

## Kavita Kané's Lanka's Princess as An Expression of Experience of Indigenous Women

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For a long time, the term 'indigenous' has been used interchangeably for tribes, first peoples, native peoples, aboriginals, adivasi, janjati, hunter gatherers and many more ethnic groups. Indigenous peoples are the disadvantaged descendants of the first known occupants of a region, particularly those who have experienced colonisation or have been uprooted from their ancestral homeland. They represent the non-dominant and marginalised section in society. They have to face negligence and discrimination and don't have access to social assistance. They strive for recognition and acknowledgement. But there is a tendency to overlook and neglect indigenous peoples despite of their being an important part of society. As Annalisa Enrile, an aboriginal professor says, "Indigenous populations are incredibly overlooked. We're not used to seeing them in general." People belonging to the indigenous communities are often treated as others by the dominant strata of society. They are exploited and oppressed. They are not given equal rights and opportunities for their growth and development. They face oppression and discrimination. Among them indigenous women are the least known and recognised. They are the worst sufferers. They have been impacted and marginalised by patriarchy and by dominant sections of society. Enrile regards indigenous women as "among the most powerless of human victims." They are discriminated on the basis of their caste, colour and gender. Their voice remains unheard. They experience high rates of violence and oppression even within their own family and society.

In Indian mythological context, asuras and demons were indigenous tribal peoples. Rigveda and other Hindu scriptures described asuras as

indigenous people of India. They were estranged from the dominant Aryan Dravidian group who formed the vast majority of the composite Indian population. After many wars and conflicts, the Aryans established themselves in the northern region of India driving the non-aryans into the southern jungles hoping that the hostile terrain and forest would act as a barrier between them. Due to their dwelling in forests and striking differences in appearance from the Aryans, these non-Aryans became the folklore figures known as rakshsas (demons) and asuras (ungodly creatures). The Aryans regarded themselves superior to non-Aryans and tried to prove these non-Aryans as inferior. Quoting Manish Meena, “Manu, in his writings describe forest dwellers and tribes as barbarous and sub-humans. By establishing a hierarchical form of society, Brahmins designated tribal society as being inferior...Aryans also described tribals as having dark-complexion, people who spoke strange languages with no grammar, ate meat and drank alcohol and did not perform Vedic rituals.” Sanskrit epics, Hindu mythology and several mythical narratives from subsequent eras depict them as violent, deceitful, unlawful, dark skinned and well versed in black magic and sorcery. Madhu Kaitabha, Ravana, Meghnad, Hiranayakashyup, Raktabij, Putana, Surpankha etc. are well known Hindu mythological asuras and demons. The present paper attempts to unearth the anguished experience of indigenous mythological rakshasi Surpankha who is victim of triple jeopardy with special reference to the mythofiction “*Lanka’s Princess*” written by Kavita Kané. The researcher focuses on the anguish, atrocities, complexities meted out to Surpankha and its harmful effects on her personality development.

Kavita Kané’s “*Lanka’s Princess*” is an account of the plight of Meenakshi who was later rechristened as Surpankha by her brother Ravana for having nails that resemble sharp claws. Kané narrates Meenakshi’s transformation from a loving and compassionate princess into a vile, harsh and vengeful lady. Our heart shatters as we follow Surpankha’s journey. Aditi Dhirghangi and Seemita Mohanty in their paper “*De-mythifying the Ramayana: A Study of the Devoiced Surpankha*” comment- “Kavita Kané’s *Lanka’s Princess* (2017) is

one such account of the unsung Surpankha, Ravana's sister- a strong independent woman who is able to take decisions and make choices; but is questioned and controlled by the dictates of a patriarchal society. This novel narrates the plight of Surpankha, from a young girl ridiculed and neglected for her looks, to her strong and independent choices in adult life refuting the stranglehold that her brothers had on her life, for which she is ultimately punished by a highly judgmental society that never forgives such transgressions"(9).

