



Revenge to Redemption in Kavita Kané's *Lanka's Princess*

Akshaya T, Ph. D. Research Scholar (Department of English),
Sri Sarada College for Women (Autonomous), Salem 16.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3843-3698>

Dr. S. Ramya Niranjani, Associate Professor of English,
Department of English, Sri Sarada College for Women (Autonomous), Salem 16.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4211-5185>

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Abstract

Indian mythology has been a rich source of inspiration for many writers, both past and present, who focus on interpreting and demystifying Indian mythology. Kavita Kané is a popular Indian author widely known for her retellings of Indian mythological stories from the perspective of lesser-known female characters. She has written several novels, including "Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen", "Sita's Sister", "Menaka's Choice", "Lanka's Princess", "The Fisher Queen's Dynasty", and "Ahalya's Awakening". Her novels typically explore themes such as the role of destiny and the power of belief. Through her storytelling, Kané offers readers a fresh perspective on voiceless female mythological figures, such as Ahalya, Urmila, Uruvi, Menaka and Surpanakha, bringing them to life for contemporary readers. Hence, Kavita Kané's "Lanka's Princess" is a compelling narrative that reimagines the life of Surpanakha, a character from the ancient Indian epic, "The Ramayana". Traditionally portrayed as the vengeful sister of Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, Surpanakha's character in Kané's retelling undergoes a significant transformation from seeking revenge to finding redemption. Kavita Kané humanizes Surpanakha in her novel by providing readers with a keen perspective on a traditionally denigrated character. The novel also underscores the themes of love, loss, empowerment, and forgiveness. It ultimately presents a story of personal growth and transformation. Thus, the present article attempts to analyse the novel "Lanka's Princess" which explores the story of Surpanakha from the perspective of revenge to redemption.

Keywords: Revenge, Redemption, Kavita Kané, *Lanka's Princess*.

Introduction

Indian mythology has been a rich source of inspiration for many writers, both past and present, who focus on interpreting and demystifying Indian mythology. Kavita Kané is a popular Indian author widely known for her retellings of Indian mythological stories from the perspective of lesser-known female characters. She has written several novels, including *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, *Sita's Sister*, *Menaka's Choice*, *Lanka's Princess*, *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, and *Ahalya's Awakening*. Kavita Kané's works are appreciated for their powerful narrative voice. Her labyrinthine character development is a pleasure to unravel from the beginning until the end. Her unique exploration of the human psyche within the framework of ancient mythology makes the novels more captivating. She often delves deep into the untold tales and perspectives of less familiar female characters from Indian epics like *the Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*. Her novels typically explore themes such as the role of destiny and the power of belief. Through her storytelling, Kané offers readers a fresh perspective on voiceless female mythological figures, such as Ahalya, Urmila, Uruvi,



Menaka and Surphanaka, bringing them to life for contemporary readers. This paper ponders over the incidents of revenge and redemption in the novel.

Theoretical Framework

The present article attempts to analyse the novel *Lanka's Princess* which explores the story of Surphanaka, the sister of Ravana, the demon king of Lanka. The study uses a descriptive study to assess the novel. Kavita Kané focuses on the life of Surphanaka and imparts her readers with a fresh dimension on this often-misunderstood character. But the facts are much different as compared to “The Ramayana” in Kané’s novel. So, the article will portray the journey of Surphanaka from her childhood to her eventual encounter with Rama and Sita, focusing on her ambitions and desires and the choices and decisions that shape her destiny.

From Revenge to Redemption

The novel *Lanka's Princess* revolves around Surphanaka, the famous sister of Ravana, the daughter of Rishi Vishravas, and Kaikesi, a rakshas princess. The novel is praised for its rich storytelling, meticulous research, and nuanced portrayal of Surphanaka, offering readers a compelling reinterpretation of her role in the epic tale of *The Ramayana*. Nancy Sharma in her article states,

Kavita Kané’s reinterpretation of the marginalised character of Surpankha challenges the stereotypical characterization of Surpankha as the “other” of Sita. She tries to unravel the real identity of Surpankha by giving expression to her voice and establishing her as an embodiment of knowledge, action, and power.” (Sharma 1)

Her birth is unwelcome in her own family, as her mother, Kaikesi, expects a son. She is named Meenakshi. On looking at her newborn, Kaikesi says, “She hardly looks beautiful or like me. In fact, she’s quite ugly!” (LP 2). Her father, Rishi Vishravas, comments that his daughter does not resemble their elder children, Ravana, Kumbha, and Vibishan. Kaikesi questions, “How is this monkey going to bring us good fortune?” (LP 3). They worry about who will marry her. The rejection she suffers in her family hurts her. She wishes to study magic, but her father prohibits it, saying “It is unnecessary and unhealthy” (LP 14).

