
SHURPANAGHA, A MYTH RETOLD

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M. LAKSHMI

*Research Scholar, Department of English**St. Joseph's College Devagiri Calicut, Kerala, India*

In India, the spiritual and cultural life has been greatly influenced by the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, the two great epics of Hinduism. Both heroes and villains of these two epics never refuse challenges. They are exemplars of moral and physical action and are crafted to create an awe and desire in the readers. They are not just stories of heroism, but stories about the ideal way of life. The atmosphere of the main narrative is that of a society just emerging from tribalism, in which personal loyalty to one's chief and fellow clansmen is still very strongly emphasized.

Ramayana the ancient Indian epic, which in Sanskrit means "Rama's Journey", narrates the life of Rama who is an incarnation of all the qualities of an epic hero. Ramayana can be considered as an epic of humanity. The Ramayana has a special place in India because of the purity of Rama and Sita and their love. Rama is the protector of the oppressed, of widows and orphans. Rama is the perfect prince who is brave in face of danger. He is protective and tender to all women. Rama has long formed the ideal of Hindu manhood, as Sita has of Hindu womanhood. Rama is obedient and respectful to his parents and loyal and affectionate to his wife, relatives and friends. He is benevolent and gentle towards his subjects. Rama is shown as the man of courage and as the one who stands for virtue against all evils. He is "*Purushothaman*"- an embodiment of all virtues and righteousness. The obedience and deference which Sita shows to her husband and her husband's family is boundless, but at the same time she possesses intense courage to stake her life in defence of her virtue. Thus the epic narrates the ideal behaviour for men and women. It tries to instil in us the virtues of courage, loyalty, obedience, faith, devotion, self-sacrifice and selflessness.

Rama, the hero of the epic, is depicted as the ideal of manhood, and Sita, the ideal of Indian womanhood. Epics never cease to marvel and they always offer the scope of interpretation, according to the contemporary realities. Ramayana also is not an exception. As one of the largest epics in world literature, '*Ramayana*' has taken

different frames and has been retold, deconstructed and reconstructed, in many languages across the world. Ramayana exists in different forms in different parts of the world. It doesn't exist as a monolithic narrative story, but as a multi-voiced entity. Ramayana has taken different forms and versions according to the different historical periods, regional literary traditions, socio-religious cultures, and also the intended audience. The ideologies of the characters were questioned, major shift in perspectives were made, and reversal of roles have been attempted time and again since ages.

The subject matter of the epics is a perfect blend of myth and legend (history). Mythology simply refers to the aggregate of myths, legends, beliefs and deities of the Indic peoples. The Indic peoples include ancient and contemporary adherents of "Hinduism", Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism and the peoples and diaspora of the entire Indian Subcontinent and South East Asia. Thus Epics form the corpus and main sources of many mythologies. Myths are traditional stories, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events. The simplest definition of mythology is that it is "a collection of stories endemic to a certain community, which describes their deities, heroes and general worldview". Myths, intended to provide explanations for things people don't understand, form an important part of every human and is the inseparable part of the culture of any country. Sara Joseph, the well known Malayalam writer, in her short story *Thaikulam* uses the myth to project the views of Shurpanakha, the sister of Ravan. She uses the stream of conscious technique or interior monologue to bring in a reversal of the conventional understanding of a hero and heroism. The story looks at the ideal Rama from a woman's point of view and thrashes his 'Purushothaman' image.

Sara Joseph's literary career began very early and there is one and only one theme - the marginalized woman struggling for release from the oppressive and dominant social, cultural and economic structures-which find its prominence in every form of literature, may it be poems, short stories or novels that she happened to be involved. Through her stories the author portrays the individual woman's specific reactions to the power relations operative in society. They become a commentary on the female experience in a patriarchy; also a commentary on the socio cultural and ethnic identity of the "other" perspective. As Simon de Beauvoir has said, "he is the subject, he is the Absolute - she is the 'other'". In all her works there is an emphasis on womanhood, a feminist agenda of survival against social and cultural deprivations to which women are exposed. Shurpanakha is one of the most important characters of the Ramayana. In fact, she played an important role in setting the events of the epic in motion. Shurpanakha, which means 'sharp nails', according to the myths, is the daughter of Vaisravas and Kaikasi. In the Valmiki Ramayana, she is a demoness character who tries to seduce Rama. She then tries to harass Sita and to kill her in order to win Rama. Lakshmana catches her and cuts her nose. Shurpanakha then returns to

Lanka and tells Ravana how Rama and Lakshmana mistreated her. This infuriates Ravana and he resolves to take revenge on the brothers. This is how the whole story of the war between Rama and Ravana, which eventually led to the destruction of Ravana, began in the Valmiki Ramayana.

The short story *Thaikulam* by Sara Joseph puts forward a new critical reading of this classic story. In her story, Shurpanakha is the protagonist. It is through Shurpanakha's words that the story progresses. Sara Joseph is presenting before the readers a feminist approach to Ramayana. She attempts to question the patriarchal norms that have been glorified since ages and reads the glorious deeds of Rama and Lakshmana with a critical mind. In her story, Sara Joseph presents before us the double marginalization that Shurpanakha faces, both as a 'rakshasi' and again as a woman. The author in the novel is sympathetic towards Sita. But she looks at Rama as one holding the privileges of both being a male and also an Aryan. Sara Joseph, the feminist activist, by looking through 'feminist reading glass', tells how Rama and Lakshmana join with the many arrogant patriarchs when they act against Shurpanakha's romantic advances towards Rama by cutting off her nose and breasts.

