

# **'TO REBEL OR NOT TO REBEL': UNHEARD VOICE OF SHURPANAKHA IN KAVITA KANE'S 'LANKA'S PRINCESS'**

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## **ABSTRACT**

India is a country of tales and mythological stories. Mythology has been the very foundation of many cultures and civilizations. In India mythology is significant and lively construct of contemporary relevance as it would be said to describe every experience emotions of people. One turns to myths not for searching binary answers instead to broaden One's understanding, gain wisdom and deepen universal insights that one typically misses out by the limited repertoire of thought, experience and personal narrative. This article is a study on Kavita Kane's 'Lanka's Princess' to examine Shurpanakha's character that was neglected and overlooked in original versions and breakdown Kavita Kane's redressal effort.

## **KEYWORDS:**

Mythology, Formlessness, Identity, metanarrative, subservient.

Mythology is deeply rooted in our culture, hope and faith. Mythology is a beginning of every religion and culture in the world. The word mythology is a happy combination of two Greek words 'mythos' and 'logos'. Mythos means 'speech' and 'discourse' and the logos is known as 'fable' or 'legend'. Thus mythology means 'speech of Legends'. When the collection of myths accumulates then a mythological system is established. Mythology is the study and explanation of holy tales of fables of a culture. It is also known as the collection of stories which usually deal with the human condition, good and evil, human origins, life and death, and after life, and the Gods. Myths express the beliefs and values on these subjects held by any culture across the world from ancient time to the present. The Hindu mythology has rich history mysterious characters, enchanting stories and a surprising innate association with modern science. The great epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana are the earliest and being the longest known epics in the human history which depicted the Indian culture. Mahabharata is a story of Kurukshetra war and the fates of the Kauravas and the Pandavas princes. It is written by with Veda Vyasa. Mahabharata is the longest epic poem. It consists of 100,000 shlokas and over 200,000 individual verse lines. According to the mythology there are the 10 avatars of Vishnu: Matsya (the fish), Koorma (the tortoise), Varaha (the boar), Vamana (the dwarf), Parshuram (angry man, Ram with an axe), Lord Rama (the perfect man, Prince of Ayodhya), Lord Krishna (the divine Statesman), Balram (elder brother of Krishna), Kalki (mighty warrior). The most celebrated avatar is the avatar of Vishnu within the Vaishnavite tradition of Hinduism are Krishna and Rama. The role of Lord Vishnu, but also Goddess Lakshmi in the Hindu mythology is of equal importance. Hindu texts show diverse and conflicting views on the position of women, ranging from feminine leadership as the highest goddess to limiting her role to an obedient daughter, housewife and mother.

Monika Khanna Jhalani in her book 'Revisioning Indian Mythology' states how patriarchy used mythology to popularize the ideologically constructed Identity of women in Indian society. While examining five prominent female characters in Hindu mythology Sita, Gandhari Draupadi, Ahilya and Surpanakha in her book, she explains that mythology not only provides role models a woman must emulate, but also illustrates the consequences of transgressing the boundaries prescribed for women. However, certain literary text has attempted to reinterpret mythological characters, and have given them a different dimension. She examines how contemporary authors have questioned, re-visioned' and consequently subverted the stereotype images of women in Hindu mythology. There is 're-mythification' and consequently 're-mythification' of original myths. Her analysis brought new outlook to revising mythology. This article explores Kavita Kane's 'Lanka's princess' to examine the character of Surpanakha who was neglected and overlooked in original versions and talk about Kavita Kane's rectifying endeavour.

In Hindu mythology a lots of importance is given to the women equal to that of men. But this importance is limited to few selected women in mythology and other women characters are left unnoticed. Shurpanakha is one of those characters. We fail to recognise those women characters who played a major role in the great epics. The character of Uruvi (Karna's wife in Mahabharata), Menaka (an apsara and wife of Vishwamitra), Urmila (wife of Laxman in Ramayana), Surpanakha (the sister of Ravana in Ramayana) are some characters those characters that have always been unnoticed and ignored. But in the present scenario many authors reconstruct what we believed to have been happened. Their interpretation shows different aspects. They recall the stories with new technologies and modern age tools. A single character viewpoint of the whole epic, they always try to bring out the outlook of a

character which is overlooked. About 160 books have been written exclusively by interpreting such great epics of India in different ways. Each one is unique in their explanation. Devadutt Pattanaik's books are mostly recalling the epic stories. His books consist of folktales and line drawings which make him a unique among mythologist. Ashwin Singh is an Indian Dan Brown whose books are thrilling mysterious and have a mythological story running parallel to the mystery solving story. As far as women writers are concerned, they are comparatively few in number. Only few women writers like such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Roshani Chokshi and Kavita Kane retell female characters in the epics as the protagonist of the novel and recall the story from their perspectives.

