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# Surpanakha- More Hated than Hateful: Exploring the Possible Nuances of Mytho-fiction in Kavita Kané's *Lanka's Princess*

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## **Abstract:**

Kavita Kané is a magnificent writer of mythological fictions, popularly known as “mytho/ mythic fictions” where mythology is not about molding the old fables in a newer fashion but treating it as a literary technique since there has always been an intermingling of literature and mythology. Kané is more engaged with those women characters, silenced and eradicated from subject-position of history like Sita's sister Urmila or the fisher woman Satyavati who was elevated in power to become a queen of the Kuru dynasty, established a matriarchy and navigated the destiny of her family and Hastinapur; or an overlooked character like Surpanakha in *Lanka's Princess* (2016) or the traitorous Menaka of *Menaka's Choice* (2015). She explores an alternative narrative by making Surpanakha or Menaka or Satyavati hold the centre before it gets shifted again. She considers mythology as a blank space and imprints contemporary ideas merging them with old folk tales to re-create and re-interpret different characters and to create modern sensibilities against a social canvas. This paper will try to establish that mythologies are enmeshed with socio-political, moral and philosophical tinges; they not only narrate the stories of legends but deduce different aspects of

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one's life, celebrate human spirit, and address the human incompetency as well. It is not about magnificence or grandeur or nobility of one person but humanity in general that mythology deals with. We mostly perceive mythology through a man's point of view whereas Kané here approaches it through the women – it could be Gandhari, Kunti, Radha, Tara, Mandodari or Surpanakha. Surpanakha born as Meenakshi, "the one with beautiful, fish-shaped eyes", ends up being perceived as "ugly and untamed, brutal and brazen"; one whose nose was "castrated" by Lakshmana, and the one who fuelled a war in Ramayana. But was she just reduced to an instigator of war? Or was she sacrificed in the process? Was she the "Lanka's princess" or the cause for its annihilation? – These are the questions that the paper will try to pose.

**Key Words:** Mytho-fiction, Surpanakha, Princess, Victim, Hated, Hateful.

The word "myth" has been derived from modern Latin "mythus", via Late Latin from Greek word, "muthos". "Mythos" is the term used by Aristotle in Poetics for 'plot' as one of the six elements of tragedy. According to Elizabeth Belfiore's *Tragic Pleasures; Aristotle on Plot and Emotion*, Aristotle examined that "plot is essential to tragedy; ethos [character] is second to plot" ("Mythos"). Aristotle believes that "psychological and ethical considerations are secondary to the events themselves" ("Mythos"). Aristotle focused on 'mythos' (plot) over 'ethos' (character) or "conflict either in the sense of struggle within a person or in the sense of the clashing of opposed principles" ("Mythos"). Aristotle elucidates how tragedy is an imitation of human lives and actions than human beings themselves. Aristotle highlighted the universally coherent events of plot than the specific and incoherent conflicts between characters related with these

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events. On the contrary, the novel *Lanka's Princess* (2016) by Kavita Kané focused more on the “ethos” or the conflicts and crisis of the characters than the “mythos” or plots itself. Kané was inspired by the discourse of modern Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp who “reverses Aristotle's theory by writing that stories are about characters who act” (“Mythos”). Propp also argues that basic story elements, which he defines as functions, “are in fact ethically colored, either in themselves or because they are defined in terms of a character that has specific ethical qualities” (“Mythos”). Ethical conflicts between characters are the focal point of Kané’s novel.

In an article in *The Hindu* titled “Myth for Modern Times”, the author, Anusha Parthasarathy, comments on the reworking of the term ‘myth’ by writers like Amish Tripathi. For Amish Tripathi, as stated in the article, “the very word mythology which is derived from the Greek term ‘mythos’ means to hide the truth and it is up to us to discover it through the story” (Parthasarathy n.pag). Further, quoting Tripathi, he said:

Probably the only ancient civilization that has kept its myths alive even today is India. This is not because the other myths aren’t as rich as ours but because we have understood the philosophy behind them. Myths are not about the stories but about the message you spread through them. And as societies and beliefs change, myths have to change along with them. Modernising and localising myths are ways of keeping them relevant in modern times. (qtd. in Parthasarathy n.pag.)

And indeed, ‘modernising’ and ‘localising’ myths have led to a new trend in Indian Writing in English, questioning the established hierarchy and producing new voices beyond stereotypes. “Mythic fiction”, a term coined by Charles de Lint and Terri Windling is a kind of literature that draws its source from motifs, symbols and analogies

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of mythical legends, and folk tales. Mythic fiction can sometimes be used interchangeably with “urban fantasy” since it overlaps the boundary of “fantasy fiction”, yet it sometimes incorporates contemporary works in non-urban setting too. But this is in contrast to “mythopoeia”, such as the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, C.S Lewis or George R. R. Martin that create their own legends and folklore or initiate wholly new pantheons. The breakdown of grand narratives which accompanied the advent of post modernism, leads to the alternate narratives to be explored. Retelling the myth becomes a part of the small narratives that can overthrow the powerful hold of the Hindu myths which is a part of the grand narratives.

