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Surpanakha - Dreadful Demoness or Wronged Damsel?

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Indian mythology brings us colourful and interesting stories, not only of Gods and Goddesses, demi-Gods, heroes and kings, but also of certain anti-heroes and negative characters, who also had an equally important role to play in the tale.

Just as light cannot exist without darkness; so also, good cannot exist without evil. What is more, the so-called evil and wicked characters not only released their own karma, but also helped bring good to the world in general. Also, looking at the matter from a different perspective, these characters had their own reasons for doing the terrible deeds they did in their lifetimes. Many of them were pure of heart, but were oppressed and sometimes were even forced to commit sins they would not have otherwise committed.

Such is the story of Surpanakha. A demoness by birth, hers was a persona which could strike terror in the minds of the layman. Yet, there was another side to her, that was far softer and more mellow than one could ever imagine. This month, we bring you the tale of Surpanakha, the dreadful demoness of Lanka.

Surpanakha

Surpanakha, also spelt as Shurpanakha, literally means the "one with sharp fingernails" or the "one whose fingernails are like winnowing fans". She is an important character in the Valmiki Ramayana and is the sister of the main antagonist, Ravana, the demon-King of Lanka.



Ravana - Hand Painted Perforated
Leather Hanging Puppet

Surpanakha was the youngest child of Sage Vishravas and Kaikesi. She was married to Dushtabuddhi. Sometimes, he is also referred to as Vidyutjihva, the Prince of the Kalkeya Danava clan. Dushtabuddhi (literally, the one with an evil mind) was a prominent member of Ravana's court and Surpanakha married him by choice. However, he was plotting against Ravana. When the latter came to know of this, he got him killed, thus causing his own sister to become a widow.

Surpanakha then divided her time of stay between Lanka and some forests in South India. Sometimes, she went to live with her other relatives, Khara and Dushana.

Life

Some texts describe Surpanakha as thin and slender, with beautiful brown eyes, which were slightly tilted upwards. She is also described as having thick, long hair and a sweet, melodious voice.



Surpanakha - Papier Mache Mask

At birth, Suparnika (which later developed to become Surpanakha) was given the name of Minakshi "Diksha". Some also called her Chandranakha (the one with nails like the moon). She was as striking and stately as her mother Kaikesi and her grandmother Ketumati. When she came of age, she secretly married the Danava prince, Vidyutjihva. Ravana was enraged that she married a Danava - the Danavas were arch enemies of the Rakshasas. He was about to punish her, but his wife Mandodari convinced him to respect the wishes of his only sister. Thus, Ravana was forced to accept him into the family. After Ravana conquered Rasatala (the Underworld), he decided to visit his newly married sister. That is when he discovered Vidyutjihva's true motive to marry her. He wanted to kill Ravana. The latter then attacked and killed him. When Suparnika came to know of her husband's death and that Ravana had caused it, she was filled with grief. She then split her time between Lanka and Southern India. By then, she also conceived a son by Vidyutjihva, known as Shambhri, who was later accidentally killed by Lakshmana.

Surpanakha Meets Rama

According to the Valmiki Ramayana, Surpanakha met Rama, the exiled Prince of Ayodhya, on one such trips to the Forest of Panchavati. She was instantly smitten by his handsome persona and youthful good looks. She tried to make advances towards Rama, but he repeatedly kept rejecting them. He even told her that he had taken a vow of having only one wife (eka-patni vrata) and hence, he would never accept any other woman in his life. Surpanakha then approached his younger brother, Lakshmana. He reacted very differently from Rama. He was harsh and cruel in his rejection of her and said that she would never become that which he desired in a wife. Eventually, she realized that the brothers were making fun of her. Insulted and humiliated, she attacked Sita, but was thwarted by Lakshmana. When he had had too much, he cut off her nose and left ear and sent her racing back to Lanka. According to some versions of the story, he also cut off one of her breasts.



Lakshman Cuts Surpanakha's Nose in
Presence of Rama and Sita - Orissa Patta Painting

Crying loudly, Suparnika first went to her brother, Khara. He immediately sent seven Rakshasa warriors to attack Rama. The latter effortlessly defeated them and sent them back. Khara then challenged Rama himself, along with 14,000 soldiers. They were all killed, except for Akampana, Kaikesi's brother. He fled to Lanka.

