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Saraswathi Binoj

M.A, Eng. Lit.

Dept of English Literature

Stella Maris College, Chennai

India

saraswathibinoj@gmail.com

Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess: A Revisioning of the Ramayana*, Breaking the Binary
of the Concepts of Asura and Sura

Chapter I

Introduction

The 21st century witnesses a revival of interest in myths, legends and folklore through the works of the renowned writers like Ashok Banker, Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik, Anand Neelakantan, Kavita Kane, Anuja Chandramouli, Amruta Patil, Samhita Arni etc. There is an ever-growing authorship and readership for the various retellings of the epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in both English as well as in the various regional languages. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*, Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (Oriya), Sreekantan Nair's *Kanchana Seetha* (Malayalam), Sara Joseph's *Kathakal* (Malayalam) etc. are just a few to name. Thus, Indian writing is in its golden, prosperous era.

In her essay, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*, Adrienne Rich brings out the theory of Revisioning which she defines as "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." Revisioning can hence be seen as a post-modern

technique that questions the master narratives, promotes multiple perspectives and viewpoints, brings the subaltern characters to the center from margins and gives them visibility and voice of their own. Such retellings of the myths, epics, folklore and legends in today's scenario would provide us with the double possibilities of getting back to our roots, past and culture while questioning or subverting the master narratives and heroes of worship. Arshia Sattar, in her article titled *The New Gods of Fiction* published in India Today rightly points out, "The new mythologists, are already on surer ground in terms of how they choose to tell stories we already know. As a culture, we've been telling our myths in the ways we want to tell them for centuries. There is no single version of a myth; each telling is inflected by time and place, by caste and region, by politics and ideology and sectarian bias."

Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* can be looked upon as a revisioning of the epic *Ramayana* and the minor character Surpanakha from Surpanakha's perspective. James Macpherson, in his article "Revisionist Historians", claims that "revision is the lifeblood of historical scholarship. History is a continuing dialogue between the present and the past. Interpretations of the past are subject to change in response to new evidence, new questions asked of the evidence, new perspectives gained by the passage of time. There is no single, eternal, and immutable "truth" about past events and their meaning". Similarly, there is no single meaning or interpretation that can be made of the character Surpanakha. This potential of multiple interpretation is what gives a space to Surpanakha in Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*. The novel, like Poile Sengupta's play *So Said Shakuni, Thus Spake Surpanakha*, portrays the situations that shaped her into the so-called evil temptress of the epic who instigated the war between Ram and Ravan which led to the catastrophic downfall of Lanka. The tortures and alienation that Surpanakha had to face from birth due to her dark complexion, the rejection she faced from her family except from her brother Kumbhakarna, the loss of her beloved father Vishravas, the brutal death of her loving husband Vidyujiva by

the hands of her own brother Ravana, the murder of her grandmother Taraka and son Kumar, the cruel joke of the brothers Ram and Lakshman who tossed her between them and cut off her ears and nose, the lonely life and identity crisis she suffered in spite of having everyone around her etc. make the reader sympathise with her character. The novel asks if Surpanakha was the instigator of war or a poor victim. The people around her and the circumstances transformed Meenakshi, the beautiful fish-shaped-eyed girl to Surpanakha, the woman 'as hard as nails'. She was born as the daughter of the Brahmin scholar Vishravas and the asura Kaikesi. She is identified as an asura by her family who is supposed to have evil characters. The book *Hindu World* by Benjamin Walker identifies that the term asura was used in the oldest part of the Rig-veda for the Supreme Spirit and in its later portions and in the Atharva-veda, it acquired the directly opposite meaning to refer to a demon or an enemy of Gods. The term is used synonymously with two other classes, the Danavas (titan children of sage Kasyapa and demon Danu) and the Daityas (children of Kasyapa and the goddess Diti). According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica's definition, 'Asura', in Indian Hindu mythology is a class of beings defined by their opposition to the devas or suras (gods). Later the asuras came to be understood as demons. But the portrayal of Surpanakha in the novel reveals that she is not a totally evil character but is the one wronged by those who are worshipped in the epic and she is only responding to the ill treatments she had to suffer. The text reveals her complex psyche and hence makes it difficult to draw a clear-cut boundary between asura and sura. Surpanakha's character proves that no one is entirely an asura or a sura but both. Each one carries both within himself/herself. Thus, the character of Surpanakha, having an ambivalent identity, can be seen as blurring or breaking the binary of asura and sura.

Surpanakha's character could be thus studied using the critical theories of Homi Bhabha's Ambivalence, Ferdinand de Saussure's Structuralism, Nasseem Maleki's Logocentrism and Pieter Fourie's concept of binary oppositions having a deeper/secondary

level of binaries to look at how the physical appearance of Surpanakha as against that of Sita, Ram and Lakshman, reinforce her as an asura in the epic.

