

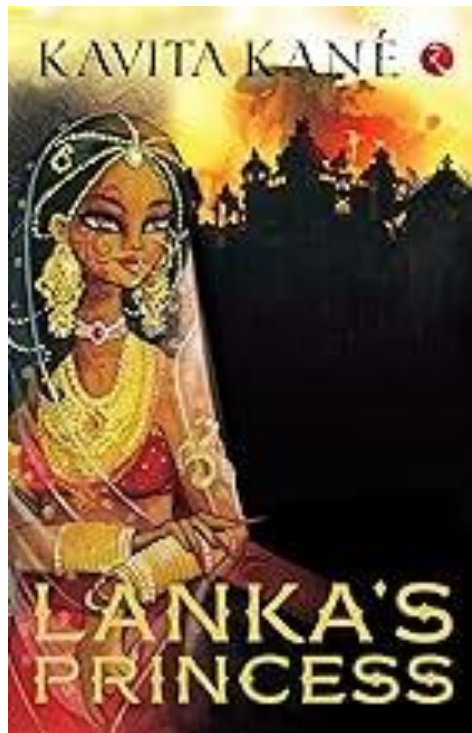
Reclaiming Identity and Authority: A Feminist Analysis of Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*

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Abstract

Emphasizing the often misinterpreted and disregarded figure of Surpankha, Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* offers a creative rereading of the Ramayana. Kane challenges the traditional definition of flawless womanhood by humanizing Surpankha, who was once presented as a villain. Originally called Meenakshi, Surpankha's rebellious character drives her

brother Ravana to choose her a new name. Examining Surpankha's experiences as a neglected and underprivileged daughter, Kane offers a detailed study of her inner turmoil and the social rejection she suffers. By stressing Surpankha's resilience among hostility and loss, the story questions the usual dichotomy between Surpankha and Sita—where Surpankha marks disobedience, and Sita epitomizes acquiescence. By dissecting Surpankha's portrayal as a dreadful "other" and pushing for reevaluating women's image in Indian mythology, Kane's reworking highlights sometimes disregarded aspects of female identity. This study questions the way women are portrayed in legendary literature, challenging patriarchal paradigms.

Keywords: *Lanka's Princess*, Kavita Kane, Ramayana, Indian mythology, female subjectivity, revisionism, gender perspective, Indian literature.

Introduction: Image of Women in Indian Mythology

Oppressive stories that uphold rigid and idealized qualities for femininity have historically shaped how women are represented in Indian mythology. Deeply anchored in the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, these mythologies have helped to produce regressive and often repressive images of women. While marginalizing and denigrating any who deviate from these norms, these epics have created the archetype of the ideal woman as subservient, obedient, and self-sacrificial. In this framework, it is essential to scrutinize and challenge these images and the mythological conceptions of women that support them. Pillai (161) argues that rereading these male-centric epics from a female perspective helps to question the ideas of ideal womanhood.

Postmodernist theory has challenged the legitimacy and claims of universal truth, undermining the authoritative standing of "grand narratives" since the late 20th century. Lyotard (xxiv) argues in *The Postmodern Condition* that an "incredulity towards metanarratives," which denigrates the dominant institutions controlling knowledge development, defines the postmodern ethos. Particularly by feminist writers who challenge the predominance of patriarchal mythology, this metamorphosis has produced more reinterpretation and modification of legendary stories. According to Madhavi Arekar (132), Indian feminists seek to "revisit mythology by recreating, retelling, and refolding it from a woman's perspective," therefore subverting the patriarchal portrayal of female characters.

Sharma (140) points out that this revisionist viewpoint stimulates important questions about the goals and techniques of mythical reinterpretations: Why is this perspective being revived? For what fresh meanings does it seek to establish? Reevaluating women's position in Indian mythology, these revisionist works highlight the voices of underprivileged female characters historically limited to binary stereotypes of either moral figures or promiscuous people. With heroines like Sita representing the ideal woman, these legendary stories have often shaped Indian cultural expectations and norms. Any departure from this ideal is usually seen as a transgression, thereby preserving the authority of the patriarchy over women's subjectivity.

