

From Villainess to Victim: Contemporary Representations of Śūrpaṅakhā¹

1. Introduction

In the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* of the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*, Vālmīki introduces his audience to the female character, Śūrpaṅakhā, by comparing her to the hero of his epic poem:

Rāma was handsome, the *rākṣasa* woman was ugly, he was shapely and slim of waist, she misshapen and potbellied; his eyes were large, hers were beady, his hair was jet black, and hers the color of copper; he always said just the right thing and in a sweet voice, her words were sinister and her voice struck terror; he was young and attractive, and well mannered, she ill mannered, repellent, an old hag.²

1 All translations are my own unless noted otherwise. This essay draws from and builds on my MA thesis ‘Representations of *Rākṣasas* in Contemporary India’ (Columbia University, 2015), an article entitled ‘The Diversity of the Rama Epic’ (*Lotus Leaves: The Society for Asian Art*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2016, pp. 10–19), a paper entitled ‘Vamp or Victim? Representations of Śūrpaṅakhā in Contemporary India’ (presented at the ‘A Tale for All Seasons: The Rāmāyaṇa from Antiquity to Modernity in South Asia’ symposium on 18 November 2016 at the University of California, Berkeley), and a paper entitled ‘Fire and Blood: Sītā and Śūrpaṅakhā in Modern Rāmāyaṇa Dance-Dramas’ (presented at the 25th European Conference on South Asian Studies in Paris, France on 26 July 2018). The research I conducted for my MA thesis was supported by a Fulbright-Nehru Student Research Fellowship. I would like to thank Robert Goldman, Sally Sutherland Goldman, Sudipta Kaviraj, Vasudha Paramasivan, and Danuta Stasik for reading different versions of this essay and for their valuable suggestions. I am also very grateful for Prakash V.’s assistance with transcribing Tamil dialogue from the film *Rāvaṇaṇ*. I dedicate this essay to the memory of my beloved MA advisor, Allison Busch.

2 3.16.7–10; G.H. Bhatt and U.P. Shah (gen. eds), *The Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa: Critically Edited for the First Time*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1960–1975 in Sheldon Pollock’s

With these verses, Vālmīki firmly establishes Śūrpaṅakhā as a repulsive creature who is the exact opposite of the noble prince, Rāma. As Kathleen Erndl, Karlina McLain, and Heidi Pauwels have all shown in great detail, several other popular and authoritative Indian *Rāmāyaṇa* retellings also present Śūrpaṅakhā as a dangerous and promiscuous monster.³

In this essay, however, I argue that a new, highly sympathetic representation of the sister of Rāvaṇa has recently emerged in India. I suggest that this new Śūrpaṅakhā is a reflection of changing perceptions towards rape and sexual violence in contemporary India.

2. Śūrpaṅakhā the Villainess

Before discussing this new Śūrpaṅakhā, we first need to review some of the most well-known and authoritative depictions of the episode in which Śūrpaṅakhā's nose and ears are sliced off by Rāma's younger brother Lakṣmaṇa. Let us begin with the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*, in which Rāma instructs Lakṣmaṇa to 'mutilate this misshapen slut, this pot-bellied, lustful *rākṣasa* woman'⁴ after Śūrpaṅakhā unsuccessfully attempts to seduce Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa and then threatens to kill Sītā. Due to Rāma's status as the perfect human being and the personification of *dharma* in Vālmīki's Sanskrit text, several commentators and readers have been baffled by Rāma's actions in this episode.⁵ How can Rāma—the supposed ideal man and god on earth—command his brother to brutally attack a woman?

One answer to this question lies in Śūrpaṅakhā's identity as a member of the *rākṣasa* race. Sheldon Pollock argues that the *rākṣasas* of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* are the 'Others' of Rāma's model human society and 'creatures whose lives are plunged in the pollution of violence, blood, and carnivorous filth'.⁶ As the enemies of Rāma's civilisation, *rākṣasas*—regardless of their gender—must be pun-

translation: *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India. Volume III. Aranyakāṇḍa*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 123.

3 Kathleen M. Erndl, 'The Mutilation of Śūrpaṅakhā' in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 67–88; Karlina McLain, 'Sita and Shurpanakha: Symbols of the Nation in the *Amar Chitra Katha*', *Manushi*, no. 122, 2001, pp. 32–39; Heidi R.M. Pauwels, *The Goddess as Role Model: Sītā and Rādhā in Scripture and on Screen*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 320–329.

4 3.17.20 in Pollock's translation: *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki (...) Aranyakāṇḍa*, p. 126.

5 See Erndl, 'Mutilation of Śūrpaṅakhā', pp. 70–72.

6 Sheldon Pollock, 'Rākṣasas and Others', *Indologica Taurinensia*, vol. 13, 1985–1986, p. 280.

ished.⁷ By having Rāma describe Śūrpaṅakhā as ‘lustful’, Vālmīki further suggests that Śūrpaṅakhā deserves to have her nose and ears sliced off because she is licentious, unlike Sītā, the epitome of womanhood. A virtuous woman would never roam around the forest shamelessly making sexual advances towards men she just met. As Erndl observes, ‘Sītā is the chaste good woman; Śūrpaṅakhā the “loose” bad woman’.⁸

Kampan’s twelfth-century Tamil literary masterpiece, the *Irāmāvatāram*, presents the mutilation of Śūrpaṅakhā a little differently. In the *Irāmāvatāram*, Rāma is not present when Lakṣmaṇa attacks Śūrpaṅakhā and so he is no longer responsible for her disfigurement.⁹ Kampan’s retelling also features a lovely scene in which, after seeing Rāma for the first time, Śūrpaṅakhā goes home to her crystal palace and spends the night longing for Rāma. Yet, while the image of Śūrpaṅakhā tormented by her lovesickness all night adds a level of sympathy to her character, Kampan also tells us that Śūrpaṅakhā is a ‘deadly woman with lies in her heart’.¹⁰ Furthermore, given that Kampan’s Śūrpaṅakhā uses her *rākṣasa* powers of illusion to assume the form of a beautiful woman in an attempt to seduce Rāma, the Śūrpaṅakhā of the Tamil *Irāmāvatāram* seems even more devious than her Sanskrit counterpart.

