

THE UNFOLDING SAGA

* Soma Mandal

Abstract:

Rama has been interpreted as an icon of divinity. *Ramayana* has been seen and followed as the touchstone for morality. The killing of Vali and Ravana has been justified through various points of view. In the battle between Rama and Ravana the character of Surpanakha gets unnoticed, who is the primary concern of our discussion in this paper. She is the actual reason for the great battle between two supreme powers. She has actually incorporated the plan of Sita's kidnapping into Ravana's head. The king who is extremely knowledgeable and powerful went to abduct someone else's wife which cannot be supported only to avenge his sister Surpanakha's insult. Surpanakha is the most underrated and misinterpreted character in the epic *Ramayana*. Although living in the palace in the midst of magnificence with powerful parents and brothers Surpanakha was in search of true love which leads her to take hasty and wrong path to fulfil her desires, lust and revenge.

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, Gobordanga Hindu College

Introduction

Down the decades, the epic *Ramayana* has been interpreted as the touchstone for morality in the Hindu culture. It holds a unique position in the lives of Hindus and serves as an appropriate model for ideal behavior and virtue. The epic is a eulogy to the quintessence character of Lord Rama and his heroic deeds. He is called the *uttampurush* (ideal man) as he is the epitome of ethical conduct and an embodiment of *dharma*. His image is worshipped and his actions are admired. The epic, though considered as a benchmark of morality and ethics, has instances and episodes, which contradict the image of Rama as the righteous one. Kathleen M. Erndl (1997) writes that many interpreters, commentators and authors of the *Ramayana* have found faults in the behaviour of Rama and have questioned few of his actions that are considered convincingly ethical. Few examples are - the episode of Rama's killing of the monkey king Vali unethically from behind his back, the banishment of Sita on the grounds of public censure, or the mutilation of Ravana's sister Surpanakha by Lakshmana at the command of Rama, after her confessions of love, and sexual overtures towards Rama. This article is an attempt to articulate the voice of Surpanakha who has been traditionally, though unfairly, portrayed as a monster, an adulteress, and wicked and flawed. Even though the Surpanakha episode from the *Ramayana* is considered integral to the main story, she is considered a marginal character in the whole epic. Her characterization is done in sharp contrast to Sita's character, *Dharma* is a concept core to Hinduism and it believes in fulfilling one's duty according to the customs and laws. Lord Rama is considered the epitome of *Dharma*, a righteous king who abides by the law and this attribute makes him the ideal man to be admired.

Proceeding of the International Conference on Arts and Humanities, who is generally considered to be the epitome of feminine qualities and virtues. Surpanakha dared to express her sexuality transgressing the societal markers of conceived femininity. The character of Surpanakha has been condemned on the grounds of body, colour, choice and gender. On one hand Rama is shown as a chivalrous protector of women, yet on the other when he is seen commanding Lakshmana to mutilate Surpanakha for transgressing the gender boundaries, there are hardly any dissenting voice. On the contrary, there are efforts made to convince the act of mutilation as a punishment for a woman's dominion and sexuality when left unchecked by male control. There are also retellings that justify this mutilation on ethical grounds - a woman like Surpanakha who is shameless, brutal, impure and immodest, deserves such a punishment. The tale of the *Ramayana* upholds several ambiguous dichotomies between the good and the evil, the pure and the impure, and the male and the female. But with the publication of recent post-modern retellings these dichotomies have become blurred. The developments in the field of women studies have ideally questioned the ideologies and rules made by a patriarchal society. Most of the sacred texts are androcentric and offer inherent authoritative ideologies, with patriarchal discriminations devoicing the women characters and giving them minimal space to express their choices. The traditional gendered structures of Hindu society as represented in the epic are still valued and considered as the transcendental model for the youth in the contemporary times, but with post-globalisation retellings these models are being rationalised and subjected to women-centric consciousness.

