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A Deviant or a Victim of Pervasive Stigmatization: Wicked Women in Kavita Kané's *Lanka's Princess*

By Meenakshi¹ and Nagendra Kumar²

Abstract

Building on the foundational theories of Judith Butler and Edwin Schur, this paper scrutinises the traditional myth of the Hindu epic the *Ramayana* and argues: (1) how socially constructed gender performance is naturalised by cultural ideology and (2) how infringement of this performance leads to labelling individuals as deviant. Women who transgress these cultural ideologies are defined as deviant and subjected to various punishments, from public humiliation to genital mutilation. Through an exploration of the novelist Kavita Kané's mythology inspired novel *Lanka's Princess* (2017), this paper focuses on the mythical figure known as *Surpankha* whose character embodies masculine attributes and vilified qualities that contradict the archetypal image of women in India, as prescribed by Hindu scriptures. This paper highlights the consequences of resistance and deviance when it comes to gender performance and examines mutilation from a feminist point of view. We also simultaneously remove *Surpankha* from her archetypal villainous image to the image of a 'wronged' woman. Hence, this study creates a lens for examining femininity, deviance, and ancient gender roles, particularly, when it comes to the performance of gender and the social construction of deviance. In doing so, this paper deconstructs the male-dominated structure of deviance and constructs a new understanding of the *Ramayana*.

Keywords: Mythology, Re-visioning, Gender, Deviant, Performance, Phallogocentric, Phallocentric

Introduction

Common Hindu conceptualisations of women are based on Hindu mythologies and highly influenced by the *Manusmriti*³, the text that underlines the governing principles of life called 'codes' which set out ideal conduct and the rules regarding social life. These scriptures draw strict

¹ Meenakshi is a Ph.D. research scholar at IIT Roorkee. Meenakshi is working on Kavita Kane's novels from a revisionist point of view. The selected novels focus on marginal women characters like Surpankha, Urmila, Menaka, and Satyavati. In this way, the study opens an important space for elaborating the theory of feminism within the Hindu cultural context.

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³ *Manusmriti* is an authoritative Hindu text also known as *Dharmashastra*. It has served as an ethical law text since 200 CE. Regardless of the time, the text still influences modern Indian society and is still upheld as the ultimate ethical guide. It has explained the moral duties that should be followed by every Hindu woman. *Manusmriti* is single-handedly responsible for the secondary position accorded to women in the post-Vedic period.

boundaries for women and posit a clear dichotomy between subversive and submissive women⁴. In mythology, women are either idolised or depicted as fallen women devoid of virtuosity. Women like Sita and Savitri are considered idols because they remain faithful to the patriarchal structure and bear all injustices silently. Hindu epics are also replete with negative images of women that vary; examples include Rakshasi, Tadka, etc. These mythical women occupy our collective consciousness as “emblem[s] of female deviance” (Schur 1984, p. 11).

These biased narratives shape meaning through their use of symbolic constructs and, once established, extend outward into all domains of social structures. Myth is a subject of endless idiosyncratic perception that in itself renders the theme of polar opposition and, which like grammar and language, has a tendency to organise the experience and structure into a restricted channel⁵. Myths help people to understand the “ongoing nature and ever-changing process[es]” (Blumberg, 1979, p.87) of the world and universe. During the past few years, feminist writers have approached and discovered myths from their point of view. Women writers’ visions and experiences are entirely different from men’s in both ordinary and profound ways⁶.

