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Topic: A Feminist Study of Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*

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Abstract

Indian epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* had not only shaped the Indian tradition and culture, but these prehistoric literary classics also provided alternate ways to reexamine life itself. Though these epics belonged to that prehistoric age, but the epical issues are still relevant to this contemporary society. This relatability of the epical events with this modern age itself proves their universality and timelessness. Emergence of the retellings centered on the different epical characters, again proves their popularity among the modern readers. Retellings of the epics have intended to brought out all those aspects of life which have remained undisclosed in the epical representation. And most of the time women characters of the epics could not get that much attention that they really deserved. Therefore, some of the contemporary writers found to recreate the epical women characters by portraying the epical events through their perspectives. Kavita Kane in her *Lanka's Princess* brought out some new dimensions to analyze the character of Surpanakha. Here in this research article adopting a feminist perspective, an attempt has been undertaken to explore the life of Surpanakha to examine whether she was the vamp or the victim of the patriarchal system.

Keywords: feminism, gender-discrimination, subjugation, resistance, identity

Introduction

Kavita Kane is known for her remarkable contribution in the genre of Indian mythological fictions. Besides *Lanka's Princess*, she wrote some other popular mythological novels like, *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, *Menaka's Choice*, *Sita's Sister*, *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, *Ahalya's Awakening* and *Sarasvati's Gift*. In all her novels, Kane portrayed the lives of the titular characters through their own perspectives. Kane herself found to adopt a feminist standpoint in depicting the lives of the women characters in all her fictions. In this way, she attempted to deconstruct the epical representation of women's life, by narrating their stories through their own experiences as women. Both the Indian epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as the creation of the male writers had left significant gaps in depicting the lives of the women characters. Therefore, the contemporary women writers have intended to explore all those unsung tales of their lives which were necessary to unveil women's predicament in that pre-historic society.

Analysis

Most of the time, Lanka's princess, Surpanakha is perceived under the negative undertones, and she was known as the woman who brought annihilation to the whole Asura dynasty. But the reasons why she had committed such acts were left less discussed. Her journey from Meenakshi, a girl with fish shaped eyes into Surpanakha, an *asura* woman with claw-like sharp nails, was never provided any emphasis; and her struggles as a woman remained undisclosed. Both in the epical representation and in the general interpretations of the *Ramayana*, she was presented as a devilish character endowed with different mystical powers. And in order to avenge her own humiliation and indignation, she brought destruction to her own dynasty. Under the representation of such negative aspects as an asura, her sufferings as a woman had remained unnoticed.

Though she belonged to the asura dynasty, but as a woman her conflicts never differed from the other common women; and despite her dark mystical powers she failed to change her own predicament.

Kane in her *Lanka's Princess*, presented how Meenakshi was compelled to transform herself into Surpanakha only for survival. Kane portrayed how Meenakshi as an asura girl was not different from the other girls of her age. And like others, she also wished to have a loving and supporting family, but she was not fortunate enough to get what she had desired. Her mother Kaikesi never gave her that much attention as she gave to her sons. Her father Rishi Vishravas always remained quite indifferent regarding her presence in the family; even her brothers were also cold towards her. From childhood, Meenakshi had been suffering from the trauma of abandonment. Though she was physically there with her family but emotionally she was distanced from all of them, and she herself was turned into an outsider amidst her own people. As a girl child unlike her brothers, she could do nothing to fulfill the ambitions of her mother, and to gratify her father's pride. Therefore, she was often treated as a burden by those people whose love and support she mostly needed in those years of her childhood. In this way, Meenakshi had also become the victim of gender discrimination, but that side of her life hardly got any expression in the epical representation. In a patriarchal society, women are always treated as the other, they are considered as everything that men lack. The whole concept of women's subordination is based on the same idea of 'lack', and not on the notion of 'difference'. To legitimize the dominating policies, patriarchal society compels women to accept that subjugated position; and patriarchal hegemony enables them to perceive their subordination as natural. Hence Simone de Beauvoir said, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (249). Judith Butler also argued that gender itself is a performance, because, "This 'performance' is the repeated *citation* -iteration- of the role in particular contexts" (Nayar 128).

