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Lanka's Princess as an Art of Reclaiming Beauty

Dr. M S Gayathri Devi¹

Abstract

This paper revolves around the idea of beauty as represented and circulated in literature, which becomes the norms for defining the same. The way in which Surpunakha is groomed, treated and inch by inch described in ancient mythology becomes the substance of discussion in Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*. The paper hence analyses the whole known story from the standpoint of Surpunaka, and her reasons for being so from different angles.

Key words

Beauty, Myths, Hypertextuality, Intertextuality, Feminism, Stereotypes, Marginalisation, objectification, Gender roles

“Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder”. These words can be taken as a more profound realisation than mere quotes. The concept of beauty itself is a very debatable one as it can be. It is defined “as a combination of qualities, such as shape, colour, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight “by Google. But this is something that varies according to perspective. Beauty, according to ancient India is not something that would be slim, and fair. The walls of our age-old temples speak about another form of beauty which could be dark and plum-looking. But these western concepts of beauty invaded India when it fell into the hands of Colonial Britain.

India is a country that holds the age-old traditions and culture close to its heart while moving fast towards the future. Culture and mythology are two centres that dwell deep into the concepts of beauty

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and its different shades. The temple walls and scriptures highlight the concept of beauty that the culture upholds. One of the early poets, Magha describe beauty as "sane ksane yannavatamupaiti tadeva rupam ramaniyatayah" (Rajendran, 164), which is roughly translated as 'That which appears anew is the nature of the beautiful'.

Myths are traditional tales that have become legends. Some claim to be facts, while others might only be making up information. Myths have more meaning in ancient and contemporary civilizations than in ordinary stories. They are religious narratives that describe the universe and human experience. The myth around the world has different views on women and mythology. Human activity and the reasons underlying human behaviour are central themes in Indian literature. By portraying both Indians living in India and those living outside of India, it depicts Indian history, culture, customs, and the spiritual element of India.

In India, mythology plays a significant part in all literary genres and is admired by people of all ages. A collection of grandly written tales about legendary or real-life heroes, in which God manifests as a person to spread truth and dharma, is referred to as mythology. The Hindu epic Ramayana has come to be seen as the standard for morality over the years. It occupies a special place in India and provides a suitable example of ideal conduct and virtue. The epic is a homage to Lord Rama's heroic accomplishments and exemplary character. He is referred to as the "ideal man" or "Uttampurush" because he embodies dharma and is the model of moral behaviour. His likeness is revered, and people honour his deeds. Despite being regarded as a model of morality and ethics, the epic contains instances and situations that disprove Rama's reputation as the righteous one.

Whenever we look into Ramayana, we can see the most handsome, perfect man called Ram and a very ideal, beautiful, fair wife Sita. On the other hand, Surpanakha, sister of Ravan is represented in Ramayana as an ugly, adulterous, misshapen lady with demonic knowledge who briefly plays the role of seducing Ram. The feminist writers have questioned Surpanakha's double marginalisation in mainstream narratives due to her communal and gendered identity through the use

of revisionist myth-making methodologies, examination of the female psyche, and subjective story-telling techniques. By recreating the story from Surpanakha's point of view, they attempted to counteract her icy silence and give her a voice. They have made an effort to paint her as a strong-willed, independent-minded, revolutionary woman who follows a life of her choosing and is punished for her candour and for having the nerve to make a man feel special. The majority of popular writers have represented Surpanakha as a dark, ugly, overweight demon in contrast to the radiant loveliness of her foil Sita to emphasise the binary opposition between Sita and Surpanakha.

