



# CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES AND REWRITING MYTHS: SUBVERTING GENDER NORMS THROUGH SURPANAKHA'S RESURGENCE IN KAVITA KANE'S *LANKA'S PRINCESS*.

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## **Abstract:**

This paper aims to analyze the character of Surpanakha who is often portrayed as an ugly and vicious woman who transgressed the gender boundary by expressing her sexual desire towards Ram in the famous Indian epic *Ramayana*. Surpanakha is a perfect illustration of the archetype of a “bad woman” of Indian mythology who is punished for being bold and having a liberal outlook. The paper will focus on Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* (2017) and how it subverts India's most popular tale of morality by giving space to Surpanakha as a “new woman” who wants to express her individuality but is repeatedly penalized for breaking social norms. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to explore how contemporary writers are re-narrating traditional mythologies to challenge the authoritative and discriminatory ideologies they convey. By offering spaces to minor characters like Surpanakha, these authors are challenging the patriarchal mindset and the privileged character's hierarchical dominance. Overall, it also emphasizes the necessity of challenging and reinterpreting mythology in light of the sensibility of minor characters more inclusive and progressive tales.

**Keywords: mythology, reinterpretate, “new woman”, stereotype, social conventions**

## Introduction

This paper analyzes the character of Surpanakha in the Indian epic *Ramayana* and explores how contemporary writers have subverted traditional mythologies to challenge discriminatory ideologies. Surpanakha is often depicted as a “bad” woman who transgresses gender line by articulating her sexual longing towards Ram and is punished for it.

Kavita Kane’s *Lanka’s Princess* (2017) is a text that gives space to Surpanakha and allows her to narrate her own story. The work presents Surpanakha as a “new woman” who desires to stand out but is constantly punished for perceived violation and cultural conventions. Through this subversion of traditional mythology, contemporary writers are countering the patriarchal mindset and the privileged characters’ hierarchical dominance. The paper argues that by offering spaces to minor characters like Surpanakha, writers are creating more inclusive and progressive narratives which highlights the importance of re-examining traditional mythologies and allowing the voices of marginalized characters to be heard. It also emphasizes the need to challenge and re-shape the mythology according to the sensibilities of minorities, in order to create narratives that reflect the diversity of human experiences by thoughtfully analyzing the character of Surpanakha in *Ramayana*. The portrayal of Surpanakha in the *Ramayana* has been controversial, with some critics arguing that she is a victim of male aggression and others viewing her as a villain who deserves punishment for her actions. The character’s physical appearance has also been a subject of debate, with some interpretations of the text suggesting that she is depicted as dark-skinned and unattractive, reinforcing negative stereotypes about skin color and beauty standards. In the current years, there has been a thriving movement to re-examine the portrayal of women in Indian mythology and to challenge patriarchal attitudes and practices. Scholars and writers have pointed out the ways in which women’s voices and experiences are marginalized or silenced in sacred texts, and they have called for a more nuanced and inclusive approach for interpreting these stories. Feminist retellings of the *Ramayana* and other Indian epics have sought to give voice to marginalized characters like Surpanakha and to challenge traditional gender roles and power dynamics. These works have sparked important discussions about representation, cultural identity, and the role of literature in shaping our understanding of the world around us.

It is true that the *Ramayana* and other Indian epics continue to be influential cultural touchstones in contemporary Indian society and that traditional gender roles and power dynamics are reflected in these texts. Nonetheless, it is important to note that there is also a growing awareness and critique of these structures, particularly among younger generations. However, post-globalization retellings are subjecting these models to women-centric consciousness, rationalizing and challenging the patriarchal norms and discriminatory practices that have traditionally been upheld. It is essential to recognize and acknowledge the complexities and contradictions in the portrayal of women in religious texts and question the patriarchal structures that uphold them. The development of a women-centric consciousness and the integration of diverse perspective in the retelling of these stories can help promote gender equality and challenge discriminatory practices in society.

Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* offers a fresh perspective on the *Ramayana*, by re-examining the story from the point of view of Surpanakha, who is often portrayed as a one-dimensional villain in popular versions of *Ramayana*. Kane's novel gives voice to Surpanakha and portrays her as a complex character who is shaped by her experiences in a patriarchal society. The novel highlights how Surpanakha is ridiculed and neglected for her looks from a young age, which leads to her feeling isolated and resentful. As she grows older, Surpanakha is able to assert her independence and make her own choices, but these choices are often challenged and regulated by the expectations of a patriarchal society. Through Surpanakha's experiences, the novel sheds light on how women are often judged and punished for stepping outside the boundaries set by patriarchal society. Despite her strength and resilience, Surpanakha is ultimately punished for her transgressions, which makes the novel a poignant commentary on the limitations that women face in the society that is dominated by men. Overall, *Lanka's Princess* is a compelling and thought-provoking retelling of the *Ramayana*, which offers readers a fresh perspective on the story and the characters. By giving voice to a neglected character like Surpanakha, Kavita Kane had crafted a novel that challenges conventional gender roles and explores the complexities of female agency and empowerment in a patriarchal society.

### **Assertion of new woman autonomy**

It is interesting to note that Kavita Kane's portrayal of Surpanakha in *Lanka's Princess* highlights a strong and independent woman who challenges the traditional societal norms that restrict women's roles and freedoms. Despite living in a patriarchal society, Surpanakha asserts herself freely, expresses her needs and emotions, and fight for her rights. Furthermore, Surpanakha subverts the conventional gender roles that determine a woman's value solely based on her ability to bear children. This idea is often deeply ingrained in traditional societies, where women are expected to prioritize motherhood above all else. However Surpanakha refuses to be defined by this narrow definition of femininity and instead asserts her autonomy and agency as an individual. In this way, Surpanakha can be seen as a trailblazer and a symbol of empowerment for contemporary women who also seek to challenge and break free from restrictive societal norms. The portrayal of Surpanakha as a strong and independent woman in Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* is reminiscent of the depiction of female characters in post-colonial literature by Indian woman writers like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande, and Manju Kapur. These writers have portrayed women not as helpless victims but as resolute people who struggle to oppose the patriarchal hegemony to assert their identities and express their power. The female protagonists in their works like Maya from *Cry, The Peacock* (1963), pursuit for liberation to acquire her own individuality in her family. Monisha from *Voices in the City* (1965) Sita from *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975) and many other works depicts the theme of entrapment, madness, exile, and isolation, drawing out the inner turmoil and insecurities of women. The protagonists in these works assert their inner voice within the patriarchal system. The term "new woman" in Indian society refers to a woman who is awakened to her rightful place in society and her potential for self-realization. These women are no longer content to live within the confines of traditional gender roles and seek to challenge and subvert societal norms that restrict their freedom and agency.

Overall, the paper sheds light on the concept of the new woman who is conscious of her individuality and asserts her rights in the society. It also highlights the struggles and challenges faced by women in patriarchal societies and their efforts to break the shackles of patriarchal social structure. It seems that according to Kane, Surpanakha's personality was shaped by her experiences growing up in a family where she was mocked and ignored by her siblings and mother, who favoured masculinity and showed partiality openly towards her. This, combined with her own physical appearance being belittled, would have had a significant impact on her self-esteem and confidence. Despite this, Surpanakha was able to liberate herself from societal expectations and claim her rights and choices. Her physical strength, intelligence, and willpower are the key roles, which allow her to defend herself and make decisions for her own, such as choosing her life partner, Surpanakha also demonstrated a strong sense of individuality and desire to assert her identity, resisting the judgments made about her persona and expressing her physical desires without hesitation. Overall, it seems that despite the challenges she faced, Surpanakha was able to overcome them and assert her own agency and autonomy.

### **Deep-rooted marginalization of Surpanakha**

Surpanakha experienced a constant maltreatment as a female child growing up with three elder brothers Vibhishan, Kumbhakarna and Ravana. Vibhishan was favored by his father a lot whereas Ravana by her mother. She only received consolation from her middle brother Kumbhakarna, Vibhishan and Ravana were always preoccupied with themselves with no concerns for others, focused on inheritance of empire which was ruled by his grandfather Sumali. Ravana worked on himself by developing his warrior skills and quest for gaining his good command over Vedas and six Shastras in attempt to fulfill his mother's ambition. Sumali claimed that Ravana innate enthusiasm for politics was an attribute of Asura blood. Both Sumali and Kaikesi inspired Ravana and had a strong believe that he will be the next who will lead the Asura reign. Kaikesi and Vibhishan both used to have debate over Ravana's and Vibhishana's needs and desires through completely neglecting their youngest child Surpanakha.