This paper would look at how the characterization of Surpanakha by Kavita Kane in her novel *Lanka's Princess*, a revisioning of the character from the epic *Ramayana*, blurs the binary division of asura and sura. This would be done by comparing the character of Surpanakha who is deemed as an asura with other characters like Ram, Lakshman and Sita who are both conveniently seen as mortals or hailed as godheads or incarnations. Surpanakha's character would also be compared to the other members of the asura clan like her three brothers, with special reference to Ravana and their mother Kaikesi. The paper would also look at how the wives of the three brothers have more balanced qualities though they belong to the asuras by birth. The following chapters would also raise questions on the cycle of revenge and whether revenge be justified.

Chapter II

Surpanakha, An Asura Or A Sura?

Kavita Kane has been successful in gaining the sympathy and empathy of her readers towards the character Surpanakha in her novel *Lanka's Princess*. From the beginning of the novel to the end, the character goes through many mental, emotional, physical and social violations that transform her from the innocent, beautiful Meenakshi, the girl with fish-shaped eyes who longed for love and affection from her family, especially from her father, to Surpanakha, the evil woman 'as hard as nails' who uses her long, sharp nails to attack others.

Meenakshi was also referred to as Chandranakha by her mother but she is named Surpanakha by Ravan when she, to his horror, attacked him with her long, sharp nails for arrogantly killing her beloved goat Maya. That is when Meenakshi became Surpanakha for the first time and from then she willingly took up this identity as it gave her a sense of power and authority.

'Yes, I am a monster!' screeched Meenakshi, her eyes flashing, baring her claws at her mother. 'See them? If anyone hurts me, I shall hurt them with these!! I am Surpanakha!' Her high-pitched voice was filled with rage. Her nails glinted in the sunlight. (Kane, 9)

As a little girl, Meenakshi was completely ignored by her parents Vishravas and Kaikesi and her brothers except Kumbhakarna. Kumbha was the only one who cared for her, comforted and protected her as his little sister "from Ravan's moody tantrums or their mother's sharp tongue" (Kane, 11). Other than Kumbha, if anyone else showed affection to her, they were her maternal uncles Mareech and Subahu and grandparents Sumali and Taraka. Meenakshi was always ignored, rejected and criticised at the ashram and "they had rarely seen Meenakshi smile, forget laugh. Her scowl was a permanent feature pasted on her small, grim face" (Kane, 12). For Kaikesi, Meenakshi was an undesirable child, even from

her birth. Kaikesi wished and prayed for a forth son who, along with his elder brothers Ravan, Vibhishan and Kumbhakarna, would make her dreams of regaining Lanka, the golden city from the hands of Kubera and building up an asura empire with her sons ruling the three worlds, come true. She felt disappointed and cheated by the birth of Meenakshi, ‘an ugly girl child with a dark skin complexion’. This takes us back to the age-old idea of the girl child considered as useless and undesirable. Deborah King, a prominent feminist theorist uses the term “double jeopardy” to refer to the “dual discrimination of racism and sexism that subjugate black women”. Here, we see that Surpanakha’s gender and dark colour act as multiple/ additive effects adding on to her subjugations. But, it is paradoxical to note that the same child whom Kaikesi called incapable because of her gender and colour, had the potential to ruin the entire family down, as predicted by Pulastya, father of Vishravas,

‘She’s no child- neither small nor inferior in strength or significance...I have seen in her the same mad passion that fires Ravan, they are alike. Fiery and resentful, marked by an indignant ill-will. Both will start a terrible war...she will be responsible for unseen turn of events. She is the one fated to bring about Ravan’s destruction just as he is hers...ut yes, she is a boon for us, rishis, mark my words!’ Pulastya continued enigmatically. (Kane, 31)

Taraka is the first one to notice that it is the same physical asura features and the asura fire blazing in Meenakshi too. Kane pens down the thoughts of Taraka,

“Unlike us - and most Asuras – Meenakshi is petite, but does Kaikesi not recognise that she has inherited our sharp, regular features with that uncompromising, decided chin? Kaikesi is too biased, too disappointed about Meenakshi” Taraka concluded, glancing at the little girl in her arms: her hair and clothes were dishevelled, her face streaked with dirt, her hands and feet

grubby. Her habits and habiliments were as neglected as the poor girl herself was in the family. (Kane, 13)

Sumali, Surpanakha's grandfather, also believes that her birth has a reason. He ponders; "There must be reason why a girl has been born. Would she be like Kaikesi, changing the fortunes of the asuras and the daityas to vanquish the deavas? Or was she meant for more grand designs?" (Kane, 18).