Between his upright hero Rama and his evil villain Surpanakha, Valmiki provides a stark contrast. The one with a giant stomach faced the slender-waisted one, the one with malformed eyes faced the one with large eyes, the one with copper-coloured hair faced the one with excellent hair, the one with an ugly form faced the one with a handsome form, the one with a horrible voice faced the one with a pleasant voice, the hideous and ugly one faced the young one, the one who was harsh in speech faced the one who was sweet in speech, the one who was extremely wicked in conduct faced the one who was good in conduct, the ugly one faced the handsome one. (Debroy 39)

However, Kavitha Kane has also given importance to the character of Surpanakha in the book *Lanka's Princess* and has described her as a strong, aggressive, and independent woman with all the qualities associated with femininity who manages to endure hatred, loss, and rejection from others. The "stories of crime" that make us shudder to read are actually about us, Cixous claims, "albeit under an assumed name, behind a pseudonym." (84). Kane has characterised her retelling as an attempt to fill a gap left by Surpanakha's legacy in the many Ramayana tales. Instead of telling us some ancient myths about Gods and Goddesses as carelessly supposed, it informs us about Man and his errors and fallacies (Interview by Tushar Kaushik, 2017).

According to Kane, mythology is a lengthy metaphor with underlying principles. It is a literary device that allows for the telling and retelling of stories, in her words (Interview by Chakravarthy 2018). *The Ramayana* is retold in *Lanka's Princess* from Surpanakha's point of

view. Intertextuality in this work is obligatory for Kane as she is trying to recreate the greatest epic of all time in India. But the challenge is to deconstruct the story in a new way. She is the lone child of Kaikesi and Rishi Vishravas and the lone sibling of Ravan, Kumbhakaran, and Vibhishan. Meenakshi, which translates to “the one with fish-shaped eyes,” was her original name. In a patriarchal society, her identity is obscured. Her change from Meenakshi, a girl with beautiful eyes, to Surpanakha, how her arrogance and rage destroy everything.

Surpanakha is both good and bad because of her mother Kaikesi and her brother Ravan, as well as the guidance of her father Vishravas, her husband Vidyujiva, and their two brothers Kumbhakarna and Vibhishan. But as a loving wife, mother, and aunt, she vows to get revenge and vengeance for the injustice meted out to her by the patriarchal society despite the seething bitterness she has felt since infancy as a result of rejection and neglect. In the conflict between Ram and Ravan, she is crucial. By faking events between Ram and Ravan, resulting in a horrific conflict and the annihilation of her family. It is heartbreaking to see how she changes from a kind, sympathetic, and beautiful princess to a ruthless and spiteful Surpanakha, revealing her internal conflict. This illustrates how women were subjected to double oppression because they were restricted inside the royal gates and denied the right to travel, with the justification that they had no exposure to the outside world. Surpanakha is in a similar circumstance because her brother's constraints prevented her from experiencing the outside world. Ravan, her brother, made all of her life's decisions. “Women are continually reminded where their ‘place’ is and that they are put back in their place, should they wander out,” Henley and Freeman (474).

The two views of familial and societal marginalisation can both be used to understand and explain the other. Marginalisation frequently begins at birth. Whether a person is hegemonic or marginal is primarily determined by their birth. Gender is the primary factor at the societal and familial levels. If one is unlucky enough to be born a woman, gender is typically the first factor that pushes them out of society and their families. However, this categorization would appear to be overly simplistic because, when marginalisation is examined

more closely, there are further layers of prejudice and oppression that emerge and fall apart.

A woman's ability to obtain a position in a privileged area, even among the fringe, depends heavily on both beauty and chance. One must accept that the Asian idea of praising the fair over the dark in terms of complexion is no different from its western equivalents. As a result, a girl who is born dark and whose birth is marked by tragedy or death is dragged even further into the bottomless pit of prejudice and persecution. She is required to behave more submissively and silently there to make up for being 'unworthy and unseemly'. Women who are born with physical abnormalities rank last among the marginalised. The majority of the time, their own families and cultures reject them, abhorring their mere shadows and expressing their mockery and disgust by subjecting them to physical, verbal, and psychological harm. Such ladies swing between life and death with utter unsteadiness, unable to enter one and far too afraid to voluntarily enter the other.

