



**SURPANAKHA: AN OUTCAST AND DISDAINED CHARACTER IN
RAMAYANA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KAVITA KANE'S
*LANKA'S PRINCESS***

Piriyadharsini R,
Assistant Professor,
Department of English (SF),
V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women,
Virudhunagar, Tamilnadu, India.

Corresponding Author's mail ID: piriyadharsini@vvvcollege.org

ABSTRACT

Kavita Kane, in her novel *Lanka's Princess*, offers a feminist perspective that humanizes Surpanakha, portraying her as Meenakshi, a woman wronged by her family, society and circumstances. Traditionally portrayed as a demonic and vengeful woman responsible for the war between Ram and Ravan, Surpanakha has long been denied empathy and depth. Through Kane's narrative, Surpanakha becomes a symbol of resistance and strength rather than evil and lust. By giving Surpanakha her own story, Kane redefines mythological retelling through a gendered lens, emphasizing empathy, individuality and resilience. Thus, *Lanka's Princess* not only revives the forgotten voice of Surpanakha but also questions the cultural conditioning that continues to suppress women's identities in both myth and modern society.

The research paper titled "Surpanakha: An Outcast and Disdained Character in Ramayana with Special Reference to Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*" examines the reinterpretation of Surpanakha, one of the most misunderstood figures in Indian mythology. The study highlights how gender bias, patriarchy and social inequality shape Surpanakha's transformation from an innocent girl into a vengeful woman. It explores themes of identity, rejection and the quest for respect, showing how her experiences mirror the struggles faced by

women in a patriarchal world. The paper further discusses how Kane challenges traditional mythic portrayals and provides a platform for the silenced female voice.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Identity, Transformation, Resistance, Oppression, Revenge, Misrepresentation, Empowerment, Gender bias, Victimization, Retelling, Mythology, Equality, Redemption.

Kavita Kane is a prominent contemporary Indian writer known for her feminist reinterpretations of Indian mythology. Her works primarily focus on marginalised and silenced women characters from epics, offering them psychological depth, individuality and narrative agency. Through novels such as *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen*, *Sita's Sister*, *Menaka's Choice*, and *Lanka's Princess*, Kane challenges patriarchal myth-making by retelling familiar stories from alternative female perspectives. Her writing interrogates gender bias, power structures and the politics of exclusion embedded in epic traditions, making her a significant voice in modern mythological retellings. By foregrounding women who are traditionally portrayed as secondary, transgressive, or villainous, Kane reclaims myth as a space for feminist discourse and cultural critique.

The aim of present study entitled, "Surpanakha: An outcast and disdained character in Ramayana with special reference to Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*" is to explore the strong and

compelling voice of Surpanakha who is brought into limelight by the novelist Kavita Kane. Her works present the general idea of the various unknown Indian mythological characters who are being introduced to the current generation and it's her attempt to bring out the hidden characters breaking stereotypical ideas. *Lanka's Princess* is about Surpanakha, a neglected soul who is more of a victim than a vamp.

Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* is the story of Meenakshi, who is known by the name Surpanakha, the brazen and deformed, demonic figure who is responsible for the war between Ram and Ravan in the great epic Ramayana. Kane's *Lanka's Princess* makes the readers see the familiar events unfold through the eyes of a woman more hated than hateful. The strong focus and the gender bias that is prevalent in the Indian society prevent any importance being given to the women characters in literature. As Arti Sharma observes, "Kavita Kane, in her novel *Lanka's Princess*, offers a feminist perspective that humanizes Surpanakha, portraying her as Meenakshi, a

woman wronged by her family, society and circumstances” (Sharma 46). This is the case in the Indian epic *Ramayana* which underlies the role of Surpanakha who is forced to abandon her identity as Meenakshi and evolves to be Surpanakha due to her dreadful and fatal situations.

Women from the Asura world are depicted as ugly, wearing large chunks of jewellery, jealous; the ones who snatch and steal all that is not theirs and so are associated with all that is negative. In the *Valmiki Ramayana*, Surpanakha is introduced as “a rakshasi... deformed, pot-bellied, red-haired and copper-eyed” (Valmiki 248), establishing her identity through physical grotesqueness and moral othering. The gender inequality in the world of the Asuras is not very different from the world of Devas and human society, revealing the impact of patriarchal hegemony, biased gender roles and rigid social order. The study takes into consideration the life of Meenakshi who is forced to become Surpanakha and Mandodari who comes close to a match to the Deva world but has the Apsara blood in her; so too Vajramala and Sarama, who are virtuous, strong-willed and independent, yet remain embroiled in the male-dominated

world of Asuras as reflected in *Lanka's Princess*.