Kavita Kane in her *Lanka's Princess* intended to change Surpanakha's identity from the dark demonic adulterous ogress into a strong, determined and bold woman who had not only survived, but also resisted and retaliated all the injustices she had confronted as a woman. Here Kane deconstructed the long-prevalent views regarding Surpanakha's identity by giving more emphasis on the reasons behind her actions, rather than echoing the known tale regarding her character. Kane portrayed how the rejection and humiliations, Meenakshi had to confront as a girl child, greatly affected her later life. It had not only brought to her the feelings of resentment, but also compelled her to search out an alternate identity which would enable her to fight for her own rights and dignity. Meenakshi had never accepted the discrimination she had to confront as her fate, because she knew that she had the ability to create her own destiny in her own unique way. At the same time, she also knew that she had to face all the challenges of her life alone, as she herself witnessed how everyone had forsaken and humiliated her very existence. Male dominated society never allows women to live their lives as they wish; women hardly get any inspiration to dream for their own selves. Their worth is measured by the importance of their service towards 'others', and not through the upliftment of their own lives. The whole system of gender discrimination operates through the belief of worthlessness imposed upon women. Women

are always taught, to accept, to remain silent, to compromise, to sacrifice and to suffer without complaining. Therefore, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said, "We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller" (10). And any woman who dares to go against such expectations will be criticized and denounced as immoral.

As a girl child Surpanakha had to suffer from the trauma of emotional abuse and had to bear the agony of psychological injury; but unfortunately, in her family no one was there to rescue her from such unreasonable and unjustifiable tortures and to sympathize with her miseries. Among her brothers, Ravana was the one who used to enjoy devilish pleasure by throwing away all her happiness out of her reach. Though her other brothers Kumbhakaran and Vibhishan were different from Ravana, but despite their desire to support their sister, they were never there by her side; because they could not go against the acts of their eldest brother. Constantly subjugated, discriminated and neglected, Meenakshi understood that in order to survive, she must learn to raise her voice and fight for her own rights. But in her journey of retaliation, she again turned into the victim of her own self-centered attitude and long preserved hatred for all her abusers. Because later on, she herself was overpowered by her own negative attributes which ultimately caused her own sufferings. Meenakshi was turned into Surpanakha for the first time, when she was enraged by Ravana who killed her pet only to irritate her. Then in order to punish him for this heinous act, Meenakshi attacked Ravana with her claw like nails. For Ravana such an act from a girl was quite unexpected; and therefore, with utter disapproval and fury for her vengeful retaliation, he called her Surpanakha. Meenakshi was not afflicted by this new identity her brother had found in herself. Without any accusation or protest, she completely accepted this new identity and welcomed the needed shift in her outlook. She knew that for her survival this transformation was mandatory, because Meenakshi alone could not stand for herself. Hence, addressing Ravana, she fiercely said, "If this could protect me, then well, I am Surpanakha" (Kane 8). "Yes I am a monster!" (Kane 9), she added. Surpanakha's rage and her protest turned into a threat to Ravana's dictatorship, because the patriarchal society can never expect women to retaliate and to fight for their rights. Even when Kuber their step-brother attacked her in order to enrage Ravana and her other brothers, then she again courageously showed him her true strength and proved that women are not weak or helpless. It is also true that Surpanakha's perspective towards life was always self-centered and her actions were deteriorating and destructive not only for others but also for her own self. But for her negative attributes, her courage and strength as a woman can't be overlooked. Surpanakha was a woman of iron will who dared to fight alone and who had never surrendered. Surpanakha through her struggles proved that, if women firmly stand for their own cause, and determinant enough regarding their own aspirations and expectations from life, then they can become invincible. Surpanakha's marriage with Viduyjiva also can be considered as her own way to retaliate against her brother Ravana and her own family members. She had chosen Viduyjiva, one of the greatest opponents of Ravana as her husband, because Surpanakha knew that this decision would not only hurt her family's pride, but it would also provide her the long-awaited opportunity to go away from Lanka itself; as she had never considered Lanka as her home. Surpanakha got love and support only from her husband