The Indian novelist, mythologist, and feminist, Kavita Kané (b 1966), explores the beauty of marginal women characters’ unconscious thoughts and divulges their erogenous pleasure in her novels, thus deconstructing the androcentric order of the hierarchies “from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies for the same reason” (Cixous 1976, p.1). Her mythology-inspired narratives are distinguished by a deep understanding of the most overlooked Hindu mythical women characters by deconstructing the idea of any grand narrative. Her retellings of Hindu mythologies compel readers to rethink the notion of institutionalized ideologies. This began in 2014 with *Karna’s Wife: An Outcast Queen* and continues with novels such as *Sita’s Sister* (2014), *Menaka’s Choice* (2015), *Lanka’s Princess* (2017), and, *The Fisher Queen’s Dynasty* (2017). In her retellings, she teases out the patriarchal complexities, especially concerning the most overlooked women characters. In an interview with *The Indian Express*, Kané points out,

“Man does not want to let go of what he possesses first, whether it is a house or land. In addition, this is the point where the hierarchy rises... from land to basic needs. In today’s times, it leads to an internal war of anger, jealousy, and hate” (“A Tryst with the Ramayana”).

Kané’s feminist writing of Hindu epics reflects Adrienne Rich’s 1971 essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision”, in which Rich states,

⁴ Hinduism, unlike other religions, lacks a single authoritative narrative. Any belief may be contradicted by someone else. Thus, the Hindu epics are fertile ground for feminists. In the epics, women have been shown ambiguously. Hence these epics have been revised and reinterpreted from a gender perspective. See *Clearing Sacred Ground: Women-Centered Interpretation of the Indian Epics* p. 2-3.

⁵ The word ‘myth’ has been taken from the Greek word ‘mythos’ meaning ‘word’ that tells the true state of things. The Sophists were the first to use this word as *logos* means knowledge. Many myth critics have attempted to objectify these myths from their point of view. From the 19th century on writers have started approaching myth scientifically. Broadly, we can divide myth theory into two parts: theories that situate myth in religion and theories that study myth symbolically. Human attributes in myth exemplify this. Myths relate everything to their origin. Segal has divided the theory based on its origin, functions, and subject matter. See Segal p. 1-2.

⁶ For the last few years, feminist critics have revisited and reinterpreted traditional tales from a contemporary point of view; Tuttle states that they ask a “new question of old text[s]” (p. 184). Revisioning these tales does not mean correcting the narratives but ‘defamiliarizing’ them and in this way discovering mythological women’s desires and dilemmas.

“the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction.... nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call it experimentally by another name. For writing is re-naming” (p. 35, 43).

This study investigates the mythology-inspired narrative *Lanka's Princess* (2017) by Kavita Kané. The novel redrafts the narrative of the *Ramayana* from Surpankha's perspective. The original narrative sidestepped the inner conscience of Surpankha although such prejudiced descriptions in sacred narratives were not uncustomary⁷. Here, Surpankha has been depicted from a phallogocentric world view.

The name Surpankha has become synonyms with demoness and unchaste woman in Hindu society. The *Ramayana* has predisposed Surpankha's character as a monster whose nose is cut off by Lakshmana at Ram's behest, for her attempt at adultery. This misogynistic narrative portrays her as 'inhuman' because she has resisted the *status quo* of Aryan hegemonic society. The Hindu epic *Ramayana* has been interpreted as a moral book for human action. Since Ram has been held up as *Maryada Purshusuttam*⁸, it is essential to discuss the act of mutilation of Surpankha from a feminist point of view as the act sheds light on Ram's sentiments regarding female sexuality in Indian culture. On the other hand, it also examines how these mythologies affect Hindu cultural ideologies. Kané depicts her character as a woman and questions why the beautiful princess Meenakshi is given the infamous name Surpankha. As Kané reveals,

“I wanted to go beyond the stereotype. There is no denial in the fact that her nose was cut off which I think was one of the most violent episodes in the *Ramayana*. But whatever happened to her was it because of her actions? Was she a vamp or a victim?” (2016).

Women have been labeled as 'monsters' for centuries in the narratives that have set the standard for the Hindu conceptualization of femininity, such as Seeta, Savitri, and Draupadi. Deviant women such as Taraka and Surpankha are portrayed as harbingers of destruction, not only for the protagonist but for all of society. According to Mantymaki, all portrayals of wicked women have been drawn from men's point of view, so at first glance this shows men's preoccupation with power, and on the other hand, “it can also be interpreted as a recognition of female power” (2014, p.10).

