"Laugh like Surpanakha": Modern Literary Re-Imagining of a Famous Villainess in Indian Folkloric Traditions

Sarita Ray Chaudhury

California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt
USA

Abstract

The Ramayana, *a mythological tale passed down in oral folkloric traditions with the earliest discovered written version dating between the 4th and 6th centuries BC, continues to hold dominant cultural sway in India and many south Asian countries. To the many millions of people in South Asia, Surpanakha, the female character in Ramayana who instigated the great war between good and evil, continues to be upheld as the embodiment of all things women should not be—vocal of her lustful desires, fearless to proposition a man, violent and selfish. However, her role as a villainess is being questioned. In contemporary re-imagined narrative, she is portrayed as a misunderstood and oppressed female in a patriarchal system. Through qualitative analysis of online user generated content (UGC), this study explores how modern readers perceive Surpanakha's characterization in Kavita Kane's novel* The Lanka's Princess. *Findings suggest readers' willingness to accept Surpanakha's villainous traits as expressions protesting mainstream expectations of the female ideal*.

Keywords: female villain, villainess, fairytale, folklore, feminist revisioning, India, Surpanakha

In Western countries, fairytales are some of the first stories children hear. These continue to be part of cultural socialization narratives. While growing up, children continue to build familiarity by seeing the same characters in films, television, and market mediated narratives like advertising (Odber de Baubeta 1997; Mieder 2007). Beginning in 1960 with the use of fairytales and traditional folklores by the advertising industry and up to the present-day framing mechanisms of contemporary issues of modern society, demonstrates the continued relevance of characters in popular culture (Greenhill and Rudy, 2014). Within this broad genre, where the fight between good and evil imparts the ideals of gender norms by pitting the hero against the villain, the female antagonist is the focus of this study. Although pivotal, their stories are typically secondary to the male characters. In Western narratives, enduring villainess characters continue to have their presence culturally felt, such as Maleficent (Sleeping Beauty), Mother Gothel (Rapunzel) and Ursula (The Little Mermaid) in contemporary revisions and reimagined retelling of the original stories. Deviating from earlier one-dimensional portrayals where gender role portrayals remained intact, contemporary creators of entertainment content are exploring narratives that extend such bi-

polar depictions such as re-imagining the wicked stepmother as the heroine (Williams 2010). The American Broadcasting Company (ABC), in their television series *Once Upon a Time*, which ran from 2011 to 2018, as well as the National Broadcasting Company's (NBC) *Grimm* series incorporated fantasy imaginings of fairytale characters in real-world settings, thus giving them back-stories where none existed. Along similar lines, Angelina Jolie's *Maleficent* films (2014, 2019) produced by Disney centralize and portray the character of the villain in Sleeping Beauty in a sympathetic light.

So, what stories of villainesses do children in India hear of while growing up that continue to hold sway into their adulthood? If one were to ask, one of the most famous would be that of Surpanakha, the strong-willed sister of the villain Ravana in the Ramayana. Her story is familiar to hundreds of millions of people in Asia (Erndl 1991; Pillai 2020; Ramanujan 2004). She is a pivotal character who manipulates and connives to trigger the war between good and evil in the epic tale. The legendary story, crafted a few thousand years ago, has been told and retold in several languages, intertwined in folktales and performance arts in multiple countries across South-East Asia. Stories from the Ramayana can be found in various forms in folktale arts, fiction and nonfiction books, comics, video games, theater arts, television and films (Austin 2014; Pillai 2020). In recent times, with a growing interest to discover the rich literary heritage of India's folklore including mythical narratives, women writers are offering fictional retellings of female characters. One such effort is the fiction novel, *Lanka's Princess* which offers Surpanakha's story from her point of view (Kane 2017). This study answers the call to explore modern interpretations of the female villain in popular culture content (such as the fictional novel). The perceptions of modern Indians, articulated in the form of user generated content (UGC) within the context of participatory culture in today's networked era, offer insights into the evolving nature of gender identity and socio-cultural norms of such retelling efforts by feminist writers.

Surpanakha as the Female Antagonist in Traditional Telling of *The Ramayana*

The Ramayana is described as an exemplar of the Hindu ideals where Rama, the main male protagonist, is the epitome of an ideal male faithfully sacrificing himself in his duties as a son, a husband, a brother and a king (Goldman 2004). At the behest of one of his stepmothers, Kaikeyi, Rama gives up his right to the throne and accepts a fourteen-year exile accompanied by his wife Sita and one of his brothers, Lakshmana. Kaikeyi wanted her own son to ascend the throne and Rama, although the eldest and thus the rightful heir, fulfils his filial duties towards his ailing father Dasaratha who owed a promise to Kaikeyi. In the tenth year of exile, Rama meets Surpanakha. Surpanakha is the princess of Lanka, the kingdom of Ravana, the demon king. Smitten by his beauty, Surpanakha propositions to Rama. Rama rejects her, noting he is married to Sita and humorously suggests she proposition Lakshmana instead (he too is married having left his wife Urmila behind as he followed Rama into exile). Lakshmana also rejects Surpanakha, who mistakenly believes that Sita is the cause for the rejections, and lunges at her. Lakshmana intervenes and cuts off Surpanakha's ears and nose. Strick-