The identity of Surpanakha as an asura is questionable right from the aspect of her birth itself. Kaikesi used her magical powers, sorcery and beauty to seduce and woo Vishravas so that "she would marry him and have his children: ones with the best of the rishi brain and the asura blood to make the most formidable warriors- the *brahmarakshasas*- which the world would witness and fear" and thus the three brothers and their little sister were born. Therefore, by birth itself Surpanakha has a hybrid identity or parenthood and hence is not a complete asura. Moreover, as she herself notices, her physical features also resemble both her brahmin father and asura mother. Watching Ravan hugging their maternal relatives Surpanakha notices,

All of them looked like giants – tall and strapping. Even her grandmother was exceptionally tall, taller than even her father who looked diminutive in front of that asura family. She too felt especially dwarfed by them. No wonder her mother called her stunted. Now she knew why she was short, possibly because of her father, a fair short man with a serene plumpness about him... But we siblings have distinctly taken after our asura grandparents. (Kane, 19)

On the other hand, when there is a blurring of the binary of the identity between asura and sura in the case of the four children, their parents Vishravas and Kaikesi are clear about their own identities. Though Kaikesi married Vishravas for begetting children having rishi's brain, she does not want her children to acquire any other quality of their father. Similarly,

though he fell for Kaikesi, Vishravas is totally against his children (especially Surpanakha) assimilating asura characters and features. Their difference of opinion is evident even from the difference in the Gods they worship.

‘Do you believe in God, Taraka?’ asked Vishravas thoughtfully.

‘Yes, in our God, who is fair, not differentiating between rishis and kshathriyas, daityas and devas, asuras and adityas, caste and colour, creed and country. Your God did that and created a division not with all people but amongst Gods too!’. (Kane, 14-15)

Another instance is when Kaikesi says, “This is outrageous...wicked and unfair...But then, what do you expect from the devas and rishis?....They are infamously known to cheat when cornered, rather than battle it out” (Kane, 57) when she gets to know from Ravan that Saraswati intervened on the request of Indra and made Kumbhakarna ask for Nidravatvam (sleep) instead of Nirdevatvam (annihilation of the devas) from Brahma when he appeared after his years of continuous, strenuous tapasya. All these instances are side-lined in the epic *Ramayana* by giving them a comical aspect and looking at them as the victory of good (Indra/devas) over the evil (asuras). But such revisionings like *Lanka’s Princess* make the reader realise them as foul play and treachery by the devas against the asura clan. They also guide us to look at the asuras as the subaltern who are cheated and deceived in spite of their hard-work and dedicated efforts.

Vishravas is wary of any asura learning, including the knowledge of sorcery but failed in keeping away Surpanakha from Taraka’s sorcery. Taraka brings her up “not just with the power of knowledge but with the knowledge of power” (Kane, 24).

Surpanakha is never loved and appreciated by her parents. Though she longs for the love of her father, he showers his affection only towards Vibhishan which instilled a painful

jealousy in her. She could never bear hurting her father or disappointing him, but he was least bothered of her affection and sentiments.

But he barely bothered about her. He lathered his attention solely on Vibhishan, the brightest of all his children whom he believed will be the only one to follow his dream. Meenakshi felt a stab of red hot jealousy as it always did where it concerned her father. But he was oblivious of both- her jealous fury and her zealous adoration. (Kane, 25)

Surpanakha, though due to her asura instincts rejoiced when her entire family encouraged Ravan's vow to be the king of the three worlds and take revenge on Kartaviryarjun and Kuber, she immediately feels a gush of resentment for her brother the moment she sees that this decision of Ravan put her father into misery and anguish. Thus, we see the so-called sura quality of pure, genuine love for her father in Surpanakha. At the same time, she also faces the confusion of whom to side with, her dear father or her mother and brothers,

But she agreed more with Ravan than her father, whom she loved to a fault. Ravan was fighting for her, for her grandparents, for her uncles- all whom had been destroyed by the devas and the rishis. Did her father not understand or was he so different from them, as her mother and Ravan always insisted. Was he the rishi and we the savage asuras, Meenakshi felt her stomach clench. Am I not my father's daughter as much as my mother's? (Kane, 60)

As foretold by Kumbha, Meenu had to choose between her parents and to her horror, her father leaves them as he felt himself an outsider in his own family, "a rishi amongst the asuras, a scholar amongst the warriors- unwanted and unwelcome" (Kane, 68). The loss of her beloved father shakes the ground beneath Surpanakha's feet, and he realises that she is

more of an asura than a rishi-kanya. “That world of the rishis versus the asura, peace versus war, them versus us...that had driven a wedge between us all” (Kane, 75).

Even when she admired and adored her father and hence took his side and quarrelled with her mother, Surpanakha always craved for her mother’s love too. But Kaikesi saw her only as a monster who troubled the entire family, especially Ravan, the apple of her eye. She took no care of Surpanakha and found fault with her every single action and constantly criticised her about her physical appearance. When all her three brothers were tall, fair and handsome, she was seen ugly and short with her dark complexion and undergrown body size. All these alienations she faced in her family from her closest relatives turned Surpanakha bitter from a very young age. As years passed by, this bitterness only grew stronger and stronger. The sibling rivalry between Surpanakha and Ravan widened along with the biased treatments of Taraka. Though Pulastya warns Vishravas, “...all your other children but for Vibhishan, are more asura than rishis, even that daughter of yours” (Kane, 31), we get to see that it is the attitudes and behaviour of the characters around Surpanakha that turn her into a monster because we realise that Kumbha never behaves like an asura, though Pulastya’s warning includes him too. Surpanakha also notices this when she tells Kumbha about himself and Vibhishan,

