

16. Shurpanaka: The Subversive Journey of a Woman Unheard in Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*.

Ms. Madhavi Arekar

Asst. Professor of English, VPM's Joshi Bedekar College, Thane (W).

Ms. Kranti Doibale

Asst. Professor of English, R.D. and S.H. National College, Bandra (W), Mumbai.

Abstract

In India, mythology is a significant and lively construct of contemporary relevance as it could be said to describe every experience and emotion of people. One must have an understanding of our myths and their impact and influence on the people to comprehend the complex social, political, cultural and religious framework and attitudes of modern India. However, writing of these myths has been a predominantly patriarchal discourse which has elided and infantilised women, driving them towards the margins. Indian feminists, now, have walked away from the peripheries to re-visit mythology by recreating, retelling and refolding it from the perspective of a woman. This research paper attempts to analyse Kavita Kane's novel *Lanka's Princess*, lending a feminist implication to the unheard voice of Shurpanaka and seeks to reshape her position from that of an ugly, adulterous, disfigured ogress in Valmiki's metanarrative, *Ramayana* to that of an assertive, bold and a strong woman with a clear voice who has survived hatred, loss and rejection, only to rise up again and fight.

Keywords: Mythology, patriarchy, metanarrative, formlessness, identity.

"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned"

-The Mourning Bride, William Congreve

(Act III Scene 2)

Mythology has been the very foundation of many cultures and civilizations. In India, it is a significant and lively construct of contemporary relevance as it could be said to describe every experience and emotion of people. One must have an understanding of our myths and their impact and influence on the people to comprehend the complex social, political, cultural and religious

framework and attitudes of modern India. Furthermore, the mythology is distinguished from that of most other lands, and certainly from those of the West, by the fact that it is still part of the living culture- and not merely of the uneducated masses but of every level of society.

However, writing of these myths has been a predominantly patriarchal discourse which has elided and infantilised women, driving them towards the margins. Indian feminists have walked away from the peripheries to re-visit mythology by recreating, retelling and refolding it from the perspective of a woman. Kavita Kane, in her novel *Lanka's Princess* lends a feminist implication to the unheard voice of Shurpanaka. She reshapes her position from that of an ugly, adulterous, disfigured ogress, in Valmiki's metanarrative, *Ramayana* to that of an assertive, bold and a strong woman with a clear voice who has survived hatred, loss and has faced rejection, only to rise up again and fight. Thus, acclaiming itself as a masterpiece in re-telling of mythology. Kane says, "I always believed that mythology can be a huge canvas for contemporary thought. It is not telling us some old tales, as so carelessly assumed, of Gods and Goddesses, but of Man and his follies and fallacies." (Exp 43 L229).

Shurpanaka is originally named Meenakshi- the one with fish-shaped-eyes. *Lanka's Princess* is about how she enroutes her journey from 'form' to 'formlessness'. It speaks about her mother's rejection and neglect, her brother, Ravana, eclipsing her identity, life with her father at his Ashram and finally finding and enveloping herself in her husband's love. Her journey from being the beautiful-eyed girl to Shurpanaka, a girl with sharp claw-like nails, unfolds the peaks and valleys in her life. She oscillates between good which is manifested by her father, Vishravas, her husband, Vidyujiva and her two brothers, Kumbhakarna and Vibhishan, and evil which is personified by her mother Kaikesi and Ravana. From the simmering bitterness since birth due to rejection and neglect, to being a loving wife, mother and aunt, Shurpanaka keeps watering her desire for revenge and vengeance due to the injustice inflicted upon her not only by her clan but by outsiders who mutilate her. Her mutilation adds fuel to the fire and thus transforms 'Lanka's princess' into a cunning and scheming yet an assertive woman. The novel speaks about her assertion and heightened anger that destroys everything. Thus, *Lanka's Princess* explores the complexities of human nature to comprehend the meaning of life, learning and self-identity.

The novel opens with the declaration, "It's a girl!" (1) In spite of having three sons, Kaikesi, Shurpanaka's mother, is disappointed to know that she has given birth to a daughter. This

is because, ‘a girl’ will not be of any aid for the dream project Kaikesi had hatched- getting Lanka back from her step-son, Kuber, who had snatched it from her parents. Thus, she believed that Shurpanaka had “cheated [her] of [her] plans... a faint stirring of unease making her more restless.” (2) Furthermore, the fight between Kaikesi and her husband, Vishravas, always revolved around Ravana- the choices he makes, the decisions he takes. This side-lines not only their other two sons but marginalises Shurpanaka doubly as she is a girl. For instance, as a five year old she gets into a fight to save Vibhishan. However, instead of being praised, her mother snaps at her saying, “Vibhishan is a boy, and he’s older to you. He doesn’t need your protection!” (5) Thus, time and again, in her own clan, Shurpanaka is perceived as the powerless ‘other’. Simone de Beauvoir in her monumental work *The Second Sex* explains this attitude towards women by asserting that, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (249). It is the society which terms the female as ‘the other’. Otherness, in this context, refers to the differences that becomes the basis for being treated as inferior. By extension, the term applies to the marginality that they experience as a result of this ‘other’ing process operative in manifold situations. If woman is othered on account of her sexual difference from man, internal divisions of race, culture, hierarchy and birth in the family marginalise women further.