en, Surpanakha goes back to Lanka, recounts her humiliation and manipulates Ravana by describing Sita's beauty as worthy of his possession. Ravana, upon confirming Surpanakha's claims for himself, abducts Sita and takes her back to Lanka. Rama then fights with Ravana and defeats him to rescue Sita. This fight is described as the Great War where good overcomes evil (Kishler 1965; Ramanujan 2004). While Rama is the male ideal and Sita is the epitome of the ideal woman, the villains are the extreme opposite. Ravana is the main antagonist with no moral character. Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana, is portrayed as selfish and cunning. Surpanakha's brief but pivotal appearance in the story begins and ends with the war between the male hero and villain. This black and white, good versus evil characterization has remained consistent over thousands of years as the epic tale has been shared across geographic borders in various written, oral, and performative traditions. In popular culture, stories from the Ramayana remain popular in media and entertainment (Booth 1995; Mclain 2001; Pillai 2020). Surpanakha is never too far from the public attention, as women who do not conform to heteronormative gendered ideals are often compared to her.

Situating the Mythical Narrative of Surpanakha in Fairytale Discourse
One would argue why mythical tales like the Ramayana should be part of the fairytale literature. The answer would be to decolonize fairytale academic discourse from the predominantly Western focus (Haase 2010). This is evident where stories from Asia are classified under "Asian Literature" or "Asian Studies" with predominantly Western authors leading the scholarship (Brockington and Brockington 2016). Scholars have long suspected the origins of fairytales in folk narratives to have diverse Indo-European roots dating back thousands of years (Hasan 2009; da Silva and Jamshid 2016; Sugiyama 2001). This view is not without merit, given that the artificial lines drawn by academe cannot untangle the threads of storytelling that has woven itself across borders through human activities (migrations, trade) over thousands of years (da Silva and Jamshid 2016; Jacobs 1892; Zhang 2015). Parsons (2004, 138) notes that despite the Grimms or Perrault given credit for popularizing fairy tales, "there is no genuine or authentic version of a fairy tale." This is evident in the uncanny similarities between Jataka folktales from India and Aesop's Fables, where Jacobs (1892, viii) notes:

> Some—as Benfey in Germany, M. Cosquin in France, and Mr. Clouston in England—have declared that India is the Home of the Fairy Tale, and that all European fairy tales have been brought from thence by Crusaders, by Mongol missionaries, by Gipsies, by Jews, by traders, by travellers…..So far as the children of Europe have their fairy stories in common, these—and they form more than a third of the whole—are derived from India. (Jacobs 1892, viii)

In response to Haase's (2010) call to acknowledge the cross-cultural heritage of the origin of fairytales, this study introduces an iconic female villain from Indian folkloric traditions. Although her story is a few thousand years old (at least what can be traced at present), it is known by many people around the world. Acclaimed as one of two

great epics of India (the other being the Mahabharatha), its earliest origins, believed to have been passed down through oral folkloric traditions in various regions and languages, is estimated to have originated between the 4th and 6th centuries BC (Ramanujan 2004). Historians have traced approximately three hundred different versions of the Ramayana in written form adopted across countries such as Myanmar, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, China, and Japan amongst others (Ramanujan 2004; Watanabe 1907).

The Ramayana permeates every aspect of the Indian culture in every form of content imaginable, comparable to fairytale influences in Western societies. Similar to the depiction of Snow White and the Evil Queen as female ideals of the good and the bad in Western fairytales, Sita is upheld as the ideal woman in a righteous Indian society steeped in Hindu traditions while Surpanakha is "othered" as the opposite of this ideal. In this "other" framing, villainesses, irrespective of their origins, often suffer violence resulting in death, to depict the triumph of good over evil (Luthra 2014). The mutilation of Surpanakha is upheld as a just punishment for a woman's transgression of overstepping gender norms to proposition to a man. There are various interpretations of this act as the critical event that changes the trajectory of the plot (Erndl 1991; De Clercq 2016). Similarities of such is also seen in Western fairytales with Cinderella suffering active and passive injuries from her step-mother and step-sisters (Alcantud-Díaz 2012).

Arguments against the stereotypical depictions of female ideals (pure versus evil) and aspirations (happy endings resulting in marrying the handsome prince) have been evident in the waves of feminist critique of fairytale literature in the 20th century (Ragan 2009). Haase (2000; 2004) notes that the works of Suzanne Barcher, Rosemary Minard, Ethel Johnston Phelps, Kathleen Ragan, James Riordan, and Jane Yolen challenge patriarchal gender norms in the literature to subvert such narratives. Feminist 'rewriting' have expanded the genre of folkloric conventions to encode novel discourses challenging troubling patriarchal ideologies that are detrimental to modern societies (Crew 2002; Luthra 2014). Indeed female characters, even the idealized, have little agency in the narrative.

