Reinterpreting Surpanakha: A Subaltern Analysis of Kavita Kane's Lanka's Princess

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Abstract:

The mythology of India is deeply rooted in its culture and shape, conduct, and moral code, which provides individuals with ideal characters to emulate. In contemporary Indian literature, these mythologies provide a framework for reinterpretation and recreation to overthrow patriarchal absolutism, old traditions, misinterpretation, and ideological hegemony. These reinterpretations were influenced by prevailing social, political, and cultural tendencies, and contributed to examining the epic from diverse perspectives and the revival of various characters marginalized by mainstream literature. This paper explores Patriarchal politics underlying the transformation of Surpankaha the disregarded character from the epic Ramayana, from Princess Meenakshi to a perceived demon, through a comprehensive analysis of Kavita Kane's popular book "Lanka's Princess". The essay also studies the subordination of Surpanakha as an embodiment of evil while asserting her agency in a restrictive society in the context of the subaltern theory. The analysis revealed that Surpanakha was resilient against patriarchal control and was characterized as a demon in the conventional version of Ramayana. This paper will help to understand the status of women since ancient times and challenge the perception of women as either demons or ideals.

Keywords: Ramayana, Mythology Reinterpretation, Surpanakha, Gender roles, Subaltern studies.

Introduction:

The mythology of India plays a significant role in shaping cultural ideologies and moral values within the society. These mythological narratives have been transmitted through oral and written traditions, undergoing reproduction and modification across generations, while maintaining universal significance. American folklorist and anthropologist William Bascom says, "Myths are prose narratives which are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith, usually sacred, often associated with theology and ritual, and the embodiments of dogma" (qtd. in Vitthani, 4).

French literary theorist Roland Barth says in his book Mythologies (1972), "myth as an expression of a historically specific ideological vision of the world. He sees myths as ideological forms that organize and direct social life' (qtd.in Vitthani, 6). Indian Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik defines "Myth is essentially a cultural construct, a common understanding of the world that binds Individuals and communities together", in his book *Myth=Mithya* (2014). Roland Barthes In his book, *Mythologies* (1972), seems to have explained what Cavendish tried to convey, Myths are the ideological forms that perpetuate their schema of eternal, timeless, and natural, while exercising power in society, for Barthes, myth also constrains such ideological visions of the world into being specific and local, With these double functions, myth enables the ideological inversion of society" (qtd.in Sharma, 61). Indian myths are not limited to author-driven texts but are stories that have been constantly reinterpreted and retold over the years. The epic Ramayana was composed in the 3rd century B.C., still concerning the primary issues of society has been reinterpreted in 300 ways, carrying emotional significance and playing a vital and influential role in society and also spread to other countries to communicate with Raj Dharma. Throughout the ages, whether it would be the Hindu law book Manusmriti, also known as Manav Dharmasastra, or the epic Ramayana and Mahabharata, all have reinforced patriarchal ideologies while stereotyping female characters. According to the YouTube video "Mythology and Feminism: A Case for Subaltern Narratives," "there is a school of thought that is known as the functionalist school of thought that explains every myth has a kind of function, a reason not just story, they had some purpose, unfortunately, the major purpose had always been patriarchy, setting down social norms and behavioural norms" (Patel4:12). Reinterpretation of myth counters these hegemonic narratives, where women characters are just subalterns, and for feminist revisionists, it is the way through which they question the stereotypes and justify them. Kavita Kane, a popular feminist mythological writer, is known for her retelling of women characters from mythology like Urmila, Ahalya, Satyabati, etc. with a new perspective, her unique style of exploring neglected, supressed women characters is captivating in modern literary era. In her narratives, Kane provides a platform for marginalized and suppressed individuals to articulate their experiences, offering them a platform to express their perspectives. One such reinterpreted character is Surpankha from the Ramayana: Kane humanizes the character by imbuing her with emotional depth and passionate conviction, emphasizing her struggle against patriarchal structures and presenting her as an expressive, courageous, and self-reliant individual. Since its publication, this book has been subject to scholarly interpretation, with the majority of researchers emphasizing Surpankaha as a victim of patriarchal structures rather than a vampire. Meenakshi's obstructions against patriarchal hegemony, her retaliation to get her rights are less explored. To address this perspective, the paper aims to conduct a comprehensive study of the text and analyze the patriarchal politics

underlying the transformation of Surpanakha as an embodiment of evil from Meenakshi, who subsequently asserted her agency and suppressed in the mainstream narrative. The analysis is grounded in the theoretical framework of subaltern studies. The term "subaltern" was used for the lower rank, in the military, Introduced by Antonio Gramsci for the first time in his work "*Prison Notebooks*" to represent the oppressed class, and later succeeded by many intellectuals. "Ranjit Guha, a member of the Subaltern Studies group, used the term "subaltern" in terms of the peasant class of India and viewed it "as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way. He opines that "traditional history only told the stories of the elite, whereas the marginalized were left muted, making it the 'elitist history,' dominating the narrative of the sections higher in the hierarchy" (qtd.in Tiwari, 4). In Ramyana, male are Elites, they modifies the plot, and set the rules for women.

