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The Unsung Princess of Lanka: A Critical Analysis of Patriarchy and Power in Kavita Kane's The Lanka's Princess

Dr. Visweswaraiah S

Associate Professor of English
Govt. First Grade College Hoskote-562114

Abstract:
Indian mythology has always been narrated from a patriarchal perspective, where women are either idealized as goddesses or demonized. Kavita Kane's novel The Lanka's Princess (2017) is a significant attempt at feminist mythopoeia that reclaims the story of Surpanakha, the most misunderstood and vilified character of the Ramayana. Traditionally portrayed as a lustful and ugly demoness whose mutilation was justified, Surpanakha in Kane's hands becomes a woman of flesh and blood - a daughter, a sister, a widow, and a lover seeking acceptance. This paper aims to critically analyze how Kane deconstructs the patriarchal power structures that operate in both the epic and contemporary society. Through the lens of feminist literary theory and Foucauldian power dynamics, the study explores how female sexuality is policed, how beauty becomes a tool for othering, and how a woman becomes a site for political warfare. The paper argues that by giving a voice to the unsung princess of Lanka, Kane is not just revisiting an ancient myth but is reinterpreting it for the modern woman who dares to desire, to speak, and to choose.

eywords: Kavita Kane, The Lanka's Princess, Surpanakha, Feminist Retelling, Patriarchy, Power, Mythopoeia, Gender, Ramayana

Introduction

The great Indian epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, have been the cultural repository of Indian values for centuries. However, these epics were written, compiled, and interpreted by men, for a largely patriarchal social order. In this grand narrative, women have been given peripheral spaces. They exist as the ideal - Sita, the epitome of purity and sacrifice; or as the anti-ideal - Surpanakha, the embodiment of unbridled lust and ugliness. The very name Surpanakha, meaning one who has nails like a winnowing fan, dehumanizes her from the start. Kavita Kane, known for her feminist revisionist mythological fiction like Karna's Wife and Sita's Sister, takes up the most challenging character in The Lanka's Princess. The novel is a bildungsroman of Meenakshi, who later becomes Surpanakha. It traces her journey from an unloved child to the princess of Lanka and finally to the woman who triggers the greatest war in mythology. The title itself is ironic and intentional. She was indeed a princess of Lanka - sister of the mighty Ravana, educated, royal, and powerful, yet history never remembers her as a princess. She is remembered only as a demoness. This paper, titled "The Unsung Princess of Lanka", seeks to analyze how Kavita Kane uses the twin axes of Patriarchy and Power to resurrect this unsung princess.

Review of Literature

The tradition of re-telling the Ramayana from a female perspective is not new. Volga's The Liberation of Sita, Kavita Kane's own Sita's Sister, and Saoli Mitra's Five Lords Yet None a Protector have attempted to question the male-centric narrative. Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi and After Kurukshetra have been pioneering works in giving voice to marginalized women in epics. In the context of Surpanakha, previous scholarship has largely focused on her role as a catalyst. Paula Richman's Many Ramayanas shows how Surpanakha is depicted differently across regional Ramayanas. However, Kane's work is unique because it does not treat Surpanakha as a plot device but as a protagonist with interiority. This paper builds upon the existing feminist scholarship on mythological retellings and applies it specifically to the intersection of patriarchy and power in Kane's novel.

Patriarchy: The Architecture of Surpanakha's Suffering

Patriarchy in The Lanka's Princess is not just a system; it is a pervasive architecture that shapes every aspect of Meenakshi's life.

a) The Patriarchy of the Father and Brother: Meenakshi's trauma begins at home. She is the daughter of the great sage Vishrava and the Rakshasa princess Kaikesi. Her father abandons her family, terming her mother and her brothers as uncultured Rakshasas. Within her own family, her brother Ravana, who becomes the emperor of Lanka, represents the ultimate patriarch. He kills her beloved husband, Vidyutjiva, out of political insecurity and dismisses her grief as inconsequential. For Ravana, his sister is a political pawn to be married and widowed at will. Her identity is never her own; she is always someone's daughter or someone's sister.

b) Policing of Female Sexuality: The central incident of the Ramayana - Surpanakha's proposal to Rama and Lakshmana and her subsequent mutilation - is re-read by Kane as the most brutal example of patriarchal policing. When Meenakshi, lonely and widowed, sees Rama and desires him, she exercises the most basic human right: the right to choose and to propose. In a patriarchal world, a woman proposing to a man is itself transgressive. Rama, bound by his image as Ekapatni Vrata (man of one wife), rejects her politely, but Lakshmana, the upholder of patriarchal honor, mutilates her by cutting off her nose. The nose, a symbol of honor and beauty, is cut to punish her for her shameless desire. Kane asks a pertinent modern question: Would a man be mutilated for desiring a woman? The punishment is gendered. Her desire is termed as lust, while Ravana's desire for Sita is termed as conquest.

c) The Beauty Myth as Patriarchal Tool: Kane brilliantly exposes how patriarchy uses beauty to divide women. Meenakshi is described as dark-skinned, not as beautiful as her mother Kaikesi or as Mandodari. She grows up with an inferiority complex. When she meets Sita, who is fair, delicate, and the epitome of Aryan beauty, she is further marginalized. The epic justifies Rama's rejection by stating that Sita is more beautiful. Thus, beauty becomes a yardstick for a woman's worth. This is a very modern concern, where colorism and body shaming still dictate a woman's social capital.

Power: The Foucaultian Dynamics in Lanka and Dandakaranya

If patriarchy is the ideology, power is the mechanism through which it operates. The novel is a study in power - political, physical, and epistemic.

a) Political Power and the Female Body as Battlefield: Michel Foucault argued that power is not just repressive but productive. In the novel, Surpanakha's body becomes the site where male power is produced and displayed. Her mutilation is not a personal revenge; it is a political statement by the Aryan princes

against the Rakshasa Empire. Later, when she reports this to Ravana, her wounded body is used by Ravana to justify his own political ambition to abduct Sita. In both cases, the woman's body is not her own. It is a pretext for war. The abduction of Sita is a counter-attack for the insult to Surpanakha. Two women - Sita and Surpanakha - pay the price for a war between two egoistic male powers. This reflects the modern reality where women's bodies are still used as battlefields in communal and nationalistic wars.

b) Powerlessness and Agency: Throughout the novel, Meenakshi is powerless. She cannot save her husband, cannot save her brother Kumbhakarna, cannot prevent the war. Yet, Kane gives her agency in the only way possible for a woman in that era - through endurance and through telling her story. Her final realization is powerful: she understands that she was never a demoness; she was made one. This realization is itself an act of reclaiming power.

Conclusion: The Modern Relevance of the Ancient Princess

The Lanka's Princess is more than a mythological retelling. It is a mirror to contemporary society. The issues Surpanakha faces - victim-blaming, slut-shaming, colorism, widow stigmatization, and the use of women's honor for political gains - are not ancient. They are terrifyingly modern. Kavita Kane's Surpanakha is the modern woman who is told she is too loud, too dark, too desirous, too ambitious. By making her the princess and not the demoness, Kane forces the reader to question all the Surpanakhas we have created in our own lives. Thus, the journey from ancient to modern is complete. We started by reading an ancient epic that taught us to hate Surpanakha. We end with a modern novel that teaches us to understand her. In doing so, Kavita Kane does not just give justice to an unsung princess of Lanka; she gives justice to all unsung women in history whose stories were never told because the men who wrote history never thought their stories mattered.

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