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The Politics Of Subversion, Power And Deviance: Sita, Surpanakha And Kaikeyi In Select Feminist Re-Visioning Of Ramayana

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Abstract

Building on the foundational theory of Ranajit Guha, this paper scrutinizes two women-centred retellings of the Ramayana and argues: (1) how select feminist re-visioning with the aim to distort, combat and rectify the imbalance and the patriarchal bias have further complicated the stereotyping and (2) how the politics of 'centre' and 'margin' work betwixt the characters Sita, Surpanakha and Kaikeyi. Feminist re-visioning has led to heterogenous retellings of mythological women in fiction, attempting to question the pre-dominant androcentric messaging in the epics like Ramayana. Through an exploration of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments (2019) and Sini Panicker's Sita: Now You Know Me: A Novel (2021), this paper highlights and reveals the workings behind 'gender policing' Sita, Surpanakha and Kaikeyi, as 'Pure, liberated and wicked'.

Keywords: Mythology, feminist re-visioning, centre/margin, neo-nationalist historiography.

Introduction

In the act of setting up the ideals, characters, chiefly women, have been incarcerated; in the process of advocating good and evil, Sita and Surpanakha are typified as "archetypal foils in the dichotomy of heroin/villainess" (Austin, 2014, p.132). In the process of epitomizing Sita as an ideal Hindu woman, a selfless, dutiful and devoted wife, women have been subject to tenacious subjugation (Moodley, 2020, p.3). In the course of establishing husband-wife relationships, the scope for restriction, justification, and imperative commands over women (Hess, 1999, p.15) heightened. Alongside the reverence for Hindu divinities, epics, and myths, the notion of women's chastity and purity has also been embedded in the national psyche and identity (Banerjee, 2010, p.273). And in the wake of the dominant "androcentric demeanour" (Bhat, 2022, p.6), female subjectivity is unquestioningly subverted and suppressed.

Feminist revisionist mythologists question the above predominant androcentric messaging in the epics like Ramayana. Diana Purkiss has established three modes of re-writing poetry applicable to feminist re-visioning of mythology. Firstly, one can do it by shifting the focus from male to female, thereby marking the shift of agency from the 'other'(male-centric) to the 'self' (female-centric) narrative; secondly, by transposing the dominant-negative connotations and terms into positive versions. Furthermore, placing the role of narrator in the hands of a minor character (qtd in Koshy, 2010, p.77-78) gives autonomy to the voiceless, marginalized, and side-lined women in the grand narratives. Bailey and LaFrance (2017) highlight ". . . gender polarization and biological determinism frame women and men as opposites due to biological causes, and androcentrism use

this difference to establish men as primary and women as secondary" (683). Re-visionist approaches aim to relocate women's status from secondary figures aiding the principal action in the epic to the primary ones establishing the action. These approaches have increasingly found ways to say "no thank you" to the dominant orthodoxy model (Hess, 1999, p.17). One such response is Sita's straightforward rejection of dharma and the trial by fire in Snehalata Reddy's play titled Sita (1974).

RAMA: ... Come to your senses! ... My word is law! ... I cannot take it back! ... If you do not do your duty, I must reject you!

SITA: (fiercely) How dare you! It is I who reject you! I reject you as a husband. (p.40-41)

Sita contrasts with the conventional picture of a docile and submissive wife who never objects to her husband, duty, or society (Kaur, 2016, p.8). By "defying the dominant patriarchal code" (Nagar, 2022, p.62) and patriarchal ethos imbued in Hindu Ideology, Sita establishes her individuality and her words uncover the power politics working at the heart of patriarchy (Kaur, 2016, p.9).

Feminist Re-visioning and Subaltern Approach to Historiography

In one dimension, the objective behind the demand for feminist retellings stands on par with the ideas formulated by the Subaltern Studies Group. Subaltern Studies 1: Writings on South Asian History and Society (1982), edited by Ranajit Guha, stands relevant in this domain. It is a collection of essays that aims to provide and promote a 'systematic and informed discussion' of subaltern themes in South Asian Studies, to distort, combat, and rectify the imbalance and elitist bias in the academic work on South Asian questions. In the first essay titled "On Some Aspects of Historiography of Colonial India", Guha states, "The historiography of Indian nationalism has long been dominated by elitism-colonialist elitism and bourgeois- nationalist elitism" (p.1). It claims that in the process of writing Indian history, these two 'varieties of elitism', though assort to varied methods, share the common prejudice that making the "nationalist consciousness" is "exclusively or predominantly elite achievements" (p.1).

The epic tradition in India is grounded in androcentrism, where the male voice is "the central determining and unifying point of the plot" (Bhat, 2022, p.2). These epics glorify its 'hero' and celebrate his feats, character, and the moral values he upholds to preserve the larger moral order (Madhulika, p.3), thereby establishing and developing space for gender asymmetry and typical stereotyping. They have, in turn, aided the institutionalization of gender inequality by preserving dominant ideology.

