

Lanka's Princess: Feminist Deconstruction of Surpanakha

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Abstract

This research paper highlights the feminist perspective in Lanka's Princess by Kavita Kane and will be Deconstructing the Meta-Narratives of Surpanakha through a Feminist Lens concerning Kavita Kane's Novel *Lanka's Princess*. What factors made her transform from once caring and kind Meenakshi to monster Surpanakha? According to meta-narratives such as *The Ramayana*, Surpanakha has always been depicted as a monster in all the stories. The stories have always been one-sided and delivered as meta-narrative and that too from the men's perspective but what about the women's perspective and how she was ill-treated by men and society? Using feminist perspectives, the research will focus on Meenakshi and what made her a villain in her own family and life. It will examine the events from the perspective of women and how the incidents led to them. Trying to re-narrate her femininity through the way she articulates her self-perception as a daughter, sister, wife, and more in particular as a human being, the book explores the way she makes sense of herself as a daughter, sister, and wife. The paper investigates suppression, anger, vengeance and revenge by relating incidents throughout her life which shaped her identity.

Key Words: Meta-Narratives, Deconstruction, Feminism, Myth, Revenge, Discourse, Counter Discourse, Patriarchy

Meenu, you were always ugly, not merely in your looks but your ugly twisted mind—mean, vindictive and...oh, so unlovable! You are Surpanakha, not my daughter but a monster.

(Kane 149)

The mythology of every culture is the bedrock of cultural practices which creates the ethos of a society that is unquestionably followed from generation to generation. When the power centres change or when the marginalized factions realised the deception, the discourse is exposed and a new perspective is provided to look at and understand things.

Representations and identities are discursive as discussed by Foucault. Identities and impressions about people are not inherent but constructed through a discourse which itself is a creation of power. Truth is established by power, he says, *truth isn't outside power or lacking in power.... Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by the virtue of multiple forms of constraints. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regimes of truth, its general politics of truth* (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 131) which means the truth is manufactured to empower power. Mythological truth is challenged in the contemporary age by many Indian authors. The present novel is one such challenge. It not only challenges the discourse but also provides a different view of the same story. As Chimamanda Adichie says in her lecture a single story always entails the danger of misrepresentation and misinterpretation. It is the discursive power that established Surpanakha. Power acts so cunningly that manipulation is accepted by the masses. Foucault, in an interview, says *power is the exercise of something that one could call government in a very wide sense of the term, one can govern society and community.* (413) the unchallenged power establishes the truth.

The epic Ramayana has been written and rewritten so many times yet no one ever wrote from the perspective of Surpanakha. *The Ramayana* is the story of Rama so Rama is the hero and the supporter of Rama are good people and the opponents are bad people though they are not his enemies in the true sense. Rama is glorified and Surpanakha's pains and agonies are unheeded. By making Surpanakha the protagonist of her novels *Lanka's Princess* Kavita Kane has radically reversed the order and not only brought the other side to the fore but also changed the thousand-year-old image of Surpanakha. Over the centuries has been presented as a woman who was punished for looking after a married man. The novel *Lanka's Princess* explores whether Surpanakha was the instigator of war or a poor victim.

The novel chronicles the journey of the girl from Meenakshi, to Surpanakha. Her second incarnation is evil and demonic. On the contrary, she is not what she is in the meta-discourse. She is rebellious, strong, and resourceful. Such a woman is either considered mad or a woman of questionable character. The discourse about Surpanakha has ratified the power of patriarchal discourse. A woman is good only when she confines herself to the mores of society. If a woman dares to follow her instinct, she is suppressed and humiliated. In mythology Seeta, Mandodari and Panchali and many others are good women because they

are loyal to patriarchy mutely experiencing injustice and letting society decide what is good for them.

The Indian feminists have broken all the boundaries to resurrect mythology by reconstructing, recounting, and refolding it from a female perspective. In her novel *Lanka's Princess*, Kavita Kane gives Surpanakha's unheard voice a female undertone. In Valmiki's metanarrative, the Ramayana, she transforms herself from a disgusting, adulterous, disfigured ogress to an aggressive, courageous, and strong woman with a distinct voice. She has withstood ignorance, betrayal, rejection and negligence only to rise and fight again. As a result, it has been hailed as a masterpiece in the mythological retelling.

Surpanakha was born as Meenakshi the fourth child of Kaikesi and Vishravas. Her mother was not happy as she was expecting a son. Vishravas, the father was happy at her birth as he already had three sons namely Ravan, Vibhishana and Kumbha. Kaikesi has always been eccentric and wanted to consolidate what she had dreamt of through her sons. Kaikesi felt that this girl had cheated on all her plans and expectations to succeed in Lanka, the Asura Empire, for she dreamt of being a ruler of three worlds through her sons.

