

The Untold Narratives: Shurpanakha's Redemption in 'Lanka's Princess'

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Abstract

People tend to view mythology as a depiction of human experience and emotion, and in this scenario, it is not only an essential and changing phenomenon but also an important one, especially in India. The effects of myths on modern society are immense and they have impacted on our social, political, cultural and religious ideologies. These ancient tales enable us to view the convolutions of the modern India. A good number of these myths are however informed by a patriarchal perspective which devalues and infantilizes women and tends to degrade women to the ranks of inactiveness, or vilify them. This male dominance has been penetrated in the re-telling of myths more especially the representation of female characters. The female voices in the recent years have been far more outspoken in India, as a response towards these ancient descriptions in a bid to recreate and reinterpret these myths in a more empowering and inclusive way. Such feminist interpretations of ancient tales are geared towards bringing out a clear picture of voices and experiences of marginalized women with an added insight and perspective. This change of direction enables the reinterpretation of the characters that women have appeared in mythologies to grant them a certain level of identity and intricacy that they lacked in the old versions.

Lanka's Princess by Kavita Kane is one example of this kind of feminist retelling of mythology. In her novel, Kane reverts to the character of Shurpanaka, which has been portrayed negatively in the Ramayana especially in Valmiki's version. Kane turns Shurpanaka into a multidimensional character and provides her with the voice which has always been suppressed by history. Shurpanaka is not characterized by her outward appearance or her relations with men but is described as powerful, self-assured and verbal woman. Kane reinvents her as a heroine who wants to break all the rules of society and demonstrates her autonomy in the world that always wants to undermine her. It is in this way that Kane is able to re-assess the character of Shurpanaka as well as criticizing the patriarchal structures that has always been the norm as far as the telling of such myths is concerned. The retelling of Kane about the story of Shurpanaka makes the reader rethink the patriarchal roots of the Ramayana and the overall ways in which women have been depicted in mythological poet texts throughout history. Providing a more refined role to Shurpanaka, thus rendering it empowering, Kane adds to an overall feminist re-reading of classical myths and creating a more inclusive and equal perspective on gender and identity in the process. Her writing is the strength of the retelling and reshaping myths highlighting more complicated and empowering perspectives on the lives of women.

key words: feminist anguish, marginalization, patriarchal discourse, Indian mythology, etc.,

In many ways, mythology has been at the center of various societies and civilizations impacting many facets of the human experience. It has also been an essential and living concept especially in India where contemporary application is highly intervened with the societal, political, cultural and religious environment of the country. Unlike the mythologies in most cultures, especially the West Indian mythology, Indian mythology has gained prominence in the everyday life of its people, as well as its popularity in being celebrated and studied across all ranges of society. In contrast to the West, where mythology is sometimes limited to the circles of some academic research one can find that in India, the mythology is a part of the society, reaching much deeper than the masses and becoming the part of the cultural and spiritual life.

By definition, myth is linked with the divine and brings solemn histories of gods, creation, the universe and the life thereafter. According to Wilkinson (2010), any human society has its mythology, a set of horrific stories of the gods and things of cosmic importance, since the beginning of creation to the afterlife. These tales have been shared among generations and they have been able to make people understand the universe and their existence in it. Frye also writes that literature may be regarded as reconstructed mythology, and its structure was built on the laws of myth. Myth is not necessarily founded upon the historical truth, but it is still a very great method of narration that pervades many disciplines like anthropology, psychology, religion, and sociology. It is an endeavour in which the human race seeks to find the answers concerning life and its dependence on the universe.

One of the most sacred and adored myths of India is the retellings of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Most of these epics are being reformulated in various forms, and these retelling can broadly be put into three categories. The first one involves factual translations which retain the feign and meaning of the original story. The second one is minor adaptations of the folk myths with the same setting. The third type is more radical, with elements of the myth reviewed and reinterpreted in a wholly new fictional account, which is not consistent with the historical one. Such a dynamical reinterpretation can be seen in such writers like Devdutt Pattanaik, Ashok Banker, Ashwin Sanghi, Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelkantan, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kavita Kane.