There is an immediate need to analyse the ancient epics with the late 20th-century subaltern theory to evaluate the extent to which these epics have imposed their patriarchal hegemony and the consequent re-visioning. The approach to andro-centric epic creation can be associated with neo-colonialist historiography. The method of neo-colonialist historiography, as Ranajit Guha states, counts British writers and institutions among its principal protagonists. British colonial rulers, administrators, policies, institutions, and culture occupy the "centre" in constructing Indian nationalism to which the Indian elite acted as a "stimulus and response" (1989). They hence are positioned as the "marginalized". Neo-colonialist historiography maintained its dominant status by reducing Indian nationalism to a mere 'learning process' where the native elite is involved in the politics, not for the sake of national good but the mere expectation of the rewards. In establishing Indian nationalism through the lens of neo-colonialism, the assertive agency/power and individual status of the native elites are taken away.

In like manner, Ramayana, traditionally attributed to the authorship of the sage Valmiki, is considered the principal text in making an ideal society (Indian nationalism), bestowing the authority to male protagonists and their andro-centric narratives. It stands analogous to the neo-colonialists in crediting historiography solely to the British colonial rulers and institutions. The marginalized/oppressed/other 'Indian elites' were classified as a 'stimulus and response' to the colonialists (Centre/oppressors/self). Drawing the connecting line, the female characters in the Ramayana were either constructed to stimulate the war or held responsible for the major events, though not likely in the lives of male protagonists. They are either idolized or depicted as fallen women devoid of virtuosity (Meenakshi & Kumar, 2021, p.286). Sita is considered an idol due to

the "sacrifice, self-denial, and unquestioning loyalty" (Gokhale, 2009) towards her husband Rama, but her act of stepping out of the restricted space turned out to be the stimulus for the brutal war and the resultant destruction and devastation. And characters like Surpanakha and Kaikeyi, considered the "emblem(s) of female deviance" (Schur, 1984, p.11), are held responsible for the occurrence of significant events, often unlikely, like the consequent banishment of Rama, the death of King Dasharatha, the ignition of the feud between Rama and Ravan, and the destruction of the Ravan, his clan and Lanka.

In Compliance with Guha's understanding of the construction of neo-colonial historiography, the 'Indian Elites' were involved in the politics, not for the general ideological good of the nation but in expectation of rewards. This neo-colonialist construction of history not only oppressed the elite Indian class but also ripped their intentions behind the involvement in nationalist consciousness. Accordingly, the female characters in the epics are involved or constructed predominantly not for the general good of the epic as a whole but to facilitate the dominant male characters towards accomplishing their inherent ambitions. Besides side-lining the women from the andro-centric narrative, their intentions behind any decision/action stand severely criticized, denounced, and condemned to such an extent that women ultimately hold themselves responsible. Andro-centric behavioural norm-setting is further emulated by questioning the pertinence of a woman's decision-making skills. Sally J. Sutherland (1989) mentions that Valmiki takes great pains to convince us of Sita's worth, devotion, and love, channelizing her into a figure embodying self-sacrifice, submission, and piousness. These distinguishable features break in succession with Sita's act of greed for the golden deer, consequent castigation of Lakshmana, and crossing of the 'limiting line' (Real/Imaginary). For Sita, these actions lead to her abduction and confinement in the palace of Ravana (Sutherland, 1992). Thereby enormously validating the andro-centric narrative that any act of subversion by women would put them in baffling situations.

The second approach to history writing in India, as Guha establishes, is neo-nationalist historiography. The marginalized/other 'native elite Indians' in the neo-colonist construction of history put themselves in the 'centre/self' in their neo-nationalist historiographic construction. "Individual leaders or elite organizations and institutions" (Guha, 1989, p.3) claim to be the 'main or the motivating force' that led the people from the path of subjugation to freedom. In contrast to neo-colonialist historiography, this kind of elitist historiography orients to represent Indian nationalism as predominantly an idealist venture. Like the neo-colonialist behaviouristic approach toward the construction of history, the neo-nationalists present themselves as altruists and promoters of the more significant cause of people, juxtaposing the neo-nationalist accusations as collaborationists, exploiters, and oppressors.

The Pitfalls of Feminist Re-visioning:

On a similar front, in feminist literary studies, the method of feminist re-visioning evolved with a focus on "counteract, challenge or disrupt" the patriarchal bias by highlighting the autonomy of women characters (Wadhwa, 2021, p.1). This new approach to feminist criticism started gaining attention with Adrienne Rich's attempt to define it as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich, 1972, p.2). Elaborating on the meaning of revision, Tilde Sankovitch defines "revision as a process of recovery and reformation by which old myths are driven away and revitalized by reinterpretation" (p.146). For Ostriker, re-visionist mythmaking is an effective strategy to make "corrections" to the already established "images of what women have collectively suffered." But, ever since Rich (1972) inaugurated this new approach, "the silence, the misrepresentation or the negative representation" (Wadhwa, 2021, p.1) of the female characters in the mythological canon has gone through extensive scrutiny. These narratives also examine the "tyrannical, subjugating and subordinating co-ordinates (gender, class, race colour)" (Madhulika, p.3) in the canonical epics and counter them with dissenting voices from the periphery.