Surpanakha has thus come to represent the demoniac and immoral woman in Hindu culture. She is portrayed as a monster whose nose is severed by Lakshmana at Ram's command because of her attempt at infidelity. Because she has challenged the Aryan dominant society's established order, this misogynistic narrative characterises her as "inhuman." It has been said that the Hindu epic *The Ramayana* serves as a guide for ethical behaviour. Ram has been praised as *Maryada Purshusuttam*, so it is crucial to study the mutilation of Surpanakha from a feminist perspective because it reveals Ram's thoughts on female sexuality in Indian society. But it also looks at how these stories influence Hindu cultural ideals. Kané presents the female lead as a woman and queries the choice of Surpanakha for the stunning Meenakshi. As Kané explained, "I wanted to go beyond the stereotype. There is no denial of the fact that her nose was cut off which I think was one of the most violent episodes in the Ramayana. But whatever happened to her was it because of her actions? Was she a vamp or a victim?" (2016).

Often the beautiful Surpanakha can be taken into account with the Greek character Medusa. Based on the Greek tale, Medusa was cursed

by the goddess Minerva, who transformed her into an evil figure with snake-like hair and a glance that could turn anyone into stone. The warrior Perseus killed her by cutting off her head. According to Cixous, this myth describes Medusa's destruction as an effort by men to silence women's voices and sever women's languages. Furthermore, Freud's contemporary psychoanalytic analysis, which claims that the head of the Medusa recalls the male of castration, is linked to the Medusa metaphor. The demons are portrayed in traditional mythology as a wicked, unscrupulous race that lacks moral ideals and practices sin. The female demons are likewise portrayed negatively, keeping with the theme. Surpanakha is hence portrayed as a being dreadfully unattractive with protruding breasts and pot bellies. She lacks 'womanly' modesty, smells like hell, and desires human flesh.

The mainstream writers have presented Surpanakha as a dark, ugly, overweight demon in contrast to the fair loveliness of her foil Sita to emphasise the binary opposition between Sita and Surpanakha most. Between his upright hero Rama and his evil villain Surpanakha, Valmiki provides a stark contrast. Surpanakha is the opposite of what one perceives as beauty. The definition doesn't fit her and it is constantly reminded to her throughout her life. She wanted to be accepted and appreciated which doesn't happen. The gradual realisation that she is not accepted as who she is, changes her inward in a psychotic manner. Surpanakha's inner rebellion is sparked by both familial and societal injustice. She is known as the "witch with sharp claws" because she refuses to comply with androcentric and systemic patriarchy. "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!' Her high-pitched voice was filled with rage. Her nails glinted in the sunlight" (Lanka's Princess 13).

In Surpanakha, the nail is a representation of resistance and self-respect. Even Ravan reluctantly admits that she is capable of defending herself and her self-respect. Because they characterise Surpanakha in the eyes of the world, her nails are a distinctive aspect of her personality. She is a witch and a monster with long nails to those she defends by attacking. Surpanakha continues to feed her need for retribution and vengeance because of the injustice done to her not just by members

of her tribe but also by outsiders who mutilate her. Her bitterness has been boiling from birth owing to rejection and neglect despite being a loving wife, mother, and aunt. Her mutilation adds gasoline to the fire, making the Princess of Lanka into a crafty, shrewd, and aggressive lady. Her assertion and heightened rage, which destroys everything, are discussed throughout the book. Lanka's Princess, therefore, delves into the depths of human nature to understand the purpose of life, education, and self-identity.

Suparnakha is a woman who, with the help of her Nani, accepts herself as she is. She is confident in her body and presence. But the chain of events that leads to her husband's death makes her feel the toxicity of her broken family. Throughout the novel, her demonic self is presented as her negative mind takes over her rationality. Her father, Vishravas, gave her the name Meenakshi because he had noted that she had eyes that were as elegant as fish. When she first appeared, her mother was drawn to the fact that her nails were "like claws, curled and partly curling" (5). Her mother's first instinct was to trim her nails, and Chandranakha was the only name she could come up with for her single daughter.