Surpankha was the offspring of the rakshasi Kaikesi and the rishi Vishravas. They already had three sons Ravana, Vibhishan and Kumbha. Yet, Kaikesi wanted to have more and more sons to regain the lost asura empire of Lanka from Kuber and to become a ruler of three worlds. That's why she was outraged at the birth of Surpankha. She felt, "*This girl has cheated me out of my plans*"(2).

Surpankha experienced psychological harm and emotional abuse as a girl child, which left her traumatised. Regretfully, she had no one in the family who could sympathise with her sufferings. Unlike her tall, handsome and fair brothers, she was short, ugly and dark. When she was born, her mother was not happy to have such a burden imposed on her and her family. Her mother thought this child would become an independent asura that no one would want to marry. For the mother, the girl was an undesirable, unwanted and unwelcomed child. Her mother was disappointed with her ugly looks so much so that, she scornfully commented, "She hardly looks beautiful or like me. In fact she is quite ugly! . . . She's scrawny and much darker than me!"(3). Her mother kept on commenting on her dark complexion and ugly appearance. The constant destructive comments from her mother on her looks crushed her self-confidence and it made her feel like an outsider in the good looking family. "It was a sign that she would always remain an oddity, an outcast; she would never be a part of her family of good lookers"(20). The one who enjoyed most in teasing her and snatching her happiness from her was her own brother Ravana. It had turned her into an angry child and that bitterness in her heart grew stronger with the passage of time. She faced discrimination not only because of her dark skin but

also because of her gender. She was constantly criticised for her appearance but on the other hand her brother Kumbhakarna who had a huge body and spent half of his time in sleeping was never abused and insulted. Thus Surpankha was dually discriminated not only because she was a woman but also because of being a coloured woman. For such dual discrimination on the basis of gender and colour faced by black women, a prominent feminist Deborah King used the term “double jeopardy” in his paper “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Conscious: The Text of a Black Feminist Ideology”(1988).

She had a strong bond with the goat she kept as a pet. She found out one day that her goat had died. She was so distraught about the death of her goat that when she found out that Ravan had suffocated it, she became so furious that she launched herself at him, seized him by the neck, and would have killed him if Kumbha hadn't intervened. This attack so shocked Ravan that he started calling her a real Surpanakha to torment her. She received reprimands from her parents because of misbehaving with her older brother. Her mother began to treat her more harshly after that incident. She would frequently reprimand, demoralise, and tell her, adding that she was useless and would definitely cause her family grief one day. She scolded her for constantly fighting and arguing with people in a violent way. She condemned her, “ Surpankha that is the right name for you, you monster”(9). Hearing such heart breaking words from her mother, she became disillusioned and screamed with pain and fury, “Yes, I am a monster! . . . If anyone hurts me, I shall hurt them with these( nails)! I am Surpankha”(9). Since now, she preferred to be called by the name Surpankha rather than Meenakshi. Thus, the moniker Surpankha was given to her by her furious brother Ravana and it became her identity for the rest of her life.

Surpankha found it hard to feel the affection of her mother. So, she turned to her father, who was also unable to recognise her as his daughter and provide her the same kind of love that he did for Vibhishan. He used to shower his love and affection only towards Vibhishan which aroused the feeling of jealousy and anger in her. Because she always yearned to be her father's favourite and longed for his love. She had

promised herself never to disappoint her father in any way and to win his heart. She had unfathomable love for his father. But he was conscious neither about her love for him nor about his jealousy. As Kané has stated, “But he barely bothered about her. He lathered his attention solely on Vibhishan, the brightest of all his children whom he believed will be the one only to follow his dream. Meenakshi felt a stab of red hot jealousy as it always did where it concerned her father. But he was oblivious of both— her jealous fury and her zealous adoration”(25). When she was abducted by her stepbrother Kuber, his father did not come to rescue her. It filled her heart with complete disappointment. She realised that “ her father did not love her, as a father should, or as much as she loved him- so unquestioningly, so faithfully”(49).