Feminist re-visioning, in the course of 'flipping the narration' (Bhat, 2022, p.1), has contributed considerably, in congruence to the advantages of neo-nationalist historiography. The elitist-nationalist historiography, as Guha asserts,

helps in understanding the colonial state structure, knowing the various state organs, the 'nature of alignment of the classes,' understanding the ideology of the elite as the dominant ideology, the contradictions between the British and Indian elite groups, principally helps to understand historiography itself.

On par, feminist revisioning assists in understanding the existing power structure, knowing the functioning of the epics, the positioning of the class divisions within the epics, understanding the ideology of the hierarchical characters deemed as elite, and the principal contradictions between the male and female characters, and on the entirety, the re-visioning assists to understand the construction of an epic in itself.

Further, Guha discusses what historical retelling of this kind cannot do. It fails to acknowledge the people or the subaltern group, and their contributions have been overlooked. Along with neo-colonialist historiography, Guha terms neo-nationalist historiography as the 'un-historical historiography' due to its inherent politics. In like manner, the various feminist retellings, in this act of shifting from the 'margin' to the 'centre', this group looks at the contributions of the subaltern as a mere response to their 'elitism', thereby deterring their agency.

Us vs Them: The process of Othering

Taking Guha's cue, I situate my analysis within three characters namely Sita, Surpanakha and Kaikeyi in the select feminist retellings and try to argue that the response to the androcentric domain in these texts is prejudiced. While the men in the epic Ramayana, have one object 'adventure', women are placed against three categories- Damsel in Distress, Seductress, and Downright Evil. Sita, Kaikeyi and Surpanakha are moulded into these labels. Did the feminist 're-vision' throw a nuanced light upon these labelled characters? Though setting the discourse in opposition to the ideals of Indian womanhood's "modesty, chastity, self-sacrifice, devotion and patience" (McLain, 2009, p.62), the category of the 'othered woman' still exists. These othered women in the feminist retellings remain the same 'racially inflected' demons with "poison-fang[s] . . . bloodshot eyes, canine teeth, coal-black skin and green horns" (Chandra, 2008, p.179). Feminist retellings aim to immortalize such a prototype through the extension of Machiavellianism (Banik, 2016, p.199). And Ayomukhi is a minor character in the Ramayana, like Surpanakha, who also experiences mutilation under the hands of Lakshman, is neither visible in the grand narrative of the Ramayana nor in any major feminist retelling. Hence the titles like Bhumika: A Story of Sita (2019) by Aditya Iyengar, Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana (2013) by Devdutt Pattanaik, and Sita's Ramayana (2011) by Samhita Arni, necessarily as the feminist retellings of the Ramayana, becomes quite problematic.

To discern and grasp the existing predispositions in the major feminist re-visionings of the epic Ramayana, this study investigates two mythology-inspired narratives which can be necessarily claimed as "female", "feminine" or "feminist" modes of writing (Osborne, 1991, p.258). These writings stand against "male", "masculine" or "patriarchal" writings. Linguists Julia Penelope and Susan J. Wolfe (1983) on the epistemological difference between "patriarchal" and "feminist" modes of writing suggest:

patriarchal expressive modes reflect an epistemology that perceives the world in terms of categories, dichotomies, roles, stasis, and causation [while] female expressive modes reflect an epistemology that perceives the world in terms of ambiguities, pluralities, processes, continuities, and complex relationships (126).

In compliance with the argument, I chose two feminist re-visions namely The Forest of Enchantments (2019) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Sita: Now You Know Me: A Novel (2021) by Sini Panicker to investigate the working of labelling when "women write women".

Myth is a subject of endless idiosyncratic perception that renders the theme of polar opposition (Meenakshi& Kumar, 2021, p.3). During the past few years, many feminist writers have explored and discovered myths, subverting the dominant ideology's hidden male bias.

Sita

The Indian-American author, mythologist, and activist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (b.1956) explores the beauty of the marginalized yet dominant women characters in the epics and weaves the entire narrative from their (Sita)

vantage point, thus deconstructing the male-centric order of the hierarchies "from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies for the same reason" (Cixous et al., 1976, p.1). Her retellings of the Hindu Mythologies, The Palace of Illusions (2008) and The Forest of Enchantments (2019), compels readers to rethink the notion of institutionalized ideologies. The novel, The Forest of Enchantments (2019) redrafts the narrative of the Ramayana from Sita's perspective. The original narrative, in its urgency to propound the ideals, sidestepped the inner conscience of Sita.

In parallel to the ideology of neo-colonial historiographers, Chitra Banerjee weaves the fabric of her Sitayan with strings essentially pulled out from Sage Valmiki's Ramayan. Sita, otherwise a 'meek, almost servile' figure, with the shift of agency to narrate, becomes a 'trailblazer' to question the men's preoccupation with power and the predispositions toward gender norms.

The "Author's Note" clearly foregrounds her aim:

"I'm going to write the story of Sita…She'll fill in the gaps between the adventures undertaken by the male characters in the epic, their victories, and defeats. She'll tell us what inspired the crucial choices that directed the course of her life. What she believed in. What interested and moved her. How she felt when faced with the deepest of tragedies. And what gave her the ability to overcome them" (Divakaruni, 2019).