Discussion and analysis:

Our conventional myths are now being rewritten and reinterpreted using new ideas and perspectives. This has been the subject of keen concern for several writers. Indian historian and scholar of subaltern studies, Dipesh Chakrabarty of the view that, "in post-modernism, authors see the possibility of multiple narratives and multiple ways of crafting these narratives"(2000, P .99). There are several mythological reinterpretations aimed at liberating women from the male-centred ideology imposed upon them, and by conveying a new perspective, they empowered women's identities. American poet and Scholar Alicia Ostriker remarks in her feminist work *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986), "Old stories are changed utterly, by female knowledge and female experience, so that they can no longer stand as the foundation of collective male fantasy" (qtd.in Beena 13). Indian writer Nayantara Sehgal says, "When epics are re-examined, new Sita and Savitris will arise, stripped with false sanctity and crowned with the human virtue of courage" (qtd, in Terengpi, 4). Surpanakha is a character in the Ramayana who is marginalized by patriarchal society due to her nonconforming feminine traits. as Beena. G writes in her book Vision and Re-vision (2919), that Surpanakha is subjected to multiple forms of othering: primarily on racial grounds, secondarily based on gender, and subsequently as unfeminine and libidinous, serving merely as a counterpoint to the idealized woman. In her book Lanka's Princess (2017), Kane says, "I always believe that mythology could be a huge canvas for contemporary thought. It's not telling us some old tales, as so carelessly assumed of Gods and Goddess, but of man and his follies and fallacies" (Exp 43 L229). "This process of interaction between the postmodern revisionist authors and the subaltern characters of mythology has built a bridge between the text and society" (Tiwari and Chaudhary, 6). Pretty Terringpi writes, "Kane's retelling emphasizes

the relationship of the innocent Meenakshi to the long-clawed Surpanekha, who surrenders to none' (5). In the narratives by both Valimiki and Tulsi Das, the only account we have of Surpanekha commenced with her mutilation. These writers depicted Surpanakha as a demon, categorized by her violent and wicked nature, akin to the snake. She wandered only in the jungle to intimidate animals, and her persistent lust towards the physical appearance of Ram and Lakshman allured her to attack Sita, and was mutilated by Lakshmana. After that, she instigated Ravan to kidnap Sita, the most beautiful lady ever on earth, to manifest her revenge on the two brothers. In the end, Surpanakha is humiliated by her sisters in laws and leaves the palace to pray to lord Bramha, being enlightened about her next birth where she would meet Krishna, the reincarnation of Ram, Surpanakha, has resulted in suicide. As Ranajit Guha a member of the subaltern studies group opines that "Traditional history only told the stories of the elite, whereas the marginalized were left muted, making it the 'elitist history,' dominating the narrative of the sections higher in the hierarchy". (4-7) Those narratives implanted in our society, in the minds of people more easily through the help of the Telecasted series "Ramayana Katha" By the Door Darshan National, Ramayana Katha displays the abrupt emergency of Surpanakha flying over the jungle suddenly infatuated with Ram, she lost her conscience in lust, she transformed herself from ugly appearance to a beautiful lady with her power of Maya (illusion).Surpanakha proposed marriage to Ram and disclosed her true identity as the sister of Demon King Ravana, for whom she harbored excessive pride and felt unrestricted in her movements. Upon rejection by both brothers, she attempted to consume Sita, whereupon Lakshmana promptly disfigured her by severing her nose and ear. Although Ram expressed remorse due to her gender, Lakshmana deemed her malevolent and justified the punishment. Ram observed, "When licentious women become lascivious, they become more perilous and lead to the destruction of both themselves and others." The serialized narrative depicts Surpanakha manipulating Ravana to seek retribution for such an egregious act against a woman within the dominated territory of the great King Ravan, and falsely claiming she approached them to procure Sita, purportedly the most beautiful woman on earth, as a gift for the mighty Dasanan. "Religion is the most potent force and institution behind patriarchal social life and structure, and the majority of religions propagate male supremacy and male control over women and suppress their sexuality, mobility, and reproductive choice'(N.M. and Kuruvilla.S 3). Ranajit Guha conveys in his seminal work Subaltern studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society, "it is essential to recover the experience and resistance of the subaltern groups, for these constitute the core of our social being"(P 6). Explaining his statement, subaltern experience, and resistance are crucial to understanding social dynamics, and recovering those is essential for a nuanced history. Precisely The book *Lanka's Princess* (2017), elucidates Surpanakha's experiences as both a victim and a resistor against patriarchal

domination while retrospectively examining the historical stereotypes of women in the canonical Ramayana stories.