Meenakshi's upbringing in the patriarchal environment is related to how she came to be known as Surpanakha. She was continually compared to the family's male members, chastised for her lack of beauty, constantly criticised for being a monster, and forced to live in the shadow of her attractive mother. Here we are seeing a war between nature and nurture, Genetic inheritance and other biological variables impact nature, which is what people refer to as pre-wiring. Generally speaking, nurture is the result of external influences on an individual after creation, such as exposure, experience, and learning. When Surpanakha is by nature an asura, by nurture, she is a human.

Surpanakha is neither stunningly gorgeous nor repulsive. Although she had an inferiority complex because of her dark skin tone, she was proud of her curved body structure and full breasts when she was younger. She used to confidently display her cleavage as a tool for seduction. For men, Surpanakha is unquestionably a beautiful and desirable object. Beauty itself is always a relative concept. Men don't

necessarily find attractive, fair, thin ladies with attractive features. Perhaps the two brothers, who have developed a sort of longing for Surpanakha, were drawn to her because of her darkened features. The only thing that has been highlighted so far is Surpanakha's yearning for them. If the two brothers are drawn to her, all complication prevents the particular desire from developing into a satisfying relationship. To restrain their passion for Surpanakha, they hacked off her nose and ears and otherwise defiled the object of their desire.

Meenakshi, who has been marginalised and rejected, finds love and happiness in Vidyujiva, a strong rival monarch who admires her not for her unusual black beauty but her intelligence, cunning, and strength. He loves her and refers to her as "my tigress," highlighting her mental fortitude and sexual boldness. This is contrasting with Kaikeśi's taunting remarks, "She's scrawny and much darker than me... How is this dark monkey going to bring us a good fortune? No one will ever marry her." (3) Ravana, who is dubious of Vidyujiva's motivations, plans to have him killed to preserve the political order. Surpanakha's anguish and rage are sparked by this murder, in which nearly the entire family is complicit, and they turn into bitter hate for Ravana which propels her to seek retribution against her own family. "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).

However, she is already old and has developed wrinkles when she first encounters the two brothers. Princess Meenakshi approaches them "with a suggestive sway of her flaring hips, walking with confidence and purported friendliness" after using her magic skills to change herself into a younger version of herself (Kane 196). She is content when she detects-

She saw them quickly straightening themselves up, fully aware that the two men were eyeing her, their eyes taking in her appearance: the angavastra draped casually over her slim, bare shoulders, revealing the top of her cleavage; the thick hair hanging loose till her slender waist and the sari knotted seductively low at the generous hips. She saw that their eyes appraised what they looked at. (Kane196)

Surpanakha doesn't mind being objectified if that leads to her

revenge. Ram is astounded by her audacity because he has never witnessed a woman express her aspirations in such a fearless and tenacious way. Although she expresses her opinions and fights for her rights, she never tries to overthrow the existing social order that discriminates against women. Instead, she only seeks to make a few little changes to the existing system. This boldness is contrasted with the ideal woman that Sita and Mandodari are. They are the respective wives of Ram and Ravan. When Sita trusts in Ram's love for her and duty towards her as his wife. Mandodari on the other hand forces her to live in the delusion that her husband is righteous. These women are considered beautiful because of their patriarchal duties which is not the case with Surpanakha. She was depicted as a beautiful wife, so much in love with her husband till the death of her husband. But when she finds out murdered by her brother, she leaves behind her courtesies as a woman and takes a vindictive stand. This makes him ugly and monstrous in the eyes of the world.