‘You are good and gentle and kind too Kumbha, but you are proud to be an asura....Yet the two of you are so different in your kindliness. Being a rishi or an asura is just a matter of attitude involving beliefs and feelings and values and dispositions to act in certain ways, is it not?’. (Kane, 69)

Unlike Surpanakha, Kumbha never faced extreme violations and abuses from his family even though he had a huge body frame and slept for almost half of the time. Naomi Wolf, in her book titled *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*, talks about how the society expects a woman to adhere to the norms of the beauty standards

and how these expectations are pressurising women to transform themselves to suit these standards. It is also important to note that such expectations of beauty are associated only with/ more with women than with men. This gives Kumbhakarna the space to be what he is while Surpanakha is constantly criticised for her physical appearance and is forced to change herself to suit the beauty standards to stand in front of Ram, Lakshman and Sita, who are considered as the epitome of beauty. Hence, years later, with Taraka's help, she develops into a beautiful, dark, voluptuous woman, capable of attracting and seducing any man. Even Ravan is shocked to see his sister's transformation when he comes back to the ashram after years of tapasya along with Vibhishan and Kumbhakarna, but his and Taraka's aversion towards Surpanakha continues.

For the first time, Ravan noticed his sister, startled at the transformation. She was no longer a saucy chit, who had almost gouged his eyes out. He touched the scar on his neck. He could never forget what she was capable of. She had grown, not as tall as their mother but no longer diminutive but a sultry girl with a full figure. She was attractive with her large, hazel eyes and the wavy cascade of a thick mane, dusky and sensuous...She seemed to know how to protect herself. Her flat, golden eyes were windows revealing a cold and ferocious ruthlessness that made most people flinch from fear. (Kane, 58)

Though everybody around her, including Kumbhakarna and Pulastya identified her as an asura, Surpanakha continues to miss the life at the ashram. She is constantly reminded of the humble meals at the ashram while Lanka offers her all sorts of delicacies on golden plates. When Lanka sparkled in wealth and luxury, she still missed "the frugal oil lamp burning low in the hut at her father's ashram" (Kane, 78). If she was a complete asura, she would have been overjoyed by the material extravagances offered by Lanka and would never have looked back at her life in the ashram.

She was bored and restless. She had everything here, but she enjoyed nothing. She found the opulence of the palace stifling. She missed the rustic peace of the ashram. Something in the scene- the fragrance of the early morning mist on dew-petalled buds, waking her up to the characteristic deep vocal moos of the cow, the lingering scent of the sandalwood, the humming chants of the Vedic hymns floating in the air through the day- was lodged in the young girl's mind as a symbol of unaccustomed peace. (Kane, 79)

The things that are seemingly enjoyed by the asuras are irritating for Surpanakha. This suggests that she or a part of her still is an innocent rishi-kanyaka though she also belongs to the asura clan. She is clearly displeased and feels indignation when she says,

What savage manners, what louts, all these people. What senseless nights, what uninteresting, uneventful days all of them indulge in- raucous card-playing, the gluttony, the drunkenness, the ceaseless chatter about the same, over and over again. The men talk of war, victory and wealth and the women seem to enjoy the benefits of each. Such useless pursuits and conversations always about the same subjects. (Kane, 80)

The one person to whom Surpanakha devoted her body and soul was Vidyujiva. This relation is initially vehemently opposed by Ravan but he helplessly agrees to their marriage when she retorts that she will tell Mandodari (Ravan's wife) about how Ravan raped Rambha, the daughter-in-law of Kubera, when he raided and conquered Lanka. To blackmail and coerce someone into doing/ accepting something may be seen as a demonic quality but Surpanakha proves this wrong, as Kane gets into the psyche of Surpanakha and puts down her following thoughts,

Meenakshi felt a sharp twinge of guilt, recalling her ultimatum to Ravan. But would I have had the courage to carry out the threat, Meenakshi wondered,

and destroy this tender-hearted girl? Both my brothers knew I was capable of it. I knew it, but would I have had hesitated speaking out the awful truth about Ravan to his pregnant wife? (Kane, 127)

Thus, here we see the gentle heart of Surpanakha, a woman's heart that is capable of understanding and respecting another woman's feelings, emotions and sentiments. What she wanted was only a peaceful life with her husband Vidyujiva. This gets all the more evident when she tells Vidyujiva that she would like to go with him to his country and live as his wife there, instead of staying back in Lanka as an ally of Ravan. She says, "I would rather live with respect than wealth or power or false status" (Kane, 134). Unlike the other asuras who are greedy for wealth, power and status, Surpanakha never found happiness in such material possessions. She never wanted to create any trouble to anyone but circumstances and people around her turned her into the so-called trouble maker and instigator of war. Thus, she blurs the boundary between asura and sura. Moreover, Kavita Kane also tries this blurring of the division through the characters like Mandodari, Sarama and Vajramala, the wives of the brothers Ravan, Vibhishan and Kumbhakarna respectively. Though they all belong to the asura clan, they do not exhibit demonic qualities but have more balanced qualities.

