

**Voiceless Women in Mythology-An Analysis of Sita and Draupadi**

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**Abstract**

The position of women in two great epics of India called as ‘*Ramayana*’ and ‘*Mahabharata*’ is questionable through feministic point of view. These women are placed on the pedestal as goddess and are worshiped, but what about the question of choice, does these women wants to be worshiped is a big question which is answered in this Article. Do they want the position of goddess? The answer is ‘no’. Her identity is only someone’s daughter, wife, mother and not as an individual self. The treatment of her is not equal but rather they are subordinated in the patriarchal notions. Representation of Draupadi as the fiery woman, crossed the path that has been designed to be, lived with five husbands, raised her voice, opinion oriented, suffered with her husbands and travelled along with them in their exile, reasoned for Kurukshetra and denied by the society as the Hot headed lady. The Article discusses about the identity, Gender stereotype and how they stood apart and performed their individual role.

**Key Words:** Worshipped, questioned, identity, stereotype

**Issues of women in Indian mythology**

As the mythological character of Sita is presented in epic ‘*Ramayana*’ is very passive, she is described as epitome of beauty and a daughter who obeys everything her parents and her husband tells her to do. From the point of her marriage to the exile of fourteen years and then to perform the ordeal of fire to prove her chastity, she obeyed everything as a woman is taught to obey and doesn’t think of her own wishes. And later all her sacrifices are celebrated in the society because she became a part of the male dominated society rather than rising her voice. But in the same way we don’t celebrate Draupadi because she questioned her position and oppression and didn’t bow down to the stereotypical notions of the system that is why she is not

worshiped as Sita is and is considered as a hot-headed lady who tried to rise her voice. At this point of time also we don’t give the example to our girls about being like Draupadi, we want our girls to be polite and obedient like Sita, rather than being like the ferocious Draupadi who was bold and opinion oriented.

On the other hand, the character of Urmila who was a silent sufferer all along the epic ‘*Ramayana*’ and was not in the center but only in periphery, she was known as Sitas sister or Lakshman’s wife not as individual person. Urmila’s struggles and sacrifices are ignored in the epic. She was always over showed by Sita, Urmila is only known for her beauties, docile nature, calm and quite personalities which are the characteristics a patriarchal society wants from a woman. Urmila too has suffered the

separation from her husband who forgot his duties towards his wife and followed his brother Ram for fourteen years of exile. Her pain and agony are ignored altogether in the great epic.

There are common issues women have faced in Indian mythology, from Sita to Urmila, Kaikeyi, Sumitra, Kaushalya, Shurpanakha and many other minor female characters. The basic issue faced by them is gender discrimination and sexism. There were and still are many things which the patriarchal society allows a male to do and opposes a female to do the same, from anything basic like what to wear, to something big as life decisions. In the mythology also, we observe that a woman cannot take her own decisions in her life, she has to answer her elders, and she has certain boundaries and limits to follow. Her life is restricted amongst the four walls of her palace; she is merely a caged bird that has to dress up and present herself like a beautiful doll and obey others.

The body related issues of a woman can be questioned in mythology, it is one of the basic issue's women faced in the epic '*Ramayana*', a woman has no right over her body, and it is only oppressed by a male. She has no right over her pregnancy and has to bear many children to carry forward the generation. Starting from the three queens of Ayodhya we find, the stereotype of having a male child which is considered good for the family because male child brings home a wife, and gets dowry too, so in the epic *Ramayana* king Dashrta performed a 'putrakameshti yagna' a ritual performed to bore a male child, which is a stigma on the society and clearly gender biased.

The series of three marriages by king Dashrta was performed because his first

wife Kaushalya couldn't give birth to a boy child and was pregnant with a girl named 'Shanta'. The second wife of Dashrta was Sumitra who too couldn't give birth, then the king married the third time to queen Kaikeyi and the 'puta kameshti yagna' was done after which the four princes of Ayodhya were born- Ram, Lakshman, Bharat and Shatrughan. The process of humiliation the queens went through for a male child was common issues of that time which clearly portrays that a female doesn't have any right over her body and reproduction.