Meenakshi’s low self-esteem makes her grandmother feel pity for her. She consoles Meenu, telling her she looks beautiful. She assures, “Beauty lies in your head and heart; you have to believe it. But for that, you first have to love yourself. Love is magic; it has the mysterious supernatural power of influencing and healing your heart, mind, and soul and changing the course of events in your life” (LP 22). But Meenakshi is always conscious of the way her mother treats her. She trembles. “She could not forget that day, nor could she forget those words. *Monster. Surphanaka*” (LP 23).

Ravana rages when he learns that his half-brother Kuber has tried to kidnap Meenakshi. The brothers decide to get Lanka back and teach Kuber a lesson. Their father, Vishravas, denies their idea to protect his sons. Surphanaka becomes upset upon seeing her father’s reluctance and his dislike for her questions, “Why did you always take their side? Because they are boys!? They are the ones leaving you against your wishes. And I am here always by your side, but you prefer them to me each time!” (LP 36). She observes that her father sits transfixed upon the tragic news of the death of his father-in-law, Sumali, without doing anything, even after knowing that his brother is the cause of his death. Surphanaka feels “a mounting anger against her father” (LP 46). Ravana has won Lanka without any bloodshed, as Kuberan is afraid of Ravana’s power. Meenakshi feels anxious about her new life at Lanka’s palace, “being trapped, like a prisoner walking into a cave” (LP 63).



Meenakshi's life in Lanka seems very desolate and lonely. She defines, "There was a lot of wealth but little sign of culture; the luxury in the chamber was senseless, haphazard, and ill fitting" (LP 77). She lives like an "outsider in the family, bearing no particular affection or affinity" (LP 81). She overhears Ravan's secret about his death and feels a sense of power over him. She finds that her mother has selected Mandodari as her daughter-in-law. Meenakshi accepts that she is a blend of beauty and intelligence. She feels "dwarfed by Mandodari's height and beauty. She felt awkward, falling a step behind to keep distance between her and this fair maiden" (LP 90). She feels sorry for Mandodari, as she knows her brother will break her heart someday. She looks at Mandodari's brothers and their concern for getting their younger sister married before them. She feels, "Such is the kind of regard a brother has to have for his sister, unlike her brothers. That caring, careful thought for others seems to be absent in my family" (LP 92).

Meenakshi hears the voice of Vidyujiva, the king of Kalkeyas, from behind and finds that he is a guest who has arrived for her brother's wedding. She feels attracted to the young man and aroused by desire and passion. She says, "I want him savagely" (LP 101). She yearns for the stranger that she met at her brother's wedding. She meets him once again at Kumbha's wedding, but she feels different at that time. She feels desperate and "searched for the imperfections to make herself hate him" (LP 105). She is aware that her brother Ravan will disagree with this. Her brother sees Vidyujiva as the greatest enemy, far equal, and more of a threat to him and his power and position as king. That night, Vidyujiva entered her chamber. At once, when Ravan and Kumbha get them red-handed, she threatens to reveal Ravan's secret to Mandodari. Ravan and Kumbha eventually agree to her wedding. Kaikesi suspects Vidyujiva's sudden proposal to the marriage. Meenakshi feels satisfied after defeating her brother and winning back her love.

Her family decides to hold her and her husband back in Sri Lanka. She doubts Vidyujiva's love for her. She thinks, "Is he an opportunist after all, taking immediate and cunning advantage through their marriage? Is their wedding simply a planned circumstance of possible benefit, his expedient grab at power? Had he ever loved me, or had this been his ploy all along?" (LP 133). But she wants to leave Lanka forever. She finds Mandodari weeping as Ravan leaves for Mithila for Sita's Swayamvara. Mandodari questions, "Why does our love never admit failure?" (LP 154). Meenakshi does not understand why she questions him. The battle of the Asmanagara proves a tragic loss for Meenakshi. Her brother Kumbha informs her that her husband Vidyujiva is dead, and he claims that Vidyujiva had an illegal affair with Mrunalini. She suspects her family's involvement in her husband's death and hates her entire family. She feels perplexed about the events happening around her. Ravan also adds that Vidyujiva had also planned to attack Lanka and his throne. She thinks, "She had been unwanted in her family, and it was Vidyujiva who had saved her from them. He had given her the love that none of them could offer—that warmth, that peace, that sense of being wanted, that belongingness. Not her mother, not her brothers (LP 170). With utmost pain and anger in her heart, she vows, "This was her moment of truth. She wanted to see him dead" (LP 174). She leaves Lanka and vows, "From henceforth she was Surphanaka; she was shrugging off the cloak of Meenakshi forever as she left the shores of Lanka" (LP 179).