The slaughter of Taraka by the two princes of Kosala, Ram and Lakshman, traumatises Surpanakha. Kavita Kane, by giving a voice to Kaikesi questions the master narrative of the epic and criticises the aura of godliness associated with the suras. Kaikesi says,

Ma's woes all started with that Agastya. She lost Father and went mad with grief and worse, that curse transformed her from a beautiful Yaksha to a hideous demon, disfiguring her beauty and her mind, turning her from a scholar to a demented woman, as ugly in heart as in appearance. Ma could

never forgive him or his entire community of rishis for killing her husband and her father. (Kane, 147)

Her happily married life with Vidyujiva and their son Sambhukumar is shattered into pieces by her brother Ravan who killed Vidyujiva. Moreover, she feels betrayed and gets insane when she realises that even Vidyujiva, the man whom she loved the most, was also cheating on her with other women. From then, Surpanakha's life has been a dedication to seek revenge against Ravan who killed her husband and against herself who was reduced to a mere object by her own family. She seeks to see the complete destruction of Ravan though it meant the catastrophe of her entire family and even of herself. Leaving behind all bonds and bondages, she goes to the forest along with her son Kumar. "From henceforth she was Surpanakha: she was shrugging off the cloak of Meenakshi forever as she left the shores of Lanka" (Kane, 179). This empowers her to raise her son Kumar with the sole purpose of seeking revenge against Ravan, but all her plans are turned topsy-turvy by Lakshman who accidently chops off the head of meditating Kumar, while he was cutting down a few branches for setting up a hut in the forest. Surpanakha is totally devastated by the death of her son, the only tie that she cared for the most in her life after Vidyujiva. None of her family members also provide her with any comfort or solace. "They had left her with nothing, except with a vicious determination to seek solace through vengeance" (Kane, 175). These turns of events transform her into a demoness who cares for none, not even the death of her beloved brother Kumbha. This makes Kaikesi say,

'Meenu, you were always ugly, not merely in your looks but your ugly, twisted mind- mean, vindictive andoh, so unlovable! You are Surpanakha, not my daughter, but a monster. We tried to save you from one, but we forgot you are one yourself! Both of you deserved each other, one's mercifully dead and you, I know will make life hell for us. (Kane, 175)

Surpankha's search for the princes who killed her son end up in her meeting Ram and Lakshman. Their charm and beauty captivate her, and she immediately feels a sexual desire. This desire is seen as Surpanakha's greatest sin in the grand epic and desiring for a married man is what makes her the ugliest of the asuras in the *Ramayana*. But *Lanka's Princess* justifies her desire as a woman's natural desire.

But a spurt of anger prompted her to ask, why be ashamed? She had reasoned with herself, the desires she felt. She had done nothing to make herself feel ashamed. In fact, she told herself without much conviction, that she wanted it. She wanted those two men just as she had wanted Vidyujiva. She wanted to share something, to blot out this awful loneliness... That was the kind of help she wanted and yet how few could or would give her that? In solitude, one welcomes any living thing. In complete loneliness even a certain tenderness can be born. (Kane, 195)

The same concept is discussed in Poile Sengupta's play *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni*, another revisioning text where two of the side-lined characters of the two great epics, Shoorpanakha from the *Ramayana* and Shakuni from the *Mahabharata* meet in a modern setting at an airport and engage in a dialogue which positions them as the victims of their own smaller stories when the larger stories portray them as the temptress and instigator of war. The Woman (Shoorpanakha) in the play openly tells the Man (Shakuni) about how sexually active she became at the first sight of Ram. "I am a woman, don't you understand? A woman. Not a saint. Not a whore. Not just a mother, a sister, a daughter. I am a woman" (Sengupta, 267). Through her narrative, she explains how it is quite natural for a woman too to express her sexuality and sexual desire just as a man;

He was alone... He... how do I describe him? He was the most desirable man I have ever seen, yet it was not his eyes or lips, or his fingers or his wide

shoulders that took away....took away the breath in my throat. It was what happened to me in that instant. I wanted him to tear my clothes off and tear through me and yet I also wanted him to be tender and melting. I would suckle him. I would hold him in my arms in the darting sunlight, in the light of the moon and the stars and I would kiss those feet that held all the sunsets of the universe. (Sengupta, 257)

Though her body thirsts for Ram, she also immediately feels an inferiority complex about “her body- parched, pinched skin, thickening waist and sagging breasts, which she once used to flaunt.... Her age...her heavy figure, the coarse face with its high cheek bones, the dull yellow coloured eyes, the short, sharp nose” (Kane, 194). Here, the Post-structuralist Pieter Fourie’s concept of binary oppositions having a deeper/secondary level of binaries that help to reinforce meaning could be used to study the physical descriptions of Surpanakha, how she is labelled as an asura, a demon through her physical appearance which is contrasted with the beauty of Sita, Ram and Lakshman. Surpanakha also compares herself to Sita, the epitome of beauty according to the beauty myth, and feels much inferior. In the play too, when Shakuni refers to her as a demoness, Shoorpanakha retorts angrily,

Why do you call her that? A demoness?...because she was dark and big. She wasn’t the way men like women to be. Fair-complexioned. Delicate. Shy...biddable. Look at the Ramayana. The hero is tall...straight-nosed...handsome. The villain is grotesque with ten heads. The heroine is slender-waisted, dazzlingly fair. The vamp is dark, swarthy, big. Outspoken. Coarse. Therefore, the vamp is a demoness. Because she speaks up her mind. Because she takes up space. (Sengupta, 277)

Hence, she glamourizes/sexualises herself through her magical transformation to rise up to the standards of the beauty myth set up by society and to match the beauty of the suras Sita, Ram and Lakshman.