The characterisation of Śūrpaṅakhā as a villainess is also found in Tulsīdās’ beloved sixteenth-century *bhakti* (devotional) *Rāmāyaṇa* in Hindi—the *Rāmcaritmānas*. Tulsīdās informs us that ‘Śūrpaṅakhā was Rāvaṇa’s sister. She had a wicked heart and was fearsome like a snake’.¹¹ Like the Śūrpaṅakhā of the Tamil *Irāmāvatāram*, Tulsīdās’ Śūrpaṅakhā adopts the form of an attractive woman to try to entice Rāma. The *rāmlīlā* theatre performances of North India, which are based on Tulsīdās’ *Rāmcaritmānas*, present the mutilation of Śūrpaṅakhā as a

7 Śūrpaṅakhā is not the only *rākṣasa* woman who is violently assaulted in Vālmīki’s poem. In the *Bālakāṇḍa*, Rāma’s preceptor, Viśvāmitra, commands Rāma to kill Tāṭakā (*Rāmāyaṇa* 1.25) and in the southern recension of the *Aranyakāṇḍa*, Lakṣmaṇa mutilates another *rākṣasa* woman named Ayomukhī (*Rāmāyaṇa* 3, App.17).

8 Erndl, ‘Mutilation of Śūrpaṅakhā’, p. 83.

9 Notably, in an earlier Tamil *Rāmāyaṇa* retelling, the final ten verses of Kulacēkarālvār’s Perumāltirumolī (c. 8th or 9th century), it is Rāma, not Lakṣmaṇa, who physically disfigures Śūrpaṅakhā. See Suganya Anandakichenin, ‘On the Non-Vālmīkian Sources of Kulacēkara Ālvār’s “Mini-Rāmāyaṇa”’, in *The Archaeology of Bhakti I: Mathurā and Maturai, Back and Forth*, eds Emmanuel Francis and Charlotte Schmid, Pondicherry: Institut Français de Pondichéry-École française d’Extrême-Orient, 2014, p. 272.

10 3.7.148: *poy niṅra neṅcil koṭiyāl*; V.M. Gopalakrishnamachariyar (ed.), *Kampan-māyaṇam*, 6 vols, Madras: no publisher, 1926–1971.

11 3.17.2: *sūpaṅakhā rāvana kai bahinī. duṣṭa hṛdaya dārūna jasa ahinī*; Hanumanprasad Poddar (comm.), *Śrīrāmcaritmānas*, Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1966.

humorous scene. Erndl describes the episode as ‘a kind of burlesque, to which the (predominantly male) audience responds with ribald jokes and laughter’.¹² In the legendary thirty-day *rāmlīlā* of Ramnagar in Uttar Pradesh, the scene ends with the male actor playing Śūrpaṅakhā comically running around and spraying fake blood at the audience.¹³

Karline McLain observes that in the English-language *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book, *Valmiki’s Ramayana* (1975), Śūrpaṅakhā and other *rākṣasa* women are depicted as ugly monsters who are ‘dark-skinned and stocky, with sagging breasts, fangs, and exaggerated noses and lips’.¹⁴ McLain adds that in this comic ‘the immediate reason for her [Śūrpaṅakhā’s] mutilation might appear to be her threatened attack on Sita, but the actual reason is more intimately connected with her gender, sexuality, and communal identity’.¹⁵

In Ramanand Sagar’s immensely popular Hindi *Rāmāyaṇ* television serial, which was broadcast on India’s national television network, Doordarshan, from 1987 to 1988, Lakṣmaṇa justifies his attack on Śūrpaṅakhā by telling Rāma ‘she was an evil, immoral woman... there’s no wrong in killing an immoral woman. I only cut her nose’.¹⁶ Rāma seems to agree, remarking that ‘when a shameless woman becomes lustful, there is nothing more terrifying’.¹⁷ Zee TV’s remake of Sagar’s series, *Rāmāyaṇ: Sabke jīvan kā ādhār* (2012–2013), depicts Śūrpaṅakhā’s disfigurement as not just a necessary action, but as a divinely sanctioned one with Hindu deities in heaven nodding their heads in approval and blowing auspicious conch shells in celebration after the mutilation.¹⁸ We thus find representations of Śūrpaṅakhā as a vile demoness who deserves to be punished for her promiscuity in both premodern and modern *Rāmāyaṇas*.

12 Erndl, ‘Mutilation of Śūrpaṅakhā’, p. 82.

13 Anuradha Kapur, *Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods: The Ramlila of Ramnagar*, Calcutta: Seagull, 1990, p. 117.

14 McLain, ‘Sita and Shurpanakha’, p. 34. On a similar depiction of Śūrpaṅakhā in Virgin Comic’s *Ramayan 3392 AD* (2007), see Sarah Austin, ‘Sita, Surpanakha and Kaikeyi as Political Bodies: Representations of Female Sexuality in Idealised Culture’, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2014, pp. 131–132.

