



Beyond Silence and Sacrifice: Ethical Agency and the Politics of Female Endurance in Sita's Sister

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary feminist retellings of the Ramayana have increasingly shifted attention from celebrated heroines to marginalised female figures whose ethical significance was largely overlooked in classical epic discourse. Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* exemplifies this shift by foregrounding Urmila, a character traditionally remembered only for her absence and silence. This paper argues that Kane's reimagining of Urmila moves beyond the paradigms of silence and sacrifice to articulate a nuanced model of ethical agency grounded in endurance, moral choice, and emotional labour. Rather than framing Urmila's waiting as passive suffering, the novel presents it as a conscious ethical decision that challenges patriarchal ideals of heroic renunciation and visible sacrifice. Through close textual analysis, the paper examines key moments that reveal Urmila's voluntary withdrawal, restrained anger, rejection of idealised wifehood, and redefinition of strength within confinement. Drawing on feminist theories of agency and ethics, the study demonstrates how Urmila's silence functions as moral resistance rather than submission, and how her endurance emerges as a politically and ethically meaningful act. By reclaiming marginality as a site of moral authority, *Sita's Sister* offers an alternative vision of female power that resonates strongly with contemporary readers navigating gendered constraints in their own lives. The paper concludes that Kane's portrayal of Urmila expands the discourse on female agency in mythological retellings, positioning ethical endurance—not spectacular action—as a legitimate and transformative mode of empowerment.

Keywords: Ethical Agency; Female Endurance; Silence and Feminist Resistance; Mythological Retellings

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have witnessed a significant rise in feminist retellings of Indian epics

that seek to recover women's voices from narratives historically shaped by patriarchal priorities. While much critical attention has focused on prominent figures such as Sita and Draupadi, marginal female characters—whose experiences unfold away from the epic centre—have begun to attract renewed scholarly interest. Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* participates in this revisionist project by foregrounding Urmila, a figure traditionally remembered for her absence rather than her presence. In classical epic discourse, Urmila's silence and prolonged waiting are often read as passive sacrifice, rendering her ethically insignificant when compared to more visibly suffering heroines. Kane's retelling challenges this assumption by repositioning Urmila's confinement as a space of moral deliberation, emotional labour, and conscious choice.

This paper argues that Kane's portrayal of Urmila moves beyond conventional binaries of silence versus speech and sacrifice versus agency. Through close textual analysis, it demonstrates how Urmila's endurance, restrained anger, and rejection of idealised wifehood articulate a distinct model of ethical agency operating within confinement. By reading silence as moral resistance and waiting as a form of power, the study situates *Sita's Sister* within contemporary feminist debates that challenge narrow definitions of agency. In doing so, it contends that Urmila emerges not as a marginal figure but as a critical site through which female power, ethics, and resilience are reimagined in modern retellings of the Ramayana.

II. ANALYSIS

Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* begins its feminist intervention not with silence, but with choice. Urmila's ethical agency is first articulated at the moment when Lakshmana prepares to follow Rama into exile—a moment that classical epic tradition leaves largely uninterrogated. Rather than allowing this absence to remain narratively invisible, Kane foregrounds Urmila's interior



deliberation, transforming what is often perceived as abandonment into a conscious moral decision. This shift is crucial, because it relocates female agency from action to ethical reasoning, from movement to moral judgment, aligning with feminist arguments that agency must be understood not only through resistance but also through reflective participation within existing structures (Mahmood 15).

Urmila's refusal to accompany Lakshmana is not presented as emotional withdrawal or passive acceptance. On the contrary, Kane carefully constructs this decision as the outcome of reflective self-awareness. Urmila recognises that love does not automatically translate into physical proximity, and that ethical responsibility may require restraint rather than participation. She reflects that by saying,

"I support him in this decision. By going with him, I would have simply imposed myself on him; I would have been a distraction. I helped him follow his heart and his greater good. As I see it, he saw his brother needed him more in the forest than I needed him as a wife in the palace. It was not just a sense of duty, or a filial sense of obligation, Ma, it was love. And I accept that love—I love and respect him more for it... Each one here followed his dharma. I am following mine, too." (Kane 184).

This moment is significant because it reframes waiting as ethical clarity. Urmila does not choose suffering; she chooses what she understands to be the morally appropriate course of action.

