

Writing 'Otherness': Revisiting Unheard Women of Mythology in Selected Contemporary Narratives

Kiran B.Mamgain*, Simranjyot Kour

DIT University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand-248009, India

*Corresponding Author: kb.mamgain@dituniversity.edu.in

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ABSTRACT

Mythology has always been a part of our collective unconsciousness. The famous Indian epics are always used in contemporary narratives to present the characters that are seen as demonic or fragile but led a life that goes unnoticed. However, while writing such epics, there are voices that are often left unheard and not paid much heed, to name a few like Ahalya, Urmila, Vrinda, Mandodri and Shilavati. The paper explores the voices of unheard characters given a voice in the contemporary narratives with the aim to revisit the mythology through their lens. The study primarily focuses on the exploration of society's repeated attempts to uphold the male/female, masculine/feminine, polarization and subjugation through Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* and *Lanka's Princess*. The derelict and often distorted image of the two characters: Urmila (Lakshman's wife) and Surpanakha (Ravana's sister) is explored and analyzed to show that mythology in contemporary fiction gives rise to the unheard voices that are rarely discussed and widely forgotten. Revisiting mythology thereupon gives voice to the quite characters in the epics. The objective of the paper is to relate to the present issues of society like gender discrimination and insecurity based on looks and skin color, feminism and violence by intertwining through the mythological representation of the characters. The persona of Urmila and Surpanakha has always been eclipsed by the other prime characters in Ramayana. Thereupon, the present study aims at representing the dramatis personae in the mythology revisiting through the selected novels by Kavita Kane.

Keywords: mythology, patriarchy, Ramayana, revisiting, Urmila, Surpanakha

Introduction

"Ahalya Draupadi Kunti Tara

Mandodrilatha Panchkanya Snarantivam Mahapataka Nashaka"

It can be roughly translated to mean that one who always remembers the five great women, Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, and Mandodri is saved from all manner of sin and failure. Myths are the most powerful engine used by the contemporary writer's mythologists to give voice to the unheard women. Myths attribute to women a gender identity built on the binary logic and a sexual submerged within the phallic system. As opined by Devdutt Pattanaik, "Within infinite myths lies the Eternal Truth who sees it all? Varuna has but a thousand eyes Indra, a hundred And I, only two." Women poets revise myths to present their perspective so far ignored. The myth is a complex form of language and mythologists steal the language in which they are humiliated and refashion it to tell their story. In this paper, revisions of the myths are represented as a re appropriation of male space for female ends. Therefore, revisioning and retelling the mythology from female perspective has been an effective tool of feminism. They give voice to the unheard and marginalized. The paper deals with such voices of Urmila and

Surpanakha through Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* and *Lanka's Princess*. Traditionally, Indian mythology has always kept the women at the bottom of the ladder with the Shudras. But the things and the fables are turning now. The subaltern of the past is now wielding the very tools which are used to justify their oppression for ages. Today, as acknowledged citizens, rather than telling our generation about the "shreshthanari" or "pativrattadevi" we can also acquaint them with the stories about a strong Shakuntla, a brave Satyabhama, a sensible satyavati, or an independent Urmila. Perhaps no other female character in Ramayana has been the recipient of such undeserved indifference as Urmila, the wife of ever-voluble Lakshmana. Among the plethora of characters in such timeless epics, Urmila is relegated to sidelines, rather than inexplicably. The character of Surpanakha is also revisited where Surpanakha is seen more than just a lustful demoness whose nose was cut off by Lakshmana. It builds upon the narratives of feminism, whose followers have long championed Surpanakha's cause. It reiterates the idea that women who are vocal about their desires and sexualities are not automatically evil. In the words of Jawaharlal Nehru in The Discovery of India, "the position of women deteriorated (and

Tulsidas' Ramayana) painted a picture of woman which is grossly unfair and prejudiced. (Nehru, 1982, p. 267)