Kavita Kane sees mythology as a framework for present reflection rather than only as a collection of historical stories. She argues in an interview that although they reflect the socio-cultural values of their time, myths can be reinterpreted to face modern issues (Kaushik, para. 3). According to Kane, myths are dynamic things that act as living books, allowing one to consider and criticize modern society problems. Kane presents different points of view on female characters who have traditionally been neglected or misinterpreted, challenging the patriarchy inherent in mythology via a revisionist technique. Rich (18) notes that "Re-vision" goes beyond simple historical study; it becomes a necessary act of survival, particularly for women excluded in conventional narratives.

Kane's works mirror Adrienne Rich's "revisionist mythmaking," which turns a person or story towards feminist goals. The feminist rereading of these great stories presents an opportunity to correct the gender stereotypes that have dogged these stories for millennia (Ostriker 73). Divakaruni (xv) notes that mythology often marginalizes women, showing their emotions and intentions just in comparison to male heroes, with their positions depending on the men in their lives. Kane argues that the conventional view of women in mythology results from sexism and chauvinism, which hides the strength and complexity of female characters, therefore undermining this limited portrayal. She says these women should be returned to their authentic selves and that mythology can help them find their voices (Kaushik, para. 5).

The story of Surpankha, the much-mistreated sister of Ravana, Kane's Lanka's Princess, shows this approach. Traditionally, Surpankha—who represents the "other" of Sita in the Ramayana—has been portrayed as a hideous, demonized creature whose story is sometimes

disregarded and misinterpreted. Rereading Surpankha's story, Kane transforms her from an "ugly, adulterous, disfigured ogress" into a confident and audacious woman who questions society's expectations and rejects the constrictive rules pushed upon her (Arekar 131). Using recounting, Surpankha can express her own story, offering a more complex picture of her identity and behavior.

Kane's focus on Surpankha's identity development as an unwelcome female child—overlooked by her mother and eclipsed by her brothers—highlights the neglected aspects of her character, therefore highlighting how these events shaped her female subjectivity. Kane offers a feminist rereading of Surpankha's story, enabling her to be seen as a woman who has suffered rejection, hate, and loss rather than as a "monster." This paper investigates how Kane's rereading of Surpankha challenges accepted ideas of gender and marks a significant turning point in reforming patriarchal stories.

Meenakshi's Crisis as an Undesired Female Reproduction

The only girl among three strong sons—Ravan, Kumbhakarna, and Vibhishan—Meenakshi, the progeny of Rishi Vishravas and Rakshasi Kaikesi. With her sons running the three kingdoms and Lanka acting as their capital, Kaikesi dreamed of another son, realizing her desire to build an asura empire (Kane 14). Still, Kaikesi was unhappy by the time Meenakshi was born. She sobbed, resentful, staring at her newborn child, "This girl has turned back my intentions... a faint sense of discomfort making her more restless" (Kane 14). The story shows Kaikesi's great suffering at bearing a daughter instead of a son, a perceived failure buried in sadness and frustration (Kane 14). Rishi Vishravas claimed that Meenakshi was "born fighting against the expectations of the world" (Kane 15), meaning that her presence damaged the basic hopes of her family. Meenakshi thus was excluded, ignored, and neglected, having defeated her mother's goal of producing perfect children—robust men to uphold the asura legacy.

The way Kavita Kane presents Meenakshi as an undesired female child invites readers to consider the psychological development of a woman subjected to mistreatment and exclusion. Chakravarty (133) argues that a woman's subjectivity is much influenced by her surroundings. Meenakshi's formative events most certainly significantly influenced her

growing identity in this environment. Mandapaka (81) claims that a family provides stability and a feeling of belonging, helping to shape a person's self-identity. Meenakshi's family did not provide her with the necessary emotional support. Her family's disregard for her health made her prone to feelings of bitterness, anxiety, and anger.

Meenakshi was forced to grow up seeing herself as an outsider inside her own family because of the ongoing injustice she experienced. Kane clarifies Meenakshi's inner terrain, therefore improving this study. She considers her place in the family and notes that her brothers receive preferential treatment: "Ravan consistently advocated for his mother, while Vibhishan aligned himself with their father. Kumbha, exhibiting unwavering loyalty to Ravan, would feel compelled to support her mother." She was thus in a dilemma: what line of action should she follow? Still, nobody seemed to be bothered about her. "Or her opinion"[(Kane 56). Meenakshi's comments suggest that her parents favored Ravan and Vibhishan, which caused her isolation and voicelessness. With his physical power and asura inclination, Ravan stood for Kaikesi's dreams for the future; Vibhishan, with his rishi qualities, attracted his father's respect. Meenakshi was caught between these extremes without a clear stance in this power relationship.

