



# Journey from a Victim to that of a Villain: Critical Analysis of the Untold Tale of Transformation and Vengeance in Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*

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**Abstract:** The study discusses the way myths express cultural ideas and values, highlighting the significance of reinterpreting traditional narratives by giving voice to the suppressed characters. It then delves into Surpanakha's transformation from an innocent young girl to a vengeful woman and illustrates the manner in which her progress has been influenced by cultural prejudices, abusive family members and personal tragedies. Her desire for vengeance is fueled by her experiences of being excluded because of her dark complexion and gender. It also accentuates Surpanakha's relationship with family members especially her mother's ongoing disparagement upon her, contributed to her identity issue and hatred for herself. The analysis summarizes Surpanakha's development from a victim of circumstance to a villain motivated by retribution, which captures the complexity and depth of her character. Kavita Kane has humanized the character Surpanakha and has beautifully made the readers to sympathize with Meenakshi and hate Surpanakha.

**Key words-** Mythology, marginalization, dark-complexion, hatred, humiliation

Myth is an allegorical story based on culture and religious belief. Even if does not tell us about the true events, a myth conveys facts about the universe or humans. It is passed orally through ages by sagas or priests. Myth explains how a particular culture came into existence by providing a sense of ordered life. The foremost function of myth is to provide rationalization for the adopted ritual. Myths grant stability to human culture. According to Jung, Myths are the expressions of the primordial images in the collective unconscious of man. In the beginning, man had certain expressions and received them in their psyche in the form of primordial images. Levi Strauss claims in this book *The Raw and the Cooked* (1970), that people do not think in terms of myth but it is myth that operates people's mind through their id or conscious realm of the people.

Every country has one text or the other that serve as the foundation for its culture. India has many epics but *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are considered to be the oldest and most celebrated stories. Indian epics were written in Sanskrit and they have guided the Hindu way of thinking and belief system. It is believed that Indian epics are partially based on historical events. Indian oral epics are filled with didactic material which teach moral and ethical lessons and it tells us about the happening that molded our culture. Indian epics provide the characteristics of Indian- culture based beliefs, values, etiquette and rituals. India is diverse country with many religious practices and cultural habits which includes the epic of the nation with evocative religious background.

Contemporary authors like Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni, Devudutt Pattanaik, Kavita Kane have tried to answer unending questions and mysteries through their works. The writers make an effort to enhance the richness of Indian mythology and demonstrate the grandeur in modern times. Indian mythologies which are austere in nature have undergone many interpretations in various parts of culture. *Ramayana* itself has three hundred versions. Indian mythological narratives appear in numerous ways with Gods, demons, fight for good versus evil and triumph of good. So, mythological novels are the museum of artefact but they are not yet extinct.

Kavita Kane writes about the forgotten female characters in myth by retelling the narrative through the point of view of women. Her famous works are *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen*, *Menaka's Choice*, *Sita's Sister* and *Lanka's Princess*. Reinterpretation and retelling of mythology in the modern era serve as a bridge that connects the distant past and the present time, at the same time linking people to the ancient times while also making them pertinent to the current texts. This process of revisioning is a deliberate approach to give visibility to the voices that have failed notices enclosed by the prominence of traditional narratives. Thus, the aim of the revisionist writing is to spotlight the individuals and communities who have been socially oppressed whether on the basis of caste, race, gender or ideology. So, this form of creative reinterpretation is instrumental in carving out a place for representation and expressions of cultural groups that are subordinated and have been historically sidelined.

The novel *Lanka's Princess* is not a story from Surpanakha's point of view but it is a story of Surpanakha and recounts the events that changed her from an innocent daughter who loved her father like any other girl child to a demoness lady who initiated a war between Ram and Ravan which killed her son, brothers and also their sons. Right from her birth she had been facing humiliation and marginalization because of her dark complexion and physic. She did not get enough love from their parents as her brothers got. Kaikesi was very much bothered about Ravan, on the other hand, Vishravas was concerned about Vibhishan and Kumbhakarna. The very first line of the novel is itself "It's a girl" (12) by Kaikesi who thought she will be useless and unfortunate to her family although she was having three sons. Vishravas named her Meenakshi as she was having fish-shaped golden eyes. Her mother was proud of Ravan's skills in warfare and her father was happy about Vibhishan's studies. Each of them were concerned about their favourites and none of them appreciated Meenakshi for her individuality. She was constantly disregarded, ignored and condemned at the ashram.

