Assertion or Transgression: A Critical Study of Surpankha as an Unwelcomed Girl Child in Kavita Kané's Lanka's Princess

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Assertion or Transgression: A Critical Study of Surpankha as an Unwelcomed Girl Child in Kavita Kané's *Lanka's Princess*

By Nancy Sharma[1] and Smita Jha[2]

Abstract

Kavita Kané's *Lanka's Princess* is the retelling of *Ramayana*[3] from the perspective of the often misrepresented and misunderstood character of Surpankha,[4] the daughter of *rishi* (sage) Vishravas and *rakshasi* (monster) Kaiskesi. Kavita Kané uses myths as a pretext to defy the idea of an ideal femininity in her book. Kané's representation humanizes the character of Surpankha (translation: woman with sharp fingernails) who was born as the beautiful princess Meenakshi, but her defiant demeanor caused her brother Ravan to give her the name of Surpankha. Kané's work exhibits the inner thought process of an unwelcome girl child in the family who has always been ignored by her mother and overshadowed by her brothers. The "violent restlessness" which is appreciated in the behavior of Ravan as a marker of heroism is often criticized when embodied by Meenakshi (Kané 28). The present study undertakes a textual analysis of *Lanka's Princess* and further analyzes how Kavita Kané's reinterpretation of the marginalized character of Surpankha challenges the stereotypical characterization of Surpankha as the "other" of Sita, who is the embodiment of obedience. In this light, the rewriting of Surpankha's story by Kavita Kané focuses on the neglected aspects of Surpankha's identity, which have been crucial in the formation of her female subjectivity. Moreover, *Lanka's Princess* as a text strives to liberate her from the stereotypical image of a disfigured monster by demonstrating her as a woman "who has survived hatred, loss, and rejection" (Arekar 131). This research has the potential to invigorate and intensify the impulse to challenge the universally accepted patriarchal discourse concerning the representation of women in Indian mythology.

Keywords: Indian mythology, Female subjectivity, Revisionism, Gender, Kavita Kané, *Lanka's Princess*, Indian literature

Introduction: Representation of Women in Indian Mythology

The predicament of ideal womanhood in Indian societies is deeply rooted in the patriarchal discourse concerning the narratives coming out of the corpus of Indian mythology, which is often deemed responsible for formulating and propagating the idealistic characteristics expected to be embodied by women. In their numerous versions and interpretations, the epics

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[3] A Sanskrit epic poem from ancient India written by Valmiki. It is based on the life of Lord Rama, the prince of Ayodhya. The epic belongs to the genre of *Itihasa*, narratives of past events (*purāvṛtta*), interspersed with teachings on the goals of human life. Scholars' estimates for the earliest stage of the text range from the 7th to 4th centuries BCE, with later stages extending up to the 3rd century CE.

[4] Surpankha, a minor character in *Ramayana* and the sister of the antagonist Ravana, has always been misinterpreted as a woman who received the deserved punishment (mutilation of her face) for her act of sexual assertion. This act of transgression established her as the "other" of the sexually pious Sita, Lord Rama's wife.

of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have been crucial in creating a regressive image of ideal womanhood. The portrayal of women in the whole corpus of mythology has had such a problematic and suppressive effect that now is the time to challenge these representations and idealized constructions. It becomes essential to re-interpret "the male-centric epics and legends from a woman's point of view" to subvert the preconceived notions of ideal womanhood (Pillai 161).

