



Subverting Patriarchal Discourse: A Feminist Counter-Narrative Reading of Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*

Mr. Hiran Pandurang Kamble

Research Scholar,

Research Centre of English,

Ahmednagar College,

Ahilyanagar, India.

k.hiraman17@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9614-3277>

Dr. Jayashri Aher

<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n4.69>

Abstract:

Indian classical epic literature has traditionally adopted a male-oriented perspective, in which female characters have been marginalised or confined within the dichotomy of the 'ideal woman' and the 'malignant instigator.' However, through her novel *Sita's Sister*, Kavita Kane challenges the male-dominated narrative by bringing the focus to Urmila, who has remained sidelined throughout history. This research work will undertake a complete feminist study of the portrayal of women characters in Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*. It utilises theoretical frameworks such as Elaine Showalter's "gynocriticism," Deniz Kandiyoti's "patriarchal bargain," and Miranda Fricker's concept of "epistemic injustice." The study examines how Kavita Kane deconstructs the idealisation of female silence, passivity, and unrecognised sacrifice in the patriarchal structure. It also elaborates on Urmila's intellectual independence and her resistance to traditional masculine notions of responsibility, the tacit bond of sisterhood forged among the princesses of Mithila, and the complex survival strategies adopted by the older generation of queens, particularly the ostracised Kaikeyi. Kane's work reclaims the narrative from the margins and humanises these legendary figures, but also gives a powerful critique of the institutional patriarchy embedded in ancient literature. The study argues that *Sita's Sister* is an indispensable gynocentric text and tries to re-establish epistemic agency for women. It also argues that hegemonic heroism in the ancient epics is fundamentally flawed because it neglects the psychological, emotional, and intellectual power of its female protagonists.

Keywords: Counter-narrative, Epistemic Injustice, Female Solidarity, Urmila, Gynocriticism, Patriarchal Bargain, Ancient Epics.

Article History: Submitted-13/07/2026, Revised-10/08/2026, Accepted-25/08/2026, Published-31/08/2026.

Copyright vests with the author. Licensing: Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

1. Introduction:

One of the remarkable developments in modern literature is the retelling of ancient texts. In such writings, writers foreground female experiences rather than male-centred hagiographies. Within this literary movement, feminist counter-narratives have become an important means of understanding ancient epic literature. The earliest texts have traditionally been lauded as male epics that celebrate the victory of duty and righteousness through the valorous deeds of their male heroes. At the same time, the lived experiences, sacrifices and socio-political viewpoints of their female characters are minimised. Key female characters such as Sita have been studied by scholars as victims of patriarchal norms and symbols of silent endurance. However, secondary women such as Urmila, Mandavi, Shrutakirti, and the elder queens of Ayodhya have been largely silenced by historical and literary conventions.

Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* is a significant addition to this literary tradition. Kane undertakes a significant narrative subversion by focusing on Urmila, the sister of Sita and wife of Lakshmana. Kane reimagines Urmila's unusual fourteen-year 'sleep' as a period of separation, reflection, and eventual intellectual development rather than simple narrative absence (Kane 184, 215–21). The novel consequently gives Urmila a new identity as a fiery, intellectually accomplished, and fiercely independent protagonist.

The novel demonstrates how changing narrative perspective can recover experiences marginalised by traditional literature and foreground female agency. This study therefore examines the female characters in *Sita's Sister* through an integrated feminist framework. Kane deconstructs patriarchal notions of ideal womanhood by granting her characters intellectual and moral autonomy, while also exposing the institutional limitations that compel women to negotiate, resist, and survive within patriarchal structures.

2. Review of Literature

Recent scholarship on contemporary Indian mythological fiction demonstrates a growing interest in feminist reinterpretations that recover women's voices from canonical narratives. Studies of Kavita Kane's fiction identify her revisionist method as a means of foregrounding mythological women who have been marginalised or reduced to secondary roles (Chandran and Jothi 89–90; Madhesiya and Singh 149–54). The above-mentioned research highlights the fact that the feminist retelling of myths is not limited to repeating traditional tales but opens up these stories to reconsideration in light of gender, agency, identity, and power dynamics.

