

Unfolding Multifaceted Dimensions of Dharma and Moral Responsibility in Kavita Kané's Sita's Sister

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Abstract

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata have an immense contribution to the construction of Indian society, inculcating dharma, the righteous act that leads to our moral growth, and the knowledge of right and wrong. The Ramayana is highly celebrated for setting ideals like Ram who has discarded all the luxuries of the palace and goes into exile for fourteen years to keep his father's promises; Lakshman does the same, accompanying his brother in the jungle in his exile. Sita, being a princess and queen, later on, rejects all the comforts of the city and chooses to go with her husband. They all followed dharma by choosing the right and hardest path to fulfil their duty and responsibilities. Similarly, Urmila, Sita's sister, sacrifices a lot for Ayodhya, for the well-being of her family, but we don't know much about her. Kavita Kané is a renowned scholar who unfolds the journey of Urmila through her work, Sita's Sister which is written from the perspective of Urmila who performs various roles as a daughter, sister, wife and lastly as a queen which are played with utmost sincerity. The study aims to explore the multifaceted dimensions of the dharma of Urmila maintaining the moral responsibilities highlighted in the narrative. It will also explore how she navigates her duty not only for society's welfare but also for her family, and for herself, through a qualitative approach.

Keywords: Ramayana, Dharma, Moral responsibility, Mythological fiction, Sita's Sister, Urmila

Introduction

'Dharma' is one of the four 'Purusharthas' in Hinduism that is regarded as the most essential goal for human beings to live a meaningful life in this universe. Dharma means to choose the righteous path despite any circumstances. One follows dharma when one chooses the hardest and the best path for the betterment of society creating harmony and balance. Dharma is the most crucial and complex term in Indian ethics which comes from the Sanskrit root word 'dhr' meaning 'to hold' or 'support'. So, it signifies order that sustains stability and growth. Ingo Strauch defines dharma as

... the Hindu concept of dharma designates a comprehensive complex of rules for individual and social behaviour. Its observance not only guarantees the rituals → purity of the person or group and is therefore regarded as a necessary precondition for individual salvation, but also is significant for the maintenance of the social and cosmic order. (Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism 736)

According to the Vedas, dharma indicates duties and moral conduct that guide an individual to make the right decisions. The concept of dharma is closely related to another concept that is karma, actions of human

beings, coming from morality and inner conscience which are highly essential to set behaviours to maintain equilibrium in society. Both the concepts originated from the central idea of the Rigveda, 'ṛta', emphasizing law and order. Later on, dharma (duty or moral responsibility) was redefined in the Upanishads, Epics and Dharmasastras. It is one of the four fundamental goals of Purusharthas in Hinduism that requires living a meaningful life in the universe. To manifest dharma, one must choose the most difficult, challenging, and righteous path to foster progress, harmony and balance in society. The practice and understanding of dharma are the central concerns in Indian epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which have an immense contribution to building our nation, instilling righteousness and moral principles through several characters. In The Ramayana, the characters like Dasarath, Ram, Lakshman and Sita are the perfect embodiment of dharma who choose the most ethical and noble path for the stability and betterment of society despite any circumstances. King Dasarath, for instance, remains true to his morals and duties sending his son, Ram, into exile for fourteen years to keep his promises given to Queen Kaikeyi though he suffers a lot till his death as a consequence. Ram, the key figure and epitome of dharma, adheres to his duties as a son through self-sacrifice. To foster his duty as a son, he goes into exile rejecting all kinds of material pleasures and luxuries of the palace accompanied by Sita and Lakshman. Similarly, Sita's unshakeable honesty and fidelity to Ram show her duty as a wife who refuses all the comforts of the city and lives the life of an ascetic in the jungle. Unlike Sita, Urmila cherishes her duty and moral responsibility by staying in Ayodhya. When Lakshman determines to accompany Ram into exile to follow his duty as a brother, Urmila fulfils her duty as a wife which is interconnected with her roles as a daughter, sister, queen and, lastly, an individual, being present in Ayodhya. She always prioritizes her societal and familial responsibilities over her personal desire. But she remains unnoticed; we don't know much about her.