'Gender' is a word that crops up ubiquitously yet ambiguously. For many centuries the word has been confused with the word 'sex'⁹. In general, the term 'sex' can be understood as an individual's biological identity, while gender “has been employed to refer to social identity” (Brodbeck & Black, 2007, p.12); it is culture specific. With the exposure of gender studies, theorists and scholars have interrogated the clear division of these two words. Foucault claims that

⁷ Surpankha's episode in the *Ramayana* is one of the crucial turning points of the mythology especially from an ethical point of view as it unveils Hindu culture's outlook toward female sexuality and sheds light on the character of Ram. Many writers have interpreted this episode through various points of view as Erndl states “Reflecting a deep ambivalence in the tradition concerning the action of Rama, Lakshmana, and Surpankha herself” (67).

⁸ This is a Sanskrit phrase which means 'the man who is supreme in honor'. Ram is one of the most esteemed deities in Hinduism. In Hindu culture, he is known as *Maryada Purushuttam*.

⁹ Gender studies emerged alongside women's studies in the 1970s. Gender theory provides a pathway to reconsider the power structure in society and narratives.

sex is the concept of discourses and does not exist independently. Sex and gender are intimately related as Glower and Kaplan state “both are inescapably cultural categories that refer to the ways of describing and understanding human bodies and human relationships” (2000, p. xxxvi).

According to Butler, gender is an effect that is produced by an individual's repeated action, speech, and behaviour. She claims, “Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (1999, p. 519). Moreover, they confront clear negative consequences if they fail to perform their respective gender roles based on pre-defined norms. Butler asserts, “Gender proves to be performative that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be” (Butler 1999, p. 10). Her concept of ‘Performativity’ is based on two notions: first, gender does not occur with language, rather it is only about bodies doing things. Secondly, gender is not something that is done by a pre-existing or an unconstrained individual. Gender is not a role that someone chooses, rather it is a decision made by a detached, pre-social, conscious mind. Once gender becomes naturalised it becomes part of reality. Genders are constituted throughout different historical ages, and this is an everlasting process. Moreover, there are social rituals and traditions attached to each gender that render its identity.

Like Butler's theory of performativity, Schur propounded his theory on deviance. The term ‘deviance’ is a sociological concept that remains a hermeneutic tool. It is defined as “An identified difference that the members of a society regard as morally offensive or threatening” (Schur 1983, p. 10). The difference is not merely an unadorned process but a radical one from a collective perspective. Deviance in this regard refers to the dogma, ideology, and narrative about which these differences are produced. Social Psychologist Howard Becker claims that the whole labeling process is selective and targets the people who are politically and socially ‘undesirable’ in society¹⁰. Edwin Schur, much like Butler, argues that women who go against society's prescribed norms are labeled as deviant.

In the patriarchal structure, manhood is something that men must prove while women seem to accept their fate. Women who deviate from culturally ascribed gender norms are portrayed negatively. The cultural construction of women's deviance shows men's preoccupation with concepts of hierarchy and power. Alicia Gaspar de Alba notes, on the portrayal of the wicked women, or as she calls the “bad women” stereotype. She says it “is not object d'art created by an artifice of patriarchy created to oppress women and at the same time promote the interest of men” (2014, p.33). While these digressive approaches “operate to impose control” (Schur 1984, p. 8) they also serve to “keep women under control, or in their “place” (p. 8).

The above theories of Butler and Schur look very appropriate when applied to Kavita Kané's *The Lanka's Princess* as the study focuses on the character of Meenakshi who manipulates her feminine performance and is labeled a deviant. She is fated to pervasive social stigma and earns an ill-famed name, Surpankha. The novel is situated within the tradition of the Revisioning Strategy. It reinterprets the character of Surpankha, who directly challenges the family, home, and prescribed female role, therefore, labeled as ‘wicked’, and an ‘outsider’. She faces negative sanctions when she violates specific gender roles prescribed by the hegemonic class as she suffers drastic consequences and is born as *Kubja* (hunchback) in her next birth. She cries and questions “what did I do so terrible than that I had to lead this life in misery?” (Kané 2017, p. xiii). In her