To get back what she had lost, Kaikesi married Vishravas so she could have the most powerful and wisest progeny to win back what she had lost. Kaikesi never forms good opinions and always loathed her daughter. The daughter was deprived of love and motherly affiliation. Her complexion was one of the reasons for hatred. She was the ugliest child in the family. Such a child would not have better fortune was the impression of every family member. In the innocent world of her brothers, she had a place. The brothers on the other hand were happy to see their sister. This childhood situation created a low psyche and confidence in the life of Meenakshi. She expected support from her mother which she never received. The treatment meted out to her had long-lasting effects on her personality. She was constantly nagged by her mother. Her mother demoralized her confidence. She was a girl with no self-esteem. Her being a girl was constantly reminded. She was the victim of patriarchy and womanly limitations had been imposed on her. It caused a lethal situation in which she finds herself stymied. The gender politics that have enslaved women for thousands of years play to ruin her life also, she is constantly advised *the neighbours have been complaining bitterly. Why did you pick up a fight again Meenakshi? Vibhishan is a boy, and he's older than you. He doesn't need your protection!* (Kane, 15)

She is not beautiful. But as Naomi Wolf says in her book *The Beauty Myth, she wins who calls herself beautiful and challenges the world to change truly*. (5) Surpankha is known not for her womanly beauty but for her actions. Naomi Wolf says in the same book, *the beauty myth is always actually prescribing behaviours and not appearance*. (8) Black is also beautiful and can catch the attention of men. This has been taught by Tarakato Meenakshi. She is made to believe in her womanliness, her confidence is boosted.

Unlike us – and most Asuras– Meenakshi is petite, but does Kaikesi not recognise that she has inherited our sharp, regular features with that uncompromising, decided chin? Kaikesi is too biased, too disappointed about Meenakshi" Taraka concluded, glancing at the little girl in her arms: her hair and clothes were dishevelled, her face streaked with dirt, her hands and feet grubby. Her habits and habiliments were as neglected as the poor girl herself was in the family. (Kane, 13)

Sumali, Surpanakha's grandfather, also believes that her birth has a reason. He ponders, there must be a reason why a girl has been born. Would she be like Kaikesi, changing the fortunes of the asuras and the daityas to vanquish the devas ? Or was she meant for more grand designs? (Kane, 18)

Meenakshi feels annoyed at the attitude with which she is treated. She cannot express her true feeling when Ravan takes over the rule to take revenge on Kuber. She thinks Ravan is selfish and rapacious. In her own family, she feels alone and helpless. Nobody takes her while making decisions about her life. Her own family's attitude is indifference and negligence. She is distanced from her brother; she does not feel any empathy for Ravan as she deems him to be responsible for the death of their father. She hates Ravan for his womanizing behaviours. She is very sensitive in this regard.

Ravana's wife Mandodari is very beautiful. Meenakshi does not feel jealous. Rather her strength is different. She does not feel any inferiority complex. The marginalised and ignored Meenakshi finds love and acceptance in Vidyujiva, a powerful rival king. He loves her not for her unconventional dark beauty but for her intellect, smartness and might. He cherishes her and addresses her as 'my tigress' underlining her mental strength as well as her sexual assertiveness. This is in contrast to her mother's derisive remark. *She's scrawny and*

much darker than me... How is this dark monkey going to bring us a good fortune? No one will ever marry her. (3)

Surpanakha decides to go to the jungle and stay there to continue her revenge. *My revenge would be my respite. Ravan has to die for this murder. And I will, from today I would be the Surpanakha* she promised herself. That night she makes a promise to herself to seek revenge on her brother through her son. She hates her brother Ravan but now the intensity has peaked. After leaving Lanka, she and her son move into the deep forest. She was a widow whose sole purpose in life is to seek revenge on her brother. Meenakshi since childhood has been made to feel inferior to her brothers. Her mother was unhappy about her birth and called her ugly. She always had a bitterness that got intense with time. She was not born a monster but was made one by time and tragic events kept happening throughout her life.

Her husband is killed by Ravana as he feels threatened that he will become the king in his place. Her son is also killed. This fills her entire life with gloominess. Life becomes a burden for her. She craves motherly love. She is happy with her husband but his death brings bleakness to her life. She wants to live with her son but upon his death sadness comes back. She has a natural desire for physical satisfaction. She can overcome any feeling but the feeling of having a partner cannot be suppressed. The novel *Lanka's Princess* defends this natural yearning of Surpanakha. *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.* (Kane 193) She is attracted towards Rama. Rama sends her to Lakshman. Both of them take her yearning wrongly. They fail to understand her. Surpanakha thinks *they are rejecting me! But why? She thought wildly. I am young, beautiful and desirable. Why did they not like me? Am I not enticing enough?* (Kane, 172) She is punished for a very normal desire. It is very instinctive in the modern sense. Her act of proposing Rama or Lakshman is not punitive. Still, she is severely punished. On the recommendation of Rama, she suffers at the hands of Lakshman, *Her beauty, Ram commanded, "Lakshman take care of this unvirtuous, ruttish rakshasi and teach her a lesson she will never forget! Don't kill her, maim her, she will remember her dishonourable crime and never attack a helpless woman again.* (Kane 172) Kavita Kane has amply made it clear what was wrong on the part of Rama and his brother. The discourse of the Ramayana stigmatizes the character of Surpanakaha. Here also she is the victim.