Surpanakha- The 'New-Woman'

Though Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* is set in the Treta Yuga, the character of Surpanakha has more similarities with an accomplished and liberated 21st century woman than any of her contemporaries. Here, Surpanakha is not a submissive or a feeble character but a strong independent woman who never fails to express her choices, needs and emotions. Growing up surrounded by men, she was always neglected and suppressed, but within the existence of this patriarchal dominance she rose to fight for her rights. She subverted the conventional societal construct of determining a woman biologically, which is the ideal feminine role of bearing children. Surpanakha represents the attributes of the 'new woman,' similar to the established characters from the works of post-colonial writers like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, who have depicted women not as silent sufferers, but as spirited and determined individuals who know how to fight against injustice and humiliation. The female protagonists of these Indian writers had to face many vicissitudes of family-life but they keep abreast of all the hurdles that come their way in their arduous quest for their own identities in a highly patriarchal society. They fight for emancipation and empowerment. In Indian society, the term 'new woman' signifies the awakening of women into a realization of their appropriate place in the family and society. Conscious of individuality, the new Indian woman asserts her rights as having a status equal to that of a man in the society. They struggle to be independent, breaking the old shackles of submission and mute-sufferings. Anita Desai's protagonists also portray similar attributes of self-assertion within the existing patriarchal

setup. *Maya from Cry, The Peacock* (1963), had an irresistible desire for self-assertion and emancipation to acquire autonomy in the patriarchal setup of her family. Monisha from *Voices in the City* (1965), was conscious of her identity and silently defied the traditional values to seek meaning in life. Sita from *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975), was entrapped within the confinement of patriarchal regulations, and to defy those, she takes recourse to a secluded life in the Manori Island. In this context, expressions like entrapment, madness, exile and isolation could be considered as distinctive themes exhibited by the protagonists in the above-mentioned works and are relevant to the understanding of the concept of new woman. This works portrayed the inner psyche of women and their insecurities. And these women promptly voiced their inner self and asserted their identity within the patriarchal structures. Likewise, Kavita Kane's Surpanakha was also entrapped within the confinement of control by her brothers. The incessant disparity of gender that she faced in her family drove her to a frenzied level for vengeance and to defy all these discriminations she self-imposed an exile. According to Kane, young Surpanakha's personality was completely influenced by her complex relationship with her brothers and mother, and the open partiality shown by her mother towards her brothers. She was ridiculed by her siblings, and even by her mother for her ugly looks and dark complexion in comparison to their good looks and fair complexion. Nothing can be more humiliating and miserable for a young girl when her own mother taunts her for her looks and complexion. Additionally, she was the least favoured child, and always denied and ignored. Her decisions were considered inconsequential by her family members, but the strong-willed and assertive Surpanakha liberated

herself from the shackles of the male-dominated society by claiming her rights and choices. She was physically strong which strengthened her individual capacity to self-defence. Additionally, her keen intelligence and will-power enabled her to take decisions of her life, primarily of her own marriage, much to the dejection of her family members. She never hesitated to express her bodily desires, continually resisted the judgements made on her persona, and always sought to assert her identity and individuality.

Surpanakha's life in Lanka was under constant surveillance because of her over protective brothers. She was not allowed to go outside the palace and she felt trapped inside the magnificent premises. The glamour of the palace never allured her, rather it seemed to confine her desires and needs. When she developed into a woman no suitor approached her because of her brother Ravana's wrath. Ravana wanted all the family ties to be done with influential families but Surpanakha was in search for true love and companionship with no hidden interest. Now the question is why did Surpanakha complained to Ravana against Ram and Lakshmana. Why did she instill the plan of kidnapping Sita into Ravana's head? One answer to this question lies in Śūrpaṅkhā's identity as a member of the *rākṣasa* race. Sheldon Pollock argues that the *rākṣasas* of Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa are the 'Others' of Rāma's model human society and 'creatures whose lives are plunged in the pollution of violence, blood, and carnivorous filth'. As the enemies of Rāma's civilization, *rākṣasas*—regardless of their gender—must be pun- translation.

