

Exploring the Courage and Generosity of Women in the Select Novels of Kavita Kane

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Abstract

This paper explores the courage and generosity of women as a daughter, sibling, companion, and mother with reference to the select novels of Kavita Kane, *Sita's Sister* and *Menaka's Choice*. The characters Urmila and Menaka sacrifice their own well-being standing in support of their respective families. While Urmila voluntarily takes up the household and state administration responsibilities in the absence of her consort, Lord Laxman, Menaka separates from her husband Maharshi Viswamitra and extends her support to him to become the Brahmarshi. Their sacrifices reassert the fact that the woman's generosity, courage, and unhesitating sacrifice for the well-being of her family are the inherent characteristics of a typical Indian woman. At times, both of them demonstrate their grit and determination. While Urmila does not hesitate to attack Lakshman standing in support of the weak in a context, Menaka courageously confesses the truth that she was sent by Indra to allure and distract him from his ambition of becoming the Brahmarshi. So, the objectives of this research are to study the grit and determination of the characters of woman protagonists in these two novels, and to analyze their unstinting readiness to sacrifice their well-being for the welfare of the members of their respective families. The method employed in this research is the feminist method which differs from traditional methodologies. This method is used to carry out the research in literature for advocating the feminine cause.

Keywords: Feminism, patriarchy, dharma, unstinting readiness, confession.

1. Introduction

Women, despite their varied capabilities, are neglected in many a situation. When it comes to taking a decision, their concern is not taken into consideration except in a few families. The proprietorial man, either in his pursuit his craving or in the pretext of executing

dharmas is considering only his perception when there is a situation of taking a decision. It is not because of the only chauvinists; it is taken for granted even the so-called educated families. Women raised their voice whenever they could not endure this unfairness. This paper highlights the voice of Urmila from *Sita's Sister* and Menaka from *Menaka's Choice*, mythological novels by Kavita Kane. The novel *Sita's Sister*, published in the year 2014, is the second mythological novel by Kavita Kane, and it is a retelling of the Ramayana in the perception of Urmila. *Menaka's Choice*, published in the year 2015, is the third novel by the same author is a retelling in the perception of Menaka.

2. Literature Review

Margaret Atwood says, "[Myths] only remain relevant because people keep retelling them. If nobody ever told them again in any other way, their meaning would become obsolete." Vikram Singh (2017) a doctor and an expert in literature has mentioned in his paper in *IMPACT*, "The mythical stories across cultures are viewed as an embodiment of beliefs, values and philosophies that serves the national interest of the people." In another research done by Dr Pradnyashailee Sawai (2015) in *The Context*, it is noted by him that pure myth can be retold in any language, any style and in any medium without losing its identity. It is his understanding that the reinterpretation of the tales is the way in which the writers tell us what they exactly feel about that particular story or the narrative. In his paper *A Study of Retelling in Indian Mythology with Special Reference to Sita - A Book* by Devdutt Pattanaik, Sanika Kulkarni opines that myths have to be critically studied to get a complete understanding of its relevance in the cultural context. It can be observed that with the increasing number of avenues available to us, the practice of passing on mythology is very much prevalent today, as never before. Devi Vandana in her paper for Union Christian University titled "Interpretations and Reinterpretations in Ramayana and the Scion of Ikshvaku" mentions, "The Ramayana does not belong to any one moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places. Not only do diverse Ramayanas exist; each Ramayana text reflects the social location and ideology of those who appropriate it."

In the book review Vibha Sharma mentions, "In *Sita's Sister*, Kavita Kane has lent that missing voice to Urmila. The title itself is extremely well thought out, true to the life spent over-shadowed and outshone. Here Urmila 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 as 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. But this does not push her down rather she reciprocates the favour by being a source of strength for her loved ones.”

Ayuta Mohanty and Puspita Das in their article Urmila’s Feminist Stance against Patriarchy in Sita’s Sister, “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.” (Mohanty, 2016)

3. The Character Sketch of Urmila

Urmila is the biological daughter of Janak, the king of Videha and Sunaina. Her parents bring up Sita who is found by Janak, her two cousins Mandavi and Kirti. The scholarly parents nurture the four girls to be exemplary human beings – as beautiful in their minds as in their bodies. Among the four, Urmila is like the blend of colors, so dexterously – warm, vibrant, and sparkling, her quicksilver temper included. She has an effortless easygoing manner that makes her very agreeable. She is adored by all her sisters for grit and decisive nature. Sita comments her, “You have answer for everything.” She further tells her that they rely on her for support and comfort. She comments that she has great inner strength that enables her to endure the emotional hardships. Even her mother praises her, “You have mothered me as often as you have your sisters.” She has the courage to face the rage of Parshuram to save her beloved, Lakshman. If she had not interfered, the furious sage could have attacked him. Urmila falls in love with Lakshman when he comes to Mithila along with his brother Rama and guru Viswamitra. After Rama breaks the Shiva’s bow in the swayamvara to marry Sita, on the proposal of Dasaradha the marriages of the four brothers with the four sisters is performed. The four couples reach Ayodhya and they start living happily.

Urmila’s grit and determination can be seen in many a context in the novel. Urmila is angry with Lakshman when she overhears the conversation between Ram and Lakshman, about his disinterestedness in marrying her. She has the courage in accepting him despite his priority to be loyal to his brother. She assures him that she will not come between his loyalty and family. She readily answers her mother when she asks her about the secondary status that she is grown up with it. She is well guided by her at many a times. When the four sisters are

leaving with their husbands, their mother suggests them to listen to what their minds say and follow their heart.