This decision disrupts one of the most entrenched assumptions of epic womanhood: that female devotion must be proven through visible sacrifice. In the Ramayana, virtue is frequently measured through acts that are legible, dramatic, and publicly acknowledged—exile, renunciation, and suffering performed before witnesses. Urmila's choice exposes the gendered bias embedded in this moral framework. By refusing to enter the forest, she implicitly questions whether ethical worth must always be enacted through spectacle. Kane allows Urmila to articulate this doubt internally, asking whether love is validated only through physical suffering and separation from comfort. The question itself becomes an ethical intervention, unsettling the moral absolutism of epic ideals and challenging patriarchal constructions that historically defined women primarily through relational roles rather than autonomous moral subjectivity (de Beauvoir 26).

What emerges here is a crucial distinction between sacrifice and ethical agency. Urmila herself articulates this when she insists, "And is not

dharma all about giving? It can never be about taking or demanding" (Kane 184). Sacrifice, as Kane presents it, often operates within patriarchal systems as an expectation imposed upon women, one that is celebrated precisely because it reinforces ideals of obedience and self-erasure. Ethical agency, by contrast, requires deliberation, refusal, and responsibility. Urmila's strength lies in her refusal to accept a single model of virtue. She does not reject Lakshmana's choice, nor does she diminish Sita's decision to follow Rama. Instead, she asserts that moral action is contextual, shaped by circumstance rather than hierarchy. Her decision to stay behind affirms that there can be multiple ethical paths, none of which need to be measured against the visibility of suffering. Such plurality reflects feminist critiques of universalised models of liberation that overlook the diverse material and historical conditions shaping women's lives (Mohanty 22).

Kane further deepens this ethical positioning by situating Urmila's choice within a broader understanding of responsibility. Urmila is acutely aware that exile, however valorised, creates absences that must be absorbed by those who remain behind. She recognises that the emotional and political stability of Ayodhya depends upon figures who are willing to endure continuity rather than disruption. When she acknowledges that "someone must stay behind," Kane reframes waiting as ethical labour rather than emotional deficit. This labour is invisible, uncelebrated, and profoundly gendered—but it is no less essential to the moral order than heroic renunciation.

Importantly, Kane does not romanticise this choice. Urmila's decision is accompanied by loss, loneliness, and uncertainty. However, what distinguishes her endurance from passive suffering is her continued ownership of the choice itself. She does not relinquish agency once the decision is made; instead, she must repeatedly reaffirm it over time. Ethical agency, in this sense, is not a single act but an ongoing practice. Urmila's strength lies not in choosing once, but in continuing to choose—to wait, to endure, and to remain ethically coherent in the absence of recognition.

Urmila also explicitly rejects fatalistic passivity when she asks, "Don't, Ma, are we to be so helpless? Bound, pulled and pushed by the tug of the strings held in Fate's fingers?" (Kane 258). By grounding Urmila's agency in moral reasoning rather than rebellion, Kane fundamentally redefines female power in the epic context. Agency here is not loud, visible, or disruptive. It is thoughtful, restrained, and



grounded in responsibility. Urmila's confinement does not negate her autonomy; instead, it becomes the condition within which ethical clarity is tested and sustained. This reconfiguration resonates with feminist theoretical frameworks that conceptualise subjectivity as relationally constituted rather than defined solely through autonomous resistance (Butler 24).

Thus, in its opening ethical movement, *Sita's Sister* establishes Urmila not as a silent victim of epic fate, but as a woman who governs her life through conscious moral judgment. Silence, at this stage, is not absence of voice but presence of thought. Waiting is not loss of agency but its most demanding expression. Kane's narrative insists that ethical agency begins not with action, but with the courage to choose responsibly—even when that choice leads away from recognition and reward.

If Urmila's initial decision to remain in Ayodhya establishes the foundation of her ethical agency, the true test of that agency unfolds in the years that follow, when choice must be sustained through time, uncertainty, and emotional isolation. Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* carefully shifts the narrative focus from the dramatic moment of departure to the quieter, more demanding work of endurance, suggesting that ethical agency is not a single decisive act but an ongoing practice that must be repeatedly reaffirmed.

Urmila's waiting is not portrayed as static suspension but as an active condition shaped by psychological discipline and emotional management. She must continuously negotiate grief, loneliness, and uncertainty without the compensatory recognition that accompanies visible sacrifice. The narrative notes that she learns to guard her emotional life carefully, developing the ability to conceal inner turmoil and prevent it from overwhelming her sense of purpose. This self-regulation becomes a form of ethical strength, allowing Urmila to maintain coherence in the face of prolonged absence. Silence here is not emptiness but a space of internal work, where emotion is processed rather than performed—demonstrating how agency can operate within constraint rather than solely through overt resistance (Mahmood 15).

