

## Surpanakha's Mutilation or That of Womanhood? An Inquiry into Two Feminist Retellings

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### Abstract

Traditional mythological narratives have been chiefly dominated by male writers and reflect patriarchal ideologies. Revisionist mythmaking is a process of re-explication of patriarchal myths; it is the substitution of female elements from margin to centre. The central motif of the re-tellers is to break down the preconceived fabrication of woman and womanhood. The female revisionist writers of the *Ramayana* have attempted to give voice to the ignored or peripheral women of the mainstream epic through the lens of feminism. They have discovered many hidden shades of Surpanakha who is nothing but a fearsome demon in *Valmiki Ramayana* and also have questioned patriarchal prejudices through her eyes. In their retellings, she has been represented as a love-thirsty woman who has been mutilated by patriarchy for her bold expression of her erotic desires. The paper focuses on the mutilation scene of Surpanakha and attempts to investigate how these feminist perspectives have inquired into her character in different ways. Two retellings- *Lanka's Princess* by Kavita Kane and "Rajkumari Kamaballi" by Nabanita Debsen have been selected for the study. The objective of the paper is to analyse how these feminist discourses of the epic have delineated the mutilation episode and raised questions on women's position in a male dominated world and also to investigate how the female re-tellers have attempted to expose the sexist stereotyping of women in *Ramayana* and advocated gender consciousness through their re-interpretation of Surpanakha and re-evaluation of Sita-Surpanakha dichotomy.

**Keywords:** *Ramayana*, Surpanakha, mutilation, revisionism, feminism.

The ancient stories of the *Ramayana* have actually emerged in time immemorial, possibly even when the alphabets were not invented. These have emerged as small narratives and with the passage of time have grown. Valmiki was the first poet who has given the epic a written form. But the *Ramayana* is not a singular text, it is not bounded within any religious or geographical circumference. It is a tradition. Several regional writers like Kamban, Madhava Kandali, Tulsidas, Krittibas and many other ancient writers have re-written the epic from their own perspectives. Without hurting the basic storyline of *Valmiki Ramayana*, they have redecorated the epic with various ornaments from their own culture, in light of their own analysis and interpretation. But the male versions of the epic seem to be systematic tales of hero-worship and oppression of women. Patriarchy has woven the language of mythology in a robustly intricate way to utilize it as a tool of female manipulation and exploitation, thus constructing strict gender boundaries. Rama dared to banish Sita from his kingdom on the basis of his doubt on her chastity, Lakshmana left Urmila for the sake of his brother, Surpanakha's nose and ears were cut off for merely proposing marriage to a man- but all of them were made to remain silent by the men who held the narrative-cord. Their struggle, pain, anguish remained unvoiced, unsung and unhonoured. In order to secure cultural hegemony and glorify the binary opposition of 'good woman' and 'bad woman' the male discourses of traditional *Ramayana* manoeuvre mythology as an instrument and impose patriarchal ideologies on women by constructing the 'Sita-Surpanakha' dichotomy. Sita, an ardent follower of 'Stree Dharma', the acquiescent and submissive woman who has unconditionally sacrificed and mutely suffered all her life is considered to be an epitome of ideal womanhood. The mainstream writers of the epic urge women to follow Sita as a role model to suit the requirements and visions of the formative Hindu patriarchal society. On the other hand, they brand Surpanakha as an evil woman as she does not uphold the socially sanctioned traits of womanhood and push her to the category of the 'other'. She is socially unacceptable because her life is beyond any male control. She has the boldness to propose to the man she loves and she leads a life of her choice. A dominating, vocal, sexually aggressive woman is a threat to the patriarchal society. Surpanakha's mutilation is a warning to women, a message to obey the patriarchal terms and conditions, otherwise the society will not hesitate to teach them a lesson.

