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Urmila: An Epitome of Female Resilience in the context of Mythology

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Abstract

Indian Mythology is re-sounding with the echoes of many women characters, which have proved themselves as the epitome of resilience questioning and fighting against the patriarchal society and its norms. Urmila has been such a character, who can be studied in that light. She has always remained quite away from the eyes of all who have read Ramayana. In Ramayana she is a character who has been undermined, and has not been given due respect that she should have got. Under the major garb of illuminating characters, she has been taken very lightly, but her stance can very well be recognized if we delve deep into the study of her life and character. Urmila is the second daughter of Rajarshi Maharaja Janaka and Maharani Sunaina. She is the wife of Laxman, the younger brother of Rama. In Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*, we can get a clear picture of her, how she has questioned the so called social norms of the then patriarchal society and stood as voice for women. Urmila can be compared with Draupadi, Sita or Damayanti, but they have come to the limelight for their stance in their context, where perhaps Urmila has been under wraps though she is no way less than them. In every way she is as par with other mythical female characters of her time but she has not been given her due respect. She has proved herself as an obedient daughter, loving wife, dutiful daughter-in-law, respectful women, and humble royal princess. She had a volcano of questions but never tried to hurt anyone. Lived 14 years away from her husband like exile but never regretted and en-shouldered all her royal responsibilities. Such a legendary woman is unique in every way. She is the embodiment all heavenly qualities that we seek in a woman. According to one of the legends, in our Jagannath culture goddess Bimala is worshiped and before offering Prasad to the lord, it is offered to the goddess then it becomes Mahaprasad. She is none other than Urmila, who has been blessed by Lord Rama in Tretaya Yug after returning from 14 years of Vanbas, as she has sacrificed her luxuries and lived a life of sanyasi for Laxman, which made possible for Laxman to kill Irdrajit, the son Ravan, who could only be killed by anyone who had not slept and fasted for 14 years.

Keywords: Ramayana, Resilience, Mythology, Patriarchal, Norms, Sacrifice

Introduction

Review of literature

Ramayana has been retold time and again by many writers but the character of Urmila, much has not been discussed much which is a matter of conjuncture. Apart from few, Kavita Kane in her *Sita's Sister* has tried to make an attempt to bring this character to limelight. But instead of naming her book Urmila, she has named Sita's Sister. In this light we can see that Urmila has been remembered in the context of Sita. Presently some researchers have tried to bring this character to light, by highlighting her contribution in Ramayana apart from Rama-Sita's story.

Research Gap

In the mythology of Ramayana, Urmila is a character who has not been given her due justice. Due to the illuminating character of Rama and Sita, this (Urmila) minor character that has played a major role in the killing of Meghanada, has remain under wraps. The character of Sita has over-shadowed her. The woes and suffering of Sita has curtained estranged Urmila's sacrificed. Her 14 years of separation from her husband, Laxman has become an exile that many have not been taken into consideration by many. But her relentless service to the family in absence of her husband, her voice for the cause of women, her self-sacrifice must be enlightened.

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But from this point of view much has not been discussed which is a fundamental issue. In Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*, instead of Urmila, she has entitled the book as *Sita's sister*; which has once again displays that Urmila has been portrayed in the context of Sita rather than by her individual stance.

Research Question

- Why Laxman has not accompanied Urmila in his exile?
- Why Urmila has not envied Sita?
- Why she had en-shouldered the family responsibilities?
- Did Lord Rama consider her contribution?

Research objective

- Urmila as a universal voice of women.
- Urmila as an epitome of self-sacrifice.
- Urmila as an estranged woman.
- Urmila as a victim of patriarchy.

Hypothesis

Urmila was one of most the potential characters of Ramayana. She is the epitome of sacrifice. She is instrumental for Laxmana's victory. She is the voice of women the then patriarchal society. Her dedication and contribution is example to many. She can be a voice to many in the present society who question the age old traditional society that moulds women for the whims of men without the consent of their consort. Her life is the example of female resilience. According to mythology, the deeds of our present birth result in the next. Urmila too got blessed for her sacrifice and was glorified by Lord Jagannath who is the avatar of lord Rama of Tretaya Yuga according to the Jagannath culture.