A close critical analysis of fiction by Kane brings into the forefront her reconstruction of female characters as complicated subjects and autonomous ethical entities. Chandran and Jothi examine Kane's reconstructions of women as *Sita's Sister*, *Menaka's choice*, *Lanka's princess*, and *Ahalya's awakening* within the scope of androcentric storytelling (89-92). Madhesiya and Singh emphasise that in Kane's stories, her heroines transform their silences, desires, and experiences of marginalisation into forms of agency (149–56). The above-mentioned analyses help to understand Kane's place in contemporary feminist mytho-fiction and point out the importance of mythological narration in the context of gender and power issues.

Feminist analysis of *Sita's Sister* emphasises the importance of recovering Urmila from the margins of the Ramayana tradition. Lekshmi argues that Kane reconstructs Urmila as a historically neglected character whose experience of separation and sacrifice receives sustained attention (93–95). The study also emphasises Urmila's questioning of patriarchal authority and her insistence on speaking for women whose suffering remains unacknowledged (94–95). Chandran and Jothi likewise identify Kane's treatment of Urmila as part of a broader attempt to reconstruct marginalised female voices within Indian mythology (89–90). Suguna and

Malathy further place *Sita's Sister* within Kane's broader engagement with modern mythological fiction (134–36).

Feminist literary criticism provides an important theoretical basis for interpreting such revisionist narratives. Showalter distinguishes gynocriticism from feminist critique and defines it as a mode of studying women's writing through the history, themes, structures, and experiences of female literary production (185). Kandiyoti's concept of the patriarchal bargain explains how women negotiate patriarchal systems through strategies shaped by concrete social constraints and the pursuit of security and limited autonomy (274–75). Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice identifies the ways in which prejudice can diminish a person's credibility as a knower. It describes hermeneutical marginalisation as a structural limitation on the ability to make sense of one's social experience (1, 9–28). These perspectives provide a coherent theoretical framework for examining female agency, negotiation, and epistemic marginalisation in the novel.

Nonetheless, a significant research gap persists. Existing research on *Sita's Sister* has focused primarily on Urmila's marginalisation, Kane's feminist revisionism, or individual aspects of female agency rather than integrating gynocriticism, the patriarchal bargain, and epistemic injustice (Akshaya Lekshmi 94–95; Madhesiya and Singh 154–56). Moreover, relatively little attention has been given to the relationships among Urmila, Sita, Kaikeyi, Mandavi, Shrutakirti, Kausalya, and Sumitra as responses to patriarchal structures. This study bridges the gap by exploring the ways in which *Sita's Sister* functions as a feminist counter-narrative that challenges patriarchal discourse.

3. Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of this paper, three distinct feminist theories have been utilised to examine the female characters of *Sita's Sister*.

Elaine Showalter's Gynocriticism: Showalter's gynocriticism involves moving from the critique of women based on male-critical criteria towards the exploration of the writing of women and its themes, structure, history, and experience (185). In this research, it facilitates an exploration of the female characters of Kane in terms of their own experiences and identities.

Deniz Kandiyoti's Patriarchal Bargain: Kandiyoti uses the term "patriarchal bargains" for the mechanisms of accommodation and negotiation of the actual constraints imposed upon women within patriarchy in order to maximise security and options in life (274–75). It is very useful in explaining the actions of Kaikeyi, Kausalya, and Sumitra, who show various forms of accommodation and resistance.

Miranda Fricker's Epistemic Injustice: According to Fricker, epistemic injustice is the wrong committed against individuals in their status of a knower. Testimonial injustice takes place when prejudice reduces the credibility of a speaker, whereas hermeneutic injustice takes place when structural lack of collective interpretive tools puts individuals at an unfair disadvantage with respect to the interpretation of their social experiences (1, 9–28).