One day Raavan killed Surpanakha's pet lamb, Maya and that made her very furious. Angered Surpanakha tore her brother's skin and exposed the flesh on his wrists using her nails, Ravan became helpless and he was shaken by his sister's act. From then on Ravan called her by the name Surpanakha because of her long and sharp claws. Kaikesi outraged on Surpanakha and spoke, '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! 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!' ..... Was her daughter a monster? (12).

The word 'monster' echoed in her ears often, embedded deep in her memory and thought only her nails would protect her. Despite the repeated attempts to suppress her voice, Surpanakha always managed to establish herself as a powerful and aggressive individual. It was always Kumbhakarna, who was there at her tough times, he paid special attention to her, consoled her and encouraged her. Arrival of her grandparents made her happy and her grandmother Taraka, was the only one in the family to bestow the love she deserved and always appreciated her. She never accused her for her dark complexion or physic as her mother did. Meenakshi one day asks her grandmother 'Can you make me beautiful with one of your potions, Nani? (28) this shows how the taunts of mother about her complexion has affected her. Meenakshi's self-hatred stemmed from Kaikesi's constant complaints about her appearance and gave her a belief that she did not meet the society's standard for what it meant to be beautiful.

Meenakshi had always been a misfortunate child in the eyes of Kaikesi right from the beginning. Kaikesi hoped for a bright youngster who, along with his elder siblings Ravan, Vibhishan, and Kumbhakarna, would help her realize her aspirations of regaining control of the radiant city of Lanka from Kuber's control and establishing an Asura kingdom where her three children would rule across the three worlds. She was aggravated and deceived by the introduction of Meenakshi, 'an ugly girl with a dark complexion'. This reminds us of the young girl's ingrained conviction that her life is tragically pointless. Meenakshi was mostly mistreated and abused by her mother, who ought to have shown her more kindness and love. However, it did not imply that her childhood was devoid of affection and joy. Kaikesi's mother and father, her grandparents used to lavishly shower their affection on their daughter's children. Meenakshi's happiness doubled whenever her grandparents visited her. Taraka, her grandmother taught her magic though Vishravas and Kaikesi were

unhappy about the art of magic. Taraka's teaching skills in magic filled the girls' heart with boundless happiness.

Meenakshi, who has been ostracized and rejected, finds love and acceptance in Viduyjiva, a strong rival monarch who admires her for her intelligence, cunningness and strength rather than for her remarkable dark beauty. She marries him despite her family's opposition because they assumed that Viduyjiva was using Meenakshi as a pawn to usurp Lanka. But, Meenakshi was very stable in her decision as her love for Viduyjiva made her blind because she was able to feel loved only by him which her parents either her brothers had not been capable to do so. He adores her and addresses her as 'my tigress', highlighting her intellectuality and mental strength. This is in disparity with her mother's insulting comment 'How is this dark monkey going to bring us good fortune? No one will ever marry her!' (6). After twelve years of married life, they were blessed with a boy baby and named their dear son, Sambhu Kumar. It was only in the presence of her husband she could find a soul where she could express all her worries and doubts while trying to forget the ill-treatment by her own family members.

Meenakshi felt as though she was rarely treated as a family member, especially while everyone else in the family was preoccupied with important concerns. Nobody appeared to care about her or what she had to say. As a result of implicit or explicit disregard for herself and her viewpoint, she practically lost any sense of emotion or sensitivity for all her family members notably, Ravan and her mother. She became a highly complexed person as a result of feeling unbidden in her family and she was reluctant to forgive anyone for their misdeeds except her father. Among all this she could find herself comfortable and wanted only with Viduyjiva, her husband, but that too did not last long.

Ravan had killed Viduyjiva in the battle as he thought he was wishing to dethrone Ravan to make himself rule Lanka and also, he was cheating on his sister. But she never thought her husband was ambitious to usurp the throne of Lanka or had an eye on other women. She refuted every allegation because she hardly found any reason to suspect her husband in the twelve years of marriage. Meenakshi could not accept the death of her husband with whom all her heart was. Her entire family was unrepentant about the murder of her husband and compelled her to believe that she was having blind trust on her husband. This aroused bitterness and she became determined to take revenge on those people who had killed her husband, the centre of her world. Instead of showing all her anger towards her family members, she decided to leave the palace with her five-year old son and move to Dandak forest. She decided to raise her son in a way that he would avenge his father's death and make Ravan die in front of her eyes. She was poisoning her son all through the years to kill her brother who was so much concerned about her, protective about her and loved her. Again, to her fate, she heard the shattering news that her son was beheaded by an unknown person while he was meditating to ask a boon from Brahma.