Surpanakha's Relevance in Contemporary India

> Sabhapati ji meri aapse vinti hai Renuka ji ko kuch mat kahiye. Ramayan serial ke baad aisi hansi sunne ka saubhagya aaj jaake mila hai. (Chairman sir, don't stop Ms. Renuka. Ever since seeing Ramayana serial, for the first time I have got an opportunity to hear such a laughter)
>
> *Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, February 7, 2018*

The traditional interpretation of Surpanakha has sustained well into the 21st century. To this day, Surpanakha continues to be referenced in stereotypical ways to draw comparisons of the actions of modern women. In 2018, an incident involving a female politician was widely covered in the national media. Ms. Renuka Chowdhury, a member

of the opposition party, laughed during a parliamentarian session. She was rebuked harshly by the presiding chairman at the time. Mr. Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, and the leader of the ruling party, mocked her loud laughter and jokingly asked the chairman to not censure her with the remark in the above quote (Bhatia 2018). The quote references the exaggerated cackling laughter made famous by an actor essaying the role of Surpanakha in the extremely popular Ramayana television show (Cusack 2012), and refers to Surpanakha's disregard for gender norms of the demure female. In this popular series aired in the 1980s, the exaggerated laughter of Surpanakha as she made her entrance to proposition Rama made a significant impact on the public (Nagpaul 2018). Mr. Modi's censure of Ms. Chowdhury was criticized by the media as a form of gender oppression (Bhatia 2018). Surpanakha trended again on Social Media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) March 2021. Media reports of a physical alter-cation where Hitesha Chandranee, a female customer, uploaded a video of herself on Instagram with her nose bleeding where she narrated the story of being assaulted by a male food delivery service person. In subsequent reports, the male service person accused Chandranee of fabricating the story. While the police reviews the case (Arakal 2021), social media users created and shared memes of Chandranee referring to her as the modern day Surpanakha, falsely accusing a man of a fight which she may have ini-tiated. Thus, be it Renuka Chowdhury or Hitesha Chandranee, women in 21st century India are familiar with societal comparisons to the female characters in the Ramayana in their everyday, mundane lives.

To question such stereotypical depictions, along with the growing interest in In-dia's rich literary folkloric heritage, some women writers are re-imagining such nar-ratives. One must note that feminist retelling of traditional stories is not new in In-dia. Reviews of historical oral traditions by women have found that the male ideal of Rama has been questioned (Rao 1998; Dev Sen 1998). In the 21st century, a myriad of retellings of India's folklore in the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anuja Chan-dramouli, Amruta Patil, Samhita Arni, Sara Joseph, Kavita Kane to note a few, have been received enthusiastically by readers eager to explore their rich literary history (Ramadurai 2021; Sattar 2017). In her review of the portrayal of Surpanakha in the arts and media in modern times, Pillai (2020) reveals the primary depictions continuing along similar plots as seen through centuries, with some exceptions where cinematic portrayals and fictional writings showcase Surpanakha in a more sympathetic light. One such retelling of Surpanakha's story is the fictional novel *Lanka's Princess* by au-thor Kavita Kane published in the English language in 2017 (Binoj 2019). Kavita Kane is noted for her attention to the lesser known female characters in traditional tales. She conducts in-depth research and does not deviate from what is already known about the story or the characters. Her intent is on providing a fictional feminist account of characters that do not have any notable narrative arc in the original stories.

The interest amongst academic scholars to understand the author's retelling of Surpanakha's story is evident in recent works (Meenakshi and Kumar 2021; Srishti 2021). Readers are encouraged to review these studies for an in-depth understanding of the novel. For instance, in her analysis De (2020) reviews Surpanakha's disfigure-ment in the hands of Lakshmana by authors Kavita Kane and Navanita Debsen as

seen through the lens of abusive patriarchy. Similarly, Dirghangi and Mohanty (2019) conclude that Kane portrays Surpanakha as the "new" woman of the modern times who seeks independence from male-centric societal dominance. Asha and Nandini (2019), in their review of Kane's approach to feminist retellings in her novels, note that the author sought to make her readers view the patriarchal subjugations faced by the female protagonists through the latter's point of view. Kane gives voice to the voiceless, thus offering a different perspective than what the traditional versions offer through the male gaze. In her re-imagination of Surpanakha, Kane stays within the traditional view of her role as the villainess while giving her voice and agency by narrating the story from her point of view. Kane's work is comparable to the philosophy of that of Donna Jo Napoli who offers revisioning to empower characters, alter narrative conventions and encode feminist themes and values (Napoli 1993, 2000; Napoli and Tchen 1999). Kane writes in English. Her works have been translated into regional languages. For this study, the novel itself is not the focus. It is the reader's responses that are analyzed as a form of participatory culture.