Bronislaw Malinowski is considered one of the pioneers of the Functionalist School of Thought, concerning the functionalism in myth states that every myth has a reason/purpose. This theory argues that myths, in general, are created for social control and also to ensure social stability. Contextualizing the epic Ramayana within functionalism, in one dimension can be observed that epics served the purpose of the dominant patriarchy to impose and set down the social and behavioural norms, chiefly for women. Chitra Banerjee breaks the very purpose upon which the myths, for generations, have been built. The behavioural norm-setting is entirely rooted(out) in the deeply nuanced retelling of the epic Ramayana. The rooting out of the norms established by the patriarchy can be understood, for instance, as the purpose of any feminist re-visioning, as Alicia Suskin Ostriker's foundational article titled "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking" claims that the objective of the feminist revisionist mythology, at its core, is "the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth" (1982, p.73).

The name Sita has been synonyms with ideals of purity and chastity, unselfishness and service, simplicity, and modesty (Allen& Mukherjee; Hess, p.10-16) in Hindu society. Henceforth it is contrived as quite insurmountable for an Indian woman to leap out of Sita's inheritance. Divakaruni depicts her as a woman who paves the way for the Indian woman to jump out of that undesirable inheritance. The silenced Sita, who in the grand narrative is 'removed from all lines of social mobility' (Spivak, 2005, p.475) and bereaved from her own identity, is re-visioned here with the agency and power to counteract, which is otherwise deemed as uncustomary in the sacred narratives.

"The Complexity of female existence" (Divakaruni, 2019, p.257) is unravelled with the domineering first-person narration by/about Sita. The re-visionist narrative opens exquisitely with the elaborate detailing about Sita found wrapped in a strange fabric; and advances with recounting her adventurous childhood at Mithila with her affectionate father Janak, insightful mother Sunaina, and close-knit sister Urmila; her sensibility and expertise of foliage and herbs, upskilling and prowess in martial arts; marriage and quick adaption to a new home; the epic journey to the wilderness; self-composure during the dreadful days of captivity; grace in embracing the test of fire; reigning as dear queen; desolation in harsh banishment; the joys of motherhood; and establishes the denouement with a spectacular reunion with Mother Earth.

Women characters like Sita in the grand narratives occupy the position of subalterns. They are constructed within a class of disempowerment, a position without social/political agency, and are erected to an extent where they lie without any identity. Divakaruni interlaces Sita's narrative with the strings deliberately left unwoven in the grand narrative. With the furtherance of these strings, Sita, with her spirited and resilient voice, counters the subjugation, victimization, and the resultant marginalization.

When her mother, Sunaina, offers a piece of advice before embarking on a new life's journey to Ayodhya, "If you want to stand up against wrongdoing if you want to bring about change, do it in a way that doesn't bruise a man's pride. You'll have a better chance of success" (52), Sita's tone adopts a tone of protest, "Was a man's pride more important than the truth? Why should I have to strategize if I was in the right" (52). Through the course of the narrative, Sita flings in too many rhetorical questions, "what of his wife? Would he ever consider her to be as important as his dharma? (47), In my kingdom, every man will have a voice, no matter how humble he is…I wanted to ask, what about the women?' (97), "…he'd banished me and his babies, all three of us equally innocent because he believed that was his duty to his people. But weren't we his people, too? Didn't he have a duty to us?" (320)

Re-positioning Sita with an independent voice, unabashed of the social inhibitions surrounding her, she evolves from being at the forefront of "narration" to the forefront of "action".

"Let Sita walk with you as your own shadow, Rama, in the righteous path of your life" (qtd. In Panicker, 2021) is a blessing verse in the Valmiki's Ramayana. Disentangling Sita from the captivity of mere submissiveness, Sini Panicker presents Sita, moving into the light, away from the shadows in her debutante novel Sita: Now You Know Me: A Novel (2021), a feminist re-visioning of The Ramayana. Panicker's narrative is entirely in the first person, and her knowledge of the other events comes only as a reflection. Lord Rama's exploits that occupy the glorified central position are pushed to the periphery, and readers learning about such heroic deeds is filtered through Sita's affective responses towards them. Focusing entirely on what goes on in Sita's mind, she narrates the same story from her viewpoint. But a change in the perspective of events unfolded through Sita's most impressionistic expressions does give an effect of something new. Though the fate of Sita, like in the original Ramayana, is already predicted and fixed in the course of history, Panicker's technique of setting the story alternating between present time and flashback makes it afresh.

In the prologue to the novel, Panicker unfolds Sita's final act of reunion with her mother, Earth. Sita is presented to be graciously descending to the realm below. "This is me at last, eternally free and jubilant!" (2021) Throughout women's lives, the self is defined and characterized through social relationships (Gardiner, 1981, p.7). Girls' personalities take shape differently in comparison with boys. A girl begins life in a symbiotic merger, forming her gender identity like the mother. Secondly, she develops in such a manner that she re-creates the mother-infant symbiosis when she herself becomes the mother. As a result, Nancy Chodorow (1978) comments that women develop capacities for 'nurturance, dependence, and empathy' more quickly than men. Qualities like 'Independence' and 'autonomy' become typically hard to attain. Panicker's Sita evolves from the inherent capacities and gains autonomy by not just being the narrator of the events. Still, amidst trials and tribulations, grief and despair, she evolves and transforms at various stages of life.