Postmodern discourse dismantled the authoritative position once held by these sacred epics (grand narratives). The recent surge in the retelling, rewriting, and revisioning of these phallogocentric mythological narratives questions the legitimacy of the knowledge propagated by these grand narratives. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Francis Lyotard asserts, "I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv). In general, the postmodern discourse renounces the status quo of the dominant systems responsible for controlling the construction of knowledge. The contemporary trend of mythological revisionism adopted by postmodern feminist writers has questioned the hegemony of the phallogocentric[5] world of mythology. In the words of Madhavi Arekar, Indian feminists have tried to "re-visit mythology by recreating, retelling and refolding it from the perspective of a woman" (132). Rohit Sharma, in his work, *The Art of Rewriting Epics,* proclaims that it is crucial to understand the "practice of rewriting" mythology as it raises several "questions of why, what, who, how, whom: Why is it renewed?" (Sharma 140). In this context, the revisionist reading gives voice to the marginalized women characters, who have been hitherto reduced to the archetypes of angels and wantons. It enumerates how the categorization of these mythological women characters as either good or evil has pushed them further into the shackles of patriarchy. In the Indian context, mythology serves as a driving force in formulating the ways of living. Even now, the idealistic image of Sita[6] is revered and expected to be emulated by ordinary women to the extent that a slight deviation from these unrealistic standards is immediately labeled a transgression. But the question is how justified it is to label an assertion of a female's subjectivity or, in other words, an assertion of a woman's identity, as a transgression.

In an interview, Kané once suggested that "mythology can be a huge canvas for contemporary thought" as it is not about "telling us some old tales" concerning gods and goddesses, "but of Man and his follies and fallacies" (Kaushik, para. 3). According to her, "if Myths[7] reflect the socio-cultural ethos of the earlier times, they can also be used [by] contemporaries [to address] those same issues in today's world" (Krithika, para. 1). In simple terms, myths can be used as a tool to represent "contemporary issues and sensibilities" (Krithika, para. 1). Mythology has always favored patriarchy not only by glorifying heroic male characters and their manly powers but also by pushing women towards the periphery by projecting them as docile and powerless. Under such circumstances, a revisionist technique of writing helps assign new meanings and perspectives to the already-established myths. In Adrienne Rich's words, "Re-vision the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival" (Rich 18). In other words, whenever a writer "employs a figure

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[5] Phallogocentrism is a portmanteau word made from the amalgamation of phallocentrism and logocentrism. In the context of feminist critical theory, phallogocentrism is understood as a system of thought which has been essential in intellectually and culturally subjugating women.

[6] Sita is a Hindu Goddess and the female protagonist of *Ramayana*. In Hindu mythology, she is considered the epitome of ideal womanhood. Her abduction by Ravan, Surpankha's brother, is a turning point in the story of *Ramayana*.

[7] The term "myth" is derived from the Greek word *mythos*. According to Northrop Frye, myth means a "certain type of story" in which some of the major characters are "gods or other beings larger in power than humanity" (Frye 597).

or story previously accepted and defined by a culture," the writer is attempting to undertake a "revisionist mythmaking," in which "the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine" (Ostriker 72). It signifies how the revisionist texts written by contemporary feminist writers are corrections, as a revisionist retelling of myths in these fictional narratives allows us to redefine the conventional notions of femininity. In simple terms, the revisionist narratives intend to correct and challenge the "gender stereotypes embodied in myth" (Ostriker 73).

Besides this, the world of myths and mythology has repeatedly encouraged oppressive images of women. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni,[8] a contemporary of Kavita Kané, has criticized the inappropriate and unsatisfied portrayal of the women in mythology as, in some ways, "they remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons" (Divakaruni xiv). In this light, Kané thinks, mythology is in itself a "victim of patriarchy" (Kaushik, para. 5). She suggests:

> If women have not been portrayed in a proper light, it's because of misogyny and chauvinism which made us all myopic and did not allow us to see these women for their enormous strength and conviction. We need to return them into their original self by again using mythology as a tool to show what they originally were. (Kaushik para. 5)