Methodology and Data Analysis

The purpose of this study is to explore how Lanka's Princess resonated with contemporary readers as articulated in their own UGC, which depict a form of participatory culture in today's networked world (Jenkins, Ito and Boyd 2016). Not content in merely reading books, people are sharing their experiences in the form of online reviews, blogs and social media posts. Since the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, UGC is ingrained in participatory culture. Empowered with digital tools and platforms, users are able to create and share their thoughts and creative output (text, audio-visual content) "at the intersection between old and new media, (and) are demanding the right to participate within the culture" (Jenkins 2006, 24). UGC is understood to be "i) content which is made publicly available, through internet, ii) boasting a certain level of creativity and maybe the most important aspect iii) created outside of professional practices" (Balasubramaniam 2009, 28). Examples of UGC are online blogs, fan fiction, wikis, images and videos prevalent on websites and social media. For the purposes of this study, since the story developed Surpanakha's villainous character that is prominent in its absence in the original version, the readers' perceptions of the re-imagined narrative was of particular interest. Blogs in particular are utilized by women to express their thoughts and feelings in the online domain (Chen and Huang 2020; Kurtz et al. 2017).

Table 1 lists the sources of secondary data gathered through purposive sampling (Kurtz et al. 2017). Simple keyword search of "Kavita Kane" and "Lanka's Princess" was used to access publicly available data using Google's search engine, social media platforms and other websites. The textual content of blog posts and review comments on Goodreads, Amazon India and Flipkart formed the units of analysis of this study. To access these data sources, one can find the book Lanka's Princess on these prominent websites. The review comments of consumers who purchased the book are easily accessible. Several consumers include hyperlinks to their individual blogs that are

also available in the public domain. A majority of the blog posts and reviews were favorable. Adhering to the best practices recommended by Kurtz et al. (2017), personally identifiable information have been removed when presenting quotes in the analysis.

Table 1: Data Sources

Type of Data	Number	Select sources	Data Format
Units of analysis			
Online reviews on E-commerce sites	375	Goodreads.com Amazon.in Flipkart.com	Textual content : Review comments
Online Blogs	37	Blogspot.com Wordpress.com	Textual content : blog posts
Informed the analysis			
Media reviews		Hindustan Times India Today The Hindu Times of India Daily News & Analysis The Statesman The Indian Express	Textual content : News articles on the book News articles on author
Social Media UGC	843 Not counted Not counted 27	Instagram Twitter Facebook Youtube	Audio-visual content and accompanied text in original post, comments, emojis.

Qualitative analysis was adopted to analyze the textual content of the blogs and review posts to examine readers' perceptions of the reimagined story of Surpanakha in *Lanka's Princess*. Qualitative inquiry was appropriate for the purposes of this study, as cultural transference of meanings needed to be interpreted in a nuanced way. Data was analyzed within (e.g blog posts) and across (e.g e-commerce purchase reviews). Additional sources of secondary data that informed the analysis include social media posts, mainstream media reviews of the book, interview videos and transcripts of Kavita Kane in literary festival venues and mainstream media outlets. A hermeneutic interpretivist approach (Laverty 2003) was used to develop codes from emic terms evi-

dent in the data such as gender norms, power dynamics, and cultural systems. These were supplemented with codes from feminist fairytale literature (e.g. androcentrism, renegotiation of patriarchal ideologies) to situate the findings within the context of extant knowledge. Throughout the analysis, the iterative practice of continuous comparisons of the data analysis and the literature (Strauss and Corbin 1998) helped identify emergent descriptive themes. Representative quotes from the UGC of blog posts are utilized to elaborate on the perceptions of the readers of Surpanakha as reimagined in *Lanka's Princess*. These are discussed as follows:

What's in a name? Meenakshi First, Surpanakha Later. In this theme, perceptions of Surpanakha as the beautiful princess of Lanka in the re-imagined narrative takes center stage, rather than the grotesque demon Surpanakha of conventional portrayal. Often female villain characters are used as props to further the plot and perpetuate gender stereotypes (Austin 2014; Fisher and Silber 2000). After they serve the purpose, they are either killed or negated to the background. In traditional depictions, we first see Surpanakha as she happens to encounter Rama in the forest. In *Lanka's Princess*, readers are introduced to her at birth. She is an unwanted girl child. She is named Meenakshi by her father which refers to her beautiful golden hued eyes. UGC blog posts marveled at the fictional story arc that encompass Surpanakha's childhood and growing up years.

> I remember in my younger days where we used to watch Ramayana cartoon at home in one of those old DVRs. This character gets approximately 10 minutes of screen presence, but the most important 10 minutes. (Blogger 1)

> The POV is brilliant. Surpanaka's story is an often neglected one. She gets a secondary appearance (firstly because she is a monstress and secondly as she is a woman) in the epic. I like how Kane weaved the story from Meenakshi's thoughts as a child and the grief she encounters because she is always loved lesser than her brothers. (Blogger 6)

The agency of her story arc, where her neglected childhood and fraught relationship with her parents, resonated with readers. Here, the point of view of the female villain allowed her to reclaim her voice. The absence of the male gaze allowed her to demonstrate low self-esteem stemming from gendered discrimination she faced in her environment.