Vidyujiva, but her happiness didn't last long; because Ravana killed Vidyujiva in order to secure his own political stature, and unfortunately her family supported Ravana in this whole conspiracy. Ravana by killing Vidyujiva, her only support and love of her life, had also killed Meenakshi, her 'original self'. And with the death of Meenakshi in her, Ravana lost his sister forever. Ravana compelled her to remain as Surpanakha for the rest of her life, and in this way she turned into the most sinister version of herself that anyone could hardly imagine. Ravana was totally unaware of the inner turmoil she had been going through all these years of her life; and which had reached its zenith when she lost her husband. Surpanakha turned into the most treacherous and dubious hidden enemy of Ravana, and along with him, her hatred eclipsed the destiny of Lanka itself. The death of her husband took away everything from Surpanakha; left her only with indignation, hatred, bitterness and atrocious desire to avenge his death by destroying everyone responsible for it. The consequent fury and resentment at the death of her husband, embittered her mind and soul; and Surpanakha vowed to punish Ravana for his deed. Hence revealing her hatred, she furiously said, "My revenge would be my respite. Ravana has to die for this murder" (Kane 175). Surpanakha prepared her son Kumar to avenge his father's death; but her son was killed before he could fulfil the impending retribution. With her son, Surpanakha lost the last hope of her life; but she had never allowed to fade away her hatred and antagonism towards Ravana and others responsible for her sufferings. When she came to know about the power and divinity of the Ayodhya princes Rama and Lakshmana, then she decided to use them as pawns to accomplish her conspiracy. With cold manipulations, she compelled the Ayodhya princes to wage the devastating battle against Ravana; and in this way, she successfully avenged the death of her husband. Surpanakha's revenge obliged her to sacrifice her pride and dignity in this cursed journey of hatred and animosity; but she herself had never expected such an outcome. The day when she was rejected and humiliated by the Ayodhya princes, had turned into one of the cruelest days of her life. Her mutilation not only turned her physically deformed and ugly, but it dismembered her soul and her very existence. On that day the cruelty she had to face, again reflected how she was doubly subordinated and discriminated as an asura woman. The indignation and the insult, she received from the two princes of Ayodhya, fueled all her negative attributes and she lost her conscience. In order to punish the two princes, Surpanakha plotted Sita's abduction by Ravana; and in this way through this abduction, she also ensured the inevitability of Ravana's death in Rama's hand. Surpanakha amidst the whole conspiracy to fulfil her revenge, unknowingly turned into the reason of annihilation of her own dynasty. Surpanakha's hatred for Ravana turned her blind and she could not perceive how her conspiracy to kill Ravana would also demand the sacrifices of her dear ones. Though later on Surpanakha could clearly see what she had done, but it was too late and she couldn't change the irreversible misfortune her hatred brought to the whole asura dynasty. Hence with utter helplessness Surpanakha said, "I didn't want Kumbha to die or his young twin sons to, I don't want my Meghnad killed as well. It had been Ravana alone who was supposed to die on the battlefield. But, he would be the last to die. Before him all those whom I once loved would be sacrificed" (Kane 254).

Conclusion

In the Patriarchal society of that pre-historic age, women can exist either as vamp or as victim, hence other opportunities of existence were unreachable for women. When a woman followed and silently accepted all the societal norms and restrictions then she would be admired; and if she dared to oppose, then she would turn into an aberrant and vicious character. Most of the women characters of the *Ramayana* had been found to accept victimhood, hence they knew that if they preferred to do the contrary, then they would be declared as pervert or immoral. But despite that some women characters dared to resist and retaliate, and all such women characters were presented as a threat to the whole society. Surpanakha was one such character who is considered as the reason behind the annihilation of the whole asura dynasty of Lanka; but the reasons behind her actions remained undeciphered. Here it must be mentioned that Surpanakha only provoked Ravana to abduct Sita; but Ravana did that only for his own lascivious nature. By cutting off Surpanakha's nose besides revealing his own uncontrollable anger, Lakshmana's action also explored how asura women were treated in that society. It is true that Surpanakha in the fit of violent anger tried to attack Sita and at that time Lakshmana saved Sita by mutilating Surpanakha. But there must be some other ways to prevent her from doing that. Therefore, Kavita Kane by revisiting the epic through the perspective of Surpanakha attempted to brought out an alternate version of the epic itself. In this approach Kane decentralized the epical representation and put light on the life of Surpanakha, the Lanka's princess; whose character needs more interpretation to understand women's predicament in that pre-historic society.

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