Reclaiming the 'Bitch': Surpanakha's Journey to Self-Actualization in Kavita Kané's "Lanka's Princess"

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Abstract
In the intricate tapestry of Hindu epics, vilified women, particularly Surpanakha, have been persistently portrayed as embodiments of female malevolence. Within Valmiki's *Ramayana*, she is depicted as both a monstrous witch, symbolizing dark femininity, and an unruly whore, representing unbridled desire and chaos. This portrayal has perpetuated a damaging archetype, leading generations of Indian girls to internalize fear or abhorrence of Surpanakha. The pervasive nature of this phallocentric narrative underscores the formidable power of patriarchal constructs in demonizing and marginalizing women who transgress societal norms. To subvert this persistent image, this study explores Surpanakha's individuation quest in Kavita Kané's feminist retelling, *Lanka's Princess* (2017). Utilizing Anis Pratt's framework of the Novel of Rebirth and Transformation, the research elucidates how Surpanakha undergoes a profound metamorphosis by centering her narrative within a personal, rather than patriarchal, space. Anchored in Pratt's framework, which aligns with Carl Jung's concept of the "individuation" process, this study also re-evaluates Surpanakha's so-called 'bitch' tendencies. These traits, traditionally stigmatized, are reconceptualized as pivotal in her quest for self-actualization. Consequently, this research posits that Surpanakha need not expunge these tendencies from her psyche but rather embrace them to enrich her existence as a fully individuated feminine archetype.

Keywords: The 'Bitch', Surpanakha, Anis Pratt, Individuation, Kavita Kané, Carl Jung, Feminist Retelling

Introduction

Kavita Kané's novel, *Lanka's Princess* (2017), reimagines the story of Surpanakha, an evil demoness in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Surpanakha, the younger sister of Ravana, King of Lanka, is pivotal in the epic, instigating events that lead to the decimation of Ravana and his kinsmen. Traditionally portrayed negatively, Surpanakha symbolizes the patriarchal suppression prevalent in Hindu mythology, where even revered women like Sita[1] are marginalized. Kané's novel challenges this portrayal, presenting Surpanakha not as a monstrous figure but as a resolute, fearless woman who endures hate and loss yet fights back. By retelling Ramayana from her perspective, Kané aims to correct the flawed representation of women in mythology, who are condemned persistently as a 'bitch'[2] by emphasizing their strength and conviction.

Using a feminist lens, Kané chronicles Surpanakha's life, highlighting her struggles and development as a woman in a powerless position. This narrative aligns with the female individuation journey, a literary framework that supports women's self-creation and experience expression, challenging androcentric traditions (Friedman, 1981). Due to this prevalence, I am able to engage in an investigation on Surpanakha's individuation journey based on the literary framework by Annis Pratt: Novel of Rebirth and Transformation which principally draws upon Carl Jung's schema of *Wiedergeburt.*[3] It also fundamentally details older women's quest—having lived through various feminine and masculine roles and having rejected a good many social expectations, they attain a state of unity with the green-world and with the universe (Pratt, 1981)—for self-knowledge and fulfilment. With this framework, I am provided with a premise to re-evaluate traditional stereotypes prevalent in Hindy mythology as the retelling of *Ramayana* from Surpanakha's viewpoint works as an excellent entry point to unearth the blind spots at the very core of this traditional epic as well as help to shed light on the necessity of Surpanakha's 'bitch' side to attain a meaningful existence. Rather than propounding misogynistic images of Surpanakha as a potent warning for the female readers, this study wishes to contribute to the burgeoning movement of reclaiming the 'malevolent and wicked' women within the feminist literary canon with interpretations and analysis that focus on Surpanakha's individuation journey.

Meenakshi's[4] Shadow (Animus)

To be able to observe and decode the individuation journey of Surpanakha within Pratt's inductive outline of the rebirth journey which consists of five phases, it is vital to first identify her shadow (animus) as Jung explains:

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[1] Sita is the consort of Rama. Her abduction by the demon king Ravan and subsequent rescue are the central incidents in the Hindu epic, *Ramayana*.