> It is a tale of a girl, a kid who yearned for love from the ones who mattered most her parents but who faced nothing but ridicule. Always the butt of ridicule Meenakshi or the one with beautiful, fish-shaped eyes finally became Surpanakha the woman 'as hard as nails.' (Blogger 35)

> Meenakshi is the youngest of the children born to Kaikesi, an asura, and Vishravas, a rishi (yes a scandalous intercommunity marriage). She was also the only girl born after 3 sons- Ravan, Kumbha and Vibhishan. One would expect the youngest girl to be petted and pampered, but unfortunately that was not Meenakshi's life. (Blogger 17)

> The childhood incidents of Meenakshi were beautifully narrated, especially the one in which she attacks Ravan with her nails because he killed her pet. (Blogger 14)

It Is Not All Black Or White. It Is Mostly Gray. The reimagination of Surpanakha's life allowed for character development typically subverted by the folkloric bi-polar gender identity depictions (Austin 2014). How the young Meenakshi earned the name of Surpanakha gave the female villain agency and a venue for self-determination. As she tried to save her pet by fighting with her bigger and stronger brother, effective use of her sharp, long nails earned her the name of Surpanakha. The retelling with detailed incidents in Surpanakha's life allows a multi-dimensional portrayal of the progression of the female self (Haase 2000).

> ….as the story progressed I found myself going through a myriad of emotions directed at, and sometimes with, Surapanakha. The story makes you reflect at what is right and what is not, and whether what you've believed them to be so far is the truth. (Blogger 3)

> I felt various emotions for Surpanakha. It's not whether her actions justified the bloodshed and loss but what forced her to take such drastic steps. In retrospect, she suffered a lot. Right from being neglected by her parents and brothers in her childhood to always competing for her parents love. Constantly trying to prove her worth but failing each time. People who were close to her left her. Her father left her after Ravan captured Lanka. Her grandmother whom she had immense respect for was killed. She lost her husband. Her son was killed. Her face was maimed by Lakshman. Suparnakha lived a life of pain and loss. (Blogger 12)

These character development narratives over the course of the novel allowed for a deeper reflection into how Surpanakha attempted to challenge the traditional power dynamics within patriarchy. Due to her lack of power she resorts to manipulations, as the sex-gendered system did not allow her to succeed and resulted in persistent failures. Associating Surpanakha's tactics as trickery resonates in fairytale literature where villainesses, like witches, justify such acts as necessary to overcome the oppressive systems within which they live (Mills 2018). As androcentric views of utilizing extreme measures to get one's way is denounced by society, readers are left to wonder what is right and what is wrong if the system is designed to oppress women (Schimmelpfennig 2013).

> Be it Helen of Troy or Draupadi, women were indirectly the reason behind great wars. In Ramayana, it was Surpanakha who triggered the war by manipulating events and provoking Ravana to kidnap Sita.…. In the first few pages the reader will feel sympathy for the poor Meenakshi. In the later pages, as Meenakshi's happy family gets devastated, she takes no time to show her grey, vamp shades. (Blogger 9)

> All throughout the book, you will alternate between feeling bad for Meenakshi on one hand and on the other hand feeling disgusted with her choices. (Blogger 2)

> Kavita Kané's books usually have lead female protagonists who haven't been given much voice in the telling of the epics. This is a first though, where the lead is an antagonist. Surpanakha as we know her has no redeeming qualities, by the end there is no good in her. (Blogger 27)

Violence Continues To Be Internalized. Gender role expectations are utilized as a comic mechanism with the warning of violence if the women propositions to a man. These misogynistic interpretations of Surpanakha's mutilation are commonplace in social media discourse. Memetic imagery in media and contemporary UGC often contextualize Surpanakha's violent mutilations from a macabre male gaze (Arakal 2021). This theme reinforces the internalized gender norms where UGC comments refer to the incident as a recount of the traditional narrative. The bloggers, the majority women, appear to seek the reclamation of Surpanakha's agency but are ambivalent in engaging with the physical violence, perhaps in deference to prevalent norms of hegemonic masculinity. Agarwal (1995) notes that perhaps it is because of conservative patriarchal structures that protect women who belong and violate those that do not, thus legitimizing the latter. As folkloric traditions often espouse glorification of gendered violence against non-conforming women as a form of patriarchal honor, one can only speculate if the disfigurement of Surpanakha is accepted by modern readers as a symbolic act.

> I knew of her as Ravan's ugly sister who was attracted to and tried to entice Laxman and had her nose and ears cut off as a punishment and to teach her a lesson. (Blogger 3)

> How much do we really know about Surpanakha apart from the fact that she was Ravana's sister? We do know that she had her nose cut off by the hands of Laksham but that is pretty much it. She has always been portrayed as an evil character who was the reason behind the war between Ram and Ravana. (Blogger 25)

Despite the ingrained internalization of violence against women, there are some reader comments likely arising from lived or observed experiences which demonstrate the need for further retelling of these significant events in the story of Surpanakha.