Her brothers, Kumbhakaran and Vibhishan are protective towards her but, cannot stand their ground against the power-hungry and self-obsessed Ravana who loathes his sister and derives perverse pleasure in depriving her of happiness. This irks her and makes her realise that she has to be strong and self-reliant. In an attempt to assert herself and seek justice for the killing of her pet by Ravan, Shurpanaka claws at him which leads to changing of her name from Meenakshi to Shurpanaka- a demoness by Ravan which reflects the patriarchal phobia of a strong, assertive woman. She, however, appropriates this name by saying, “If this could protect me, then well, I am Shurpanaka.” (8) Further she says, “Yes, I am a monster!” (9). Thus, though an attempt was always made to suppress her voice, Shurpanaka always found a way to root herself as a strong and assertive individual. This can also be seen in the incidence where, Kuber, her step-brother, tries to show his power by targeting her femininity to instigate her brothers, especially Ravana but fails abysmally when she fights back instead of succumbing and retaliates strongly with her weapon- her nails; proving her identity with complete acceptance of who she is.

This marginalised and ignored Meenakshi finds love and acceptance in Viduyjiva, a powerful rival king who loves her not for her unconventional dark beauty but for her intellect, smartness and might. He cherishes her and addresses her as ‘my tigress’ underlining her mental strength as well as, her sexual assertiveness. This is in contrast with what her mother’s derisive remark, “She’s scrawny and much darker than me... How is this dark monkey going to bring us good fortune? No one will ever marry her.” (3) However, Ravana, suspicious of Viduyjiva’s motives, plots his death for his own political stability. This murder, in which almost the entire family is involved, triggers Shurpanaka’s pain and anger which transforms into acute hatred towards Ravana and drives her towards seeking revenge against her own family. “She was like [a] tigress. If she saw a way out, she would have run. But, she was trapped in her grief, churning into fury. *My revenge would be my respite. Ravana has to die for this murder*” (175). She promises herself that she will make life hell for each one her family members and takes an oath to be Shurpanaka- determined to seek solace through vengeance.

Shurpanaka manipulates the events in Ravana’s life and becomes the epicentre of *Ramayana*, proving her dominance and striding away from the margins. To achieve this, she trains her son, Kumar to fight for her revenge. Unfortunately, his mysterious death leads her to plot Ravana’s downfall at the hands of Ram and Laxman. A sexually assertive woman, Shurpanaka tries to attract the brothers with her enchanting mirage of beauty but is ‘disciplined’ for it. Karline McLain in her essay “Sita and Shurpanaka: Symbols of Nation in Amarchitrakatha” states,

Shrupanakha... approaches the two men, informs them bluntly of her sexual desires, and is not just mocked for it, but is punished. The immediate reason for her mutilation might appear to be her threatened attack on Sita, but the actual reason is more intimately connected with her gender, sexuality, and communal identity. Had the idea been just to subdue Shurpanakha, her mutilation would not have been necessary. Mutilation of a woman in the specific way described in the epic can symbolically be interpreted as a gendered punishment for sexual transgression. In Indian legal texts disfigurement of a woman is the most common punishment for crimes of a sexual nature. Shrupanakha was mutilated not for her attack on Sita, but for her sexual assertiveness. But Shrupanakha does not suffer this humiliation just because she has been sexually assertive – her status as the “other”, also figures in her disfiguration. In communal struggles the humiliation of the “other” woman plays a crucial role.” (35)

Shurpanaka is treated as the ‘other’ woman who is perceived as a threat to the patriarchy and thus, by mutilating and disfiguring her, patriarchy proves its discipline. This adds fuel to the raging fire of Shurpanaka’s vengeance. She therefore, epitomises the voice that is raised not only against the family which marginalises her, but also the society that tries to tame her.

Seeking revenge, this intelligent woman schemes to employ her disfigurement to instigate Ravana against Rama which she believes, will bring her solace. Thus, ensues the abduction of Sita leading to the downfall of Ravana and his entire clan. This entire plot of Shurpanaka becomes a double-edged sword wherein, she loses many of her loved ones such as Meghnad, Kumbha, among others, but remains unaffected by it as her vengeance stands supreme in the face of her unrequited love for her family. She ponders, “I didn’t want Kumbha to die or his young twin sons to, I don’t want my Mehnad killed as well. It had been Ravana alone who was supposed to die on the battlefield. But, he would be the last to die. Before him, all those whom I had once loved would be sacrificed.” (254) Shurpanaka’s character throughout this narrative embodies Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s statement that, “[p]eople in their natural state are basically good. But, this natural innocence, however, is corrupted by the evils of society.” (Exp 1L1). It is her need for justice for ill-treatment and ignorance during her childhood, the death of her husband and son which channelizes the emotion of revenge in her, demonising her and completing her transformation from the beautiful-eyed Meenakshi to the long, sharp-nailed Shurpanaka.

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