

Beyond Monstrosity: Feminist Revisionist Readings of Surpanakha's Embodiment**Dr. Shobha M**Associate Professor and Chairperson
Dept. of English, Bangalore University**Iramma V H**Research Scholar
Bangalore University**Abstract**

This paper investigates the representational politics in the depiction of Surpanakha's character in modern revisionist interpretations of the *Ramayana*. In many canonical versions of the *Ramayana*, Surpanakha is depicted as ugly, dark-skinned, pot-bellied, with long nails, sharp teeth, and horns—features that serve as metaphors for evil/the other. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Surpanakha is introduced as a rakshasi who instantly falls in love with Rama. She is portrayed in contrast to Rama who is 'beautiful, slender, wide-eyed, black hair, pleasant voice, youthful, well-spoken, lawful, and pleasing'¹, whereas, Surpanakha is ugly, bloated, deformed, copper-coloured hair, frightful, dreadful old hag, evil, coarse and repellent' (Erndl 69). This portrayal serves to other Surpanakha, aligning her physicality with notions of moral and social deviance.

Contemporary writers and artists such as Kavita Kane, Anand Neelakantan, Gita Vishwanath, Volga, etc., contest traditional portrayals of Surpanakha's body, which are often shaped by misogynistic and cultural hegemonic standards. They attempt to destabilize and problematize Surpanakha's physicality as a site of agency, change, and empowerment. This reimagining destabilizes stereotypes and foregrounds the intersections of gender, body politics, and cultural identity, thereby offering a more inclusive narrative that affirms not only female diversity and autonomy, but also foreground specific cultural and ideological positions. The paper analyses how contemporary socio-political contexts have prompted a reconfiguration of the epic character, Surpanakha, subverting the conventional discourse toward identity, bodily autonomy, and resistance to patriarchy. In this context, the study examines Gita Vishwanath's sculpture of Surpanakha (My "Many Meetings With Shurpanakha", 4 October, 2022), and *Mappila Ramayana* (19th or early 20th century), the folk song tradition of Malabari Muslims of Kerala, as compelling counter narratives that critique the violence against Surpanakha. Furthermore, these feminist revisionist interpretations highlight the body as a powerful locus for agency, transformation, and resistance.

Key Words: Body, Feminist, Representation, Agency, Resistance, Identity

One of the most represented and discussed scenes in the Valmiki's *Ramayana* is the mutilation of Surpanakha's body; her body is objectified, and treated as a 'calculated chaos' that patriarchy controls by mutilating her ears, nose and breasts in order to maintain patriarchal norms of chastity. As Kathleen M. Erndl in "The Mutilation of Surpanakha" expresses, "there is a deep suspicion about women's power and sexuality when unchecked by male control" (68). She observes that Surpanakha's mutilation is crucial from an ethical perspective which introspects Rama's character, and attitudes toward female sexuality in Indian culture. She analyses that the mutilation of Surpanakha is significant to the Rama story

from multiple points of view – the narrative, ethical and cultural perspective. She postulates that punishing a woman who expresses her sexual desire is a major implicature of the episode of Surpanakha's mutilation in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, and other versions based on the same. However, while analysing Kampan's *Iramavataram* (12th century), Erndl observes that unlike other versions of the *Ramayana* in which only Surpanakha's ears and nose are mutilated, in Kampan's version, Laksmana cuts off her nipples as well as her nose and ears. Erndl analyses this addition as Kampan's sympathy toward Surpanakha, as in Tamil culture, breasts are symbolic of a woman's power, and mutilation of them is cruel and undignified.