Kané aspires to use the mythic structures in a way that will allow her to challenge the conventionally accepted versions of mythology by rereading these epics through minor women characters. Moreover, before delving into the critical aspects of *Lanka's Princess*, it is crucial to understand this current trend of rewriting Indian mythological tales. In recent times, a plethora of revisionist literature has been written by women writers like Kavita Kané, Githa Hariharan, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and many others. Their works have questioned the predicament of these epics in projecting women as the secondary and sidelined characters. Mythology, in general, has always favored patriarchy, which is why women writers have to make great efforts in reconstructing mythic frameworks. The fictional narratives written by these feminist writers recreate the "mythic stories to fit in the frame of the modern feminist demands of society" (Asha and Nandhini 2391). Kavita Kané, an established woman writer of our times, has challenged these frameworks by putting neglected women characters like Urmila, Ahalya, Surpankha, Menaka, and Uruvi at the center of the contemporary narratives concerning myths and mythology. In *Contemporary Women's Writing in India*, Varun Gulati and Mythili Anoop have suggested that these "doubly Othered" writers "are inclined to avail themselves of the literary strategies of subversion, deconstruction, and reconstruction in order to break their silence, retell tales, and recount their points of view" (Gulati and Anoop xi).

The character of Surpankha has always been known to the populace as a demon, the "other" of Sita, Ravan's younger sister, that no one has ever tried to know "anything else about her—her past, her thoughts, her future" ("A Destructive Demoness," para. 2). Kavita Kané's *Lanka's Princess* retells the story of Surpankha from a feminist perspective. The text "seeks to reshape her position from that of an ugly, adulterous, disfigured ogress in Valmiki's[9] metanarrative, R*amayana*, to that of an assertive, bold and strong woman" who subverts the principles of conformity and repression (Arekar 131). Kané's novel aims to give space to the voice of Surpankha by allowing her to narrate her side of the story. The present study, therefore, aims to analyze how Kavita Kané's retelling exhibits the identity formation of an unwelcome

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[8] Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a renowned feminist writer and a contemporary of Kavita Kané. She has authored several fictional texts, including *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *The Forest of Enchantment* (2019), and *The Last Queen* (2021) among many others.
[9] Valmiki is an Indian classical poet who is the author of the epic poem *Ramayana*.

girl child (Surpankha) who has always been ignored by her mother and overshadowed by her brothers. It further investigates how Kané's story focuses on the neglected aspects of Surpankha's identity, which have been crucial in the formation of her female subjectivity.

Meenakshi's Predicament as an Unwelcomed Girl Child

Meenakshi, the daughter of *rishi* Vishravas and *rakshasi* Kaiskesi, was the family's only daughter, alongside three physically strong sons (Ravan, Kumbhakarna, and Vibhishan). At her birth, Kaiskesi was expecting another son to consolidate her dream of "an asura empire with her sons as the rulers of the three worlds; and Lanka, their lost golden city as their capital" (Kané 14). The disappointment in Meenakshi's mother's eyes while looking at her newly born child is described in the text: "Kaikesi looked down at the baby and could not help cringing or quench the well of bitterness. This girl has cheated me of my plans, she thought angrily, a faint stirring of unease making her more restless" (Kané 14). This statement signifies the lack of happiness exhibited by Kaikesi at the birth of Meenakshi. The fact that she had given birth to a daughter and not a son made her heart bleed as she could see her aspirations and dreams "drowning in a flood of disappointment and easy tears" (Kané 14). In the words of *rishi* Vishravas, Meenakshi was "born fighting against the expectations of the world" (Kané 15). Under such circumstances, Meenakshi was ignored, sidelined, and neglected because she had spoiled her mother's plan of begetting the best progeny from *rishi* Vishravas in the form of sons.

Kavita Kané's depiction of Meenakshi as an unwelcomed girl child invites readers to reflect on the psychic development of a woman forced to experience negligence. As Chandrava Chakravarty states, "a woman's engagement with her surrounding world remains a crucial component of female subjectivity" (Chakravarty 133). In this context, it can be inferred that Meenakshi's childhood experiences must have been key to forming her female subjectivity. The environment of the family as a space plays a significant role in developing a woman's identity and subjectivity. Gauri Mandapaka maintains that "Home, the physical space" is crucial in the "mental and physical conditioning" of an individual (Mandapaka 81). She has further suggested that "family not only gives us a sense of self but it also resurrects and reinforces the presence of an identity giving a strong sense of security and belonging" (81). However, Meenakshi's family structure in the text fails to provide her with a sense of security and instead becomes the reason for her insecure self-identity. In simple terms, the lack of warmth and love fills Meenakshi with hatred, anger, and insecurity.