Neo-mythology deconstructs the idea of what it means to be a woman, defying trends. The feminist authors have highlighted Surpanakha, a neglected female. Their examination of the female psyche is devoid of chauvinism and misogyny. They have also demonstrated the hypocrisy of the so-called "Stree dharma" formed by men and how the patriarchy used this form of "dharma" to limit women to the roles of daughter, wife, and mother solely to exploit them in many ways. They have given a marginal woman like Surpanakha a voice and caused her to rethink some patriarchal stereotypes, but they have some reservations about how the principles of gender equality are being put into practice. The idea of "gender equality" looks like a step down to the majority of males in a culture where they have long enjoyed a position of advantage. Perhaps this is the reason why feminist writers have attacked some patriarchal standards through their rediscoveries of Surpanakha's identities; they have depicted and given voice to her in a way that allows contemporary women to relate to the challenges of Surpanakha through their own experiences. However, they have not made any recommendations or solutions for how to dismantle the very arrangement that has oppressed women since the dawn of mankind.

Similar to the well-established characters from the works of post-colonial authors like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande, and Manju Kapur, who have shown women as spirited and determined people who know how to fight against injustice and humiliation, Surpanakha represents the characteristics of the “new woman.” These Indian authors’ female protagonists had many family life upheavals, yet they persevered in their laborious search for their own identities in a largely patriarchal society. They struggle for independence and empowerment. The modern Indian woman, conscious of her uniqueness, asserts her rights as having a status in society equal to that of a man, breaking free from the old chains of subordination and wordless agony.

Surpanakha is a demon of her own making. She never wants to be beautiful or to be objectified. All she ever asked for is acceptance from her world – her family, especially her father and mother. In their fights and agendas, they made the mistake of leaving behind a child who asked for acceptance from her parents. Frédéric Gros, in his work *The Philosophy of Resistance* explains three reasons for resistance disobedience: the widening of social injustices and inequalities of wealth, the need to build and sustain money at the expense of humanitarianism, as well as the degradation and pollution of the environment that eventually prevent the planet from regenerating and revitalising.

However, in the opinion of a reader who is aware of and sympathetic to the condition of the marginalised, Surpanakha, acknowledges that she expresses her identity through her nails and her refusal to participate passively in the androcentric environment. Her nails serve as a cautionary tale to males who underestimate women. By the novel’s end, Kaikasi and Surpanakha face each other to say it out loud. When her mother says, “I loathe you from the day you are born.” Surpanakha accepts it without shock as she has been living with that reality all her life. It was this realisation that made her mind collude with toxicity. It was removed and calm during her married life, but she loses it with Vidvijva’s death and again she is left alone with her dark thoughts and loneliness.

Surpanakha is an embodiment of her mind to put it that way. Esther Thelen, a developmental psychologist, explains the characteristics of embodied cognition as follows:

To say that cognition is embodied means that it arises from bodily interactions with the world. From this point of view, cognition depends on the kinds of experiences that come from having a body with particular perceptual and motor capacities that are inseparably linked and that together form the matrix within which memory, emotion, language, and all other aspects of life have meshed' (Thelen et al.2001: 20).

Strong evidence that what happens in the human mind cannot be reduced to information processing can be found in aesthetic processes. Lanka's princess evolving from the dark-skinned lotus-eyed Meenakshi to a sharp-nailed, vindictive angry spank is her mind transforming from a hopeful, affirmative mind to a toxic, vengeance, selfish one. This transformation of her mind is seen through her actions. Whenever rakshasi is mentioned in the myths, it will always be a beautiful, seductive woman who transforms into a monster. For Surpanakha also this is the case, but we can see that it is her beautiful, yearning, mind that turns monstrous.

Surpanakha's entire plot turns into a double-edged blade in which she loses many of her loved ones, including Meghnad and Kumbha, but is unaffected since her need for vengeance triumphs over her unfulfilled love for her family. Her mind struggles, "I didn't want Kumbha to die or his young twin sons to, I don't want my Mehnad 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) Throughout this story, Surpanakha embodies Jean-Jacques Rousseau's dictum that, people in their natural state are good, but this natural innocence is corrupted by the evil prevalent in the society. The death of her husband and son, along with her yearning for retribution for the mistreatment and ignorance she experienced as a child, channelizes her desire for vengeance, demolishing her, and completing Surpanakha's change from the fair-eyed Meenakshi to the long, pointed nailed Surpanakha.