The problems faced by a woman during her upbringing in mythology where the clear difference is seen, in how a male child is bought up and how a female is bought up, the discrimination is very clear. The four princesses of Mithila- Sita, Urmila, Mandavi and Kirti are bought up in a stereotypical way, these four sisters always remained in the palace and never went out to get education from the 'Gurukul', they were only allowed to go out in temples, they were only provided with the knowledge of culinary skills and were deprived from the knowledge of war, politics and economics, which was specifically provided to male child. Girls were taught to be calm, polite and learn basic things to run a house like, cooking, cleaning and washing which was a major issue.

Women in mythology are only associated with kitchen, doing any culinary work, cooking for their husband to make them happy, dressing up for the husbands, always dressing up and try looking sensitive. They are portrayed as helpless creatures that are being saved by the men. Girls are bought up by the mindset to serve their husbands and fulfill all their needs, keeping their wishes first than their own,

devoting themselves to their husbands and worshipping them, following husband's path like Sita who went for exile with her husband for fourteen year, leaving her identity behind. The false, stereotype upbringing is deep rooted in the mind of the society.

The change is seen in the representation of women in rewriting of the epics where women are presented as intelligent, independent individuals which is the true identity of a woman and not just being beautiful and docile. The phrase glass ceiling is cracking, the stereotypes are breaking through the revisionists work, like Amish Tripathi's "*Sita Warrior of Mithila*" and Kavita Kane's "*Sitas Sister*", which portrays mythological characters in a liberal and feministic sense.

## 2.2 Gender stereotype in mythology-

Difference in treatment of man and woman is been seen from ancient time what better to look into the ancient mythological works to understand how the problem is ingrained in our mind that we differentiate between man and woman. Analyzing the ancient epic Ramayana in this research we find that society is biased in dealing with men and women. Observing from birth to marriage till death, from the time a girl is born she is not welcomed instead is seen as a curse, she has to follow many orthodox rules imposed by the family on her, she is not liberated to make individual choices which is not taken into consideration for a male child.

Gender stereotype is seen clearly in marriage, in "*Sitas Sister*", Kavita Kane has clearly mentioned the situations took place in the swayamvara of Sita which is by far the truth told and happens in the society. A swayamvara is a performance of a task which a prince has to perform to win

the hand of the bride, in this whosoever completes the given task will marry the bride, the freedom of choice is lacking because the bride marries anyone who completes the task. A bride can't choose her groom, she is like a bait; she is a trophy which is given to the person who wins the task. Clearly in Sita swayamvara same thing happen she had no freedom to choose her husband. The epic would have been written differently because in many retelling versions of Ramayana Ravana the demon was capable of performing the task of picking up the bow of Shiva and pulling the bow string but he didn't that made all the difference. The marriage of all the four sisters of Mithila was done with the four princes of Ayodhya, without the consent of the women the decision was taken which shows the gender stereotype and lack of liberty.

A scene from the novel "*Sitas Sister*" Kavita Kane has described a scene which shows how Urmila was insulted in Sita swayamvara, which clearly reflects gender stereotype- Ravana speaks when he is not able to pick up the Shiva bow, he says-

"I would hate wasting this visit, I would not mind marring your other; she is as ravishingly beautiful as the world claims her to be." (Kane32)

This reflects upon the fact that men didn't respect women at all; they treat them as a commodity and insulted them. Ravana uttered these insulting words to Urmila because this ego was broken as he couldn't complete the task and the easiest way to come out of it was by insulting a woman. The lack of freedom to meet their groom was also not given to the four princesses of Mithila, a scene in "*Sitas Sister*"; Kavita Kane has described a sequence in which Sita goes early morning to the temple

when Ram arrives to Mithila just to see him every day. The real picture was the patriarchal society where a girl is not allowed to meet a boy privately or even make him friend. The sequence followed that the other cousins followed Sita to the temple and met other princes of Ayodhya. So, no change is seen in the women's lives in the society under domination and patriarchal threats. In "*Sita Warrior of Mithila*" also Sita and Urmila secretly meets Ram and Lakshman in a garden and exchanged few words before marriage, as the society didn't even allow a woman to know her groom with whom she will spend rest of her life.