Social roles are highly polarised by gender, with a wider range of acceptable notions available to men than women (Gardiner, 1981, p.352). Shanta, the daughter of King Dasharath and Kausalya, who is hardly mentioned in the original narrative, handcuffed with social roles, duties, and responsibilities, is again not presented as an independent identity but used as a yardstick to highlight Sita as an unusual princess. Shanta did not simply exist for her family, and while the world was filled with thousands of Shanta-like shadows, dead but moving, Sita is the 'unusual princess' who has learned to read, write and debate, to think and question. Others being stuck in socially imposed roles through marriage and motherhood and are essential of no significance, Sita learns skills usually deemed inappropriate for their smooth functioning, horse riding, sword fighting, archery, and ruling a province. She is not a field that can be organized for cultivation but is free to become a forest.

In the significant narratives surrounding the Swayamvara, Sita is demeaned as a prize of the contest, and very often, there exist behind-the-scenes compromises between both fathers, the Kings, where the groom is often involved in the decision. At the same time, the bride is kept in the dark (Panicker, 2021, p.25). Panicker, besides transmitting the narrative agency to Sita, also posits Sita within the agentic power to choose Ram and wed him. "…I fell in love with

every layer of him" (27). She resists becoming a pawn on the stage for anyone else (50). Sita evolves remarkably bold and critical; she leads and guides Ram and Lakshman in their journey incognito. Frank Tannenbaum states, "the person becomes the thing he is described as being" (Meenakshi and Kumar 20). In Sita's case, she associates herself with distinctiveness, and the affirmative labelling by people right through their unmapped journey pushes her to act beyond the set framework. She unfolds as a person with the fearless potential to say, "I will choose where I am going next. You do not get to decide anymore" (289).

Surpanakha

Though feminist re-visioning like elite Indian historiographers aimed to acquire the agency and have quite well placed their agent in the centre of the otherwise andro-centric narrative, it fails to acknowledge, far less interpret, the contribution made by people on their own…the involvement of Indian people in vast numbers, sometimes in hundreds of thousands, or even millions (Guha, 1989, p.3) (in history), and limited women characters (in the epic). Such "one-sided and blinkered historiography" (p.3) does not help to understand the profound displacements below the surface of elite politics.

The feminist narrative, in the act of retelling the biased grand narrative, yet again presents its inadequacy in narration by foregrounding the important women characters and leaving the minor women 'prototypes' untouched. Though texts like these, owing to the constraint to generate the meaningful 'discourse', from within the subaltern position, as 'the subaltern as a female cannot be heard or read' (Spivak, 2015, p.20), entrusted 'agency' to the female characters. As Spivak claims that 'there is no space from which a sexed subaltern can speak' (19), the feminist re-visioning works by attempting to (dis)place women from the subaltern position and identifies them as the 'elite'. These newly woven narratives, reject the power/knowledge of the andro-centric weavings as a merely 'repressive' methodology, the ones showcasing the incumbent patriarchy, thereby invoking the often-confused negative connotations of power, associated with Foucault, such as 'coercion,' 'constraint', and 'domination' (Simons, 2004, p.191). Disapproving the power-politics of the grand narratives, the feminist re-visioning narratives re-enforce power as a productive drive in producing the 'reality,' which is otherwise shadowed, and 'rituals of truth' (191).

The claims of enforcing power positively do not seem to fit in retelling the grand narratives, as the works re-enforce power politics even within women characters. Though firstly, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni rewrites the epic from Sita's voice, scholars criticize her work as, although she proclaims to 'place women in the forefront of the action,' "it falls short of her ambitions because she is operating in the same grid of narrative" (Sharma, 2016, p. 153).

"Write our story, too. For always we've been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten or maligned and used as cautionary tales (Divakaruni, 2019, p.4)". Albeit Chitra Banerjee claims that Sita also voices all women who have never been thought about 'extensively', the stereotyping stands, even more, exacerbated in the new re-visioning. Surpanakha, the primal 'othered' woman, the downright evil, which the patriarchal narrative labelled as the demon with physical deformities, the one with huge canine teeth, poison fangs, coal-black skin and greenhorns, her treatment stays unvaried.

The first impression of the demon Surpanakha, not by the male narrator, but by the woman narrator, the protagonist Sita is provided as "WAS BATHING IN the river when the girl showed up next, popping up from behind a giant clump of elephant ears, startling me into swallowing a large mouthful of water…Her teeth, bared in amusement, were very white and pointed, and her dark skin gleamed…I was quite sure now she didn't have any clothes on"(Divakaruni, 2019, p.143). Does the female lens (Sita) view the object (Surpanakha) in a similar fashion, as the male gaze has viewed it? Luce Irigaray, a French Philosopher, asserts the term Parler-femme in a direct effort to posit a female identity, irreducible to the masculine subject (2004, p.49-50). Parler-femme is "Speaking (as) woman" when translated into English. It amounts to the redefinition of the nature of women in positive terms. If we consider Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writing to be a Parler-femme, she definitely redefines Sita to show the absurdity of patriarchal constructions but further abstains from decoding the stereotypical figurations. Instead, she complicates the stereotyping.

