



Narrative Reformation – An Analysis of Kavitha Kane's *Lanka's Princess*

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Abstract

Indian folklore and mythical history have significantly contributed to the development of literature in India. The writers from the past delved deeper into identifying the reasons closer to the expected or rather existing reality; which became the major source of acceptance of mythical characters and mystical ramifications. Revisiting the mythically designed characters and stories offer the writers with ideas and concepts which could be re-structured based on the existent theories. Kavitha Kane, contemporary Indian writer focuses on retelling the traditional tales not to just recreate or reignite the dead female characters, rather she makes them relive again, and the struggles undergone by them are examined from the insightful perspective. This paper deals with Kane's *Lanka's Princess* to understand the possible reasons for having revisited mythical history to recreate the character of Surpanakha.

Keywords: Mythology, Tradition, Malignant, Victim and Recreation

Kavitha Kane- Life and Works

Kavitha Kane an Indian born writer spent her days completely in Delhi, Patna and Pune. She had been a voracious reader since childhood, and the hobby of reading was ignited in her by her father, who had more than ten thousand books in his repository. She completed her post graduation in Mass communication and English Literature from Pune university. She later worked in various media houses and later became a full-time author. Her works are mainly based on female mythical characters from the Epics, who had been recreated by her in the present. The collection includes *The Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013), *Sita's Sister* (2014), *Menaka's Choice* (2015), *Lanka's Princess* (2016), *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* (2017), *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019), *Saraswati's Gift* (2021), and *Tara's Truce* (2023).

Introduction

Kavitha Kane is best known for retelling the traditional tales. The tales have made significant impact on the Indian people since time immemorial, and are from the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana. The characters and the stories narrated through the epics are part of culture and tradition pertaining to Hinduism; a religion with foremost share

in the Indian soil. The depiction of characters, Gods and narratives have bound the people together both religiously and spiritually. Ramayana, with its godly characters, massiveness in its depiction and spiritually inclined beliefs have had tremendous trajectory of influence on the people from past until present. On one hand the characters like Ram, Lakhsman, and Sita, Hanuman are considered reincarnations of deities, and on the other, there are characters like Ravana and his sister Surpanakha who gained the titles of being villainous throughout and it is the tussle of the good and the bad; the positive and the negative represented through such characters.

The characters or the tales are mythical and also mysterious. Myths in a way offer the platform to reflect the contemporary world through imaginations, Subbulakshmi in her thesis states, “Myths have been utilized as a huge apparatus to uncover some vital discussions of contemporary India. Issues of the contemporary world, discover their equals in the fantasies and tales of the past, giving new implications and experiences building up the topic.” (2) Kane’s fiction oriented on the most important and malignant character brings to the forefront, the undeniable truth that any individual is forced to become a certain kind due to circumstantial gravity and vulnerability. Surpanakha, a simple villain, with vengeful nature, is also a victim since childhood, which in particular is a psychological reason identified in the contemporary world to be the reason behind individual’s transition. Surpanakha is portrayed with a difference by Kane. She is shown as a tragic woman with complex and maligned nature.

A Brief Summary

Lanka’s Princess revolves around the life of the protagonist Surpanakha, who is the younger sister of famous and influential Ravana, Vibhishna and Kumbhakarna. She is named Meenakshi after birth, but her birth is not celebrated even by her mother Kaikesi. She indeed wanted a son, which reflects the gender inequality of contemporary society. Despite being born in an influential royal lineage, she could not gain significance as her brothers, thus, the pessimism birthed inside of her. Her mother constantly neglected and hated her and even elder brothers treated her with coldness. The cold and dejected behaviour developed within her made her to be christened Surpanakha, which literally meant person with sharp nails.

Her love life and marriage with Vidyujjihva is shattered by her brother Ravana. She remains normal for a very short period, the desire for power and colonizing kingdoms, Ravana, attacks Vidyujjihva's kingdom. The absence of mere contemplation, before attacking the brother-in-law, pushes Surpanakha vouch revenge over his brother. She considers him to be the direct killer of her husband. She burns with vengeful desire of ruining Ravana completely. Her exile into Dandaka forest is to plot against Ravana, she believes, his arrogance, desire and power were directly responsible for destroying her life.

Her encounter with Rama and Lakshmana in the forest provides her with utmost reason to plot against her brother. Her moves are calculative. She falls for Rama initially and then Lakshmana, but the mock and rejection from their end aggravate her further. Lakshmana mutilates her nose and ears, which routes her back to Ravana, with the reason to take revenge and destroy him completely by directly bringing Rama and Lakshmana in the plot. She is aware of Ravana’s weakness for beautiful women. Her description of Sita instigates in him the desire to attain her. He falls prey in her plot, to avenge for sister’s honour, he decides to abduct Sita, thus vengeful tale kickstarts.

She is happy seeing the destruction of Lanka, her brothers and war of Rama and Ravana. Her manipulation leads to the catastrophic circumstances, by which she attains her long-awaited revenge.