From understanding the Ramayana by Valmiki, we clearly see gender discrimination in the society, from what a woman should wear, how she should walk, talk, behave everything is told to her and to act according to the male dominant society, without her individual identity, but the picture changes in the revisionist texts in which now writers show an independent woman, who doesn't work according to the society rather does what she wants. The stereotype is breaking; the glass ceiling is cracking down, example is the work "*Sita Warrior of Mithila*" by Amish Tripathi, who has portrayed Sita as fearless and bold individual who breaks stereotypes.

### 2.3 Identity crisis-

Identity is the way we understand our individual self, and the portrayal of women in Indian epic shows that they lack identity. For example, the two queens of Ayodhya, Kaushalya and Sumitra. The appearance of Sumitra in Ramayana is not felt at all, she is treated as a passive character, she didn't keep forward her opinions, is voiceless, she is described as

'fair and pale' by Kavita Kane. Sumitra is clearly a character with identity crisis; she is the second queen of Ayodhya yet she is silent. Her life in the palace has always been inactive, as a queen she is always been a second optional, technically seen as third option because she had two other queens to compete with but she never did, so she always remained as third option. As a passive character Sumitra doesn't rise her voice and don't give out her opinions in any matter of the court or life of other people around her, this is how her character is shown in the epic '*Ramayana*', which shows she lacks individual identity.

The character of Kaushalya who is the elder queen of Ayodhya but never got the respect she deserved, being the elder queen, she had responsibilities on her which she couldn't full fill, as she remained in periphery, and could never come up. She didn't say her part when Ram her own son was exiled for fourteen years by his own people. She didn't question her husband king Dashratha when he married twice after her and didn't give the position she deserved. Kaushalya is described as a wise person but she couldn't do much in her life, she was only considered as Rams mother and Dashraths first wife. She suffered through identity crisis throughout her life because she didn't get the place she deserved in the palace and in the life of the king. Her character is not portrayed as empowered and lacks individual identity as portrayed in '*Ramayana*'.

Sita who is portrayed as an ideal wife, daughter and a queen, she did everything according to the wish of others. She sacrificed everything for her husband and her Kingdom. She is considered the epitome of beauty, and given as an example to other girls to become a woman

like Sita. Being all of this, did Sita have identity crisis? The answer is yes, Sita who is everything a woman should be under the sun, still she lacked individual identity. In the world where she is supposed to be a perfect woman according to the norms of patriarchy, she lost her identity of being her individual self. She forgot she had her own dreams and had to fulfill them. In the race of making everyone else happy around her she forgot herself and her true identity.

Sita who was an adopted child, but she got all the love any parent would give to their child, she was beautiful, intelligent and a pampered child, but she had to live according to the nature of a woman made by the society, by being quiet, docile, stupid and voiceless. That is what Sita did, which was totally opposite to her nature as she was bold, fearless and opinion oriented, in becoming the ideal woman she lost her ideal self and went in the stream of becoming a person she was not, which made her lose her true self and hence lacked her true identity. In Ramayana she does what is told to without questioning and lost her true self in the process. Sita couldn't make decisions of her own life.

Sita's identity quest is shown in the revision work of Ramayana, a woman who finds herself in the journey of her life which is full of adventure; she is described as a warrior by Amish Tripathi. She makes her own decisions, rules Mithila by her own rules and by the support of Samichi who also is a powerful female character. Sita becomes the support system for her sister Urmila, her mother Sunaina, her father Janak and finally her husband Ram. Sita's true identity is of a ruler, an individual and independent ruler who works on her own terms, which she finally

is given in the revised version of Ramayana.

Another character who goes under identity crisis in Ramayana is Urmila, majorly identified as Sita's sister or Lakshman's wife, not as an individual being. In Ramayana Urmila is merely Sita's sister in her childhood, that's what her identity was, she was ignored around Sita, so she remained in darkness in her early life. She lost her identity at very early stage of life by being in shadow of Sita. Later after her marriage still Urmila remained in periphery, under the shadow of her husband Lakshman and never came to limelight. She was left behind in Ayodhya by her husband for fourteen years; he basically abandoned her, when she lost her identity as a wife as well. She remained passive, unnoticed and unidentified in Ramayana.

Urmila's true nature is revealed in the revised work of Ramayana by Kavita Kane, in which she brings out Urmila from the shadow of being Sita's sister and Lakshman's wife to Urmila's true self of independent person. She is pictured as a woman of self-respect, a knowledgeable individual, a bold person with opinions which she gives out time and again. Here she is the one who looks after Sita and becomes her emotional support; she is the one who makes Lakshman's life easier and lets him accompany his elder brother for exile and manages Ayodhya and other family members to become each other's strength. That's her true identity and her real color.