Both *Lanka's Princess and Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* make the reader sympathise with the character of Surpanakha as she is tossed between the brothers like a toy, ignoring all her pleas and requests. Ram calls her a rakshasi and as he instructs Lakshman to maim Surpanakha and he obeys his brother's words, the bleeding Surpanakha asks,

Maim her, what weird barbarity was this and for what? She thought panicking. For displaying desire for these two handsome men? How could someone so beautiful be so ugly and cruel? What were they furious about- me attacking Sita or me assaulting their chastity, their moral righteousness? Was it their apprehension of my uninhibited behaviour, assuming it to be an overt vulgarity, an open display of unleashed carnal anarchy? Was that why they had laughed at me, ridiculing me in their contempt and amazement, their arrogant condescendence condemning me for my feminine profanities? (Kane, 202)

In the play also she questions the act of maiming her by calling Ram and Lakshman "violators who assaulted a defenceless woman" (Sengupta, 278). She says, "I wanted love... just a little love... for a little while" (262). When Shakuni tells her that she is different from Sita because she is an asura, Surpanakha asks, "So? You were from the hills. Does that make us both less human? Do our hearts not know love?" (268). Her plight is obvious through these lines.

The novel *Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is yet another revisioning of the *Ramayana* narrated from the perspective of Sita in which she, on seeing

Ram and Lakshman tossing Surpanakha between them says, “I could see the men wouldn’t change their minds.... Their belief in the superiority of their own ways was too deeply ingrained for them”. In *Lanka’s Princess* also Sita is unable to answer Surpanakha when she asks how Ram, who is claimed to be the most virtuous, the one who strictly practices monogamy, could send her to Lakshman knowing very well that he too is a married man who loved his wife to the core. If desiring for a married man is the greatest of the sins, then Ram was also committing the same sin when he tossed her to Lakshman.

Sita is unable to explain to Surpanakha that in the worlds she lived, there was a deep suspicion of women’s power and desirability flaunted so openly and when unchecked by male control. Surpanakha’s overt sexuality had taken the men by surprise, amused them greatly and they have played along till the amusement had gone awry. Surpanakha had been the predator and they the prey, but in a swift stroke of the sword, from an aggressor, Surpanakha had become the victim. (Kane, 240)

Sita’s observations suggest a very patriarchal reason for the maiming of Surpanakha, though the epic glorifies it as dharma succeeding over adharma. Thus, almost all the retellings question the master narrative of ‘good winning over the evil’. They make us realise that there is no absolute good or evil.

Sara Joseph, a prominent writer from Kerala also attempts a retelling of the *Ramayana* in her short story “Mother Clan”. The story portrays Surpanakha as belonging to the tribal clan and put her at the centre. Her description of the way she was attacked by Ram and Lakshman suggests them to be barbaric and demonic and the reader would automatically sympathise with her.

They butchered the root and source of my breast milk. The roots of my clan and blood! My breasts were full-round and black- like the graceful breasts of

Karimkali sculpted by Maya. I have suckled three or four generations! Yet, when I stood before them, my heart filled with love, my breasts full and swaying, treacherously they drew the sword. To this day no one has ever done such a deed. In my forest, no man has shown such cruelty to any woman. Filled with passion, if a woman approaches a man and he is unable to fulfil her desire, he should speak to her as he would to a sister and show her another direction. King Ravana had never lifted his sword to turn a woman's body into a barren land. No one in my clan has posed as a hero after destroying a woman's shape and form. (Joseph, 118)

Through all these retellings, the marginalised character Surpanakha is brought to the forefront and the master narratives that are worshipped and glorified are questioned and criticised simultaneously. Recently, in a reality show on Amrita TV (a Malayalam channel) titled "Sreshta Bharatham", a young contestant named Rahul was also questioning and critically analysing the deeds of Ram against Surpanakha. He also questions, if Ram was a divine incarnation or a mortal, capable of transforming even Ahalya, then why couldn't he advice Surpanakha as a brother and change her mind. Thus, these analyses suggest that if Ram wanted, he could have avoided all these circumstances that led to the ultimate war. The common reason that the religious pundits, as M S Rao would call them, give is that the things that are bound to happen should happen at any cost. But if that is so, it can even be done by Ram himself taking up the negative image. Why should he use Surpanakha as a pawn for his entire play and put her in the negative light while projecting himself as the divine? That again indicates his selfish nature and the general patriarchal way of putting the blame on the woman's head. The Saussurean structuralist theory of binary opposition could be used here as binary opposites are two units of opposition which may not be contradictory but complementary. Here, we see that Surpanakha is required as an embodiment of evil to

compliment Ram as the uthamapurushan. Post-structuralism goes one step ahead and realises that one of these two opposites dominate over the other and this is exactly what we see in the glorification of Ram and demonization of Surpanakha. Moreover, Pieter Fourie's concept of binary oppositions having a deeper/secondary level of binaries that help to reinforce meaning could be used to study the physical descriptions of Surpanakha.