Surpanakha's desire for Rama is depicted as transgressive, and her body becomes the site upon which this transgression is punished. Lakshmana mutilates her—cutting off her nose and ears. This act is not just physical violence but also symbolic: it is a punishment for a woman who dares to express sexual autonomy. Feminist theorists argue that this reflects a patriarchal anxiety about female sexuality and agency, where women who do not conform to normative ideals of beauty, chastity, and submissiveness are violently disciplined. As Nandini Chandra in *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha* (2008) explains, the othered woman, embodied in low-caste prostitutes or 'racially inflected' demons are featured with "poison-fang[s] ... bloodshot eyes, canine teeth, coal-black skin and green horns" (Chandra 2008, p.179). If a woman transgresses the fixed identity of patriarchal norms, then she "ha[s] to be taught a lesson" (Chandra 2008, p.179), such as the disfigurement of Surpanakha's nose and ears. Feminist critique highlights how this demonization serves to delegitimize Surpanakha's desires and voice. By making her body grotesque, the narrative justifies her 'othering' and suffering. This raises questions about whose bodies are deemed worthy of empathy and whose are demonized, reflecting broader social biases about appearance, gender, and desirability. In this context, Erndl observes the larger scheme of cultural practices which violence against women often finds its root in the socially ascribed identity of women.

Contemporary retellings and feminist reinterpretations re-imagine Surpanakha as a complex, autonomous woman whose desires and experiences deserve attention. These versions problematize her depiction as merely a caricature and seek to recover her agency, portraying her mutilation not as just punishment but as an act of patriarchal violence that silences dissenting female voices. Her body, rather than being a site of shame, becomes a symbol of resistance to gendered oppression.

In "My Many Meetings With Shurpanakha" (*Outlook*, 4 October 2022), Gita Vishwanath recounts her evolving understanding of Surpanakha and the creation of her sculpture, "Shurpanakha: Rather Uncanny!" Vishwanath traces her relationship with the character across different stages in life, reflecting on the *Ramayana*'s multiplicity and reinterpretations she encountered. As a child, her earliest exposure to Surpanakha was through her father's bedtime stories, which consistently depicted Surpanakha as grotesque, ugly, and violent—aligning with the mainstream narrative. The vividness of her father's narration, particularly the tremor in his voice describing the mutilation, deeply impressed her subconscious mind, prompting her to later connect this episode to broader historical patterns of violence against women.

In the 1970s, as an undergraduate English literature student, Vishwanath encountered Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress." The poet's impatience with his mistress's coyness reminded her of Surpanakha, revealing a parallel: centuries before Marvell's poem, Surpanakha boldly expressed desire and suffered harsh consequences. Surpanakha and Marvell's mistress represent two sides of the same coin—women who are judged and acted upon for how they navigate their own desires. Their stories highlight the persistent double standards and pressures placed on women regarding sexuality, revealing a pattern of male authority determining the "acceptable" ways for women to feel and express longing. These

reflections informed her feminist reinterpretation of Surpanakha and ultimately inspired her sculpture as an act of resistance and reclamation.

A pivotal moment in Vishwanath's evolving understanding of Surpanakha occurred through her mother-in-law's *Ramayana* retelling (rooted in Kamban's *Ramayana* from Tamil Nadu). As a young woman in her late twenties, Vishwanath heard her mother-in-law narrate a version diverging sharply from the television depiction of Surpanakha as ugly, grotesque, and innately evil. Instead, Surpanakha was described as a beautiful woman, proud of her appearance, and endowed with magical powers—her real name being Meenakshi. This encounter introduced Vishwanath to the *Ramayana*'s multiplicity and opened more nuanced possibilities for understanding Surpanakha's character within the epic.

Inspired by many layered narratives, Surpanakha's image resurfaced to Gita Vishwanath as a beautiful, intelligent, and enigmatic figure. Enrolling in a beginner's sculpture course at an art centre in Baroda, Gujarat, she seized the opportunity to give physical form to Surpanakha who had long inhabited her imagination. Declaring her topic as "Shurpanakha: Rather uncanny!", Vishwanath embarked on a creative process aiming to capture Surpanakha's complexity and multiplicity—challenging unidimensional portrayals in mainstream retellings. Vishwanath describes her task of creating Surpanakha's image:

As the clay was pummeled, rolled, and made into dough with my hands, everything around me vanished. I traveled into a forest where a bold, defiant woman, unafraid to express desire openly, was heckled and shunted from one to another until finally deformed. The woman, with her nose in the air, so to speak, had to be taught a lesson by chopping that precise part she would no longer hold up. That sword, with its brute, *phallic force*, also took part of the ear (Vishwanath, my italics).