Kane notes that Meenakshi's gender restricted her potential. Meenakshi was robbed of knowledge and education, unlike her brothers, who had the chance to develop their intellectual and athletic capacities. By asking, "Am I not also the offspring of Rishi Vishravas?" she questions this unfairness. Why, like my brothers do, am I not reading the Shastras and the Upanishads? Kane 33 Her research exposes the gender barrier preventing her from gaining the same skills her boys were advised to acquire. Meenakshi's discontent emphasizes her awareness that, being a woman, she was judged unworthy of the intellectual and physical growth given to her male siblings. Her absence from the intellectual circle of the family confirms her marginalization and identification as "other" inside the family. Meenakshi was excluded from her family's ambitions as she could not fulfill her mother's vision of an asura empire, reachable alone through her brothers.

Meenakshi's portrayal of Kane as the unloved and neglected daughter emphasizes the psychological and emotional consequences of gender-based abuse. Meenakshi's road is marked

by the terrible awareness that her existence compromises the patriarchal goals of her family, leading to great loneliness and discontent. This story clarifies the complex evolution of female subjectivity under the impact of personal traits and the confining family and societal structures limiting a woman's potential.

Princess of Lanka: Surpanakha or Meenakshi?

Named for her "golden and graceful" eyes resembling a fish (Kane 16), Meenakshi was also known as Chandranakha by her mother, Kaikesi, who was enthralled by her "abnormally long nails." Then Ravan called her Surpankha after her hostile behavior. For Meenakshi, moving from Meenakshi to Surpankha marks a profound path of assertion, disobedience, and sexual emancipation. Crucially, in the story, Ravan kills Meenakshi's beloved pet, Maya, which drives her to exact revenge by attacking him. This violent deed shows that Meenakshi chooses to resist rather than give in to grief, therefore highlighting her tenacity and ability to defend her dignity and rights. Her first act of rage, the attack on Ravan, marks the start of her transformation into a strong and independent being.

"Meenakshi felt her hand twitch and, like a cat, pounced on the unsuspecting Ravan, sinking her nails into the delicate flesh of her neck, her teeth exposed in a fit of rage," Kavita Kane says, "one arm shielding her face from her clutching fingers while the other attempted to dislocate her." Ravan cried astonishment that turned into a scream of agony, one arm shielding her from her clutching fingers while the other tried to remove her. She continued, nevertheless, lacerating the flesh, biting her sharp nails into any exposed skin, and probing beyond to produce more severe injuries. (Kane 19)

Meenakshi: Unrestricted Sexually Restrained Woman

Surpankha's story is sometimes reduced to a portrayal of horrific disfigurement in the Ramayana, where she is marked as a sexually (un)tamed female. Her visage was severely mutilated in the confrontation in the bush involving Ram, Laxman, Sita, and Surpankha. The female body as a site of patriarchal control is best shown by this forceful attack against Surpankha (Sabala and Gopal 45). Considered a legitimate reprisal meant to dishonor Surpankha, the mutilation permanently branded her face as a reminder of her degradation (Kane 196). In her essay "Surpanakha's Mutilation or That of Womanhood?" In "An Inquiry

into Two Feminist Retellings," Anindita De argues that this mutilation serves as a warning for women, therefore motivating them to follow patriarchal rules (De 2). Surpankha's disfiguration in the male-centric story is explained as her attempt to attack Sita. The feminist theory holds that her "dishonourable crime"—yearning for Ram and Laxman—was the reason behind her punishment (Kane 190). Surpankha's mutilation, notes Karline McLain, reflects a gendered vengeance for her sexual transgression (McLain 35). It also shows the ingrained mistrust in patriarchal nations about unbridled female power and sexuality (Erndl 68).