15 McLain, ‘Sita and Shurpanakha’, p. 35.

16 *durācāriṇī duṣṭā thī... aisī duṣṭā nārī kā vadh karne mē koī doṣ nahī. ham ne to keval uskī nāk kāṭī hai; Rāmāyaṇ*, Episode 29, Doordarshan, 16 August 1987.

17 *ek lajjāhīn strī jab kāmātur ho jāe to use bhayānak aur koī nahī hotā; Rāmāyaṇ*, Episode 29.

18 *Rāmāyaṇ: Sabke jīvan kā ādhār*, Episode 28, Zee TV, 17 February 2013.

3. Śūrpaṅakhā the Victim

Yet, while the shameless, evil Śūrpaṅakhā of the poems of Vālmīki, Kamaṇ, and Tulsīdās can still be seen in some modern retellings, a more complex and sympathetic representation of Śūrpaṅakhā has also recently emerged in contemporary India.

Multiple modern *Rāmāyaṇas* complicate the familiar representation of Śūrpaṅakhā as a wanton woman by depicting her as grieving mother or widow. In line with an episode that is first found in the Prakrit *Paūmacariya* (c. 5th century) by the Jain poet, Vimalasūri,¹⁹ in NDTV Imagine's 2008–2009 remake of Sagar's television serial, Śūrpaṅakhā approaches Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa with the intention of killing them after Lakṣmaṇa accidentally slays her son Śambūka.²⁰ A similar depiction is found in Zee TV's Hindi television program, *Rāvaṇ* (2006–2008), in which Rāvaṇa viciously murders Śūrpaṅakhā's husband Vidyujihva as she begs her brother to stop.²¹ This backstory seems to have been inspired by an episode found in Vālmīki's *Uttarakāṇḍa* (7.23–24). In *Rāvaṇ*, an enraged Śūrpaṅakhā then decides to seduce Lakṣmaṇa and tell Rāvaṇa that he raped her since she believes that this will start a war that will lead to the death of the *rākṣasa* king. In Kavita Kané's *Lanka's Princess* (2017), an English novel told from Śūrpaṅakhā's perspective, Śūrpaṅakhā seeks to avenge the murders of both her husband and her son.²² When Śūrpaṅakhā's motivation for seducing Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa is shifted from lust to revenge, audiences may be able to sympathize more with her character.

It is also highly significant that Lakṣmaṇa does not actually mutilate Śūrpaṅakhā in the *Rāvaṇ* serial. When Śūrpaṅakhā attempts to entrap Lakṣmaṇa, he angrily turns her away without mutilating her. Śūrpaṅakhā then rips her clothes, goes to her brother, and cries rape.²³ As I will soon discuss in greater

19 Eva De Clercq, 'Śūrpaṅakhā in the Jain Rāmāyaṇas', in *The Other Rāmāyaṇa Women: Regional Rejection and Response*, eds John Brockington and Mary Brockington, New York: Routledge, 2016, pp. 23–24. This episode is also found in 'the puppet plays of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Kerala; the chitrakathi tradition of southern Maharashtra; literary Rāmāyaṇas in Sanskrit, Prakrit (Jaina texts), Assamese, Telugu, Kannada, Thai, and Malay; [and in] an Oriya Mahābhārata'; Stuart Blackburn, *Inside the Drama-House: Rāma Stories and Shadow Puppets in South India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p. 71.

20 *Rāmāyaṇ*, Episode 75, NDTV Imagine, 2008.

21 *Rāvaṇ*, Episode 50, Zee TV, 28 October 2007.

22 Kavita Kané, *Lanka's Princess*, New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2017, pp. 164–184.

23 Śūrpaṅakhā also falsely accuses Lakṣmaṇa of rape in Jain retellings. De Clercq, 'Śūrpaṅakhā in the Jain Rāmāyaṇas', p. 25.

detail, rape and sexual violence against women are receiving more and more attention in mainstream Indian media. Could the decision to have Lakṣmaṇa not mutilate Śūrpaṅakhā be a conscious decision to show less violence towards women in popular media? Or, is this a way of further villainizing Śūrpaṅakhā by having her falsely accuse Lakṣmaṇa of rape? The issue of false rape allegations has dominated current public discourse in India.²⁴

Rāma's murder of the *rākṣasa* woman, Tātakā, like the disfigurement of Śūrpaṅakhā, has also been viewed as a controversial incident in the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition as it involves Rāma killing a woman. Both the NDTV Imagine²⁵ and the Zee TV²⁶ remakes of Sagar's serial mentioned earlier depict Tātakā as the victim of a curse who is trapped in the body of a gigantic *rākṣasa* woman. Although in the *Rāmcaritmānas*, it is briefly mentioned in a single line that Rāma gave Tātakā 'his own status',²⁷ this is not seen in the corresponding episode of Sagar's *Rāmāyaṇ*.²⁸ Again, did these two modern television serials decide to recast Rāma's attack on Tātakā as an act of compassion in order to make this violent murder of a woman less disturbing?

Yet, while some modern *Rāmāyaṇas* eliminate violence against *rākṣasa* women, a number of others highlight and emphasize the brutality of Lakṣmaṇa's attack on Śūrpaṅakhā, thus making audiences seriously question the actions of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa in this episode.

Perhaps the most disturbing recent depiction of Śūrpaṅakhā as an object of sexual violence is the one seen in the Tamil film *Rāvaṇaṇ* (2010), which was directed by Mani Ratnam.²⁹ *Rāvaṇaṇ* takes place in the jungles of Tirunelveli in present-day Tamil Nadu in South India and reimagines Rāvaṇa as a powerful low-caste Adivasi tribal leader and Rāma as a Brahmin superintendent of police. *Rāvaṇaṇ*'s Śūrpaṅakhā is presented as a lovely and likeable character who despite her playful nature is still a virtuous Tamil woman who deeply cares about her three older brothers and her fiancé: a handsome young Brahmin man.³⁰

24 Joanna Jolly, 'Does India Have a Problem with False Rape Claims?', BBC, 8 February 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-38796457> (accessed 05.01.2019).