Kavita Kane brings out a new angle to the story of Shurpanaka, the sister of Ravana the character that is usually sidelined in the classic Ramayana in her work *Lanka's Princess*. Kane gives this forgotten character a new breathing life through the narrative, not the usual image of her as a villain, but the story and events that she is compelled to go through. The novel explores the modern problems including honour killings, gender discrimination, xenophobia, family strife and the physicality of women with some parallels on the similar mechanisms of strain between the ancient myths and the contemporary struggles. It is not only the reinterpretation of the character of Shurpanaka which gives Kane an alternative way of looking at the Ramayana, but also sheds light on how myths which are thought to be in the past, are so much needed today to reflect and help in solving problems that still much content our societies all around the world today. With the help of the novel, Kane reveals the timeless nature of the mythology to question and re-evaluate the current social problems, and thus ancient narratives become closer to modern readers.

Surapankha is a name that implies an evil, impetuous, and evil person. One of the reasons why Surapankha was a character is explained in an interview with Kane:

“Society has always ridiculed her. We take her role in the Ramayana so lightly, when in fact she's such a crucial character. And then she has been sidelined through the rest of the epic, whereas her brother Ravana is more fleshed out. I wanted to humanise her and make her real to people.” (Palat 2017)

This point of view disputes the widespread opinion of Surapankha as a villain. The novel narrates the tale in the peripheral view of Surapankha and gives a new and multidimensional characterization to the female. Surapankha was born to Rishi Vishravas and Kaikesi and was brought up with her brothers Ravan, Kumbha and Vibhishan. She was married to Vidyujiva even though her family did not approve, however, the marriage was broken according to a plan of the family. Vidyujiva has been executed due to his supposed intention of stealing the throne of Ravan and this is the tragedy that creates the urge of revenge in Surapankha. She goes with her son Kumar to the Dandak forest where she lost him fatally. Surapankha in addition takes advantage of both men in a move to cause a clash between them, which ends up being instrumental in the destruction of the clan of Ravan.

Since childhood, women are regarded as inferior and they are usually at the bottom of the societal ladder. Numerous women are discriminated against underground of their physical looks, more so color of their skin. The theory of the matrix of domination by Patricia Collins summarizes the interplay of the issues of ethnicity, gender, and oppression by class. The idea of Surapankha is a woman who became twice displaced and oppressed, in terms of her gender, and not belonging to her clan of Asura.

There has been a long-standing patriarchal discourse of writing these narratives and excluding and infantilizing women. Asian feminists however no longer stay in the fringe, reenacting, retelling and redefining these ancient legends in a way that conveys the women standpoint. In the *Lanka's Princess*, Kavita Kane voices Shurpanaka, making her a figure in the original Ramayana that is disfigured and an adulterous ogress to a strong woman that is assertive and courageous. Surapankha stands above hatred, loss, and rejection by virtue of Kane retelling it which gives it strength and determination. This is a feminist touch to the myth, a re-invention of her character making the novel a substantial work of mythology retelling.

“I've always believed that mythology can serve as a vast canvas for modern thought...” (Doddapaneni et al. 102).

Meenakshi was then renamed Shurpanaka and translates as one with fish-like eyes. The Princess of Lanka finds the chronicle of her progression as she loses form to formlessness. It talks of her abandonment and rejection by the mother, her being concealed by her brother Ravana about the secret of her real identity, her life in her father ashram as well as her eventual immersion in the love of her husband. Shurpanaka experiences a metamorphosis as a result of these experiences, where her eyes are likened to those of a girl but her nails have been compared to those of a woman, which are claw-shaped. Her own parents Vishravas and Kaikesi as well as her own brothers Ravan, Kumbhakarna and Vibhishan symbolize the inner powers of good and evil that she always swings in between.

The unfair treatment she gets both by her clan as well as her outsiders who mutilate her and the anger that she experiences due to her early rejection all drive the woman Shurpanaka into her revenge. Her mutilation makes her angrier, and causes her to become manipulative, cunning, and a forceful woman, like the one of Lanka. Her vicious and devastating anger are depicted in a bright way through the whole novel, and the latter can be described as the profound study of human nature, self-identity and looking for one personal place on the Earth.

The novel begins with the sentence, "It's a girl!". Having already three sons (1), this is a disillusionment of the mother (Kaikesi) of Shurpanaka, who she cannot find worthy of a daughter. The fact that Kaikesi was obsessed with the idea of Lanka being returned to her by her stepson Kuber makes her blind to the value of her daughter so that Shurpanaka is an unpleasant beginner to her great schemes. Kaikesi finds Shurpanaka as the one who has robbed her of her plans and she is getting upset as the birth of this girl disrupts her intentions. Tension existing between Kaikesi and her husband Vishravas is because of the decisions and the actions taken by Ravana and hence is sidelined as a consequence of his actions both in their family and the bigger picture. When at the age of five, she courageously attempts to take care of her brother Vibhishan, her mother rejects her attempts explaining,

Vibhishan is a boy and he is older than you are. he wants no protection of yours! (5).