Surpanakha's childhood was marked by neglect and emotional pain, as her parents and elder siblings were focused on their own pursuits and interests. She found solace only in her middle brother Kumbhakarna, who was kind and caring towards her. However, even he was unable to shield her from the cruelty of her elder brothers. Ravana, in particular was known for his violent temper and arrogance, which often manifested in acts of cruelty towards those around him, including his own family members. The incident with Surpanakha's pet lamb Maya was a turning point in her relationship with Ravana. It showed her the depths of his callousness and lack of empathy, and she was unable to reconcile herself with him. This incident was one of the reasons that led to her eventual transformation from a vulnerable and neglected child to a fierce and independent woman who refused to tolerate any form of injustice.

As Ravana grumped at her, "You should have trained your pet, Meenu"... (Kane 7). She annihilated months of efforts and forbearance with that dumb animal. Surpanakha thought, that her sorrow is gradually erupting into a hatred and contempt directed at her brother. Unexpectedly charging towards Ravana, she buried her claws into the

delicate flesh of his neck, ripping the skin and exposing the flesh as she did so. In pain and rage, Ravana yelled at Surpanakha, “you ugly wretch...Surpanakha, that is what she is...a witch with long, Sharp claws”. (Kane 8). Even her mother rebuked her for her audaciousness to foray her elder brother and also reprimanded her for her aggressive behaviour and said, “Surpanakha that’s the right name for you, you monster” (Kane 9).

Surpanakha’s response to her mother’s harsh words shows the impact of her mother’s discrimination and neglect on her self esteem. She embraces her supposed “monstrous” appearance and takes pride in her sharp nails, using them as a symbol of protection. This shows that Surpanakha had to find a way to cope with the rejection and humiliation she faced throughout her life. It is unfortunate that Surpanakha had to endure such cruelty and discrimination from her own family. The constant criticism and rejection she faced because of her appearance must have been very painful for her. It is heartening to know that her grandmother Taraka recognized and appreciated her unique beauty, and provided her with the encouragement and support that she desperately needed. It is important to remember that beauty comes in all shapes and sizes, and everyone should be valued for their inherent worth, regardless of their appearance. “...Love that smooth dusky skin, love that petite, fragile figure of yours, those big honey drop eyes...” (Kane 22). It is clear that Surpanakha was constantly belittled and discriminated against by her family members, especially her mother, because of her appearance and gender. Her unique physical attributes, such as her sharp nails, were turned against her and became a source of ridicule and ostracism. Even when she tried to defend herself or her siblings, her efforts were dismissed and criticized. This constant rejection and isolation undoubtedly had a negative impact on Surpanakha’s self-esteem and sense of belonging. It is unfortunate that her true identity and potential were never recognized or celebrated, and instead she was reduced to a one-dimensional and vilified character portrayal in popular culture and literature.

### **Loneliness of Surpanakha**

Surpanakha’s life in Lanka seems to have been suffocating and restrictive. She was denied the freedom to explore the world beyond the palace, and her own desires and choices were disregarded. Her physical appearance was admired by the men in Lanka, but her overprotective brothers prevented any possible suitors from approaching her. It must have been frustrating for Surpanakha to have her life controlled by her brothers in such a way. The opulence and grandeur of the palace did not appeal to her, as she longed for something more fulfilling than material possessions. It is unfortunate that Surpanakha’s physical appearance was the only thing that was valued by the people around her, rather than her personality or character. This objectification of women is a common problem that persists in many societies even today.