Reconstructing the tale of *Ramayana* from the perspectives of the peripheral mythological women can help them occupying a pivotal position. Revisionist writers are remodelling the age-old stories in a feminist language to counterattack the patriarchal humiliation and to articulate the female emotions that have been suppressed for centuries. They aspire to give voice to the prejudice and discrimination that mythological women have experienced and to destabilize the so-called 'natural' attributes that have been ascribed to women by patriarchy. To quote Adrienne Rich- "Re-vision- the act of looking

back, 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.”

It is through the use of revisionist myth making strategies, exploration of female psyche and subjective story-telling method that the feminist writers have questioned the doubly marginalized position that has been given to Surpanakha in mainstream narratives because of her communal and gendered identity. They have tried to subvert the coldness of silence of Surpanakha by retelling the epic from her perspective, thus offering her a voice of her own. They have attempted to describe her as a strong-willed, independent-minded, revolutionary woman who leads a life of her choice and gets punished for her outspoken nature, for her audacity to propose to a man. The paper proposes to investigate how different feminist perspectives have analysed Surpanakha’s mutilation in different ways. Two retellings- *Lanka’s Princess* by Kavita Kane and “Rajkumari Kamaballi” by Nabanita Debsen have been selected for the study. The objective of the paper is manifold- to question the male stigmatization of Surpanakha as an evil woman or a loose woman, to analyse the differences between two different feminist approaches of representation of Surpanakha and to conduct an inquiry into the formation of Sita-Surpanakha dichotomy.

Traditional mythology portrays the demons as an evil and unscrupulous group who lack principles of righteousness and engage themselves in sinful activities. Following the same tune, the female demons are also portrayed in a negative light. Surpanakhais depicted as terribly ugly with huge breasts and pot bellies. She smells like hell, craves for human flesh and lacks so-called ‘womanly’ modesty. In order to stress the binary opposition between Sita and Surpanakha most of the mainstream writers have portrayed her as a dark, ugly, fat demon in contrast to the fair loveliness of her foil Sita. Valmiki has offered a sharp contrast between his all-righteous hero Rama and his wicked villainess Surpanakha-

The one with a giant stomach faced the slender-waisted one, the one with malformed eyes faced the one with large eyes, the one with copper-coloured hair faced the one with excellent hair, the one with an ugly form faced the one with a handsome form, the one with a horrible voice faced the one with a pleasant voice, the hideous and ugly one faced the young one, the one who was harsh in speech faced the one who was sweet in speech, the one who was extremely wicked in conduct faced the one who was good in conduct, the ugly one faced the handsome one. (Debroy 39)

The reader is made to believe that she is a corrupted woman and her physical ugliness is synonymous with the evil nature of her mind. However, among the traditionalists, Tamil poet Kamba has challenged the conventional demonization of Surpanakha by attempting to humanize her as a woman in love. In sharp contrast to the

lustfulness and fearful appearance of Surpanakha in *Valmiki Ramayana*, Kamba portrays her as a woman who wants to devote her whole self to the man she is in love with. She is ready to sacrifice her everything and even to reject her clan in order to be with Rama. But other regional writers like Tulsidas, Madhava Kandali, Giradhara, Krittibas have portrayed her as a ‘rakshashi’ who transforms herself into a sexually alluring woman to make herself desirable, to arouse the erotic desire of the two brothers. They portray her not as a forlorn woman craving for love but as a fierce monster who is intoxicated with the smell of human flesh or primarily driven by sexual desires. The formation of a malevolent identity for Surpanakha is a patriarchal strategy to justify her social rejection and subsequent disfigurement.

