

Freedom Behind Restraint in Kavita Kane's *The Lanka's Princess*

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Abstract: The part women play in the Indian community has been changing. This tendency is exemplified by Hinduism, where the shift from the Ancient to the Early Mediaeval period indicates a clear reduction in the level of independence that women had in the family and social systems of India. The Ancient Indian civilization can be compared to study the changing status and position of women in the culture. She became more and more interested in mythic female figures who were given little recognition. She began to write stories based on myth. This study aims to expand understanding and empower women with the ultimate goal of tackling and deconstructing cultural stereotypes about women. The results of the study show that women experience objectification, reduced educational options, social marginalization and lack of autonomy. Kane's narrative attempts to provide a full examination of the liberation of its female protagonists from the limiting constraints of social conventions and the challenging circumstances that led to an identity crisis for women.

Keywords: Social, familial, physical, emotional, ideological, human desire for independence

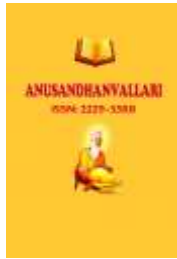
Introduction

Women have often been mischaracterized and misrepresented in many historical records. This is especially common in patriarchal settings, where women are sometimes completely marginalized or seen only as means of enhancing men's status. This may be well seen in the sacred texts and mythology of different cultures. Mythical Female in *The Lanka's Princess* The book discusses the representation of strong female characters in the narratives. The challenges faced by women have continued through the ancient times. B. Padmavathy, P. Premalatha and P. Vedamuthan rightly say: "Kane decentralized epic portrayal and illuminated the life of Surpanakha, the Lankan princess, highlighting the pre-historic social challenges faced by women" (115). The major objective of this research is to examine the obstacles faced by women in the age depicted in the novel and the subsequent empowerment of women in overcoming these hurdles. Women are given their due recognition in society for being important.

Discussion

This story is a mythical retelling from the point of view of Surpanaka, who is claimed to have started the fight between Lord Rama and King Ravana of Lanka in Hindu mythology. *Lanka's Princess* recounts the story of Surpanaka from her neglected childhood to her maturity. A mythological creature widely misunderstood, Kane challenges us to question if she is the devious monstrosity we attribute to her or a victim of a patriarchal society. Her actions in the second part of the narrative is explained by her need to take independent decisions about her life, to protect herself and to fight for her rights. C. Sivasankari and Dr. P. Vasuki points out: "Kavita Kane mythological retelling writer gives a new insight for unknown minor characters. In Lanka's princess Surpanakha transforms her identity from human to demoness" (74).

The view is good. The story of Surpanaka is often neglected. Her role in the epic is secondary, firstly, since she is a monster and secondly, because she is a woman. I like the way Kane weaves the story together with Meenakshi's childhood memories and the sadness she feels of always being in the shadow of her brothers' love. I also really like the character progression of the rishi, Meenakshi's father, who begins to realize his offspring



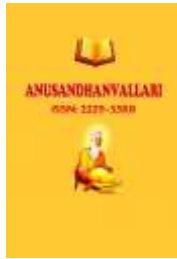
has a greater affinity for the monster bloodline acquired from their mother. They do not want education and their behavior is not good thus he may have to choose between family and moral values.

The pace of the storyline was just too slow for me. Meenakshi's youth to her marriageable age was so boring for me that I thought of stopping reading. It is fairly repetitive in that several cases are given to prove the same point that male children were preferred to female children. But the time in Lanka was a fast and easy read. Kane speeds through the domain of Ravan, his quarrels with women, the neglected Meenakshi, whose brothers ignore her marriage chances, family secrets, passion and betrayal. Again the story turns to a slow read as we reach the half way mark in the clash of Ravan and Ram. The tempo was slow in the beginning and the end as compared to the middle section. I think I would have liked it better if the book had been just a bit shorter.

Rishi Vishravas and Rakshasi Kaikesi had a single daughter Meenakshi. Kaikesi is the mother of three fearsome males Ravan, Kumbhakarna and Vibhishan. Kaikesi wanted another son with whom she might build an empire of asuras with her sons ruling the three kingdoms and Lanka as their capital. But Kaikesi was not pleased at the arrival of Meenakshi. "This girl has turned back my intentions... a faint sense of discomfort making her more restless" (14), she said bitterly, looking at her baby daughter. The story is a reflection of Kaikesi's deep sense of loss in having given birth to a daughter instead of a son, a failing steeped in grief and frustration. Meenakshi was born against the norms of society which means her birth challenged the very goals of her family. So Meenakshi was shunned, ignored and abandoned since she had denied her mother the opportunity of having perfect children strong men to continue the asura blood line.