Urmila has clear mind set in how to treat the one who tries to provoke. She readily recognizes Manthara's words and sends her away. She knows how cushion her word with delicacy and discreetness when needed. She tries to discuss the malignant nature of Manthara with Mandavi knowing that misunderstandings are malignant. They spread and seep, corrode one's mind and eat into emotions.

Though she felt hurt for not consulting her when Lakshman decides to accompany his brother in his exile, she respects her husband's decision. She encourages him saying that when love surpasses duty, it is salvation. She indulges herself in her twin pursuits: studying and painting. She readily shoulders the administration of the palace. When her mother questions why she could not stand for her rights, she replies that she stood by his decision. She adds that they were brought up about their dharma is to support their husbands- never blindly, but to be with them when they are right and to correct them when they are wrong.

Urmila is a good executer of dharma. She pronounces punishment to Manthara and her accomplices. She takes the initiative of arranging common meal for the family to root out the differences and avoid killing themselves in silence. She answers Mandavi that they are creatures of circumstances and cannot change anything but themselves. She has the courage to firmly say that she and her sisters underwent suffering because of the petty jealousy of queens of Ayodhya.

Urmila's grit can be seen in her representation as a wife during the meeting of all the learned men of Ayodhya and her family members. She questions them, "All I am asking is that does the man have no dharma for his wife? Or his mother? Not taking another wife, is that all this dharma means?" (Kane p.221) When Kashyap cries that she is violating the profanity against the king and his family, she replies that the women in the family are never allowed to speak. This episode clearly tells the grit of Urmila in questioning the scholarly and society that women is enjoying her status in the family.

Urmila is so generous, supporting and understands the people around her. She realizes that is her parents' second priority. She never objects to her parents when they praise Sita for everything. When her mother asks her why she could not go with her husband to the forest, she replies that she is not her man's first priority and she further tells her that she has grown up with the feeling of secondary. When Mandavi has differences with Sita about who

becomes the king, Urmila empathizes with Mandavi. Urmila enlightens Mandavi that they should move on with the circumstances. She consoles her leading a peaceful life.

4. The Character Sketch of Menaka

Menaka, the second character chosen by the researcher, is from the novel Menaka's Choice. She arose translucently from the Ocean of Milk when the Devas and Asuras churned for nectar. She is the apsara who can charm the entire court with her dancing and singing skills. She is in the court of Indra to bewitch the strongest, to weaken the toughest – they can be mortal men, asuras, devas or rishis. The saddest part of apsaras is that “they are meant for quick pleasures – like lust, power, and wealth – giving instant, momentary joy, but fickle and unstable, slipping away from grasp. They could not be faithful; they had faith only in themselves and their consummate skills. They did not love; they loved themselves more. They followed neither their hearts nor heads; their whim leads them. They were taught to be selfish and pitiless: they cared for their selves.” (Kane p.30)

On the contrary to that, it is Menaka who thinks differently, and questions the king of Indra Lok that it is unfair to treat them in that manner. She questions herself, “Am I to suffer for this transgression?” (Kane p.30)

When Menaka is questioned by Indra about her love towards Vasu, she questions him, “Say it lord. Admit it. And that is what I am, a reluctant seductress. To make love, to lure, but for my own pleasures. A woman of lust but who cannot love, wed, or conceive. Your land of great wealth and wantonness does not favor social equality...!” (Kane p.46) Menaka has the courage to raise her voice against Indra saying that “You use me not just lure men to have sex but to entice them away from their goals, to lead the astray.” (Kane p.47)

It is Menaka who demands justice for her, “And if you cannot deliver justice to me and my expelled Vasu, then I announce right now, right here, that I refuse to dance in this court till Vasu returns. My lord, I came here today in respect to your order to see me in court. From henceforth, I shall not attend this court, your royal orders, or the expectations from me as a heavenly courtesan notwithstanding. You are not my king!” (Kane p.78) In answering Sachi, Menaka tells “I am battling for is not only justice but dignity. It is not defiance; it is a demand for justice.” (Kane p.79, 80)

In a desperate attempt to escape from Heaven Menaka agrees to go to Viswamitra and distract him from his ambition of becoming of a Brahmarishi. But the love arrow makes her really fall in love with him so passionately that she enjoys living with him. She realizes that

she is detracting him from his life ambition and finally confesses with him that she is sent by Indra to distract him. When he is reluctant to leave her, she forces him to go for it. She even bares the torture of separating herself from her child.

We can see the recognition of her sacrifice in rishi Kanva's words," Menaka, why do you think yourself undeserving? You loved and lost but won in the end. One who participated in all the aspects of life, not as a man's equal, but in fact superior to him. Vishwamitra might be the greatest rishi today, but he would not have been so were it not for you. You castigate yourself unfairly that you were the cause for his downfall. But you were also responsible for resurrecting him to his current glory." (Kane p.228)

Menaka has the bravery to raise her voice to get justice for her fellow apsara Rambha who is molested by Ravan. Menaka questions Urvashi "Then why not Ravan punished? Were they too cowardly to fight him? Or did they think Rambha, being an apsara, was not worth defending? (Kane p.212)

5. Conclusion:

There are innumerable stories that tell the grit and courage of women and to name a few, Savitri who followed Yama for her husband's life, Satyabhama who saved her husband's life in the battle, and Kaika saved the life of her husband Dasaradha etc. It is not only in the battlefield but also in day-to-day life too they have exhibited their valor. They showed their grit whenever the situation demanded. But most of the times remained silent even at the cost of their individual interests and character. It is high time that we acknowledge their sacrifices and give the due respect to the feminine gender. The novelist has chosen mythological characters to reach the audience as many people are familiar and enumerate these characters. Through these characters she raised her questions of identity, equality, dignity, and expression of thought.

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