The stories have evolved in numerous directions as The Ramayana

has assimilated into Indian culture. Because of the potential for many interpretations, these stories have been accepted and used in accordance by various cultures over time. A minor character in the so-called main story could advance to a major one in a different tale. Because of this, subversions and reinterpretations have always been very likely and have been supported by substantial evidence in these epic narratives. Additionally, they have created the potential for conflict, possession, and dispossession. These tales can produce a variety of neo-notions and concepts since they are amenable to many interpretations. Perhaps this explains why feminist authors have used the Ramayana stories to address important issues such as female sexuality, female psychology, the status of women in society, the oppression they experienced, and the steps they took to challenge the hegemonic patriarchy.

One of the Ramayana's most overlooked and misunderstood characters is Surpanakha. Surpanakha was given a small amount of screen time in Valmiki's Ramayana, but despite this, she had a crucial role in setting up the Lankan War. The unheard voice of Surpanakha is skillfully recounted in Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*, which also creates an image that sticks in the mind. She was depicted in the epic as an immodest, unvirtuous, and rude woman, which calls into question the authoritarian ideals the epic had loaded her with. In this alternative Ramayana retelling, Surpanakha's tale is told, and she is portrayed as a strong, independent woman who can stand up for her rights and make her own decisions. She was a victim of gender bias in society and patriarchal dominance. But she managed to free herself from the constraints of the traditional gendered systems of Hindu society because of her tenacious will and independent spirit. She made her own decisions and was successful in achieving those decisions. She had to walk a painful path while dealing with prejudice due to her gender, appearance, and wit. Her brothers encouraged her to believe that she was too trusting to make any sensible decisions, and her decisions were never taken seriously.

Historically, women have been represented as beings who are reliant and in need of protection from men, first from their father or brother and then from their husband and son. The Manusmriti

(Sanskrit: obedience to and devotion red, Tradition of Manu.”), ancient Hindu literature usually regarded as an influential guide in shaping the structure and function of Hindu society, states that the status of women is restricted to the home and childbearing. It teaches women that their place in society is obedience to and devotion to their husbands as good wives. Surpanakha resists traditional gender roles, defies the signs of femininity, and makes her presence known within the patriarchal line. She seeks retribution for the slights she endured, defends her rights, makes her own decisions, and defends herself against the gender segregation her family practises. To that extent, a striking parallel can be drawn between her, a figure from an ancient Hindu epic, and the “new woman,” or the empowered woman of the twenty-first century who is not afraid to explicitly express her sexual desires for the man of her choice and who is not constrained by the social mores of the past.

In contemporary culture, women are expected to reveal more of themselves than males, including more of their brains and hearts. Women are expected to express their emotions freely, but men are expected to be stolid and to keep their feelings to themselves beyond a certain point. Research shows that both sexes exhibit these stereotypes. According to Hall's analysis of 38 studies comparing male and female nonverbal communicators, ladies are more expressive than males in over two-thirds of the studies he looked at. Our understanding of good and wrong has changed as a result of the enormous changes that old beliefs and ideas have undergone in the contemporary world we live in. This has changed how we interpret the tales we read and heard as children. We re-evaluate these myths and ask if there is more to them than meets the eye—if Rama was really so pure and good, and whether Surpanakha was truly that sinister and terrible. This is made possible by modern education and values. We continue to witness horrible crimes against women in the guise of authority and tradition in today's world. However, most women in rural areas and even urban areas experience assaults, rapes, robberies, and other forms of violence. What's startling is that a sizable portion of society still holds them responsible for this suffering. Even worse, rape's very definition varies depending on a victim's caste, religion, and social level. Divorced

women and those who don't consent to sex are frequently criticized as being conceited and immature.

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