[2] Beverly Gross contends that "the 'bitch' means to men whatever they find particularly threatening in a woman and it means to a woman whatever they particularly dislike about themselves. In either case the word functions as a misogynist club" (1994). Sarah Aguiar further details that the 'bitch' is seen with apprehension because of her domineering traits like independence, anger, aggressiveness, heartlessness, and carnality which all suggest that she is "incapable of the "desirous" traits of "true" womanhood, especially love, loyalty, altruism, and self-sacrifice" (2001). Hence, the 'bitch' is not necessarily as malevolent a figure as she has been commonly portrayed (although she is most definitely a threat to the established order); her offence was to express the truth and this very act opposed the male order.

[3] A rebirth process which helps an individual to renovate and transform his/her self by bringing all his/her faculties (e.g., the ego, the shadow) into consciousness (Pratt, 1981).

[4] Surpanakha is initially named Meenakshi (the girl with fish-shaped-eyes). Her adoption of the name, 'Surpanakha' transpires only later during an ill-fated episode of her life, hence until then, I'll be addressing her with her birth name.

> The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge. (Jung, 1979)

Surpanakha, originally named Meenakshi, was always considered second-best in her family. Her parents favoured her brothers, especially Ravan. Her childhood was marked by neglect and cruelty, leading to deep resentment and bitterness. Her brother, Ravan nicknamed her 'Surpanakha', meaning "witch with long, sharp claws" (Kané, 2017) after a brutal fight. This vengeful, malicious, 'bitch' side became her shadow. Growing up perturbed and at loggerheads with most of her family members, viciousness and discontentment became an intrinsic part of Meenakshi. As she allows herself to be consumed with wrath whenever she embodies her 'bitch' self in the face of discomfort, it clouds her judgement and she develops a pathological disposition to hold others, mainly Ravan, culpable for all her miseries (Kané, 2017). In the words of Ursula K. Le Guin, "Unadmitted to consciousness, the shadow is projected outward, onto others. There's nothing wrong with me—it's them. I'm not a monster, other people are monsters" (1975).

Additionally, due to her family's chronic conflicts which always meander towards scapegoating her, Meenakshi carries emotional scarring that has left her feeling like a pariah: "I am the monster of the family, and I am never made to forget that!" (Kané, 2017). All this festers into a deep wound that has made her feel victimised and keeps her obsessed with her need for vengeance and apportioning blame whenever she feels wronged and broken-hearted. However, as she blooms into a maiden, she learns that her 'bitch' self (animus) is despised and is deemed undesirable by others, especially the men around her, so much so that she develops a sense of disquietude towards this tendency of hers (Kané 2017, 23). In the face of injustice and discrimination in her adulthood, she learns to repress this fiendish side and does not act out like she used to when she was younger; however, she continues to harbour her feelings discreetly and resentfully (Kané, 2017). But for all that effort, her constant rejection of her shadow causes projection and according to Whitmont:

> These projections eventually so shape our own attitudes toward others that at last we literally bring about that which we project. We imagine ourselves so long pursued by ill will that ill will is eventually produced by others in response to our vitriolic defensiveness. (1991)

This mechanism allowed her ego to defend itself, maintaining a false identity within society. She adopted a 'good' persona, complying with patriarchal expectations, believing it made her noble and virtuous (Kané, 2017). This psychological projection isolated her from reality, relating not to the world as it is, but to the distorted version her shadow showed.