We find many important writers involving in this new genre like Ashok K Banker, Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakantan, Devdutt Pattanaik, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kané among others. Interestingly, the women writers experimented with this genre by putting forth the silent women figures to the forefront. We find Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (in *The Palace of Illusions*) delving deep into the events of Kurukshetra from Draupadi’s perspective, similarly like Kané’s *Karna’s Wife* or *Sita’s Sister* which unfurled the events from the viewpoints of Uruvi, Karna’s wife and Urmila, Lakshmana’s wife respectively; thus producing an alternative narrative and deconstructing the patriarchal way of story-telling. Kané in an interview defended her subject: “I was curious about her, and I wanted to see how as a writer, I could handle her. I needed to understand why there was so much negativity surrounding her” (Tushar n.pag). Kané did an extensive research to comprehend different intricacies and nuances of Surpanakha. “Society has always ridiculed her. We take her role in the *Ramayana* so lightly, when in fact she’s such a crucial character. And then she has been sidelined through the rest of the epic, whereas her brother Ravana is more fleshed out. I wanted to humanize her and make her real to people,”

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(Tushar n.pag.) she comments. However, Kané concludes that her racy account of Surpanakha is not any kind of justification that she has offered. “I’m not saying they were heroes. They were people with flaws. That’s the beauty of mythology. Every character has shades of grey, and they make you think and question,” (Tushar n.pag.) she comments.

*Lanka’s Princess* narrates the life of Princess Meenakshi, the only daughter of Rishi Vishravas and demon Kayikeshi and sister of Ravana, Kumbhakaran and Vibhishana. Meenakshi, born in a family intrinsic to war and violence, is ignored and mistreated by her mother and brothers, and condemned by her father. Thus her chances of being happy are sacrificed letting her soul driven by spite and anger. It was these circumstances that shaped her character and made her unleash that spite by initiating a battle between Rama and Ravana in Ramayana. Her book unfolds and traces this transformation from a kind, soulful Meenakshi into a violent, vengeful and deceitful Surpanakha which will make us sympathize with the distressful nefarious protagonist.

‘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!’ (Kané 89)

Surpanakha, Ravana’s famous sister— ugly and untamed, brutal and brazen— this is often how she is generally portrayed in dominant fictions; one whose nose was maimed by Lakshmana which consequently fuelled a war. ‘Surpanakha’, connoting a woman ‘as sharp as talon’, was born as ‘Meenakshi’ — the one ‘with beautiful, fish-shaped eyes’, is often the most misrecognized and misjudged character in the *Ramayana*. Accused of being a manipulator between Rama and Ravana, which culminated into the destruction of her family, Kavita Kané’s *Lanka’s Princess* makes us see the familiar

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events unfurl through the unfamiliar eyes of a woman who is more “hated than hateful”.

Kayikeshi could never provide her with the succor and love that a daughter deserves to receive. It was not Ravana or Vibhishana, but Kumbhakaran who was her constant support and voice of wisdom, sometimes. When Kuber’s tried to abduct Meenakshi, he was taken aback by her spirit to fight back with her sharp nails. But her mother was exasperated at Rishi Vishravas’ “cowardliness” that despite being the father figure he was proved to be helpless during this sudden onslaught. Meenakshi was ashamed and embarrassed by her father’s defenseless motion as he used to admire him silently. She was vexed that her father, putting aside his vanity and dignity, begged to Kartiviryarjun for Ravana’s rescue. The realization that her father actually never loved her unquestioningly now dawned upon her.

Secondly, her husband Vidyujiva’s demise makes her decide that she desires to avenge his death by obliterating him from the surface of the earth. She decides to leave Lanka and stay with her uncle Mareecha in Dandaka forest along with her son Kumar in order to train him to be warrior who can build a bulwark against Ravana’s prowl. There she loses her identity as Meenakshi, and decides to become the vengeful Supanakha. She became vehemently violent when her son was assassinated mistakenly by Lakshmana; hence Rama and Lakshmana were added to her list. She understands that Sita can be used as a ploy in this game of destruction: “Sita would be the cause and she, Surpanakha would be that culprit to precipitate the mayhem” (Kané 210).