¹⁰ Becker is an American sociologist also known as a ‘social constructionist’ and ‘symbolic interactionist’. The founder of the labeling theory, Becker's idea of social deviant is not based on an intrinsically deviant individual, rather he claims that they become deviant from being labeled as such. See, Becker.

previous life she is born as a beautiful princess and the sister of King Ravan, but she turned into a monster as Krishna reveals to her, “You were born into a beautiful princess Meenakshi...but your wickedness turned you into a monster-Surpankha, the woman as hard as nails...” (Kané 2017, p.xiii). Hence, she suffers because of her defiantness.

Woman: An Inferior Gender

Meenakshi’s colour and gender label her as “other” from the beginning of the novel. The novel starts with the utterance, “it’s a girl! Kaikesi heard the words as the last wave of pain and relief. *It was a daughter, not a son*, her heart sank, her aspirations drowning in a flood of disappointment and easy tears” (Kané 2017, p. 1). This sentence showcases women’s position in society, as Daly asserts, “To be female is to be deviant by definition in the prevailing culture” (1985, p. 65). Here, the patriarchal institution and social relations are responsible for her secondary status as a ‘girl’. Her sex defines her predefined gender role. The body becomes a physical marker for her identity. In the context of Butler’s theory of Performativity ‘gender’ is something that one should perform. So, in this sense Meenakshi’s gender doesn’t allow her to participate in certain actions as her mother expects from her sons, and the disappointment of her mother is explicit in the following description:

Kaikasi had had three sons from him and was hoping for a fourth, but it turned out to be a daughter ...Kaikasi looked down at the baby and could not help cringing or quench the well of bitterness. This girl has cheated me on my plans, she thought angrily, a faint stirring of unease making her more restless. (Kané 2017, p. 2)

Unlike her three brothers, gender trapped her in a specific definition of performance that is prescribed for her to follow. This confirms the androcentric order of the society that controls women. Surpankha as a girl is placed in a subordinate position. She is expected to be emotional, sensitive, and empathetic, but instead she deliberately fights with boys to save her older brother Vibhishan and gets scolded by her mother, “Vibhishan is a boy and he’s older to you. He doesn’t need your protection!” (Kané 2017, p. 5). The emphasis on Vibhishan’s gender is obvious. Their mother implicitly indicates that as a boy, Vibhishan is capable of protecting himself. She is upset when Surpankha transgresses her territory and tries to challenge the defined gender roles. This instance shows that the term ‘gender’ is more about patterning and shaping an individual being. The mother promotes her son as an individual and encourages ego boundaries thus dividing notions of femininity and masculinity further.

Gender differences can be explicated not only through her character orientation but also through her performance. Surpankha manipulates her ascribed role of femininity, “She sounded Defiant” (Kané 2017, p. 24) as she asks her grandmother, Taraka, “But why am I not allowed to study the Vedas like my brothers, Nani” (Kané 2017, p. 24). Again, she complains about her subordinated status, “But why...Am I not Vishravas’ child too? Then why am I not with my brothers right now who are performing austerities and invoking Lord Shiva’s blessings near Narmada? Am I daft?” (Kané 2017, p. 25). This interaction is useful to assess women’s position in society as it proves the dissymmetrical views of the society that do not allow her to take part in spiritual activities like her brothers. Surpankha's self-assertiveness makes her a deviant woman since “Vedic mantras are not to be recited by women, because women are lacking in strength and knowledge of Vedic texts. Women are impure and represent falsehood” (Buhler 1886, p. 128). As

Manusmriti illustrates, gender norms and conditions are to be followed strictly, and violation of any of these norms can lead a person to be labeled as deviant. This distinction clearly shows that “women were handicapped in their spiritual practices” (Stanley 1997, p. 40). These scriptures, in this sense, render the performance valid and the infraction of this performance constitutes deviance. In this regard, the nature and the basis of the subordination of women is based on these scriptures.