Kavita Kané is a well-known scholar of contemporary India who reframes and redefines mythology, locating the peripheral characters at the centre. In her work *Sita's Sister* (2014), she unveils the struggles, hardships and sacrifices of Urmila in a very unique way. Placing Urmila at the centre of the novel, Kané has given a broader view and understanding of dharma and moral responsibility. In the narrative, Sita is represented as the most gentle, kind and stoic figure whom King Janak and Queen Sunaina got from Mother Earth when they were childless. Urmila is the second and rightful daughter of King Janak and the princess of Mithila, portrayed as wise, outspoken and courageous. Though their path differs, as Sita chooses to go with her husband, unlike Urmila, who remains at the palace to accomplish her duty as a wife, Urmila's unconditional love and respect for Sita never fade away which shows her righteousness as a sister. Arunima Shekhar in her book review, asserts, "If Ram went on an exile to fulfil the promise given by his father to Kaikeyi, citing it to be his dharma to fulfil his father's wishes, Urmila exiled herself in the palace, so that Lakshman could fulfil his promise of always protecting his brother". Hence, from supporting her sister to maintaining law and order in Ayodhya when there was no ruler on the throne to protect the country from enemies, she performed her duties unwaveringly. The study seeks to explore how Kavita Kané has reconstructed and reinterpreted the concept of dharma through the character of Urmila in the novel. It also studies the multifaceted dimensions of the dharma of Urmila, focusing on her actions and decisions, analysing how she remains obedient to her responsibilities.

Discussion

In Hinduism, dharma is interdependent with morality that sets up certain principles and guidelines to live a moral and virtuous life in society. S. Radhakrishnan claims, "The term dharma is one of complex

significance. It stands for all those ideas and purposes, influences and institutions that shape the character of man both an individual and as a member of society". To live life purposefully and honourably, the Hindu scholars recommend some necessary rules and morals based on the stages of life and the Varna system, which come under 'Varnasrama Dharma'. So, one must adhere to one's duty or the defined rules for a prosperous life. On the other hand, 'Sadharana dharma' is dependent on the moral norms, ethics and righteousness of an individual which construct and form the character of man, which is also called universal duties. 'Svadharmā' is explicated as one's duty which is done rightfully for the welfare and prosperity of society.

By revisiting the Ramanaya, Kavita Kané sheds light on Urmila and keeps her at the forefront, representing her strength, consciousness and wisdom. She undercovers a profound understanding of dharma through Urmila, in Sita's Sister. Like other major characters of Ramayana, Urmila devotes her life to fulfilling her duties, sacrificing her personal desires. She is the sister of Sita, daughter of King Janak and has a strong bond with her cousins, Mandavi and Shrutakriti. As a sister, she always supports Sita and is aware of her emotions. When Sita is anxious about her 'swayamvar', thinking about whom she is going to marry, whether she will get the person whom she loves or marry a stranger, Urmila comforts her at that time making Sita exclaims, "O Urmi, what will I do without you?" ... "You have an answer for everything..." (Kané 23). Sita is the adopted daughter of King Janak, whereas Urmila is his rightful daughter, but Sita is hailed as Janaki, the daughter of King Janak and adored unconditionally by her parents. Though Sita feels embarrassed because of excessive love as an adopted daughter, Urmila never treats her unfairly. Although she was Sita's younger sister, she performed her duty as an elder sister, as Kané reflects on the role of Urmila "...strong, fiercely protective like a tigress shielding her from everything, guiding her, helping her, consoling her" (25). Again, Urmila expresses her undivided love and adoration for Sita at the time of her departure into exile. Sita leaves her home as well as the comfortable life at the palace and goes with her husband into exile for fourteen years, but Urmila's sacrifice seems more painful as she remains alone in the absence of her husband, holding her duty in Ayodhya. To quote Sita in Kavita Kané's narrative, "I might be the oldest but it was you on whom we relied for support and comfort" (120). In the same way, Urmila carries out her duty as a wife contributing to her husband's endeavours. Lakshman remains apologetic since he is not able to take her with him, referring to his duty towards Ram and Sita to protect them in the forest which is not a safe place. Though the separation is painful, Lakshman remains firm in his decisions. He can make the hardest decision only because of Urmila's support and strength. Sita explicates, "... do you know why Lakshman could take such a hard decision? Because he has faith in you. I think he believes in you more than in himself. You are his tower of strength..." (119-120). Urmila's fidelity to her husband shows her duty as a wife which complies with her sacrifices, though it was painful, heartbreaking and unbearable. Despite differences in their decisions, there are no grievances against each other. When Lakshman is unable to take care of his mother during his absence, Urmila takes responsibility on his behalf. Even Urmila requests Sita and Ram not to discuss her, as it can create distractions in Lakshman's actions in following his dharma. Sita, accomplishing Urmila's self-sacrifice, utters with great admiration, "I bow to you, sister, for your vanvaas, your exile here in the palace shall be way harder than mine in the forest" (Kané 120).