"It's a girl" (Kane, 1), the book commences with the mother Kaikeshi's disappointed remark upon the birth of a female infant in a male-preferring society. When the child was named "Meenaksi" by her father Vishravas due to her graceful eyes resembling those of a fish, her dark complexion caused her mother considerable distress. She questioned, "How will this dark-skinned child bring us good fortune? No one will ever marry her!" (3) These statements illuminate Meenakshi's apparent rejection as a dark-complexioned woman in a patriarchal society. Meenakshi frequently engages in physical alterations to protect Vivishan from external aggressors, resulting in personal injuries. However, rather than receiving commendation for her courageous actions, her mother admonished and compelled her to exercise caution and never retreat. These behavioral expectations were prevalent for women in that society, victimizing Meenakshi, who resisted all forms of domination and discriminated against their identity within the patriarchal social structure. In the context of subaltern identity, Guha says, "The subaltern's identity is constituted by its difference from the dominant, and this difference is itself a product of the relation of power" (17). Meenakshi, a compassionate individual, was left isolated and neglected within her own family, for her explicit and rebellious attitude and reprimanded for the name Surpanakha by her elder brother, when she pierced Ravan's skin upon the demise of her pet lamb, "Maya." unable to justify herself, she reluctantly accepted it and prepared to advocate for her rights, even if it resulted in being labeled a demon. According to the Indian feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "There are many factors that prevent the subalterns from speaking, the most important is the power differential between the privileged and the subaltern, which allows the privileged to speak for and represent the subaltern, thereby robbing them of their voice and agency"(283). Meenakshi found strength in being a monster; it allowed her to assert herself rather than being submissive, "If this could protect me, then well, I am Surpanakha' (Kane, 8). Notwithstanding these circumstances, she maintained affection for and concern for her family members. She experienced anxiety when Ravan was captured by Kartaviryarjun and felt deprived when Rishi Vishravas departed; she found her father's absence in her life intolerable. Meenakshi exhibited affectionate and nurturing qualities; all the children of the golden palace addressed her as "Meenu maa" due to the care and attention she bestowed upon them, which demonstrates her humanity, in contrast to her portrayal as merely a demon or vagrant in certain radical narratives. As Spivak says, "Subalterns are those who are divided by caste, gender, religion, and region, preventing them from speaking for themselves (276). Preeti Terrrengpi writes, in her article, "Kane's retelling emphasizes the transition of the innocent Meenakshi to the long-clawed Surpanakha, who surrenders to none" (5). Kavita Kane emphasized Meenakshi's struggle

for existence and self-identity, encompassing her pursuit of education and romantic autonomy, in a patriarchal society, where, women were often perceived as vulnerable and in need of male protection, Meenakshi rejected the reputation associated with being Ravan's sister and declined his protPatriarchal action and concern. Instead, she used her sharp nails to exhibit self-reliance and confidence and was accused of being a demon. Characterized by her humanity, Meenakshi aspired to a straightforward and modest life, exhibiting minimal interest in the Golden Palace and reminiscing about pastoral peace and the Vedic hymns of the ashram. Patriarchal narratives blamed for her amorous tendencies, contrasting it, Kane examines Meenaksi's autonomy in choosing to marry Vidyujiva, who was from the Danav clan, based on his affection and esteem for her, bestowing upon her the appellation "My Tigress"(113),for Meenakshi's candid and courageous nature. After Meenakshi's grandmother, Tadka, only Vidyujiva appreciated her for her dark, distinctive appearance and comprehended her innocence. "The marginalized and ignored Meenakshi finds love and acceptance in Vidyujiva, who values not only her unconventional dark beauty but also her intellect, acumen, and potential" (Arekar and Doibe, 5). Meenakshi's exploitation began in her family, they blamed her, for every minor issue and assumed that she had been justified by the murder of Vidujiva, for his hypothetical conspiracy of obtaining Ravan's crown and killing Meenakshi: Her family not only impaired her childhood but also her adolescence; she was left alone in a hostile environment at the age of sixteen. Meenakshi struggled to cope with the unforeseen circumstances and perceived mistreatment from those around her. The extent of Meenakshi's loss and suffering is evident in Kane's portrayal: "You have undone me," screamed Meenakshi in demented despair, you killed whatever I had'" (Kane, 172). This traumatic experience transformed her into a psychologically wounded, vengeful individual. She departed from the opulent palace for the Dandaka forest to devise a strategy against Ravan; however, her sole source of hope, her only son, Kumar, was also tragically beheaded by Lakshmana during meditation. The harsh realities of life, patriarchal dominance, and frustration and pursuit of justice fuelled her retributive desires. In succession, she lost all of her close relations, rendering life intolerable. Upon encountering Ram and Lakshman in pursuit of her son's assailant, she experienced an emotional response reminiscent of her former feelings toward Vidyujiva. She recalled Tarka's assertion that desiring a man was not inherently immoral, recognizing her entitlement to seek companionship following her husband's death. Motivated by the prospect of reciprocal affection and esteem, she proposed to Ram; however, they unexpectedly manipulated her emotions, exemplifying Spivak's observation that "Subaltern women are doubly marginalized, first as the colonized, then again as women" (294). Consequently marginalized, she attempted to abduct Sita, but Laxman apprehended her with her hair and inflicted injury upon her, as she lacked the physical capacity to contend with the two robust men. Meenakshi's mutilation was not solely a consequence of the