25 *Rāmāyaṇ*, Episode 17, NDTV Imagine, 2008.

26 *Rāmāyaṇ*: *Sabke jīvan kā ādhār*, Episode 5, Zee TV, 9 September 2012.

27 *nija pada*; *Rāmcaritmānas* 1.209.3.

28 *Rāmāyaṇ*, Episode 4, Doordarshan, 15 February 1987.

29 *Rāvaṇaṇ*, DVD, directed by Mani Ratnam, 2010, Chennai, India: Ayngaran International, 2011. There is also a Hindi version of this film called *Rāvaṇ* that was made concurrently with a slightly different cast.

30 All of the characters in *Rāvaṇaṇ* have different names than their counterparts in most authoritative retellings of the epic. For example, the Śūrpaṅakhā character is called

Tragically, her wedding day is interrupted by a police raid and Śūrpaṅakhā is separated from Rāvaṇa and abandoned by her new husband. When Lakṣmaṇa, a hot-tempered officer, harshly asks her where Rāvaṇa is, Śūrpaṅakhā sarcastically replies: ‘You’re the great policeman’.³¹ She then smells the air like a police dog and snaps: ‘Sniff and find out!’³² Infuriated, Lakṣmaṇa then grabs her by the nose and hisses: ‘I’ll cut it!’³³ As this Lakṣmaṇa seizes Śūrpaṅakhā’s nose, we wonder if he, like his premodern literary counterparts, is going to slice it off. Erndl notes that ‘the nose is a symbol of honor; in all versions of the story its removal signifies the loss of honor’.³⁴ The Lakṣmaṇa of *Rāvaṇaṇ* strips Śūrpaṅakhā of her honour, but in a far more disturbing way.

Śūrpaṅakhā is next seen the following morning. She is dressed in a policeman’s khaki shirt and the orange petticoat of her wedding sari and her face is covered in bruises. In tears, she explains to Rāvaṇa what happened to her while she was being held by the police:

I wasn’t scared. ‘Yes, your new husband has run off, who do you want to spend your first night with?’ they asked... I swore at all of them... begged them not to make a mistake like this... ‘This is all just a dream’. I closed my eyes. I told myself that I would soon go home. But they wouldn’t let me go. I screamed. Begged. Cried. All night they took their revenge. I’m completely ruined. Everything is lost.³⁵

As Śūrpaṅakhā tells her story to Rāvaṇa, we see flashbacks of her sitting on the floor of the police station. Lakṣmaṇa slowly unbuttons his shirt and several other police officers close in around the petrified Śūrpaṅakhā who angrily points her finger at them. Later that day, unable to bear the shame of what has happened to her, Śūrpaṅakhā commits suicide by throwing herself into a well. *Rāvaṇaṇ* thus takes the already disturbing episode of this *rākṣasa* woman’s mutilation and makes it even more upsetting by having Śūrpaṅakhā brutally gang-raped.³⁶

Veṅṇilā. To make things simpler, however, I will refer to all of these characters by the names of their *Rāmāyaṇa* counterparts.

31 *nī tāṅ periya pōlīsāccē; Rāvaṇaṇ.*

32 *mōppampuṭucci kaṅṭupīṭicikka; Rāvaṇaṇ.*

33 *aṟuttuṟuvēṅ; Rāvaṇaṇ.*

34 Erndl, ‘Mutilation of Śūrpaṅakhā’, p. 82.

35 *nāṅ payappaṭavillai. oṃ putu puruṣaṅ oṭippōyīṭāṅ. mutal iravu yāru kūṭa vēṇumṇu kēṭṭāṅṅuka... ellām ēciṅēṅ... tappuṭāṅṅu keṅcuṅēṅ... itellām veṟum kaṅavu kaṅṅa toṟantā vīṭṭukkuppōyitalāṅṅu collikkīṭṭēṅ. āṅālum eṅṅai viṭala. kattiṅēṅ. keṅcuṅēṅ. aḷutēṅ viṭala. rāṭṭiri muḷukka paḷivāṅkiṭṭāṅṅuka. ellāṅ keṭṭuppōccuṅē. ellām pōccu; Rāvaṇaṇ.*

36 It should be noted that revenge narratives in which the hero’s sister, mother, or girlfriend is raped (and then often kills herself) are also very common in Tamil cinema, espe-

Rāvaṇaṇ's Śūrpaṅakhā brings to mind the Śūrpaṅakhā of the Self-Respect Dravidian cultural movement in Tamil Nadu. Founded by E.V. Ramasami in the early twentieth century, the movement asserted that Rāvaṇa and the *rākṣasas* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition were representations of the great South Indian people and that Rāma and his subjects were representations of the barbaric North Indian high-caste invaders who destroyed Dravidian civilisation.³⁷ Ramasami believed that Śūrpaṅakhā had been greatly mistreated by Rāma and he made plans to publicly burn pictures of her disfigurement in 1956.³⁸ Many other Tamil nationalists also saw Śūrpaṅakhā as an innocent woman whose suffering had been caused by the heartless Rāma. In Pulavar Kuḷantai's 1946 poem, *Irāvaṇaṇ kāvīyam*, it is Rāma who wants a sexual relationship with Śūrpaṅakhā, not the other way around. When Śūrpaṅakhā refuses Rāma's advances in Kuḷantai's poem, she is not just mutilated, but murdered by Lakṣmaṇa.³⁹