Vishwanath's approach to sculpting Surpanakha is a subversive act, challenging conventional expectations that sculpture should aspire to perfection and aesthetic harmony. Instead, she deliberately crafts a deformed face, freeing herself from the compulsion to attain classical beauty and using the medium to question dominant visual and cultural norms. Her Surpanakha thus becomes an emblem of resistance—both in form and content—demonstrating how artistic practice can contest and reimagine conventional narratives. By imbuing Surpanakha with a bold, startled expression and strategically placing a rose behind her right ear to signify pride in her appearance, Vishwanath directly confronts the mainstream portrayal of Surpanakha as a demoness or ogress. As Alicia Ostriker argues the female body is not an object of male desire or patriarchal control, but a locus of strength, creativity, and autonomy—a reclamation that constitutes a foundational element in revisionist readings of Surpanakha. Ostriker foregrounds the complexity and richness of female embodied experience, positioning the female body as a site of power, transformation, and resistance against patriarchal domination. Vishwanath gives agency to Surpanakha and makes her to question her mutilation and cruel treatment of patriarchal system. She explains,

I fashioned a rose and stuck it behind her right ear to symbolize her pride in her beauty. It was also a way of upholding my mother-in-law's version. The perfect rose stood out as an ironic contrast to the deformity of Shurpanakha. I then began to focus on expression. I was clear that I wanted a startled look in my Shurpanakha's eyes, a look that exclaimed, 'But why? What have I done?'—the first question that rings loud and clear in the head of every woman when she is punished by the laws of patriarchy (Vishwanath).

The sculpture serves as an explicit critique of patriarchal subjugation, highlighting Vishwanath's ideological commitment to reimagining Surpanakha's appearance. By juxtaposing the delicate beauty of the rose with Surpanakha's deliberate deformity, Vishwanath disrupts the binary of beautiful versus ugly woman—a dichotomy central to

mainstream narratives' exclusionary logic. Her work exemplifies how artists and writers can radically reinterpret episodes and characters in established narratives through their mediums, reclaiming narrative space for marginalized voices, and challenging aesthetic and ideological boundaries of tradition. It calls for a re-examination of whose bodies are valued and whose are punished, using Surpanakha's story as a lens to question broader cultural frameworks of gender, beauty, and power.

Sculpture of Surpanakha by Gita Vishwanath



The second work the study considers for the examination of Surpanakha's representation is the *Mappila Ramayana*, an oral retelling from the Malabar region of Kerala, first popularized by T. H. Kunji Raman Nambiar, who heard it from a bard named Piranthan Hassankutty, when he was a fifteen-year-old boy. Later published by Dr. M. N. Karassery in *Kurimanam* (July 1976), the extant version consists of approximately 700 lines that Nambiar recollected from Hassankutty's performance some eighty-five years earlier. Today, only a few episodes survive which have been translated into English by Rich Freeman in 2008 – the general introduction of the story, Surpanakha's makeover before meeting Rama, her proposal to Rama, Ravana's proposal to Sita and his sorrow over her rejection, and Hanuman's destruction of Lanka. The poem displays distinctive phonetic variations—such as the use of 'l' instead of 'r' in 'Rama' and 'Ravana'—and incorporates Arabic and Persian terms like 'nikkah' (marriage) and 'Shariyat,' thereby situating the narrative within a specific historical and cultural context of the Malayali Muslims in the Malabari region.

Mini Krishnan in "Remembering 'Mappila Ramakatha' in Ramayana Month," examines the historical context of the creation of the *Mappila Ramayana* and its continuing relevance in Malabar region. She notes, "In the 'Ramayana month', remembering the fine tradition of religious and communal harmony that made possible the Mappila Ramakatha" (*The Hindu*, 2016). Krishnan draws attention to the multicultural exchanges that shaped *Ramayana* retellings, including the Emperor Akbar's commission to render Valmiki's *Ramayana* into Persian in the 16th century in order to better understand his Hindu subjects. The translation, initially undertaken by Abdul-Qadir Badauni with hesitation, was later abridged by Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan and is now preserved in the Washington D.C. museum, USA. Akbar also selected beautiful illustrations for the epic, and distributed gold coins depicting Rama and Sita's exile, with surviving samples housed in museums in Lucknow, Varanasi, and London. This historical context underscores the enduring syncretic tradition in India in which retellings like the *Mappila Ramayana* are embedded, highlighting the ongoing dialogue between communities and faiths in South Asia.