The Parler-femme lens through which Sita catches sight of Surpanakha is described,

It was the girl from the lake, but now she looked different. She wore garlands of white flowers around her neck and wrists, and against them, her skin glowed like polished onyx. Flowers decorated her nose and ears and were woven so skilfully into her curly, unruly hair that they looked like they'd grown there. She wore a sari… Still, she walked with confidence, swaying her hips in a clearly sexual way… like a peacock preening itself in mating season (Divakaruni, 2021, p.145).

Identity and dress are intimately linked. Clothes display, express and shape identity (Twigg, 2009, p.1). In traditional narratives, Surpanakha never wears a sari, half-sari or any other distinctly Indian clothing (Austin, 2014, p.9). She is always depicted wearing a leather or copper breast piece with a split skirt. This combination of animal-based material and exposed skin marks Surpanakha as 'racially inferior', 'other,' and 'low-caste' (Tarlo, 1996, p.143-6). In an attempt to deconstruct and decode the dominant prototype, Divakaruni's Surpanakha approaching in a beautiful saree presents an exact opposite. But this intense description automatically pre-sets the tone for the expression of libido. This approach to removing the label has reinstated Surpanakha as a 'sexualized body'. And with the unvaried narrative of Surpanakha's horrible mutilation, the work reinstates the norm-setting that a rebellious woman shall face societal ostracism. Does this mutilation put forth the premise that a woman's strength lies in beauty, and mutilating ears and nose would deny her further sexual desires? Furthermore, the expression of sexual desire is still considered to be shamed or stigmatized. The result of this act labels her, as 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 (1984).

She is represented as the same 'outsider' and 'inhuman' (Meenakshi & Kumar, 2021). "You don't understand, Sister-in-law…They're not human like us. They're rakshasas. They can't be treated with human courtesy… They'll turn on you any moment like a venomous snake that's just how they're made. They're worse than snakes because they're devious (Divakaruni, p.151). She again becomes the subaltern, who cannot speak, because their words cannot be properly interpreted as the native 'subaltern' in the bourgeois-nationalist historiography.

At the outset, Sundara Kand, the fifth section of Ramayana, composed of 2885 verses and 68 chapters, is perhaps the only section where Hanuman's adventures, not Rama's, are focal. In an exceptionally detailed and vivid manner, it accounts for the journey of Hanuman from assuming a gargantuan form and making a colossal leap across the ocean to Ravan's abode, his vigorous search activity for Sita, consequent spotting her in the Ashoka Vatika, the wreckage of Ravan's citadel, and to the giant leap back from the island. In contrast, Divakaruni's narrative challenges the androcentric demeanour by shifting the agency to Sita as she "… fills in the gaps between the adventures undertaken by the male characters in the epic, their victories, and defeats… How she felt when faced with the deepest of tragedies" (6). To a great extent, she narrates Sita's painful moments, self-defence exercises, hopeless encounters with rakshasis, and courageous conversations with Ravan. In showcasing Sita's external, mostly inner world in captivity, Divakaruni has intensified the stereotypical image of Surpanakha that the age-old patriarchal narratives have put forward. In an instance, to frighten Sita and to further ignite the spark of fastest surrender to the wishes of their King Ravan, the rakshasis resorted to many ways of tormenting Sita. One such attack creates the image of an injured and bleeding Ram, collapsed on the ground. The intuitive thought that Sita gets on how these rakshasis are aware of the image of Rama is that "Surpanakha must have described to them, in detail, what he looked like because the images were horrifyingly realistic (184). While the primary narrative has established the popular stereotypical image of Surpanakha and advances with the narrative glorifying men, their manners and war; Divakaruni's narrative did not cease with the further projection of the stereotypical image, rather her every encounter with Sita in the Ashoka Vatika, reinforces her label as the "wicked" and "outsider". Some extracts from

the text comply with the racialized 'other' labelling.

SOME MORNINGS I'D WAKE to find Surpanakha standing over me, muttering. The hatred flowing from her was so palpable, that I could taste it…Sometimes she'd grab my face and force me to look into hers, which was difficult because there were gaping holes where her nose and ears had been (Divakaruni, 2019, p.185).

Surpanakha's characterization is also utilized in the new re-imagining to bridge the gap between Ravan's threats and Sita's anxieties. "There's no way Ram can rescue you, even if he dared. But frankly, I don't think he's trying. I think he's gone back to Ayodhya and taken another wife… So, you'd better make your decision- Ravan's queen, or my slave" (186). Though Divakaruni's Sita is 'everywoman' and 'abundantly human', detaching from the overarching 'goddess' image, Surpanakha's characterization with the touch of aggressive attitude towards Sita as "Well, you don't look that great yourself; more like a scrawny crow. She spat. A greenish glob landed on my foot" (185). The institution of such additional fictitious exchanges would incarcerate Surpanakha in the same/beyond 'trivialization, blame, and malignity' that traditional narratives have chained her to.

