
**DECONSTRUCTING THE “RAKSHASI”: IDENTITY, VOICE, AND
RESISTANCE IN *LANKA’S PRINCESS* BY KAVITA KANE**

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ABSTRACT:

This paper reinterprets Surpanakha in *Lanka’s Princess* by Kavita Kane by challenging her conventional portrayal as a “rakshasi” and repositioning her as a complex figure shaped by identity, voice, and resistance. Traditionally reduced to a grotesque antagonist within the Ramayana narrative, Surpanakha is reclaimed in this text as a woman negotiating power, desire, and marginalisation. Through a feminist and postcolonial lens, the study examines how Kane reconstructs Surpanakha’s subjectivity, foregrounding her emotional depth and agency against patriarchal and hegemonic frameworks. The analysis explores how her silenced voice is restored, allowing her to articulate her experiences of rejection, humiliation, and defiance. Furthermore, the paper situates Surpanakha within broader discourses of otherness, where her demonisation reflects cultural anxieties about female autonomy and transgressive identity. By interrogating dominant narratives, this reinterpretation exposes the politics of representation embedded in mythological storytelling. Ultimately, the paper argues that Surpanakha emerges not as a mere symbol of monstrosity but as a figure of resistance who challenges normative constructions of femininity and power. This reading contributes to a larger project of reclaiming marginalised voices in myth and literature.

KEYWORDS: Surpanakha, Identity, Voice, Resistance, Feminism, Postcolonialism, Myth Reinterpretation.

INTRODUCTION:

“A woman writer is conscious of the problem of feminine identity as she writes” (Showalter 13). Kavita Kane’s *Lanka’s Princess* offers a compelling reimagining of the Ramayana through the perspective of Surpanakha, a character traditionally marginalised and vilified as a “rakshasi.” By shifting the narrative focus, Kavita Kane reconstructs Surpanakha not as a one-dimensional antagonist but as a complex woman shaped by her lineage, desires, and experiences of rejection and power. Set against the backdrop of the kingdom of Lanka, the novel explores her evolution from a spirited princess to a figure marked by loss, anger, and defiance. Kane’s retelling challenges dominant patriarchal narratives by foregrounding Surpanakha’s voice and agency, inviting readers to question inherited notions of morality, beauty, and otherness within epic traditions.

“The representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth” (Beauvoir 143). In the traditional narrative of the Ramayana, Shurpanakha is depicted as a grotesque and dangerous “rakshasi,” embodying excess, desire, and moral transgression. Introduced in the Aranya Kanda, she is portrayed as being instantly infatuated with Rama and, upon rejection, aggressively approaches Lakshmana, thereby violating accepted norms of feminine modesty and restraint. Her open expression of desire is framed as deviant, and her subsequent humiliation, most notably the cutting of her nose and ears by Lakshmana, is presented as justified punishment rather than violence. This episode marks a turning point in the epic, as her wounded pride drives her to seek revenge, ultimately triggering a chain of events that culminates in Sita’s abduction and the great war in Lanka. In this conventional portrayal, Shurpanakha functions less as a fully realised character and more as a narrative device, symbolising chaos, uncontrolled female sexuality, and the “otherness” of the rakshasa world, in stark contrast to Sita’s idealised virtue.

Ironically, despite making up nearly half of the global population, women are never given the same treatment as men in practically every aspect of human endeavour. Even though every woman works extremely hard to ensure the growth of her family, husband, and children, they have been oppressed, suppressed, and marginalised when it comes to sharing the opportunities for the fulfilment of their lives. This is the global situation facing women (Dr. M Kannadhasan 65).

