Shikha Saharan
Ph.D, Research Scholar,
Department of English and
Foreign Languages, MDU
University, Rohtak, Haryana,
India

Dr. Neelam Hooda
Associate Professor,
Department of English and
Foreign Languages, MDU
University, Rohtak, Haryana,
India

Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*: A Study of Female Solidarity and Rivalry

Shikha Saharan and Dr. Neelam Hooda

Abstract
Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* defines the epic narrative of the *Ramayana* through the perspective of Urmila, the often-overlooked sister of Sita, thereby offering a fresh lens to explore female experiences within a traditionally patriarchal framework. The novel foregrounds the intricate dynamics of sisterhood, depicting both solidarity and rivalry as central to understanding women's roles and relationships in mythological and cultural contexts. Through Urmila's eyes, Kane illuminates the emotional labour, sacrifices, and resilience of women whose stories have historically been marginalised or silenced. The narrative highlights how female camaraderie functions as a source of strength, empathy, and mutual support, while also acknowledging the tensions, jealousy, and competition that can emerge within familial bonds. Urmila and Sita as distinct yet interconnected personalities, the novel interrogates the nuanced interplay between duty, loyalty, and personal desire. This duality challenges conventional readings of mythological women as passive or archetypal figures, instead presenting them as complex, self-aware, and morally engaged individuals.
Kane's work also situates these personal narratives within broader socio-cultural and gendered frameworks, revealing how epic tales often mirror societal expectations, norms, and hierarchies that shape women's lives. The novel's feminist re-interpretation emphasises agency, voice, and subjectivity, encouraging readers to rethink the portrayal of women in classical texts. The historical imagination with contemporary feminist sensibilities, *Sita's Sister* underscores the importance of revisiting myth to recover marginalised perspectives and interrogate gendered power structures. The text thus contributes not only to literary discussions of re-interpretation and re-telling but also to the ongoing discourse on women's solidarity, rivalry, and resilience across time.

Keywords: Sisterhood, feminism, urmila, female solidarity, mythological retelling

Introduction

Kavita Kane is an Indian author known for her feminist retellings of classical Indian epics. She reimagines mythological narratives by centering the experiences and perspectives of women who have traditionally been marginalised. Kane's works explore themes of female agency, resilience, and moral complexity within the framework of epic stories. She challenges patriarchal interpretations of myths, offering nuanced portrayals of female characters as thinking, feeling, and choosing individuals. Her narratives blend mythology with contemporary sensibilities, making ancient stories relevant to modern readers. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are two prominent epics in Hinduism. For ages, these epics have played an important role in developing and nurturing Indian civilisation and culture. And, as one of the current trends, the art of retelling has given us classic stories with a fresh twist. They encourage us to examine how society evolves throughout time and responds to new advancements. In a similar vein, current authors, such Kavita Kane, are giving these stories their own distinct perspective. Her writings are inspired by the mythology of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and she is an Indian novelist who writes in English. She is well-known for her mythology-themed fiction writing, which has earned her numerous honours. It is vital to note that the primary characters in both epics were never of any interest to her.

Urmila's character reflects the struggle for self-identity in a patriarchal context. While she stands in the shadow of her sister Sita, her journey is unique and deeply personal. Kane crafts Urmila's story as one of resilience, as she navigates her path amid familial obligations and societal expectations. This exploration of Urmila as a multi-dimensional character

Corresponding Author:
Shikha Saharan
Ph.D, Research Scholar,
Department of English and
Foreign Languages, MDU
University, Rohtak, Haryana,
India

invites readers to reflect on their own journeys of self-discovery. V. Narayan Rao's article *The Song of the Urmila's Separation: The Andhra Women's Ballad* highlights the most overlooked character of Urmila when she comes to the centre of the stage. *The Liberation of Sita* by Volga (translated from Telugu by T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree) also focuses on the self-centred attitudes of Urmila, who explores the truth by meditating during the long separation from her husband. Urmila's voice emerges powerfully throughout the narrative, revealing her innermost desires and fears. She grapples with her feelings of isolation and longing, showcasing the emotional complexity that defines her existence. In doing so, Kane presents Urmila as a contemporary figure, one whose struggles resonate with modern readers navigating similar challenges in their lives. This portrayal of Urmila as a relatable character highlights her role not just as a sister but as a woman seeking her place in a world defined by constraints.

