



Reconfiguring The Mythological Character Of Surpanakha In Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*: A Literary Reinterpretation

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Indian fiction is rich in mythological lore, with authors continually reinventing classic tales. Mythology plays a vital role in shaping Indian society, imparting moral values and cultural traditions. Drawing from epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Indian literature has experienced a revival, reinterpreting myths in innovative ways. Kane skillfully reinterprets mythological stories, infusing them with fresh perspectives and insights. Her writing is marked by vivid descriptions, bringing mythological characters and settings to life. Kane's novels often feature strong, independent female characters, challenging traditional patriarchal norms. Kane's novels often feature strong, independent female characters, challenging traditional patriarchal norms. Kavita Kane's retellings, such as *Lanka's Princess*, excel in weaving myth and imagination. Kane's writing is notable for giving voice to marginalized characters, transforming them into central figures. This paper explores Kane's portrayal of Surpanakha, a misunderstood heroine from the *Ramayana*, and how she convincingly reimagines Surpanakha's transformation from Meenakshi.

Key Words: Indian Writing, Mythology, retelling, Kavita Kane, Surpanakha, Feminism, Marginalization.

Introduction

India has had a rich tradition of recreating and retelling its myths and legends. Most of the popular mythologies, particularly *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, are recreated and released as retellings these days. Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakandan, Patnaik, Chitra Divakaruni and Kavita Kane are popular retelling story writers in India. Kavita Kane, a modern writer from India, known for her writing with the themes like retelling of myths, unveiling marginalised women characters from Indian Mythology. All of her books are dipped in Indian mythology; most of them are based on lesser-known women characters in Indian mythology- Uruvi (*Karna's Wife*), Urmila (*Sita's Sister*), Menaka (*Menaka's Choice*), Surpanakha (*Lanka's Princess*), Satyavati (*The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*), Ahalya (*Ahalya's Awakening*), Sarasvati (*Sarasvati's Gift*) and her latest work *Tara's Truce* deals with Tara, wife of Vaali from *Ramayana*.

Kane is a distinguished author known for her women-centric novels that shed light on the neglected female characters in Indian mythology. Her works are feminist retellings of mythological tales, focusing on relatively lesser-known women and exploring issues that remain relevant in contemporary times. This paper undertakes a critical examination of *Lanka's Princess*, one of Kane's notable works, with a specific focus on the character of Surpanakha. Traditionally marginalized and maligned, Surpanakha's narrative is reimagined by Kane, offering a nuanced and empowering portrayal. This study aims to deconstruct Kane's efforts to redeem and reposition Surpanakha's character, challenging the original mythological account.

Kane's stories explore the emotional complexities of her characters, making them relatable and human. Kane's writing is deeply rooted in Indian culture and mythology, offering a unique blend of tradition and modernity. Her prose is engaging, making mythology accessible to a wide range of readers. Kane's works often explore feminist themes, questioning societal norms and expectations. Her novels demonstrate thorough research, drawing from various sources to create rich, detailed narratives.

Discussion – From the Villain to Victim

Reconstructing Surpanakha in Kavita Kane's narrative unveils the voice of silenced Surpanakha from a feminist perspective. Surpanakha, also known as Meenakshi, undergoes a significant transformation throughout the novel. Her physical transformation from a beautiful woman to a demonized, grotesque creature

is mirrored in her emotional journey. She evolves from a vulnerable and loving person to a strong and determined individual. Meenakshi is the younger sister of the royal brothers Ravana, Kumbhakara and Vibhishana. The royal blood runs through her too. But she could never receive care and love from her mother. In the opening lines of the novel her mother reveals her disappointment.

Kaikesi had three sons from him and was hoping for a fourth, but it turned out to be a daughter...

Kaikesi looked down at the baby and could not help cringing or quench the well of bitterness. The girl has cheated me of my plans, she thought angrily, a faint stirring of unease making her more restless”

(Lanka’s Princess.2).

It is evident that, even from the childhood days Meenakshi endures hatred by her own mother. She is often neglected and becomes a victim product of Patriarchal society. She is longing for her mother’s love and affection. Due to her gender, her mother scolds Meenakshi who saves her brother Vibhishana from one of the fights. But she knows her mother wouldn’t understand or believe whatever explanation she gives. She is side-lined by her mother as “Vibhishana is a boy, and he is older to you. He doesn’t need your protection” snapped Kaikesi (Lanka’s Princess.5).

Kaikesi never loves or adores her due to her gender and appearance and it becomes the root of her anger and eternal jealousy in her heart. When Meenakshi fights with Kumbhakara for the loss of her pet animal, the name Surpanakha is given to her. “Surpanakha, that’s what she is. Not Chandranakha as Mother calls her, but a witch with long, sharp claws. Next time I’ll break your bloody arm, Surpanakha”(8). Kaikesi holding Meenakshi tight by her wrist, the fingers digging into her flesh. But Meenakshi doesn’t utter a single whimper, the shooting pain giving her sudden strength to battle again.

Why can you not behave like a girl? Always fighting and squabbling, hitting boys and throwing stones and scratching the eyes out of anyone who provokes you. Surpanakha, that’s the right name for you, you monster’

‘Yes, I am a monster’ screeched Meenakshi, her eyes flashing, baring her claws at her mother. ‘See them? If anyone hurts me, I shall hurt them with these!! I am Surpanakha’ Her high-pitched voice was filled with rage” (Lanka’s Princess.9).