Evidently, if not misunderstood or unappreciated, Surpanakha is, at length, denied the space to develop and actualize into a fully individuated woman in her youth just as Dale Spender in *Feminist Theorists* (1983) elaborates that women shut in a male-dominated society will have learnt to devalue themselves as he says, "if they have learnt their lesson well, women will have emerged with their confidence undermined, their assurance dissolved and their sense of self debased." However, not all is lost. Although Surpanakha had to weather her powerless position and constantly battle her shadowy 'bitch' self in her prime and youth, she—after experiencing wifehood and motherhood—braves the five phases put forward by Anis Pratt in

her framework: Novel of Rebirth and Transformation and achieves self-knowledge. Her journey to her self is expounded below:

Phase 1: Splitting off From Family, Husbands, Lovers

At first, the quester rejects conventional social roles, feeling emotionally and psychologically separated from the community of which she forms a part (Head, 2009). The distancing takes place due to the quester's "acute consciousness of the world of ego and of consequent turning away from societal norms that the author often graphically and specifically details" (Pratt, 1981). Despite her low self-confidence, Meenakshi grows into an attractive woman with a strong mind. She stands out as the only woman in the novel who marries Vidyujiva by her own choice —a 'bitch' move as she defies cultural norms (Kané, 2017). However, her happiness is fleeting. Vidyujiva's kindness hides his unfaithfulness and plans to overthrow Ravan. Unaware of his true nature, Meenakshi believes Vidyujiva is faithful despite family warnings (Kané, 2017). Vidyujiva is eventually killed by his own soldier due to his extramarital affair (Kané, 2017). Blinded by love, Meenakshi blames her family for his death, believing they orchestrated it to protect Ravan's throne: "But my family in their own distrust of him, had destroyed him, had destroyed the love, and destroyed me too" (Kané, 2017). Her repressed emotions surface violently, showing distrust towards her family and belief that they caused her setbacks. Meenakshi's psyche may have allowed temporary obscurity of these emotions in the past but in an unbearable situation such as this, she is compelled to face them. Jung explains that everything that makes a person must be acknowledged and lived, including the shadow because "it is a living part of the personality and therefore wants to live with [the personality] in some form. It cannot be argued out of existence or rationalized into harmlessness" (1991).

Amidst the turmoil of Vidyujiva's death and lack of familial sympathy, Meenakshi can no longer conceal her shadow. She embraces her shadowy 'bitch' self, Surpanakha, integrating her rejected aspects. As Jung's concept suggests, "[t]he shadow usually contains values that are needed by consciousness, but that exist in a form that makes it difficult to integrate them into one's life" (Franz, 1991). Surpanakha rises to the challenge, embracing her shadow as she prepares to leave for the Dandak Forest, driven by vengeance. No longer repressing her darker side, Surpanakha, brooding with palpable anger and consuming revenge, leaves the golden palace—a 'bitch' move because it takes her out of prescribed patriarchal boundaries—despite Ravan's guilty cajoling to stay under his protection; breaking the cycle of patriarchal hegemony of controlling femininity. Ideally, ancient Hindu women are located within the palaces and homes, controlled and confined under the supervision of male members of the family (Chakravarti, 1993) and Surpanakha, a widow now, is expected to seek and be treated in such a way as per the regulating ideal. At this stage, Surpanakha "separates herself from the feminine" as proposed by Murdock who postulates that the female hero has to abandon the false feminine values embedded in her culture at the inceptive step of her quest to self (1990).

Phase 2: The Green-World Guide or Token

In this stage, the ordinary transforms into extraordinary significance, and the quester is helped to "cross the threshold" of reality by a green-world guide or token (Eckard, 2002). When Vidyujiva is murdered, Surpanakha senses something is wrong, but awareness and addressing it are different. Although Surpanakha embraces her darker twin, she hasn't fully comprehended her shadow; as she wears it merely to exact revenge on Ravan. Franz, in

favour of this, explains that individuation could only be possible, "…if one focuses attention on the unconscious without rash assumptions or emotional rejection"; only then would "a flow of helpful symbolic images" break through to help with the process (as cited in Jung, 1964).

Surpanakha's emotional disquiet means she must open up to her unconscious to access hidden archetypes. This only happens when she attains centricity in an apatriarchal space, which she does, appreciating her new environment due to her green-world guide—memories of Vidyujiva that comfort her in the Dandak Forest (Kané 2017, 180). The forest becomes her sanctuary from patriarchal pressures left in Lanka. Her childhood dream of green freedom, lost when she moved to Lanka, is now realized. In the forest, she reunites with her Eros and Logos, transcending gender norms and achieving an androgynous state (Kané 2017, 182).