Introduction

Woman has been the best creation of God. While creating the universe, the God must have thought he is tired enough, so he created women, from thence, she created everything. Since then, we cannot think of the society without woman. There are innumerable examples of women in mythology, folk-lore, literatures and history. From the age of Veda till today the voice of women has been echoing. Ramayana and Mahabharata are two excellent epics that depict their stance. Since the inception of the civilization, it can be visualized how crucial women are in the society, not only let say biologically or socially but also for cultural purpose. Women have been cited in mythologies, Veda-Purans and holy books since the era of Rishis and Munis, and they have been assigned dominant positions. Because of their explicit contributions, the religious texts and epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata have been tremendously appreciated and they have become the most sacredly read and loved by many.

Women in Indian society

Women were assigned the throne of the goddess in the Indian society from time since immemorial, however the view has changed a little in the present time. They are being ill-treated for many years and used as object to full-fill the mundane wishes of men. They have been subject to the whims of the patriarchal Indian society. Let it be Draupadi, Damayanti, Radha or Urmila. They had to suffer the patriarchal decision of their counterpart. They had become

the grass beneath the rock- who lived death like life, still survived to prove the importance of their existence.

Urmila has been such a character who suffered the fate of the most of the women in our society. Urmila is the most under-rated character because of our mind set and ignorance. Ramayana for us has always been the story that revolves around Ram and Sita and their divine births, their lives, their marriage, exile, Ram's war against Ravana to rescue Sita from his clings, their way back to Ayodhya, Ram's coronation, banishing pregnant Sita etc. Lakshman is better remembered as he has been the shadow of his elder brother Rama, being in his brother's side in any circumstance. But Urmila is ignored just like any other minor characters though her life and her self-sacrifice have been instrumental for the cause of Rama and Ramayana. When her husband prepares to go on exile with his brother, she stays back at the palace and is on an exile too with the others.

Role of Urmila in the Ramayana

Urmila, was the second daughter of king Janaka, beloved sister of Sita and devoted wife of Lakshman, the most loyal, wise, dedicated and responsible royal princess. She was expected to remain in the palace of Ayodhya and take the responsibility of the in-laws as her husband, Laxman would be away with lord Rama in the forest for long fourteen years. By all standards, Urmila may be a minor character in Valmiki's Ramayana but her contribution cannot be overlooked. If we take Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*, we can very well take into account her role. Practically she could be the eldest daughter of the king as she is born out of Sunaina and the king Janaka. She has been one of the most sensible and strong. Her name Urmila is very suggestive, it is of Sanskrit origin, which could be divided as '*Ur*' means waves, and '*Mila*', means to unite. It means 'waves of passion that unite a couple'. It can also mean 'humble' or 'enchantress'. What Kane says- "Urmila- meaning the enchantress, the meeting of the hearts. Urmila, meaning, waves of passion..."

In some of the books, Urmila has been called as 'the Heroine of Ramayana' for her prolific contribution to the epic of Ramayana written by sage Valmiki. Her unconditional love for her husband and his family can be a great example for then and times to come.

Urmila's resolution is praiseworthy. She devoted her life and time for the noble cause. According to Valmiki's Ramayana, Urmila had decided to go with Laxman along with Rama and Sita, when they were leaving Ayodhya for fourteen years as an exile. But Laxman directed Urmila to remain in the palace and in her absence to take care of the kingdom and her in-laws until Bharat comes.

"Laxman was going out of his own volition with Rama, he had not been banished. He was going with his brother as his soldier, his bodyguard, and a soldier does not take his wife to the battlefield. Urmila knew she had to harden her heart for herself- and for him.

There was no time for anger and rancor, for pain and regret, for hatred or forgiveness. All she could do was love him.

'I love you' she breathed softly. 'Go.'