Shurpanaka is therefore continually perceived as the weak (in comparison to other family members) other in her own family. This is reflected by the analysis presented by Simone de Beauvoir (1997) in her book *The Second Sex* that says: one is never born a woman, one is made one (249) implying that the way the society views women as the other is something learned. This othering alienates women, making them feel inferior as they are of the female gender and in most cases, their colour, culture, and status.

She tries to seek refuge in her brothers, Kumbhakarna and Vibhishan, but they cannot do anything with Ravana, on whose hands free will, he feeds off of her pain. The activities of Ravana make Shurpanaka feel frustrated and at the same time give her the lesson of being strong and self-sufficient. The patriarchal fear of a powerful independent woman is demonstrated when she faces Ravana and seeks vengeance on the murder of her pet by naming her Shurpanaka, a demon. But this does not stop Shurpanaka who accepts this new identity with a declaration,

"Should this stop me, then I am Shurpanaka" (8)

and an additional statement,

"Yes, I am a monster!" (9).

By taking herself in as her new name, Shurpanaka demonstrates her authority and independence and does not allow herself to be repressed by the efforts to subjugate her. Her stepbrother Kuber attempts to portray her femininity to seduce the Ravana and her other brothers but in vain. Shurpanaka is a non-conformist and her nails, her weapon, give her a chance to fight. She can withstand the repressive powers surrounding her, and despite the repression, Shurpanaka time and again demonstrates that she is a very powerful and brutal person, who cannot be underestimated and handled.

Surapankha has always been struggling with inferiority complexes associated with her

physical appearance and skin colour. Since she was born she has been made to feel inferior and Kaikesi, who is her mother, has doubted her value: how will this dark monkey make us luckier. (Kane, 3). These childhood experiences define how she views herself and she feels unsatisfied to her grandmother, Taraka. Surapankha then questions her,

Grandmother, could you make me beautiful with one of your potions? (20),

as she would say, she wished to have her looks changed. She tells her sadness by uttering,

"But I am neither of you; I am as black as the night sky!" (21)

As Kane (21) notes, she is ashamed of her skin tones. The demand that women conform to the standards of beauty especially the ideal of fair skin exists even now. But Kane provides a way out to this dilemma by use of wisdom of Taraka that informs Surapankha that

Beauty is in your thoughts and heart that you must believe. Nonetheless, you should love yourself first, however (22).

Her words to Surapankha stirred the feelings of the latter who understands the value of love to the self and that the beauty is inward. The wisdom contained in these words is eternal; it is a strong reminder of the young generation nowadays, of how vital inner power and self-acceptance is.

Vidujiva, a strong debaucherous king of the world, in the story falls in love with the Surapankha (at this point she is known as Meenakshi) not due to her beauty, but rather her cleverness, wit, and strength. He refers to her as his tigress, because she is intellectual, sensual, and not afraid. But Surapankha is rejected by her mother who asserts that she is skinny and much darker than her mother.

How can we expect good luck with the help of this black monkey? Her status of being single is permanent. (3).

This pejorative comment serves to support the negative body perception of beauty in society, in which the body, and especially skin colour is common in determining ones value. In his personal political motives, Ravana commands the assassination of Vidujiva, whom he suspects of real motives on the part of the king. Such an act of betrayal, of almost her whole family, causes Surapankha pain and anger, which eventually lead him to hatred of Ravana. She even swears, she resembled a tigress to me. When she saw a means of getting out, she would have made her escape. Nevertheless, she was overcome in her sorrow and raging with anger.

In my case, I would find it curative to even score. Due to his atrocious act, Ravana has to meet with death. (275)

It is during this instant that Surapankha swears to become the avenging Shurpanaka who takes solace in revenge and wants to render the life of her family a living hell.

Taking control of the fate of Ravana, Shurpanaka puts herself at the centre of the Ramayana story claiming her superiority. She tricks her son, Kumar, on how to fight in battle, a trick, which is influenced by the sorrow of his premature death. This is what inspires her to scheme on the downfall of Ravana by devising a scheme with Ram and Laxman. Shurpanaka is also a portrayed female that is sexually assertive and confident, but her advances are rejected and rebuked by the brothers who regard her seduction efforts as threats.