Review of Literature

Kumar, Arun in his article “Reimagining Mythology in Contemporary Literature: A Study of Kavitha Kane’s work” posits, the novelist delves deeper into the mythologies and brings to the brim the inner thoughts and emotions of the characters. The in-depth analysis provides a special attention to those portrayals beyond the traditional depiction. She brings relatability through her works is what the researcher opines, “She meticulously researches the cultural and historical context of the myths she retells, ensuring that her narratives are rooted in authenticity. This attention to detail enhances the reader's immersion into the ancient world and makes the characters more relatable.” (652)

In the work “Women Identity and Self-Assertion: Study of Kavita Kane’s Mythological Novels” the researchers opine the women characters portrayed in the selective works are not the victims of patriarchal society. They did not cater to the desires of men completely and also opposed them optimistically, “The victory of the main female characters, Ahalya and Satyawati in the novel provides an optimistic and logical message to the people around the world that their life is in their hand and if they have the intention and guts to protest the impediments enclosing their path then they can extricate themselves.” (5754)

“A study of perspective writing with reference to Kavita Kane’s Sita’s sister” an article published in 2020 studies the work under different perspective. A narrative of different kind, which is tweaked and twisted by the author to materialize the supremacy of the character she believed stood strong against the cruelty of time and tide, “Sita’s sister gives the due respect to a woman who stood tall at a time when giant characters fell. Her perseverance, passion and liberal mind make her great while turmoil, suspicions and weariness make her human. The author lives the life of a practical and passionate woman through the character’s voice.” (4900)

Vindictiveness to Victimization

Suparnakha’s character appears in Ramayana. She is portrayed as a catalyst for the war in the epic. She becomes the main reason for vengeful history associated with the story. She is portrayed as a villainous entity totally exuding her villainous venom over those who do not oblige with her desires. There is no significant portrayal of hatred from either the mother or the brothers, in the actual narration of Ramayana. She grew into a sharp-witted and vengeful persona, true to her nature the circumstances around altered her nature to a larger extent. As her fate had decided she became a victim after her marriage as well. Her brothers who are considered stronger than her had significant impact on her. She had been pampered and her brother Ravana showers love on her as well, which is evident from the fact that the moment she complains with the mutilated state to Ravana he decides to fight for her.

Kane in her revision offers a different perspective to the character. She is considered more complex and a victim in re-interpretations. She is victim of the fate, devoid of love and affection from people of her own family result in consequent chain of events that lead to her vengeful story of definite significance.

The narrative voice brings major difference in the two works. The original portrayal of Surpanakha is considered to be chaotic; she is the agent of chaos and malice. She is not an ordinary woman or a praiseworthy princess but a demon exuding wickedness. The war of dharma is consequence of her act. The moment she comes in contact with Rama, she is flattered by him and his majestic looks, she is determined to present herself as a damsel against her real demonic outlook, but Rama rejects her, and so does Lakshmana. The mutilating act of Lakshmana leads to revenge against the entire clan. It sets forth the war of good against evil and lords against demons. Valmiki's Ramayana which is considered to be the pioneering text for later creations, captures the story 'dharma' and 'adharma' gloriously.

Suparnakha is an ugly, evil and demonic figure Rakshashi in the original creation. She is not a victim of fate or circumstances, rather she is born evil and has all the triggering reasons within to emulate with the aura of Ravana. She triggers the inner desire of Ravana; the weakness for beautiful women and lust. She is herself abandoned intrinsically and immoral internally; and falls for Rama lustfully. She disguises to present herself beautiful before Rama; the feeling of lust is sudden which eventually transforms into jealousy towards Sita. Sita is the reason for Rama to reject her, and this truth annoys her.

She is used as a channel to reveal the truth that 'Karma' and 'dharma' are two inseparable concepts. Her vengeance on one hand, Lakshmana's mutilating action on the other bring fateful events thereafter. Rama who is considered an incarnation of perfection does not leave any page unturned while disgracing Surpanakha. He respects and adores women in general and his wife in particular but his actions and commands make him guilty towards her, thus he also undergoes the consequences of 'dharma', while describing the underrated nature of major characters Aditi Dirghangi is of the view that,

The character of Surpanakha has been condemned on the grounds of body, colour, choice and gender. On one hand Rama is shown as a chivalrous protector of women, yet on the other when he is seen commanding Lakshmana to mutilate Surpanakha for transgressing the gender boundaries, there are hardly any dissenting voice. (9)

She is sharp-witted and psychologically ardent in analysing people. She is acquainted with her brother Ravana's psyche and nature, this helps her in becoming the catalyst instigating inner desires of Ravana towards Sita and awakening the vile demon within him. She is grotesque in appearance, with portly stomach, harsh voice, and sharp nails for which she was christened Surpanakha. Adding to her grotesqueness was the mutilation undergone by her. The deformed physical appearance adds on to her demonic nature. She acts decisively, which results in transgressions against righteous people. She is not wise to understand her immoral deformity.