> Lanka's Princess may be a mythological retelling of events. However in today's day and age, when women are still subjected to various forms of discrimination. (Blogger 7)

> Surpanakha's role is often glossed over to one episode where she suffers a nose cut when she makes her advances to Ram and Lakshman in the forest and rushes back to goad Ravan into taking her revenge. (Blogger 29)

> Every woman (and I mean 'every' not 'almost every') I have met in my life experiences some form of abuse, just that the abuser adorns a different role in each case; husband or parent or sibling or colleague or friend and so on. (Blogger 36)

Appreciation of Reimagined Narrative. As Surpanakha gains agency and questions gendered norms in the patriarchal system she was born into, UGC comments appreciated the re-visioning of her place in the story. Where earlier she was a convenient prop, the catalyst that ignited the war between good and evil, *Lanka's Princess* allowed for a space where she is able reclaim her voice and agency. It is her point of view envisioned in feminist retelling (Palmer 2016). The familiar tropes of gender socialization where female characters are pitted against each other is utilized (Zipes 1994). Here Surpanakha is reviled by her mother who favors sons over daughters. However, in the absence of the male gaze with no gendered admonition in the context, one is able to view through the female lens and sympathize with her perspective.

> Surpankha or Meenakshi reminded you of someone who is beyond reason and needed a moment of catharsis to even consider a different viewpoint. It reminds you of a lot of the younger generation today who think the world is out to get them and fail to even consider or notice that the people who care are only looking out for them. (Blogger 8)

> Kavita Kane bravely picked up the most difficult character to narrate the events of Ramayana. Story of Surpanakha was shrouded in mystery throughout the epic. Author did a beautiful job of connecting all dots and filling the gaps with her vivid imagination. One unique element of the novel is the depiction of all shades of feminism, joy and warmth of jovial girl, agony and pain of hurt woman. This novel is a blend of all recognizable-unrecognizable human emotions. (Blogger 13)

> Having grown up despising Surpanakha to an extent due to her antics this story was a refreshing read in terms of the descriptions. The layers of her character brought out so beautifully by the author make her more relatable now than she ever was. It is like trying to see her a new light altogether and in a way try to understand why she behaved the way she behaved.(Blogger 33)

Conclusion

This study answers the call to decolonize and expand the purview of fairytale and folklore literature (Haase 2010) by introducing a famous villainess from the Indian subcontinent's vast trove of traditional literature. India is a Hindu majority country, hence folkloric traditions are intrinsically intertwined with mythological tales that are part of societal tenets. Such folkloric traditions have been crafted both in oral and written versions by men from ancient times to present day renditions in contemporary formats such as books, performance arts, television and films. In this predominantly patriarchal world view, female characters are marginalized with little agency of their own. They are depicted as either the idealized yet subservient heroines or the loathed and indomitable villainesses. The latter in particular are held up as examples

of everything that a woman should not be. The villainess's violent destruction is often the highlight where good wins over evil at the climax of the story. Such established fairytale and folkloric narratives are cultural sources from which millions of women develop their self-concepts, what they can and cannot accomplish, what type of behavior is rewarded and censored, indeed the type of rewards and censors as well (Haase 2000; Lieberman 1972; Zipes 1994). Even in modern media such as comic books and videogames, Sita is the epitome of the ideal Indian woman deserving of a happy ending and Surpanakha is the extreme "other" who meets a violent end (McLain 2001; Austin 2014).

In the 21st century, some women writers are venturing into this male dominated genre to re-write the scarcely developed female characters. This form of intervention is posited as a form of 'refleshing' of these characters by defamiliarizing the masses from the previous version with a new characterization. The notion of 're-vision' is established in post culturist thought of feminist writers and refers to their decision of how to rewrite the original by retaining certain original elements while challenging others (Parsons 2004). This goal is achieved with fictive versions that lend agency to the voices of female and gender queer storytellers (Evans 2011; Fisher and Silber 2000; Palmer 2016). Although fairly recent in India, such feminist rewritings of established mythical and folkloric narratives have been previously published in the West (Carter 1979; Joosen 2004; Le Guin 2008). To re-imagine narratives of these highly revered folklores, particularly in the patriarchal society of India, is a sensitive undertaking. Surpanakha, in particular, continues to be referenced in public discourse to persecute women who deviate from the heteronormative patriarchal gender norms through centuries of the established traditional narrative.

However, modern Indians are also contesting such societal manifestations by reading emergent retellings such as that of Kavita Kane's Lanka's Princess. Moreover, they are generating UGC as a form of engaging in participatory culture to share their thoughts and perceptions of such retellings in online public spaces. The findings of this study demonstrate that modern Indians' evolving perceptions of the negative stereotypical female archetypes welcomes the negotiation of patriarchal ideologies in these reimagined narratives. Subverting black and white characterization of the female villain to where a spectrum of gray is acceptable is cause for celebration.