Surpanakha appreciates the green-world where she can be herself, though there is dissatisfaction from her thwarted attempts to become a fully realized human in patriarchal culture. Reflecting on her love for this wilderness, she confesses she doesn't struggle for personal authenticity here: "This was her Dandak, her Janasthan, the place where she had been reborn from Meenakshi to Surpanakha" (Kané, 2017). However, her transformation acknowledgment seems misleading; while aware of her darker side, she hasn't balanced her conscious attitude with the unconscious influence. She discards Meenakshi for the shadowy Surpanakha, but totality means nothing is excluded, as Jung believed that "…while the self-conscious ego emerges out of the total self, it is the interaction of the whole personality, rather than the action of the sovereign ego, that gives the self its potential for unity and wholeness" (1980) hence, her individuation is far from being concluded as brandishing the 'bitch' Surpanakha alone at the expense of obliterating Meenakshi points to her imbalanced sense of self.

Phase 3: The Green-World Lover

In this phase, an idealised, nonpatriarchal lover turns up to guide the quester through difficult courses of the quest. Pratt explains that this green-world lover may be a real person, an idealized figure found in reverie, or even an animal (1981). After becoming a widow, Surpanakha is expected to abstain from engaging with her Eros, but this is counterproductive to achieving selfhood as Eros is crucial for personal growth and maturity (Pratt, 1981). Despite cultural prohibitions, Surpanakha, embodying her 'bitch' side, lusts after Ram and Lakshman, princes of Ayodhya. This attraction is fated, as Surpanakha is destined to be romantically entangled with them across centuries. Sometimes they are her idealized lovers; other times, they are authoritative figures (Kané, 2017), always interacting with her as natural and sexual forces being her "Pan …internal Adonis" (1981). Despite her interest in them, she could not help but feel guilt for her attraction towards her eternal lovers, Ram and Lakshman; however, she remembers the words of her grandmother "that there was no shame in desiring a man, that a self-assured woman can be comfortable with her flowing urges and desires" and decides to pursue them (Kané, 2017). Her hesitation is understandable as widows in her social milieu are not afforded with much autonomy and Pratt defends this tendency as she says, "[W]omen heroes often blame themselves for their own normal human desires, warping their quests for Eros, for example, by internalizing patriarchal norms about feminine sexuality" (1981). By being a 'bitch'—choosing to initiate sexual intimacy with a man—Surpanakha destroys her society's taboos and imbalanced gender polarisation, crucially learning new insights and meanings attached to her femininity. This awareness is essential as Pratt postulates that "erotic autonomy" is one of the core values that shapes the totality of self

or individuation for women, and this is what women desire to achieve alongside "meaningful social roles and celebration of femininity" (1981).

Despite her interest, they spurn her advances, professing to be married. Then again, they do it unkindly by toying with her feelings which calls attention to their ethically problematic way of treating women (Kané, 2017). Feeling insulted and ill-treated by the both of them, Surpanakha, by habit, quickly lays the blame on others; this time round, it is Sita: "She was the reason why Ram had rejected her…She was the one who had come between both the men, snatching them away from her" (Kané, 2017) and attacks her. Defending Sita, the brothers maim Surpanakha to teach her a lesson about her "uninhibited behavior" and "unleashed carnal anarchy" (Kané, 2017). Surpanakha is vilified and treated dreadfully for moving about the forest without a male protector and boldly articulating her passionate feelings. It is incontrovertible here that a "loose woman" like Surpanakha, while perceived as dangerous to notions of domesticity and asceticism, also holds a certain fascination for the male imagination. This is perhaps why Ram and Lakshman linger a bit, egging her on rather than banishing her immediately, underscoring the discriminatory workings of patriarchy (Erndl, 1991). Ram and Lakshman, although clearly not close to resembling the figure of an ideal, nonpatriarchal lover in this incarnation, remain as her "Pan and internal Adonis". Her existence, whether as Kubja, Phulwati, or Surpanakha, is always intertwined with them, as seen in both the prologue and epilogue (Kané, 2017).