By having Rāma describe Śūrpaṅkhā as 'lustful', Vālmīki further suggests that Śūrpaṅkhā deserves to have her nose and ears

sliced off because she is licentious, unlike Sītā, the epitome of womanhood. A virtuous woman would never roam around the forest shamelessly making sexual advances towards men she just met. As Erndl observes, 'Sītā is the chaste good woman; Śūrpaṅkhā the "loose" bad woman'. Kampan's twelfth-century Tamil literary masterpiece, the Irāmāvātāram, presents the mutilation of Śūrpaṅkhā a little differently. In the Irāmāvātāram, Rāma is not present when Lakṣmaṇa attacks Śūrpaṅkhā and so he is no longer responsible for her disfigurement. Kampan's retelling also features a lovely scene in which, after seeing Rāma for the first time, Śūrpaṅkhā goes home to her crystal palace and spends the night longing for Rāma. Yet, while the image of Śūrpaṅkhā tormented by her lovesickness all night adds a level of sympathy to her character, Kampan also tells us that Śūrpaṅkhā is a 'deadly woman with lies in her heart'.

Furthermore, given that Kampan's Śūrpaṅkhā uses her *rākṣasa* powers of illusion to assume the form of a beautiful woman in an attempt to seduce Rāma, the Śūrpaṅkhā of the Tamil Irāmāvātāram seems even more devious than her Sanskrit counterpart. The characterisation of Śūrpaṅkhā as a villainess is also found in Tulsīdās' beloved sixteenth-century bhakti (devotional) Rāmāyaṇa in Hindi—the *Rāmcaritmānas*. Tulsīdās informs us that 'Śūrpaṅkhā was Rāvaṇa's sister. She had a wicked heart and was fearsome like a snake'. Like the Śūrpaṅkhā of the Tamil Irāmāvātāram, Tulsīdās' Śūrpaṅkhā adopts the form of an attractive woman to try to entice Rāma. The rāmlīlā theatre performances of North India, which are based on Tulsīdās' Rāmcaritmānas, present the mutilation of Śūrpaṅkhā as a Śūrpaṅkhā is not the only *rākṣasa* woman who is violently assaulted in Vālmīki's poem. In the Bālakāṇḍa, Rāma's

preceptor, Viśvāmitra, commands Rāma to kill Tāṭakā (Rāmāyaṇa 1.25) and in the southern recension of the Aranyakāṇḍa, Lakṣmaṇa mutilates another rākṣasa woman named Ayomukhī (Rāmāyaṇa 3, App.17) humorous scene. Erndl describes the episode as ‘a kind of burlesque, to which the (predominantly male) audience responds with ribald jokes and laughter’. In the legendary thirty-day rāmlīlā of Ramnagar in Uttar Pradesh, the scene ends with the male actor playing Śūrpaṇakhā comically running around and spraying fake blood at the audience.

Conclusion

Surpankaha is one of the most ignored and misunderstood characters of the Ramayana. Even though the space offered to Surpanakha in Valmiki’s Ramayana was inconsequential, yet her character was certainly important because she was the precursor to the war of Lanka. Kavita Kane’s *Lanka’s Princess* successfully recounts the unheard voice of Surpanakha and portrays an image that resonates into one’s psyche. It questions the authoritarian ideologies the epic had burdened her with where she was presented as an immodest, unvirtuous and obnoxious woman. This alternative retelling of Ramayana narrates the story of Surpanakha, where she is portrayed as a strong and independent woman who is able to fight for her own rights and take her own independent decisions. She was a victim in the hands of patriarchal dominance and a gender-biased society. But she liberated herself from the clutches of the traditional gendered structures of the Hindu society through her strong will-power and individualistic determination. She made choices of her own and succeeded in attaining those choices. She had to travel through an excruciating trail, facing discrimination because

of her gender, looks and her astuteness. Her choices were never taken seriously, and she was enforced upon by her brothers to believe that she was too gullible to make any appropriate choice. The traditional gender roles have always portrayed women as dependent beings who need guidance and protection, initially by her father or brother and later by her husband and son. According the *Manusmṛiti*, (Sanskrit: “Laws of Manu” or “The Remembered Tradition of Manu”), the ancient Hindu text that is traditionally considered as an influential guide in determining the structure and function of the Hindu society, the status of women is limited to the household and for bearing children. It instructs women that their role in the society is to be a good wife by obeying and serving their husbands. But Surpanakha rejects these gender roles, transgresses the markers of femininity and asserts herself within the patriarchal boundary. She avenges the insults meted out to her, fights for her rights, makes her own choices, and protects herself from the gendering done by her family. To that extent a remarkable parallel can be drawn between her, a character from an ancient Hindu epic, and the ‘new woman,’ or the 21st century empowered woman who knows how to claim her own rights, make her own choices, is not averse to explicitly express her sexual desires for the man of her choice, and is not bound by the traditional moralities of the society.