ORCID

Sarita Ray Chaudhury https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5388-8360

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Response

Sritama Maitra
Loyola Academy
Hyderabad, India

At a time when the rereading and rewriting of canonical texts is done with much fervour, perhaps with respect to mythological texts in particular, and which has expectedly caught the attention of scholars the world over, a subversive, feminist reading of the Indian epic poem *Ramayana*'s arguably minor character, Surpanakha, is timely as well as relevant. There have been several creative attempts in recent times when Indian mythological characters, particularly female characters who did not have a major voice in their original narrative spaces, have been revisited by creative writers. Kavita Kane herself, the author whose novel *Lanka's Princess* (2017) has been selected for this article by Ray Chaudhury, has attempted similar reinterpretations in other novels of hers, such as *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (Kavita Kané 2013), *Sita's Sister* (Kavita Kané 2014), and *Menaka's Choice* (Kavita Kané 2016). Her works may be seen in the larger context of this literary trend of reinterpreting female characters of popular Indian mythological narratives. Some other such famous endeavours, especially by female writers, include *The Palace of Illusions* (Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni 2009), *Yajnaseni* (Pratibhā Rāẏa 1995), *Sita's Ramayana* (Samhita Arni, Moyna Chitrakar, and Vālmīki 2018), *Liberation of Sita* (Volga C Vijayasree T Vijay Kumar 2018), and *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata* (Karthika Nair 2019), among others.

Thus, the text chosen for this study, thus, is particularly well-suited to current literary trends. It is, however, also pertinent from the still prevailing social perspective of women being compared favourably or unfavourably to mythological characters, particularly in India. The sympathetic reconstruction of the character of Surpanakha in the novel, *Lanka's Princess*, assumes an ironic significance in how women in real life are shamed by being compared to Surpanakha, as seen in the Indian parliament as cited by the author in the section of the article entitled 'Surpanakha's Relevance in Contemporary India'. Significantly, the remark alluded to in this section made by the Prime Minister in the Indian Parliament seems to be based on an understanding of Surpanakha's laughter as depicted in a famous television adaptation of the *Ramayana*, called "Ramayan" (Sagar 1987) which is often considered a faithful adaptation of the epic and rules public perception as wholly representative of the epic for many years. A reference made to the allegedly monstrous laughter of Surpanakha as depicted in the television series in order to mock the laughter of a female Member of the Parliament may be seen as an act resulting from a refusal to indulge in critical thinking, since an adaptation can never really stand in for the text it represents. An adaptation is the adapter's take on a particular text, and therefore a completely new text in its own right. A completely faithful representation of the source text is impossible to achieve in any adaptation. An adaptation can also take creative liberties in approaching a text, in accordance with the adaptor's vision and agenda. Nevertheless, the incident referred to bespeaks how popular culture sways public per-

ception in terms of their interpretation of ancient epics. People who may not have read any of the existing versions of the epic *Ramayana* (and there are several hundred versions that exist, as famously seen in the now controversial essay of Ramanujan called "Three hundred Ramayanas: Five examples and three thoughts on translation" (Ramanujan 1991), and several other works on the topic that came later) or people who may only be familiar with certain aspects of the epic transmitted to them through the oral culture of storytelling, which often involves a selective narration of certain parts of famous epics, might strongly associate certain traits with Surpanakha based entirely on her portrayal in the television series. The comment in question appears to have been made in a similar situation. The several epic versions of *The Ramayana* (such as Valmiki's Ramayana (Vālmīki et al. 2021), Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas (Ojha 2003), and the Kamban Ramayana (Kampan 2008)) do not make any mention of Surpanakha's demonic laughter that Ramanand Sagar's televised version does, in addition to several animated versions of the epic made specifically for children's consumption. The reference to Surpanakha's laughter, therefore, is in itself a questionable mythical element since the various versions of the epic do not mention it but television series often depict it to emphasise the demonic nature of Surpanakha as well as to paint her as a villainess. One would expect that when epics that are considered to be holy texts in a country and are cited in parliamentary proceedings, one would refer to the epical narratives themselves rather than the televised artistic recreations of them, but that is not quite the case in daily parlance. If there are so many written versions of *The Ramayana* and so many versions in other media such as television, films, radio shows and graphic novels, one must ask here which of these versions' Surpanakha's supposedly raucous laughter was alluded to in the comment made in the Parliament. Just as there are different Ramayanas, there are several different Surpanakhas too, and the ones created from the point of view of creative works like *Lanka's Princess* offer a human understanding of a largely villainised character. If one had to imagine Surpanakha's laughter in terms of her portrayal by Kane, it would perhaps first be a rather beautiful laughter. In fact, most of the epic versions of *The Ramayana* describe Surpanakha as a beautiful woman with a beautiful smile. Second, it must be a melancholy laughter tinged with sad irony because Surpanakha has been imagined as a wronged and discriminated child who grew up to become a bitter adult in this particular representation. Seen in this light, the meaning of the female Member of the Parliament's laughter's meaning would change entirely and one would then perhaps see her as emitting a sad laughter as an ironical response to a policy she sees as problematic in the Parliament. So, if one is referring to Surpanakha as a devilish woman and her laughter as equally diabolical (in order to establish a real, living woman as equally disgraceful), one perhaps needs to ask: Which Ramayana? Which Surpanakha? Which description of Surpanakha's laughter? The answers would be so baffling that the logic behind the comparison would topple entirely. The reference to this incident in the article, therefore, problematizes not only the general refusal to see the interpretations of mythological characters as non-absolute but also the

problematic vilification of real-life women through their comparison with these mythical figures.