In another such instance in Dandaka forest, Rama and Lakshmana toyed with her emotion by asking her to approach each other in a zestful manner which was an act of condemnation, debasement and much degradation. She stood perplexed in the middle watching the

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two brothers with deceptive and cruel appearance, grinning surreptitiously, and sharing a secret jest; she was the jest. As Ram implored Lakshmana not to kill but maim her as a way of ‘abjecting’ her, she reverts back that it was the duo that killed Taraka, her grandmother and Subahu, her uncle. And Surpanakha’s introspection and grievance at this juncture is quite justified: “Was that why they had laughed at me, ridiculing me in their contempt and amazement, their arrogant condescendence condemning me for my feminine profanities?” (Kané 202). The “monstrous femininity” is incorporated by the patriarchal society to reinforce “submissive femininity” as a norm. Those who transgress the boundary of chastity, piousness, virtuosity, marital stability, attributed to women, suffer the fate of “castration” like Surpanakha.

Surpanakha also breaks the fabricated ideals of piousness and chastity of the royalty hinting at Rama’s efforts to make his wife a ‘pure woman’ in a trial by fire at Lanka. Surpanakha justly questions whether this was an act of freedom or humiliation. In spite of being an ideal and upright king, Rama compelled Sita to perform ‘Agnipariksha’ to prove to the world that she was innocent, virtuous and untouched by Ravana. Torn apart between performing his royal duties and personal relationships, the king in him took over to perform his duty even if it meant sacrificing the woman he loved.

In Samhita Arni’s dystopic mythological thriller *The Missing Queen* (2013), set in the recognizable subcontinent of today, Surpanakha’s is a story that challenges the authoritative version in two ways —as a desiring woman and as an ‘alien’ woman. Years after the main incidents narrated in the epic have occurred, and after the mysterious disappearance of Sita, an unnamed female narrator sets out on an obsessive search for the missing Ayodhyan queen, meeting along the way, several marginal characters that shed light on the Ayodhya-Lanka war. Surpanakha is now working as a militant with the Lankan

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Liberation Front, and she clarifies to the journalist narrator that she had desired Lakshmana, not Rama, that Lakshmana had teased her and that her face had been disfigured because it was considered unacceptable to kill a woman under the Ayodhya code of honour. The link between female vanity and desire, and her disfigurement is made clear here, and reminds us of the horribly misogynistic contemporary practice - though there the reason is the thwarting of male desire and not the violent suppression of female desire. Lakshmana, she rants, is “a man so narrow-minded that he can’t imagine a woman has needs and wants and can act on them”(Arni 76). Reflecting on Ayodhya in general, she remarks, “ In Ayodhya, it seems, people are fond of locking up their women, drawing circles in the dust to contain them, looking up skirts at every opportunity to check that a woman’s virginity or virtue is intact...Lankans are different! We believe in freedom and equality” (Arni 78). However, it is important to note that Surpanakha is not entirely blameless — proud and self-absorbed, she clearly manipulates everybody she can to avenge her dishonour. But, this is a result of the abuse and malign she has faced and her transition from a beautiful seductress to an embittered, vengeful woman seems to the narrator to be the greatest tragedy of all.

Amit Chaudhuri’s short story ‘An Infatuation’ in the excellent anthology of essays, ruminations and creative interpretations: *In Search of Sita — Revisiting Mythology* (also published as ‘Surpanakha’ in *The Little Magazine*) is a short narration of Surpanakha’s humiliation, which paints an unflattering portrait of Rama and Lakshmana. Here, the conventional structure of romance narratives is clearly inverted, such that Surpanakha is the one attracted, stalking, nervous and desperate, and Rama experiences, “for the first time, the dubious and uncomfortable pleasure of being the object of pursuit”( Chaudhuri 15). Amused and flattered, Rama plays along for a while, before turning to Lakshmana with casual



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cruelty and asking him to teach her a lesson for her ‘forwardness’. Lakshmana promptly obliges, though the mutilation happens off-stage so to speak, and we hear of its description from her heartless perpetrator, who compares her to a beast in agony. Bewildered and pained, “that the one she’d worshipped should be so without compassion, so unlike what he looked like” (Chaudhuri 20), she goes looking for Ravana. Almost in a continuation to this plotline, is the powerful scene in Atul Satya Kaushik’s celebrated play *Raavan Ki Ramayan*, where Surpanakha is reliving that nightmarish episode in Ravana’s court. On being taunted about her use of dark magic to transform into a beautiful woman to seduce the man she desires, she lashes out at the insidious patriarchal matrix, whereby her brother kills her husband and promises her a man of her choosing but which also precludes that a man of her choice should desire her in return, given the harsh and uncompromising standards of female beauty which disqualify her without the use of deception. Her choice was no choice at all, she laments, something that Sita too would soon discover when Ravana comes to exploit the loophole in the code book of patriarchy, whereby a Kshatriya wife must not step out before an unknown man, yet a Kshatriya daughter-in-law must not anger a Brahmin by disobeying him.

