FROM DEMONESS TO DAMSEL: REIMAGINING SURPANAKHA IN A FEMINISTIC LIGHT

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Abstract

In India, Mythology is a significant and lively construct of contemporary relevance as it can influence the thought process of people in general. Myths reach to the psychological nuances of a society and exist as a part of its collective unconscious. Indian epics are largely misogynist in nature and thus provide space for revision. A revisionist function over genres, stretches and expands the horizon of canonical narratives by decentering and foregrounding lesser known facts and marginalized characters. Feminist revisionist myth making is a strategy which is having an objective of reevaluating the experience of marginalized female characters. Silenced women voices find an identity in these narratives, adding currency to the texts and the issues that they raise. The female characters in Indian mythology, particularly in the epics are bracketed into two extremes: as the victim or villain, the innocent or the immoral, the revered or the denounced. Being an embodiment of all that are evil and immoral in \textit{Ramayana} for centuries, Surpanakha finds a newly minted perspective in Kavita Kane’s novel \textit{Lanka’s Princess}. The present article analyses how the canonical narratives in general and Vatmiki \textit{Ramayana} in particular treat Surpanakha as the ‘other’ woman and how Kavita Kane has deconstructed the image of Surpanakha in her novel \textit{Lanka’s Princess}. Feminist revisionist theory and the postcolonial concept of the ‘other’ are used as methodological framework for the analysis. It also foregrounds the fact that feminist revisionist narratives serve as rehabilitation centers for the misogynistic minds.

Key Words: Feminism, Revisionist Mythology, Rehabilitation, the ‘Other’, Retelling

Mythology contributed to the growth and development of cultures and civilizations across the world. While history is the study of objective truths revealed by factual data, mythology explains people’s beliefs that may be sometimes indifferent to rational thoughts. In India, it is a significant and lively construct of contemporary relevance, as it is right to say that myths can describe every experience and emotions of people irrespective of the difference in culture and religion. Myths reach to the psychological nuances of a society, and this psychological aspect is the reason and instrument for the transportation of myths over generations, across timeline. People still hold on to these narratives as an exchequer of knowledge to find solutions to problems of human existence.

Myths are fluid in form and can be shaped into new forms without a change in its cardinal structure. Even a single myth is not one book, rather a cluster of books written by different people at different times, and hence greater are chances to find reflections of values of the time on these narratives. It provides umpteen number of scopes for revisiting, refashioning and reformulating myths for their contemporarisation. Revisionists function over genres, stretch and expand the horizon of canonical narratives by decentering and foregrounding lesser known facts and marginalized characters. It can be called a celebration of unheard voices that emerge out of the silence of mainstream narratives. These rabble-rousing interpretations persuade the readers to analyse and question the status-quoist views of dharma from the perspectives of the victims of an unfairly biased social order: women, ethnic minorities, tribal people and sexual minorities. Thus, revisionism in myth-making employs myths in the service of human rights, democracy and social justice.

As the Indologist Wendy Doniger says, “the female sex has never found favour with any of the world’s religion, or with their priests and prophets (Doniger,1975,p.11).” Since mythology is interwoven with religion, this biased treatment is also visible in the tales that often invites a feminist revision. Feminist revisionist myth making is a strategy which is having an objective of reevaluating the experience of marginalized female characters. Marginalized voices find an identity in these narratives, adding currency to the texts and the issues that they raise. As Alicia Ostrieker points out

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Old stories are changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy. They are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered, and in some case, they are instructions for survival. (Ostriker, 1982, p.215)

Revisionist writers in India, especially feminists, chiefly relook and question ‘dharma’ in the text and bring in a contemporary relevance by connecting it to the present. The great twin epics of the country, Ramayana and Mahabharata, which reflect and coax the collective consciousness of India become specimens of study for these feminist writers where they are reading between the lines and chime in certain nuances in the mythological characters, that make them more human and more accessible. The epics reached their final form roughly around two thousand years ago. They were composed in North-India, in the Gangetic Plains and specifically having focus primarily on the heroic deeds of men. Of these two, collectively called the Itihisas, Ramayana is assured to be the one that happened first as per both mythological beliefs and historical studies.

Retelling the Ramayana has been part of the literary and performative traditions in India and South Asia. These revisions are actually in opposition to the conventional views that hold the Vatmiki Ramayana as the standard and authentic text. These attempts persuade the readers to think along in different ideological lines. Different versions of the Ramayana therefore signify the varied attempts on the part of different cultural identities to deconstruct a monolithic domain.