In the concluding section of the war, Divakaruni elevates Surpanakha's primary position as a rakshasi to a 'harbinger of destruction'. "In a moment she had transformed into full rakshasi mode… Her fingernails were sharp and curved like scimitars, and her fangs were sharp as well. I knew I was no match for her…" (222). Her jaws, wide open, had grown to a gigantic size. Her fangs were as long as knives, and as sharp. They dripped a greenish saliva… (223). The "othering" from which Divakaruni initially propounds to deviate from but is compelled to stick to the "bad women" stereotype, as Alicia Gaspar de Alba notes. The pre-eminent descriptions that feminist revisionists find pitfalls in the grand narrative of Ramayana concerning the subordinate characters like Surpanakha for violating the established feminine performance and 'deliberately' acting out of the conventional role of femininity is mutilation. The gender 'correcting' punishment enforced upon Surpanakha can be understood in the context of operant conditioning theory (1948) propounded by Burrhus Frederic Skinner. It states that a person or animal's behaviour could be increased or decreased by adding or removing appropriate stimuli after the behaviour is exhibited. Within operant, 'reinforcement' aims to increase a behaviour, while 'punishment' aims to reduce a behaviour. Further divided into positive and negative punishment, negative punishment reduces a behaviour or a response by taking away a favourable stimulus following that action. Also known as 'punishment by removal', Surpanakha's behaviour begets negative punishment where "Lakshman picked up his bow and, in one swift motion, released an arrow that corkscrewed through the air and chopped off the girl's nose and ears" (149).

The 'negative punishment' enforced upon Surpanakha is further heightened with her return to Sita, bereaving her brother Ravan's death. "Surpanakha! What are you doing? Have you lost what little sense you had? I order you to stop" (223). Sarama, the wife of Vibheeshan, tries to reduce Surpanakha's behaviour by enforcing strong verbal punishment.

"Behave, for once, like the princess you are, haven't you done enough harm to Lanka already? Had you not come crying to Ravan, asking for revenge and describing Sita's beauty, tempting him, we wouldn't be seeing this day. Now at least think of the welfare of your people. If you harm Sita, what do you think Ram will do to the surviving rakshasas?" (223)

Although Surpanakha receives no further mention in Valmiki's writing, Divakaruni gives space for the character to develop. During the coronation at Ayodhya, Surpanakha reappears. She takes the form of Rama's only sister Shanta. Her conversation with Sita, "tell me, Sita, did you think you'd get away so easily? Did you think I'd give up and forget about you after you'd destroyed my home and everyone I loved? Did you think there were no consequences? (285) does not align with Divakaruni's motive of providing a voice to the voiceless, often 'misunderstood and relegated'. But Divakaruni, in an attempt to provide a voice to the 'subaltern' women characters by challenging, manipulating, disrupting, or dismantling the gender constructs like the elitist-Indian historiographers, remained prejudiced in reconstructing the narratives surrounding the subaltern characters like Surpanakha. She remains to be the 'hero' of the cautionary tale.

Men's domination and authority lead to women's subordination and deviance. Andrea Dworkin, an American radical feminist author, and activist, states, "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). The Ramayana has encapsulated Surpanakha as 'unchaste' and 'demoness', with Ram being highlighted as Maryada-epitome of truth, courtesy, virtue, bravery, and generosity. The misogynist narrative enlarges the figure of Ram and Lakshman with the horrible castration of Surpanakha.

Panicker weaves the story of Surpanakha contrary to Sita. While Sita evolves from the stereotypical 'damsel in distress to the 'heroic' stature, Surpanakha sustains the static position of 'downright evil'. Panicker's Sita narrates the arrival of Surpanakha in the same alignment as Divakaruni's narrative. Surpanakha is introduced as a 'gorgeous and voluptuous woman' (Panicker, 2021, p.172). And the typical sensual portrayal as "dressed in silk, and adorned with jewels and ornaments" vanishes after promenading back and forth between Rama and Lakshman. Panicker deliberately sets the mutilation in reporting.

Kaikeyi

The hero/Villainess dichotomy in the epic Ramayana is grounded in the three principal female characters, Surpanakha, Sita, and Kaikeyi. While 'Surpanakha' is identified as the 'cast-out', the 'demon' and the 'racialized other' to the ideal 'Sita', and Kaikeyi is considered as the 'capricious woman' who 'is not evil . . . [but] is unreasonable, led to mischief for no reason at all' (Rao, 1999, p.176) rightly qualifying her as one of Aruna Rao's eight distinct categories of female characters. Besides being regarded as the 'catalyst' and 'perpetrator' of tragic events (Blackwell, 1976, p.140), Kaikeyi is understood to be the most complex character.