Mini Krishnan explains that there are many Adivasi stories in the subcontinent and the Western Ghats which are reimagined around shared community experiences and local interpretations of the Rama story—such as Sita’s struggles in the forest, the rock where Sita sat and meditated, and the spot where she returned to her mother, Bhoomidevi. Over time, the arrival of immigrants, such as the Arabs who came to trade peacefully and mingled with the local population, led to the development of a unique culture that fused Islamic faith with Hindu traditions. Krishnan notes that influenced by local Hindu customs and epic storytelling, the Malabari Muslims (Mappilas) developed their own version of the *Ramayana*, which they sing with ease and confidence. Pooja Pillai, in her article “*Mappila Ramayanam*: Setting India’s most ancient epic in a Malabari Muslim milieu,” observes, “The *Mappila Ramayanam*, coming from the folk song tradition of the Malabari Muslims or Mappilas, is an example of how the epic has crossed cultural boundaries” (Nov 10, 2015).

In the Mappila version, Surpanakha is depicted as a beautiful woman and a ‘matron,’ referred to as ‘Lady Surpanakha,’ and is married to the great Sultan Vidyutjiva, the king of Patalam. During the war in Patalam, Vidyutjiva is killed, and she becomes a widow at the hands of her own brother, Ravana. She later decides to remarry, and Ravana consents to her choice of husband. At fifty-six, wishing to regain her youth, Surpanakha applies heavy makeup—an episode described in vivid detail and laced with humor. The narrative proceeds:

On each white hair of her greying head
she put charcoal and honey, to blacken them.
Then summoning Fatima from the house nearby,
she settled on a fee and got her hair braided.
Her sunken eyes, like great round wells,
she encircled with walls of make- up.
She plucked out the long hair growing from her chin,
and for her disorderly teeth, she hammered her gums.
She dug the rubbish from the hollows of her nostrils with a palm- leaf,
and chewed palm- sugar with reddener to put a shine on her lips.
She strained to scrub her ears, front and back,
then donned ivory ear- pendants to make her lobes dance.
She bound stays to her breasts to prop them upright,
and on top of them mangoes to stand out in her thin blouse.
She opened the strongbox of her long- buried family matriarch,
and scooped up its gold.
She pleated her fine waist- wrap so that it bunched out behind,
and bound a waist- chain over it that would hang down below.
Above and below her sets of ten bracelets,
she had pairs of armlets, beautifully polished and set with gems.
Glittering with gold and glittering with jewels she wore a crisp waist-
cloth;
she had a dancing neck- pendant, heavy as a metal mirror.
Colorful and lovely, she gathered around her a gem- blue wrap,
and a floral drape she let out at length to flutter (Richman 196).

This distinctive scene, unique to the *Mappila Ramayana*, presents Surpanakha not as a supernatural demoness capable of magical transformation, but as a confident, independent woman making conscious choices about her appearance and her future. In contrast to the violent, ugly, or demonic caricature found in the classical Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, the Mappila retelling reimagines Surpanakha as a woman with desires and vulnerabilities—someone who

seeks companionship on her own terms. Even before she encounters Rama, Surpanakha undertakes a transformation in her appearance in search of a partner, foregrounding her agency and self-determination.