'... Go Lakshman. I shall not stop you...' she choked"

Laxman was reluctant to take Urmila as he would be busy in the forest, serving his lord, and there would be no time to devote her; as he didn't want to get distracted as he knew she was very beautiful, and forest in comparison to the

palace is unsafe for such a beautiful lady. Reluctantly, Urmila had to obey her husband for she didn't want her husband to do any negligence in his service to lord Rama.

Urmila is one of the strongest ladies who could be entrusted a mammoth responsibility of the whole family that has been afflicted by the inner enemy. While going to the forest Laxman could very well realize that they are leaving a palace where there are- one heart-broken ailing king and four desperate queens and one wicked Manthara; however she had to protect all being strong and resolute.

"you are very strong-the strongest women I have ever known. You are Urmila, one where the hearts meet..." "...It is you who binds all the sisters together with your patience and wisdom. Please do it for me now. Look after my broken family.' ...this is so difficult for us. Make it easier for me, Mila. Make it easier... you are my strength but also my weakness"

Here Laxman too believed that Urmila is the strongest of all the sisters of king Janaka. But she could be the weakness of Laxman as she is very beautiful for which he might get distracted and would not be possible to discharge his duties for his brother Rama. Like any loving wife Urmila exhibits her emotional stance, she questions which could be the voice of any modern day loving and caring wife-

"But what about my future? ... I don't have any one but you! Oh Laxman, I need you! ... You either take me to the forest or don't go there, stay back for me... you cannot stay back for me because your brother is more precious than your wife...Then, let me hate you for that. Let me hate you for that. Let me hate you for the forth coming fourteen years-that endless chasm you have driven between us. Let me hate you as passionately as I loved you. Now, go!"

Suddenly she hardens herself; she could choke the gust of her emotion, she makes-up her mind, she says this not out of love but too much in love-

"... look at me Laxman! ... I am a princess, born in leisure and luxury. Would you expect to spurn this to chase you in your misguided, wild adventure with your brother eating berries, walking bare foot and cooking meals the two of you?"

She is very protective for all the sisters, she always defend Sita from all others. She tried to protect her from the malicious Manthara, who always had an eye on Sita and never let a chance to make her look down upon. While leaving for the forest, when Sita was asked by queen Kaikei to change her royal robes, she stood for Sita-

"Not that the change of dress would make any difference to Sita- she would still be Rama's queen in the forest... what difference would it make to her what she wears in the forest while we live in the comfort of the palace, Mother! ... Irrespective of what she wears, she will be at her husband's side, suffering the discomfort with a smile.... Who do we have... four lonely women and who do you have? Your old faithful, Manthara, your maid"

Urmila is not only a loving wife but also a caring and dutiful lady; she expresses her deep sense of love and care for her husband-

"These fourteen years are going to be a test for each of us. The pain and suffering is inevitable, but it will be valuable. It teaches us a lot in many ways... and, Sita, please I have a request. Don't ever discuss me with Laxman; don't do anything that would remind him of me... That is my sincere appeal to both you and Rama."

At this, Sita bowed before Urmila for her devotion and pati-bhakti that could epitomize her as the idle lady of her time and ages to come.

This displays the deep concern of a loving wife and responsible lady.

Contribution of Urmila in defeating Meghanada

In another instance, when Laxman was in forest with Rama and Sita, on the very first night in the forest, when Rama and Sita went to sleep, leaving Laxman awake to guard them, Goddess Nidradevi (the Goddess of sleep) appeared before Lakshman. He begged the goddess to spare him for 14 years as he had been assigned to serve his brother, and he could carry out his dharma (responsibility) and service relentlessly. The Goddess Nidradevi was pleased by his devotion to lord Rama and agreed to spare him for the fourteen years of his exile. But, according to the law of the nature, someone else had to enjoy that amount of sleep of Laxman. Finding a way out he sent the goddess to Urmila who too wanted to contribute her for the noble cause of her husband. When Goddess Nidradevi narrated everything to Urmila she heart-fully replied, "Give me my husband's share of sleep for the next 14 years so that he can constantly stay awake without any stress or fatigue." In this way Urmila did her duty as the dedicated and devoted wife of her husband.