Kavita Kane's representation of Meenakshi as an unwanted female progeny makes the audience ponder over the psychological development of a woman who is the victim of cruelty and marginalization. Simone de Beauvoir points out: "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (249). The environment has a huge effect on a woman's sense of self. In this case, obviously, the essential experiences of Meenakshi's life played an important part in the creation of her identity. Family offers the stability and belonging that are necessary for the formation of self-identity. However, Meenakshi's family was unable to provide the emotional support that she needed and thus, she was resentful, anxious, and angry since her family did not care for her well-being. Meenakshi had to see herself as an outsider in her own family, because of the constant injustices she encountered. This examination becomes more exciting as Kane explains in detail the inner world of Meenakshi. She thinks of her place in the family and the favoritism of her brothers: "Ravan was always for his mother, Vibhishan for their father. Kumbha, loyal to Ravan, felt duty-bound to help her mother. "She was thus in a dilemma: what line of action should she follow? Still, nobody seemed to be bothered about her. "Or her opinion"(56). Meenakshi's remarks hint at her parents' preference for Ravan and Vibhishan, which alienated and silenced her. Ravan's colossal strength and asura nature symbolized Kaikesi's hopes for the future, while Vibhishan's rishi qualities won him his father's respect. Meenakshi was stuck between these two poles without a definite place in this power game.

Kane notes that the potential of Meenakshi was limited because of her gender. Her boys were provided with the opportunity to develop their intellectual and physical faculties, but Meenakshi was denied information and education. She asks: "Am I not also the offspring of Rishi Vishravas? Why, like my brothers do, am I not reading the Shastras and the Upanishads?" (33). Her study reveals the gender impediment that prevents her from developing the same competences that her sons were pushed to achieve. What frustrates Meenakshi is the fact that as a woman she was not considered worthy of the same academic and physical growth as her male colleagues. Her isolation from the family's intellectual life confirms her marginalisation and her "other" status within the family. Meenakshi was excluded in her family's goals as she could not fulfil her mother's dream of an asura kingdom that could only be done by her brothers.



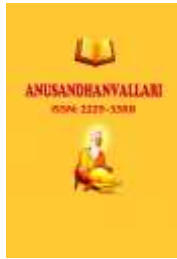
Meenakshi's depiction of Kane as the neglected and deserted daughter emphasizes the psychological and emotional effects of gender-based abuse. Meenakshi's journey is about the bitter understanding that her very existence threatens the patriarchal aspirations of her family, and results in deep solitude and misery. The story explores the complex evolution of female identity, impacted by individual features and the limiting family and social factors that impose boundaries on a woman's potential.

Meenakshi, whose eyes were compared to a fish with 'golden and graceful' (Kane 16) eyes, was also called Chandranakha by her mother, Kaikesi, who was charmed by her 'abnormally long nails'. Later, Ravan named her Surpankha for her combative nature. For Meenakshi, the change from Meenakshi to Surpankha is a voyage of self-assertion, rebellion and sexual freedom. Crucially, in the story, Ravan kills Meenakshi's pet Maya, whom she loves, and she attacks him for revenge. Meenakshi's cruel behaviour means she would rather fight than bow to sadness, showing her strength and her capacity to retain her dignity and privileges. The first manifestation of her wrath, the attack on Ravan, is the beginning of her transformation into an independent and powerful being. Meenakshi's hand spasmed and, like a cat, she pounced on the unsuspecting Ravan, her claws sinking into the fragile flesh of her neck, her teeth bared in rage. One arm protected her face from the groping fingers, the other tried to dislocate her, as Kavita Kane writes. Ravan was shocked into a cry of anguish, one arm shielding her from the clutching fingers, the other trying to pull her away. But she kept at it, shredding the flesh, digging her sharp nails into any exposed skin, plunging deeper to inflict more terrible wounds.

In the *Ramayana*, Surpankha's story is often reduced to a vision of hideous deformity, and she is defined as a sexually (un)restrained lady. In the fight in the forest with Ram, Laxman, Sita, and Surpankha, her face was severely damaged. The female body is a site of patriarchal authority as indicated by the violent attack on Surpankha (Sabala and Gopal 45). The mutilation was looked upon as a fitting retribution to embarrass Surpankha and it disfigured her face for life as a reminder of her shame. Surpankha's disfigurement in the masculine gaze is the result of her attempted assault on Sita.

Surpankha is shown as a vulgar and adulterous woman compared to the idealised Sita, who is shown as a pious and devoted spouse. Surpankha is the autonomous, sexually assertive woman with her strong individuality and ravenous passion, while Valmiki's Sita is the traditional ideal of femininity with her restrained sexuality and steadfast subservience. Surpankha represents the defiant woman who defies societal restraints, and the virtuous woman is one who is submissive to her husband or male kin, where her sexuality is limited to childbearing and her partner's demands, explains Kathleen Erndl. No, Sita was not marked by Surpankha's attack; her audacity in matters of sex broke social codes. This suggests the idea that sexually promiscuous women are a danger to society and need to be fixed. These ladies are disfigured as a proper penance for maintaining the social order. The trouble was not that Surpankha was a rakshasi but that she was a woman. Such communication sends a strong message that promotes aggressiveness toward sexually active females. It suggests what men may have to do to cope with uncontrolled female libido. Kane's reading of this episode underscores the inherent violence of the disfigurement, something that many critics have missed. She investigates the use of violence to force conformity to patriarchal values. In her portrayal, Surpankha asks if she was punished so harshly because she desired the two men, or if they were frightened by her sexually aggressive side that they saw.