Ravana Abducts Sita

Suparnika then went to Ravana's court and related the entire story. She also convinced him to abduct and wed Sita. Akampana too played a vital role in instigating Ravana to abduct Sita and make her his own. The only one who was against this was Vibhishana, Ravana's other brother. Ravana called him a traitor and, ignoring his warnings, proceeded to take Sita.

Ravana's abducting of Sita, also his act of killing Jatayu, the Divine Vulture, triggered the war between Rama and Ravana. After many days of battle, Ravana was killed at the hands of Rama. As per some legends, Sita and Surpanakha eventually forgave each other after the war and even managed to become friends.

The Valmiki Ramayana does not speak of Suparnika after the war. However, it is generally believed that she continued to live in Lanka after Vibhishana ascended the throne as King of Lanka. It is said that, a few years later, she and her half-sister Kumbini perished at sea.



Sita's Abduction by Ravana and Jatayu Vadh

- Raja Ravi Varma Painting on Canvas

Other Legends

Some versions of the Ramayana state that Surpanakha had no real romantic interest in either Rama or Lakshmana. She was still seething about the fact that Ravana had killed her husband and so, instigated him, knowing well that he would fight against Rama and eventually be killed at his hands. Rama had killed both her grandmother, the terrible Tataka, and her Uncle, Subahu. She was aware that Ravana would be no match for Rama and so, she patiently plotted for months together and hatched a plan to get him killed.



Rama and Lakshmana at War with

Ten Headed Ravana - Kalamkari Painting

Yet another version narrates that Suparnika was a beauty beyond compare. She had a crush when she saw Lakshmana in Panchavati - at that time, she was not aware that he was married. When she approached him, he got offended and in extreme (and rather unnecessary) rage, he cut off her nose, thus rendering her ugly for life.

After spending years in solitude, she finally found peace within herself and recreated her original beauty in an enchantingly beautiful garden, which Sita happened to stumble upon, much later, during her own exile at Valmiki's ashrama.

Suparnika - the Untold Story

Suparnika was indeed one of the central characters of the Ramayana. Valmiki himself stated that, had there been no Kaikeyi and no Surpanakha, the Ramayana would not have existed. She was the catalyst who set into motion the chain of events that led to the destruction of Ravana. She, therefore, is considered to be the driving force behind the Rama-Ravana war. However, there is also another side to the story...

Highly Misunderstood

Though a beautiful woman hailing from a royal family, Surpanakha was belittled and made fun of by Lakshmana, just because she showed an interest in him. To add to her insult, her nose and ear were chopped off as well, disfiguring her permanently.

Victim of Injustice

The Ramayana portrays Rama and Lakshmana as the personification of divinity and dharma. However, the story of Surpanakha makes one think again about it. No man that insults and disfigures a woman like they did to her can be termed as being good or dharmic. In that sense, Surpanakha was the victim of injustice and never deserved the punishment she got, merely for showing interest in a member of the opposite sex.

She Wished to Marry Rama

On seeing Rama, she was instantly smitten by him and wanted to marry him. But then, which woman would not want that? She then approached Lakshmana only on Rama's recommendation. At that time, she was not aware that the brothers were only tossing her around and were cruelly having fun at her expense. When she realized what was happening, she felt deeply insulted and angry.

A Wronged Woman

Several scholars state that Surpanakha was, in fact, a wronged woman. Had Rama and Lakshmana calmly reasoned with her, she would probably have understood their point of view and would even have decided to leave the matter alone. But their act of insulting her and severing parts of her body was unforgivable, especially for Kshatriyas (warriors) of their stature. She was a strong-willed, independent woman, who dared to approach a man and tell him that she liked him. That should actually be looked at as a virtue and is not something to be made fun of.

Why Surpanakha Wanted Ravana Killed

Surpanakha always felt that she was living under the shadow of her highly dominating brother, Ravana. It was like she was never allowed to have a mind of her own. He would order her to do something and she simply had to do it. Over the years, this created a deep resentment towards him. He had tried to interfere and stop her even when she wished to marry Vidyutjihva, the love of her life. It was only because of Mandodari's recommendation that she could finally marry him.

