

The Archaic Ramayana and the Hidden Voice of Power: Unveiling Mandodari: Queen of Lanka and Surpanakha: Lanka's Princess

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Abstract

This paper aims to compare two of the most significant characters from the Ramayana, a renowned epic traditionally divided into seven major kandas. While the Ramayana might have given the campaign a bold appeal in one's imagination, the heart of the epic resonates with strong female characters. The story speaks about the women who navigate a society that is rich in choices concerning social, marital, political, and spiritual statuses, regardless of whether they reside in a palace or a forest. Mandodari, who appears in the Uttara Kanda, and Meenakshi in the Aranya Kanda are analysed, and two novels by different authors, Mandodari: Queen of Lanka by Manini J. Anandani and Surpanakha: Lanka's Princess by Kavita Kane, are taken for comparison.

Keywords / திறவுச் சொற்கள்: Mythology; Patriarchy; Subjugation; Social acceptance

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Kavita Kane and Manini J. Anandani are Indian authors who write in English, and their works have become best-selling fiction inspired by myths. They explore myths based on ancient Indian stories. Both novels are enriched with the vast treasures of Indian mythology and religious history. Their narratives focus on the often-overlooked female characters of the Ramayana. The characters depicted in their works are reimagined figures, and their storytelling deviates from the original epic. Both Kane and Manini excel at illustrating female characters who exist on the periphery of mythology. The women portrayed in their stories are powerful yet have remained in the shadows, with their motivations largely overlooked. Kavita Kane and Manini J. Anandani's narrative style reflects their brilliant and captivating artistry. They have skillfully developed a character from the Ramayana who is often overlooked. Through the figures of *Mandodari, the Queen of Lanka*, and Meenakshi, *Lanka's Princess*, the authors present their perspectives on these women's stories.

In *Mandodari, the Queen of Lanka*, Mandodari was a lovely girl who was rescued by Mayasura, the ruler of Mayarastra, a celebrated architect known for designing Lanka, the golden city. His wife, Hema, an apsara and celestial dancer, together wished for a daughter, and after performing penance to Lord Shiva, they were blessed with Mandodari. Filled with gratitude, they happily adopted the rescued child as their own. As a princess, she completed most of her education by the age of twelve. When Mandodari reached the age of fifteen, her brother Mayavi began involving her in his projects, and her mother had instructed Mai, the midwife, to teach her everything a perfect bride should understand. During a visit to Mayasura's home to study architecture, Dashaaan met the beautiful Mandodari and fell in love.

In the tale of Lanka's Princess Meenakshi, the daughter of the revered sage Vishrava and the demon princess Kaikesi. Kaikesi's father, King Sumali, aimed to arrange a marriage for her with the most influential person, but in the end, she selected Vishrava, with the approval of her

father and mother, Taraka. Vishrava had fallen so deeply for her that he abandoned his first wife, Ilavida and son Kuber to take Kaikesi as his second spouse. Meenakshi was the fourth child among Ravana, Kumbakarna, and Vibhishan. Her name, Meenakshi, meaning "fish-eyed," was inspired by her golden, graceful eyes. Her mother Kaikesi viewed her with disdain, as her fingernails resembled claws. Kaikesi was disheartened, as she needed sons to rule the three worlds and restore Lanka to its former glory, their lost golden city. Meenakshi, constantly criticised for her appearance, was nicknamed Surpanakha by her own family due to her claw-like nails. Kaikesi mistakenly thought Meenakshi would remain single because of her perceived unattractiveness, but contrary to that belief, Meenakshi eventually excelled in magic and the art of seduction, learned from her beloved grandmother Taraka, who cherished her more than the others.

Mandodari was wed to the powerful Asura king Dashaanan, who was the elder brother of Meenakshi. Kaikesi adorned her firstborn son Ravana with a crystal necklace, and the necklace's reflection created the illusion of ten heads on his face. Thus, he was known to all as Ravana, the King of Lanka. Consequently, Mandodari, the daughter of Mayasura, was crowned as the 'Queen of Lanka.' As the princess of Lanka, Meenakshi grew up with a slender and curved figure, fish-like eyes, beautiful long brown hair, and a charming, melodious voice; she fell in love with Vidyujiva, the Danava prince from Kalkeya Danava. He declared his affection for her, profoundly captivated, and expressed his desire to marry her. Meenakshi reciprocated his feelings but was hesitant to accept his proposal because of Kumbha's words. They were discovered together in her bedroom by Ravana and Kumbha, and her brothers considered Vidyujiva to be dishonest. Meenakshi replied scornfully, pointing out that their brothers were preoccupied with their newly married lives and had forgotten about their sister, who was now well past the age of marriage, older than their wives. Unyielding, Meenakshi continued to highlight Vedavati and Rambha's fates. Mandodari did everything she could to convince Dashaanan to allow Meenakshi to explain herself and accept Vidyujiva as her husband. In the end, he forgave them due to his affection for Meenakshi but gave Vidyujiva an insulting name, Dushtabuddhi, in Lanka for his wickedness in influencing his sister. And twelve years later, Meenakshi gave birth to a son named Sambhukumar.