The brutal humiliations and violations she had to go through in her life make Surpanakha to instigate a war between her brother Ravan and Ram and Lakshman. Though she knew that it would result in the complete destruction of her family, she refuses to back out from her plan because of her resentment. Even then, at some points Surpanakha intensely wants to stop all the violence but once the cycle is set to motion, it goes out of her control and everybody falls victim to it.

Ravan got up from his throne and approached her, his eyes filled with an undecipherable emotion. It was soft and soulful. It was love. For the shortest moment, she felt a twinge of guilt: what was she doing? She wanted to kill this man, who stood tall and mighty, yet humble and helpless in his love for his sister, grief dulling his eyes, his face stricken. She was orchestrating her brother's death right now, and she could still stop it, halt this madness. Save him, save her family, save herself.... But the image of her husband's mangled body brought into this very room flashed before her, the dastardly way they had murdered him. She trembled; she could not forgive, never forget. She buried her face in her hands and wept. (Kane, 209)

Her helplessness, guilt and tears show that she is not entirely an asura, a rakshasi, but a woman who has a tender heart towards her relations though it is these same relations that ruined her life.

The postmodern retellings like *Lanka's Princess* also raises questions on who the real instigator of the war is. Though Surpanakha could have prevented the entire war if she sought no revenge, her bitterness and resentment never gave her a chance. This brings us to the whole question of can revenge be justified. If we say that revenge can never be justified, then what Ram did to Surpanakha was also to seek revenge for her attacking Sita. If the so-called 'uthamapurushan' could not stop himself, then how is it even possible to demand Surpanakha, the so-called asura who is believed to have all the demonic qualities, to refrain herself from seeking revenge? This is where M S Rao's observation gains prominence. In the preface to his book *The Greatest Stories Retold Ramayana and Mahabharata*, he says,

The trouble with the pundits- 'the clever idiots' as I call them- is that they get themselves into a right twist over every paragraph of the story.... On the one hand they want us to believe that Rama is as human as any of us and on the other hand they keep harping that he is an incarnation of God and therefore not entirely human. (Rao, 3)

Surpanakha realised that Sita is the weakness of both Ram and Ravan and she used it as her strength. While Surpanakha played with Ravan's feelings for Sita to wage the war, Ravan could have stopped it at any moment. But his arrogance, selfishness, ego, lust and self-love prevented him from stopping further deaths in the family, including that of his own brother's and sons'. Again, as Rao has mentioned, if Ram is an incarnation of God who could foresee the war, he could have also prevented the war or stopped the violence or could have at least behaved better with Surpanakha.

The text tells us that Meenakshi's transformation into Surpanakha is not her fault alone. She herself identifies this when Mandodari tells her that lack of scruples has turned a scholar like Ravan into a rakshasa. On hearing these words, Surpanakha agrees, "Just like I did.... But it was all of you, my family, who turned Meenakshi to become a Surpanakha

bent on destroying everyone and everything” (Kane, 222). The ember of anger burns fresh within her that she promises herself, “I shall have him killed(Ravan), even if it meant annihilation of my family, this palace, this kingdom, my race. He and they have all made me suffer as I had never thought it was possible to suffer. I would do it....I would” (Kane, 214). But in spite of all this, when she hears from Kaikesi the gladdest news that she had been impatiently waiting to hear for ages, the news of Ravan’s death, she is taken back to their childhood days, to “the long-forgotten memories of the past- Ravan helping her swing the sword, his roar of hearty laughter, the quick jerk of his head as he spoke” (Kane, 264). These little nuances from the emotions of Surpanakha prove that she loved everyone deep within her. But unfortunately, her spirit was made into a rakshasi by the others around her.

Another instance in the novel that depicts the virtue of Surpanakha is when she is unable to kill Lakshman’s son even when she yearned for it knowing very well that Lakshman killed her own beloved son Kumar.