In contrast to the character of Surpanakha portrayed in the epic Ramayana, one could find a completely different picture describing her personality in contrast to the understanding through previous mythical works. Here Kane in *Lanka's Princess (2017)* transports her personality from being vengeful unto a victim's position, "This novel narrates the plight of Surpanakha, from a young girl ridiculed and neglected for her looks, to her strong and independent choices in adult life refuting the stranglehold that her brothers had on her life, for which she is

ultimately punished by a highly judgemental society that never forgives such transgressions. The novel is a gynocentric retelling of the Ramayana with Surpanakha as the protagonist narrating her neglected story.” (9)

Kane’s portrayal of Surpanakha as the protagonist of Lanka’s princess represents a liberated woman. She does not comply with traditional and submissive woman, rather is modern in her thinking and transcends the limitations of the society, “Though Kavita Kane’s Lanka’s Princess is set in the Treta Yuga, the character of Surpanakha has more similarities with an accomplished and liberated 21st century woman than any of her contemporaries. (9) She fails to receive the love and tenderness from her mother and brother, which renders her emotionally feeble, despite subduing environment around, she grows into a strong woman. She does not possess the devilish or demonic attributes of Ramayana’s Surpanakha, but is often found to be victim of conventional chauvinistic society.

Victimization of Surpanakha begins with her birth, as it shows how gender-biased the members of her family were, including her mother. Despite being a woman, her mother is an embodiment of gender inequality, “This girl-child has cheated me of my plans” (LP 2). Her condescending behaviour towards the sons reflect she disdained the birth of a girl child. She body-shames her for the looks and demeanour, and literally calls her ugly, ““She hardly looks beautiful or like me. In fact she is quite ugly!”(LP 2) Such harsh treatment from a mother is quite unexpected, and it leaves a dent within her forever.

Similar to her mother, the brothers also abused her. She grew up in a family devoid of love, unity and compassion, and for her parents, sons meant the world. She was always humiliated and treated dismayingly. The killing of her favorite pet by Ravana as it had eaten the herbal plants reflects the hatred he inherited within. It inadvertently meant neither sister, nor her pet held any significance. One could relate to the murder of Surpanakha’s husband too, as he was nothing more than like that small pet animal which he had killed in the past. She is often rebuked, demoralised and ridiculed. Surpanakha’s birth is considered unnecessary, and her growth is accompanied with rebukes and later life filled with pain. She is made feeble both mentally and physically. Her family neglects her completely fails to fulfil her desires, even after her marriage, she is not allowed to spend the life happily. After a brief moment of happiness, she was pushed into bereavement by her own brother, “Her anger was directed at a family, which destroyed her identity, questioned her choices, ignored her values, and killed the love of her life in the guise of the safety of Lanka. The grief of being widowed by her own brothers was all-consuming and she imposed an exile on her own self in the Dandaka forest, far away from Lanka.”

Surpanakha’s exile into forest with her son represents her exile from life. She exiles herself of normalcy. Even at the forest she is shown to be ill-treated by Rama and Lakshmana, she is shamed for having lustful desires for men, and mutilated emotionally. She is born normal but is made abnormal by the society; including her own family members. Women being suppressed socially had been an issue since time immemorial. The examination of her life by Kane is to throw lights on the forgotten and unattended phase of Surpanakha. She is considered feeble, undesirable and ridiculous by everyone around her. The vengeful nature of Surpanakha is resultant of her painful life. Her decision to revenge her brother and the two men Rama and Lakshmana further create the plot for the was in the future. Her life makes her shrewd to link the malignant people into an untoward relationship, which marks an end of happiness of those who had ruined her life.

Surpanakha, is portrayed to be strong, self-reliant and courageous. She is made malignant by the society which includes even her own family members. She is considered unwanted but she makes herself the most important person amidst all by her presence. She does not confine herself within the circle of gender role. Her feminism is replaced by chauvinism and she succeeds as a woman in the patriarchal society.

Conclusion

A woman is not born a weakling, the society makes her one, Surpanakha's character represents this truth vividly. Kavitha Kane had given life to the forgotten and dead woman through imaginary work. She had tried to enlighten upon the factors responsible behind emotional breakdown of a woman. She is not justifying the act of Surpanakha, but brings out the possible reasons that could transform any individual into malicious person. Surpanakha's portrayal by Kane makes the readers think, if she had antithetical treatment since childhood, had she been under the positive and motivating ambience, the Ramayana war would never have occurred. Gender discrimination and social injustice paved the path for her destructive life. Surpanakha is portrayed as a woman, a human by Kane, the human side of hers could have been beautiful if people around her had accepted her, but the rejection due to every possible untoward reason made her what the people perceived her as, 'the demoness'. Ramayana offered us with a woman, a demon who invited destruction; but Kane has given the readers a woman, a human being, by unmasking her; in her true self. Woman is powerful enough to change the fate of an entire nation, and Surpanakha is a pioneering example of the same. 'Dharma' always is victorious over 'adharma' and life of Surpanakha reflects the truth, she is indeed victorious, she is able to destroy and take revenge making her one of the strongest and self-made-woman depicted in Indian traditional and mythological narratives. She proved herself to everybody, gender discrimination and suppression in a society could never deter the intention and ambition of a woman.

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