Kavita Kane is a trend setter in modern century whose book focus on the ignored characters of the Great epics. She was a senior journalist with the career of over two decades, which includes working for Magna Publication and DNA, but she quit her job as an Assistant Editor of 'Times of India' to devote herself as a full-time author. as self-styled connoisseur of cinema and theatre and sufficiently armed with the postgraduate degree in English literature and Mass Communication from the University of Pune. She chose only skill she knows and she candidly confesses, is writing. Kavita Kane's *Surpnakha* is vulnerable yet strong, beautiful and young woman with full of life and hope to live her normal life but become a victim of someone's action, her mother's ignorance and her brother Ravana's ambition. Like Alicia Ostriker writes in her essay 'Stealing the Language', "we cannot measure the work of women poets, past or present, without a thorough... and if possible demystified... awareness of the critical context in which they have composed and continued to compose their work."

(3) Kavita Kane's 'Lanka's Princess' is one of the classic examples of Feminist revisionist mythology. A revision mythmaking is a strategy to "subvert and transform the life and literature women poets inherit." The trademark of the Indian mythology is its strong female

characters who had created a place for themselves, through their strong sense of individuality. Despite point out their individuality these strong women had also displayed immense courage and mind of their own. They trusted their sensibilities and were bestowed with sharp acumen. Recalling their tales to contemporary lens only adds to their inherent beauty and undiscovered charisma of their character. According to Lisa Tuttle, the goals of feminist criticism should be "(1) developing and uncovering a female tradition of writing, (2) interpreting symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view, (3) rediscovering old texts, (4) analysing women writers and their writings from of female perspective, (5) resisting sexism in literature, and (6) increasing awareness of the sexual politics of the language and style" (186). Feminist revisionist mythology tends to fulfil at least one of these goals. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'The palace of illusions' and Pratibha Roy's 'Yagyaseni - the story of Draupadi' are both recallings of the great epic Mahabharata, but with the point of view of Draupadi. Pratibha projected Draupadi is a devoted wife and Divakaruni let her heroine long for the love of two invulnerable men Krishna and Karna. Modern writers like Kavita Kane, Utkarsh Patel, and Saiswaroopalyer have wielded their pens to recall the myths in feminist lens. Modern writers have used many method of recalling the myths, rewriting them from the point of view of female characters. In their stories women are not submissive or docile but they transform them as an individual or sustainability. Frances Babbage in her work "In revisioning Myth: Modern and Contemporary Drama by Women" states, "Myths and practices of rewriting can be means of revealing shared attitudes and experience" (5). Kavita Kane is known as revolutionary force in Indian writing, introducing a feminist perspective in Indian Mythology. she explores the ideological in aesthetic potential of such practice and elucidates the tensions that are seen in the narratives that have fundamentally shaped the western thought. To an interview to the Hindu, Kane has emphasized on the importance of mythology:

If myths reflect the socio- culture ethos of earlier times, they can also be used to contemporaries those same issues in today's world. Actually, nothing has changed. Love, rivalry, disappointment, war, anger, greed, all these emotions still exist. There is a chance of an alternative perspective by looking at the epics through the women and minor characters are that. (The Hindu)

She believes that mythology is a literary device to portray contemporary issues with sensibilities. She has written few books over the years that are dominantly feminist in nature. In her latest novel 'Lanka's princess', she lends a feminist implication of the ignored voice of Surpanakha. she reinvigorates her status from that of an ugly, adulterous, disfigured giantess, in Valmiki's metanarrative, 'Ramayana' to that of a positive, beautiful and a strong woman with a clear voice who has survived hatred, loss and faced ignorance and rejection only to rise up again and fight. Kane says, "I always believed that mythology can be huge canvas for contemporary thought. It is not telling us some old tales, as so carelessly assumed, of God's and Goddesses, but of Man and his follies and fallacies." (Exp43 L229)