In *Sita's Sister*, relationships are multi-faceted, reflecting the complexities of familial bonds in a patriarchal society. The interplay between Urmila, Sita, and their other sisters reveals a landscape rich with emotion, duty, and love. Vidhya Vijayan finds Urmila an audacious heroine of *Ramayana*. He says, "Like a combatant, she fights against all the malevolence that exists in society and also questions the injustices and atrocities shown towards the submissive category of society, especially to Sita" (141). Kane captures the nuances of sisterhood, showcasing how these relationships can be both nurturing and challenging. The loyalty among the sisters is palpable, yet there is also tension rooted in their individual choices and sacrifices. As Urmila navigates her own desires, she must contend with the expectations placed upon her by her family and society. Kane adeptly illustrates the internal conflicts that arise within familial relationships, emphasizing the sacrifices women often make for the sake of harmony.

The re-presentation of romantic relationships in Sita's Sister further enhances an understanding of Urmila's character. Her love for Lakshmana is depicted as both passionate and complicated. While she is deeply in love with him, there are moments of doubt and frustration, illustrating the multifaceted nature of love. Kane's nuanced portrayal of romantic love contrasts with the idealised versions often found in traditional narratives. Urmila's desire for autonomy and her longing to be more than just a wife is highlight the struggles faced by women in expressing their own identities within romantic partnerships. This exploration of love invites readers to re-evaluate their perceptions of relationships and the societal norms surrounding them.

Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* serves as a feminist reinterpretation of the *Ramayana*, challenging the traditional narrative while honouring its essence. By cantering the story on Urmila, Kane breathes new life into familiar events, allowing for reframed interpretations of key moments. This re-examination emphasizes the silent struggles of women and their underrepresented perspectives within the epic. Kane masterfully navigates the historical context of the *Ramayana* while infusing modern sensibilities into the narrative. Her portrayal of female characters redefines their roles, presenting them as active participants in their own stories rather than passive figures shaped by the actions of men. This narrative shift encourages readers to reflect on how the retelling of myths can impact contemporary discussions about gender and power. In *Sita's Sister'*,

Urmila adorns various roles - a sister, a daughter, a wife, daughter-in-law, and so on. However, what stands out, irrespective of the various roles is her strength and an ability to handle every situation with finesse and aplomb. Urmila's journey from Mithila to Ayodhya is in fact an allegorical and tenacious search for an individual identity aimed at going beyond being merely Sita's sister or Lakshman's wife.

Kane has provided the marginalised female characters in her books with a voice so that they may tell their own tales, which exemplifies the feminist perspective that she takes in her writing. Kane recognised these women as more than what they are in the epics, and one of her novels, *Sita's Sister*, is an example of this. In this book, Urmila relates the story of the *Ramayana* from her point of view. Kane is known for her work dealing with underappreciated female characters. The book *Sita's Sister*, in which the *Ramayana* is retold from the perspective of Urmila, provides the solution to this riddle. This time, however, the story takes on a fresh perspective. Urmila does not sleep throughout the fourteen years that Laxamana is forced to spend in exile. Instead, she focuses on putting the pieces of their fractured family back together. Nonetheless, we cannot ignore the fact that the novel depicts the close relationship that the four sisters have so eloquently.