The Lost Voice of Urmila

The lost voice of Urmila is given a roar in Kavita Kane's 2014 religious fiction. Kane presented the epic in the text from the vantage point of Urmila. The most overlooked character has been given a dominant feminist voice. She questions patriarchy that subdues women. She fulfills all her duties along with takes a stand against the injustice done to her and her sisters by their husbands. The novel is "a scathing critique of the subservient role women were expected to play, even in royal families." (Mohanty, 1621-1624) Urmila is the sister of Sita and wife of Lakshmana. As asserted in the novel, like the women of her class, she had a highly developed sense of aesthetics and was proficient in various arts such as music and paintings. Lakshman defines Urmila as his enchantress or Mila, "one where the hearts meet" (Kane, 2014, p.145). She shows her sensible attitude while opposing the crooked behavior of Mantara, the maid of Queen Kaikeyi. When Sita and Lakshman decided to accompany Ram for the fourteen year exile in the forest, Urmila feels rejected by her husband and sister. And, thus, Sita as a pativratta is shown and Urmila later reproaches herself for being a weak and selfish wife who had failed to recognize the higher purpose that her husband was destined to serve. This new awakening heralds the end of Urmila's age of innocence; till now she had led a sheltered existence, oblivious of the world of palace intrigues. While leaving the palace Lakshman said to Urmila, "If I am being praised so profusely for being the devoted brother, I fail as a good husband, who is leaving behind his bride. O Urmila, will the world ever know of your inner suffering, your divine sacrifice?" (Kane, 2014, p. 158). Urmila furiously questions the dharma of a husband towards his wife and that of a son towards his mother when Bharat decides to serve Nandigram for fourteen years as a hermit attain penance. Even Guru Kashyap fails to silence her. She argues that when Queen Kaikeyi asked for boons no one stopped her and when Sita decided to accompany her husband everyone felt happy as she was doing her duties as pativratta. She says to Guru Kashyap, "you may be the best of princes, the perfect sons, the ideal brothers, but never the good husbands." (Kane, 2014 p.223). Guru Kashyap interrupts her

angrily and asks her for how she dared to speak such words there. He further objects that it is not her father's court that allows free thinking women philosophers like Gargi to argue so shamelessly. But this argument couldn't silence her she asks again that being the daughter-in-law of the great Raghukul, she wants to know what is dharma of a husband for his wife and what is dharma of a husband for his mother. Why is it always the queens who have to suffer for the decisions taken by the male members? Ram decided to leave for the forest so Sita following her dharma of a wife accompanied him, with Lakshman and then Bharat. Has anyone thought of their mothers and wives? Their grief and tears? Has anyone of them pondered over wedding promises they gave their wives? Didn't they have any duties for their mothers and wives? Why is it only the ladies who have to keep suffering these pains silently. She further adds, "If you couldn't keep the vows you made to your wives, why did you brothers marry? you are right, Guru Kashyap, yodhya is not Mithila, Mithila does not treat women so shabbily." (Kane, 2014, p.223)

Next stance of the powerful voice of Urmila is when she heard that Sita has been abducted by demon King Ravan, rather than following the norms of royal princes to remain silent at the atrocities, she questioned everyone that when she was going to the forest why did no one stop her? She was allowed to go as she was titled as a dutiful wife. Another stance that exemplifies the strong voice of Urmila in Kane's novel is when she gets to know that Sita had to walk into fire to prove her chastity, she questioned that why didn't Ram take a stand for Ahilya when her own husband had renounced her then how can he hurt his own wife Sita by allowing her to prove her chastity. As we watch the anguish and the gradual self-annihilation of this woman, Urmila, we cannot help but recall the work that began the process of questioning the gender stereotypes- *The Second Sex* where the writer makes a fine analysis of the male-female equations:

Often older with masculine prestige, legally head of the family; her husband has a position of moral and social superiority; he has the advantage of superior culture, or at any rate, professional training; since adolescence he has taken an interest in the world affairs. That is what a great many young women lack. Even if they have read, listened to lectures, toyed with accomplishment, their miscellaneous information does not constitute culture. (Beauvoir, 1997, p.482)

Kane's Urmila started a fight against age old patriarchy long before these theories of old feminism came into motion. Urmila

stood for the rights of women of royal families. If we analyze Urmila's arguments from a feminist lens, she was a strong, brave and intelligent woman, with a broad outlook who fought for the right of women and took a stance against patriarchy in her times.

The Aphonic Surpanakha

If we look at Valmiki's Ramayana (Aranyakanda) where Surpanakha is put in contrast with Ram, "His face was beautiful; hers was ugly. His waist was slender; hers was bloated. His eyes were wide; hers were deformed. His hair was beautifully black; hers was copper-colored. His voice was pleasant; hers was frightful. He was a tender youth; she was dreadful old hag. He was well spoken; she was coarse of speech. His conduct was lawful; hers was evil. His countenance was pleasing; hers was repellent." (16.8-9) (Erndl)

How do we identify Surpanakha or how we describe her to our children? As someone who belongs to the clan of Rakhshas, the one was ugly, evil with a chopped nose. This stereotypical depiction of Surpanakha exists in our mythology is revisited by Kavita Kane in her 2017 mytho fiction novel, Lanka's Princess. Surpanakha which means the woman 'as hard as nails' faces the turmoils of her life alone, away from the powers of her brothers but with her scheming, successful thinking which results in the destruction of Asuras. When we talk about Urmila and Surpanakha, their world are different, yet they were the victims of patriarchal hegemony and had their battles to fight in their own ways. Where challenging the system was the strength of Urmila, violence and seduction is what Surpanakha resorts to.

