

Facing the Void: An Existential Reading of Selfhood in Kavita Kané's *Lanka's Princess*

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Abstract:

This paper reads Kavita Kané's *Lanka's Princess* (2017) through the lens of existentialist theory, arguing that Surpanakha's much mythologised "monstrosity" is best understood as an existential crisis: a rupture between an imposed, objectified identity and a self she is never permitted to author. Drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre's account of "being-for-others" and bad faith, Albert Camus's theory of the absurd, and Søren Kierkegaard's phenomenology of despair, the paper traces Meenakshi/Surpanakha's passage through three existential moments the naming by the Other, the mirror-crisis of self-image, and the absurd rupture of the mutilated body to argue that Kané's novel stages selfhood itself as an unfinished, contested project rather than a fixed essence.

Keywords: Existentialism, the Other, Selfhood, isolation

Introduction

Existentialist thought holds that a person is not born with a fixed nature but is thrown into the world and must forge a self through choice, often against an indifferent or hostile gaze (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 47). This paper reads Kavita Kané's *Lanka's Princess* through that lens, drawing chiefly on Sartre's ideas of "the look" and bad faith, and on Camus's notion of the absurd, to argue that Surpanakha's mythologised "monstrosity" is better understood as an existential crisis of selfhood.

Kavita Kané's *Lanka's Princess*, a revisionist narration of the Ramayana from the perspective of Ravana's sister Surpanakha, offers unusually rich material for this framework. The novel does not simply recount a mythic villain's deeds; it stages, chapter by chapter, the psychological process by which a girl named Meenakshi is renamed, re-seen, and re-made

into "Surpanakha" by the successive judgments of her family, her society, and finally the heroes of the epic. Read existentially, her arc is not a fall into villainy but a sustained crisis of selfhood: an attempt, only partly successful, to seize authorship of an identity that others have already decided for her.

The clearest Sartrean moment in the novel occurs in childhood, when Ravan brands his sister with the name that will outlive her: "Surpanakha, that's what she is... a witch with long, sharp claws" (Kané 18). What follows is a striking existential turn: rather than simply suffering the label, Meenakshi appropriates it as a shield. "The word echoed in her ears... If this could protect me, then well, I am Surpanakha, she thought with perverse pleasure" (18). Confronted moments later by her mother, she completes the self-naming aloud: "Yes, I am a monster!... I am Surpanakha!" (19). In Sartrean terms, this is bad faith in its most literal form — the wholesale adoption of an identity authored entirely by the Other's look yet Kané complicates the diagnosis by making the adoption strategic rather than merely passive: Meenakshi chooses the monstrous name because it offers a shield her actual vulnerability does not. The crisis, in other words, is not that she is named a monster, but that naming is the only form of agency her family permits her.

This objectifying gaze recurs as ordinary neglect rather than open cruelty. Ravan, we are told, remained "barely aware that she existed," tolerating her presence with impatience rather than recognition (21). To be unrecognised is, for Sartre, a subtler violence than to be condemned, since it denies the subject even the contested status of an object worth judging; Meenakshi's crisis of selfhood begins, the novel suggests, not with the insult but with the prior indifference that makes the insult possible.

Kané returns repeatedly to the mirror as the site where Meenakshi's crisis of identity is renewed. "Meenakshi grimaced at her reflection in the mirror. What she saw never pleased her" (28), the narrative reports in a chapter otherwise devoted to her grandmother's affection — the discomfort is entirely self-generated, evidence that the Other's judgment has been internalised as her own standard of seeing. Yet the novel also stages moments of resistance to this internalised gaze, moments closer to what existentialists would call authentic self-possession. Confronting her own face directly, she insists: "I am not fair, but I am attractive, she reasserted fiercely" (85). The verb "reasserted" is telling: authenticity here is not a natural condition but effortful, repeated labour against an already-internalised verdict, precisely the kind of continual self-making that Sartre argues existence requires (47).

If the naming scene enacts a social bad faith, the novel's central episode Surpanakha's mutilation by Lakshman in Panchavati, enacts what Camus would recognise as an absurd rupture: the violent, disproportionate collision between a woman's assertion of desire and a world that answers it with irreversible bodily punishment. Kané's prose lingers on the character's disoriented encounter with her own disfigured facticity: "She had no nose!

She gasped in frenzied horror" (185). The moment recalls Camus's insistence that the absurd is felt most acutely in the body's sudden, senseless betrayal of the self's expectations (Camus 28); Surpanakha's crisis is no longer merely social, imposed by words and glances, but ontological, imposed on the very matter of her face. Significantly, Kané traces this rupture back to the earlier crisis of belonging: "She had been unwanted in her family," the narrative notes of the adult Surpanakha, before adding that another had briefly "given her that sense of being wanted, the belongingness" she had never had (156). The mutilation, read in sequence with this earlier admission, completes a existential arc that begins in the neglecting feel of the family home and ends in the absurd violence of the forest the body, finally, made to bear what the family had long ago decided about the self.

The novel's late chapters push this existential logic toward its Kierkegaardian conclusion: despair as the sickness of a self that cannot settle its relation to itself (Kierkegaard 13). Watching her brother Ravan die, Surpanakha registers not triumph but an image of "the immense weariness of existence" closing over him (Kané 237), a phrase that could as easily describe her own exhausted selfhood as his. By the novel's epilogue, this weariness becomes explicitly her own reckoning: "I had lived a dead life, would I die a better death?" she asks herself, reproaching a life spent forgetting "our human dignity and the higher grace of our existence" (263). The line is the novel's closest approach to existentialist vocabulary in its own right, and it frames Surpanakha's entire trajectory — naming, mirror, mutilation, revenge — as a long, unresolved negotiation with the question Sartre poses to every subject: what does one do with what has been done to one (Sartre, *Existentialism* 41).

Conclusion

Read through Sartre, Camus, and Kierkegaard, Lanka's Princess emerges as a sustained study in existential crisis: a self repeatedly seized, named, and embodied by others, and only fitfully able to reclaim authorship of her own meaning. Kané does not resolve this crisis into a triumphant reclamation of identity; Surpanakha's dying question whether a better death might redeem a dead life remains open, which is itself the most existentialist gesture the novel makes. The monster the epic tradition remembers, this reading suggests, was never a fixed essence but the sedimented record of every look that refused to see Meenakshi as anything else.

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