



The Dynamics of Karma in Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*: A Critical Reading through the Lens of the Indian Knowledge System

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Abstract: Indian knowledge systems refer to the tremendous intellectual and philosophical heritage and tradition that originated on the Indian subcontinent in ancient times. India is known for its principle of "Vasudeva kutumbhkaṃ" that considers the whole world as one family. This knowledge has been transmitted orally and later transcribed into the great Vedas, including the Rigveda, Atharvaveda, Samveda, and Yajurveda, as well as the great epics Mahabharat and Ramayan, by our great sages and intellectuals. These texts posit not only the mores and value systems of those times but also offer a golden passage for future generations to follow.

Contemporary society is suffering from many problems, not only on the national level but also on the international level. Driven by epicureanism and philistinism, people worship Mammon that leads to degradation, ironically, instead of prosperity. Though we may generalise the problem by putting it under the study of Mythology and culture, it's rooted in a specific moment also. The metanarratives exhibit this perennial problem from East to West discourse. Every culture encapsulates certain concepts that fuel and sustains its society, explaining and commenting on day-to-day life. The Greek world drew its inspiration from Hesiod's Theogony (730-700 BC) and later on Bible, Egyptian people obeyed Old Testament (1100-960 BC), the Persian people followed Avesta (1500-400 BCS), Torah (450-350 BC) regulated the Jews and even before these holy texts certain belief systems and faiths modulated the world. Hinduism is said to be the oldest religion in the world, and its oldest scripture is the Rigveda, written (1500-1100 BC)

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Introduction: The Indian Knowledge System can save and sustain mankind from this moral and ethical deterioration. Kavita Kane, the mythological novelist, is known for positing the different perspectives of marginalised women from mythology. This paper will explore the multifaceted character of Supranakha, Ravan, Kakesi and Lakshman from the perspective of Karma. The journey of Meenakshi transforming into Supranakha, Ravan from an intellectual into a greedy king, Kakesi from a mother into a rapacious successor of the Asura clan, and Lakshman from a devoted brother into a blind follower.

Karma, as explored in Kavita Kane's *Lanka' Princess*, revolves around the ideas of personal choices and desires that further lead to one's destiny and its consequences. In the context of *Lanka's Princess* (a retelling of the Ramayana from the perspective of Supranakha), Karma plays a significant role in shaping her character. She is considered an unwelcome and ugly child by her mother, leading her to be an underconfident child, always bullied by her mother for not possessing the brilliant brain and beauty of her mother and grandmother. As a child, she was targeted and suffered for the faults for which she is not responsible anymore, always reminding her what she lacks and never acknowledging what she is the owner of a quick, receptive and acquisitive mind, big honey-golden eyes, a lovely heart always craving for the love of her parents and family. This desire for acceptance and validation into her family leads her towards the world of magic and its unbelievable powers, introduced to her by her loving grandmother Taraka, making her closer to evil internally and further leading her to adopt her half self, which is Asura. Ravan, the most loved and validated lad of the family, instigated her to externalise her evil by strangling her lamb Maya, only for munching on his medicinal plants. The compassion and pain of the little creature and love for her only friend that responded to her emotions turned her from Meenakshi into Supranakha, and she attacked Ravan with her sharp and long fingernails. Vishrava failed as a father when he could not save her from the clutches of Kuber, who tried to abduct her as a ransom for his own safety and security from Ravan, who had acquired great powers from Brahma through his penance. Further ignored in terms of marriage, which leads her to accept whatever bare minimum was offered to her, Vidyujiva, a Kalkeya defamed for his immorality, swindling and dishonesty. So far, always physically rejected (in terms of beauty) and verbally abused, Supranakha covered by the mist of emotions, could not see her further decline into evil. Though her whole family reasoned her out, everyone had to surrender in front of her formidable desire mixed with arrogance and a chance to take revenge on her family for all its negligence and humiliation on her part so far. Very soon she was stripped of her happiness, firstly by the killing

of her husband by Ravan, compelling her to destroy not only Ravan and her whole family but the golden city Lanka, the desire of not only of mortal but also immortals. The smouldering desire of revenge blinds her to the law of nature that we glean whatever we sow. Her very birth as the daughter of an Asura family is the result of the sin that she committed in her earlier birth as Apsara Nyantara by disrupting the Tapasya of rishi Vajra. Her having the blood of Rishi Visharva symbolises her chances of correcting her this birth and being worthy of a better one in her next life. Her vaulting desire for revenge leads her to her ultimate destruction. Supranakha scowled at Ravan and murmured,