She had come here to kill Lakshman’s son Prince Angad. All she had to do was to smother him with a pillow.... But her stiff fingers could not close on the small cushion. It mocked her.... Was that how brave an asura she was? Was she as wicked? Has she stooped so abysmally low? Had her vengeance made her such a hideous monster? Her heart contracted, feeling strangely moved and sad, and conscious of a slight remorse.... She could not assault and kill a harmless baby. Or his innocent mother.... She trembled not in frustration, but in the fear of the act, the dastardly brutality of her intention.... It unnerved her, like a long, gushing wound with the gurgle of blood spurting out. She almost stepped back, flinching.(Kane, 282- 287)

When Lakshman admitted his mistake of killing Kumar, though it was an accident, and bowed down before Surpanakha, the goodness in her suddenly melts her anger and she

simply cannot kill him. “It was compassion. In Lakshman she saw her dead Vidyujiva, in Urmila she saw herself and in the tiny Angad she saw her Kumar.... Compassion heals suffering.... It was a new, raw feeling, coursing through her, strangely draining yet filling her with fresh, buoyant emotions” (Kane, 289). Thus, the psyche of Surpanakha belonging to “the asuras, the proud people without sentiments” (Kane, 289) prove that everyone has some form of goodness within. Nobody is entirely asura or sura. Moreover, to the end of the novel, Surpanakha the so-called asura is the one breaking away from the cycle of violence by not attacking Lakshman, Urmila or Angad. “A person’s conscience is not simple, Surpanakha had thought she had no conscience, that she was a simple asura woman, who could not unravel what motives, what temptations and self-delusions she had” (Kane,292) but as Urmila rightly tells her, Surpanakha was only an angry person, not a wicked one.

Homi Bhabha’s concept of ambivalence which he adapted into the colonial discourse from the discourse of psychoanalysis can be used to study the identity of Surpanakha. According to the book *Post-Colonial Studies, the Key Concepts* by Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, Homi Bhabha’s concept of ambivalence,

describes the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized. The relationship is ambivalent because the colonized subject is never simply and completely opposed to the colonizer. Rather than assuming that some colonized subjects are ‘complicit’ and some ‘resistant’, ambivalence suggests that complicity and resistance exist in a fluctuating relation within the colonial subject. (10)

This postcolonial concept of Bhabha can be tweaked and extended to look at Surpanakha’s identity. The various instances pointed out and analysed in this paper from the life of Surpanakha show that she is neither a complete asura nor entirely a sura. Her

ambivalent identity, presented through the various retellings, can be seen as questioning the clear-cut binary division between asura and sura and thus she blurs and breaks this binary.

The theory of structuralism can also be used to study the character of Surpanakha. Structuralism as defined by Simon Blackburn in the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* is “the belief that phenomena of human life are not intelligible except through their interrelations. These relations constitute a structure, and behind local variations in the surface phenomena there are constant laws of abstract structure” (38). The novel *Lanka's Princess* and the various other retellings of the epic also clearly show that each character cannot be looked at in isolation as entirely good or evil, but will have to be studied in its entirety, in the various roles they perform and multiple dimensions of each character, in its multiple interrelations with the other characters and circumstances to realise why a character behaves in a particular way. It is easy to judge anyone without realising what has brought that person to that state.

Chapter Iii

Conclusion

Kavita Kane's novel *Lanka's Princess* is a revisioning of the epic *Ramayana* from the perspective of Surpanakha, the sister of Ravan who was mutilated by Lakshmana. The story revolves around Surpanakha's life and shows that her transition from Meenakshi to Surpanakha was not totally her fault alone but was triggered by the characters around her. The text reveals her complex psyche and hence makes it difficult to draw a clear-cut boundary between asura and sura. Surpanakha's character proves that no one is entirely an asura or a sura but both. Each one carries both within himself/herself. A similar theme is reflected in Poile Sengupta's play *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Forest of Enchantment* and Sarah Joseph's short story "Mother Clan".

The success of any piece of literature depends on how well the reader can connect with the character and *Lanka's Princess* as well as the other retellings open up a platform for connecting and empathising with Surpanakha, the repressed subaltern character in the *Ramayana*. Revisionings like these provide an opportunity for them to voice out their perspectives and thus they play an important role in questioning the master-narratives. Hence, revisionings can be seen as a counter-narrative or a protest literature against the grand-narratives. They are a literature of dialogue where the victim questions the victimiser and seeks justice for all the ill-treatments and humiliations they have suffered.

The epic *Ramayana* depicts Surpanakha as a representation of all that a woman should not be. On the other hand, the retellings like *Lanka's Princess* accept her as a woman and empathise with her. In opposition to the Logocentric approach as explained by Nassem Maleki which identifies that certain sections of the readers would favour one unit of the binary opposition to the other depending on their cultural backgrounds, the postmodern

writings give emphasis to the multiple possible truths. When the grand narratives like the *Ramayana* would look at the mutilation of Surpanakha as the victory of good over evil, the retellings would realise that good and evil are relative concepts and that there is nobody wholly good or evil. Each character is ambivalent in nature and responds or acts according to what the situations/contexts demand. Though Ram is the man who leads the action, whether his actions should be human or divine is left up to destiny/ the greater Truth. Surpanakha's actions are also determined by the situations she goes through and how she is expected to behave in such situations. Similarly, Ravan, the asura king, despite all the flaws in his character is a noble ruler accepted wholeheartedly by his subjects. The same holds true for all the characters. Everyone has a fault at some point, and it is all about realising and accepting that fault, not repeating it in the future and breaking away from the cycle of violence, as done by Surpanakha.

***The character's name is spelt Surpanakha in Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* and Shoorpanakha in Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni*.

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