Whereas Kavita Kané’s *Lanka’s Princess* takes a largely indulgent view of Surpanakha and traces her tragic journey to becoming the monster she has always made to feel she was. After Sita’s abduction, the two women finally confront each other in Lanka. Surpanakha asks Sita who it was who loved her more, Rama or Ravana, given that Sita had sacrificed a lot for Ram, but that Ravana had staked a lot for her sake, a question that is sure to haunt Sita in later years after her return to Ayodhya. Sita in turn asks her if the whole point of the war was to assuage Surpanakha’s hurt ego, because the two men had spurned Surpanakha’s advances. To this, the latter demands, “If they

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found me so crass and crude and unwelcome, could they not have just politely refused me like the chivalrous warriors they claim themselves to be?” (Kané’ 189) and asks why Rama had toyed with her instead. Sita’s unuttered thoughts are significant — “How could she explain to Surpanakha that in the world in which 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 had played along till the amusement had gone awry”. Sita is uncomfortable with her husband’s violence in this episode, as much as she is both, admiring and uneasy with Surpanakha’s forthrightness. Surpanakha in turn wonders if Rama’s reaction was more attributable to his guilt at a possible attraction he had momentarily felt towards her.

In Telugu writer Volga’s novel translated into English by T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree as *The Liberation of Sita*, four of the five stories revolve around Sita’s interactions with marginalized female characters from the epics, each of whom teaches her important life lessons from their own experiences, as well as the significance of real and forged sisterhoods in one’s emancipation, the true meaning of which Sita realizes in her own time and at different stages and tribulations of life. In ‘The Reunion’, it has been years since the war of Lanka has been fought, and Sita has been abandoned in the forest, where she is now rearing her sons. Surpanakha is an object of pity for Sita, as she recollects how Rama and Lakshmana had ‘tricked’ and mutilated her, all with the intention of provoking her brother Ravana into war. Sita admonishes her sons against judging Surpanakha as ‘ugly’ on the basis of her external appearance and seeks her company out of curiosity about the beautiful garden that Surpanakha is rumoured to have nurtured, which surpasses all others in beauty. Sita expects to meet a woman who is resigned to her fate, lonely and

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channeling her yearning for beauty and love into the garden and its flowers. Instead, she finds peace, wisdom and dignity on Surpanakha's face and the latter is moved by the kindness, affection and maturity that she finds in Sita. Surpanakha relates her brave tale of overcoming her bodily disfigurement, grappling with body image issues, contemplating suicide, grappling with crippling hatred, jealousy and spite. Interestingly, it is in the lap of nature, and not under human tutelage, that Surpanakha learns to appreciate true beauty and love another part of her body — her hands. Thus she now uses her hands to create things and serve others, instead of lamenting the loss of that bit of herself that was more a sign of her vanity than anything else. When Sita remarks that Surpanakha is genuinely beautiful and not in need of male appreciation, Surpanakha is quick to interject that not all men are destructive and hateful and that she has found meaningful companionship with one such man, though also maintaining that she has come to understand that “the meaning of success for a woman does not lie in her relationship with a man” (Kumar and Vijayasree 67). She warns Sita gently against making the mainstay of her existence the upbringing of her sons, who would inevitably leave the forest to join the kingdom in the city. Sita is touched by Surpanakha's ‘unsolicited kindness’ and teaches her sons to never forget their way to Surpanakha's garden.

Surpanakha's story, in all its longing, desire, self-pity, vanity and dignity, is being scripted anew, by women and men. Kané has read her as Adrienne Riche has argued the act of entering an old text anew is not just a chapter in Cultural Revolution for women, but their very act of survival. This new alternative account of Surpanakha could deconstruct the godly image that Rama carved and thus build up a more humane image to the demons with their human strength and weakness. Though the tale of Meenakshi is heart wrenching, it also speaks volumes about the strength, integrity, dignity of a woman who

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has survived love, loss and rejection, only to rise up from her ashes and to chart out her battle proudly against the world.

Kavita Kané has not prototyped Surpanakha in binaries, either as a “saint or sinner” or “betrayed or betrayed”; she simply has voiced her part of the story which was unheard of. The incredible prologue and epilogue sequences make us wonder if we shall remember Meenakshi as a princess, beloved, warrior or devil. This is a retelling of the hyper-masculine epic from Surpanakha’s perspective; there is a marked shift in the tale from the ‘other’ to the ‘self’.

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