The author does not portray it in a rosy light; rather, she demonstrates both the rocky and the smooth sides of their relationship. Even after all of their arguments and misunderstandings, they never give up on each other but instead rise strongly after falling short in their bonding. This is something that should be noted because it is an important aspect of the story that the author does not idolise them but rather humanises them by showing their flaws. In addition to the relationship that exists between Sita, Urmila, Mandavi, and Shrutikirti, find many additional examples of women advocating for other women, speaking out for, and supporting one another, coming to an understanding of one another, and making sacrifices for one another. This demarcation is so powerful, so beautiful, and so genuine that it keeps us riveted to witness their trip, the journey of the sisters evolving with change in various seasons of their life. The book is a retelling of the *Ramayana* from Urmila's point of view and it is told from a feminist perspective.

Mythology is an inextricable component of human existence and cannot be divorced from the lives of individuals. It evolves as other cultures and religions influence it. The premise, on the other hand, that it links and associates' individuals with their religion and beliefs continues to hold true. The mythology of a culture is comprised of the tales of gods and godmen, as well as traditions and folktales about the beginning of the world, the creation of man, and man's arrival on Earth. Mythology, on the other hand, does not confine itself to religion and culture; rather, it is an impression of the ideas and ideals that dominated in the past and continue to do so now. In a broader context, it is abundant in morality; nevertheless, this is not the only purpose it serves. *The Vedas, The Puranas, The Samhitas, The Aranyakas, The Upanishads, The Natyashastra, The Ramayana, The Mahabharata,* and *The Bhagavad Gita,* together with their numerous forms and a number of translations, make up the diverse texts that make up Indian mythology.

Mythological fiction is created when the author takes elements such as storylines and themes from mythology and

combines them with their creative and inventive imagination to produce the work. Mythological Fiction, Mytho-Fiction, and Mythic-Fiction are all interchangeable phrases that were first coined by Charles de Lint and Terri Windling. These authors are credited with the terms' creation. The mixture can be prepared in a number of different ways, such as by narrating the accounts from mythology from a different point of view, by keeping the line of characters while modifying the plot, or by transforming both the story and the characters while clinging to a theme. Each of these approaches has the potential to produce a unique result. When it comes to creating a mythological fiction, there are many different possible paths to go. While writing a work of mythological fiction, the author has the freedom to narrate, illustrate, and retell the myths that are associated with a particular society. Nonetheless, one must exercise extreme caution while writing creatively about it since mythology consists of more than simply a collection of stories.

The stories go beyond depicting gods and godmen; they reflect humanity its follies, weaknesses, families, societies, and struggles. They reveal man's inner conflicts and his battles against life's challenges, creating a deep emotional connection with readers. These narratives symbolize humanity's perseverance in a world that suppresses emotions like love, hatred, rage, and forgiveness. Since mythology shapes people's beliefs, writers of mythological fiction risk offending the sensibilities of their audience. The concept of retelling goes hand in hand with the practise of composing mythic fiction. The art of recounting has provided us with familiar stories but with a fresh spin on each one. In nearly all of our religions and regional languages, there have been several variations of famed threads of the tales, and there is now a significant amount of works available on their retelling. Reviving the stories from mythology with new ideas, these tales have been told in many ways. They encourage us to observe how society changes through time and how it adapts to new developments.

Writers have been creating mythological fiction and retellings for a very long time, with examples dating back to ancient times. From Kalidasa's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* through Banabhatta's *Kadambari*, the genre has always fascinated authors and captivated readers. When recounting a tale that originated in mythology, the author would often inject modern concepts and concerns into the narrative in order to make it more interesting for the audience. In the same manner, contemporary authors are giving classic tales a fresh point of view, they are bringing a different viewpoint. Some of the Indian postcolonial writers, such as Devdutt Pattnaik, Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Ashok Banker, Anuja Chandramouli, and Kavita Kane, have chosen mythology as their writing genre, and they are breaking barriers and breaking stereotypes with their writing style. Sita, Urmila, Mandavi, and Shrutikirti were the four lovely princesses of Mithila. While they each had their own unique personalities, they were bound together by a profound and unbreakable relationship as sisters.