Both *Irāvaṇaṇ kāvīyam* and *Rāvaṇaṇ* eliminate the hallmark of Śūrpaṅakhā's character in most authoritative *Rāmāyaṇas*: her licentious behaviour with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. In *Rāvaṇaṇ*, Śūrpaṅakhā may be flirtatious with her own fiancé, but she is never promiscuous. She only interacts with Lakṣmaṇa after he ruins her wedding and she never even meets Rāma. Yet, when we listen carefully to the lyrics of the wedding song *Keṭā kari aṭuppula keṭakku* (*The Meat Curry is on the Stove*), we find something that is somewhat perplexing when the women of Śūrpaṅakhā's community describe the young bride singing: 'If you look at her with your eyes, she has the features of Jānakī (Sītā). But if you look at her on the bed, she has the lineage of Śūrpaṅakhā'.⁴⁰ Why is *Rāvaṇaṇ* comparing its beautiful, innocent Śūrpaṅakhā character to her sexually assertive, 'loose' counterpart found in the authoritative retellings of Vālmīki, Kampan, and Tulsī-dās?

A closer examination of Śūrpaṅakhā's character in *Rāvaṇaṇ* reveals that she does indeed share some characteristics with premodern literary Śūrpaṅakhās. Erndl points out that Śūrpaṅakhā is 'denounced' in the *Rāmāyaṇas* of Vālmīki,

cially in films from the 1980s. See Sathivathi Chinnah, 'The Tamil Film Heroine: From a Passive Subject to a Pleasurable Object', in *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's Other Film Industry*, ed. Selvaraj Velayutham, New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 35.

37 See Paula Richman, 'E.V. Ramasami's Reading of the Rāmāyaṇa', in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 175–201.

38 Paula Richman, 'Epic and State: Contesting Interpretations of the Ramayana', *Public Culture*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1995, p. 642.

39 K.V. Zvelebil, 'Rāvaṇa the Great in Modern Tamil Fiction', *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 120, no. 1, 1988, p. 132.

40 *iva kāṇala pāta canaki amsam. kaṭṭil mēla pāta cūrppaṅakai vamsam; Rāvaṇaṇ*.

Kampan, and Tulsīdās because of ‘her status as an independent woman’.⁴¹ She adds that ‘the good woman [Sītā] is one who remains controlled, both mentally and physically, by her husband (or, in his absence, her father, brother, or son)... The bad woman [Śūrpaṅakhā] is one who is not subject to these controls’.⁴²

Rāvaṇaṇ’s Śūrpaṅakhā is by no means a ‘bad’, loose woman, but is definitely an independent one. She is not controlled by her brothers or fiancé and is shown to be constantly teasing them. When Lakṣmaṇa rudely questions her after ruining her wedding, Śūrpaṅakhā is not afraid to retort. In the police station, Śūrpaṅakhā yells at the police and points her finger at them. Also, unlike the Sītā character who is a Brahmin and whose husband was chosen for her through an arranged marriage, Śūrpaṅakhā picks her own husband. Moreover, Śūrpaṅakhā chooses a husband from a different caste and social class. In the Tamil *Irāmāvātāram*, one of the reasons why Rāma rejects Śūrpaṅakhā is because ‘the wise always have said it is not fitting for human men to marry a woman from the Rākṣasas who live at ease’.⁴³ *Rāvaṇaṇ*’s Śūrpaṅakhā, like Kampan’s, does not care about caste or community and pursues the upper-caste man she wants to marry anyway.

Unfortunately, as *Rāvaṇaṇ* illustrates, Dalit, low-caste, and Adivasi women—who are perceived as dangerous ‘Other’ women by many upper-caste men—are repeatedly the targets of sexual assault and rape.⁴⁴ *Rāvaṇaṇ*’s Śūrpaṅakhā is an independent as well as a low-caste, Adivasi woman who falls prey to a horrific gang rape. *Rāvaṇaṇ* thus highlights the ways in which Śūrpaṅakhā could be perceived as the Other and sheds light on how it is often the Other woman who is the victim of rape in India today.

Another modern *Rāmāyaṇa* that presents Śūrpaṅakhā as the Other but that also depicts the attack on her in a sensitive and sympathetic manner is the Hindi dance-drama *Śrī Rām*, which has been put on annually by the Shri Ram Bharatiya Kala Kendra (one of Delhi’s elite performing arts centres) since 1957 and which incorporates many different classical and folk dance forms from all over India. *Śrī Rām* presents Śūrpaṅakhā as the Other of Rāma’s world by distinctly depicting her as a Dravidian. Throughout *Śrī Rām*, Rāvaṇa, his son Meghanāda, and Śūrpaṅakhā are all depicted via the *kathakali* theatre form from Kerala and *karnāṭak* music is used in scenes centred on Rāvaṇa and Śūrpaṅakhā. This is all

41 Erndl, ‘Mutilation of Śūrpaṅakhā’, p. 84.

42 Erndl, ‘Mutilation of Śūrpaṅakhā’, p. 83.

43 3.5.48 in George L. Hart and Hank Heifetz’s translation: *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, p. 92.

44 Ruchira Gupta, ‘Victims Blamed in India’s Rape Culture’, CNN, 28 August 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/27/opinion/gupta-india-rape-culture/> (accessed 08.10.2014).

in stark contrast to the North Indian dance forms and costumes chosen to depict Rāma and his family and the *hindustānī* classical music that is played throughout the rest of the show.