Meghanada, the mighty son of Ravana was performing Yagna to become *Ajaya* which means the undefeated one. In fact, he had attained the boon that he could only be defeated by the one who had not slept for years along. In that very sense Laxman was only eligible to do so; his relentless service without food and sleep made him the one who could kill Meghanada in the war. In this context, without the contribution of Urmila, it was next to impossible for Lakshman to defeat Meghanada.

Being very pleased by Lakshman's relentless devotion Rama and Sita, the goddess Nidradevi appeared before him and told him to ask for any boon but considering the devotion of his wife, Lakshman said he had all he needed and the goddess would rather bless his wife instead. The goddess Nidradevi then went to Urmila in Ayodhya and told Urmila everything, she instead asked the only boon that she wanted her husband would remain steadfast in his path to serve his brother with full dedication and he would never be reminded of her in his years of exile.

Urmila and her Responsibilities

With the unfortunate death of King Dashratha, Ayodhya became kingless, as Bharat and Satrugan were at their maternal uncle's house, all were panicked as anarchy would break out and there might be a chance of external invasion also. At that time, excluding Urmila, all others were emotionally fragile soaked in the grief of the king's death; but she had been headstrong and logical.

"we are emotionally vulnerable right now but let us not be unprepared for war. Keep the army ready. And it is just a matter of another day or two..... Bharat would be returning... once he has performed the last rites, he can take charge but yes, till then let's not get weak or be caught unawares"

And Guru Vasishta, he had deep faith in her. He knew very well that it was Urmila who could be entrusted the royal responsibility this vast empire till Bharat arrived -

“the other queen are in deep mourning and the only person we can now turn to is Urmila, the learned daughter of learned Janaka. And as the royal daughter in law, she should know the state of affairs especially when none of the sons and their wives are present in Ayodhya...” he added pointedly.”

Not only Guru Vasishtha, all other noble ministers and learned men of the royal court of Ayodhya - Jabali, Maharishi Markandeya, Rishi Gautam, Maharishi Kashyap and Katyayana turned to Urmila. Sumantra said softly-

“O daughter of the wise Rajarshi Janaka, please look into the matters of the royal court for we do not want to be accused of power play or otherwise... We shall let you know of all that is happening- and is expected- in the given situation.”

Apart from her divinity, Urmila was an opportunist. Being away from her husband, she could very well use her time wisely. In other versions of Ramayana, Urmila has been depicted as a great scholar and a prolific painter. She not only spent the years of exile in the palace away from her husband with her mother-in-laws, but also painted a splendid picture of Rama's wedding to Sita. In this way the long fourteen years of slumber is a symbolic representation of a married woman without her husband is supposed to sink into. She spent her fourteen years as if she was in sleep, without any longing or regret for not being with her husband.

Urmila a voice for Women Segment

Where we can see the soft and enduring aspect of a lady, side by side we can also have a glimpse of the empowering aspect of women in Urmila. After returning of Bharat, When she accompanies others to the forest of Chitrakoot to convince and bring back Rama, Sita and Laxman we see how being the voice of the women segment of the society, she questions the patriarchy. When Rama refused to return and convinced Bharat to rule Ayodhya for 14 years as gift of him, Bharat too agreed to rule the throne by keeping the sandal of Rama on the throne as an epitome of Rama, and for these 14 years, Bharat too shall do penance as a hermit on the banks of river Sarayu at Nandigram; Urmila was the one who raised her voice, as like she, Mandavi was going to suffer the sorry fate being away from her husband too. She questions the male dominated society, which takes decision without considering the ill-fitting results on their female counterparts. Here we are reminded of Draupadi, who too had suffered the same at the game of dice.

“Urmila felt a fury she had never experienced before... ‘So be it, Bharat, like your brothers, Rama and Laxman, you too shall live a life of an ascetic, free from the bond of love and worldly care. Who cares whatever happens to your wife and your family? ... Today in this room, we have talked about all sorts of dharma- of the father and the sons, of the king and the princes, of the Brahmins and the Kshatriya, even of the wife for her husband. But is there is no dharma of the husband for his wife? No dharma of the son for his mother? Is it always about the father, sons and brothers?’”