“I want to kill this man, who stood tall and mighty, yet humble and helpless.... She was orchestrating her brother’s death right now; she could still stop it, halt this madness, save him, save her family, save herself.” (209)

Her desire for vengeance turned her into a reprobate villain. Firstly, she loses her only hope, her son Kumar, and secondly, she is stripped of her dignity as a woman by cutting her nose and ears. She forgot the law of Karma that saves none. Though she is stationed in the sea of negligence and injustice, and to compensate for her discrimination, she resorted to the wrong path. She silenced the good counsel of her father and brother Vibhishan. Like Dr Faustus, she chose evil over good and had to suffer till her last moment by turning her into a seductress and guilty murderess of her family. Fortunately, in her last moment, she realised her sins and had the chance of her redemption.

“Supanakha’s Story in *Lanka’s Princess* is not just about personal growth; it’s also about challenging the patriarchal growth; it is also about challenging the patriarchal structures of her society..... Supanakha’s assertive behaviour is often viewed negatively in traditional narrative the subjugation of women.” (Padmavathy, 115)

In her next birth, she was born as Kubja, destined to humiliation and suffering and was regenerated by Lord Krishna into a beautiful woman whom she craved so much for not only in this birth but in her earlier life. Though she is more sinned than against sinning, she must have stopped and reflected on the actions that will affect not only her as an individual but as a daughter, sister, wife, mother and human being. Though she thought she had agency, in reality, she is reduced to being only a reactor to evil sprawled onto her in different forms.

Kakesi, the daughter of the Asura clan, wife of a Rishi, Visharwa and mother of her children, chooses her role as an Asura daughter born to vindicate her clan and was groomed into an ambitious woman. She is tricked by her parents to marry Rishi Visharwa, who was known for her sagacity and wisdom, so that she can be the mother of extraordinary children owner of supreme intelligence and exceptional sturdiness. Her role as a mother was overcome by her role as a

daughter, and was used by her parents as a deadly weapon to justify their family. Her vindication and ambition prevailed over her, leading to the suppression of her motherly feelings and rejection of Supranakha being an ugly girl child. Her ambition blinded her to the fate of her children, and she engulfed all of them in her fire of desire. She groomed Ravan as an invincible and formidable king of Lanka, but she forgot to teach him the basic lesson of content, humility and compassion. Illusioned by the boons of Brahma, Ravan underscores his immortality and mocks the fate of human beings,

“Man is fleeting! They are lesser beings-mere mortals!

Weak, mean and avaricious, who bring upon their own downfall.

Now I am no longer Ravan but Dashanaan.” (58)

Ironically, seduced by his ego, he is unable to acknowledge the transience of his own existence. Vibishan, as the voice of reason and good sense, was always silence branding to be coward and pedantic. As a besotted mother, she failed to arouse the intellectual part of Ravan to be a righteous and gratified king. As the mother of a socially vulnerable daughter, she never cared for her insecurities and fears, leading Supranakha into the mire of sin. Karma spares none. She was chosen as the witness of the destruction of her dream city, Lanka and her family. She could not save herself from the mighty clutches of Karma, who caught her and punished her eternally. A benevolent creator was turned into an ill-fated destroyer.

Lakshman retired into the jungle not only as a devoted brother to Ram but also as a fellow sufferer of his ordeal in the Vanvass. On the suggestion of Ram, he sliced off the nose and ears of Supranakha, snatching away her bare minimum hope to live as a better human being and pushed her into the fire of revenge more dangerously. After Ram has come to Ayodhya to resume his role as a king and Sita as his queen, she spreads rumours about the character of Sita that led to her exile. Lakshman is oblivious to the fact that he is also responsible for the dishonour and tribulation of Sita. In reducing Supranakha into an evil determined to exterminate everything. Lakshman regrets his rash actions. Others can share our blessings and bounties, but our sins have to be suffered alone by us. Karma never leaves anyone. We are always surrounded by moral and ethical dilemmas. We always have the choice to choose either of the side. We must have the guts to go against even ourselves if the situation demands. Daily, we are lured by the big and small temptations, and we are put into our own witness box where our conscience interrogates us, and it's up to us how we deal with the questions. Do we surrender to the existential and ethical interrogation or face the conscience with firm determination, courage rooted in righteousness and morality? In Kane's retelling, the characters' moral choices lead to various outcomes, and the concept of karma underscores the balance between justice and retribution.