From, here begins a transformation in her story. Right from her birth till the early stages of growth, she was a simple girl happy to play in the lap of the surrounding natural beauty and content with the few people and the few resources she had. She resembled every essence of nature, even a slightest change in the circumstance would stir her emotions be it joy or sadness. Her desire to demand or receive more and more love, attention, and importance from everyone around her, whether they were her parents, grandparents, brothers, friends, or nature, among others, developed into an insatiable desire as she grew older. This desire was the root of all of her suffering. She had rarely thought beyond the boundaries of the family. She loved her father more than her mother and preferred him, who was tough with her and partially responsible for the person she became.

Vibhishan followed the footprints of his father earning the title loyal son; however, he was disloyal to his brothers. On the other hand, Ravan and Kumbhakarna followed their mother's wishes living a life in a same way that their maternal grandparents, Sumali and Taraka lived. The elder ones were the mother's favourite and the younger ones their father's. But, Surpanakha's (i.e., Meenakshi) life became unimaginable. She never took sides either with her father's or mother's or with any of her brothers. As time passed by, her hatred and suspicion upon her family members grew stronger. She assumed Ravan used her as a pawn in the plot because he was afraid of the share in the kingdom. Neither Kumbhakarna or Vibhishan could help her, as Ravan would banish them out of the country. She was engulfed in desolation because of her husband's and her son's death.

Surpanakha saw Ram and Lakshmana one day when she was alone in the forest wandering. She felt a rush of hot blood in as she watched the handsome brothers tighten the strings on their bows, showing off their powerful muscles beneath their tanned skin. She planned to use Ram and Lakshmanan as a pawn in the plot to take revenge on her brother. Her fury was focused at a family, that under the pretence of ensuring the safety of Lanka, had killed the love of her life, ruined her identity, challenged her decisions, disregarded her principles, and questioned her choices. She thought they would be easily allured to her sexually and fall as a prey to her plan like other men. She rushed forward to express her ravaging lust for them but both of them declined. She

stood in the centre and saw two brothers who were both attractive and vicious, smirking and making fun of her. She attempted to assault Sita in the wrath of being rejected and humiliated but Lakshmana stopped her. Ram commanded Lakshmana to impart a lesson to the unvirtuous Surpanakha that she will never forget. He ordered Lakshmana to mutilate her “maim her” (177) a penalty that will serve as a reminder for her shameful crime.

Lakshmana slashed off Surpanakha’s nose and ears with his sword. She wondered whether this punishment was for transgressing the moral boundaries or for assaulting Sita. Humiliated Surpanakha went to her brother to convey all the events that happened in the forest and initiated an anger in him against the two brothers. Nevertheless, she did not forget to describe the beauty of Sita which in addition aroused the passionate desire in Ravan for Sita. Surpanakha was clever enough that even if her tribulation did not move Ravan to take revenge on them, the extraordinary beauty of Sita would definitely force him to take any action. Ravan captivated Sita for his desire and also to avenge his sister. Humiliated Surpanakha became the cause of war between Ram and Ravan and for the fall of Lanka.

In the war, she lost her two brothers except Vibhishan who allied with Ram and also lost all her nephews. As per her plan she saw the death of Ravan and also the grief of her mother. But then her thirst for revenge did not end, she also wanted to take revenge on Ram and Lakshman. She successfully separated Ram and Sita but she was unable to kill Lakshman and his son. Flash of her son’s image came in front of her eyes by seeing Lakshmana’s son. She realized that the children should not suffer anything because of their parent’s action just like her son.

Surpanakha is one of the most overlooked and misunderstood character in Ramayana. Even though she was given a very limited space in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, her role is unquestionably significant because she was the catalyst for the Lankan war. Though there are many retellings of *Ramayana* in the contemporary era, Kavita Kane’s *Lanka’s princess* recounts the unheard voice of Surpanakha and leaves a memorable image in one’s psyche. In mythologies, women have been frequently portrayed as a one-dimensional character. They are either glorified or defied, as chaste virgins, never-ending suffering who revel in self-sacrifice or a wicked temptress who is sexually assertive and aggressive. Women have been consistently blamed in mythologies for their inquisitiveness which has led to the downfall of humanity.

This does not mean that Kavita Kane sympathized with the character Surpanakha, rather she recounts the events that has happened in the life of Surpanakha from her childhood to her death to convey the fact that one person is not born evil but the circumstances in their life make them evil. Her quest for justice for her haunting childhood memories of mistreatment and ignorance, as well as for the death of her husband and son, channelize the emotion of vengeance in her, turning her into a demon and completing her metamorphosis from a beautifully-eyed Meenakshi to the long, sharp-nailed Surpanakha.

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