Unlike Valmiki's narrative, where Surpanakha's transformation is interpreted as merely an act of seduction (to underscore her otherness), in the *Mappila Ramayana*, it is motivated by her own longing and initiative, which resonates with the local cultural context. It is a realistic portrayal of a woman trying to reinvent herself in her fifties. The references to sunken eyes, coloured hair, hair growing from her chin indicate how difficult it is for an elderly woman to look beautiful as per society's standards, and also to find love. The humour in details such as hammering gums, plucking hair is on the verge of trivializing Surpanakha's desire and agency. Diane Purkiss explains how women's lived experiences of their bodies are profoundly shaped by external expectations. She observes that reinterpretation of myths and fairy tales reclaim the female body from patriarchal appropriations, and recast it as active, powerful, and autonomous entity, rather than as passive or objectified. Surpanakha's portrayal in the *Mapilla Ramayana* also foregrounds alternative representations that celebrate female strength and agency. Prof. Chandan Gowda, in his newspaper article, "The Pleasures of *Mappila Ramayana*", highlights the 'toilette' scene of Surpanakha as a particularly striking moment, capturing her as a woman in love and inviting readers to see her through a different cultural lens. He observes that, "In the Valmiki original, for instance, Shurpanakha, who has the power to assume any guise, inexplicably shows herself to Rama in a hideous form. But as we saw, she does otherwise in the *Mappila Ramayana*" (*Deccan Herald*, 6 April 2025).

Surpanakha approaches Rama and directly asks him to marry her. Rama, however, rejects her proposal by invoking the law of the Shari'at: "For a man, there is a woman, and for a woman there is a man: this is the law in the Shari'at! It is calamity indeed, young miss, if one nurses from all and sundry breasts. If the oil you bathe with now suits you, should you change it for some other kind? Lioness of Lanka, you'd better leave, young miss, and tend to your own affairs!" (197). Rama's reference to religious law is both humorous and patronizing; the narrative satirizes patriarchal logic and exposes the fixed gender roles. His use of the metaphor – "if the oil you bathe with now suits you, should you change it for some other kind?" – not only trivializes Surpanakha's desire, but also shifts the encounter away from violence and demonization to a negotiation of legal, religious, and social norms within the Mappila community's frame of reference. The direct engagement with Surpanakha's request—rather than shaming or silencing her—foregrounds mutual respect and showcases her persistence and intellect. The scene not only exemplifies how folk and regional retellings such as the *Mappila Ramayana* challenge and disrupt the canonical narrative's gendered hierarchies shaped by patriarchy, but also uses dialogue and local law to dramatize the negotiation of desire, autonomy, and tradition. It reinforces the paper's central thesis by demonstrating how subaltern and pluralistic traditions reclaim marginalized figures like Surpanakha to critique dominant cultural norms and hierarchies. In doing so, this retelling expands the interpretive possibilities of the *Ramayana* and offers a critical framework for understanding agency and resistance within epic traditions. The 'toilette' scene, in particular, becomes a site of both satire and sympathy, highlighting her emotional vulnerability as well as her resourcefulness and courage in pursuing what she desires.

Another significant aspect of the 'toilette' is the space given to Surpanakha. She refuses to concede in the argument with Rama, asserting that while men are permitted to marry multiple women under Shari'at, women are denied the same right. She persistently argues her case to Rama, employing logic and wit to challenge his reasoning. In response, Rama deflects her proposal by directing her to Lakshmana, explaining that he is already