Like the traditional *rāmlīlā* performances described earlier, *Śrī Rām* would present the Śūrpaṅakhā episode in a comical fashion. The show's director, Shobha Deepak Singh, shared with me that while this scene used to bring much laughter, 'that laughter became less and less, year after year. I thought this was time to make a change'.⁴⁵ Thus, Singh decided to alter the scene in 2001. The current version of the scene is no longer comic, but quite serious.⁴⁶

The simple make-up and modest costume that Śūrpaṅakhā wears when she approaches the brothers corresponds to those used to portray *minukku*, or 'radiant' characters (such as respectable women and servants) in *kathakali* performances.⁴⁷ After being mercilessly teased by Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa (as she is in Vālmīki's epic), Śūrpaṅakhā exits and a new Śūrpaṅakhā, presumably in her 'true' *rākṣasa* form, enters. Yet this new Śūrpaṅakhā does not look very different from the previous one, apart from her lack of headdress and her face now featuring pale make-up. Also, the actress playing the real Śūrpaṅakhā does not don the dark, frightening make-up or costume for *kari*, or 'black' characters (who Phillip Zarrilli describes as 'the grossest and most grotesque of *kathakali* characters'⁴⁸) that Śūrpaṅakhā in her true form would have sported in a typical *kathakali* performance. This costuming decision humanizes Śūrpaṅakhā.

Upon seeing the true Śūrpaṅakhā, Lakṣmaṇa accuses her for being consumed with lust. Ironically, Śūrpaṅakhā has not acted particularly promiscuously. Yet, Lakṣmaṇa still attacks her. Red lighting immediately floods the stage as Śūrpaṅakhā falls to the floor and flails around helplessly, screaming in pain. Rāma grabs Sītā and physically shields her from the mutilation. When Śūrpaṅakhā finally stumbles into Rāvaṇa's court, she repeatedly slams her head against the floor in shame, while a group of women try to console her as Rāvaṇa sorrowfully watches his sister further harm herself. In *Śrī Rām*, the South Indian costumes and dance forms used to depict Śūrpaṅakhā establish her as the Other of the North Indian Rāma. Yet, as with *Rāvaṇaṇ*, *Śrī Rām* seems to be suggesting that Śūrpaṅakhā is a modest and innocent woman. The presentation of her defacement is also rather distressing.

45 Shobha Deepak Singh, personal communication, September 2012.

46 My observations on this production are based on the three times I viewed this performance in the autumn of 2012.

47 Phillip B. Zarrilli, *The Kathakali Complex: Performance and Structure*, New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1984, p. 175.

48 Zarrilli, *The Kathakali Complex*, p. 175.

There are, however, other recent *Rāmāyaṇa* retellings that present Śūrpaṅakhā in a sympathetic manner despite her sexually assertive nature. Take *Maya Ravan*, an unauthorized dance-drama adaption of Ashok Banker's popular English *Ramayana* fantasy novels that was directed by the film actress and *bharatanāṭyam* exponent Shobana.⁴⁹ In *Maya Ravan*, which premiered in Chennai in 2007, Śūrpaṅakhā dresses in a Western-style leopard print dress (contrasting with Sītā's strictly Indian attire) and makes 'meowing' noises like a cat.⁵⁰ Śūrpaṅakhā is shown luring Sītā away from Rāma, drugging her, and assuming her form to go meet Rāma. While pretending to be Sītā, Śūrpaṅakhā seductively suggests that she and Rāma 'celebrate' being married and 'bathe in the river'. Following this exchange, Rāma realizes that this cannot be Sītā. Śūrpaṅakhā is far too eager to be intimate with Rāma to be his chaste wife.

Yet, although this Śūrpaṅakhā is sexually assertive, her mutilation is quite upsetting. In a familiar pattern, the *Rāmāyaṇas* of Vālmīki and Tulsīdās have Rāma command or encourage Lakṣmaṇa to mutilate Śūrpaṅakhā. Yet, in *Maya Ravan*, Rāma clearly tells Lakṣmaṇa: 'Do not draw first blood!'. Despite this order, Lakṣmaṇa cuts off Śūrpaṅakhā's nose and ears anyway. Śūrpaṅakhā falls to the ground crying, 'Why! Why? I only wished to love you!'. As she runs away, Rāma sadly states: 'You should not have done that Lakṣmaṇa. You should not have'. What makes this sequence especially distressing is the fact that Lakṣmaṇa attacks Śūrpaṅakhā as she is leaving their home. Therefore, in *Maya Ravan*, Lakṣmaṇa's assault is not only shown to be downright malicious, but completely unprovoked too.

Another similar disturbing depiction of Śūrpaṅakhā's mutilation is found in Life OK's Hindi televised musical *Rāmlīlā: Ajay Devgan ke sāth* (2012).⁵¹ In *Rāmlīlā*, Śūrpaṅakhā is a hideous creature with blue skin and pointed elf ears who looks very different from the lovely, fair-skinned women of Rāma's society. Upon seeing Rāma, however, Śūrpaṅakhā transforms into a beautiful woman with fair skin and a revealing outfit. She then proceeds to perform a song entitled *Maī kāhe kūrī* (*Why Am I Single?*) with a group of her friends.

⁴⁹ Despite the dance-drama's obvious debt to these novels, Ashok K. Banker 'had zero involvement or knowledge of the production'. He explains that, 'I was not informed of [the production] by the producers, nobody asked me for permission to use my work, there was no attempt made to include me in the production or even to invite me to attend a performance'. Ashok K. Banker, e-mail communication with author, March 2013. For Banker's depiction of the Śūrpaṅakhā's mutilation, see Ashok K. Banker, *Demons of Chitrakut: Book Three of the Ramayana*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005, pp. 566–570.