Kavita Kane has portrayed a strong and vicious female character Meenakshi whose fate was decided as soon as she was born. She was a burden to her mother who aspired to have a boy in order to win Lanka instead she got a girl, though an ugly dark girl, who was of no use to her. But it was Meenakshi's grandmother Taraka who trusted her and changed her faith to be just the opposite of her mother's thinking. She soon learned magic and sorcery. Her grandmother taught her how to use her body and beauty and trained her in the art of seduction. She was independent and was strong enough to defend herself. Her mind was as sharp as her brothers.

In a way, she proved herself to be a feminist and decide to stand up for her own rights when no one supported her. Surpanakha had her own opinions and knew when to use something to hurt someone. She was courageous enough to go against her brother Ravan when no one else can be stood against. Meenakshi was made Surpanakha by Ravan in an early duel when she attacked him by gouging at him with her nails for killing her pet goat Maya. “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!' (Kane 9). The grudge of never being equally treated fairly kept growing alongside the thirst for vengeance for her family.

How Meenakshi grew to be called Surpanakha is connected with her upbringing in the world of patriarchy: always compared with the boys in the family, reprimanded for not being beautiful, constantly chided for being a monster and living under the shadow of her beautiful mother. Her behaviour, her action which was at times on self-defense was criticized by her mother and her siblings. She is reprimanded by her mother when she fights for her meek brother Vibhishan. Her mother told her that her help is not necessary and needed for Vibhishan is a boy and can take care of himself. "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!" (Kane 9)

Puberty brought with it a gift of beauty and Surpanakha blossomed into an attractive young lady physically and a

shrewd, manipulative schemer mentally. Armed with the knowledge of magic and witchcraft taught to her by her Asura Grandmother Taraka even as her brothers were tutored in the Vedas, Upanishads by their Rishi father, she was beautiful and dangerous. Readers see her from the eyes of her mother as a girl who is no beauty in comparison with her mother, is unkempt and is not conscious of her beauty even though Taraka her grandmother keeps reminding her that she is beautiful in a different way.

Through the character of Surpanakha, Kane has portrayed the strength of women who have survived love, loss and rejection, only to rise up and fight again. Neglected by her parents, Surpanakha always doubted her self-worth and this played a major role in shaping up her character. As Ravan takes over the throne of Lanka, Surpanakha becomes the Lanka's Princess. She develops no sense of belonging in Lanka as she missed the two best people in her life, her grandmother and her father. Though she chose to be a rishi kanya, Vishravas doesn't agree to it forcing her to live as an asurakanya. Constant hatred, suppression and ego towards Ravan lit the fire of vengeance in the heart of Surpanakha.

While Amish Tripathi reimagines Sita as a decisive warrior and moral agent who earns recognition within the patriarchal order, Kavita Kane presents Surpanakha as a marginalized woman whose resistance is born out of exclusion and sustained humiliation, thereby offering two contrasting yet complementary feminist reinterpretations of epic womanhood.

Meenakshi becomes a Meenu and one sees a different form of Surpanakha when Viduyjiva is in her life. In the world of Devas and human society she is portrayed as a vamp, while Kane gives her a very different image in her novel, *Lanka's Princess*. She is the passionate wife of Viduyjiva, like all young girls of her age, she yearns to go away from Lanka to Ashma, the kingdom of Viduyjiva and set up home to live with the family of Viduyjiva despite his caution that life may not be comfortable for her at her husband's place.