Feminist revisionist readings challenge and dismantle the accepted truth and reality of the phallocentric traditions in Ramayana. As the writer Susan Sellers points out, their writings are not “pleasurable reversal or ingenious tinkering, but new embroideries, adding fresh images and colours to radically alter the picture” (Sellers, 2001, p.29). Amidst the notable feminist writers of India like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Gita Harirhan and Suniti Nam Joshi, Kavita Kane stands apart with her choice of protagonists and intensity of narration. Kavita Kane handpicks less-explored or silenced female characters from mythology and gives them voices, retelling their stories in sync with the current scenario. While going through these characters no one will feel that they led a submissive life, centuries ago in a faraway land. They are contemporary in their deeds and spirit, and expose their minds without any inhibitions.

The female characters in Indian mythology, particularly in the epics are bracketed into two extremes: the victim or villain, the innocent or the immoral, the revered or the denounced. Being an embodiment of all that are evil and immoral in Ramayana for centuries, Surpanakha finds a newly minted perspective in Kavita Kane’s novel Lanka’s Princess. In the canonical versions of the epic, there is an eerie and disturbing silence on Surpanarkha’s story, especially the unjust mutilation she underwent. Kane depicts Surpanakha as a free-spirited woman, freed from the shackles of societal judgment and moral influence. Vatmiki Ramayana portrays Surpanakha as demonic or ‘ghora mukhi’, an ugly and fierce figure. But by humanizing Surpanakha, Kane probes into her deep psyche and analyses the character yonder the clichéd portrayals.

It is believed that Ramayana is about dharma. But the tale of Surpanakha makes the readers to think if the epic centers on extreme envy, misapprehensions and rivalry. One character who was deeply misunderstood and much marginalized in the Ramayana is Surpanakha. The canonical narratives always treat her as the ‘other’ woman. In Vatmiki Ramayana which advocates for an upper hand of good over evil, civilized over uncivilized or cultured over uncultured, Surpanakha clearly occupies a space outside the margins of encompassment. The present article analyses how the canonical narratives in general and Vatmiki Ramayana in particular treats Surpanakha as the ‘other’ woman and how Kavita Kane has deconstructed the image of Surpanakha in her novel Lanka’s Princess. It also foregrounds the fact that feminist revisionist narratives serves as a rehabilitation center for the misogynistic minds. Surpanakha represents ‘other-ness’ in multiple spaces, being in terms of gender, race and culture. Feminist revisionist theory and the postcolonial concept of the ‘other’ are used s methodological framework for the analysis.

Lanka’s Princess shows a familial space which itself was despairingly gendered for Surpanakha. Kaikesi, Surpanakha’s own mother repudiates her for being a girl, a dark skinned one who is not at all pretty in her eyes. She was a child who is uninvited, unbidden, and unasked for. Kaikesi considered her merely as a girl without any purpose, unlike her brothers who were raised and praised as the weapons to win back Lanka from Kubera. “How is this dark monkey going to bring us good fortune (Kane, 2016, p.3)” she asks. Living under the shadows of powerful and stupendous brothers such as Ravana, Vibhishana and Kumbakarna, Surpanakha had to suppress her
individuality and the strength in her personality at several instances. Furthermore, the discussions and fights between Kaikesi and her husband Vishravas always revolve around their precious son Ravana, the choices he makes and the decisions he takes mattered. This diminishes not only the significance of their other two sons, but doubly marginalizes Surpanakha as she is also a girl. For instance, as a five-year-old she gets into a fight to save Vibishana and succeeds in it. But, instead of being praised, Kaikesi snaps at her saying, “Vibhishana is a boy, and he is older to you. He doesn’t need your protection!” (Kane, 2016,p.5). Thus, in her own clan and in her own home, Surpanakha is perceived as the powerless ‘other’. This is as same as what Simone de Beauvoir explains, “one is not born but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir,2001,p.249). It is this ‘difference’ that becomes the foundation for being treated as inferior. *Lanka’s Princess* exposes the marginality Surpanakha experiences as a result of this normalized ‘othering’ process operative in manifold situations.