Ravana's slaying of her husband was the last straw for her. She was seething with rage when she came to know how Vidyutjihva died. She desperately wanted revenge, but being a helpless widow, she could do nothing on her own. She also felt lonely and disrespected at Lanka and that is why she often spent time away from the palace and in the forests, where she found more peace.

She was well aware that no ordinary mortal or beast could cause even the slightest harm to Ravana. It would need someone extraordinary and divine to destroy him. Knowing that only Rama could do this, she plotted to instigate Ravana against Rama.

Surpanakha - Description in the Ramayana

Surpanakha has been described and portrayed differently in different versions of the Ramayana. Valmiki's Ramayana states that she was a ghora mukhi (ugly faced), pot-bellied, cross-eyed and had oversized breasts. Further, it says that she had thinning, brown hair and a grating voice, which had no hint of softness or femininity in it. This version also describes her as evil-minded, with a heart full of wickedness.

On the other hand, Tamil poet, Kamban, has a different perspective of Surpanakha in his Kamba Ramayanam. He describes her as a strikingly beautiful woman with long, lustrous hair, fish-shaped eyes (that is why she was given the name Minakshi at birth), a slender form and a magnetic and bewitching personality. She also wielded magical powers and could assume any

form at will.

As per the Kamba Ramayanam, she put all these powers to good use when she initially approached Rama with her proposal. Rama, however, realized who she actually was and decided to play her for a while, before finally rejecting her.

As per the Brahmavaivarta Purana, Surpanakha later visited the holy lake of Pushkara and prayed to Lord Brahma that she should marry Rama in her next birth. Accordingly, she was born as Kubja in her next birth. She was a hunchbacked woman, who married Lord Krishna, the next incarnation of Sri Maha Vishnu.



Lord Brahma - Photographic Print

Sita Meets Surpanakha

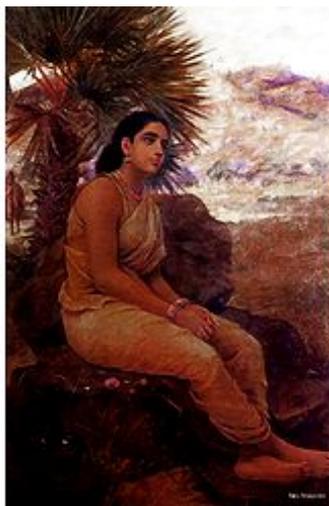
According to an excerpt from Devdutt Pattanaik's "Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana", Sita met Surpanakha much later in her life, when she herself was in exile in Valmiki's ashrama. At that time, Lakshmana had abandoned the pregnant Sita in the forest, on Rama's orders. This, in spite of the fact that she had proved her chastity by undergoing the agni-pariksha (test of fire), for having stayed so long in Ravana's place.



Agnipariksha of Sita - Photographic Print

According to the Uttara Ramayana, after Rama's Pattabhishekam (coronation ceremony), some people in Ayodhya were still doubting Sita's purity and were wondering who the father of her child could be. Rama heard them discussing the matter and decided that it was in his kingdom's best interest to let Sita go from there, so that no one would doubt his integrity and adherence to his duty as King. He, however, did not have the courage to face Sita and tell her that she should leave the palace. Hence, he asked a reluctant Lakshmana to accompany her till the forest and then abandon her there.

Sita, who was in immense grief, sat under a berry tree. That was when she found Surpanakha, filled with hatred, was gloating and laughing at her. She said that they rejected Sita, just as they rejected her. Now, Sita was stripped of her status, just as she (Surpanakha) was stripped of her beauty.



Sita Vanavasa -

Reprint of Raja Ravi Varma Paintings

Though deeply hurt by the Rakshasi's words, Sita found the strength to smile at her and offered her a berry. She told Surpanakha that the berries were sweet - as sweet as the ones in Mandodari's garden - and urged her to have some.

Sita's gentleness surprised Surpanakha. She had hoped to inflict pain on the former, but she was obviously growing beyond the pain. She realized that she had to stop this cycle of hatred and had to start loving herself, before expecting anyone to love her in return. That was the only way that she could find peace within herself.