On the other hand, the various kinds of online reviews to *Lanka's Princess* that constitute the analytical matter of this article tellingly make references to alternative understandings of Surpanakha's character. Many of these reader responses rightly perceive the childhood discrimination faced by the character which cancels out the uncritical acceptance of her as an out-and-out monster. The perception of the importance of Surpanakha's backstory as expressed by the readers is encouraging in the critical thinking these reviews reveals. In fact, the last reader comment cited in the article (Blogger 33) shows that some readers are willing to reevaluate their own conventional stance of understanding the character as typically villainous, a stance they presumably held strongly for several years. The obvious limitation of such a survey, however, is that the general public's perception of the characters from mythological stories is not shaped or reshaped by the reading of such alternative narratives. In fact, the desire to read an alternative narrative such as *Lanka's Princess* will stem likely from an earlier reading of at least one or two versions of the several available of the epic, *Ramayana*. But a major part of the general populace would not read the epic followed by a reading of its subversive rewritings, and would rather allow their perception of these epical characters to be shaped solely by their uncritical reliance on depictions of such characters in film and television media, most of which often lead to very simplistic interpretations of rather complex characters, quickly heroizing or villainising them to allow people to take sides conveniently.

As Ray Chaudhury points out, the retelling of a canonical text which strongly shapes public perception of good and evil in Indian society is indeed a difficult and sensitive endeavour on part of an author like Kane. More so because India is a predominantly religious country where even mythological tales written in epical forms such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are believed to depict historical reality rather than fictional. The portrayal of characters as good or evil in such religious mythological texts is considered sacrosanct (even if, ironically, the understanding of these characters is often based on the simplistic televised representations of these epics which are naively regarded as faithful representations and wholesome substitutes of the texts themselves). Any alternative narrative is therefore likely to be seen as a threat to the beliefs of the people, possibly even as a sinful understanding of the canonical texts. It is then indeed a risky as well as brave venture to undertake a sympathetic, especially feminist, rewriting of a character like Surpanakha who is almost unquestionably seen as a villainess in popular Indian understanding. What is definitely encouraging are the online responses of readers to this novel which have been analysed in this study, most of whom have opened up to the possibility of reevaluating the character of Surpanakha. However, in this context, another obvious limitation of this study is that it only takes into consideration the responses of presumably well-educated, perhaps also urbane, readers. These readers would, first, have the interest to read a subversive novel like this and second, have the openness of mind to accept not only the depiction of an otherwise marginalised character brought into the centre of the

narrative as the protagonist of the novel, but also to see the flaws in the traditional black and white reading of her character and admit the possibilities of seeing her character as grey, especially from the point of view of the childhood traumas that she has survived. Ray Chaudhury's article brings into focus the importance of public perception of villainous characters depicted in religio-mythological texts by mentioning the Prime Minister's disparaging comments on a female Member of the Parliament by comparing her raucous laughter to that of Surpanakha's. It needs to be considered that the part of the population (in no way a small minority) that would enjoy, appreciate, and approve of an act of shaming as such would also do so based on their perception of Supanakha's character from televised adaptations of the *Ramayana*, as seems to have been the case with the Prime Minister who made the remark. It is unlikely that they have read any of the existing versions of the text where the description or even mention of Surpanakha's supposedly demonic laughter has, to the best of my knowledge, not been made. This group of people are also unlikely to be interested in reading a subversive version of the character of Surpanakha, as dealt with in the novel 'Lanka's Princess.' It is presumably some of India's city-educated people, endowed with critical thinking skills and an interest in the rethinking of mythology, who would ever pick up such a novel like that and explore its nuances. The popular public opinion of Surpanakha, and by extension, its potential comparison with real women in order to vilify them, therefore is unlikely to be changed by novels like Kane's or the reception of such novels by the presumably well-educated and progressive-minded Indians. One can view the comments section of the video ("PM Modi's Ramayana Jibe in RS Has Renuka Chowdhury Seeing Red | the Quint" n.d.) where the Prime Minister had taken the liberty to ridicule his colleague by an explicit comparison with Surpanakha, and the way several people have expressed their enjoyment and approval of the comment. Books like *Lanka's Princess* are unfortunately meant for a niche readership in India, and therefore, the possibility of a progressive and empathetic relook at characters like Surpanakha also remains limited to such an audience. The impact of a study such as Ray Chaudhury's, therefore, remains equally limited at the social level, albeit highly pertinent and deeply enriching in the scholarly and academic arenas in the ways in which it sheds light on perspectives related to feminism and literary rewriting.

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