Importantly, her encounter with them triggers her to move forward in her quest for her self and "confront with the figures from the past", when she storms back to Lanka for Ravan's aid to wreak revenge on Ram and Lakshman. Their intervention implicates her spiritual quest as they have played their part of a "guide" and a "vehicle" at the most difficult point of her quest; they direct her focus (although not in an ideal way) towards addressing her crusade for revenge which subsumes her quest towards totality of self. She risks diverting from her quest when her initial desire to merely "blot out her loneliness" (Kané, 2017) and exercise erotic authenticity transmutes into a desire to embrace wifehood once again when she becomes greatly enamoured by them (Kané, 2017). As with Pearson and Pope's model of the female hero's quest, Pratt views the quest for love as a deterrent to the larger quest for self. The interaction with the green-world lover should be treated like a pitstop; further pursuing it would cause the hero to pay a heavy psychological price—"an abortion of selfhood" (1981).

Phase 4: Confrontation With Parental Figures

The quester who has abandoned her society due to "disenchantment with her past" must still come to terms with parental figures that reside in the subconscious, the "repository of personal memories" (Pratt, 1981) and "reconcile with them" (Head, 2009) so that the quester "can proceed to unlock her own unconscious resources…and complete her quest for renewal" (Pratt, 1981). Surpanakha, disfigured by Ram and Lakshman, returns to Lanka to pit Ravan against them and avenge her humiliation (Kané, 2017). Arriving in Lanka, she experiences memories of her mother's harsh treatment, indicating unresolved childhood trauma (Kané, 2017). Her mother's harsh words and unforgiving treatment of her still haunted her: "Be a woman, Meenu, not a self-absorbed snivelling urchin. I can't bear self-pity. You should be ashamed! Ashamed!!" (Kané, 2017). This tips us off that she has yet to transcend the cruelty and toxicity she has suffered at the hands of her mother her childhood. Unlike a nurturing mother who fosters self-worth and confidence (Forward & Glynn, 2013), Surpanakha's mother treated her cruelly, impacting her psyche and behaviour. Even after marriage and motherhood, Surpanakha struggles with her mother's toxicity, which distorts her sense of self

and place in the world. This is not unforeseeable as "girls define their emerging womanhood by identifying and bonding with their moms. But when that vital process is distorted…they're left to struggle alone to try to find a solid sense of themselves and their place in the world" (Forward & Glynn, 2013).

Clearly growing up feeling lonely and unmothered, Surpanakha embodies the image of "unnurtured daughters" as described by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* (1986) as she develops the tendency to "follow blindly any person who offers her the slightest maternal warmth" (as cited in Abudi, 2010). She marries Vidyujiva, seduced by his tenderness, despite knowing his flaws. This leads to an unhealthy relationship, making her vulnerable to exploitation. Her loyalty to Vidyujiva, even after his death, worsens her family relationships, bringing catastrophic consequences (Kané, 2017). To overcome this vulnerability that she develops due to the absence of a loving and nurturing mother, Surpanakha, as Nancy Chodorow puts forward, must go through a "severance" with the mother even if it is "prolonged and painful" (1978). This process culminates when Kaikesi, learning of Ravan's death, confronts Surpanakha. Surpanakha realizes she's always been the black sheep and grasps the extent of her mother's hatred. Her mother's cruel words confirm she'll never be accepted by her family for her distinct 'bitch' self: "Each of my sons was born to fulfil my dream of Lanka but I always suspected you were born a monster, born to ruin my family, my Lanka" (Kané, 2017).

She leaves Lanka with far more clarity about her mother's animosity towards her which plagued her conscience from her childhood (Kané, 2017). This time round, Surpanakha leaves resolutely and stout-heartedly like the 'bitch' that she is as encouraged by Chodorow: "She would never look back" (Kané, 2017). Her confrontation with her mother is the key to her imminent plunge into the unconscious as Marianne Hirsch details that if a continued allegiance to the mother appears as regressive and potentially lethal, it must be transcended; a daughter can only culminate her true self by an angry and hostile break from the mother (1989). Surpanakha achieves this, at long last.