Despite being betrayed in love, Surpanakha is a strong woman who is anti-image of womanhood. She is arrogant, haughty, impulsive and stubborn, much like all her brothers. When Kuber, her step-brother tries to kidnap her, again she has used the nails as a weapon and provokes her identity with full acceptance of who she is. After many years, as a young girl who is always ignored by someone, for the first time finds love with Vidyuji, a famous king. He loves Surpanakha truly only because of intellect, strength, smart behaviour not for her dark beauty. He always addresses her as 'my tigress' because of her courage and sexual assertiveness.

Vidyuji is a good person and for political issues, Ravan murders Vidyuji. On hearing this news, Surpanakha gets angry and decides to take revenge on Ravan. "She was like that tigress. If she saw a way out, she would have run, but she was trapped in her grief, churning into fury. My revenge would be my respite. Ravan has to die for this murder" (Lanka's Princess.175). She takes an oath to kill Ravan. So, she creates another mess to take revenge against Ravan. She tempted her brother to kidnap Sita, then only Rama will fight against Ravan. Surpanakha plans this entire plot and it becomes a double-edged sword. During the war, she loses many of her loved ones like, Kumbha, Meghnad but she did not affect by those lose, because her vengeance only stands supreme. Then she glanced at Ravan and confess, "I did not want Kumbha to die or his young twin sons to, I don't want my Meghnad killed as well. It had been Ravan alone who was supposed to die on the battle field. But he would be the last to die. Before him, all those whom I had once loved would be sacrificed" [Lanka's Princess, 254].

Surpanakha is torn between her desire for revenge against Ravan and her love for her son Kumar, who feelings of loss intensify. Seeking solitude in the Dandak forest, she devises a plan to retaliate against Ravan by manipulating the arrival of Ram and Lakshman, the princes of Ayodhya.

While wandering through the forest alone, Surpanakha chanced upon Rama and Lakshmana. Transfixed by the sight, she gazed at the brothers, their muscular physiques evident as they tightened the strings of their bows, their tanned skin glistening in the light. A sudden flush of excitement coursed through her veins. "She wanted them, badly, madly. She wondered what it would be like to have them and her body grew hot, moist and yielding at the thought. They must be skilled and intense lovers, but she would control them" (193). She sought to entice them, convinced that they would be as easily captivated as many men, vulnerable to her

sexual charm. Although she experienced a sense of shame for desiring two young men at her age, she also yearned for the comfort that lust could provide, eagerly wishing for companionship to alleviate her solitude. She recalled her grandmothers words, "...there was no shame in desiring a man" (194).

Lonely after Vidyujiva's death, Surpanakha sought intimacy with Rama, who rejected her, being devoted to Sita, and directed her to Lakshmana. He too declined, citing loyalty to his wife Urmila and urged her to return to Rama, suggesting she deserved better than a servant's affection. Realizing the brothers mocked her, Surpanakha, humiliated and furious, lunged at Sita but was stopped by Lakshmana. Rama then ordered Lakshmana to punish the "unvirtuous" woman. Horrified, she questioned whether the cruelty was for her desires or her attack. As Lakshmana mutilated her, pain and blood overwhelmed her. Disfigured and terrified, she fled in shame to seek refuge with her brother Ravan

The actions of Surpanakha shows that it is her need for justice, because during her childhood days, she faces ignorance, ill-treatment, the death of her husband, the death of her son, all these things only make her very cruel. This is the complete change over from the beautiful-eyed Meenakshi into the sharp-nailed Surpanakha. On the other side, it is understood that, Surpanakha is the victim in the hands of her mother, brother and the whole family and the situations forces her to suspect her own family and their attitude towards her as a child. Taraka, a maternal grandmother of Surpanakha is the only person who always comforts her and gives confidence with soothing words and gestures.

Surpanakha shows remarkable courage and resilience in the face of adversity. She stands up for herself and her loved ones, even when faced with overwhelming opposition. Her loyalty and devotion to her family and loved ones are unwavering. She is willing to make sacrifices for their sake and fights to protect them. She is intelligent and resourceful, often using her wit to outmanoeuvre her opponents.

Surpanakha experiences lead to low self-esteem and self-doubt. She struggles to find her place in the world and assert her identity. Her fear of rejection and ridicule drives many of her actions. She is desperate to avoid being rejected or ostracized. Her inner conflict between her desire for love and acceptance and her need for protection and revenge is a recurring theme throughout the novel.

In the original epic, Surpanakha, forgotten Princess describes as a vamp, but here, Kavita Kane reveals that she too had a human side, because she is very affectionate towards her brothers, a loving wife and she is

very fond of her nephews and a loving and carrying mother. When she hears the news of Ravan's death, she is taken back to her childhood days and she recollects the memories with her brother. Though she is unfortunately changed her spirit into a rakshashi, she loved everyone with deep within her. It is understood that, Kavita Kane also depicts the good qualities of Surpanakha in this novel.

Kane's portrayal reframing Surpanakha who challenges traditional mythological narratives, offering a fresh and feminist perspective on the character. Kane's writing style is a unique blend of traditional and modern elements, making mythology appealing and relevant to contemporary readers.

Conclusion

Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* explores the unheard character of the Ramayana- Surpanakha in a feminist reconfiguration. She has successfully portrayed the character Surpanakha as a symbol of rebellion who survives emotional trauma. Kane revived the great Indian epic into the modern retelling era with the sidelined character. The recreation of Surpanakha with the personalized touch of feminism has been appreciated. Kavita Kane believes that Surpanakha is a very misunderstood character thus she repositions Surpanakha as a figure of immense emotional endurance and defiance, challenging the patriarchal structures of mythology.

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