“Supanakha’s journey unfolds as a relentless pursuit to break free from society’s expectations and carve her own identity. Ultimately, Supankha’s transformation is a complex one, marked by a deeply emotional journey from love to hatred and passion to vengeance.”

(Gamana Duvuu, 117)

Kavita Kane’s *Lanka’s Princess* offers a compelling feminist reinterpretation of the *Ramayana*, re-examining the roles of women within the epic and challenging the traditional power dynamics that have shaped their portrayals. Through her focus on Shurpanakha, Kane transforms a vilified character into a symbol of female agency, desire, and resistance. The novel invites readers to reconsider the portrayal of women in mythological narratives and to reflect on the ways in which patriarchy constructs and limits female identities.

In *Lanka’s Princess*, Kane also reinterprets the character of Sita, traditionally seen as the idealised woman—virtuous, loyal, and submissive. While Sita is often viewed as a paragon of feminine virtue in the *Ramayana*, her role in Kane’s narrative is more nuanced. Kane does not dismiss Sita’s virtue but instead questions the limitations imposed on women’s agency through the idealisation of such qualities. Sita’s identity, particularly her role as a wife and mother, is examined through a feminist lens that highlights the way these roles are constructed and constrained by societal expectations.

In the novel, Sita’s suffering is portrayed as a consequence of her adherence to these rigid ideals. While she is admired for her steadfastness and devotion to Rama, she also becomes a symbol of the societal pressure placed on women to conform to restrictive gender roles. Kane explores the emotional and psychological toll that these expectations take on Sita, revealing the emotional and spiritual isolation she experiences. Through Sita’s character, Kane illustrates the complexities of being a woman in a world where one’s worth is determined by her relationships to men, rather than her individual desires or capabilities.

Kane’s portrayal of Sita invites readers to question the conventional notions of feminine virtue and to consider the broader implications of the societal pressures that shape women’s identities. By presenting Sita as a woman caught between love, duty, and the expectations of her society, Kane reveals the emotional labour that is often demanded of women in traditional narratives. Sita’s character thus becomes a reflection of the limitations placed upon women’s agency and how their identities are shaped by patriarchal values.

The novel’s feminist analysis extends beyond the individual characters to explore the broader theme of power and its relation to gender. Power, in *Lanka’s Princess*, is largely defined by men—through the figures of Ravana, Rama, and Lakshmana—while women are often depicted as the objects of men’s desires, trophies of their battles, or victims of their decisions. Yet, Kane’s

narrative also uncovers how women negotiate power within these constraints, attempting to carve out spaces for their own agency in a world that continually seeks to suppress them.

Shurpanakha's initial pursuit of love and acceptance can be seen as a form of resistance against the patriarchal structures that seek to define her role. Her desire for Rama, though unreciprocated and ultimately punished, represents her attempt to assert control over her own life and her own body. Similarly, Sita's choices, despite being framed within the confines of duty and devotion to her husband, also reflect a form of agency, as she struggles to reconcile her own desires with her societal role.

Kane's feminist analysis of power dynamics highlights the tension between women's autonomy and the patriarchal structures that attempt to define and limit their lives. The novel suggests that power is not solely about dominance but also about the negotiation of space, the assertion of self, and the struggle to define one's identity in a world where one's worth is often determined by one's relationship to men.

Kane's feminist analysis of power dynamics in the novel emphasises the complex interplay of desire, autonomy, and social expectation that shapes women's lives. By presenting Shurpanakha and Sita as multi-dimensional characters, Kane reveals how women negotiate their roles within a patriarchal society, striving to assert their agency despite the constraints imposed upon them. In doing so, *Lanka's Princess* serves as both a critique of traditional gender roles and a powerful exploration of the possibilities for female empowerment within the framework of myth and history. Through this reimagining of the *Ramayana*, Kane contributes to the ongoing feminist project of reclaiming women's voices and reinterpreting narratives that have long been dominated by patriarchal discourse

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