References:

Primary Sources

1. ERNDL, M. K., 1997, The Mutilation of Surpanakha. In: *Many Ramayanas: the Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* edited by P. Richman (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).

2. HARLAN, L., and COURTRIGHT, and P. B., 1995, *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press).
 3. KANE, K., 2017, *Lanka's Princess* (New Delhi: Rupa).
 4. MENON, N., 2012, *Seeing like a Feminist* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House)
 5. PYKETT, L., 1992, *The "Improper" Feminine: the Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.137.
 6. SHARMA, K. S., 2011, *Redefining Self: Women in Postcolonial Indian English Literature: An Indian Approach*. In: *Women in Postcolonial Indian English Literature: Redefining Self* edited by M. Agarwal (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors).
 7. THAPAN, M., 1998 *Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).
- Secondary Sources**
8. Anandakichenin, Suganya, 'On the Non-Vālmīkian Sources of Kulacēkara Ālvār's "Mini-Rāmāyaṇa"' in *The Archaeology of Bhakti I: Mathurā and Maturai, Back and Forth*, eds Emmanuel Francis and Charlotte Schmid, Pondicherry: Institut Français de Pondichéry-École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2014, pp. 249–288.
 9. Arya, Divya, 'Headlining Sexual Violence: Media Reporting After the Delhi Gang-rape', in *Breaching the Citadel: The Indian Papers I*, eds Urvashi Butalia and Laxmi Murthy, Zubaan Series on Sexual Violence and Impunity in South Asia, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2018, pp. 294–348.
 10. Austin, Sarah, 'Sita, Surpanakha and Kaikeyi as Political Bodies: Representations of Female Sexuality in Idealised Culture', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2014, pp.125–136.
 11. Banker, Ashok K., *Demons of Chitrakut: Book Three of the Ramayana*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005.
 12. Barry, Ellen, 'Man Convicted of Rape in Delhi Blames Victim', *The New York Times*, 3 March 2015, (accessed 13.07.2016).
 13. Bhatt, G.H. and U.P. Shah (gen. eds), *The Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa: Critically Edited for the First Time*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1960–1975.
 14. Blackburn, Stuart, *Inside the Drama-House: Rāma Stories and Shadow Puppets in South India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996
 15. Chinnah, Sathiavathi, 'The Tamil Film Heroine: From a Passive Subject to a Pleasurable Object', in *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's Other Film Industry*, ed. Selvaraj Velayutham, New York: Routledge, pp. 29–43.
 16. De Clercq, Eva, 'Śūrpaṅakhā in the Jain Rāmāyaṇas', in *The Other Rāmāyaṇa Women: Regional Rejection and Response*, eds John Brockington and Mary Brockington, New York: Routledge, 2016, pp. 18–30.
 17. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee, *The Forest of Enchantments*, Noida: Harper Collins Publishers, 2019.
 18. Erndl, Kathleen M., 'The Mutilation of Śūrpaṅakhā' in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 67–88.
 19. Gopalakrishnamachariyar, V.M. (ed.), *Kamparāmāyaṇam*, 6 vols, Madras: no publisher, 1926–1971.

20. Gupta, Ruchira, 'Victims Blamed in India's Rape Culture', CNN, 28 August 2013, (accessed 08.10.2014). Paula Richman, 'Introduction: The Diversity of the Rāmāyaṇa Tradition', in *Many Rāmāyaṇas*, p. 15. This comment was in response to Erndl's study of Śūrpaṇakhā in the same volume.