Sita was the first of the four children to be adopted by King Seerdhwaj Janak and Queen Sunaina of Mithila, Urmila was born exactly one year after Sita's adoption. Sita was the oldest of the four children. Both Mandavi and Shrutikirti's father, Kushdhwaja, was Janak's younger brother. Kushdhwaja's daughters Mandavi and Shrutikirti were cousins. As Mandavi and Shrutikirti's mother, Chandrabhaga, passed away while her girls were very little, Mandavi and Shrutikirti were raised by their uncle and aunt along with the cousins that the uncle and aunt already had. Because of this, the four sisters have always been very close to one another, even from a young age. Janak was a very intellectual individual and a feminist parent in addition to being an adept ruler. He did not place any obstacles in the path of his girls and encouraged them to follow whatever it was in life that interested them. He gave them an open sky. They were free to voice their opinions, make their own choices, and challenge anything in their view that they deemed unethical. The four girls were raised together in a wise manner, and as a result, the castle was filled with the sound of chirping birds. For the ebullient girls, the fact that they had a kind of sisterhood with one another is shown in the prologue itself, during the time that they spend playing hide and seek in their magnificent garden.

The three sisters are under the impression that they had misplaced Sita while they were playing, they start looking for her in different areas of the palace. Urmila is ready to face the wrath of her father and is adamant about finding Sita; as a result, they find Sita in the marvellous auditorium lifting the hefty Shiva Dhanush. Urmila is ready to face the wrath of her father because she is worried about Sita and because she is afraid of the punishment they will get. At Sita's swayamvara ceremony, her four sisters engage in a powerful and meaningful dialogue. Urmila is worried about her sister even though Mandavi and Kirti (Shrutikirti) are thrilled for Sita. In the story, the author portrays a picture of their dynamic friendship by saying:

The four young girls engaged in such banter all the time. There was no malice in it, not a shred of meanness. They were simply disarmingy frank with each other; brutally blunt sometimes. And why wouldn't they? They were sisters, after all, and there was no need to be nice and good all the time. (8-9)

They were so noticeable to one another that they were able to pick up on the slightest change in attitude that the other may have. During the story, we also learn that Urmila has a soft spot in her heart for Sita. Her whole world comes crashing down when Laxaman kills the demon that was pretending to be Sita, and she even gets to the point where she is prepared to stab him to death. It is important to note that by this time Urmila was already in love with Laxaman; nevertheless, the instant she watched him murder Sita, she forgot all of the love and affection she had for him and instead tried to get retribution in an honourable manner. In addition, their happiness knows no bounds as it reaches the seventh heaven when they are informed that all four sisters would be proposed to by four different princesses from Ayodhya. They are overjoyed since the four sisters would soon be sisters-in-law to one another. Sita questioned Sunaina about her opposition to the idea of all four sisters marrying within the same family by asking:

How could our staying together harm us? Will marriage lessen our love for each other? No, ma' it shall strengthen it further, as no one knows us better. We love each other too much for anything or anyone to come between us. And your husband? Sunaina asked sharply. If such a situation arises, and it will happen someday, sometime before anyone of you, where you are concerned into choosing between your husband and your sister, whom would you choose, dear? (55-56)

They are always looking out for one another and are willing to do whatever it takes to make sure that each other is happy. Laxaman says no to Urmila being married, which leads to an argument between the two of them. Concerned about Manadvi, one of her sisters asks, "Why didn't he want to marry you? After what he said and how he hurt you, I swear I was ready to kill him! She spat" (71). That was the point of their nexus: to take pleasure in the triumphs of others and commiserate with them in their sorrows. They were able to sympathise with one another by talking about the feelings that they go through. But, rather of shedding tears for one another's misfortune, the ladies were constantly working towards finding a solution to the issue that they were facing. They might hold their tongues for themselves for once, but they would never do it for their sisters. In addition, they are aware that their mother is concerned about the possibility of all four of them marrying inside the same family. They are aware that there will be a wide variety of responsibilities waiting for them in the future, but at the end of the day, they will still be sisters who love each other unconditionally.

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