Meenakshi always craves for love and acceptance from which she is deprived of since her birth despite of having a big family. Everyone in the family leaves no occasion to humiliate her. They always remain eager to find faults with every single step taken by her. She feels alienated even being among her closest relatives. Her opinion does not matter for them. Besides, she is not granted any freedom to take any decision, to have choices and to fulfill her needs. She even cannot go beyond the boundaries of the palace without taking permission. Her life as a princess of Lanka is just like that of a bird in a gilded cage. The luxuries, the wealth, the opulence of Lanka have no charm for her. What she dearly wants is love and affection. Her search for true love comes to an end when she meets Vidyujiva, the king of Kalkeya. His courage to propose her wins her heart. Against the wish of everyone in the family, she married him. But villainous part of her is aroused when her happily married life is ruined by her brother Ravana who murdered her husband treacherously. The whole family support Ravana in this conspiracy. Ravana has taken away everything from her and left her with nothing except never ending hatred and indignation. It has embittered her mind. It has turned her into a hateful and vindictive woman, born again as Surpankha. The words of Prerona Bora and Dr. Jayanta Madhab Tamuly from research article entitled “ A Feminist Study of Kavita Kané's Lanka's Princess” can aptly be used here, “Ravana by killing Vidyujiva,

her only support and love of life, had also killed Meenakshi, her original self. And with the death of Meenakshi in her, Ravana lost his sister forever. Ravana compelled her to remain as Surpankha for the rest of her life, and in this way she turned into the most sinister version of herself that anyone could hardly imagine”(558).

Besides being discriminated on the grounds of gender and colour, she had to bear the humiliation of belonging to asura clan. She was insulted by the Aryan princes Ram and Lakshman when she was roaming in Dandak forest after the treacherous death of her husband by her brother Ravana. When she saw Ram and Lakshman concealed in the dense undergrowth, she was physically thrilled by their masculinity. She was seized by an unbridled wave of gnawing lust, and it consumed her completely. She had suppressed her sexual desire since Vidyujiva's death. But the mesmerising handsomeness and charm of these two men had ignited her suppressed desire for sexuality. She wanted the satiation of the burning desire of sexual intimacy. “She wanted them, badly, madly”(193). Initially, being a widow she felt wrong in desiring another man. But later recalling her nani's words “. . . there was no shame in desiring a man” (194), she approached towards Ram first. He rejected her proposal since he was already married and had no desire to have two wives. He directed her to his brother Lakshman informing her that his wife is not here with him so he might welcome her proposal. Lakshman turned down her request as well saying that his wife Urmila was waiting for him in Ayodhya. Lakshman sent her back to Ram citing that he is merely a servant to Ram and being a princess of Lanka, she should marry a prince like Ram. When she sensed that the brothers were making fun of her and playing with her feelings, she became terribly upset. She realised that they “were laughing at her, reeling her to and fro like a toy like a means of amusement (200). She wasn't just ridiculed but brutally mutilated by Lakshman for expressing her sexual desire for Aryan princes. They left her with a ruined face and lifelong disgrace.

The day of her mutilation was the cruelest day of her life. Her mutilation had torn her soul in addition to leaving her physically disfigured forever. The brutality she experienced that day demonstrated the discrimination

she faced as an asura woman. She lost her conscience as a result of being insulted and humiliated by the Aryan princes. The villainous part of her soul was again aroused by this indignant and discriminating treatment. She became so much infuriated by this insulting treatment that she tried to hurt Ram's wife by plotting her abduction by her brother Ravana. Consequently, she caused the Great War between Ram and Ravana.

Meenakshi's metamorphic journey from Lanka's Princess to become a demoness Surpankha is very miserable. It reflects how an indigenous woman has to suffer not only in society but also in her own family. She is a victim at three levels of discrimination colour, caste and gender as we can see in the case of Surpankha. They are insulted for their barbarous behaviour. But it is not accepted that their barbaric behaviour is the result of traumatic encounters and experiences they have faced in family and society and the environment they live in. There is a need to change our outlook towards them. They should be treated with love and affection. If Surpankha had received love and care in her childhood through her family and would have been treated affectionately by Aryan Princes Ram and Lakshman, the history would be different. There would have been no war between Ram and Ravana. Surpankha would have remained Meenakshi, a loving princess of Lanka.

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