Surpankha is portrayed as an immodest, adulterous woman, which stands in sharp contrast to the idealized portrayal of Sita, who is said to be a chaste and obedient wife. While Surpankha represents an autonomous, sexually assertive woman, marked by her fiery individuality and unquenchable passion, Valmiki's Sita reflects the classic ideal of femininity, typified by her suppressed sexuality and relentless obedience. While the "bad woman," shown by Surpankha, resists these limitations, Kathleen Erndl clarifies that the "good woman" remains subordinate to her husband or male relative, with her sexuality limited to childbearing and servicing her spouse (Erndl 83). Karline McLain also claims that Surpankha was not scarred for attacking Sita; instead, her sexual daring violated social norms (McLain 35). This emphasizes how sexually messy women are seen as dangers to society and so demand correction. It is decided that the mutilation of these women is a fitting penalty to maintain the systems of society. Erndl claims that Surpankha's gender, more than her identity as a demoness, is the main problem (Brown and Agrawal 250).

Veena Talwar Oldenburg points out that this exchange sends a strong message encouraging violence against sexually active women. It emphasizes the significant steps men might take to suppress uncontrolled female libido (qtd. in Brown and Agrawal 250). Kane's rereading of this incident emphasizes the inherent cruelty of the mutilation, usually dismissed by many specialists. She assesses using violence as a tool to enforce conformity to patriarchal norms (Kumar and Mahanand 100–101). Surpankha questions the brutality of her treatment in her portrayal, wondering whether her punishment resulted from her yearning for the two men or their concern about her apparent sexual insubordinate behavior (Kane 190).

Presenting her sexual aggressiveness as an act of affirmation rather than violation, Kavita Kane aims to challenge the traditional view of Surpankha's mutilation. She questions Surpankha's rationale for her punishment, suggesting that her bold desire challenged patriarchal conventions rather than being a lousy deed (Gulati and Anoop x). Contending that the negative image of Surpankha is a patriarchal technique to rationalize her rejection and subsequent disfigurement, Kane's portrayal of her in *Lanka's Princess* offers a feminist interpretation of her conventional representation as an evil entity (De 4).

Humanising Surpankha Mythology shows the complexity and flaws of people and gods. Kavita Kane claimed in an interview with *India Today* that in *Lanka's Princess*, she aimed to "humanize a demonized character" (qtd. in Kuenzang, para. 6). Although no one has tried to understand Surpankha as an individual, a woman with her own story, this comment highlights how historically she has been seen as either a criminal or a victim (Gupta 344). According to Kane, calling women angels or devils reduces their humanity. Kane wants to free Surpankha from the "dagger point of contempt and condescension" (Pillai 162), presenting her as a human being capable of both virtue and sin. By humanizing Surpankha, Kane helps us to see her not only as a straightforward villain but also as a complex, flawed character who reflects the aspirations and difficulties of modern women.

Surpankha's figure, according to Anjali Verma and Purna Jatav, captures the reflections of a modern woman's challenges and ambitions (Verma and Jatav 124). Surpankha's fearlessness, boldness, love, fury, and regret make her more human than demonic. P. R. and Asher. Nandhini notes that Kane gives neglected characters from these epics traits of solidarity and astuteness, therefore bestowing upon these female figures a rejuvenated identity and human dimension (2391). Particularly at a pivotal moment when Surpankha refutes killing Laxman's wife and child and chooses instead to show sympathy and regret, Kane displays Surpankha's humanity. By enabling Surpankha to be "a woman more hated than hateful," this act of restraint humanizes her (2391).

Conclusion

Reworking Surpankha, Kavita Kane challenges the traditional portrayal of her as the "other" with respect to Sita. Providing Surpankha a voice and presenting her as a symbol of

knowledge, agency, and strength helps Kane try to expose her actual identity. Although Surpankha's role may have been limited in the original Ramayana—that which keeps women from surpassing the male characters in the story— Kane's rendition highlights her strength and sharp mind. Kane shows Surpankha as an emancipated woman who has been traditionally excluded in patriarchal stories. Unlike the subdued presentation of Valmiki's rendition, Kane's Surpankha is lively in both thought and movement.

Through his retelling, Kane exposes the patriarchal character of legend and works to honor wounded women like Surpankha (Pillai 162). Kane recontextualizes Surpankha as a strong, multifarious woman and releases her from the shame of being an ugly, monstrous figure. Kane deviates from traditional epic readings in *Lanka's Princess* by focussing on the peripheral rather than the central story, offering a fresh and inspirational point of view.

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