4. Urmila: Reclaiming Agency and Overcoming Epistemic Injustice

The representation of Urmila in *Sita's Sister* is quite different from the usual representation of Urmila as a silent and sacrificing wife. In contrast to being mainly defined by Lakshmana's fourteen years of exile, Urmila is portrayed by Kane as an intellectually curious, independent and self-reflective woman. From the very start, Urmila recognises that marriage is a social obligation for women, but she states that "she would rather seek knowledge instead of a suitor" (Kane 14). Thus, the statement shows the importance of intellectual inquiry for Urmila and undermines the notion of a woman who is defined as fulfilled only because she is married. Moreover, Urmila is represented as an intellectual woman through her education and later scholarship. Having studied for many years at the court of Ayodhya's kings under the gurus,

Urmila is invited to the philosophical conference of Janak “in her own right as an acclaimed scholar.” By that time, she knew the Vedas and Upanishads and could discuss religion and philosophy with learned scholars (Kane 215). During the conference, she discusses philosophical issues with other prominent intellectuals, among whom there is the philosopher Gargi (Kane 218). Using Fricker's idea of epistemic injustice, it can be concluded that by giving Urmila intellectual authority Kane shows the value of intellectual voice of women who were traditionally subordinate to the knowledge of men (Fricker 1, 9-28).

Urmila's epistemic agency is made most apparent when she questions the gendered structure of dharma in Ayodhya. Upon being asked by the members of the royal assembly about the duties of the father, son, king, brother, and wife, she queries, “But what of the dharma of the husband to his wife?” (Kane 180). Guru Kashyap tries to shut Urmila up by pointing out that unlike at Janak's court, at Ayodhya, the women, including Gargi, have no right to discuss or argue about issues of dharma. Urmila, however, continues pressing her point and seeks clarification on the dharma of a man towards his wife and mother (Kane 180–81).

In addition, Urmila reveals how responsibilities are divided unevenly within the royal family. She observes that decisions are always made according to the duties of fathers, sons, and brothers, while mothers and wives are expected simply to follow their orders (Kane 181). In particular, Urmila says that she stayed behind in Ayodhya because she did not want to take her brother away from Rama, whom he served (Kane 181). Hence, her reasoning does not undermine the principle of duty at all but, instead, wonders why duty should be so asymmetric in nature in relation to men and women.

The text also challenges the standard hierarchical relationship between Lakshmana's overt sacrifice and the covert endurance of Urmila. Before leaving, Lakshmana openly conveys the fact that “he is leaving behind” his wife and expresses the failure of his duties as a husband and

a son (Kane 132). It discloses the price of the heroic paradigm in which the devotion of a man to his brother is recognised in public, but the pain of his wife as well as his filial duties is almost invisible. Therefore, Kane broadens the definition of sacrifice by presenting Urmila's endurance, intelligence, and responsibility as forms of female agency.

However, the fourteenth year of the woman's separation from her husband is not depicted simply as passive waiting. After coming back to Mithila for the philosophical discussion, Janak notices the significance of her years of separation for her spiritual and intellectual achievement and welcomes Urmila as an academic person (Kane 219-21). Urmila herself claims that during her years of separation she was learning and painting (Kane 219). Consequently, Kane turns what can be considered a narrative absence into a period of intellectual formation. Urmila becomes a feminist counter-narrative to female silence since she reflects upon her experience, rejects patriarchal notions of duty and acquires knowledge

5. The Princesses of Mithila: Sisterhood as a Space Against Hegemony

In patriarchy-centric storylines, women are commonly pitted against each other in search of the approval, respect, and protection of men. In contrast, Kane emphasises the relationship among Sita, Urmila, Mandavi, and Shrutakirti, which contains elements of conflict but is nevertheless depicted as a basis for emotional sustenance and constructive criticism throughout the novel. Their upbringing in Mithila constitutes an intellectual and emotional foundation from which they negotiate the restrictions imposed by Ayodhya. (Kane 14, 217–18).

5.1 Sita: The 'Angel in the House' Revisited

Sita's character is filtered through Urmila's loving yet critical perspective. At the time when Rama is sent into exile, Sita chooses not to abide by the cultural norms that expect her to stay inside the palace; instead, she asserts her right to share her husband's suffering with her husband because, as a wife, it is her responsibility and obligation (Kane 118–19). Thus, according to

Kane, Sita's decision to leave the palace is not only an act of obedience but also an exercise of agency on her part.

Moreover, Urmila's attitude towards her sister challenges the image of Sita as the ideal wife and perfect embodiment of conventional marital norms. Urmila is concerned about Sita's safety and questions whether choosing the forest was a wise decision. In other words, the novel enables a critical reconsideration of Sita's image as the perfect wife even within the community of women.