Surpanakha is upset about the fact that Viduyjiva gives in to the deal offered by her brothers, especially Ravan and is worried that this decision to stay back in Lanka by Viduyjiva would cause him death or lethal assaults and he would probably be made to remain in the court of Ravan. She wondered how a wedding could change the

equation so beautifully and so quickly. In Surpanakha's words Lanka was not a paradise for her, it's a gilded prison. Her dream of moving to Ashma, with her husband, the only man she trusted, shattered. Her childhood experiences, especially as an unwanted girl child in the family makes her suspicious of her family. "I would rather live with respect than wealth or power or false status. I want you to be respected, not looked at with suspicion." (Kane 134)

At one point, Surpanakha suspects Viduyjiva's love towards her too. One could observe the human side of Surpanakha as the novel progresses, where she is affectionate towards her sisters-in-law and fond of her nephews, the children in her family and is an affectionate mother as she does over her son Kumar. Thus Surpanakha depicts all shades of femininity, joy and warmth of jovial girl, agony and pain of hurt woman blending all human emotions. Change in Surpanakha as described in the words of her mother: "The fifth time you smiled", exclaimed her mother, grinning. That's a welcome change from the sullen girl you were. And now with a baby just fortnight old, you haven't been sunnier." (Kane 139)

Despite denial and threats from her family, Viduyjiva becomes Meenakshi's life

by marrying her, until one day when he is killed on the battlefield. She blames Ravan and her family for this calamity. Vidyujiva's death leads her to decide that she will take revenge on Ravan by removing him from the face of this earth. She decides to leave Lanka and live with her uncle Mareecha in Dandak forest. She takes along her son Kumar with her, so that she could train him to kill Ravan. She gives up her identity as Meenakshi, and decides to become Surpanakha herself. She kills her Meenakshi to take revenge towards every single person who wronged her.

Misery and revenge begins then on as she plots and schemes her life using Ram and Lakshman as the pawns in her revenge against her family. Surpanakha in Dandak forest approaches Ram and Lakshman with an eye to seduce them, the duo toyed with her emotion each asking her to go to the other. She did accordingly without a morsel of doubt that she was actually being insulted by both Ram and Lakshman. As realization dawned, she stood in the middle watching the two brothers, handsome and gentle, grinning surreptitiously, sharing a secret jest. She was the jest. As Ram beseeched Lakshman not to kill but maim her.

The Mutilation episode in Ramayana has various interpretations. In Valmiki's text

Surpanakha is disfigured for her attempt at adultery. The punishment is meted out to her as she is not a human but the 'other'. The societal norms are different for different classes of people. In Kampan's *Iramavatharam*, she is presented as a beautiful female, as opposed to Valmiki's description of her as an ugly woman. In *Adhyatma Ramayana*, a spiritual text Surpanakha is neither beautiful nor ugly. She is just an instrument to bring about Ravan's death, leading to his salvation. In Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*, Surpanakha represents female nature with no self-control or restraint. As Devdutt Pattanaik observes, "The various retellings of the Ramayana reflect society's shifting attitudes toward feminine desire and transgression" (Pattanaik 112).

A reader could say that Draupadi in *Mahabharata* started the war and Surpanakha did the same in Ramayana. As A. Kumar and D. Prasad observe, "Surpanakha in Kane's narrative is no longer the grotesque seductress of the epic, but a woman whose pain and rebellion challenge mythic stereotypes" (Kumar and Prasad 4). Surpanakha in Kane's *Lanka's Princess* was responsible for a lot of events. But her position is much closer as a victim rather than as a villain. Using Ravan's

weakness for women, Surpanakha instigates anger and jealous over Ram for her humiliation and perpetrates him to abduct Sita stating her ethereal beauty. Her inner desire for revenge is set into motion that finally lead to Lanka's war and the downfall of her entire race. As Arti Sharma notes, "Kane has made the readers realize the issues of feminism and prevalent gender discrimination, insecurity based on looks and skin color, and taboo on sexuality through the character Surpanakha" (Sharma 49).

Surpanakha's campaign doesn't end on the battlefield of Lanka but continues into Ram's Ayodhya to take revenge on Lakshman who killed her son Kumar by mistake. But she is unable to carry out her final part of revenge on Lakshman due to the unexpected reactions from her prospective victims. Finally Surpanakha find solace in the soothing and calming words of Urmila.

Thus Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* is an attempt to bring forth the voice of the vanquished that remains lost in silence. As Langpoklakpam Sophia Devi and Sangeeta Laishram observe, "Thus, Kane's *Lanka's Princess* becomes a space where Surpanakha reclaims her voice and subverts patriarchal authority through acts of defiance" (Devi and Laishram 1699). As the

so-called demon Surpanakha speaks in *Lanka's Princess*, an alternate perspective is offered to the regular reading of the *Ramayana*, thereby establishing an alternate discourse of retelling myth. The author has not tried to defend or justify Surpanakha's wrong doings but has reduced the hatred for her as every character in mythology has their own shades of grey.

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