Presentation of ‘Womanhood’

These performances unconsciously aim to reproduce and reaffirm socially accepted norms and naturalizes those acts. Henley and Freeman stated,

“If women are to understand how the subtle forces of social control work in their lives, they must learn as much as possible about how nonverbal cues affect people, and particularly about how they perpetuate the power and superior status enjoyed by men” (1975, p. 475).

Women are the victims of ‘affective deviance’ and they are labeled as deviant and punished by society if they violate their feminine performance. Along with verbal mannerism, non-verbal actions become major determinants of such deviance. In a similar vein of events, Meenakshi deliberately acts out from the conventional role of femininity. She attacks her brother Ravan after he kills her pet, Maya. Overwhelmed by emotion, her attack on Ravan is symbolically representative of her savage nature that falls out of the performance of femininity. The narrative describes the attack:

“Ravan gave a cry of surprise, curdling into a scream of pain, one arm protecting his face against her clawing fingers, the other trying to wrench her off. But she clung on, ripping her sharp nails unto any exposed flesh, tearing the skin, sinking deeper to gouge” (Kané 2017, p. 8).

Meenakshi’s action showcases a manipulated gender performance. She directly displays her aggression and assertiveness; Ravan calls her “a witch with long, sharp claws” out of rage (Kané 2017, p. 8). Because Meenakshi deviates from prefixed behavioral norms she is labeled a witch. Kaikesi scolds her:

“Why can you not behave like a girl? Always fighting and squabbling, hitting boys and throwing stones, and scratching the eyes out of anyone who provokes you. Shurpankha, that's the right name for you, you monster!” (Kané 2017, p. 9).

According to deviant theory, she violates the culturally and socially ascribed norms depicted in derogatory terms by her mother. Meenakshi feels victorious by transgressing her socially prescribed feminine role and says, “Yes, I am a monster! ...baring her claws at her mother. “See them? If anyone hurts me, I shall hurt them with these!! I am Shurpankha!” (Kané 2017, p. 9). Surpankha no longer resembles the subordinate and passive character that is prescribed for the Indian woman. Her resisting spirit scares her mother who questions “was her daughter a monster?” (Kané 2017, p. 9).

This stigmatization usually has several negative psychological and social consequences for the labeled individual. Meenakshi is labeled as a stubborn child, and she carries this image further in the text. Even her father treats her as an ‘outsider’ and doesn’t defend her against her mother’s tirade “but instead had thrown a look of disappointment sighing and shaking his head. He didn’t rush to her defense nor did he draw her close to comfort her” (Kané 2017, p. 11). He makes her leave class and rebukes her, stating “no need for you to attend these classes” (Kané 2017, p. 12). She feels castigated and isolated.

Meenakshi assumes the given label and decides to act accordingly. She becomes Surpankha. Frank Tannenbaum states, “the person becomes the thing he is described as being” (1938, p. 20). In Meenakshi’s case, she associates herself with a monster and the labeling pushes her to other delinquencies. Her self-image alters in her mind as the narrative reveals:

The word monster was echoed to her so often and each time it brought a rush of memories...her mother flinging that word at her, her eyes spitting venom and dislike. Meenakshi shivered. She could not forget that day, nor could she forget words. *Monster. Surpankha* (23).

Meenakshi adopts the name Surpankha as her identity. She reflects on her inferior nature, “I am the monster of the family, and I am never made to forget that!” (Kané 2017, p. 23). In this sense, she accepts the beliefs on which stigma is grounded. Meenakshi’s action appears to be not only against patriarchy but also against intellectual society. The narrative employs ellipses to emphasize how women are labeled as monsters.

