

Shadow Sovereignty: Feminine Power and Moral Ambiguity in Kavita Kane's Lanka's Princess

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ABSTRACT

Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* (2017) revisits the Ramayana through the marginalized figure of Surpanakha, traditionally represented as grotesque and immoral. This article advances a fresh critical concept by interpreting Surpanakha as a bearer of **shadow sovereignty** a form of feminine power that exists outside idealized virtue yet exposes the fragility of masculine dharma. Drawing upon feminist myth criticism, psychoanalytic theory, and Foucauldian power studies, the paper argues that Kane reconstructs Surpanakha as a morally complex subject whose desire, grief, and rage destabilize epic binaries of good and evil. By relocating agency to the figure of the villainized woman, the novel reconfigures ethical authority within mythic discourse. This reading shifts Surpanakha from caricature to conscience, revealing how female transgression becomes a critique of patriarchal heroism.

Keywords: Kavita Kane, Surpanakha, shadow sovereignty, feminist myth, power, Ramayana

Introduction

Mythological narratives in India have long relied on moral polarization, positioning male heroes as embodiments of dharma and women as either paragons of virtue or agents of chaos. Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana, has been persistently portrayed as a comic or demonic intruder whose desire justifies violence against her body. Such a depiction reduces her to a narrative device rather than an ethical subject. Contemporary feminist rewritings attempt to retrieve these silenced voices and interrogate epic morality by restoring interiority to women who were previously denied narrative authority.

In *Lanka's Princess*, Kane offers Surpanakha a voice shaped by grief, rejection, and political marginalization. Surpanakha observes, "I was born a Rakshasi, but I was not born a monster" (Kane 17). This declaration challenges the epic's assumption that lineage determines morality. The present study introduces the concept of **shadow sovereignty** to describe Surpanakha's authority that emerges from emotional truth rather than social legitimacy. Unlike Sita, whose virtue is sanctified, Surpanakha's desire is punished, revealing the gendered double standards embedded within dharma. By focusing on a figure traditionally excluded from moral sympathy, Kane relocates ethical inquiry from the center of epic heroism to its margins.

Review of Literature

Feminist reinterpretations of the Ramayana have largely focused on Sita as a symbol of endurance and

Draupadi as a figure of resistance. Scholars argue that mythic women are often reduced to moral metaphors rather than historical agents (Mukherjee 58). Kane's fiction has been praised for retrieving marginalized female figures from epic obscurity and endowing them with narrative subjectivity (Sharma 123). However, critical studies on Lanka's Princess remain sparse, frequently interpreting Surpanakha as merely a tragic victim of male violence rather than as a political subject.

Choudhury notes that Kane "dismantles the binary of virtue and vice by granting interiority to demonized women" (72). Yet existing criticism does not sufficiently theorize Surpanakha's anger as political or her desire as ethical. Most readings emphasize her suffering without exploring how suffering becomes a form of agency. By foregrounding her narrative consciousness, Kane constructs a counter-history of the Ramayana that exposes the ethical limits of heroic masculinity. This paper fills this gap by theorizing Surpanakha's marginality as a form of moral authority grounded in pain, memory, and resistance.

Theoretical Framework

The study employs three interrelated frameworks. Feminist myth criticism provides the foundation for analysing how canonical narratives suppress female subjectivity and naturalize gendered punishment. Psychoanalytic theory, particularly Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, explains Surpanakha's expulsion from social order as a fear of unregulated female desire (Kristeva 4). Abjection marks the Rakshasi body as impure and threatening, justifying its exclusion from the moral community.

Additionally, Michel Foucault's relational model of power illuminates how authority operates through discourse, surveillance, and punishment rather than brute force (Foucault 93). Surpanakha's mutilation is not only a personal injury but a disciplinary act that inscribes moral boundaries upon the female body. Through these lenses, Surpanakha's experience is revealed as a convergence of patriarchal anxiety and political control. Kane's rewriting thus exposes the ideological function of epic morality and reframes villainy as a product of power relations rather than inherent evil.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis of Lanka's Princess using feminist narratology. Key episodes such as Surpanakha's childhood in Lanka, her encounter with Rama and Lakshmana, and her subsequent alignment with Ravana are examined. Close reading of selected passages is combined with theoretical interpretation to trace the transformation of Surpanakha from caricature to moral agent. Secondary sources on feminist myth-making and narrative ethics supplement the analysis.