Research Problem:

The central problem this paper addresses is the tension between the demonisation and humanisation of Shurpanakha within literary traditions. In the Ramayana, she is constructed as a monstrous “other,” her identity reduced to physical grotesqueness, unrestrained desire, and moral deviance, which legitimises the violence inflicted upon her. This demonised portrayal reflects broader patriarchal and cultural anxieties surrounding female autonomy and transgressive behaviour. “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears” (Spivak 304). In contrast, contemporary retellings such as *Lanka’s Princess* by Kavita Kane seek to humanise Shurpanakha by restoring her voice, emotional depth, and agency, presenting her as a woman shaped by love, rejection, and systemic marginalisation. The problem lies in examining how and why her identity shifts across narratives from a symbolic embodiment of evil to a nuanced subject and what this transformation reveals about changing perspectives on gender, power, and representation.

Research Questions:

“Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault 93). The Study is guided by three central questions: how Surpanakha’s identity is reconstructed beyond her traditional demonised image, how she reclaims her silenced voice, and in what ways she resists entrenched patriarchal norms. Focusing on *Lanka’s Princess* by Kavita Kane, in contrast to her portrayal in the Ramayana, the paper argues that Surpanakha is re-envisioned as a complex, self-aware subject whose identity is shaped through agency, emotional depth, and resistance. By foregrounding her perspective, the narrative enables her to articulate experiences of marginalisation and challenge the structures that define and confine her. Thus, the thesis asserts that Surpanakha’s transformation from a vilified “rakshasi” into a figure of voice and resistance not only subverts patriarchal representations but also reclaims her position as a significant agent within mythological discourse.

Literature Review

Scholarly attention to retellings of the Ramayana has significantly expanded in recent decades, emphasizing how mythological narratives are continuously reshaped to reflect changing cultural and ideological contexts. Studies highlight that contemporary authors reinterpret epic traditions not merely as literary exercises but as interventions into dominant

social structures. For instance, recent research on Surpanakha-centred narratives argues that modern retellings actively challenge patriarchal norms embedded in the epic by reworking marginalised characters into sites of critique and resistance. Similarly, broader analyses of mythological adaptations demonstrate how retellings destabilise the authority of canonical versions, opening space for alternative perspectives and subversive readings.

Feminist reinterpretations of mythological women form a crucial strand within this scholarship. Critics note that writers like Kavita Kane employ “revisionist myth-making” to recover female agency, voice, and subjectivity, transforming traditionally silent or peripheral figures into central protagonists. Such studies reveal how characters like Urmila, Ahalya, and Surpanakha are reimagined with psychological depth and autonomy, thereby challenging androcentric representations. Additionally, feminist analyses of Ramayana retellings underscore how these narratives interrogate gender policing and binary constructions of “ideal” versus “deviant” womanhood, exposing the ideological mechanisms that sustain patriarchal hierarchies.

Parallel to this, scholarship on marginal voices in mythology foregrounds the recovery of silenced or “devoiced” characters within epic traditions. Research demonstrates that figures like Surpanakha have historically been reduced to symbolic roles, their voices suppressed through narrative violence and moral condemnation. Contemporary studies argue that re-narrativising such characters allows for a critique of cultural othering and the politics of exclusion, repositioning them as agents of resistance rather than mere antagonists.

Research Gap:

The research gap remains: while existing studies examine feminist retellings broadly or compare multiple texts, there is limited focused analysis on how *Lanka's Princess* specifically reconstructs Surpanakha's identity through the intertwined dynamics of voice, resistance, and postcolonial subjectivity. This paper addresses that gap by offering a detailed, integrated reading that situates Surpanakha not only within feminist discourse but also within broader questions of representation, power, and narrative reclamation.

Theoretical Framework:

The Study employs Feminist Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Subaltern Studies to analyse Surpanakha's character in *Lanka's Princess* by Kavita Kane. Feminist theory helps examine how her body, desire, and identity are regulated within patriarchal structures, revealing the politics behind her demonisation. Postcolonial theory interprets her as the “other,”

marginalised and constructed as inferior within dominant cultural narratives like the Ramayana. Subaltern Studies further illuminates how her silenced voice is reclaimed, positioning her as a speaking subject who challenges narrative exclusion and asserts agency against systems of power and representation.