Underlying Perception of Deviance and Stigmatization of Women

The threat of men’s perception is a major factor that underlines the deviation of women as men finds their own dominance in danger from the possibility of women’s liberation; “it is, indeed, axiomatic that male dominance depends upon female subordination” (Schur 1994, p. 9). Meenakshi’s love for Vidyujiva scandalises her brother, Ravan, as he finds his power threatened. He warns his sister of this deviance, “I could well kill you with my bare hands right now...I shall marry you off to a beggar but not that bastard!” (Kané 2017, p. 119). The threat of Meenakshi’s liberation in love seems to be intertwined with Ravan’s experience of the very condition of femaleness threatening his power and authority. Unlike other passive women in the novel, Meenakshi raises her voice against men’s tyranny and dares Ravan, “You have no heart, just pride. And that mad urge to rule, be it over land, women or family, you tyrant!” (Kané 2017, p.122). She is a menace to Ravan; “she gloated viciously. She had him now, and she would hold him powerless and gaping in her wrenching hold” (Kané 2017 p.124). At last, she wins her battle against her brother’s wishes but “she did not know what she was going to lose” (Kané 2017, p.125). Men’s authority and domination lead to women’s deviance and subordination. Thus, according to the American radical feminist author and activist, Andrea Dworkin, “the truth of it is that he is powerful and good when contrasted with her. The badder she is the better he is” (1974, p. 44).

This study suggests that Surpankha aka Meenakshi is manipulating her performance of gender to satisfy her personal goals. Butler’s theory suggests that gender is created by performative activity that unconsciously reproduces cultural norms and values, but that still there is room to transgress these norms, thus the body gains meaning in discourses through power relations. By deliberately transgressing her role as a woman Surpankha is able to achieve her goal.

She exists as a vehicle to challenge, manipulate, and, at times fully deconstruct and dismantle the gender constructs of her contemporary society. The study suggests her gendered behavior and the drastic consequences of this violation. After the murder of her husband, Vidyujiva, by her brother Ravan she plots to kill her brother, Ravan, “she wanted to see him dead” (Kané 2017, p. 177) so she could avenge her husband’s death. Surpankha’s actions are initially elucidated as very masculine and deserving of being shamed and stigmatized. The text narrates, “She was like that tigress. If she saw a way out, she would have run, but she was trapped in her grief, churning into fury” (Kané 2017, p. 175). She embodies something exceptional on this particular point. Edwin Schur, comments:

When a woman achieves to an extent or in ways that stereotypical notions describe as beyond female capacities, it is assumed and said that she must be ‘exceptional’...it is not just an assertion that most women do not do these things, but rather an implicit claim that ‘typical,’ ‘normal,’ and even ‘natural’ women do not and cannot do them. Such reasoning allows the categorical type to stand, as does the description of a woman who behaves contrary to type as ‘acting like a man,’ or as being ‘masculine’ (1994, p.30).

The theory suggests that when women surpass their normally held gendered behavior, perceived to be followed by femininity, they are labeled as ‘inhuman’ or ‘exceptional’. Surpankha’s mother criticises her, “you were always ugly...mean, vindictive and ...oh, so unlovable! You are Surpankha not my daughter but a monster” (Kané 2017, p. 174). Surpankha exhibits a self-indulging need for revenge which wins over her consciousness. The words of her mother, “you’ll make life hell for us!” foreshadow the impending ruin of the family as she fears now what her character is capable of. Surpankha promises to herself, “And I will...for each one of them. From today I would be the Surpankha” (Kané 2017, p. 175). She deliberately and actively decides to destroy what is closest to her, to punish her brother, Ravan, and to satisfy her wishes for justice. Here, her self-image is highly influenced by other people's opinions, termed as “Looking glass image” by Cooley (1902, p. 152).

She plays the role of the victim to accomplish her purpose, and she performs femininity to intrigue Ravan. She urges to him, “I was mad, brother, when I heard the news of Vidyujiva's death, not now,’ ...and I apologize for the terrible words I uttered. To all of you, especially you, Ravan” (Kané 2017, p. 176).