Analysis

Surpanakha and the Ethics of Desire

Surpanakha's desire is condemned in the epic as vulgar intrusion. Kane reframes it as emotional vulnerability: "My longing was not lust; it was a plea to be seen" (Kane 88). This articulation humanizes her sexuality and exposes the punitive logic of masculine virtue. By refusing to idealize chastity, Kane disrupts patriarchal moral hierarchies. Desire becomes an ethical claim to recognition rather than a moral lapse.

Her attraction to Rama is framed not as predation but as a search for dignity within a world that has denied her affection. Surpanakha's confession, "To love was my rebellion against fear" (Kane 92), suggests that intimacy becomes a form of resistance against social exclusion. Through this lens, desire functions as shadow sovereignty—an assertion of selfhood that operates outside sanctioned virtue.

Mutilation as Political Discipline

Lakshmana's act of cutting off Surpanakha's nose and ears is traditionally justified as defense of virtue. Kane represents this moment as institutional violence: "They punished me for wanting what they had already claimed" (Kane 121). Drawing on Foucault, the body becomes a site of power inscription where discipline replaces dialogue. The mutilation enforces a moral lesson by publicly marking Surpanakha as transgressive.

Surpanakha reflects, "My blood taught them what words never could—that women who ask must be erased" (Kane 124). This statement reveals how violence operates as pedagogy in epic culture, teaching society which desires are permissible and which must be destroyed. The punishment thus extends beyond Surpanakha's body to regulate feminine aspiration itself.

Rage and Shadow Sovereignty

Surpanakha's rage is not mere vengeance but a response to ethical humiliation. She reflects, "If virtue had a face, it wore the mask of cruelty" (Kane 146). Her anger exposes the contradiction between proclaimed righteousness and enacted brutality. This rage embodies shadow sovereignty authority derived from suffering rather than sanctity.

By aligning herself with Ravana, Surpanakha makes a political choice rather than a purely emotional one. She states, "I chose the only kingdom that would not mock my scars" (Kane 150). Lanka becomes a symbolic refuge for wounded identities, contrasting with the forest that claims moral superiority yet practices exclusion.

Rewriting Villainy

Traditional narratives locate evil in Ravana and Surpanakha alike. Kane complicates this by showing how marginalization produces extremity. Surpanakha confesses, "I became what their world named me" (Kane 174). Villainy becomes a social product, exposing how patriarchal codes manufacture monstrosity. Her transformation reveals how ethical failure is not confined to demonized figures but embedded in the heroic order itself. Kane thus inverts epic morality by suggesting that cruelty, rather than desire, is the true transgression.

Discussion

Kane's Surpanakha is neither saint nor seductress but a morally ambiguous subject whose emotions destabilize epic certainties. By framing desire as ethical claim rather than moral lapse, the novel critiques the gendered logic of dharma. Surpanakha's shadow sovereignty challenges the epic's valorisation of restraint and exposes the violence underpinning masculine heroism.

This reading expands feminist myth criticism by incorporating psychoanalytic and post structural theories. It demonstrates that agency need not align with virtue to be politically significant. Kane's narrative thus reorients mythic ethics toward emotional truth and relational justice. The figure of Surpanakha becomes a moral witness whose pain exposes the hidden costs of heroic ideals.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Lanka's Princess reconstructs Surpanakha as a figure of shadow sovereignty whose suffering and rage expose patriarchal double standards. By integrating feminist, psychoanalytic, and power theories, the study reveals how Kane transforms a vilified woman into a moral witness of epic

injustice. Surpanakha's story ultimately suggests that the margins of myth hold ethical insight absent from heroic centers. Through this revision, Kane contributes a radical feminist epistemology grounded in ambiguity, pain, and resistance.

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