5.2 Mandavi and Shrutakirti: The Invisible Labour of the State and the Home

The character of Mandavi emerges as one marked with practical resilience and an emotionally complicated disposition. Later, she is described by the narrator as being hard and cold, but her quick-wittedness makes her able to survive hard situations (Kane 214). Her marriage to Bharat turns out to be challenging as he becomes devoted to fraternal responsibility and ascetic penances that lead her to long-term loneliness. Urmila is aware of the fact that the same type of suffering may fall on Mandavi, as it happened to her (Kane 169, 180–82). Mandavi's characterisation reflects the gendered implications of masculine moral absolutism. It is true that the refusal of the throne by Bharat is depicted as a morally good decision, but the question about the implications of his penance is asked by Urmila repeatedly. When she tells Bharat that he should think about his actions and that he cannot care only about himself as "the whole family now depends on" him, it clearly states the link between personal obligations and familial duties (Kane 169).

The inclusion of Shrutakirti adds even more weight to the significance of sisterhood as a support structure. While the women experience things in different ways depending on the circumstances of separation, death, and patriarchy, sisterhood offers an opportunity for these experiences to be expressed and debated. As a result, Kane steers clear of showing sisterhood

as a seamless entity; rather, sisterhood is a site of dissent, concern, criticism, and survival (Kane 165–66, 214–15).

6. The Older Queens: Negotiating the Patriarchal Bargain

The portrayal of the older queens in the work is particularly important because it blurs the usual moral categories used to evaluate the female characters in epic tales. In this respect, the story of Kaikeyi is especially interesting since the author reinterprets the traditional representation of the character by explaining the psychological and political pressure she experiences due to her status as a royal wife. For instance, the girl's father brings up Kaikeyi like a boy, paying great attention to her intelligence, artistic talents, and knowledge of military issues (Kane 203). However, marriage makes Kaikeyi part of a polygynous royal family. It places her in a situation in which her status depends on the king's affection, the birth of an heir, and rivalry among the queens. Thus, Kaikeyi realises that her marriage is arranged primarily to provide the king with a son, while Sumitra's arrival exacerbates her insecurities (Kane 208–09). Kandiyoti's concept of the patriarchal bargain provides a useful framework for interpreting Kaikeyi's behaviour as a response to her insecure position. The character's actions cannot be interpreted in terms of her natural jealousy; they are presented by the author as the consequences of the institutional pressure of the times. Thus, the girl tries to strengthen her position after saving the king's life and confesses that she was afraid to become "nothing" in the royal palace (Kane 209).

This further characterisation of Kaikeyi's personality is given through her fear of abandonment. In the novel, she reveals that her mother abandoned her when she was only six years old, and from that time she developed distrust in males and a fear of losing her husband to Kausalya or Sumitra (Kane 208). Manthara uses this insecurity of Kaikeyi's to work on her weaknesses. Kaikeyi is thus characterised as having all the features of the paradoxical bargain with

patriarchy; the methods she uses to secure herself in the patriarchal scheme only make her more isolated and result in dire consequences for her and other people.

The novelist further complicates the characterisations of Kausalya and Sumitra. For instance, Kausalya's rivalry with Kaikeyi is caused by her insecurities as a wife, a mother, and a queen. Urmila says explicitly that the rivalry between the two queens remains the reason for ongoing conflicts in their family. And both these women have suffered in the framework of the rivalry (Kane 199-200). On the contrary, Sumitra is often depicted as a calm and supportive woman. After Rama's banishment, she consoles Kausalya and tells her that the act of renunciation performed by her son should be seen as a heroic action (Kane 135). In another situation, she realises that Urmila suffers from emotions and tries to persuade her to use this chance to meet her brother-in-law (Kane 170).

7. Convergence of Education, Environment and Gender

Sita's Sister creates a vital distinction between Mithila and Ayodhya, the natal and marital homes of Urmila respectively. In Mithila, King Janak rejects the idea of having a son and affirms that his daughters constitute his fate, and the philosophy of the kingdom recognises the fact that the self is not gendered (Kane 217-18). Also, the story of Sulabha, the wise woman who convinced Janak through her argument about the equality of minds concerning the equality of minds, further reinforces the fact that intellectual inquiry is genderless (Kane 218). Later on, the involvement of Urmila at the philosophical forum along with Gargi also bears testimony to the practical implications of such a cultural milieu (Kane 218).