In *Valmiki Ramayana* and many other regional versions of the epic, Ram welcomes Surpanakha in a courteous manner and it is evident that he is astonished to see a woman wandering alone in a perilous forest. For quenching her carnal thirst she has come to Ram disregarding the social institution of marriage. If a woman makes advances to a man in a ‘masculine’ manner, society judges her character with a contemptuous attitude. Coyness, low voice, bowed heads, silent submission, bashful attitude – these are the so-called feminine attributes that patriarchy has imposed on women. In her wish to lead a carefree life in forest, her rejection of artificial palace life, her unrestricted movements, her being vocal and speaking her mind, her direct proposal for sexual intercourse and companionship, she has crossed her gender boundary. In order to influence the society of her forcefully constructed villainous image, most of the mainstream writers have sketched her as a coquettish temptress driven by lust rather than love or as a sinful demon. The forced construction of the archetype of ‘good woman’ and ‘bad woman’; the deliberate attempts to manipulate social mentality by using mythology as a means to propagandize people to accept Sita-Surpanakha binary opposition – such purposes are clearly reflected in these male narratives of the epic.

While most of the mainstream versions have followed the Valmiki tradition and delineated Surpanakha as a hideous monster or as a sorceress disguising herself as an attractive woman, revisionist versions have attempted to break the stereotype by picturing her as a bewitching lady. However, in Kane’s *Lanka’s Princess*, Surpanakha is neither extraordinarily beautiful nor hellishly ugly. Though she had inferiority complex for her dark skin-tone, she was proud of her curvy body structure and voluptuous breasts in her youth, she unhesitatingly used to flaunt her cleavage, using it as her weapon of seduction. However, when she meets the two brothers for the first time, she has turned old and senility has gifted her wrinkles. Using her magic tricks she transforms herself into her younger version and princess Meenakshi approaches them “with a suggestive sway of her flaring hips, walking with confidence and purported friendliness” (Kane 196). She feels satisfied when she senses-

She saw them quickly straightening themselves up, fully aware that the two men were eyeing her, their eyes taking in her appearance: the angavastra draped casually over her slim, bare shoulders, revealing the top of her cleavage; the thick hair hanging loose till her slender waist and the sari knotted seductively low at the generous hips. She saw that their eyes appraised what they looked at. (Kane196)

Surpanakha does not mind representing herself as a sexual object; she tries to seduce Ram by making erotic poses, by showing her cleavage. No man has taken her in his arms, kissed her, made love with her for years; she cannot tolerate the monotony and encumbrance of widowhood. She comes to Ram, proposes to him and makes it clear that she wants to have sex with him. Her boldness leaves Ram dumbstruck, he has never seen any woman who expresses her desires in such a dauntless and mettlesome manner. Though Surpanakha does not shrink or hesitate to defy the standard norms of patriarchy to satiate her sexual hunger, she has her limitations as well. She voices her own thoughts and fights for her rights, true, but never attempts to demolish the very social structure that oppresses women, she just wants to make some adjustments, few modifications within the inherent system. In fact, she was very happy within the socially sanctioned role of a wife and a mother, until the murder of her husband by her own brother. It is only after she becomes a widow that she leaves the boundary of palace and starts leading a solitary life in a forest beyond any male control. She considers Ram and Lakshman as a tool of sexual gratification and also as a weapon of revenge against Ravan. As part of her plan she attempts to allure the two brothers and acts as a desperate woman. When Ram rejects her advances and introduces her to Sita, she does not take a step back, rather she acts more vulnerable. Ram makes fun of her love tooth in the head and asks her to pursue her younger brother Lakshman whose wife is not accompanying him in the forest. Lakshman insults her bluntly, saying that he loves his wife Urmila and he has no intention of cheating on her. But Surpanakha still continues beseeching for love. The two brothers do not feel her pangs of mental suffering, her helplessness. Rather they mock her cruelly and maim her as she tries to harm Sita. A disfigured woman is unattractive to men, she has no place in a man's world. A woman who has been vandalized for proposing to a man will never dare to express her desires, thus she can be pushed to the periphery of silence for ever. A free woman like Surpanakha is likely to cause damage or danger to the patriarchal social system. Therefore she is bound to be punished and eliminated in a way that women of later generations will not follow her as a role model.