This passage is weighted with irony as she inculpates her invective on her abrupt emotions and successfully enshrouds her true motives as she resolves secretly, “you shall pay for it dearly with your life” (Kané 2017, p. 176) but she tries to assuage his fear and tries to pretend like a subdued female, “You are our savior, you have always thought of family first. It took me a long, painful time to realize that” (Kané 2017, p. 177). The speech represents her vilified nature and disingenuous performance. In the context of Butler’s theory of identity and gender performance, her performance constitutes subversive resistance itself. She performs this necessary feminine role to effectuate her own goals. The deception of this performance, however, serves to deconstruct the patriarchal order and constructs her behavior. In this regard, she challenges the masculine sphere. Surpankha successfully disguises her inner self under her gendered performance.

Stigmatizing Sexuality of Women

The question of deviance could easily be swept away under Manu's statement that gives Hindu society a single ideological lens to set their performance, rules and regulations where male and female deviants are treated differently. Hindu ideology is imbued with a patriarchal ethos and reproduces patriarchy interminably. These norms, when followed accurately, provide reassurance of their identical essence, while women who choose culturally deviant sexuality risk being labeled as wanton, witch, and monster.

Sexual behavior norms are a controversial topic in patriarchal societies. While sexual behavior norms can vary, they all still address the basic question regarding 'normal' sexuality and the border between deplorable, prohibited, and inappropriate sexuality. In a similar vein of thought, a psychiatrist notes that "from the feminist point of view, sexual liberation can be a conservative force in society, insofar as it enshrines the status quo as bedrock..." (Person 1980, p.60).

In the novel, the deviant character of Surpankha has been compared with the pious character of Sita, the submissive wife of Ram, whose "power must be controlled to suit the purpose of a patriarchy society" (Richman 1991, p. 83) whereas Surpankha is "unattached and wanders about freely ...it is Surpankha's status as an independent woman which is denounced" (Richman 1991, p.84). Although men are also divided into categories of virtuous versus atrocious, the division of women is far more delineated and expressed in terms of sexuality. When a woman like Surpankha violates her expected performance—her desire for Ram and Lakshmana is described as destructive and manipulative—it is often ascribed to their female character: "Women are often perceived and responded to primarily in terms of their category membership as female, first and foremost. Such responses may itself carry a certain degree of stigma, since relatively speaking femaleness is a devalued status" (Schur 1994, p.7). As a male character, Ravan's immoral deeds are never described as coming from his male nature. He rapes Rambha and tries to rape Vedawati, who saves herself by jumping into a yagna¹¹ fire. Ravan goes unharmed as his mother placates her son's deed, "it's done. She's gone. Don't think much on this ...I shall find you a better girl" (Kané 2017, p. 86). This prejudiced attitude reflects the dominance of male privilege and male power.

Surpankha's desire for two married men is described as,

"She wanted those two men just as she had wanted Vidyujiva. She wanted to share something, to blot out this awful loneliness...that was the kind of help she wanted, and yet how few could or would give her that?" (Kané 2017 p. 195).

Her desire violates the 'sacred societal bonds' and in turn, she is labeled as deviant. Hence, she must face catastrophic fate for her deed. It seems she deviates from her social performance by desiring these two men. She also tries to attack Sita and receives an admonition from Ram. He commands Lakshman, "Lakshman, take care of this unvirtuous ruttish *rakshasi*¹² and teach her a lesson she will never forget!" (Kané 2017, p. 201). Here, Ram represents a male authority who upholds masculine norms. He actively looks to re-establish the structure of male dominated society by putting Surpankha in a 'rightfully' subordinated position. As Henley and Freeman succinctly

¹¹ Yagna in Hinduism refers to a Vedic ritual performed in front of sacred Agni (fire). The word has its roots in Sanskrit meaning, to sacrifice, devotion and honour.

¹² The Sanskrit word '*Rakshasa*' can be traced to '*Rigveda*' which means 'one who consumes raw flesh'. The female equivalent of *Rakshasa* is *Rakshasi*. In Malay and Indonesian, it means 'Monster'. They have been depicted as ugly and hideous in the Hindu epics. In the epics, they are the popular race. They are both virtuous like Vibhishan and dreadful like Ravan.

state, “women are constantly reminded where their ‘place’ is and that they are put back in their place, should they venture out” (1975, p. 474). This is a process of devaluing women by using stigma laden norms.