On the other hand, the environment in Ayodhya is relatively constricted. Here when Urmila queries the issue of gendered dharma, Guru Kashyap, instead of discussing it, clearly draws a distinction between Ayodhya and Janak's kingdom by mentioning how he disapproves women debating and arguing (Kane 180). This distinction highlights the fact that cultural environment

has significant influence over the intellectual participation of women. Consequently, education acts as a medium for agency for Urmila.

Education, therefore, is linked with knowledge or epistemic authority in this story. Knowledge acquired by Urmila allows her to ask such questions that baffle the royal assembly and helps her in showing how unequally the burden of responsibility is shared by men and women (Kane 180-82). It is in the latter part of the story when Urmila comes out as a scholar at Janak's convention, indicating that she has developed an intellectual identity independent of her identity as a daughter or wife (Kane 215-21).

8. Conclusion

Sita's Sister by Kavita Kane emerges as a key feminist rewriting of the Ramayana tradition. Through the use of the concepts of gynocriticism, patriarchal bargain, and epistemic injustice, it becomes clear that Kane does not only fill in the blanks of the story, but that she also challenges the patriarchal assumptions on which women's experiences are based. Urmila's intellectual development, Sita's questioning of gender-specific dharma, Sita's assertion of marital agency, Mandavi's realisation of the costs of masculine duty, and Kaikeyi's handling of royal insecurity show how complicated female agency is within patriarchal structures (Kane 118–21, 180–82, 203–09, 215–21).

Moreover, the novel shows how heroism is understood and expands the definition to incorporate labours and endurance that do not usually receive attention in epic traditions. The public recognition by Lakshmana of the "inner suffering" and sacrifice of Urmila shows the contrast between the famous masculine heroism and the unrecognised female labour (Kane 132). Urmila's later intellectual development turns her separation into an opportunity for self-study and self-discovery (Kane 219–21).

Kane's reinterpretation of Sita, Mandavi, Kaikeyi, Kausalya, and Sumitra deconstructs binaries associated with ideal and villainous women in addition. These women do not react to patriarchy in the same manner; rather, they engage in negotiating, accommodating, resisting and even reproducing its dynamics. Thus, they ensure that the novel does not create another binary to replace a simplistic one. The feminist retelling in this work involves bringing back the ability of women to speak, interpret, decide and act in traditionally male-dominated narratives.

In this respect, *Sita's Sister* makes its contribution to the literature of recovering women's stories and histories that have been marginalised in relation to the epic heroes. In highlighting the intellectual authority of women, their labour of emotions, their sisterhood and methods of survival, Kane turns margins into the locus of narrative and epistemological agency. Thus, the creation of feminist counter-narratives is both an act of creative rewriting and cultural intervention.

Works Cited:

- Akshaya Lekshmi, S. R. "The Forgotten Feminine: Urmila's Plight and the Effects of Patriarchal Feminism in Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*." *ILN Journal: Indian Literary Narratives*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2025, pp. 91–97.
- Chandran, Sarika, and C. Jothi. "Reimagining Female Voices: Challenging Androcentrism in Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*, *Menaka's Choice*, *Lanka's Princess*, and *Ahalya's Awakening*." *Integrated Journal for Research in Arts and Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2026, pp. 88–92.
- Fricke, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender & Society*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1988, pp. 274–290.

Kane, Kavita. *Sita's Sister*. Rupa Publications India, 2014.

Madhesiya, Neelima, and Sudhir Narayan Singh. "Rewriting Myth, Reclaiming Voice: Feminine Agency, Desire and Power in the Novels of Kavita Kane." *LangLit*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2025, pp. 148–56.

Showalter, Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1981, pp. 179–205.

Suguna, S., and P. Malathy. "Exploring the Modern Mythology: Analysing Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* and *Sita's Sister*." *Turkish Journal of Computer and Mathematics Education*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2024, pp. 134–36.

---. *Menaka's Choice*. Rupa Publications, 2015.

---. *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*. Westland Publications, 2017.

Mangalam, B. *Feminism and Indian Realities*. Books Plus, 2021.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, Macmillan, 1988, pp. 271-313.

Varma, Pavan K. *The Great Hindu Civilisation: Achievement, Neglect, Bias and the Way Forward*. Westland, 2021.