Phase 5: The Plunge Into the Unconscious

After addressing her subconscious figures, the quester journeys "toward the unconscious proper, the realm from which the green-world lover and the guide or token have summoned her" (Pratt, 1981). These two figures are "matrilinear", meaning to originate from "a realm of inherited feminine power quite different from patriarchal culture" (Pratt, 1981). It is at this point that by plunging into the unconscious, according to Jung's description of the individuation journey, the new individuated self is born—a self which contains elements of the shadow—the animus as well as the anima and in which both masculine and feminine aspects are reconciled (qtd. in Tebbetts, 1989). Pratt warns that the individuation journey can either finish the hero off entirely or provide a turning point in her quest (1981).

Surpanakha, deemed as the 'bitch'—aggressive, boisterous, splenetic, and lascivious—has yet to come to terms with these male-specific traits, which assimilate into her shadow self. She wears her shadow to avenge her husband's death by destroying Ravan but hasn't addressed her imbalanced sense of self. Even after Ravan's death, she persists with revenge-seeking behavior, targeting Ram and Lakshman for mauling her and slaying her son, Kumar in the Dandak Forest (Kané, 2017). This aligns with Whitmont's view that true self-awareness begins when we see ourselves as we are, not as we wish to be (1991). Surpanakha addresses her shadow through a confrontation with Lakshman and his consort, Urmila, in

Ayodhya. Lakshman's sincere apology for Kumar's death fills her with compassion, a new emotion for her (Kané, 2017). This unusual reaction from Surpanakha during one of her most vulnerable moments does not go unsupported as Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche explains:

> There is a natural impulse in us toward balance just as there is a natural pull toward increased awareness and spiritual growth. Both can be perverted or denied, but the wisdom that can lead us toward balance is inherent in our being. (2002)

When Surpanakha is filled with compassion, an emotion that is quite foreign to her during a heated, provocative juncture such as this, she learns this side of hers that has stayed hidden all this while and this occurrence aligns with Jung's view that everything is at first unconscious: "The energy underlying conscious psychic life is pre-existent to it and therefore at first unconscious" (2014). Holistic appraisal of one's self only transpires, as Jung goes on to postulate, when a healthy relationship with the shadow begins and it is no longer engaged with as something that needs to be contained, rejected, or hidden (1991). Before, Surpanakha uses her shadow to only satiate her need for revenge; however, through her meaningful exchange with Urmila, the truth behind her dysfunctional ways comes to light:

> Surpanakha, your revenge has become your friend. You had gotten so attached to it that you could not let it go…You tormented yourself with your refusal to submit to a larger truth…Your search for peace, your anger of not being loved. Your rejection…For that, how many times were you going to take your revenge over and over again?" (Kané, 2017)

According to Belenky et al.:

> By sharing reactions and solutions…by being given the opportunity to talk things over with a sympathetic, non-judgmental person, a woman can begin to hear that maybe she is not such an oddity...they learn to see themselves as conduits through which truth emerges." (1997)

Surpanakha learns to regard her shadow heedfully, leading to remorse (Kané, 2017). Jung's conceptualization that the one-sidedness of the ego can be removed by "the realization of the shadow, the growing awareness of the inferior part of the personality" (1991) underpins her change as her shadow is impacted and is "altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived" (1991).