Kavita Kane attempts to reframe Surpankha's mutilation in terms of her sexual assertiveness as an act of validation instead of violation. She questions the heinous conduct of her bold desire as an excuse for her punishment by Surpankha who, she feels, has violated the patriarchal conventions. Kane argues that the negative portrayal of Surpankha is a patriarchal effort to explain her dismissal and eventual mutilation, and her treatment of her in *Lanka's Princess* presents a feminist reading of the conventional characterization of Surpankha as a wicked person. This indicates the fact that her historical image is either that of a culprit or the victim without any attempt to understand Surpankha as a person with a different story to tell. Kane says that calling women



angels or devils denies their humanity. Kane attempts to free Surpankha from the sharp edge of contempt and superiority, depicting her as a person who can be both morally good and wrong. Kane's portrayal of Surpankha allows us to view her as more than a villain; she is a complex, flawed character symbolizing the aspirations and struggles experienced by modern women.

Surpankha's persona is a symbol of the struggle and aspirations of a modern day woman. Surpankha's boldness, her courage, her love, her passion and her repentance make her more human than devilish. The P. R. and Asher. As Nandhini remarks, Kane gives a new identity and human essence to those female characters in old epics that have been ignored, and transforms them with traits of unity and understanding. One such critical moment is when Surpankha denies killing Laxman's wife and children, and instead, shows sympathy and sorrow, Kane exposes Surpankha's human side. This act of constraint makes Surpankha a more hated than evil woman, thereby making her more human.

Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* retells the *Ramayana* from the perspective of Surpanakha, a heroine who is primarily known for her encounter with Rama and Lakshmana and the mutilation of her nose and ears. Kane places Surpanakha at the center of the story, thus turning a typically marginalized character from mythology into a complex woman whose life is shaped by love, desire, grief, rebellion and the constraints of a patriarchal society. Surpanakha, always subjected to social, familial, and gender limits, is constantly looking for ways to achieve freedom, both within and outside of those constraints.

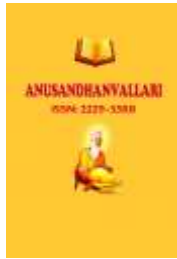
In the conventional versions of the *Ramayana*, the female figure of Surpanakha appears as an unwelcome and rowdy female. Her love of Rama, and her open expression of desire, are often read as signs of moral or sexual deviance. Kane, however, complicates this view by allowing Surpanakha to tell her own story. Her sexuality is not only a matter of shame or evil; it is a fundamental part of her identity and her struggle for freedom. She doesn't want to be bound by the traditional expectations of women. In this situation, her freedom is placed just outside the bounds set for it.

Patriarchy is a major limitation in the survival of Surpanakha. She lives in a world where women's identities are closely tied to their relationships with men daughters, wives, sisters, mothers. Surpanakha is a member of the powerful Rakshasa family of Lanka, but in social and emotional matters she is not permitted independence. Her brother Ravana holds much sway in the family and his political ambitions have a big impact on the lives of all around him. Surpanakha thus is in a paradox: she is of great ancestry, yet has no corresponding influence over her own life. Kane exploits this paradox to show that social status does not guarantee individual freedom.

Marriage is one more important sort of limitation. Family troubles and the opposition from Ravana make things complicated for Surpanakha and Vidyutjihva. Her love for him shows her desire to make a free emotional choice, but the patriarchal structures surrounding her do not permit such a choice. Her private life is thus entangled with her brother's influence and the larger political ambitions of Lanka. Her experience shows the potential for women's self-determinations to be put under male authority, particularly in patriarchal societies.

At the same time, Surpanakha is not shown as a helpless victim. Adversity often brings out determination and defiance in her. She becomes aware of politics and tries to understand the power relations she lives in. Her relationship with Ravana is particularly interesting, as it is both family and political. She sees the good traits in her brother, but she also knows his weaknesses and the price his dreams may exact. Her ability to question him makes her an own creature, not simply a subordinate character in Ravana's story.

The idea of sexual emancipation is of particular importance in the question of restraint. Surpanakha is a deviation from the stereotypical representation of female sexuality that is widespread in the age old patriarchal discourses. She is honest about her ambitions, and this honesty makes her a challenge to the social order that Rama and his cronies represent. Her relationship with Rama is a case in point of the duality of woman's desire.