A person who is an innocent victim for so long can react violently. Surpanakha also does the same thing. It is also very natural. Rama kills Ravana because he is the reason for his unhappiness. If Rama can react, Surpanakha can also. She is now determined to destroy not only Rama's life but also the lives of the people who caused so much misery in her life. She becomes very astute. She plots against everybody. She manipulates things in her favour. She lies and Ravana believes in her lies. She becomes mad about her revenge. She does not keep any moral qualms. She becomes an opportunist. She knows that Sita is the weakness of Rama and Ravana. She takes advantage of this situation to carry out her plan. She becomes the Ravana now. The novel gives justification for her cruelty *just like I did... But it was all of you, my family, who turned Meenakshi to become a Surpanakha bent on destroying everyone and everything* (Kane, 222).

Free women and sexually liberated women are not accepted in society. Patriarchy keeps holding all the time to the behaviours of women. It is very shocking to see a woman freely expressing her sexual feelings. Women are not allowed to talk about these issues. Shyness, introversion, humble are some of the attributes of women. Surpanakha does not fit into this societal framework. That is why a discourse to defame her was created and perpetuated. In the novel, an unbiased view is given. Surpanakha is shown repenting over what she does. She has a logical justification for her actions. She is morally conscious of her guilt. Only a good person can feel so.

This novel offers a fresh perspective on the epic *Ramayana*. Meenakshi, the protagonist who has always been portrayed as a monster Surpanakha was granted a chance to tell her story through this novel. Meenakshi's transformation into Surpanakha was not by her own choice but was caused by the people and circumstances around her. The magnificent epic *Ramayana* focuses solely on Rama and his life and his exemplary deeds. It completely neglects his drawbacks as a masculine power; therefore the episode of Surpanakha is neglected in ancient mythology. But it has been highlighted by modern critical writers and criticized for his behaviour. They reinterpreted the myth in an entirely different way, how Surpanakha is not the wrongdoer in the *Ramayana* but she is the most wronged character. Kavita Kane gives voice to this marginalised character and establishes her as an unsung heroine. The demonic character Surpanakha has been given a fresh identity and perspective by Kane. Revisioning mythical characters offers students a chance to express themselves and,

as a result, they play a vital role in challenging master narratives. As a result, revision might be viewed as counter-narrative or protest literature to major narratives. Retellings of the myth, like Lanka's Princess, on the other hand, acknowledge her as a lady and sympathise with her. When mythological narratives like the Ramayana consider Surpanakha's mutilation as a victory of good over evil, they realise that righteousness and evil are relative concepts. This means that no one is completely empathetic or malicious. Each character is indecisive by nature and reacts to or behaves by the circumstances. Though Ram is the man in charge, whether or not his acts are human or divine is up to fate/the Supreme Truth. Surpanakha's actions are determined by the circumstances she finds herself in and to come out of this trap she acts accordingly. Ravan, the Asura, is similar. Regardless of his imperfections, the king is a noble monarch who is universally respected by his subjects. All of the characters are in the same boat. Everyone has a flaw at some point. It's just about admitting and embracing it, not repeating it in the future, and ending the cycle of violence, as Surpanakha has done. The feminist perspective does not justify the violence that Surpanakha instigated but rather how her transformation from Meenakshi to Surpanakha happened. How she was always alone and in pain. Before she was the Monster it was the world that was monstrous to her.

Chimamanda Adieche says *Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.* Kavita Kane has used the flip side of the story to establish the new image of Surpanakha. Contemporary authors do so. At the end of the novel, we sympathize with the monster Surpanakha because her story was presented to us from her point of view. Male-dominated society presented Surpanakha as an unsavoury creature from the beginning; however, it was various instances in her life that made her what she was. As a woman the pain of Meenakshi was innumerable. She was a true feminist as she fought her war alone. Identities are the outcomes of discourse and ideology. Surpanakha did not get space in mythology to assert her identity which would be a counter-discourse. Though delayed, Kane has delivered justice as her novel provides a rationale for her transformation for which she is not to be blamed but rather exonerated.

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