Dashaanan had over a hundred other women in his antapura and took Dhanyamalini and Nayanadini as wives, and he could not stop marrying multiple times, as he had to prioritise what was best for Lanka. Nevertheless, his love for Mandodari exceeded everything else, and he also wanted her to support him. Mandodari gave birth to three children: the first was a girl, which her husband had hoped for, but she was stillborn and buried in Mithila without Dashaanan's knowledge. The second child was a boy named Meghanath, who was later known as Indrajeet, and the third child was Akshayakumara, the first to lose his life in the battle between Rama and Ravana; the mastermind behind the conflict was Surpanakha.

Vidyujiva was killed on the battlefield as an act of revenge by Ravana. Meenakshi had a flashback that revealed why her sister-in-law Mandodari included her in her sorrowful remarks about her husband's desires. After the cremation of Vidyujiva, Meenakshi departed from Lanka in great distress and settled in the Dandaka forest with her only son, five-year-old Sambhukumar, hoping he would grow quickly to take revenge on his uncle Ravana. Before leaving Lanka, she vowed, as Surpanakha, that she would turn her brother's Ashok garden into ashes. Sambhukumar, now eighteen, had mastered all celestial and mystical weaponry, but tragically, she lost her son, whom she had trained to kill her own brother, Ravana, when he was accidentally killed by Lakshman. Upon learning that the Ayodhya prince, Ram, along with Lakshman and Sita, were in exile in the Dandaka forest, Surpanakha was filled with anger and felt compelled to start a war that would bring destruction to the golden city of Lanka. Her strategy was straightforward; she decided to befriend the Ayodhya princes. Disguising herself as an attractive woman with a magical trick she learned from her nanny, she approached them, but

Rama kindly turned her down, informing her that he was a 'Yega Pathini Viratha.' Surpanakha then directed her attention toward Lakshmana, who also dismissed her advances.

Surpanakha was filled with anger at how they handled her and started to assault Sita. Lakshman defended her, and during the struggle to rescue Sita, he cut off Surpanakha's nose. Wounded and humiliated, she went to Lanka with her disfigured face. Her immediate thought was to use the young princes of Ayodhya to take revenge on her brother. Surpanakha revealed her face to Ravana, claiming that this shame resulted from her attempt to carry off Sita for him. The angry brother could no longer put up with this situation, quickly decided to take revenge. Ravana kidnapped Sita, which set off the war. Rama's confrontation with Ravana, the second significant turning point of the epic, was initiated by the warrior princess Surpanakha, who encouraged Ravana to capture Sita as revenge for her humiliation. Mandodari attempted to warn her husband, recognising that he was on a path leading to his own demise for the sake of his sister Surpanakha. Mandodari was portrayed not only as the ideal wife but also as one who challenges and advises the most powerful ruler of the three worlds. She acknowledged Sita as their daughter, recognising her by the birthmark in hand that matched with her and her own lost daughter. Mandodari stood by her husband during the battle and ultimately sent him off with her wishes for victory, fulfilling her role as a devoted and loving wife, despite being aware of the fate that awaited her.

Mandodari stood by her powerful husband, consistently offering wise advice to her loved partner. Although she repeatedly encouraged Dashaanan to honourably return Sita to Rama, she did not abandon him during the war that engulfed their Golden City. Ravana is put to death, and Surpanakha, his own sister, started this conflict that led to his demise at Rama's hands. She sought revenge for the death of her husband, Vidyujiva. In her view, she has granted him a more honourable end. Mandodari, the noble queen of Lanka, mourns her husband's death like any ordinary wife.

Mandodari and Surpanakha play significant roles in the Ramayana, and although their appearances are brief, they embody chastity and devotion toward their husbands. Tragically, they lost their husbands and children, enduring suffering without any fault on their part. Despite their deep emotions, they navigate lives filled with contrasts and diverse experiences. Surpanakha's hurtful comments wounded Mandodari when she expressed her unwillingness to attend Vibhishana's coronation or accept Mandodari's second marriage to him so soon after mourning. In response, Mandodari calmly and affectionately explained that her marriage is not for her own benefit but to secure the future of Indrajeet. Mandodari insisted that her union with Vibhishana is a political necessity.

Kavita and Manini portray their characters not only as attractive women but also as disastrous figures. Their novels focus on women, highlighting those lesser-known characters from mythology and addressing issues that continue to resonate in today's world. It is important for the books to discuss all the female characters in the Ramayana, with Mandodari and Surpanakha emerging as the most significant figures, who are both determined and composed in advancing their own interests. Rather than mourning their circumstances, they became a source of strength for themselves and others. The epic Ramayana would not exist without Mandodari and Surpanakha. We know a lot about Mandodari and Surpanakha, but there is still so much more of their story left untold.

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