Surpanakha, whose originally name was Meenakshi. Meenakshi is the one with fish- shaped eyes. 'Lanka's princess' is about how she starts her journey from 'a shape' to 'shapelessness' i.e. a positive woman to a negative one. This paper investigates about her mother's rejection and ignorance, her brother, Ravana, occulting her identity, life with her father at her Ashram and finally finding the and enveloping herself in a husband's love. Her journey from being the beautiful- eyed girl to Shurpanakha, a girl with sharp claw- like nails, point out the summits and depressions in her life. she always swings between good which is displayed by his father, Vishravas, her husband, Vidyujiva and her two brothers, Kumbhakarna and Vibhishan, and evil which is personified by her mother Kaikesi and Ravana. Shurpanakha finds rejection by

her mother Kaikesi since birth. From this continual grudge since birth to bring a loving wife, mother and aunt, Shurpanakha keeps hosing her desire for revenge and hatred due to the injustice deal out to upon her not only by her clan but by outsiders who mangle her. Her maiming adds fuel to the fire and thus she the 'Lanka's Princess' who was beautiful and very intelligent woman, transforms into a cunning and scheming yet a very strong and positive woman. This novel speaks about her confidence, positivity and tells how she enhance her anger that destroys everything. Thus 'Lanka's princess' explores the complexities of human nature to grasp the meaning of life, learning and self-identity. 'The Lanka's Princess' opens with the speech of Kaikesi, who is the mother of Shurpanakha, "It's a girl"(1). In spite of having three sons she is disappointed to know that she has given birth to a daughter. This is because, 'a girl' will not be able to complete the dream project of Kaikesi had devised - getting Lanka as back from her stepson, Kuber, who had seized it from her parents. Thus, Kaikesi thought that Shurpanaka has "cheated (her) of (her) plans... a faint string of unease making her more, restless."(2) Another reason for her hatred to Surpnakha is that, the dispute between Kaikasi and her husband, Vishravas, always rotated around Ravana- the choices he makes, the decisions he takes. Shurpanaka feels this side line and ignorance. She also feels that she is being ignored because she is a girl. For example, when she was 5 years old, she gets into a fight to save Vibhishan. Instead of being praised Kaikesi, her mother break in by saying, "Vibhishan is a boy, and he is older to you. He does not need your protection!" (5) Gradually Shurpanaka become cognizant of as the powerless 'other' in his own family. 'Simone De Beauvoir' in a monumental work 'The Second Sex' states this vantage point towards women by saying: "One is not born, rather becomes a woman"(249).It is our society, more than that it is our family which makes women feel inferior andweaker than men since childhood. By extension, the term applies to the marginality that they experience as a result of this 'Othering process operative in many situations'. If a woman is

other on account of her sexual difference from man, internal divisions of race, culture, hierarchy and birth in the family marginalised women further. In this patriarchal society it is 'Man' who is the stronger, and 'one' while it is 'Woman' who is the weaker, the 'other'. Simone de Beauvoir further comments: "She is defined and differential with reference to man and not her in reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject; he is Absolute- she is the other" (16). The 'otherness' of the weaker sex is referred to, subjugates women into a subordinate position in life, the position of the 'subaltern'. Subalternity is, in other words, a study of the whole concept of 'otherness', hiding in its depths, stories of pain and repression. According to Ajit k. Chaudhary, "The focus of subaltern studies is on the consciousness of the subaltern class..." (273). The same thing happens with Shurpanakha.

When she grew up, she secretly married to a danava prince of Kalkeya danava clan, 'Vidyutjihva'. Vidyutjihva loves her not only for her beauty but for her intellect, smartness and might also. He adores her a lot and addresses her as "my tigress" underlining her mental strength as well as her sexual assertiveness. This is in contrast with her mother's scoffing remark, "She's scrawny and much darker than me... How is the dark monkey going to bring us good fortune? No one will ever marry her." (3) Ravan became enraged by hearing this that Shurpanakha get married to the Danava. Danavas were the mortal enemies of Rakshasas, and he was about to punish her for this but Mandodari convinces him to respect the wishes of his sister. Thus, Ravana accepted Surpanakha, her husband and Danavas as relatives officially. At the time of conquering Rasatala (underworld), in the absence of Surpanakha Ravana killed 'Vidyutjihva' This murder increased Surpanakha's pain and anger which transforms into acute hatred towards Ravana. "She was like (a) 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.