The presentation of human lives in all of their manifestations on a larger scale via language is called literature. Despite cultural, sociological, political, and geographic barriers, there are similarities in the content, style, concerns, and writing forms of twentieth-century literature from countries such as America, England, Africa, Australia, India, and the Commonwealth. The entire world appears to have become a single global village. Every practice and trend found in international literature is common. (Dr. M Kannadhasan 65).

Deconstructing the “Rakshasi” Label: Identity

“The Ramayana teaches the subjugation of women and the humiliation of those outside Aryan norms... In the Ramayana, the mutilation of Surpanakha is glorified, showing how women who express desire are punished” (Periyar). The term “rakshasi” in the Ramayana operates not merely as a descriptive category but as a powerful social construct that encodes fear, otherness, and moral deviance. It is often deployed to mark women who transgress normative boundaries of femininity, particularly those who express desire, assert autonomy, or exist outside the sanctioned ideals of beauty and obedience. “Surpanakha... is commonly perceived as the evil, ugly, impure and insubordinate woman who is rightfully mutilated for expressing her sexual desire” (Dirghangi). The sense, the label functions ideologically, reflecting a dominant, upper-caste, patriarchal framework that imposes a destructive identity upon vulnerable women by casting them as monstrous and dangerous. Surpanakha’s portrayal exemplifies this process: her physicality is exaggerated, her desire is condemned, and her humiliation is justified, thereby reinforcing a stereotype that equates female agency with chaos and moral disorder. Such representation reduces her to a symbolic “other,” denying her individuality and legitimising her marginalisation.

In contrast, *Lanka’s Princess* by Kavita Kane dismantles this imposed identity by reimagining Surpanakha as a fully realised woman rather than a one-dimensional monster. Kane foregrounds her emotional depth by exploring her experiences of love, rejection, and loss, thereby humanising her beyond the rigid confines of the “rakshasi” label. The narrative reclaims her cultural identity as a princess of Lanka, situating her within a complex social and familial context rather than an abstract category of evil. By shifting the focus from monstrosity to humanity, Kane exposes how the label itself is a product of power structures

that seek to control and silence women who do not conform. Surpanakha thus emerges as a figure whose identity is not inherently monstrous but constructed, contested, and ultimately reclaimed through narrative redefinition.

Reclaiming Voice

In the Ramayana, Surpanakha exists largely in narrative silence, her voice overshadowed by the moral authority of dominant male figures and the idealized virtue of Sita. She is spoken about, acted upon, and punished, but rarely allowed to articulate her own perspective. Her desires are caricatured, her pain dismissed, and her anger framed as irrational, reinforcing a structure where women who transgress are denied the right to self-expression. This silence is not incidental; it is a deliberate narrative strategy that sustains patriarchal control by stripping her of subjectivity and reducing her to a cautionary symbol of excess and disorder.

‘The princess has lost her tongue!’ he grinned, flashing his rakish smile. She felt sloppily weak as her desire for him mounted, his gravelly voice, his eyes now openly raking her body, arousing her instantly (Kane 94). In contrast, *Lanka’s Princess* by Kavita Kane radically restores Surpanakha’s voice by placing her at the centre of the narrative through a first-person perspective. This shift grants her narrative agency, allowing her to speak, reflect, and interpret her own experiences rather than being defined by others. Through her voice, Surpanakha expresses desire without shame, articulates anger without apology, and confronts pain without erasure. Her longing for love, her humiliation at rejection, and her fury at injustice are no longer distorted but presented as valid human emotions. The act of narration itself becomes a form of resistance, as she reclaims authority over her story and challenges the versions imposed upon her. “Not just the physical pain but that heart-wrenching rejection, of having none to love. But she could do neither. Conscience or compassion, what stopped her? She faintly recalled Kumbha’s last words to her, ‘*Compassion heals suffering...*’ (Kane 258). Language, in this reconfiguration, becomes a powerful tool of empowerment. By speaking her truth, Surpanakha disrupts the structures that once silenced her, transforming from an object of discourse into its author. Her words resist the moral binaries that confined her, exposing the violence embedded in those judgments and asserting her right to exist beyond them. In giving voice to desire, anger, and pain, Kane not only humanises Surpanakha but also redefines the boundaries of acceptable female expression, positioning language as a site where identity is reclaimed and resistance is powerfully enacted.