This emphasis on emotional discipline reframes endurance as a morally productive activity. Rather than glorifying suffering itself, Kane highlights the effort required to endure without surrendering to bitterness or resentment. Urmila's waiting demands constant ethical recalibration: she must remind herself why she chose this path, resist the temptation to interpret her solitude as abandonment, and continue to affirm the

moral reasoning that initially guided her decision. The novel thus presents endurance not as passive suffering but as an ongoing ethical negotiation between feeling and responsibility.

At several points, Urmila's internal reflections reveal moments of anger and doubt, underscoring that ethical endurance is neither effortless nor unconflicted. She questions why the structures of duty repeatedly demand greater sacrifice from women and why the burdens of continuity fall disproportionately upon those who remain behind. These reflections do not culminate in rebellion, yet they prevent her endurance from being interpreted as unquestioning acceptance. Kane portrays Urmila's anger as a form of moral alertness—a refusal to naturalise injustice even when open opposition is not possible. The narrative records that “Urmila felt like surrendering, she was almost indifferent to her sister's rancour. It no longer upset her. Bitter anger and deep ill-will had hardened her sister's personality” (Kane 262). This emotional distance does not indicate apathy; rather, it signals disciplined self-governance.

The novel also underscores the invisibility of such ethical labour. While the departures of Rama and Lakshmana become the subjects of epic celebration, Urmila's endurance remains largely unacknowledged, unfolding outside the sphere of heroic narration. Kane repeatedly draws attention to this asymmetry, suggesting that moral systems often reward dramatic acts while ignoring the sustained effort required to preserve emotional and social stability. Urmila's waiting therefore acquires political significance: it exposes the gendered distribution of recognition within epic culture, where women's contributions to continuity are taken for granted even as they are essential to the functioning of the moral order.

Importantly, Kane refuses to present endurance as mere self-denial. Urmila's waiting gradually reshapes her understanding of strength, teaching her that power does not always lie in transformation or escape but sometimes in the capacity to remain ethically consistent across time. Her identity is not suspended during the years of separation; instead, it is actively formed through the practice of endurance. Each year of waiting becomes a reaffirmation of the ethical decision she made, reinforcing the idea that agency is not exhausted by the act of choosing but continues through the act of sustaining that choice.

Through this portrayal, *Sita's Sister* extends its feminist intervention beyond the reclamation of a marginal character and into a broader redefinition of agency itself. Kane



demonstrates that agency is not confined to moments of visible resistance or dramatic transformation; it may also manifest in the quieter but equally demanding work of maintaining ethical coherence over time. Urmila's endurance reveals that female power can operate through continuity rather than rupture, through responsibility rather than recognition, offering a powerful rethinking of agency within contemporary feminist literary discourse. In this sense, Urmila's endurance exemplifies what feminist scholarship identifies as agency within constraint, where moral authority emerges not from the rejection of social structures but from the capacity to act ethically within them (Mahmood 15)

III. CONCLUSION

Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* ultimately redefines female agency not through spectacle, rebellion, or dramatic rupture, but through ethical self-governance within constraint. Urmila's refusal to accompany Lakshmana is neither passive acquiescence nor sacrificial martyrdom; it is a deliberate moral choice grounded in reflective understanding of duty, love, and responsibility. Her endurance across years of absence further demonstrates that agency is not exhausted at the moment of decision but sustained through disciplined emotional labour. In foregrounding the ethical complexity of waiting, Kane challenges epic traditions that privilege visible suffering while marginalising invisible moral work.

The novel's most decisive articulation of this redefinition occurs when Urmila asserts, "Each one here followed his dharma. I am following mine, too" (Kane 184). This statement dismantles hierarchical models of virtue and affirms the legitimacy of plural ethical paths. Urmila does not reject the moral order; she interprets and inhabits it on her own terms. In doing so, *Sita's Sister* advances a compelling feminist intervention: female power need not announce itself through resistance alone—it may reside in the quiet but resolute act of choosing one's own dharma. Through Urmila, Kane transforms silence into moral articulation and endurance into ethical authority, offering a reimagined vision of agency that resonates powerfully within contemporary feminist discourse.

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