The age old and authoritative *Ramayana* narratives always favour submissive and acquiescent women either belongs to the Aryans race or the non- Aryan, Rakshasa race. This is why Mandodari, wife of the Rakshasa king Ravana is praised, worshipped and even grouped among the ‘panchakanyas’- the five iconic ladies of Indian mythology. Surpanakha on the other hand is a strong and assertive woman whose character gets negative denotations throughout the epic. She is the cultural ‘other’ to the submissive ladies. But Kavita Kane defamiliarises the same Surpanakha as a girl who realizes her limitations and reshapesces those limitations into possibilities; a model to be followed by the contemporary girls. The megalomaniac and egoistic Ravana who always abominates his sister, derives perverse and unreasonable pleasure in depriving Surpanakha of any joy. This irks her and makes her realize that in order to survive she has to be strong and self-reliant. In an attempt to assert herself and seek justice for the murder of her pet by Ravana, Surpanakha claws at him which leads to the notorious change in her name- she changed herself from Meenakshi to Surpanakha. Ravana called her so to indicate her demonessness, which shows the patriarchal phobia to negatively label the strong and assertive woman. Patriarchy won’t consider them as courageous or valorous but as arrogant women whom should be tamed and penalized. The strong gender bias and focus on submissive women in the Indian society epitomizes Sita, who gives up everything to protect the honor of her ‘ maryada purush’ Rama. She is chronicled in the sacred text as the paragon of virtues that define an Indian woman. The same Indian epic underplays the role of Surpanakha who is actually forced to cast aside her identity of Meenakshi and evolves to be Surpanakha. She is not the villain but the victim, who is even forced to suspect her own family.

The people of different races and cultures follow different codes of law. Hence it is impermissible to brand the deportment and ways of life of a group of people as evil or unacceptable especially by looking through a lens that is totally alien to the former. There are no universal laws to assess the merit of a race and label one as inferior. But before the whole world, the European colonizers pictured the colonized people as the inferior ‘other’. *Ramayana*, a book which is believed to be based entirely on dharma, introduces Rakshasas as a trouble making, uncivilized clan of demons, just like the colonizer pictures the colonized people. The behavior of the characters like Surpanakha or Tadaka is depicted like Rakshasas follow the laws of the jungle or more primitive ones which of course is based on the dominance and survival of the fittest. Their ways of life may not be appeal to the heroes of the epic, the Aryan kings. But that doesn’t mean that the ‘other’ is inherently evil. Calling Rakshasa as demon is only a convenient translation rather than a correct one.

The portrayal of Surpanakha in Vatmiki *Ramayana* is as similar as the portrayal of Asian and African women by their European colonizers. She is described as demonic or ‘ghoramukhi’, that is simply a hideous and vicious woman. She is pot-bellied with over-sized breasts and has a harsh and granting voice. The description of Surpanakha’s identity is constantly reminds of the colonized ‘other’ woman. She is a woman from the Rakshasa clan, the cultural other to the Aryans and thus sexually corrupt, wild, untamed, aggressive and barbaric. Frantz Fanon, the postcolonial critic elaborates the concept of ‘othering’ as involves two conceptions- the ‘exotic other’ and the ‘demonic other’. The ‘exotic other’ shows the fascination and curiosity of the privileged race with the inherent beauty and rawness of the primitive and undeveloped other; while the ‘demonic other’ is portrayed as savage and evil that should be punished and corrected. This attitude is clearly evident in the treatment of Surpanakha by the Aryan men, Rama and Laxmana.

Mutilation of Surpanakha is a turning point in *Ramayana* which triggered all the later developments in the plot. In *Ramayana* which supports and glorifies the meek, obedient and good women, Surpanakha is constantly out of the circle of acceptance. This male-centric conformist narrative teaches that such women should be tamed and disciplined. This happens with Surpanakha also. According to Vatmiki *Ramayana*, when Surpanakha accidentally chanced upon Rama, and infatuated with his beauty she requested him to take her as his beloved. But he had his wife with him so directed her to the younger brother Laxmana. But Laxmana also rejected her plea since all he
wished was to serve Rama and Sita. Angry at being spurned by both men, Surpanakha attacked Sita. But Laxmana blocked her path, dragged her by the hair and to teach her a lesson, did cut her nose and ears. In some vernacular versions her breasts were also ruthlessly chopped-off, since breasts are considered as a symbol of feminity. In Lanka’s Princess the author narrates the incidents as same but colors it with much emotional paints. Kavita Kane makes the readers understand that both the men, Rama and Laxmana played with her emotions which triggered Surpanakha to attack Sita. In Rakshasa clan if a woman gets attracted to a man she will openly express her emotions unlike the mild and gentle Aryan woman. The same Rakshasi (the woman of Rakshasa clan), if she gets an unjust treatment or her pride gets insulted will retaliate immediately who ever may be the opponent. That’s what Surpanakha did and which ultimately resulted in her unjust mutilation.

