

**TRACING URMILA AS A PROPONENT OF RADICAL FEMINISM IN
KAVITA KANE'S NOVEL *SITA'S SISTER***

1.S.Aishwarya

Research Scholar, PG& Research Department of English ,Vellalar College for Women
(Autonomous),Supervisor

2.Dr.P. Lalitha

Assistant Professor of English, PG& Research Department of English ,Vellalar College for
Women (Autonomous), Tamilnadu

Article Received: 28/06/2026

Article Accepted:30/07/2026

Published Online:31/07/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.07.455

Abstract:

Feminism is defined as a broad movement which advocates for freedom from sex-determined role and granting of same political, social and economic rights to women as the one granted to men. A feminist is the one who awakens the consciousness regarding the problems and needs of women. They display different interpretations about the images of women projected in the male chauvinist society. Many feminist writers have proposed various theories on feminism from the perspective of women of all ages. They have campaigned for equality and freedom from sex-oriented role. The goal of feminism is to eliminate the discrimination and oppression imposed on women by the patriarchal society and to secure freedom to decide their own life and to express themselves freely. Radical feminist theory is chiefly concerned with the issues of stereotyping a woman on the aspects of social norms and gender discrimination and it has analysed the roots of oppression that are deeply buried in our gender system of patriarchy. Mytho-fiction writer Kavita Kane, in her heart-wrenching novel *Sita's Sister*, depicts how patriarchy has been prevailing in society that denies the basic rights of women. Urmila, the epic heroine and the protagonist of the novel *Sita's Sister* rebels against the injustices which have been inflicted on women in the palace in the name of patriarchal customs and she has even stood up for her sister's rights and questions the dharma of a man towards his wife.

Keywords: radical feminism, patriarchy, oppression, demand for equality, domination.

Introduction

Feminists believe that in order to understand and uplift women's position in this world, the system of patriarchy must be scrutinised, since the roots of women's oppression are deeply buried in the gender system of patriarchy. Radical feminist theory has been

originated in the year 1960s as a part of the second-wave feminist movement. This theory justifies that patriarchy is the root cause of women's oppression and inequality between men and women. The goal is to eliminate male supremacy in the society and dismantle the existence of patriarchal customs and norms. This movement calls for a radical re-ordering of society that leads to eradication of male dominance in all political, social and economic contexts. Radical Feminists have been combating against discrimination and suppression of women based on caste, race, sexuality, ethnicity and struggles to promote gender equality. Radical feminist theory is chiefly concerned with the issues arising out of pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment, woman battering and stereotyping them. These feminists had emerged with strategies like celibacy, lesbianism and equal social laws for all genders that will pave way for women's liberation from patriarchal societal norms. They are against heterosexuality and the traditional roles of women as faithful housewives and child-bearing machines.

The pioneer of Radical Feminism

Kate Millet, the mother of Radical feminist theory in her well renowned work *Sexual Politics*, advocates that this male chauvinist society actually created all the cultural norms for women as it is a male-centric world. She even quotes Freud's Psycho-sexual theory that justifies there is no difference between the sexes at the birth and it is believed that the human fetus is originally and physically female until the operation of androgen at the certain stage of gestation which causes those Y chromosomes to develop into males and later through the development only the differentiation in sexes is determined. Therefore, the social circumstance is the cause for the genesis of male and female culture and also the difference in their life experience.

The chief institution of the patriarchy is family. The cooperation of family, society and state are interrelated which have laid the foundation and the beginning for all religious and cultural norms. It can be evident in the following passage, "under patriarchy, the female did not herself develop symbols by which she is described. As both the primitive and the civilised worlds are male centred, the ideas which shaped the culture with regard to the female were also of male design. The image of women, as we know, is an image created by men and fashioned so as to suit their needs. Yet this notion itself presupposes that patriarchy has already been established and the male has already set himself as the human norm, the subject and referent to which the female is "other" or alien" (*Sexual Politics* 46). Therefore, patriarchal system is an age-old custom resting on and vesting in the subordination and exploitation of a woman and it must be eradicated from the society.

Radical Feminism

Radical feminism is an attempt to create a new conceptual model for examining the different forms of oppression. It concludes that women's subjection to men is caused by childbearing through which women become dependent on men for survival. Therefore, they lose their freedom to design their own life. Mythic fiction writer Kavita Kane, in her excruciating novel *Sita's Sister* delineates how patriarchy has been prevailing in society that

denies the basic rights of women. Urmila, the protagonist of the novel *Sita's Sister* battles against the injustices inflicted on women in the palace in the name of patriarchal customs and she has even stood up for her sister's rights and questions the dharma of a man towards his wife.

