to visit more places and learn new things. However she was aware of the society in which she lived, a society where marriage is very important for women and she knew that she would have to marry soon after Sita's marriage. But marriage did not interest her. It was just a "social discipline she would have to conform to. She would rather seek knowledge instead of a suitor" (*Sita's Sister*, 9). Urmila was the pillar of strength for her sisters. She was brave, fierce, and protective for her sisters, especially for Sita. "For Sita, she was her anchor who secured her to a comforting veracity of her own existence. Urmila was her lifeline." (*Sita's Sister*, 22)

Sita was the adopted daughter of the childless parents Janak and Sunaina. They got a wailing baby while ploughing the fields which was a part of the yagna they were performing. The baby touched a chord in their heart and they took her as their first child and named her Sita. After sometime, Urmila was born to them. Sita was generally referred to as Janaki (Janak's daughter) and Maithili (princess of Mithila), but actually it was Urmila who should have got these titles. Sita got all the love of their parents and Urmila had to tolerate their anger and scolding. "But never had Sita seen Urmila resentful about all the favours showered upon her, when she was deprived of them" (*Sita's Sister*, 23).

When Ram and Lakshman, the two princes of Ayodhya, came to Mithila with their guru Vishwamitra, Urmila was attracted towards the frowning younger prince Lakshman while Sita fell for the elder one Ram. During Sita's swayamvar, Urmila's wit saved Lakshman from the wrath and anger of Rishi Parshuram. When the marriage of the four sisters was fixed with the four princes of Ayodhya, Lakshman made it clear to Urmila that for him Ram was everything. Ram was and will always be his first priority and if circumstances will need him to choose any one of them, he would choose his brother over her. But Urmila's love for Lakshman gave her strength to accept this second place in his life. After their marriage when they arrived at Ayodhya, to insult Sita, Queen Kaikeyi favoured Urmila more and ignored Sita. Ram was her favourite among the princes and she could not accept the fact that Ram married Sita, who was an orphan and not a real princess. She even suggested Ram to remarry. All these incidents made Urmila furious and she took a stand for Sita. She started furiously, "How dare they do this to you? You shall not take it silently anymore, Sita! The barbs were mean enough and should have been stopped. 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). She further said, "Do they seriously take us to be such tame girls who will scurry to obey? Haven't they realized yet that we are the daughters of Janak and Sunaina, who have been taught to uphold their pride and be courageous? They are so used to being obeyed without any questions that this palace seems to revel in some sort of a benign autocracy. The king said marry the four princesses, and the sons obediently did, without a murmur of protest. Now the king decrees Ram to marry again! This is tyranny!" (*Sita's Sister*, 101)

When Ram decided to fulfil his father's boons to Queen Kaikeyi and go to exile for fourteen years, Lakshman and Sita decided to accompany him. Urmila also asked to accompany them but Lakshman rejected the idea and asked her to stay back in the palace to take care of the family. He said that he was going to the forest to protect his brother like a soldier or a bodyguard and he cannot take her as he is not sure whether he will be able to protect her or not. She felt devastated as the two persons whom she loved the most will not be there with her for the next fourteen long

years. While leaving the palace Lakshman said to Urmila, "If I am being praised so profusely for being the devoted brother, I fail as a good husband, who is leaving behind his bride. O Urmila, will the world ever know of your inner suffering, your divine sacrifice? But my heart, full of shame and gratitude, knows what you are doing in silence" (*Sita's Sister*, 158). It was Urmila who helped the family in coping with the death of King Dasarath. It was she who unmasked the real culprit Manthara who was the mastermind behind Ram's exile. When Bharat came to know about his mother Kaikeyi's evil intentions, he was heartbroken. Urmila helped Mandvi in bringing him to normalcy and she helped Shatrughan in managing the palace as well as the state affairs. When Kaikeyi realized her mistake, all the three queens, Bharat, Shatrughan, Mandvi, Urmila, Kirti, ministers, Guru Vasishtha and many soldiers of Ayodhya went in search of Ram, Lakshman and Sita to bring them back to Ayodhya. When Ram denied returning back, Bharat decided to keep Ram's sandal on the throne and "administrate the kingdom from Nandigram at the outskirts of the city" (*Sita's Sister*, 219). He said that during those fourteen years he will also "do penance as a hermit on the banks of River Sarayu at Nandigram." (*Sita's Sister*, 219)

Bharat's decision made Urmila furious as Mandvi will have to suffer the same fate that she is suffering. She said furiously, "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 sorts of dharma-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 dharma of the husband for his wife? No dharma of the son for his mother? Is it always about the father, sons and brothers?" (*Sita's Sister*, 219)

Guru Kashyap interrupted her angrily and asked her how she dared to speak such words there. He further said that it is not her father's court that allows free thinking women like philosopher Gargi to argue so shamelessly. "It is the assembly of the greatest minds of Ayodhya" (*Sita's Sister*, 220). But this argument couldn't silence her. She again asked that being the daughter-in-law of the great Raghukul, she wants to know what is the dharma of a husband for his wife and what is the dharma of a son for his mother. She further argued that when Kaikeyi asked for boons why no one did question her; when Ram decided to leave for his exile no one tried to force him to change his decision and when Sita decided to accompany him no one stopped her even after knowing how much dangerous the forest can be for her. Why is it always the queens who have to suffer for the decisions taken by the male members? Ram decided to leave for the forest so Sita following her dharma of a wife accompanied him. Lakshman being an ideal brother also accompanied him to the forest. And next Bharat wants to renounce his worldly life and live like an ascetic for fourteen years. Has anyone thought of their mother's grief and tears? Has anyone of them pondered over wedding promises they gave their wives? Don't they have any duties for their mothers and wives? Why is it only the ladies who have to keep suffering these pains silently? She further said, "if you couldn't keep the vows you made to your wives, why did you brothers marry? You may be the best of the princes, the perfect sons, the ideal brothers, probably the ideal king too, but never the good husband! You are right, Guru Kashyap, Ayodhya is not Mithila. Mithila does not treat women so shabbily" (*Sita's Sister*, 223).

When Urmila heard that Sita has been abducted by demon king Ravan, she questioned everyone that when she was going to forest why did no one stop her? Everyone was happy because Sita was going with Ram and she will take care of him as a doting wife. She was allowed to go as she was doing her duties as a wife and no one thought about the dangers she will have to face in the jungle. Lakshman was able to kill Indrajit because of Urmila because Indrajit had a boon that no one can kill him except a "devout celibate ascetic, divinely strong" and who has not slept for a long time.

When the three princesses came to know about Sita had walked into fire to prove her chastity, Urmila wondered how Ram could allow that to happen. Mandvi also argued that it was Sita who was forced to stay at Ravan's palace and she didn't stay there at her own wish, then why didn't Ram take a stand for her? Urmila also agreed to what Mandvi said. Urmila said, Ram stood for Ahilya when her own husband had renounced her then how can he hurt and humiliate his wife Sita by allowing her to prove her chastity.

Kavita Kane's Urmila started a fight against age old patriarchy long before these theories of feminisms came into motion. She stood for the rights of women of royal families without caring about the outcome and the consequences. If we analyse her arguments from a feminist's lens, she was a strong, brave and intelligent woman, with a broad outlook who fought for the right of women and took a stance against patriarchy in her times. This perspective of the epic, as presented by Kavita Kane, gives the readers a new outlook and a new lens for viewing the great epic Ramayana.

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