In "*Sita Warrior of Mithila*" by Amish Tripathi, we find a strong female character called Samichi, she accompanied Sita and helped her run Mithila. She is portrayed as strong individual, who joined the police

force; she had a rare honor and an aura about herself. She has anger, strength and talent. All these qualities came from a long process, there was a time she lacked self-identity and lived in slum, wasting her life. Samichi realized her true nature and strength which she bought together to make her new and strong self. In mythology women were projected weak and helpless, but now they are strong and have identified their true identity and came up with new and strong self.

#### **2.4 Women who stood apart-**

From decades we have lived in a society where women were not supported in any ways, rather they were pushed down when they tried to make space for themselves. The patriarchal society has made a woman suffer a lot in every circumstance. It's the modern world where women are getting support and are coming up. In the epic Ramayana women have suffered a lot in every aspect, Sita went for fourteen years of exile with her husband and Urmila remained without her husband, they both endured the pain. These women wanted to stand apart but never got support of anyone.

Urmila, in "*Sitas Sister*" by Kavita Kane is portrayed as a strong character, she is well read and has knowledge which she wants to share, but the society oppresses a woman who tries to rise her voice for or against anything, she is supposed to play the role of a mute character. Similar incident is described in the novel "*Sitas Sister*", the situation is after the exile of Ram, Lakshman and Sita they are in the forest and Bharat, Shatrughan, Urmila, the three queens and Acharya Vasistha are going to meet them in the forest to inform them about the death of king Dashrath. When they all are discussing and

convincing Ram to come back to Ayodhya and rule the kingdom, which Ram denied. The conclusion is that Bharat will rule the kingdom and will live a life of hermit till his brother returns. As he wants to keep the words of late king Dashrath and fulfill the dharma of a brother. Urmila didn't agree with the proposal and spoke in anger-

"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 care whatever happens to your wife and your family?" (Kane.219)

"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 brahmin and the Kshatriya, even of the wife for her husband. But is there no dharma of the husband for his wife? No dharma of the son for his mother? Is it always about father, sons and brothers?" (Kane 219)

Urmila's outrage was justified; her husband was abandoning her for fourteen years and after Bharat's decision he was going to abandon his wife Mandavi, who was Urmila's cousin. The words she said were true that everyone was following the dharma of each other and neglected their duties towards their wives and mothers, which was wrong. As always women's priorities are not considered. Urmila's point was correct but no one came forward to support her, rather everyone told her to shut up because she is a woman and is not supposed to talk especially when men are talking.

After what Urmila said, Guru Kashyap said furiously to Urmila-

“Princess, how dare you speak such outrageous words? Do you think this is your father, king 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 greatest minds of Ayodhya!”(Kane219)

No one supported Urmila, she stood alone in her fight, and rather guru Kashyap demined her opinion and didn’t care to listen, he questioned a woman who thinks freely and speaks her mind out, he also insulted Gargi, who is another scholar, she always spoke her thoughts in the court of king Janak. The guru couldn’t bear a woman who was so bold and outspoken and the one who questioned the decision of the men and argued with them. But still Urmila told what she felt was right without the fear of others.

### Conclusion

The women who took a step out of the glass ceiling, tried to do something out of the box, or break any stereotypical rules of

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the patriarchal society is questioned immediately, is pointed out and told to step back. No one takes a stand for these women, they are without support and have to do everything on their own and they are doing it without hesitation, women are standing alone and making paths for themselves by breaking the stereotypical rules. Like Urmila did by standing up and speaking what she felt was correct. She spoke for her rights as a wife, as a daughter and more of all as a woman.

“*Sita Warrior of Mithila*” by Amish Tripathi, we find Sita who stood up for herself and the citizen of Mithila, when she knew that Ravana has come for her swayamvara with thousands of his soldiers, Sita was prepared to safe guard her citizens from the harshness of Ravana, she stood alone and took over the responsibility. Such is the power of a woman, from centuries we have kept her in a cage, we haven’t supported her but now she knows her power, her worth and she is standing up for herself.