Researching the issue of the symbolic depiction of Sita and Shurpanaka in the Amarchitrakatha, Karline McLain (2018) explores the layers of symbols and female identity and power in the mythology. Shurpanakha is generally ready to express her sexual feelings when the two men are publicly approached and declares her sexual needs but when her demand is not received with acceptance she is ridiculed, instead of acceptance, she is penalized. Although it might appear that the threat to beat Sita, as the short-term impact of her mutilation, is the root of her issue, the real issue exists at a deeper level, and this is her gender, sexual orientation, and communal identity. Her mutilation would not have been required in case the purpose was just to conquer Shurpanakha. Her disfigurement can be considered a gendered penalty to her sexual offence. Disfigurement in legal texts of Indian countries was usually utilized as a punishment of sexual activity offenses and therefore this form of mutilation is not only some physical act of violence, but also a symbolic form that underlines the patriarchal practice of control over female bodies and their right to sexual activity.

Shurpanakha was mutilated not because she attacked Sita, but because she was sexually assertive. But Shurpanakha does not endure this humiliation solely due to her sexual assertiveness; her status as the "other" also plays a role in her defacement. The humiliation of the "other" woman plays a crucial role in communal struggles. (35)

Shurpanakha is viewed as the other lady, a lady who is a threat to the patriarchal system. In reply, the patriarchy imposes its power on her to mutilate, disfigure her, an act that acts to destroy her freedom of choice and affirm her ranked position. The result of this cruelty is the urge of revenge of Shurpanakha, which makes her a figure of rebellion. She is a voice that is not only raised to speak out against the family that has marginalized her but also the society at large that wants to repress her.

Shurpanakha, always devoid of kindness, in her quest to take revenge reckons one way of going about it is to invoke her disfigurement to drive Ravana against Rama, just in case she would somehow get some reprieve. The plan initiates the sequence of events resulting in the abduction of Sita, the succession of which causes the ruining of Ravana and his whole clan. The intrigue that she creates turns out to be her two-sided sword as she loses numerous people she loved, such as Meghnad, Kumbhakarna and others. Through these losses, Shurpanakha has not been affected in her determination because vengeance is a factor more powerful than any form of affection and attachment to family. She considers the horrible effects of her actions, but she is still determined to make the rightful revenge.

I didn't want Kumbha or his twin sons to perish, and I don't want Mehnad to die either. Ravana was the only one who was expected to perish on the battlefield. However, he was the last to perish. All those I once cherished would be sacrificed before him. (254)

The nature of Shurpanakha can be seen as the reflection of the statement made by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (2018) who claimed that people are naturally good but their nature is distorted by the evil of society. She is seeking revenge because of the abuse and neglect she received as a child, and her husband in addition to son died. These are the losses that feed her vengeful feelings and she is no longer known as the beautiful-eyed Meenakshi but as the long

nailed Shurpanakha.

The re-enactment of epic stories in English in the present world is very important in the nation building process particularly in a time wherein language and culture is also being deteriorated. The quest of the same origin has created a profound amount of attention on these retellings of mythology as it contributed to bring the whole nation together and create the feeling of belongingness. By resharing the story, Kane puts emphasis on victimisation of Shurpanakha, which is to propose that she was a victim rather than a villain. The images of the strong and brave women who do not fear to state their physical needs is greet in the literature.

Having reached Dandak, the hope of Shurpanakha increases, as she can use them as her chess piece in her revenge process. Fate however takes another turn. Her wish to have sex with either of them and the fact that she is jealous when she sees the beautiful Sita prompts her mutilation which further makes her marginalized. This makes her the personification of revenge who is willing to make all people remit the injustices that they have inflicted on her. Her aspirations of vigilante activities drive that Shurpanakha seeks revenge by being deadly and destroying everything in her path. The abduction of Sita, the devastation of the Ashoka Vana, the demise of her sisters and nephews and other people give her a degree of satisfaction, but do not considerably affect her. Her revenge is greater than her devoid affection to her family. She poses as the young maid named Chandra and tries to work with Mandavi who is the cousin of Sita and wife of Bharat. Shurpanakha distrusts and fears with her unknown powers when Sita tries to sketch Ravana, doing it instead. This makes rumours on the morality of Sita and she is exiled, which ultimately breaks the heart of Ram.