The recurrent experience of injustice forces her to live as an outcast or an oddity in her family space. Kané attempts to bring her readers closer to the thought process of Meenakshi's character by making them see the other facets of her individuality. In the text, Meenakshi, while reflecting on her position vis-à-vis her father and mother, says "Ravan would always champion for his mother, Vibhishan would be with their father. Kumbha, being blindly loyal to Ravan, would have to support his mother. That left her: what was she to do? But no one seemed to be concerned about her. Or her opinion" (Kané 56). Meenakshi's statement depicts how Ravan and Vibhishan have been the respective favorites of her mother and father since childhood. On the one hand, due to his physical valor and *asura*[10] tendencies, Ravan has established himself as his mother's favorite child and her only hope, and on the other hand, Vibhishan, by exhibiting the tendencies of a *rishi*, has established himself as his father's favorite child. This leaves Meenakshi at the center of these two opposite sides.[11]

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[10] According to Hindu Vedic texts, *asura* refers to demonic beings with destructive or evil intentions who are considered malevolent in their nature and behavior. They are labeled anti-gods due to their desire to overpower the Gods.

[11] Surpankha's mother was a *rakshasa* (monster), and her father was a *rishi* (sage). Kaikesi, Surpankha's mother, belonged to the family of *Rakshas*, whereas Vishravas was the son of Sage Pulastya. The difference

Further, Kané questions the lack of learning opportunities provided to Meenakshi, the daughter of the family, whereas her brothers have been given the space to develop and master their cognitive and physical abilities. Meenakshi challenges this lack of access available to her as she says, "Am I not Rishi[12] Vishravas' child too? Then why am I not studying the shastras and the Upanishads like my brothers?" (Kané 33). Here, we see how she questions the denial of knowledge imposed on her by her parents. It is clear from her questions that she has been denied access to the learning process just because she is a woman and is considered incapable of having the potential to learn the various skills her brothers have been allowed to master. It indicates that Meenakshi was considered "other" within her family structure as she was thought to be incapable of fulfilling her mother's dream of establishing an *asura* empire which can only be achieved with the help of Ravan, Kumbhakarna, and Vibhishan.

Lanka's Princess: Meenakshi or Surpankha?

She was named Meenakshi because her "golden and graceful" eyes resembled a fish (Kané 16). Despite her father naming her Meenakshi, her mother gave her the name Chandranakha[13] because of her "abnormally long nails" (Kané 16). However, it was Ravan who renamed her Surpankha after she commits an assault. The journey from Meenakshi to Surpankha is a journey of a woman's act of assertion, rebellion, and sexual freedom. In a crucial scene in the text, when Ravan kills Maya, Meenakshi's favorite pet, she retorts by assaulting Ravan. It exhibits how instead of succumbing to grief, she seeks to retaliate by attacking Ravan and, in the process, establishes herself as a strong individual capable of protecting herself and her integrity. The attack on Ravan is Meenakshi's first display of fury. Kavita Kané describes Meenakshi's first act of assault:

> Meenakshi felt her own hand twitch and like a cat sprang on the unsuspecting Ravan, digging her nails into the tender flesh of his neck, her teeth bared in apoplectic frenzy. Ravan gave a cry of surprise, curdling into a scream of pain, one arm protecting his face against her clawing fingers, the other trying to wrench her off. But she clung on, ripping her sharp nails unto any exposed flesh, tearing the skin, sinking deeper to gouge. (Kané 19)

The physical attack on Ravan is Meenakshi's first act of rebellion and her first step towards establishing herself as a strong and ferocious woman capable of protecting her dignity by inflicting violence. Ravan, while responding to Surpankha's attack, shouts in pain and anger, "Surpanakha, that's what she is. Not Chandranakha as Mother calls her, but a witch with long, sharp claws. Next time I'll break your bloody arm, Surpanakha!!" (Kané 19). After this scene in the text, we encounter Meenakshi as the epitome of anger, vengeance, and restlessness. She internalizes the name of Surpankha and further starts to identify with the "ghastly name— Surpankha—Ravan had dumped her with" (Kané 33). The act of physically harming Ravan, her elder brother, signifies her powerful position vis-à-vis Ravan who is the epitome of physical strength and heroism. By attacking Ravan, Meenakshi reverses the conventional subject-object position,[14] particularly in the context of wreaking violence. The incident allows us to comprehend how it is difficult to identify the social position of Meenakshi merely as an

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between their faith and belief system was a major point of contention between them to the extent that it impacted Surpankha as a child.