The last few pages of the novel, however are filled with dual imagery of defeat and rebirth and the key hint of defeat is the loneliness she still feels (Kané, 2017). She walks away from Ayodhya aimlessly for days on end, musing that she will not be accepted anywhere from hereon, neither in "her father's *ashram*" nor at Lanka and the Dandak Forest, all the while feeling despondent (Kané, 2017). She evidently faces a sense of destitution, and perhaps even feels as if she is left in the lurch as everybody who actually loved or cared for her is either dead or has grown to detest her. However, this imagery of defeat is followed by extremely positive imagery of rebirth as she has been gravitating towards the sea unconsciously: "…she found herself drawn towards it…she could smell the sea, hear the monotonous, hollow echo of the crashing waves…echoing a strange peace of eternal sleep" (Kané, 2017). According to Carol Christ in *Diving Deep and Surfacing* (1995), "Such a passage would not appear in a work whose author intended the reader to see her character as defeated" and correlatively, Jung's views support this. He opines that the sea is the favourite symbol for the unconscious,

the mother of all that lives; if we were to view the sea as the mother of life, highlighting its maternal significance, roughly corresponding to "womb" (1952), then Surpanakha's wish to return to the sea implies a yearning to return to that mother and hence to be reborn. In the concluding paragraphs of the novel, as Surpanakha walks deep into the ocean towards her death, further imagery that confirms her death as a positive act of rebirth is detailed:

> She closed her eyes shutting off the sight of the rising waves, hearing instead the sound of the sea she had always loved. And in the rushing sound of the water, she heard a constancy, a complete indifference to life and death. But within its churning waves, she listened to the hidden sounds of silence, the peace of eternal salvation…of unceasing hate towards forgiveness, of violence towards peace…that happiness… (Kané, 2017)

Like Jung, Elaine Showalter asserts that water represents the "female element" symbolically because the female body is accustomed to wetness such as "blood, milk, tears and amniotic fluid" and insists that "drowning" in women's writing is a "traditionally female literary death" which serves to symbolise women's ultimate liberation and return to the source of life (1993). Therefore, it can be interpreted then that Surpanakha's suicide is a metaphoric plunge into her unconscious indicating a spiritual triumph but unfortunately, signals a social defeat as well.

Conclusion

As the focus of this study is on the 'spiritual quest' rather than the 'social quest', I argue that Surpanakha's plunge into the unconscious at the tail end of her journey is successful as described by Pratt. Although she valiantly chooses death rather than a return to a conventional society that is still hostile to women such as her, "her suicide is a social defeat in that by choosing death she admits that she cannot find a way to translate her spiritual awareness of her freedom and infinite possibilities into life and relationships with others" (Christ, 1995). This indeed underpins the grave problem that 'bitch-like' women in such unwelcoming societies will continue to face as their many subjectivities are disregarded and hindered from the twin realization of their spiritual and social quest. Surpanakha's ambiguous and tragic ending seems to demonstrate the prevalent idea that the path to women's liberation is far more arduous and complex than what the feminists have alleged and most times, "requires a soul stronger than many women possess" (Christ, 1995). Although it may be foolish to expect happy endings in an ancient mythological backdrop, it is crucial that "women ask literature to provide images of a woman who is a person they seek to become" during a time when we are encouraged to "not be fully satisfied with women's literature until it does" (Christ, 1995).

Although Kané's *Lanka's Princess* (2017) ends lamentably, the wilful journey Surpanakha undertakes and her physical death indicate her final control over her own life; actualizing herself as the hero of her own life. Her journey is equally valuable to feminist thought as in the words of Christ:

> Surely a novel depicting the relation between cosmic or spiritual power and social or political power is profoundly needed. But that should not cause us to overlook the unique contributions of the novel of spiritual quest which, in renaming the locations of power and access to them, provides women with options for self-definition and strength unknown in a male-defined world. (1976)

Surpanakha still attains a state of meaningful existence when she wedded her conscious psyche to the unconscious and affirm her wicked, bitch-like behaviours, flaws, failings, and unreserved malice rather than conforming to traditional standards of femininity. Her authenticity, her transformation, and her eventual liberation may serve as an invocation, better, an affirmation to women at large, to unsubscribe from the limiting patriarchal ideals of womanhood and believe that they are worthy in their own right; recognise that they need not be a Sita or Savitri to fit in the world named by men but accept their inner Surpanakha to actualise novel possibilities for themselves as they disrupt the patriarchal world order that has been taken for granted for centuries.

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