Kumar, Surphanaka's eighteen-year-old son, aims to achieve plenty of knowledge about war and weaponry to avenge his father's death for the sake of his mother. Surphanaka finds herself happy within the Dandak forest, "where she had been reborn from Meenakshi to Surphanaka" (LP 182). But because of the unfortunate turn of events, she finds her son being killed by Lakshman unintentionally. She vows, "I can kill him myself" (LP 185). She learns



that there are two young men and a woman roaming in the forest. She sees them and tries to take the revenge as she has always desired. When she sees Ram and Lakshman, she feels a hot wave of lust. She tries to justify her feelings to herself before she approaches them.

Why be ashamed? She had reasoned with herself about the desires she felt. She had done nothing to make herself feel ashamed. In fact, she told herself without much conviction that she wanted it. She wanted those two men. Just as she wanted Vidyujiva. She wanted to share something to blot out this awful loneliness. In solitude, one welcomes any living thing. In complete Loneliness, even a certain tenderness, can be born. (LP 195)

The two brothers mock her and tell her that their wives are a reason not to abide by her wishes. In a fit of anger, she tries to hurt Sita. Ram orders Lakshman to maim her. Lakshman immediately grabs his sword and chops Surphanaka's nose and ears. She runs away, threatening that Lakshman will pay for it. She broods over it and decides to use it for the downfall of Ravan. She goes to Ravan and says that she has tried to abduct Sita for him, but Lakshman's inability to stop her has inflicted such a tragedy on her. Ravan swears to avenge her humiliation. She observes the determination in the voice of Ravan, and she thinks, "I have done it. She had pushed him into his well of hell. She witnesses Ravan dragging Sita into the palace. She vows, "I shall use the two princes to take revenge on my brother. Through Sita. Yes, and this is just the start of your hellish nightmare" (LP 220). Mandodari accuses her of bringing about the downfall of Ravan and Lanka. Vibishan tries to stop Ravan and speaks in support of Ram. Ravan immediately throws him away from Lanka. Surpanakha tries to make Sita accept Ravan. She worries over Ravan's decision to wake Kumbha. She is conscious that Kumbha will die in the hands of Ram and Lakshman on the battlefield, and "she, his sister, will be solely accountable for the death of that brother whom she still loved" (LP 242). Kumbha snaps at Surphanaka, saying that she has killed her son. She weeps, asking him not to go to the war. But he blesses, "It's only compassion that heals suffering; remember that. Find your compassion. That is my last blessing for you" (LP 249). Klimecki observes, "Compassion is a good antidote. It allows us to connect to others' suffering without being too distressed. The main takeaway is that we can shape our emotional reactions and alter the way we feel and respond to certain situations. Our emotions are not set in stone" (qtd. in Hoffman page no1).

Surphanaka loses Kumbha, Ravan's son, Meghanad. She rages, "I didn't want Kumbha or his young twin sons to die; I don't want Meghanad killed as well. It had been Ravan alone who was supposed to die on the battlefield. But he would be the last one to die. Before him, all those whom I had once loved would be sacrificed" (LP 254). She feels that "the weight of what she had done was too heavy for her to bear. She realises that she will also be affected by grief or loss. She thinks, "Hate was bitter, but revenge was always sweet" (LP 265). She senses the arrival of Ravan's last hour. She shuts her eyes and visualises the death of her enemy, Ravan. She feels satisfied, "killed by Ram as she had planned" (LP 266). She immediately leaves Lanka and heads to Ayodhya to seek her revenge on Lakshman, and she transforms from Surpanakha to Chandra. She vows to seek her revenge and keep her brother's spirit alive.