Resistance and Agency

In the Ramayana, Surpanakha's actions are framed as deviant, yet a closer reading reveals them as acts of defiance against entrenched patriarchy, moral policing, and restrictive gender norms. Her open expression of desire challenges the expectation that women remain passive and silent, while her refusal to conform exposes the rigidity of moral codes that punish female autonomy. The violent response she receives, most notably the mutilation inflicted by Lakshmana, reflects not justice but the enforcement of a social order that disciplines women through humiliation and bodily control. If her actions were truly seen as a transgression requiring punishment, the ethical course within a royal and political framework would have been to address the matter through proper channels, such as appealing to her brother Ravana, the king of Lanka, rather than resorting to immediate and excessive violence. This moment reveals how moral authority is selectively applied, often justifying brutality against those already positioned as "other."

"Could they not have handled it without such brutality? When they severed her nose, how far away had Rama and Lakshmana driven away compassion? Are they not the real demons?"

I am here to deliver punishment! They could have informed me of my sister's misconduct. By speaking tactfully, they could have sent her away; before she returned, they could have sent me word. I am [Ravan] here; I would have corrected her. But they had no compassion, no sense of judgment. And here she [Surpanakha] stands, this woman without a nose! A woman disfigured by those who forgot mercy, by those who are the true demons! (Annadurai 27).

Lanka's Princess by Kavita Kane, Surpanakha's choices are reframed not as villainy but as assertions of agency within a system designed to suppress her. Her resistance lies in her refusal to accept imposed boundaries, whether in expressing desire, confronting rejection, or seeking retribution for injustice. "Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 95). By reinterpreting her actions through a feminist lens, the narrative exposes how her punishment mirrors broader patterns of gendered violence, where women's bodies become sites of control and retribution. The mutilation she endures can be critically linked to contemporary forms of violence, such as acid attacks, where disfigurement is used to enforce submission and erase identity. Kane's portrayal thus transforms Surpanakha into a figure of resistance, whose story not only challenges traditional moral judgments but also compels a rethinking of how societies continue to regulate and punish women who dare to assert themselves.

Body Politics and Gender

In the Ramayana, Surpanakha's body is constructed as an object of ridicule and moral warning, marked by exaggeration, grotesqueness, and excess. Her physical appearance is repeatedly emphasised to signify deviance, reinforcing dominant beauty norms that privilege fairness, delicacy, and submissive femininity. "The body is not a 'being,' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated" (Butler 189). By contrast, her assertive sexuality and unconventional presence are framed as threats to social order. This representation reduces her body to a spectacle through which patriarchal and upper-caste ideologies project fear of women who defy prescribed roles. "And that takes away her freedom to her body, her choice, her desires, but gives you the privilege of overriding her refusal and taking her by force?" (Kane 115). In this framework, the rejection she faces is not merely personal but ideological, rooted in a system that devalues bodies that do not conform to its rigid standards of beauty and behaviour.

In *Lanka's Princess* by Kavita Kane, Surpanakha's body is reimagined as a site of autonomy rather than ridicule. Kane shifts the narrative from external judgment to internal experience, allowing Surpanakha to inhabit her body with agency and self-awareness. Her desires, emotions, and physical presence are no longer framed as aberrations but as integral aspects of her identity. This redefinition challenges normative beauty ideals and reclaims bodily integrity, presenting her as a woman who owns her existence despite societal attempts to diminish her. By centring her perspective, the narrative resists objectification and reasserts her body as a space of selfhood rather than a symbol of monstrosity.