Surpanakha’s life seems to have been plagued by a lack of love, affection, and attention from her family members. She was an unwanted child from the beginning, and this discrimination continued throughout her life. She found solace in simple things like her pet lamb Maya, but even that was taken away from her. Her grandmother Taraka was the only person who showed her love and support, but unfortunately, she too was killed. Surpanakha’s desire for love and affection was repeatedly ignored, and even after reaching the marriageable age, her brothers did not

consider her well-being and got married themselves.. Surpanakha's brothers were more concerned with their own lives and desires than with sister's well-being. Surpanakha's cynicism towards her brothers' marriages and alliances is understandable, given her own experiences of neglect and discrimination she longed for genuine love and companionship, rather than strategic alliances and self-interest. Her desire for authentic connections and relationships underscores the important of emotional fulfillment and happiness in life. It also highlights the negative consequences of prioritizing power and influence over genuine human connections. Ravana's focus on building alliances with influential families have been strategic for expanding the kingdom of Lanka, but it may have come at the cost of emotional fulfillment and happiness for his family members, including Surpanakha. She was delighted by his expression of love and devotion , which she never thought she could find, "I love you because there is no reason. I just hopelessly, irrationally did!!" (Kane 115).

It sounds like Surpanakha has found love with Vidyujiva's, but their relationship is being met with opposition due to Vidyujiva's Kalkeya lineage and Ravana's distrust. Despite the skepticism of her family and Ravana's malicious intentions, Surpanakha will need to be strong and stand up for herself, while also considering the potential risks and consequences of her decision. It's understandable that Surpanakha would feel immense anger and grief towards her family for the murder of her husband and their lack of remorse. The betrayal of her own family would undoubtedly be a painful experience, and it's not surprising that she would want to seek vengeance. However, her decision to use Rama and Lakshmana as a puppet in her revenge scheme is questionable. While they may have been able to help her achieve her goal, it's not clear if this would have been the right course of action or if it would have only perpetuated a cycle of violence.

It's also interesting to see how Surpanakha's exile in the Dandaka forest parallels Rama and Sita's own exile in the same location. This suggests that even though she may have been seeking revenge and acting out of anger, there is also a sense of personal growth and transformation that can come from periods of solitude and reflection in the wilderness.

### **Physical Intimacy**

Surpanakha's experiences in the Dandaka forest reflect the transformation of Meenakshi to Surpanakha, Surpanakha's life had been filled with sorrow and loss, and her desire for revenge had consumed her. But with the death of her son, she realized the futility of her anger and began to question the purpose of her existence. The natural beauty of the forest that she had come to love now seemed meaningless to her. She longed for something deeper, something that would give her life meaning and purpose. She began to seek out spiritual guidance and found solace in the teachings of the sages who lived in the forest. She learned to let go of her anger and bitterness, and to find inner peace and contentment. Overtime, she became a wise and revered sage herself, helping others to find their own paths to enlightenment. The transition of Surpanakha from a spiteful woman to a wise sage is evidence of the power of change and the potential of atonement, even under the most trying conditions.

One day while walking alone in the forest Surpanakha saw Ram and Lakshmana, she felt a rush over Rama as she watched both the brothers tightening the strings on their bows, forming their powerful muscles beneath their tanned skin. “She wanted them, badly, madly. She wondered what it would be like to have them and her body grew hot, moist and yielding at the thought. They must be skilled and intense lovers, but she would control them” (Kane 193). She wanted to seduce them and believed that they would be easy prey like most men, susceptible to her sexual allure. She undoubtedly felt ashamed of herself for lusting for two young guys when she was so young, but she also wanted to use passion as a form of comfort and fervently desired males to fulfill their desire while she was alone. She remembered her grandmother’s advice, “...there was no shame in desiring a man” (Kane 194). She desired physical closeness with one of the two guys in order to alleviate the loneliness she had. She hurried over to Rama to express her raging passion for him, but he denied her because Sita was with him. Rama then directed her to Lakshmana because he was available and free to accept her but Lakshmana also denied her proposal as he was married to Urmila who was waiting for him at Ayodhya. Once more, Lakshmana sent her in the direction of Rama, saying that he was only Rama’s servant and that she was entitled to better and needed to persuade Rama for this. Surpanakha realized that both the brothers were mocking her, “... were laughing at her, reeling her to and fro like a toy, like a mere means of amusement” (Kane 200). She saw two brothers, who were both harsh and attractive, as they stood in the centre and smiled and mocked at her. She attempted to assault Sita in her wrath for being rejected and humiliated, but Lakshmana stopped her. Ram gave Lakshmana the task of imparting a lesson to Surpanakha, the one she never forgets. He gave Lakshmana to order to batter her, ‘maim her’ (Kane 202).