Surpanakha Lets Go

Still affected by the negativity and hatred inside her, Surpanakha argued that she had been denied justice. Sita advised her to leave the past behind her and start living in the present. She also told her to let bygones be bygones and forgive everything that everyone had done to her.

Sita continued with her stand, saying that she should not get trapped and be a victim of her own need for revenge. She stated that several Ramas and Ravanas would come and go and that millions of people would be born and would die, but life and nature would still continue to exist, as it always did. She said that it was the reason why she preferred to be here in the dense forest, in the midst of Mother Nature.

Sita's demeanour and her advice impressed Surpanakha. She realized that, in order to see change outside, she first had to change inside. She picked up the berry offered by Sita. It tasted sweet - it was the sweetest thing she ever tasted. She ate another one and smiled at Sita.

With that, Surpanakha let go of all her past suffering, negativity and hatred and started to feel truly beautiful again. She giggled happily and playfully challenged to a race to the stream. Off the ladies went, genuinely joyous and feeling at peace with themselves and with the world around them.

Suparnika - Demoness or Damsel?

With traditional notions and ideas undergoing immense changes in the present modern world we live in, our perception of right and wrong has also transformed; thus giving us a different viewpoint of the stories we heard and read during childhood. Modern education and modern values make us rethink these legends and wonder if there is more to them that meets the eye - if Rama was really so pure and good; and if Surpanakha was really that dark and evil.

In today's world, we still see unspeakable atrocities committed against women in the name of tradition and power. Still, most women in rural areas and many, even in urban areas, suffer attacks, assault, rape, honour killings and so on. The shocking thing is that a major chunk of

society still blames them for this suffering. Much worse; the very definition of rape changes with religion, caste and their class. Women who are divorced or who do not give consent for sex are often mocked as arrogant and immature.

In such a society, it comes as no surprise that Rama, who remained silent while Lakshmana physically attacked Surpanakha, is still considered as the epitome of Hindutva. On the other hand, the victim, Surpanakha, who was marred maimed all her life, still continues to be judged for her actions. She is looked down upon, merely because she expressed an interest towards Rama.

Similarly, Sita was kidnapped by Ravana against her will. She had to undergo the agni-pariksha to prove her chastity, while no one ever doubted Rama's loyalty. In spite of him sending her to the forest at the hands of Lakshmana, people still refer to Rama as the "Maryada Purushottam" (the perfect follower of rules; the epitome of perfect values).

There is yet one more angle here. The fact is that Rama never experienced peace or happiness even for a single day, after he ill-treated Surpanakha. Likewise, Ravana never experienced joy after abducting Sita. In fact, she was the cause of the loss of his kingdom, power, dignity and even his own life. This probably goes to show that those who do not treat their women properly, would finally have to face a lifetime of negative karma for it.

However, it was up to Sita and Surpanakha to find their own justice and peace for it. They went through their storms and changed themselves, so that they could experience peace and joy in their lives. They realized that they should start loving themselves unconditionally, in order to unlock the power of Shakti within themselves.

The Story of Surpanakha - A Lesson to Learn

The tale of Surpanakha has a hidden meaning that all of us can learn from. Her character shows us that nothing and no one is absolutely "good" or "bad" as we define things from our limited experience of life. Rather, everything and everyone (ourselves included) has shades of grey, that we must learn to accept.

Looking at her story from a different angle and being empathetic towards her, one would probably discover that Surpanakha was not at all that terrible as she is projected to be. There was probably one side of her, that was hapless, helpless, downtrodden and frustrated. She too, probably, was the victim of circumstances, just like Sita was. Maybe that is why the two women eventually forgave each other and became friends for life.

The very act of Surpanakha forgiving the past proves that she had transcended the realms of negative emotions such as anger, vanity and ego. Her ability to let go clearly goes to show that she too had a softer side and a heart that was filled with love and forgiveness.

Maybe we all should follow her example and learn to become less judgemental and more accepting of everything and all around us. That way, we too would be able to progress on the path of achieving true peace and joy in our own lives!

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