Many a versions of the Ramayana talk about Lakshmana's act of cutting off Shurpanakha's nose and breasts as an outcome of her illicit and immoral sexual advances towards Rama, the 'exemplar of all virtues and righteousness'. These versions of Ramayana have branded Shurpanakha as the one at fault since the time of its composition. The story goes like this- at Panchavadi, Shurpanakha makes advances towards Rama. She tries to harass Sita for Rama rejects her love, and Lakshmana, at the command of Rama cuts off her nose and her breasts.

One's nose stands for one's dignity, and according to the Tamil culture, for a woman, her breasts symbolize her power. Here in the story *Thaikulam*, Shurpanakha's breasts symbolize not only her feminine self, but femininity and motherhood in collective. In the story, we see Shurpanakha painfully thinking of her breasts which were cut off by Lakshmana. It is impossible for Shurpanakha to forgive the brothers who cut her off her womanhood and her motherhood. For her it is but an act of cowardice and not bravery. Here in the story Sara Joseph takes Shurpanakha and Ayomugi as representing the women across the globe, across time and space. Indian mythology has always served the purpose of patriarchy. She strips Rama off his *Purushothama* image; Sara Joseph's Rama is an arrogant patriarch who wields his male powers and the privileges of an upper caste man on the hapless, feeble and powerless women around him.

Shurpanakha, according to the Valmiki Ramayana, is 'goramukhi' which translates to 'ugly woman'. She is described as pot-bellied and cross-eyed. She has a harsh voice which is unpleasant to the ears. Also she is said to have oversized breasts. A woman's breasts stand for her dignity and her feminine self. Here when Rama commands his brother to chop off her breasts, he is chopping off her own self. Her oversized breasts

may be seen as symbolizing her assertive nature. Shurpanagha in the story does not satisfy the traditional concepts of an ideal woman, unlike Sita. Shurpanagha is not shown as a beautiful woman or as an obedient and humble being. She is assertive and powerful. Rama's act of violence towards Shurpanagha cannot be justified by any means. When looked at from a feminist point of view, it shows how the assertive and powerful women horrify and trembles men.

There has been many versions of the Ramayana, and in most of them there can be seen a deliberate attempt from the writers' part to clear Rama off his offensive act towards Shurpanagha by claiming that it was Lakshmana who chopped off her nose and breasts. And in some versions, it is on Rama's command that Lakshmana commits the act. Popular versions of Ramayana claim that it was because Shurpanagha tried to make sexual advances towards Rama and because she tried to harass Sita that this heinous deed was committed. But in Sara Joseph's story, she brings Shurpanagha to the frame and makes the audience listen to her. Also Sara Joseph, through Shurpanagha's voice, brings in an image of Aryan invasion. Shurpanagha of Sara Joseph's story talks unrefined Tamil. She is given a *dalit* colouring in the story. She is not shown as a refined woman.

Sara Joseph's Shurpanagha is one who shares a strong bond with nature. Even the changes that happen to the forest affect her as well. She blooms with the spring. Panchavadi, says Shurpanagha, has never failed to bring out the romantic in her. The fragrance of the flora and the lavish greenery has always seduced her. It was under this seduction that she was at Panchavadi. There is a total normalizing of Shurpanagha's sexuality and desires in *Thaikulam*. She says how she has been in love with the Panchavadi since her very youth. There is a symbiotic relationship that is established between Shurpanakha and her surroundings. The fragrance emanating out of the forest is irresistible to her. She finds her true self in there. It is in that land that she is attacked and is chopped off her femininity. When a woman asserts her sexual freedom, especially when it comes from the 'other' woman, the patriarch in Rama can't stand it. And it is as an outcome of this fear for the sexually assertive and powerful woman that he attacks her. Shurpanagha says,

"No one in our clan does this to women... The King Ravana has never caused destruction to a female body. Never has someone in ourclan asserted his power by attacking a woman's body."

As mentioned above, Sara Joseph is sympathetic towards Sita. Sita is also, in the story, a victim of the patriarchal norms and prejudices. Sita undergoes fire ordeal though she had upheld the image of a "*pathivratasthree*" till the end. At the end of Sara Joseph's story, we see Shurpanagha laughing uncontrollably on knowing that Sita, who was the very paragon of virtue, had to undergo a fire ordeal to show prove her chastity. Shurpanagha is here laughing at all the patriarchal norms and prejudices. Her laughter makes the whole of panchavadi tremble. Shurpanagha can be seen as Sita's

alter ego. Shurpanagha does all that Sita had always feared to do. Shurpanagha asserts herself, and is independent and powerful. She is everything that Sita wishes to be.

Thaikulam attempts at questioning the age old glorifications of Rama and Lakshmana. The author brings Rama out of his *purushothama* image to one of a patriarch. Sara Joseph, in the story, through certain monologues and conversations, paints Shurpanagha in new colours. The story reads Ramayana from the 'other's point of view. Epics are reborn at every age. Their messages are renewed and new readings and interpretations are brought every other time. The author, in the story, has given a different perspective of it offering feminist and also Dalit critiques of it. Sarah Joseph shows how events in the past can successfully be linked to the present and interpreted in the present scenario using epics as a tool. She truthfully feels the pain of a sensitive soul to the violence that acts as a sub-text to history and literature that are essentially men's stories of maintaining mastery and control over woman's body and land. She feels strongly the need to challenge the play of power that occasions this violence. She hopes that boundless love will wash over this earth, when it is freed of the blind desire of men for power. It will vest words with new meanings especially the words 'love' and 'freedom' will be vested with new meanings and interpretations. According to her, "freedom is something that has its foundations in love".

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