Shurpankha as an assertive woman in Kavita Kane's 'Lanka's Princess' – a critical study

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Abstract

Indian mythology has been a subject of deep study and interest. Many people have reviewed and shared their thoughts regarding various mythological subjects. Various primary, secondary, male, female characters have been discussed on various platforms. But, there are many women characters who have not got justice regarding their lives and personality. A lot of them have been portrayed as negative and dark characters. The explanation behind their angst and revenge has been unknown or hidden. Kavita Kane in her works has tried to unravel the hidden personalities and various aspects of these characters. In this paper, the focus has been made on a very negatively approached woman character, Shurpankha, sister of Ravan, from the epic Ramayan. Was Shurpankha really hateful? What would have been the reasons behind her anguish and dark nature? Kavita Kane has made an effort to answer many such questions about Shurpankha, in her book 'Lanka's Princess'. Even being a princess, what might have been the reasons about her revenge taking acts, that caused war between Ram and Ravan.

Keywords: Shurpankha, Indian mythology, Kavita Kane, Ramayan, Lanka.

Introduction

Kavita Kane, born in 1966, is an Indian writer and her genre is mythology-fiction. All her books are based on Indian mythology. After her post-graduation in English Literature and Mass Communication from the University of Pune, she chose a career in Journalism. She has worked for twenty years in different media houses. But after the success of her first novel 'Karna's Wife : the outcast's queen', she chose to become a full time author. Kavita Kane as a writer is very revolutionary in her work as she has brought feminism in an area very unexpected, mythology. Her views on feminism are very impressive and thus, attract a good number of female readers. Her interest in mythology has been from her childhood. Her interest developed more as she kept going through the mythological books. Her fondness grew deeper in dark characters, even if they were secondary characters or the

protagonists. Kavita tells in an interview, "At school besides the Austens, Brontes, Agatha Christies, Chase, Gardener, and Gerald Durrell, I had read almost all the books of Manohar Malgonkar. He was the first Indian author I read after Nehru, Gandhi and C. Rajgopalchari. I had glimpsed a chapter of his *Bend in the Ganges* in a magazine called Imprint. I was hooked! There have been many since then but I still treasure his *Sea Hawk* or *The Men Who Killed Gandhi*." (in an interview, 2017) The more she read, the more questions she had, many of which were unanswered, thus she thought of getting the answers all by herself. And from here she developed her roots for writing, even when she has not been a writer. For me, mythology is just not only the old tales of god and goddesses. But mythology is all about man's flaws and follies, which definitely teaches lessons, and is applicable even in the modern times.

Kavita states that she might be criticised or issues may be created as she has tried to change the accepted version of mythology in our minds. If the women characters in our mythology would have been studied judiciously, one would have realised the strength and conviction of women characters in mythology. She says, mythology is a thing to think upon and not to be judged. Talking about her being a female writer narrating these hugely unordinary characters, the former Assistant Editor of Times of India, Kavita articulated, “The narrative changes the moment the spotlight falls on them and most of my protagonists have been either minor or overlooked characters. In ‘Lanka’s Princess’, it is Surpanakha who dominates the book, not Ravana though he is a more flamboyant and formidable character.”(Kavita Kane, 2017, p.30)

Unravelling the Hitherto Unknown Character of Shurpankha

‘Lanka’s princess’ is her another book with another character - Shurpankha, one that has been said to be responsible for the fight between *Ram* and *Ravana*. But what really caught Kavita’s interest in the conventionally disliked character of Shurpanakha, she tells, that it has been Shurpankha, the name that has fascinated her. Why would one call their child Shurpanakha?! The name means, the one with long nails. Metaphorically it meant she was a woman as hard as nails. How? And more importantly, why? Shurpankha was not born with that name, she either achieved it or it was forced upon her. That is how Kavita Kane got the story and made her pursue the history and the making of the character, Shurpankha.

In the study of mythology, whenever we talk about Shurpankha, we visualise her as an ugly woman, no less than a demoness (rakshashin), who gets her nose sliced off from angry Laxman, younger brother of Ram, complains of it to her brother Ravan, ultimately resulting in battle. The stories we hear affects the way we form our opinions for various characters. Kavita also holds the same view in case of Shurpankha. She tells, “writing about Shurpanakha, I was weaning away

from her stereotypical image, not painting her to be a saint or a sinner: I tried to know the woman behind such an ugly name. Was she as ugly too?”(Lakshana Palat, 2017, p.25) Kavita Kane finds our mythology very fascinating. She shares her views on this that, its not only Draupadi and Sita who are strong women. Infact, all the women characters in mythology have strong character. Kunti, Gandhari, Tara, Mandodari are all strong women characters. But the characters like Urmila, Menaka, Shurpankha are women characters who are marginalised. But, she they too have their part to tell, a story not everyone knows. And Kavita Kane likes to share their stories. These marginalised characters have stories that are silent, unheard and unsung. These are minor characters, who are distinct in their individuality.

Study of mythology and history can be exhaustive. Even after collecting a good amount of information, reaching reality can be tough. And so, it becomes very challenging while writing the mythological characters. Facts and fiction together can be very challenging. For example, stating the character of Shurpankha, the writer cannot twist facts just to make the narrative believable. It gets even more challenging to enlarge minor characters. Kane gets deeper into Shurpankha’s psyche and makes an attempt to humanise her in her book. Kane wanted to treat Shurpankha beyond stereotype. Kane thinks, cutting off Shurpankha’s nose has been the most violent episode of Ramayan.