She tricks Sita and sends her away to the forest, permanently separating her from Ram. She sees Urmila and her infant and thinks she wants to kill the two people whom Lakshman loves dearly. Lakshman identifies her. She, in a fit of rage, shouts that he has made her life miserable by killing her son Kumar while he is meditating at Dandak. Gasping in horror, Lakshman stares at Surphanaka. He steps towards her unsteadily and hands over his



sword to her. He sinks to his knees in a “gesture of surrenderance” (LP 288). But to her amusement, she cannot hold the sword. She does not even dare to drain a single drop of blood, and she realises why she is unable to do that:

It was compassion. In Lakshman, she saw her dead Vidujiva. In Urmila, she saw herself, and in the tiny Angad, she saw her Kumar. She could not hurt any of them. Not him, his baby, or his wife. She had wanted him to suffer what she suffered. Not just the physical pain, but that heart wrench of rejection, of having no love. She faintly recalled Kumbha’s last words to her, Compassion heals suffering... (LP 289)

She asks Lakshman if he can kill her, saying, “It would be a release!” (LP 289). Urmila reminds her that she has been a victim of her wrath and anger, not just her family and Ram’s family. Urmila advises her to let go of seeking revenge and seek the greater truth. Urmila asks how much she will punish everyone and, “How much more will you punish yourself?” (LP 292). Surphanaka states that her baby has drenched her desire for punishment. She adds, “He doesn’t deserve what his father did. Nor do I want him to be an orphan like mine was. It was all because of me, and now let me end it once and for all. My mother was right; I am a wicked person.” Urmila denies and says, “You are an angry person” (LP 292) and adds, “You did not feed on violence and revenge; you yearned for your lost world” (LP 293). Surpanakha is aware that she does not deserve the kindness of Urmila. She says, “I did not want you to suffer my fate. Or your child” (LP 293). She realises Lakshman is not the same man she has met in Dandak. She cannot hurt him anymore. She leaves the chamber but stands to witness Urmila consoling the weeping Lakshman, and in them, she can see Mandodari and Ravan in their place. She understands, “The men needed their women, and often they did not know it. Love, trust, and respect were words to utter and emotions to experience, but what about need? That ambiguous void is necessary to be filled yet oddly lacking. They need to have someone with you to live with all your life” (LP 294). Madhavi Arekar says, “Surphanaka’s character throughout this narrative embodies Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s statement that “people in their natural state are basically good. But this natural innocence, however, is corrupted by the evils of society.” (qtd. in Arekar, 135).

Surphanaka turns to walk and does not know where. She finds the sea and cries, “Take me to Lanka to the foaming waves. She kept walking, ignoring the sinking sand and the crashing waves, and soon she felt the sifting ground under her feet giving way to a bottomless, dark abyss and the sea gently closing over her. She smiled again, shutting her golden, staring eyes to the eternal peace of that swirling darkness” (LP 296). Sujatha Aravindakshan Menon says in her article,

Kané, towards the end of her mythopoeic narrative, Surpanakha becomes a totally disillusioned yet spiritually evolved individual who is at peace with herself and the world. (Menon, 11)

Kané’s writing style and her amazing ability to blend imaginative storytelling with historical accuracy—the ancient with the modern—provide readers with a deeper understanding of the cultural and moral complexities. It is characterised by a unique blend of mythology, history, and philosophy, often reimagining ancient Indian legends and presenting them in a contemporary context. Thus, she has been a prominent figure in the Indian literary scene, inspiring readers with her creative reinterpretations of ancient myths and legends. Through this novel, Kané provides insight into Surpanakha’s motives and emotions, presenting her as a complex and multifaceted character rather than simply a one-dimensional



villain. The novel explores themes of love, betrayal, and redemption. It pushes the readers to reconsider their understanding of this iconic figure from Indian mythology.

Conclusion

Kavita Kané's "Lanka's Princess" offers a thoughtful reimagining of Surpanakha by transforming her from a traditional symbol of revenge into a complex character journeying toward redemption. By the exploration of her childhood, inspiration and personal struggles of her life, Kavita Kané provides an in-depth life to Surpanakha's character by depicting her as a woman of her circumstances rather than a one-dimensional antagonist. Through Surpanakha, the novel ponders into the themes of love, loss and empowerment. It highlights the power of self-reflection and forgiveness. Surpanakha's gradual evolution from revenge to finding peace demonstrates the possibility of personal growth and harmony found in the character. Ultimately, "Lanka's Princess" is a portrayal of the human growth of a traditionally vilified character in the myths and legends of India. Kané's portrayal gives chances to the most vengeful hearts to find the path of forgiveness and self-acceptance by presenting a persuasive story of change and hope.

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