Sisterhood

Among the four daughters of great King Seeradhvaj Janak and queen Sunaina of Mithila, Urmila is known for reciting the Vedas and the Upanishads. She has been an expert in politics, music, art and literature and always dreams of seeking more knowledge than Sita, the elder and the adoptive daughter of Janak who has been always known for her obedience whereas Mandavi and Shrutakirti are the daughters of widowed King Kushadhvaj, the brother of King Janak. The cloistered princesses usually accompany their father to all the conferences and the religious seminars across the country to experience the world that no princess is ever allowed to visit. For Urmila, marriage does not hold much interest to her. She has been born a year later to her parents after their adoption of Sita from furrows of Earth. The four sisters had been sharing a very strong bond of sisterhood that always binds them together. Urmila is often worried about her sisters and especially Sita, who is the gentlest, kindest, sweetest person in the palace. She has been the pillar of strength for Sita who feels a lot braver when she accompanies her sister Urmila. When Sita has confessed her feeling for Ram and feels dreaded to marry a stranger in swayamvar, it is Urmila who consoles her that he is the prince of Ayodhya and the disciple of great rishi Vishwamitra who has accompanied the great rishi to Mithila.

Patriarchal customs of Indian society

According to our Indian tradition, when a woman gets married, she has to leave her parents to start a new life in her in-law's home. These patriarchal customs enforce a woman to suffer the agony and alienation from one's family. This is evident when Sita expresses her despair for leaving her lovable sister Urmila who has been her lifeline and her soul mate through following phrase, "O Urmi, what will I do without you? You have an answer for everything" (*Sita's Sister* 22). In India, swayamvar is considered as a traditional marriage ritual where a woman has been provided with an opportunity to choose her husband according to her wishes. Yet these ceremonial customs have been structured by the male chauvinist society to fit the patriarchal norms and it is essentially a ritual where the woman will be gifted in marriage and it ultimately leads to many conflicts and violence often placing the bride's family in a precarious situation. Even though the princess is allowed to some degree of preferences, her autonomy is restricted as her father holds the power to manage and determine the eligibility of the grooms.

Therefore, in *Sita's Sister*, King Janak, being a king and the head of a household, determines the condition for his daughter's marriage. He is the one who has affirmed that the Lord Shiva's bow is the coveted prize of Sita's Swayamvar and one who strings this bow shall marry his elder daughter Sita. Even in swayamvar, women are not free to choose their husband. During this ritual, King Ravan of Lanka too has participated in lifting the mighty

Shiva's bow but he cannot nudge it and at last he has accepted his defeat. But out of his ambitiousness and fury to obtain Sita, he questions King Janak and has also mocked the princess with sarcastic comments. Ravan's demeanour enrages Urmila and she decides to battle the impending predicament to protect herself and her sisters from these antagonistic suitors.

This disruption in the assembly hall infuriates the prince Lakshman of Ayodhya, and he questions the assembly members about their imprudent behaviour of humiliating the princess and he requests to offer a chance to his elder brother Ram for displaying his skills in archery. Thus, the sequences of events lead to Ram's victory in the snapping of Lord Shiva's Bow and the festive occasion of garlanding Sita among the spectators. Meanwhile Urmila has fallen in love with Lakshman but when she expresses her mad love and her persistence to marry him, he has deliberately rejected her proposal by stating his loyalty to serve his brother Ram. But Urmila is ready to sacrifice her possessiveness over him and assures him that she will never come across his loyalty towards his brother.

Meantime King Dashrath has requested other marriage alliance to select other princesses for his sons Bharat and Shatrughna. Along with Ram-Sita's marriage, Lakshman marries Urmila, Bharat and Shatrughna marry Mandavi and Shrutakirti respectively. After the Swayamvar of four princesses with the four princes of Ayodhya, the princesses visited their mothers-in-law's home where Sita is not warmly welcomed and treated with bias by the queen Kaikeyi, the third wife of King Dashrath for having born an orphan and decided to find another bride for Ram. This iniquitous discrimination and favoritism of Kaikeyi aggravate Urmila's anger to defend and assert right for her sister. Thus, Sita is insulted and discriminated for being an adoptive daughter of King Janak. Urmila also expresses her uncertainty about Ram's decision as it is their family tradition of taking another wife. Even her father-in-law, King Dashrath has married several times before on the pretext of begetting a child. This above statement is evident that in patriarchy, the male holds the power and the society has allowed polygamy to beget children. Thus, Urmila upholds the true identity of a feminist who questions against the tyranny that happens in the name of autocracy.