Surpanakha is undoubtedly an object of beauty and desire for men. The very notion of beauty is always relative. It is not that men always get attracted to fair, slim women of bright features. Perhaps the shaded features of Surpanakha have attracted the two brothers who have grown a sort of desire for her. But Surpanakha's desire for them is the only

thing that has been highlighted so far. If the two brothers are attracted to her, this particular desire cannot culminate into a fruitful relationship under political inconvenience. So they cut off Surpanakha's nose and ears, they ruin the very object of desire in order to control their desire for her.

“Rajkumari Kamaballi”, a short story in Nabanita Debsen's collection of short stories *Sita Theke Shuru*, is based on the mutilation scene of Surpanakha or Kamaballi. She is a single lady by choice, no situation has forced her to lead a solitary life, neither does she need a man to exact revenge on another man. She does not remain behind veils, her movements are unrestricted, she frequently converses with men, she is not ashamed of her sexual desires. Therefore she has consciously contravened all the canons of patriarchy. If she is not given the status of a ‘bad woman’ the patriarchal constitution will be threatened. So Sita-Surpanakha dichotomy has been formed for marketing the brand of patriarchy where Sita is represented as a paragon of exemplary femininity, a desirable model that women should follow, and Surpanakha is an evil woman who inflicts damage to the age-old norms of patriarchy. Deconstructing the traditional portrayal of Surpanakha, Debsen has described her as a graceful, confident and dignified woman and does not hesitate to directly indicate that Ram is immensely attracted to her. In *Lanka's Princess* Surpanakha says that no one dares to harm her as she is the sister of powerful Ravan. But in “Rajkumari Kamaballi” she does not depend on her brother for protection. She possesses immense power, she alone can defeat thousands of men. No cultural code dominates her. She prefers nature over culture. When she proposes to Ram for ‘Gandharva marriage’, Ram demands a proper wedding. He says it would be unfair to marry her without the permission of her brothers, the elder brothers should hand her over to him. Kamaballi expresses her discontent on ‘Sampradan ritual’ of Hindu marriage in which the bride's father or an elderly male member of her family hands her over to the groom. She takes this ritual as an insult to womanhood. A woman is not an object to be donated by her father to her husband. She says that she does not belong to anyone and no man has the right to hand her over to Ram.

O Ramachandra, I am not a mute, male dominated, insignificant woman. I am powerful, independent and free. Why someone else will hand me over to you? I own my own right. (*Rajkumari Kamaballi*, translation mine)

However, when Sita arrives in the scene, Kamaballi realizes that Ram has never taken her seriously. The love-thirsty woman then goes to Lakshman and asks him to satisfy her. Lakshman fiercely criticizes her. Like any orthodox man he believes that an ideal woman should be shy, timid and bashful. He thinks that coyness is the ornament of an honourable woman, shyness is synonymous with her self-respect. He compares and contrasts Kamaballi with his wife Urmila who is too timid to disobey patriarchal norms

and concludes that she is not ‘decent’ like his law-abiding wife. She openly gives voice to her desire, therefore she is a shameless and loose woman with an immodest, libidinous character. He even does not hesitate to call her a prostitute. He thinks that only an immoral woman possesses sexual desire. It is either a man thing or a tool of procreation. He advises Kamaballi to act like a ‘good’ woman and stick to her gender roles. Kamaballi attacks this patriarchal paradigm. When a prince proposes to a princess nobody questions his virtue or morality, nobody judges his character. Why the women are not allowed to speak their mind? Why does the society urge women to be mute and submissive? On the scale of chastity men evaluate a woman’s purity. Surprisingly there is no male term for chastity. The establishment of the concept of ‘chastity’ to judge and evaluate women is a patriarchal strategy to subjugate them. Later when Lakshman agrees to make love with Kamaballi and she completely surrenders herself to his embrace, he takes advantage of her weakness and maims her. It is her punishment for her craving, her sexual aggression, for her infringement of the gender roles. Being an ‘ideal’ member of the masculine world, it is Lakshman’s duty to eliminate the woman who is a threat to the system. Many a times the mainstream versions of the epic have justified mutilation and violence on women as a punishment of their sexuality. Surpanakha is not the only woman who was violated in *Ramayana*. Women like Tadaka, Ahalya, Simhika were either killed or harmed as they tried to break the gender barriers or oppose men. The message is clear- if a woman attempts to cross her limit she will have to go through the consequences. Men consider mutilation as a more savage punishment for a woman than death. The life of a disfigured woman is too horrific to articulate in words. A woman who has been maimed begins to abhor herself for her ugliness, her suitors abandon her, she feels insecure as she will not be able to obtain the tags that are crucial for a woman to survive in a male dominated world- the tag of a wife and a mother. As people treat her as a victim and make fun of her face, she leads a life of agony and humiliation in a peripheral corner of the society.