The unfair mutilation of Surpanakha proves that a conquering race cannot always keep moral integrity and be righteous in their methods of warfare or in their treatment of the opposite race. The barbarous treatment that Laxmana adopted to Surpanakha, on a diminutive provocation, is indistinguishable from the conduct of an infuriated Aryan chief to his captive lady, who is evidently a non- Aryan. Surpanakha’s overt sexuality had taken the men by surprise and amused them greatly and they had played among till the amusement had gone awry. Lanka’s Princess makes a bold suggestion that Rama, to whom she was allured to, and Laxmana, to whom she was pointed to, must have made decisions instead of play a game which insulted her pride. This is not expected from the so called morally virtuous men of history. They made fun of her in front of another woman, offended her feelings, and exacerbating the wounds, mutilated her. She only expressed her desire to be their lover, and instead of rejecting, the men decided to make fun of her desperation. Surpanakha has faced devastating emotional and psychological mutilations in manifold levels which make the physical mutilation less painful.

Differences in the justice system of Aryans and the Non-Aryans, and the problems that result when one system forcefully replaces another are evident in Ramayana. Even in the circumstances of grave punishments, disfiguring and maiming a woman’s face is brutal, and yet the so called virtuous man did it without feeling anything remorse. Similar to this, when Rama mutilated and killed another Non- Aryan woman Tadaka, he was glorified and commended by others. A mutilated woman of the old ages is similar to an acid attack victim of the contemporary times. Punishing a woman in this fashion for any severe crime is more inhuman than killing her. Even after committing such a non-chivalrous and atrocious act, Ramayana exemplifies Rama and Laxmana as synonyms for righteous men.

By employing a feminist revisionist approach in the retelling of Ramayana, especially in the carving of the episode of Surpanakha’s mutilation, Kavita Kane opens a space for discussion of the epic from an ethical point of view. Surpanakha’s mutilation becomes crucial since it sheds light on Rama’s character and on his attitude towards feminine sex and female sexuality. Readers, in general, can juxtapose two different kinds of attitude regarding women in Ramayana. One of protecting the docile and weak women and another to criminalize and penalize those women whose sexuality is beyond man’s control. Sita is an example of the former while Surpanakha represents the latter. Hence there is nothing wrong to argue that only since Surpanakha overstepped both her expected roles as a woman, and as a member of the ‘other’ race, she is depicted as worthy of punishment at the hands of the ideal man. Surpanakha’s biggest mistake was her boldness and she was never submissive as the Aryan women. Surpanakha was not coy; she possessed powers and didn’t like being made a fool of. The irony is that even in the twentieth century, Indian society is caught up in the swirls of coyness and beauty. This mindset of people needs an immediate rehabilitation for the progress of women folk. It’s only possible through attempts in revising the conservative misogynist narratives carried over through generations. Revisionist narratives serve as rehabilitation centers for the infected minds.

In the Indian epics Surpanakha is not the only woman who explicitly expressed her sexual agency and made advancement to men who were at first disinterested and indifferent to the fairer sex. The apsaras of Indra’s court are evident examples who consciously seduced the sages on Indra’s command to stop them from their higher spiritual endeavors. These women were not punished for exercising their sexual agency or labeled as morally incorrect. They still enjoyed the privileges of Devaloka, the heaven. So, the argument is not about sexual agency or female sexuality; it’ about which authority sanctions their actions. Those who hold the hegemonic power can justify the otherwise immoral and dishonorable acts by women since it is carried out in the interest of the state. Hence it’s not for the act that Surpanakha got punished but for her state of being the ‘other’.

Kavita Kane has reimagined this Surpanakha who is marked by a nexuses of multiple marginalizations into a woman with a personality in totality. She is second to none in the entire epic. Lanka’s Princess enabled Surpanakha to rebuild her own experience as a woman first, and then narrate her story and finally the whole epic.
Kane’s Surpanakha is not a demoness, but a normal girl; a thinking, feeling individual who reacts to the situations as anyone does. By humanizing the demonized figure, the readers get a chance to probe deep into her psyche and analyse the character yonder the misogynist portrayals.

Works Cited