committed to one woman. The exchange foregrounds Surpanakha's intelligence, confidence, and assertiveness, depicting her not as a submissive figure who passively accepts male authority, but as a woman who boldly voices her thoughts and challenges existing norms. The references to Shari'at and matriarchal structures underscore how the narrative reflects the religious and regional affiliations of the Mappila Muslim community, embedding local socio-cultural debates within the retelling. As Paula Richman notes, "While this composition was clearly intended as humorous entertainment, the humour was informed by a sharp wit and underlaid with the fundamental irony of casting the Hindu religious epic and its characters in the social context and language forms of Kerala's Mappila culture" (193). Richman further argues that the irony and wit in the Mappila text reflect a historical moment of inter-religious harmony, in stark contrast to later periods of communal tension. In this retelling, Hindu characters are portrayed as culturally Mappila, and Rama invokes Muslim law (Shari'at) to explain kinship and to reject Surpanakha's marriage proposal. Richman highlights the text's cultural, social, and religious nuances, positioning it as an important example of the *Ramayana* tradition that asserts the possibility of harmony between religious communities.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations and possible critiques of the approach *Mappila Ramayana*. While the retelling foregrounds Surpanakha's agency and repositions her as a relatable and autonomous individual, some critics might argue that its use of humor and satirical tone—especially in scenes such as the elaborate toilette—risks trivializing Surpanakha's emotional vulnerability or reducing her experience to comic relief. Additionally, the incorporation of local social norms and the invocation of religious law may introduce new forms of gendered prescription or reinforce alternative patriarchal structures, even as the narrative disrupts the classical epic's binaries. Scholars may also point out that the *Mappila Ramayana*, like any specific local retelling, is deeply shaped by its community's historical and cultural milieu, which could limit the universality of its critique or the extent of its subversion. Recognizing these complexities allows for a more balanced and critical appreciation of how regional epics navigate between resistance and accommodation, satire and seriousness, and tradition and transformation.

Feminist readings of Surpanakha in Gita Vishwanath's sculpture and in *Mappila Ramayana* reinterpret her character with multiple standpoints, providing her agency, bodily autonomy, individuality, which starkly contrasts her caricature as a monster or an immoral adulteress in the mainstream versions of the *Ramayana*. The evolving portrayals of Surpanakha in modern retellings of the *Ramayana* reflect a significant shift in the understanding of female agency, identity, and resistance within Indian epic narratives. By challenging traditional representations rooted in patriarchy and cultural hegemony, contemporary writers and artists reclaim Surpanakha's body and life as sites of empowerment and critique. These new interpretations not only offer more inclusive perspectives on gender and embodiment but also underscore the importance of re-examining canonical texts through the lenses of social justice and equity. Ultimately, the reimaging of Surpanakha serves as a powerful reminder of the potential for literature and art to contest dominant narratives and foster spaces for marginalized voices.

Notes

1. From Kathleen M. Erndl's analysis of Valmiki's *Ramayana*

References

1. Austin, Sara. "Sita, Surpanakha and Kaikeyi as Political Bodies: Representations of Female Sexuality in Idealized Culture." Vol. 5, Issue 2, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, Online, 2013.
2. Chandra, Nandini. *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha*. 2008.
3. Erndl, M. Kathleen. "The Mutilation of Surpanakha," *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. Ed. Paula Richman, 1991.
4. Gowda, Chandan. "The Pleasures of the Mappila Ramayana". Deccan Herald 06 April 2025. (<https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/the-pleasures-of-the-mappila-ramayana-3480236>)
5. Krishnan, Mini. "Remembering 'Mappila Ramakatha' in Ramayana Month". *The Hindu*, 2016. (<https://www.thehindu.com/books/literary-review/Remembering-Mappila-Ramakatha-in-Ramayana-month/article14558660.ece>).
6. Manmadan, Ullattil. "The Story of a Woman Scorned". *Maddy's Ramblings*, April 19, 2011. (<https://maddy06.blogspot.com/2011/04/surpanakha-story-of-woman-scorned.html>)
7. Ostriker, Alicia. "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking." Vol. 8 no. 1, *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1982.
8. Pillai, Pooja. "Mappila Ramayanam: Setting India's most ancient epic in a Malabari Muslim milieu". *The Indian Express*, Nov 10, 2015. (<https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/mappila-ramayanam-setting-indias-most-ancient-epic-in-a-malabari-muslim-milieu/>).
9. Purkiss, Diane. "Women's Rewriting of Myth." *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, edited by Carolyn Larrington, Pandora Press, 1992, pp. 441-57.
10. Richman, Paula. "Questioning and multiplicity within the Ramayana tradition", *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian tradition*. University of California Press, 2001.
11. __ "Marriage Offers", *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology*. Indiana University Press, 2008.
12. Vishwanath, Gita. "My Many Meetings with Shurpanakha". *Outlook India*, 4 October 2022. (<https://www.outlookindia.com/national/my-many-meetings-with-shurpanakha-news-227585>).