[12] According to Hindu Vedic texts, a *rishi* is somebody who is the embodiment of spiritual knowledge. The English equivalent of *rishi* would be sage.

[13] Another name of Surpankha, which was given to her by her mother.

[14] Mohanty describes women as "objects-who-defend-themselves" and men as "subjects-who-perpetrate-violence" (339).

archetypal victim who defends herself from the male violence inflicted on her. In this scene, we see Meenakshi assuming the role of a subject who perpetrates violence. In this way, the dichotomy of women as powerless "objects who defend themselves" and men as powerful "subjects who perpetrate violence" is deconstructed in the character of Surpankha (Mohanty 339). However, it is ironic that this "violent restlessness" (Kané 28), which is appreciated in the behavior of Ravan as a marker of heroism, is often criticized when embodied by Meenakshi.

The death of Vidyujiva, her husband, is the final strike that stokes her resentment against her family. The killing of Vidyujiva involved Meenakshi's entire clan. The involvement of her brothers Ravan, Kumbhakarna, and Vibhishan in her husband's murder forces her to wage war against her entire tribe and, most importantly, Ravan. The replacement of grief with rage pushes her to wage vengeance against all who have been indifferent to her "bleeding bruises" since childhood (Kané 17). The suppressed aggression pushes her to seek revenge against Ravan, the man behind her suppression, neglect, lack of love, separation from her father, and now, widowhood. When she questions her brother Ravan's involvement in her husband's death, "she projects the power of a wronged widow, of the fury of a grieving wife, of an embittered but powerful woman, a sister questioning her brother's point to prove, with the full might of wrath and hate behind her" (Kané 158). It reflects how the killing of Vidyujiva immersed her in a wave of hopelessness and hatred. It is in Vidyujiva's death that she realizes that "her family had destroyed her" by killing the man "who had saved her from them" and "had given her the love that none of them could offer, that warmth, that peace, that sense of being wanted, the belongingness. Not her mother, not her brothers" (Kané 161). The grief-stricken Surpankha, at this moment, represents the predicament of all the women who have been wronged by patriarchy with the misconception that they are incapable of materializing their thoughts and executing their plans. Bhavesh Kumar and Anand Mahanand suggest how these social norms and stereotypical notions about the nature of women have resulted in "a deep chasm of unbridgeable differences," which has "downgraded the status of women in society" (Kumar and Mahanand 101). But Surpankha, by defying all the notions of conformity, tries to resist patriarchy. It is strange that a man's act of seeking revenge and vengeance is deemed justified, but Surpankha's act of avenging Vidyujiva's death by instigating Ravan to fight against Ram is criticized and subjected to the dictums of morality and ethics. Through her actions, she exhibits the attributes of a fierce and independent woman who attempts to evolve out of restricting social codes of conduct. The fictional space created by Kavita Kané allows her to be the epicenter of the narrative so that we can closely witness her journey from Meenakshi to Surpankha. She remains a woman caught between her identity as Meenakshi and Surpankha, for it is the injustice suffered as Meenakshi during the early years that forced her to strengthen her determination to seek solace through vengeance and establish herself as Surpankha.[15]

Meenakshi: A Sexually (Un)tamed Woman

The cult of Surpankha has been reduced to the mutilation scene of *Ramayana*, where she was stamped as a sexually (un)tamed woman. The encounter between Ram, Laxman, Sita, and Meenakshi in the forest resulted in the horrific mutilation of Surpankha's face. The disfigurement of Surpankha indicates how the "female body becomes a site of social control" (Sabala and Gopal 45). The mutilation of Surpankha[16] is considered a deserved punishment as

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[15] Most versions including the Valmiki's *Ramayana* mention her to be an ugly woman. When Surpankha first sees Rama in the forest, Valmiki describes her as facially unpleasant, pot-bellied, wry-eyed, coppery-haired, ugly featured, brassy-voiced, old, a crooked talker, ill-mannered, uncouth, and abominable (Richman 1991).