⁵⁰ *Maya Ravan: Musical Dance Ballet*, DVD, directed by Shobana, 2009, Mumbai, India: Shemaroo Entertainment Pvt. Ltd.

⁵¹ *Rāmlīlā: Ajay Devgan ke sāth*, Episode 2, Life OK, 28 October 2012.

Sanjeeda Sheikh, the actress playing Śūrpaṅakhā, describes the song saying, ‘there is nothing vulgar about the act and it has been beautifully choreographed (...) keeping in mind that we have a family audience’.⁵² Yet, it is clear that *Maī kāhe kūārī*, which involves Śūrpaṅakhā shaking her hips and gyrating, is a typical ‘item number’—a fixture in mainstream Hindi-Urdu films. Like all item numbers, *Maī kāhe kūārī* is meant to titillate and excite male audience members. In Bollywood movies, the woman performing this song is typically not the film’s heroine. Instead, she is often the ‘vamp’, a sexually assertive woman who competes with the heroine for the hero’s affection.⁵³ Upon seeing Rāma, Śūrpaṅakhā flirtatiously touches him and sings: ‘I will make sure you become mine’.⁵⁴

While this Śūrpaṅakhā is portrayed as a vamp, however, Lakṣmaṇa’s attack on her is extremely graphic and horrifying. After Śūrpaṅakhā threatens to kill Sītā (as she does in Vālmīki’s text), Lakṣmaṇa grabs Śūrpaṅakhā and slices off her nose with an axe. With the use of a special effect, it appears as if blood is being splattered on the camera lens. This effect of blood being splashed across the viewer’s television screen is repeated twice. Each time the blood is sprayed, Śūrpaṅakhā screams. Sītā covers her face with her hands in horror as Śūrpaṅakhā’s friends rush to her side as she falls to the ground. Rāma backs away from the scene in shock and Lakṣmaṇa bellows: ‘Wretched, low-bred, sinful woman! This is your punishment!’⁵⁵

The shaken reactions of Rāma and Sītā to Śūrpaṅakhā’s maiming suggest that they disapprove of what Lakṣmaṇa has done. The original broadcast of *Rām-līlā* on 28 October 2012 also included footage of the original audience’s reactions to the performance. Throughout this scene the audience is seen enjoying and dancing along to this item number. Their reaction to the actual attack on Śūrpaṅakhā, however, is not as jovial. During the mutilation scene, multiple shots of audience members with grim expressions are shown. Other audience members (mostly women) appear shocked. While the Śūrpaṅakhā of *Rām-līlā* is undoubtedly the Other woman and a pleasurable object of the male gaze, she is

52 ‘Pretty Sanjeeda Plays Surpanakha in Ram Leela’, *Hindustan Times*, 26 October 2012, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Entertainment/Bollywood/Pretty-Sanjeeda-plays-Surpanakha-in-Ram-Leela/Article1-950561.aspx> (accessed 10.11.2014).

53 The ‘beautiful’ Śūrpaṅakhā in *Rām-līlā* wears a very similar costume to the one worn by the ‘beautiful’ Śūrpaṅakhā in Ramanand Sagar’s *Rāmāyaṇ* television serial. As Pauwels notes, Sagar’s Śūrpaṅakhā is also ‘portrayed as a vamp, coded as the opposite of the good heroine’; *Goddess as Role Model*, p. 321.

54 *tujhko maī apnā banā kar hī jāūgī*, *Rām-līlā*, Episode 2.

55 *adham nic pataki aurat. terī yah sazā hai*; *Rām-līlā*, Episode 2.

also presented as the victim of a violent crime with whom the audience clearly sympathize.

As Pauwels points out, in several authoritative *Rāmāyaṇas*, such as those of Vālmīki, Tulsīdās, and Sagar, ‘it is remarkable that we do not get the slightest idea of Sītā’s thoughts during the whole interlude’.⁵⁶ Two recent *Rāmāyaṇas* that are told from Sītā’s perspective, however, give Sītā a distinctly disapproving voice during this episode. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s English novel, *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), Sītā confronts her husband and brother-in-law: “Did you have to be so harsh?” I asked once Surpanakha’s screams had died away. “To mutilate her so horribly? She was just an infatuated girl—you could’ve easily scared her off”.⁵⁷ In Star Plus’ Hindi television series, *Siyā ke Rām* (2015–2016), a distressed Sītā tells Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa that disfiguring Śūrpaṅakhā was ‘not justified’⁵⁸ and she immediately runs after Śūrpaṅakhā to apologize. The protagonist of both of these modern ‘Sītāyaṇas’ clearly views Śūrpaṅakhā’s mutilation as a reprehensible act of violence.

4. Conclusion

In light of the recent public conversations about sexual violence in India, it is significant that so many modern renderings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* present the attack on Śūrpaṅakhā as a sickening crime instead of the source of comic relief often depicted in the *rāmlīlā* tradition or as an acceptable punishment for a loose woman à la Vālmīki.

As Nilanjana Roy points out, ‘a “Blame the Victim” mentality’ is pervasive throughout India. Often more attention is given to the victims’ ‘dress, behavior, caste, and presence in insurgent areas’, than the brutality and viciousness of the rapes themselves.⁵⁹ In the highly publicized 2012 Delhi gang rape, in which a woman was repeatedly raped by six men and tortured with an iron rod in a moving van, the victim was blamed for her own rape because she was out at nine

⁵⁶ Pauwels, *Goddess as Role Model*, p. 327.

⁵⁷ Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Forest of Enchantments*, Noida: HarperCollins Publishers, 2019, p. 150.