Now this is a question that chiseled the patriarchy and all the learned gurus who were present thence were shaken. Guru Kashyap furiously interrupted

‘Princess, how dare you speak such outrageous words? ... Do you think this is your father Janak's court that encourages free thinking women like that philosopher Gargi

to debate and argue shamelessly! This is not so! This is the assembly of the great minds of Ayodhya!’

Urmila looked back at him unflinchingly and retorted-

‘I am not doubting the great minds, Gurudev; I as the daughter-in-law of the famous Raghu dynasty of the Ikshvaku race- and not merely as the daughter as the king of Janaka- ask a very simple question. What is the dharma of the man for his wife, the dharma of a man for his mother? Please give me an answer.’

Suddenly Urmila becomes a wise lady and talks intelligently and draws a logical argument about the state of affairs. This shows another facet of her personality; when time comes she too can challenge this male-centered society, she too had a great knowledge of the state of affairs- ‘we are talking about affairs of the state where personal relationships are not taken into consideration... then was it not personal when king Dashratha listened to his wife's wishes and stopped the coronation ceremony of Rama and banished him on a fourteen year old exile? Wasn't personal it personal when queen Kaikei asked her son to be made king instead of Rama? ... It's about the father, the brother, the sons; but pray what about the mothers, the wives? But yes, it is there dharma to follow their husbands' decisions and duties. ... This current catastrophe is not an act of God, it is the act of one women! ... All I am asking is that does the man have no dharma for his wife? Or his mother? ... It happened with you as well, Sita, and it has happened again. It is Mandavi this time. Why Sita? ... I ask again and again- does the man have no duties toward his wife and his mother?’

Urmila's this stance universalize the women's woes of ages along.

From the above discussion we find that Urmila, who was once considered as a shadowed character of Ramayana, is more a vibrant female figure. Her voice, her contribution, responsibility, her stance and question to the male-dominating society is no way lesser than her male counterpart and she can very well be called an epitome of female resilience. She is the torch-bearer of the women class of the present society.

Conclusion

We can conclude the whole discussion in the light of a legend that glorified the sacrifice of Urmila and has immortalized her for times to come elevating her to become a goddess. The legend goes like this-

As all know that until the 'Prasad', which is cooked in the temple of Lord Jagannath is not offered to Goddess Bimala it cannot become 'Mahaprasad.' It is in Tretayuga, that after killing Ravana the king of Lanka, Rama, Laxman and Sita when returned to Ayodhya, all were rejoicing of the heroic deeds, Urmila was listening patiently. She was happy too for Laxman who was instrumental in killing of Meghanada. When there was a meeting in the royal palace of Ayodhya to know the reality behind the matter of Meghanada's defeat, Lord Rama was overwhelmed and pleased with the supreme sacrifice, dedication and devotion of Laxman and exclaimed that Laxman's vairagya (renunciation) is at par excellence. Then he appreciated the supreme-sacrifice of Urmila, as without her contribution, Laxman could not have killed Meghanada. Rama was extremely pleased and asked Urmila to ask for any boon she desired. Then humble Urmila with folded hand asked if wanted he could grant her a boon that in coming ages or

yuga, in his next avatar, there would be no temple of her or she would be worshipped; rather she would likely to become an incense stick and spread her fragrance at the lotus feet of the Lord as 'Naivedya' for ages to come

By this Lord Rama was so overwhelmed with such devotion of Urmila that, he granted the boon that in the coming age of Kali, while he would be worshiped at Puri, goddess Laxmi would not be worshipped at his side, rather Laxman would be his elder brother and she would become 'Mahaprasad' and would spread her divine flavor and fragrance and shall be worshiped. Any 'Prasad' which would be offered to me would first be offered to you as Bimala and then it would become Mahaprasad, until then it would not be termed as divine. Devotees would worship you to attain 'Punya' and 'Moksh' and they would earn Punya. So, Tretaya Yuga's Urmila is the Bimala in Kali Yuga.

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