alleged attacks on Sita, but rather a response to her sexual explicitness and marriage proposal, which were deemed inappropriate for a woman, Furthermore, mutilation was a common form of punishment for individuals of subaltern positions. The Ramayana was influenced by Manusmriti, which posits that women who choose their marriage partners without familial consent should be ostracized from society, and those who express sexual autonomy exhibit improper behavior that warrants punishment. "The majority of organized religions propagate male supremacy and male control over women and suppress their sexuality, mobility, and reproductive choice." (N.M. and Kuruvilla 3). The disfigurement of Meenakshi exemplified patriarchal ideology's attempt to exert control over women. Driven by a desire for justice that she believed society would never provide, she could no longer remain Meenakshi; to become a more formidable adversary to men, she would transform into Surpanakha, harboring resentment towards society. She exploited Ravan's obsession with Sita, which originated from his humiliation during Sita's svayamvara (self-choice ceremony) when he was unable to lift the "Shivdhanu," and in the preceding period, Ravan was cursed by Sati, upon her seduction, who subsequently incarnated as Sita. Surpanakha manipulated Ravan into abducting Sita, ensuring that this action would lead to Ravan's downfall while simultaneously causing Ram and Laxman to experience distress in Sita's absence.The patriarchal narrative attributes responsibility to Surpanakha for the war and destruction of Lanka; however, Kavita Kane elucidated the primary motivation behind it, demonstrating that Meenakshi merely capitalized on the opportunity for the aforementioned reasons to seek retribution for her loss and suffering. "Ravan rather than Surpanakha, as stated in the epic, uses Surpankaha's dishonor as an opportunity to satisfy his yearning" (Urmila. P.S. Arulmuregan 7). Circumstances reverse for her once again; she experiences the loss of her affectionate nephew Meghnad and dear brother Kumbh in the conflict, which is contrary to her intention. Consequently, she formulated a strategy against the two brothers who not only disfigured her but also caused the demise of her beloved family members. However, when presented with the opportunity to exact revenge on Lakshman by harming his son and disfiguring his wife Urmila, Surpanakha unable to inflict harm on innocent individuals because of compassion. This demonstrates that she possesses a benevolent nature rather than embodying the monstrous figure portrayed in patriarchal metanarratives. The binary opposition of deity/demon was reinforced by the patriarchal structure through established roles and conducts, popularized as "Dharma," affirming what should be accepted and prohibited according to the benefits of male supremacy. The influential law book "Manusmruti" prescribes most conduct for women while favoring men. The character Sita is portrayed as the epitome of beauty, obedient towards her husband, subjected to the Agni pareeksha to prove her chastity, but ultimately chooses to leave society rather than advocate for justice. Consequently, she is held up as the ideal to instruct women on proper behavior, in contrast to Surpanakha, who consistently resists

male dominance and pursues justice but is stigmatized as a demon. Following a lifetime of adversity and loss, Surpanakha ultimately extends forgiveness to all and allows the sea to envelop her. Her demonstration of clemency and pursuit of justice earned her the notorious appellation "Surpanekha." In her book 'Lanka's Princess,' Kavita Kane aims to give a voice to the subaltern, a voice that rebelled not only against her family but also against the patriarchal society that sought to suppress her, a narrative often misrepresented in mainstream epics.

Conclusion:

This paper explored Kavita Kane's book Lanka's Princess to depict the called forth demon Surpanakha, from her state of subaltern to a human figure full of emotion, love, and benevolence. She is juxtaposed with Sita, who is depicted as obedient to her husband, never fought for her rights, and eventually rejected the society instead of seeking justice. She is portrayed as a virtuous, divine, and optimal woman, while Meenakshi, who fought for her rights and societal space, is characterized as a demon. This character Surpanakha unveiled the patriarchal politics under the categorisation of women as demon and deity. Meenakshi, who initially disliked her physical appearance, ultimately found prejudice in her golden eyes, dusky skin, and long nails, her agency is evident in choice-making and self-reliance, resists to be victimized and vulnerable in androcentric society. The analysis shows that the buoyant, courageous, defiant Meenakshi is a cruel, ugly, and cunning demon Surpanakha in the patriarchal society.

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