Urmila plays a very crucial role in holding the family together in their toughest times, notably when the family gets the shocking news of three dearest ones' exile from Ayodhya for fourteen years. Lakshman remains unmoved in his duty and is able to depart with his family, leaving them devastated because of Urmila's courage and strong assurance. Conveying his gratitude to Urmila, Ram acknowledges her

sacrifice and strength. He feels regretful as he has deprived her of her husband's companionship. Expressing his thankfulness, he exclaims, "I am deeply grateful Urmila... I leave my old parents under your care, and I know they could not have been in kinder hands. You are a remarkable woman—extraordinarily brave and strong" (120). After their exile, when King Dasarath dies because of the separation from his sons, she remains the backbone of her family which mourns the death of the dead king, maintaining stability and peace. Despite her own grief and pain, she provides great emotional support as well as comfort to her family. While discussing with her regarding family matters, Laxman admits her contribution to reshaping the family and confesses, "I got to know everything from Bharat and Shatrughna and Ma. How you stood brave through the tragedies – strong, stable and dependable like a fierce lioness protecting her family" (166).

Fulfilling several duties and responsibilities, Urmila ensures peace and stability in the kingdom too and becomes the guardian of Ayodhya during Ram's exile. King Dasarath announces Bharat as the king of Ayodhya and sends Ram into exile. Learning all this, Bharat feels betrayed and guilty as well as blames himself for Ram's exile and his father's death. At that time, Urmila urges Mandavi, the wife of Bharat, to support her husband. During lawlessness and disorder in Ayodhya, Urmila manages the state affairs to function properly with the assistance of Shatrughna. Kané has rightly portrayed, "Fourteen days thus went by and Shatrughna helped Urmila with the affairs of the state. On the last day of the king's mourning, Urmila called the administrators and the gurus in the assembly hall" (157).

Lastly, Urmila comes out as an extraordinary scholar balancing her multifaceted duties. Despite Lakshman's absence, personal grief and sacrifices, she discovers herself. She gets an invitation from her father to a philosophical conference who requests her to attend and acknowledges her as a scholar. Urmila, being a sincere and curious student, learns all the Vedas and Upanishads gracefully. King Janak was the father of four daughters (Sita and Urmila, Mandavi and Shrutakirti) who never yearned for any son. Even he feels lucky to have his four daughters. Urmila, not only a scholar but also a daughter, proves herself and exceeds her father's expectations as she struggles to gain her parents' love and adoration. As Kavita Kané articulates,

He was requesting her to attend the annual symposium in her own right as an acclaimed scholar. She had long been under the tutelage of Vasistha and the other gurus of Ayodhya's royal court—Guru Vaamdeva, Markandeya, Katyayan as well as the reluctant Kashyap, who grudgingly acknowledge her brilliant, questioning mind. (202)

Through her contribution to wisdom and mastery of knowledge, she performed both her duties to herself as well as to her father.

Conclusion

The study concludes with Kavita Kané's brilliant representation of Urmila's journey, struggles and sacrifices in the narrative, unfolding her multifaceted dimensions of dharma and moral responsibility as a sister, wife, daughter-in-law, guardian, daughter, and intellectual. Though she faces unexpected challenges, she remains calm and unperturbed, cherishing her duty. As a sister, she supports her sisters when they need her; she empowers her husband when he has to make the hardest decision to fulfil his duty. At the same time, she united the scattered and desolated family together. With her courage and strength, she administers the stately affairs of Ayodhya, being the protector and guardian of the nation. Kané has efficiently pointed out,

She was Urmila, not just the woman of passion as her name so defined but one whose heart and mind had come together in intellectual and spiritual enrichment. In this long quest, she had delimited her persona both as a daughter and a wife suitably, not just complementing but supplementing both the male figures in her life. (205)

Modern Indian women can take inspiration from Urmila's duties and actions, regarding their roles in family, societal aspects and personal realms. The way she balances her emotional upheavals and obstacles, being committed to her dharma and moral responsibility, shows her patience and indomitable strength which are the sources of inspiration to overcome the challenges in our contemporary society to build a peaceful and progressive nation. Through her journey of self-actualization, she teaches that one's commitment to dharma (righteousness) is essential not only in achieving higher goals but for the well-being of our society.

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