Ravana has to die for this murder"(175). She promises herself that she will make life hell for each one her family member who is involved in this murder Thus Shurpanakha determined to seek comfort through revenge. Her brothers Kumbhakarana and Vibhishana are protective towards her but, they cannot stand their ground against the power -hungry and narcissistic Ravana who cutters his sister and acquires unreasonable pleasure in depriving her of happiness. This annoys her and makes her realise that she has to be strong and self- reliant. In her childhood when she tried to assert herself and seek justice for the killing of her pet by Ravan, Shurpanakha claws at him which leads to changing of her name from Meenakshi to Shurpanakha- a demoness by Ravana which reflects the patriarchal phobia of a strong, confident and positive woman. Surpnakha appropriate this name by saying, "If this could protect me, then well, I am to Shurpanakha."(8)She again says, "Yes, I am a monster!"(9).

Thus, her voice was always unheard. She always found a way to root herself as a strong and positive woman. There is an incident in Ramayana where Kuber her step- brother, tries to show his power by pointing out her femininity to get going her brothers, especially Ravana but fails hopelessly when she fights back instead of yielding and strike back strongly with her weapon- her nails; proving her identity with complete acceptance of who she is. After the death of her husband Shurpanaka controls the events in Ravana's life and becomes the focal point of Ramayana providing her dominance and showing her progress from the verge. To achieve her goal, she trains to her son Kumar Jambumali to fight for her revenge, but unfortunately, he was killed by Laxman. Both Laxman and Jambumali did not know each other. His mysterious death by Laxmam leads her to plot Ravana's downfall at the hands of Ram and Lakshman. Karline McLainutters in her essay "Sita and Shurpanaka: Symbols of Nation in Amarchitrakatha":

"Shurpanakha... approaches the two men, informs them bluntly of her sexual desires and is not just mock for it, but is punished. The immediate reason for her mutilation might appear to be her threatened attack on Sita, but the actual reason is more intimately connected with the gender, sexuality and communal identity. Had the idea been just to subdue Shurpanakha, her mutilation would not have been necessary. Mutilation of a woman in the specific way described in the epic can symbolically be interpreted as a gendered punishment for sexual transgression. In Indian legal texts disfigurement of a woman is the most common punishment for crimes of a sexual nature. Shurpanakha was mutilated for not for the attack on Sita, but for sexual assertiveness. But Shurpanakha does not suffer this humiliation just because she has been sexually assertive- her status as the "other", also figures in her disfiguration. In communal struggles the humiliation of the "other" woman plays a crucial role."(35)

Sigmund Freud in his theory of "Depth psychology" formulated the concept of 'unconscious' which governs the human psyche. This all powerful and all-pervading aspect of the psyche is actually the storehouse of all emotions and desires, both expressible and inexpressible. Shurpanakha is treated and the 'other' woman who is recognised as the warning of the patriarchy and thus by maiming and disfiguring her, masculinity proves its discipline. This adds fuel to the raging fire of Shurpanakha's hatred. She therefore, epitomises the voice that is raised not only against the family which disempowered her, but also the society that tries to tame her. Seeking revenge, this intelligent woman schemes to employ her disfigurement to instigate Ravana against Rama which she believes, will bring her solace. Thus, ensues the abduction of Sita leading to the downfall of Ravana and his entire clan. This entire scheme of Shurpanakha becomes a double-edged sword where in, she loses many of a loved ones which as Meghnath, Kumbhakarna, among others, but she remained unaffected by it as her hatred

stands supreme in the face of her unrequited love for her family. She ponders, "I did not want Kumbha to die or his young twin sons to, I do not want my Mahendra killed as well. It had been Ravana alone who was supposed to die on the battlefield. But, he would be the last to die. Before him, all those whom I had once loved would be sacrificed." (254)

Jean -Jacques Rousseau statement resembles similar to the character of Surpanakha and throughout this narrative as well that, "The people in their natural state are basically good. But, this natural innocence, however, is corrupted by the evils of the society" (exp1L1). It is her need for justice, for ill- treatment and for ignorance, rejection during her childhood, the murder husband and son which channelizes the emotion of revenge in her, criticizing her and completing her transformation from a beautiful-eyed Meenakshi to the long, sharp - nailed Shurpanakha. Retailing myths with the contemporary lens will help to hold a mirror up to nature, bringing out some of their darkest intimidations and passions and at the same time, display their latent strength to the external world. Kavita Kane in embellishing Shurpanakha's character, has brought out the immense wisdom and courage of a woman, who is in the midst of pressure and problem stay strong to fulfil her revenge.

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