Polygamy-A threat to woman's right

Due to men's ambitious nature, their polygamy has often resulted in inequality among wives. Queen Kausalya always considers Kaikeyi as her rival who has usurped her power and position to sustain a beloved domain in King Dashrath's heart. King Dashrath's obsession with Kaikeyi has ignited a raging fire of hatred and ambition in Kausalya and that prompts her to crown her son Ram as the King of Ayodhya. Her disdain for Kaikeyi is obvious through the shrill cry of her pet parrot which always cries in shrill tone with a phrase 'Fie the enemy'. Thus, Kausalya has never wanted to forgive Kaikeyi for distancing her husband from other wives. Meanwhile Kaikeyi has been cunningly manipulated by Manthara, the handmaid who impels her to solicit her husband King Dashrath to acquiesce to the two boons which he has granted to her while rescuing him during the battle against

Sambarasura, but king Dashrath curses her and disowns her with blasphemous words. Thus, in patriarchy, whenever a woman questions her husband and demands her rights, she is cursed and disowned by her own husband.

Later, with her unrelenting passion to crown her son Bharat, Kaikeyi induces the King to assent to her two boons by asking him to disown his son Ram and orders him to be exiled to Dandaka Forest for fourteen years. Thus, Ram willingly confesses his decision of leaving Ayodhya and deserts his wife Sita to abide his father's wish. But Sita battles for her rights by stating the dharma and the rights of a husband and a wife who must be obliged to share both misfortunes and happiness. She has begged Ram, never to abandon her and even Lakshman is willing to accompany his brother and never hesitant to desert his wife Urmila. Thus, patriarchal society in the name of cultural norms and dharma enforced a woman to sacrifice her life for the self-conceit of a man. But when Sita decides to follow the dharma of a wife trailing her husband to forest, no one stops her and this infuriates Urmila. Women are confine to the traditional notions that they must accompany their husbands in all their trails.

Indian women are brought up by the essential traits of wife from their childhood that she must be faithful and subservient to their husbands. Atlast Urmila has undergone the pain of separation when she is completely forsaken both by her husband and her sister. Her husband has rejected her and betrayed her for his obligation towards his brother Ram. Lakshman's following words have created havoc in Urmila's heart, "Look after my broken family and let me go to the forest for I am not sure if I would be able to protect you as your husband. "I fail as a good husband, who is leaving behind his wife. O Urmila, will the world ever know of your inner suffering, your divine sacrifice? But my heart, full of shame and gratitude, knows what you are doing in silence, through brave smile, your generous heart" (*Sita's Sister* 145). Thus, a man can easily desert one's wife as these patriarchal norms are designed for their amenity and the society never questions the filial duty of a husband towards one's wife. Women suffer from alienation and emotional insecurity because of the sexual polarity that sustains in our patriarchal society.

Urmila-A proponent of radical feminism

When Bharat, the younger brother of Ram has returned to Ayodhya and discovers about the banishment of his dear brother, he curses and disowns his own mother, Kaikeyi. When all his efforts to redeem Ram from his banishment is thwarted, Bharat decides to retire himself to solitary confinement at Nandigram to rule as a Ram's deputy without thinking of his wife Mandavi. He is amendable to desert his own wife to execute his brotherly devotion. Bharat's obstinate nature infuriates Urmila's wrath and she is worried that her sister Mandavi too is going to suffer the same fate as her. With flames flashing in her eyes, Urmila questions Bharat and others in Chitrakoot about the dharma of a husband towards his wife. She expresses her outrage on behalf of all women through following words, "So be it, Bharat, like your brothers, Ram and Lakshman, 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? Is there 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? (*Sita's Sister* 219). In patriarchy, women must abide with the convictions stipulated in our conservative masculine society where they cannot express their discontentment.

On hearing Urmila's vehement interrogation, Guru Kashyap has reprimanded her severely by reminding her that it is not her father, Janak's court that encourages free thinking women philosopher like Gargi to debate and argue. He further suppresses her by stating that this is an assembly of the great minds of Ayodhya where men are free to decree and women must abide. Yet Urmila revolts against the injustice and battles for the rights of her sister, Mandavi. She further interrogates the patriarchal custom of not allowing the women to voice their grievances, and oppresses them to suffer the pain silently. Her vehement questions are as follows, "Why do men punish one's wife? What is their sin? Because it is a family tradition here to be silent when someone screams for justice. This royal family is famous for its justness when it comes to its people and the state but it is cruelest to its own family members. Justice here is not just blind-it is deaf and mute" (*Sita's Sister* 222).