Surpanakha felt humiliated and angry at their rejections and mockery. She saw it as yet another instance of men undermining her desires and aspirations. Her quest for revenge now took a new turn, as she saw Rama and Lakshmana as obstacles to be eliminated. She felt that they were not only responsible for denying her the pleasure of sex but also for standing in the way of her vengeance against Ravana and his family. Surpanakha returned to Ravana’s court and sought his help in avenging herself against Rama and Lakshmana. Ravana, delighted at the prospect of a war with Rama, agreed to help her and ordered his army to attack Rama and Lakshmana. However, his army was defeated, and Ravana was killed by Rama. Surpanakha was once again left alone, with her hopes of revenge shattered. She realized that her obsession with her revenge had led to her downfall, and she had lost everything dear to her. She left the Dandaka forest and wandered aimlessly, searching for a purpose in life. Surpanakha’s tragic story shows how the desire for revenge and the obsession with it can destroy one’s life and lead to ultimate downfall.

## Conclusion

However, Surpanakha’s character breaks away from this traditional stereotype of a dependent woman. She refused to be a passive victim and instead took charge of her own life. Despite the challenges and discrimination she faced, she refused to give up and continued to fight for her rights. Kane’s retelling of the *Ramayana* challenges the traditional patriarchal narrative that has been imposed on women for centuries. By giving Surpanakha a voice and

agency, Kane highlights the importance of empowering women and allowing them to make their own choices. She exposes the harmful effects of gender bias and the limitations it places on women. Overall, the retelling of Surpanakha's story provides a powerful message about the need to challenge traditional gender roles and empower women. It also highlights the importance of listening to and valuing the voices and experiences of women who have been historically marginalized and oppressed. It is important to note that characterization of Surpanakha as a "bad woman" is a product of patriarchal ideology and reflects the societal norms of the time. In reality, there is nothing inherently wrong with a woman expressing her sexual desire or refusing to conform to traditional gender roles. Surpanakha's actions can be seen as a form of resistance against the gendered norms that have imposed upon her by society. The punishment that Surpanakha receives at the hands of Rama and Lakshmana can be interpreted in a number of ways. It is possible that they view her as a threat to the established moral order and feel the need to punish her for her transgressions. Alternatively, it is also possible that their actions are driven by their sexual insecurities and the need to assert their masculinity in the face of a sexually liberated woman. In any case, the episode of Surpanakha's mutilation highlights the way in which traditional gender roles are enforced and reinforces the idea that women who do not conform to these roles are seen as a threat to the established order. However, by questioning these norms and challenging the patriarchal structures that seek to limit women's agency, Surpanakha serves as a symbol of female empowerment and resistance. Indeed, there is a parallel between Surpanakha's character and the modern empowered woman who challenges traditional gender roles and asserts her own agency, even if it means going against traditional gender roles to a certain extent, she was still ultimately defined by her relationship to the men in her life, particularly her brothers and her desire for Rama. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the empowerment of women in the modern era is still a work in progress, as women continue to face various forms of discrimination and gender-based violence. She is no longer the angry and vengeful woman, but instead, she finds peace and closure. This transformation also represents the possibility of redemption for women who have been victims of patriarchal oppression and discrimination. The novel challenges the traditional portrayal of Surpanakha as a villain and presents her as a victim of patriarchal oppression who fought against it in her own way and portrays her as a strong and independent woman who asserts herself by defending the societal norms.

Indeed, Kavita Kane's portrayal of Surpanakha offers a refreshing and empowering perspective on the character, who has long been relegated to the role of a minor antagonist in the *Ramayana*. By giving her a voice and agency, Kane challenges traditional notions of gender roles and power dynamics in Hindu society, and offers a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of female sexuality and agency. Surpanakha emerges as a multifaceted character, with strength, weakness, passion, desires, and the deep longing for love and acceptance. Through her struggles and triumphs, she becomes a symbol of resilience and empowerment, and a role model for the modern Indian woman.

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