Feminist re-visioning aims to disqualify and dislocate Kaikeyi from the bound trait of capriciousness. "Don't trust anyone in your new home too soon-least of all Kaikeyi" (Panicker, 2021, p.56). Kaikeyi, Dasharath's favourite wife, is introduced in polarity. She is the most complicated yet an accomplished and intrepid charioteer; she is a healer and a counsellor to King Dasharath, yet the most untrustworthy; and she is the most powerful yet 'as changeable as clouds' in the windy sky. Divakaruni posits Surpanakha in the same emphatic vision that the conventional, masculine, generally linear narrative upheld. In constructing Kaikeyi's character Divakaruni remains undeviated from the prodigal archetype she is embedded into, "I glanced curiously at her face, but most of it was covered by jewels and a glittery veil… The expense and quality of the gifts indicated how rich each queen was, and how powerful. Clearly, in this regard, Kaikeyi was far ahead of the others" (67).

While Queen Sunaina has begotten Kaikeyi's character into Sita's realm while embarking on her new journey to Ayodhya, Divakaruni has further strengthened the label of 'capricious woman.' She and not Dasharath is recounted as the offender behind ruining the fair and honest relationship between Kausalya and King Dasharath.

"But what wounded her to the heart,' Ram said, 'was that my father fell completely in love with Kaikeyi: her beauty, her intellect, her courage. All his nights—and many hours of his days—were now spent with his new wife" (72). She is further castrated when Ram says, "She's a difficult person, hard to understand. She's always been nice to me, though she's caused my mother plenty of grief. She's very smart and knows it … In any case, it's best if you stay away from her" (89). In the narrative space that Kaikeyi is woven into, Divakaruni strings Kaikeyi to the original, concerning the hullabaloo about her two boons and the consequent results. But through Sita's voice, Kaikeyi becomes the new cautionary tale of love. "This is what Kaikeyi failed to see: it's not enough to merely love someone…We must want what they want, not what we want for them" (129).

Divakaruni does not leave the Kaikeyi's string in alignment with the grand narrative but completes the weaving of Kaikeyi's story to a resolution. Sita meets Kaikeyi after returning from Lanka, only to incapacitate Kaikeyi's character further, relegating her to the margin. Kaikeyi's voice is also taken away as one of her maids conveys to Sita that her mistress Kaikeyi has taken the vow of silence. She has already spent fourteen years in the loss of autonomy and lost her husband, her son, and her life, almost in the process. The vow of silence being fictionally

incorporated becomes the metaphor for 'subaltern silence', and Kaikeyi continues to exist in the 'object' position. Kaikeyi's denouement is articulated to be fulfilled only with Rama's embrace, implying forgiveness for the catastrophe. The entire narrative positions Kaikeyi in two facets. As the centre of the action, asserting her rights is proved flawed, and she even receives admonitions in varied forms. Her 'authority' is taken away and doomed to believe that she must face a catastrophic fate for her deed. The text works to re-establish the hierarchy structure by putting Kaikeyi in a rightfully 'subordinated' position. As Henley and Freemen succinctly state, "women are constantly reminded where their 'place' is and that they are put back in their place" (1975, p.474). Kaikeyi eventually is characterized by finding comfort in the stigma-laden nomenclature of marginalization.

Sally J.M. Sutherland, distinguishing between the 'heroic' and 'un-heroic' women in the Indian literary tradition, posits Kaikeyi, the second queen of King Dasharatha, as the most interesting and significant of all(1992). Treated as the traitress to her husband Dasharatha and wicked step-mother of god-hero Rama, Panicker presents Kaikeyi to hold more layers of complexity than her beauty implied. Sita outrightly and out wittingly compares her to a Parijatham tree, alluring from afar; only upon closer observation, the sharp thorns on its truck are revealed (94). Kaikeyi, at the outset, is passive, seemingly indolent, living unconcernedly in the lap of luxury. With her attempt to remain King Dasharatha's favourite wife and gain the kingdom for her son, she briefly becomes the powerful and central figure. Panicker's narrative with the questioning of Kaikeyi exercising what is rightfully hers by King Dasharatha, Sage Vasishta and other priests, ministers Jayanta and Mantra Pala, directly and Sita, Lakshman, Kausalya seething internally, further desists Kaikeyi's opinion and marginalizes and maligns her further. Like the hundreds and thousands of Indians whose voice was clearly left out and marginalized by the 'un-historical historiography', Kaikeyi fades into the background and exists superfluously in the thoughts of Sita and Lakshman as the same evil, unprincipled and wicked woman that the tradition has labelled.

Conclusion

Divakaruni and Panicker's narratives though claim and assert themselves as feminist re-visionings of Ramayana, attempting to voice the marginalised of the mainstream literature, like the neo-nationalist form of historical discourse, the working of "mechanics of discrimination" (Spivak, 2015, p.44) stands palpable. Within the feminist discourse, Sita is no more the icon of 'gender policing' for Indian women as she becomes the new-age feminist icon. Surpanakha and Kaikeyi are left baffled and still are clutched to the conventional stereotyping by the hegemonic discourse, and remain as 'wanting a piece of pie, and not being allowed'(Spivak, 2015) to speak. Their actions stand 'cryptic' and the labels 'rakshasi', 'wicked', 'flawed', and 'vicious woman' is further grounded deep with the incapacity to articulate the desires behind their actions.

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