Women who signal sexual attraction are quickly labelled immoral, aggressive or dangerous, but male desire is often seen as normal. Kane's story exposes the prejudices in society that inform those judgements. Padmavathy, Premalatha & Vedomuthaninsay: "Meenakshi never accepted prejudice as her fate because she felt she could build her own future. She also knew she had to face all her life's obstacles alone, having seen how everyone had abandoned and humiliated her" (117).

The punishment that Surpanakha suffers from of great symbolic importance. One can understand her disfigurement as not just corporeal abuse but as a technique of regulating a woman who has transgressed socially accepted rules of femininity. Her body is where patriarchal power is exercised. But the savagery does not destroy her feeling of self. It is an encounter that heightens her consciousness about injustice, authority and revenge. Her self-control gives birth to a different kind of freedom: the freedom to see and name the structures that have enslaved her.

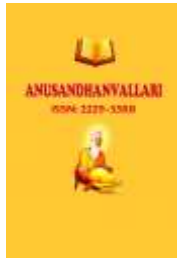
The story further complicates the notion of liberty by showing that uprising can have consequences. The behavior of Surpanakha is shown to be intrinsically related to the political scenario of Lanka. She has a personal stake in the wider struggle of Ravana against Rama. The dissonance between individual goal and political outcome therefore becomes more difficult to sustain. Kane presents Surpanakha as a woman fighting for her independence in a space where individual choices are always affected by familial, political, gendered and cultural standards.

The phrase 'freedom behind restraint' can also be read from the point of view of Surpanakha's narration. Her story is told in the conventional way by others. Her memory survives in the descriptions and assessments of people who play more major parts in the epic. Kane subverts this narrative framework by granting her a voice. Narrative production is an instrument of emancipation. Surpanakha, via articulation, recall, investigation and interpretation, challenges the narrative of herself preserved by tradition. Her narrative autonomy allows the reader to see the person behind the label of "villain."

Thus, Kane's portrayal leads readers to reconsider the connection between morality and social norms. Surpanakha's decisions might be contentious, and the story does not ignore the consequences of those decisions. But it does compel readers to distinguish a woman's actions from the patriarchal evaluations thrust upon those actions. Her craving for love, acknowledgement, autonomy, and vengeance is intertwined with her imperfections and paradoxes. Areker and Doibale observe: "From the simmering bitterness since birth due to rejection and neglect, to being a loving wife, mother and aunt, Surpanakha 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" (132).

Lanka's Princess ultimately offers freedom not only as the absence of restrictions but as the quest of selfhood that arises in the face of restrictions. Surpanakha is constrained by family duties, standards of marriage, gender expectations, political authority, and societal morality, yet she refuses to be silenced in expressing her hopes and developing her self-awareness. Her rebellion may not always give her freedom in the traditional sense, but it gives her a voice and a sense of independence.

Thus, "Freedom Behind Restraint" aptly describes the journey of Surpanakha in Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*. Her story illustrates that constraint can manifest in multiple ways social, familial, physical, emotional, and ideological but the human desire for independence can still flourish within those constraints. Kane brings Surpanakha from the margin to the center, questioning the traditional notions of female desire and power, and invites readers to reconsider what constitutes female independence. Surpanakha's greatest act of liberation is her final refusal of the identity assigned to her by mythology.



Summation

In the patriarchal society of that prehistoric era, women were relegated to the roles of either vamp or victim, hence rendering other existences unattainable for them. When a woman adheres to and quietly complies with cultural conventions and limitations, she garners admiration; nevertheless, if she chooses to resist, she is perceived as deviant and malevolent. The majority of female characters in the *Ramayana* are depicted as embracing victimhood, understanding that choosing otherwise would result in being labelled as deviant or unethical. However, even if certain female characters exhibited courage in opposing and retaliating, they were always depicted as a menace to society at large. Surpanakha is regarded as a pivotal figure responsible for the destruction of the entire asura lineage in Lanka; yet, the motivations for her behavior remain enigmatic. It should be noted that Surpanakha merely incited Ravana to seize Sita; nonetheless, Ravana acted solely due to his own lecherous disposition. Lakshmana's act of severing Surpanakha's nose not only exposed his unbridled fury but also examined the societal treatment of asura women. Indeed, Surpanakha, in a surge of intense rage, attempted to assault Sita, and during that moment, Lakshmana rescued Sita by disfiguring Surpanakha. However, alternative methods should exist to deter her from proceeding with that action. Consequently, Kavita Kane, by re-examining the epic from Surpanakha's viewpoint, endeavored to present an alternative rendition of the narrative. In this methodology, Kane decentralized the grand narrative and illuminated the existence of Surpanakha, the princess of Lanka; her character requires further analysis to comprehend the challenges faced by women in that ancient civilization.

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