The protagonist Urmila condemns all the men assembled in ashram of Chitrakoot hill for abandoning their beloved ones to discharge one's duty. She further questions their intention of marrying a woman if they can't honour their commitments to one's wife. When Urmila argues for the justness on behalf of women in palace, Lakshman stood there without uttering a single word of defense on behalf of his wife. Kate Millet, a feminist in her work *Sexual Politics* points out that every powerful circle in patriarchy is a men's group and their house is a fortress of patriarchal association and it is a preliterate society that strengthens only masculine communal experience. Due to male chauvinism, especially the rapacious decisions of men always lead to the sacrifice of a woman like Urmila, who decide to wait for the return of her husband in solitary confinement for fourteen long years. Urmila's sacrifice is evident in the following words, "You stay awake and alert all the while as you guard your brother and my sister in the forest. In exchange, I give you my rest, my ease, my sleep, my love" (*Sita's Sister* 224). After the departure of Lakshman, Urmila's hopeless future descends into darkness. Bharat's implausible action of renouncing his own mother impels Kaikeyi to lead a life in a self-imposed exile. Meanwhile Bharat's decision to leave for Nandigram disheartens his wife Mandavi and spurs her to lead a melancholic life shutting herself from the world outside.

Thus, all women characters in the great epic *The Ramayana* suffer endless agony because of irrational decisions of men to follow their own dharma. Mary Daly a radical feminist in her work, states that men drain the energy of women in a slow and steady way and extinguishing the fire within them. She also list out the variety of ways of patriarchal men who spooked women in her famous work *Gyn/Ecology: The Meta ethics of Radical*

Feminism(1978) as follows, “Women are spooked by patriarchal males in a variety of ways: through implicit messages of their institutions, through body languages, through silences and deceptive devices, their grammar, their education, their profession, their technology, their poressive and confusing fashions, customs, etiquette, humor and their sublime music”(*Gyn/ Ecology* 487).

Thus, whenever women fight against patriarchal oppression, they are never defended by the society and government laws. Thus, society’s traditional norms generally manipulate women to blame themselves and instigate them to accept it as their fate to suffer. Mandavi has expressed her grief that women are forced to acquiesce all the convictions imposed on them and eventually lead to the alteration in their perception and convinced them to adapt to this male-oriented society. She expresses her discontent in following words, “We are women, we are wives, we are creatures of circumstances. We have no control over. We do not have the power to change anything but ourselves” (*Sita’s Sister* 235)

Marriage - A patriarchal institution of oppression

Atlast the sisters regret marrying the princes as they have experienced only grief, isolation, humiliation and disappointment in their marriages. This is evident in Mandavi’s confession to her sister Urmila, “I would not have married. Ma was right- we sisters should have never married into this family! They have given us just grief, pain and humiliation. Sita is suffering in the forest, you and me are trapped in palace, left by our husbands” (*Sita’s Sister* 235). The above statement of victimised women proves the radical theory that marriage is a patriarchal institution of oppression that always results in deprivation of woman’s right. Even though women like Urmila have fought for their rights, they are defenseless as no one has stood for their demand of equality. The effect of patriarchy is evident in above phrase that women encounter inequality in their demand for rights. In spite of the fact that, Urmila is the princess of Mithila, she too has been treated in an unjust way of not getting basic right of a human being. But being a protagonist in nature she rebounds that in Mithila, women are taught to protest against injustice and encouraged to voice their opinion and their demand of rights.

Women always grow up with fear that men may desert them for the sake of another woman, and that leads them to suffer the pain of insecurity. Polygamy in patriarchy has been a curse for women who are forced to suffer fear, humiliation, the pain of rejection and insecurity. This is evident in Kaikeyi’s confession to Urmila, “When I realized the bitter truth- that he had married me just to have son, and nothing else. Then I grew up with the fear that men left their wives on the weakest pretext... and all these years I lived in the fear that I would lose the love of my husband -either to Kausalya or Sumitra” (*Sita’s Sister* 256). Even Canadian feminist Shulamith Firestone, in her work *The Dialect of Sex* (1970) states that women have been barred from culture, and exploited in their role of mother.

At the end of the chapters, Kane picturises the agonies of typical patriarchal wives, Urmila and Mandavi, who have lost their youthfulness by patiently waiting for the return of their husbands for fourteen long years. Mandavi's grievances are expressed in following verses, "It's wasted youth! The men have won their moral war, but what about us wives? Forced celibacy is not sublime; these books make better companions. They make you live in a world you wish, a world you want to belong to" (*Sita's Sister* 262). After the departure of Lakshman to forest, it is Urmila who binds her mother-in-law's family from being withered apart and saving it from a living hell. She is the peacemaker, who patches up the quarrels among Kausalya and Kaikeyi, diffusing their tempers, ironing out the difference of opinions and has made the palace a better place to live.