The final joy of the revenge that Shurpanakha seeks is the disfigurement of Urmila; she wants to kill Angad. Even though she manages to divide Sita and Ram in the most vicious way possible, she cannot hurt Angad because she perceives him as the image of her lost son and nephew. The fact that Lakshman is the one that responds when this lady challenges him of the murder of her son is a shocking blow to her character and this leads to a major transformation in her character. Urmila takes Shurpanakha to the next detachment level where she gets the actual reason behind the actions: her anger with the family and the society. Urmila tells her in a very gentle manner that she is angry with the universe; you did not survive by violence and revenge but because you yearned to your absent world (Kane 268).

Kane, in the ending of her mythological voyage depicts Shurpanakha as a disappointed but spiritually developed woman, who has come to terms with herself and with the world. She realizes when Lakshman tells her that her anger rather than her nails is her real weapon. She has been motivated not by her physical capabilities but by her anger. Similar to any weapon, her nails were guided by her anger. Under this knowledge, she that had earlier abhorred Lanka in her hatred of Ravana now misses to belong. She goes to the sea and tells the waves to back her up to Lanka so that she can find peace finally.

Even though the carnage that Shurpanakha inflicts as a way of avenging the injustices inflicted upon her is certainly unacceptable, this should be perceived in a larger context. This being the case, as much as the actions of Shurpanakha are wrong so are the actions of Ram who destroys almost as much as she destroys. Betrayal of his brother, Ravana, and his

cooperation with Ram to ruin Lanka as opposed to his betrayal of his brother cannot be accepted, though he does not openly show cruelty and hostility. However, the wrath of Shurpanakha is pictured as the pure evil whereas the acts of other people are hidden behind the curtain of supporting a hegemonical power (Ram) which is regarded to be the display of god. Her demise is not the end of the sorrows experienced by Shurpanakha. Revolting an avenging mind with a wicked and evil consciousness, she is reborn to be Trivakra, or Kubja, the hunchback that he is despised and humiliated by the society. After this, again, she is relieved of her burden under Krishna, who manifests the reason behind her physical defect, and her torturous experience of changing and finding redemption is complete.

'You were born as the beautiful princess Meenakshi, the sister of the asura monarch Ravan, but your wickedness transformed you into the monstrous Surpanakha...' he explained. 'Do you recall me? The man who rejected you, and in your rage you exacted terrible vengeance on me, my wife Sita, and my sibling Lakshman...?' (11-12)

Even a divine such as Krishna considers Kubja as masculine and dwells upon the anthropomorphism that even deities can exhibit. The reader realizes that Shurpanakha did not feel evil before but victimized on every occasion as the novel progresses. Although she brought so much devastation along with so many deaths, these were acts out of a very offended soul and not out of a malicious intent. Nevertheless, there is no automaticity that Kubja becomes a beautiful woman and gets married to Krishna, and the suffering diseases she goes through stops. The fact that this transformation does not negate the heavy emotional and physical scars she has shown the complexity of her life path, as well as her ongoing struggling, despite her transformed identity.

...Surpanakha was reincarnated many centuries later as Phulwati, the headstrong daughter of a local chieftain, in love with Pabuji, the war hero and fiercest warrior of their clan and the reincarnation of Lakshman. They will decide to marry, but on the day of the ceremony, he will be summoned to war, leaving his seven pheras unfinished and his bride alone. He will never return from the battlefield, perish on the battlefield. Krishna concluded that it was the same as before, with Lakshman, the perpetually celibate warrior, refusing to accept Surpanakha and Surpanakha being eternally unrequited in his rejection (273).

The ending certainly leaves a lot of doubts about godly justice. Is it a capricious and anthropomorphic god who manages to define the fate of people? Although the fact that Krishna making love to Kubja can be interpreted as compensations of his refusal to have a sexual relationship with Surpanakha, why is the same thing not the case with Lakshman? Why does Lakshman fail to experience his happy days with Surpanakha in an upcoming birth so as to provide him a chance to reconcile with his rejection and mutilation. Is there no place in the eye of Providence, of remorse? Is the human world the one in which all souls, who are audacious enough to challenge the order of things divine or, at least, of their human counterparts, must be doomed to eternity in the abyss? It is apparent that Surpanakha becomes more appealing to the reader, a victimized lassus instead of a prideful and evil princess of Lanka. Regardless of whether the reader can find out answers to such questions or

not, the character of Surpanakha remains taller in the minds and heart of the people who come across her tale.

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