Surpanakha's life and her scheming revolves around her upbringing, her connect and disconnect with her siblings, the open gender bias shown by her mother, rejection, her marriage, imposed widowhood and loss of her son, her self-imposed exile, revenge and ultimately her freedom and compassion. Entangled with her life is that of the life of Kaikesi, her mother who plays a dominant role in the rejection of a Meenakshi time and again. Lanka's Princess asserts and highlights how unwanted a girl child is made to feel in her own house. The text explores how hard it becomes for a girl to survive while she not only faces oppression from the outside world but is also ignored and is unloved in her own family.

Next, Surpanakha's life revolves around her only love in life Vidyujva. Whether in the human society where the Devas have taken form as Rama and Sita or in the world of the Asuras, the feelings and the treatment given to these women is no different in their families. Throughout the novel is the lurking fear of Ravana who sees parallel power in Surpanakha's life, her rebellion her candid expressions and her loathful sayings towards his weakness for women.

Kaikesi is seen as a regretful mother, alarmed at the fact that she has given birth to a daughter, was reluctant even to see the face of the child or lend her body warmth to the new born. To Kaikesi, it is only sons who can bring her glory and conquer what they had lost during her father's regime. Kaikesi puts in words, "It was a daughter, not a son, her heart sank, her aspirations drowning in a flood of disappointment and easy tears (Kane, 2017,p.1) To Kaikesi, Lanka is her "lost home"(p.1) while Surpanakha has no sense of belonging to Lanka. In fact she yearns to get away from the Lanka that belonged to her brothers and family. Surpanakha was named Meenakshi by her father Vishnavas. How Meenakshi grew to be called Surpanakha is connected with her upbringing in the world of patriarchy; always compared with the boys in the family, reprimanded for not being beautiful, constantly chided for being monster and living under the shadow of her beautiful mother. Her behavior, her actions which was at times on self defence was criticized by her mother and her siblings. Page nine of Lanka's Princess states, the words of Kaikesi, "Why can you not behave like a girl? Always fighting and squabbling, hitting boys and throwing stones and scratching the eyes out of anyone who provokes you. Surpanakha, that's the right name for you, you monster!" She is reprimanded by her mother when she fights for her weak brother Vibhishan by her mother who clearly tells her that Vibhishan is a boy and can take care of himself. When she applies the same rule to her defence of the dead lamb Maya, her pet and attacks her elder brother, as a sister as she intervenes in protection of her son. These nails and the name Surpanakha given to her by Ravana in anger is the forced identity that Meenakshi lives in the world of Asuras. Quoting Nivedita Menon, "it is child rearing practices which try to establish and perpetuates certain differences between the sexes. That is from childhood, boys and girls are trained in appropriate, gender specific forms of behavior, play, dress and so on. This training is continuous and most of the time, subtle when

necessary, can involve punishments to bring only conformity (p. 61).

Meenakshi becomes Meenu and we see a different Surpanakha when Vidyujiva is in her life. In the worlds of Devas and human society she is portrayed as a wamp while Kane gives her a very different character in her novel, Lanka's Princes. She is passionate wife of Vidyujiva, like all young girls of her age, she is the woman who is the most misunderstood, and she is the woman who built a life round the only man whom she trusted, her husband. Like Sita, she is passionately in love; she is worried about the honor of her husband, just as Sita. She spent most of her life in the forest just as Sita, spent most of her life in exile and her motherhood in the forest. Surpanakha protected her son, rears him and was his Guru, just as Sita. Surpanakha rebels against gender rules imposed on her by her family, rebels against the honor killing of her husband in the hands of her brothers, has outburst of violence in the novel in order, to protect herself and is a victim of gender based injustice in the hands of her family. "Long sufferance was not strength; it was an infliction of the weak" to Surpanakha (Kane, 2014, p. 154).

Conclusion

Our Hindu society has hinged upon its culture, tradition, moral, Kosher and values on great epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These sagas have and will always rule our values and belief system. As Roland Barthes asserts in his Mythologies, myth is a special form of the myth told with an intention. However, while writing such epics, there are voices that are often left unheard and not paid much heed, to name a few like Ahalya, Urmila, Vrinda, Mandodri and Shilavati. Revisiting mythology thereupon gives voice to the quite characters in the epics. The paper thus relates to the present issues of society like gender discrimination and insecurity based on looks and skin colour, feminism and violence by intertwining through the mythological representation of the characters. The persona of Urmila and Surpanakha has always been eclipsed by the other prime characters in Ramayana. Thereupon, the study represented the dramatis personae in the mythology revisiting through the selected novels by Kavita Kane.

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