[16] Valmiki writes that she met the exiled Prince Rama during one such visit to the Forest of Panchavati and was instantly smitten by his youthful good looks. She adopted a beautiful form to entice him, but Rama kindly rejected her advances, telling her that he was faithful to his wife Sita and thus would never take another wife.

her ruined face will force her to live in eternal disgrace. It also depicts a moment of utter horror and disgrace as, from here on, Surpankha "shall have to live with this face as a constant reminder" of her humiliation (Kané 196). Anindita De, in her article "Surpanakha's Mutilation or That of Womanhood? An Inquiry into Two Feminist Retellings," asserts, "Surpanakha's mutilation is a warning to women, a message to obey the patriarchal terms and conditions" (De 2). Moreover, according to the male-centric interpretation of the mutilation scene, Surpankha attempted to attack Sita which results in the maiming of Surpankha's nose and ears. However, a feminist reading of the scene unsettles this notion, for, in reality, the "dishonorable crime" of "displaying desire" for Ram and Laxman resulted in her mutilation (Kané 190). As Karline McLain puts it, the mutilation of Surpankha "can symbolically be interpreted as a gendered punishment for sexual transgression" (McLain 35). It also exposes the "deep suspicion" inherent in patriarchal societies concerning "women's power and sexuality when unchecked by male control" (Erndl 68).

Moving forward, the image of Surpankha as an immodest woman or an adulteress establishes her as an "alter ego of Sita, often considered the model of the chaste and submissive wife" (Erndl 10). Valmiki's Sita is an epitome of ideal femininity due to her controlled sexuality and perpetual obedience, but against her, Kané's Surpankha is an independent uncontrolled woman who is an incarnation of ferocious ruthlessness and sexual rigor. As Kathleen Erndl puts it, "the good woman [Sītā] is one who remains controlled, both mentally and physically, by her husband (or, in his absence, her father, brother, or son) and whose sexuality is channeled into childbearing and service to her husband…The bad woman [Śūrpaṇakhā] is one who is not subject to these controls" (Erndl 83). Karline McLain, in her essay "Sita and Shurpanaka: Symbols of Nation in *Amar Chitra Katha*," states, "The immediate reason for her mutilation might appear to be her threatened attack on Sita, but the actual reason is more intimately connected with her gender, sexuality, and communal identity…Shrupanakha was mutilated not for her attack on Sita, but for her sexual assertiveness" (McLain 35). It illustrates how a sexually reprobate woman is a threat to the community, so she needs to be disciplined for her actions. Under such circumstances, the disfigurement of a woman or mutilation is considered an apt punishment so that the power dynamics of society remain unchallenged. It further demonstrates how these epics encourage the image of regressive sexuality when it comes to women figures, for sexually untamed women have the potential to challenge the codes of patriarchy. As Kathleen Erndl puts it, "it is Surpankha's nature as a woman, rather than or not simply as, a demoness, that is the problem" (Brown and Agrawal 250).

Further, Veena Talwar Oldenburg maintains, "this encounter indubitably encourages violence against women who are sexual aggressors. It also illustrates, par excellence, the lengths to which men may go to assuage their primal fear of unrestrained female sexuality" (qtd. in Brown and Agrawal 250). Kané attempts to draw the reader's attention to the violence inherent in the scene. The violence inflicted on Surpankha by Laxman's sword has been invisible to the eyes of many academics, but Kané's narrative accentuates Surpankha as a victim of this unjustified violence. She questions the use of violence as a "reliable mechanism to control [the] body" in order to "ascertain their conformity to the patriarchal norms" (Kumar and Mahanand 100-101). Kané's Surpankha questions Laxman's horrific act of maiming her as she says:

> [W]hat weird barbarity was this and for what…for displaying desire for these two handsome men? What were they furious about—me attacking Sita or me assaulting

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Rejected, Surpankha then approached Lakshmana (younger brother of Ram), who said that he is only second to Ram and therefore not worthy of her. Infuriated by their dismissals, the humiliated and envious Surpankha returned to her demonic form and attacked Sita, but was thwarted by Lakshmana, who cut off her nose.

their chastity, their moral righteousness? Was it their apprehension for my uninhibited behaviour, assuming it to be an overt vulgarity, an open display of unleashed carnal anarchy? (Kané 190)

Kavita Kané tries to challenge the significance of the mutilation scene of Valmiki's *Ramayana* by deeming Meenakshi's sexual advancement as an act of assertion, not transgression. Her statement makes us wonder whether she deserved the mutilation. Was she really wrong in asserting her sexuality in front of Ram and Laxman, the two young men? Her act of boldly "articulating her passionate feelings" establishes her as a woman attempting to go "beyond the threshold of patriarchy" (Gulati and Anoop x). In this way, it can be proclaimed that Kané's depiction of the mutilation of Surpankha in *Lanka's Princess* helps reject the stereotypical image of Surpankha as malevolent by asserting that Surpankha's image as an "evil" woman is more of a "patriarchal strategy" used to "justify her social rejection and subsequent disfigurement" (De 4).

Humanizing Surpankha

Mythology is not just about the life and narratives of gods and goddesses but about human beings and their flaws. In an interview with *India Today*, Kané once proclaimed that in *Lanka's Princess*, "I have humanised a demonised character" (qtd. in Kuenzang, para. 6). It signifies how Surpankha's character has always been stereotyped as a vamp or a victim, but nobody has ever tried to understand her character as a person or a woman "who wishes to tell her own story" (Gupta 344). In her perception, the stereotypical categorization of women as angels or devils robs them of their status as human beings. Kané intends to project Surpankha as a mortal with flaws capable of both good and evil. She focuses on the neglected aspects of Surpankha's identity and further tries to liberate her from the "dagger point of contempt and condescension" (Pillai 162). The humanization of Surpankha allows us to understand her within the framework of a modern Indian woman. In the words of Anjali Verma and Prerna Jatav, "we can trace the reflections of a modern woman's quest and sufferings" through the character of Surpankha (Verma and Jatav 124). The traits of fearlessness, courage, love, anger, and remorse in Surpankha make us see her more as a human than a demon. To quote M. Asha and R. Nandhini here, Kané emphatically takes the "neglected characters from these epics and credits them the characteristics of solidarity and astuteness, thereby giving these women characters a new identity and human touch" (2391). She allows us to see the element of humanity inherent in her, particularly in the scene where she stops herself from killing Laxman's wife and his child by exhibiting the emotions of pity and remorse. In this way, it can be said that Kané has tried to represent Surpankha as "a woman more hated than hateful" (2391).

Conclusion

Kavita Kané's reinterpretation of the marginalized character of Surpankha challenges the stereotypical characterization of Surpankha as the "other" of Sita. She tries to unravel the real identity of Surpankha by giving expression to her voice and establishing her as an embodiment of knowledge, action, and power. The text establishes how the boundaries of Valmiki's epic failed to provide Surpankha the space to outshine men, but in Kané's book, when she gets that space, she reveals her ferocious and astute side. She establishes herself as an emancipated woman who otherwise has been misrepresented in the male-centric narratives. Kavita Kané represents Surpankha as a woman devoted to thought and action, unlike Valmiki's portrayal, wherein she is projected as a passive participant in the larger framework of action, war, and emotions. Kané exposes the androcentric and phallogocentric world of mythology and further tries to regain "the lost dignity of a wronged woman" like Surpankha (Pillai 162).

She tries to free Meenakshi, an iconoclast, from the burden of being an ugly, monstrous mythological character. Kavita Kané's *Lanka's Princess* dismantles the traditional approach of interpreting an epic by facilitating a movement away from the center towards the margins.

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