In these two retellings Surpanakha has been represented in two different ways. It is true that Kane accords a central position to Surpanakha in her novel, but the dominant patriarchal strategies which overpower hers cannot be denied by the novelist. It is like the novelist has indirectly admitted that we live in a man’s world- admitting within the scope of the novel the powers of men with their clear, dictatorial, detached, judgemental, diplomatic, political preoccupations for which women are no match. So the recourse to emotions, flirtations, seductions and tears as survival strategies?

Nabanita Debsen has portrayed Kamaballi as a bravewoman. Time and again she throws questions to the patriarchs. Why does an objectionable ritual like ‘Sampradan ritual’ still exist in marriage? Why does the society question a woman’s character if she proposes to a man? But even this vocal lady cannot imagine a world without men. After Lakshman maims her she laments that she will never be able to win a man’s love again in

her life. She does not need a man for social and financial security, but she needs a man to fulfil her biological and emotional needs. In the story she has attacked certain patriarchal paradigms. But, does she possess the power to completely smash the shackles of patriarchy and gender barriers? The question remains.

Breaking from the trends, neo-mythology deconstructs the definition of womanhood. The feminist writers have brought an ignored woman like Surpanakha to the light. Their exploration of the woman's psyche is free from misogyny and chauvinism. Moreover, they have exposed the hypocrisy of men-created so-called 'Stree dharma' and showed how the patriarchy made use of this brand of 'dharma' in order to restrict women to the duties of a daughter, wife and mother only and exploit them in different ways. They have given voice to a peripheral woman like Surpanakha, they have made her question certain patriarchal prejudices; but they are somewhat sceptical about the implementation of the ideals of gender equality. In a society where men are enjoying a privileged position since ages, for most of them the idea of 'gender equality' seems to be a demotion. Perhaps, that is why, the feminist writers have criticized certain norms of patriarchy through their re-discovered identities of Surpanakha; they have portrayed and given voice to her in a manner so that the modern women can relate their own problems with the contemporized versions of Surpanakha. But they have not provided any suggestion or solution on how to destroy the very configuration that has subjugated women since the creation of 'mankind'.

India has a rich heritage of mythology and epic literature. The ancient authors have consciously made the epics so wonderfully detailed and multi-dimensional and left some gaps that can be filled by the later authors in accordance with the changing necessities of their age. As the *Ramayana* has become a part of Indian consciousness, the stories have simultaneously diverged in different directions. Different cultures in different periods of time have adopted these stories because of their possibilities of multiple interpretations and have used them accordingly. A character who may be a minor character in the so-called main narrative may become a major character in another narrative. Therefore subversions, re-interpretations have always been extremely possible and have found very grounds in these epic narratives. And they have also given rise to the possibility of a discord, possibilities of possessing and dispossessing. So they are everybody's and nobody's. As these narratives are open to multiple interpretations, they can generate a number of neo-notions and ideas. Perhaps, that is why, the feminist writers have used the stories of the *Ramayana* to raise critical questions regarding female sexuality, female psyche, the place of women in society, the oppression that they had to suffer and the strategies taken by them in order to subvert the hegemonic patriarchy. Two retellings have been selected for the paper but numerous other versions of the epic do exist and the *Ramayana* in its different forms across the nation and beyond are actually a binding factor of an entire cultural progression.



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