

Abolish Marriage? Kanchuka Dharmasiri's Play 'Surpanakha'

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The *Ramayana* has many retellings, and there will be more to come. Kanchuka Dharmasiri's new play, *Surpanakha* (2022), is a brilliant retelling of an episode in the South Asian mythical narrative of which Lanka is part of the setting. It has been pointed out that the 'Lanka' of the myth is not the country known as 'Sri Lanka'. But the patriarchal universe that Dharmasiri's play beautifully critiques and deconstructs, certainly includes our contemporary society too.

Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana, wants to ride her brother's coveted flying machine, *Dandumonara*, (literally, 'wooden peacock'). But he does not allow her. At one point, he asks himself and us, "Who am I

without that flying machine?" That single line indicates that the mythical aircraft is a symbol of male power more than a machine that flies. His own prowess rests on the machine, and he would not let her even touch it. After all, she is a woman.

All men, arguably, have such an 'object' as their source of power, and they fear it would be stolen by someone, especially by women. This 'object' of power, though it is a flying machine in this story, need not be an 'object' *per se*; it could be something non-material such as an ideology or a piece of knowledge. For Ravana in this play, this flying machine is the source of his special power that makes him unique. So, he cannot part with it even temporarily.

Surpanakha eventually steals the flying machine, which turns itself into a time machine, and time travels into the 21st century. The ease with which she bridges the time gap is remarkable, and it shows Dharmasiri's skills in theatrical storytelling.

Before coming to our times, Surpanakha gets herself entangled in a series of events in the main narrative, known to us as the *Ramayana*. First, she meets the banished Rama in the Dandaka forest. As soon as she sees him, she is sexually attracted to him and communicates her desire to Rama. But Rama, being a virtuous prince and husband, tells her that she should approach Lakshmana, his brother, who is not married. Yet it is Rama whom Surpanakha wants. This exceptional desire on her part indicates that she wants to test the real strength of 'ideal marriage' symbolised by Rama and Sita. By focusing on this dimension of the *Ramayana* narrative, Dharmasiri teases out a thematic aspect in the original myth that has not been explored by any modern artist in Sri Lanka. Yet, she does not deal with it within that mythic narrative. Instead, she makes Surpanakha time-travel to the present day.

This is in many ways a poignant image because, here in the 21st century, there are many who believe that Ravana's legacy can be recovered. He led a civilisation that many believe was much superior to ours. Now, Surpanakha arrives not only in our century but in our country, where she runs into an artist who paints nude portraits of women and has a fetishist attachment to breasts. Surpanakha becomes his model, but the painter only sees her breasts. Surpanakha comes to realise that whatever breasts the male painter uses as his model, he ends up only painting an 'ideal breast' that is his own fantasy. For those male patrons or connoisseurs of such paintings, the breasts are just objects that are the same as other material possessions and play-objects such as cars. And those women, who carry those 'ideal breasts' on their bodies are also 'objects' as indicated by the Sinhalese expression *badu* (thing/object) used to designate and denigrate women.

This is quite clear in relation to this painter, whose portraits often do not have faces but only breasts and the rest. As Surpanakha herself remarks, in this country Lanka, the female body has been so objectified that men do not even see the full female body but only parts of it. Within the male gaze, women have been reduced to breasts or butts. At these moments in the play the

writer/director's feminist critique is pronounced, one might say. Dharmasiri does not shy away from making her feminism obvious. Why should she in a theatre culture where women playwrights and directors are so rare? After Somalatha Subasinghe, Dharmasiri seems to be the only woman theatre director to continuously engage in productions, this being her fourth within the last ten years.

In the Dandaka Forest, to return to the original myth, Lakshmana chops off the top of Surpanakha's nose. Here in contemporary Sri Lanka, this painter robs her of her face by painting the breasts of a faceless woman. In this postmodern culture industry, women have lost their collective and individual identities.

This painter has a wife whose name is Janaki – another name for Sita (in fact, the Sri Lankan Sanskrit poem on the original myth is called *Janakiharna*, which means the 'abduction of Janaki/Sita'). Janaki is also a painter. When she married him years ago, the promise was that once he has reached some sort of stability and mastery in his painting career, she will be given opportunities and helped to grow as a painter. But that promise, as many such promises within marital life, has been broken, and she has been restricted to domestic work within their home. For about ten years, she has been attending to all the household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry. The playwright suggests that this is a form of *janakiharna* (abduction of Sita), by robbing her of her skills and talents.

The play in its final scenes signifies something else that deserves our attention. The painter eventually gets beaten by Surpanakha when he tries to sexually assault her. The way he attempts to invade her body, and the way she forcefully fights back, indicate that a final battle between the sexes might be needed before we could invent another form of being together. Subsequently, along with Surpanakha, the painter-wife/painter's wife Janaki is getting ready to time-travel, perhaps into a future where a new concept of marriage can be found. It could be a same sex marriage, or it could be a form of marriage between more than two people, but certainly not like that from which she escapes.

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