A warrior-princess about to kill an infant. Was that how brave an asura she was? Was she as wicked? Has she stooped so abysmally low? Had her vengeance made her such a hideous monster? Her mother had been right after all...she was a monster...Surpanakha had thought she had no conscience, that she was a simple asura woman, who could not unravel what motives, what temptations and self-delusions she had. She stared at her hands, the talons long and sharp. 'My mother was right, I am a wicked person' (Kane 252, 261).

The episode of mutilation by Lakshmana stands as a powerful instance of symbolic violence, where the control of a woman's body becomes a means of enforcing moral and social codes. Her disfigurement is not just physical punishment but an attempt to erase her desirability, identity, and voice, reflecting how patriarchal systems discipline women through bodily harm. This act resonates with broader patterns of gendered violence, where deviation from accepted norms invites brutal correction. Kane's reinterpretation exposes the cruelty embedded in this moment, reframing it as an unjust assertion of power rather than a justified

act, and highlighting how beauty norms and rejection are weaponised to silence and marginalise women like Surpanakha.

Comparative Analysis

A comparison between the Ramayana and *Lanka's Princess* by Kavita Kane reveals a significant transformation in the construction of Surpanakha's character. In the traditional epic, she is positioned as a demon, an embodiment of excess, danger, and moral disorder serving primarily as a catalyst for the central conflict. Her identity is flattened into that of a villain, with little attention given to her inner life or motivations. She stared at him transfixed, speechless. "You were born a beautiful princess, Meenakshi, the sister of the asura king Ravan, but your wickedness turned you into a monster—Surpanakha, the woman as hard as nails..." he explained. 'Do you remember me? The man who rejected you and in your wrath you took a terrible revenge on me, my wife Sita and my brother Lakshman...?' (Kane 11). Her actions are interpreted through a moral lens that justifies her humiliation and punishment, reinforcing patriarchal ideals that equate female desire with deviance. In contrast, Kane's retelling dismantles this rigid categorisation by reimagining her as a woman shaped by emotional complexity, cultural belonging, and lived experience.

This narrative shift moves Surpanakha from being a demon to a woman, and from a villain to a victim and ultimately a survivor. Kane reframes her story as one of endurance and resistance, where her suffering is acknowledged rather than dismissed, and her responses are understood rather than condemned. The transformation lies not only in characterisation but in narrative perspective itself what was once an external, judgmental portrayal becomes an internal, self-articulated journey. Through this reconfiguration, Surpanakha emerges as a figure who survives violence, reclaims dignity, and challenges the structures that once defined her, marking a profound shift in how mythological identities are constructed and interpreted.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, this paper has argued that Surpanakha's character, traditionally demonised in the Ramayana, is powerfully reconstructed in *Lanka's Princess* by Kavita Kane as a figure of identity, voice, and resistance. By moving beyond the imposed "rakshasi" label, the study demonstrates how her identity is reclaimed through narrative agency, emotional depth, and acts of defiance against patriarchal and cultural constraints. The findings reveal that Surpanakha's transformation from a vilified "other" into a complex, self-aware subject

challenges long-standing representations that equate female autonomy with deviance. Re-reading mythological women in this way is crucial, as it exposes the ideological forces that have historically silenced and marginalised them while opening up space for alternative, empowering interpretations. This contributes significantly to feminist literary discourse by foregrounding the necessity of revisiting canonical texts to recover suppressed voices and reframe inherited narratives.

The Study highlights the broader importance of reclaiming marginalised identities within literature and culture. By situating Surpanakha within feminist, postcolonial, and subaltern frameworks, the paper underscores how narrative redefinition can act as a form of resistance against dominant power structures. The findings suggest that such reinterpretations not only reshape our understanding of myth but also resonate with contemporary issues of gendered violence, body politics, and social exclusion. Future research can extend this inquiry by comparing multiple retellings of the Ramayana across regions and languages, or by examining other marginalised figures within mythological traditions through intersectional lenses of caste, gender, and class. Such studies would further deepen the project of recovering silenced voices and contribute to a more inclusive and critical engagement with literary and cultural histories.

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