⁵⁸ *ucit nahī, Siyā ke Rām*, Episode 116, Star Plus, 13 May 2016.

⁵⁹ Nilanjana Roy, ‘In India, a “Blame the Victim” Mentality’, *The New York Times*, 28 February 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/29/world/asia/29iht-letter29.html?_r=0 (accessed 12.03.2013).

o'clock at night.⁶⁰ As noted earlier, women belonging to certain communities are frequent targets of sexual assault and 'it is estimated that at least four Dalit women are raped every day'.⁶¹

The new Śūrpaṅakhā that has emerged in modern India is perceived as the Other for some particular reason such as her forward sexual behaviour, or her independent nature, or her non-Aryan identity, or her low caste. And she is violently assaulted because of her Otherness. Yet, the attack on Śūrpaṅakhā is presented as a shocking and deeply upsetting incident, regardless of this Otherness. Many could identify with this Śūrpaṅakhā and feel sympathy for her. Some women may even see themselves in her. The message of modern retellings like *Rāvaṇaṅ*, *Maya Ravan*, and *Rāmlīlā* is thus clear: the fact that Śūrpaṅakhā is an Adivasi, or wears a Western leopard-print dress, or performs a sexy item-number does not make her mutilation any less upsetting or deplorable. This message also vehemently challenges the victim-blaming that Śūrpaṅakhā has repeatedly been subjected to. As this recent representation of Śūrpaṅakhā as a victim indicates, the creators of new *Rāmāyaṇas* are starting to seriously question and rethink the role of this *rākṣasa* woman and the brutal violence she faces.

Journalist Sumnima Udas has observed that in the years following the 2012 Delhi gang rape there has been a 'heightened awareness of sexual violence against women'.⁶² She adds that 'women are now feeling more emboldened to ignore the stigma and report not just cases of rape, but even harassment, molestation, stalking, and voyeurism'.⁶³ Tens of thousands of people in cities all over India including New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Bangalore took to the streets

60 Ellen Barry, 'Man Convicted of Rape in Delhi Blames Victim', *The New York Times*, 3 March 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/04/world/asia/delhi-gang-rape-mukesh-singh.html?_r=0 (accessed 13.07.2016).

61 Shobna Sonpar, 'Sexual Violence and Impunity: A Psychosocial Perspective', in *Breaching the Citadel: The Indian Papers I*, eds Urvashi Butalia and Laxmi Murthy, Zubaan Series on Sexual Violence and Impunity in South Asia, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2018, p. 257.

62 Sumnima Udas, 'Covering the Rape Case that Changed India', CNN, 15 December 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/12/04/world/asia/india-rape-problem-udas/> (accessed 10.04.2015).

63 Udas, 'Covering the Rape Case that Changed India'.

in protest after the Delhi gang rape.⁶⁴ In general, rape and sexual violence are becoming much more prominent topics in the Indian news media.⁶⁵

Due to the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s status as one of the most prevalent and influential narratives in South Asia, the characters of this epic have been used by various communities to negotiate positions of political power and social status throughout the history of the subcontinent. Premodern Hindu kings have compared themselves to Rāma,⁶⁶ members of the Niṣāda community have aligned themselves with the tribal boatman Guha,⁶⁷ and frustrated Dalits have seen themselves as servile monkeys to the Congress Party.⁶⁸ The characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition thus hold an immensely potent ascribable power.

These recent depictions of Śūrpaṅkhā discussed in this essay show that *Rāmāyaṇa* characters still remain tools for addressing and negotiating current social and political issues in present-day India. Just as the Self-Respect Dravidian Cultural movement used *rākṣasas* in their political project of regional nationalism in the early twentieth century and the Hindu Right utilized a specific idea of Rāma during the Rāmjanmabhūmi campaign in the late eighties and early nineties,⁶⁹ the creators of modern *Rāmāyaṇa* retellings are using Śūrpaṅkhā to draw attention to the social epidemic of sexual violence and victim blaming in contemporary India.

In 1991, in her introduction to the pioneering edited volume, *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Paula Richman speculated that: 'Perhaps someday Śūrpaṅkhā will be claimed as a symbol of the physical violence that has been unjustly perpetrated upon women who seek

64 Sanjoy Majumder, 'Protests in India after Delhi Gang-rape Victim Dies', BBC, 29 December 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-20863707> (accessed 10.04.2015).

65 Divya Arya, 'Headlining Sexual Violence: Media Reporting After the Delhi Gang-rape', in *Breaching the Citadel*, pp. 294–348.

66 Sheldon Pollock, 'Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination in India', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 2, 1993, pp. 261–297.

67 Badri Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilisation*, Los Angeles: Sage, 2009, pp. 128–129.

68 Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture, and Political Economy*, Calcutta: Samya Publishers, 1996, p. 59.

69 Anuradha Kapur, 'Deity to Crusader: The Changing Iconography of Ram', in *Hindus and Others: The Question of Identity in India Today*, ed. Gyanendra Pandey, New Delhi: Viking Penguin, 1993, pp. 74–109; Linda Hess, 'Marshalling Sacred Texts: Ram's Name and Story in Late Twentieth-Century Indian Politics', *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies* vol. 2, no. 4, 1994, pp. 175–206.

independence from constraining social norms'.⁷⁰ Today, nearly thirty years later, it seems that Richman's conjecture has been proven true.

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⁷⁰ Paula Richman, 'Introduction: The Diversity of the Rāmāyaṇa Tradition', in *Many Rāmāyaṇas*, p. 15. This comment was in response to Erndl's study of Śūrpaṅkhā in the same volume.

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