It is our choice that defines which part of our nature we allow to rule our minds. And this is the main essence of Kavita Kane’s ‘Lanka’s Princess’. Shurpankha was born as Meenakshi – one with the fish shaped eyes. The book is about her birth and her mother Kaikesi’s immediate rejection of her as an ugly and useless being. To Kaikesi it is only her sons that can bring her glory and conquer what they had lost during her father’s regime. Kaikesi has been reared by her father to grow with aspirations to regain Lanka, which he had lost to Kuber. Kaikesi’s bloodline had a disturbing tale to tell which she passes onto her children, and her life aims to take revenge. To Kaikesi Lanka is her “lost home”. (Kavita Kane,

2017, p.1) She spent her life as a kid at her father, rishi Vishravas's ashram. She was educated with the boys, by her father, who gradually discovered that she had no interest in studies, and is scared that she might come under her grandmother's influence. True to his fears, Shurpankha masters the art of magic and seduction from her grandmother, Taraka. Rishi Pulastya is the one who predicts that in Shurpankha he has seen the mad passion, just like Ravan. He predicts, "fiery and resentful, marked by an indignant ill-will. Both will start a terrible war.... She will be responsible for unseen turn of events. She is one fated to bring about Ravan's destruction just as he is hers...." (Kavita Kane, 2017, p.31) While growing up she was neglected and overshadowed by her brothers, who were destined with fame, prestige. Even her life as 'Lanka's Princess' was side lined. She grew a life of misery and revenge. "It was a daughter, not a son, her heart sank, her aspirations drowning in the flood of disappointment and easy tears." (Kavita Kane, 2017, p.1) The novel unfurls the incidents that contributed in the making of Meenakshi's character and how she became Shurpankha. She was living her life in Lanka under the control of her brother, Ravan, which resulted in her outrage. She observes:

"What savage manners, what louts, all these people. What senseless nights, what uninteresting, uneventful days all of them indulge in – raucous card-playing, the gluttony, the drunkenness, the ceaseless chatter about the same, over and over again. The men talk of war, victory and wealth and women seem to enjoy the benefits of each. Such useless pursuits and conversations always about the same subjects..." (Kavita Kane, 2017, p.80) In the book we see the small incidents, experiences which keep fuelling up her angst and bitterness, with an inner desire to take revenge, at any cost. These events pile up, ultimately leading to Lanka's war, and destruction of her entire race. Shurpankha believes in avenging the insults hurled at her from her childhood. She knows that her father loves her but is unsure whether he loves her more than his sons. She gets rebellious against the gender rules imposed on her by her family,

rebels against the honour killing of her husband in the hands of her brothers, has outbursts 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 Shurpankha. (Kavita Kane, 2017, p.154) Quoting Nivedita Menon, "it is child-rearing practices which try to establish and perpetuate certain differences between the sexes. That is, from childhood, boys and girls are trained in appropriate, gender-specific forms of behaviour, play, dress and so on. This training is continuous and most of the time, subtle, but when necessary, can involve punishments to bring about conformity." (Nivedita Menon, 2012, p.61)

In her book, Kane shifts the spotlight away from the original protagonists - Ram, Sita, or even Ravan, to tell about the hitherto unknown and sidelined character of Shurpankha. The book shows that a good research has been done behind it. When the spotlight is drawn on the minor characters, the entire narrative changes. The narration is flawless, and the characters are given proper space and justice they deserve. Kane plays around the character of Shurpankha, in order to expand it, but does not flip it down. The characters of the book strongly impacts the readers, especially that of Shurpankha. The book is dark in nature and one would be angry and would feel sympathetic towards Meenakshi, and one would also feel disgusted because of her asur nature, which overshadows her personality. Shurpankha has often been the most misunderstood character in Ramayan. Kavita Kane's book 'Lanka's Princess' shows how this woman Shurpankha has been hated throughout her life. Through the novel Kavita Kane brings out the admirable side of Meenakshi, who was considered a monster. She was victimized so much so that even her births to come will have continuous rejections, till one believes of rebirths. She is the princess of Lanka who says, "How really everything is so beautiful in this world if one makes the effort to see it." (Kavita Kane, 2017, p.295)

Conclusion

The book offers a look from the perspective of the female protagonist, who is side lined from the main epic. The book 'Lanka's Princess' deals with much deeper facets of human nature, which would divide human in asur, rakshas, dev, danav. We can relate to these asur and rakshas as today's murderers, thieves. But it should be noted that these classification of humans is not by birth. And so, no human holds anguish and disgust by birth.

Any oppression creates a state of war, and there is no exception. Women have been suppressed from ages, thus feminism, women empowerment came into existence. This feminism has continued to be relevant till date, the twenty-first century. The face of misogyny has changed with the due course of time, but its casualties have been living from long. In India, the problems of women have been complex, based on the caste they belonged. Not only Indian women, but women from all over the world have been suppressed from ages. Tradition of Indian feminist writers have stood up and powerfully voiced the struggles of women in India. When we talk about the mythological women characters, their personalities have not been clearly portrayed. Even they were suppressed under the noble and great gods, saints etc. In present time, women are more liberal and unapologetic. Women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Amrita Pritam, Anita Desai, Shobha De and many more have brought into light the plight of women in India. The radical feminist mythological fiction writers like, Pratibha Ray, Kavita Kane, Anuja Chandramouli, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have championed their genre. Their works reclaim the identities of mythological female characters, and hopefully they will succeed in dislodging the submissive Savitri and Sita ideal of women, and give a new thought process of looking at the women characters of Indian mythology.

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