She is labeled as *Rakshasi* by Ram who symbolizes the power structure and male dominance. It shows the dual nature of male dominated ideology. Surpankha embraces culturally deviant sexual desire and consequently she is condemned and marginalized by the dominant group. Ram orders Lakshmana to maim off her nose: “Maim her...she will remember her dishonorable crime and not attack a helpless woman again” (Kané 2017 p. 202) Here, mutilation is the consequence of her deviant nature as the nose is considered a symbol of honor; by cutting off the nose she is traditionally punished for her deviance and it is made visible. She pays the penalty for that “horrific crime”. It’s a kind of mechanism that imposes restriction and limitation on women’s behavior. She describes her censored horror:

Maim her, what weird barbarity was this and for what...for displaying desire for these two handsome men...what were they furious about me attacking Sita or me assaulting their chastity, their moral righteousness? Was it their apprehension for my uninhibited behavior, assuming it to be an overt vulgarity, an open display of unleashed carnal anarchy? Was that they had laughed at me, reticulating me in their contempt and amazement, their arrogant condescendence condemning me for my feminine profanities? (Kané 2017 p.202).

The immediate reason for Surpankha’s disfigurement seems to be her attempt to kill Sita. However, the implied reason is her attempt at adultery that makes her action punitive. Alicia Gasper de Alba puts it, “Sex empowers the body. Sex is agency, the enactment of desire, and in patriarchy, the only ones permitted to enact their desire are men; women’s sexuality has to be scrutinized, proscribed, protected, or punished at all times” (2014, p. 161). In this sense she is punished for her deviant behavior and stigma is attached to her identity.

This episode substantiates a crucial turning point in the narrative’s point of view as it sheds light on the character of Ram and his attitude toward female sexuality. It also brings forth the double standard of morality in which women are expected to be faithful while it is acceptable that men might amuse themselves with women other than their wives. This prejudice has been highlighted in the text as Mandoodari says to Surpankha:

“All for our men; we dress up for them, we keep house for them, we have their children, we carry on their lineage, and we even suffer for them, and deal with their vanities and a lot else...why? Because we love them!” (Kané 2017, p. 155).

Women lose their individuality and devote their lives to keeping men happy. These traditional roles prescribed for women enable their subjection and oppression.

Conclusion

This castration story of Surpankha evokes a particular kind of abysmal woman that faces a negative destiny, becoming a part of Hindu mythology. Kavita Kané has projected an alternative story by breaking established patriarchal myths and recreates a woman censored consciousness. Dismissive images of women are founded on the men’s anxiety. According to Cixous, “we need

our writers to do, to make us recognize that the “tales of crime” that we shiver to read are really about ourselves, ‘though under an assumed name, under a pseudonym...’ (1990, p. 84).

Surpankha is a deviant woman who violates patriarchal norms and is thus negatively portrayed in established Aryan hegemonic ideology. Her character has been represented in a complex and multi-layered structure outside of her contemporary dominant ideology that shows the image of women in contemporary society as one who is born to lose: “when a woman turns from prey to predator, out of anger or vengeance, she doesn’t win. Even if she does on the surface, her victory leads to total disaster” (Sen 1998, p. 27).

Surpankha’s destruction seems to suggest that resistance is not possible when it challenges the male oriented society and their agency; it proves that one either supports it or faces the dire consequences. To conclude, since Surpankha doesn’t accept her subordinated position, she is dehumanised and portrayed as a destroyer of the family. She is not presented as a strong woman with a will and courage of her own, but as a monstrous being. Further, this study also suggests that against the backdrop of systematic dichotomies of gender performance Surpankha appears to hold out against her contemporary code of conduct. However, since ‘gender’ is a socially constructed phenomenon, it is thought to be alterable and deconstructable. Thus, Surpankha’s depiction as a monster can be correlated with men’s oppression and aggression.

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