Urmila finds solace only in painting and by gathering knowledge under the tutelage of guru Vasishtha and other royal court gurus like Vaamdeva, Markandeya, Katyayan, Kashyap. She has gained mastery over Vedas, Upanishads and becomes a proficient debater on religion and philosophy and even receives an invitation as acclaimed scholar from her father King Janak to take part in forthcoming philosophical conference. King Janak is proud of her daughter Urmila who has also felt a glow of pride in achieving recognition as a scholar. In the conference, Urmila questions the rationality of religion and its influence on the religious truth.

Sulabha, a scholar in the philosophical conference held in Mithila has reprimanded the men assembled in the hall by stating that, "Men must look beyond woman's body. Since mind is the deity, the body just a temple to accommodate the mind. And it is the mind which is the great egalitarian truth, for it rest in both man and woman. There is no essential difference between them. Each sees the world differently not because of the gender but because of the mind" (*Sita's Sister* 268). Through the above statement of Sulabha, Kavita Kane acknowledges other feminist vision that women are equal in securing knowledge and it is their right to be educated and they can have their own dreams and vision. Urmila's feeling of desperateness about life is displayed in the following lines, "We are suffering in common-love and loss, separation and abstinence. Did marriage make people grow to be like each other?" (*Sita's Sister* 263).

After fourteen years of solitary confinement within the palace, Urmila eagerly awaits the return of Ram and Lakshman but Bharat's disclosure of Sita's abduction by Asura King Ravan has created turbulence in Urmila's mind. She vents out her anger on the elders in palace for allowing her sister to accompany her husband to this demon-infested forest. She questions them, "But didn't any of you see the risk for Sita? She was just a girl in love, a bride, who was vehement about going with her husband. You are our elders whose mere word of caution can become a command, why didn't any of you stop her?" (*Sita's Sister* 279). Even though Sita has been being an ideal wife practising the dharma of following her husband to forest without minding the danger, she still suffers the adversity of being abducted

and tortured by an asura and this proves that all these traditional patriarchal customs have brought only misery and women are projected as martyrs and at last they become a victim of this patriarchal society.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her renowned work depicts the societal status of women that, “The world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it, ruled it, and still dominate it today are men where women are inferior and dependent. Throughout history they have always been subordinate to men, and they have gained only what men have been willing to grant, they have taken nothing, they have only received” (*The Second Sex* 568). Both Urmila and Mandavi suffer and endure endless tribulations. They have undergone immeasurable pain and disillusionment and lead their life only in the land of everlasting hope. Alienation has molded Urmila into a *tapasvi*. She has also gained great spiritual understanding and intellectual attachment. Her pain, separation and her detachment too have paved way for her spiritual rebirth.

At the end of mythical tale, when Urmila and other sisters hear about Sita’s *agni pariksha* to prove her chastity to Ram and to the world, they are paralysed and their hearts are screaming for justice. Urmila reprimands the actions of Ram for granting permission for Sita’s *agnipariksha*. She scrutinizes Ram’s *dharma* of renouncing his subjects to follow his father’s command. She also retorts Ram’s behaviour for not defending Sita and considers his subject’s comments are paramount.

Conclusion

The fathomless love, sacrifices and tolerances of all women characters in great epic *The Ramayana* contributed to the victory of Ram and Lakshman in vanquishing the Asura dynasty and to perform their *Kshatriya dharma*. Thus, a woman’s life always wallows in yearning for love, security and possibility of attaining fulfillment and hopefulness. Canadian feminist Shulamith quotes that women are the power behind the throne. Male culture is built on the love of women, and at their expense. The exponent, Urmila in *Sita’s Sister* challenges the traditional gender role and existing social norms by voicing against the injustice imposed on her sisters. She is an ideal radical feminist who struggles to eliminate patriarchy and liberate royal women from traditional bounded restrictions. She advocates for radical reordering of family and societal structures. She is a paradigm of radical feminist who atlast becomes a well-known scholar advocating women freedom.

Work Cited

Kane, Kavita. *Sita’s Sister*. Rupa Publications, 2022.
Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. University of Illinois Press, 1970.

SP Publications

International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)

An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:8.337(SJIF)**

ISSN: 2581-8333|Volume 8, Issue-7(July);2026

Beauvoir, Simone de. The Second Sex. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Jonathan Cape, 1953.

Firestone, Shulamith. The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution. William Morrow and Company, 1970.

Daly, Mary. Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism. Beacon Press, 1978.