

Revisiting Surpanakha: Reclaiming Narrative Space, Agency, and the Female Body

Mrs. Iramma V. H.

Research Scholar, Bangalore University.

ABSTRACT

In the dominant versions of the *Ramayana*, Surpanakha is represented as an ugly, monstrous, pot-bellied demoness and positioned as the antithesis of the obedient and passive Sita. Her transgressive behaviour renders her a villain and invites severe punishment. This stereotyping is reinforced through popular media, which visualizes her with grotesque features, an ugly face, a monstrous body with long nails, sharp teeth, and horns. She is depicted as a temptress. This one-dimensional representation denies her agency, complexity, and humanity. In contrast, contemporary writers such as Kavita Kane, Volga, Sara Joseph, Anand Neelakantan, and others have reimagined her character with feminist, Aryan-Dravidian, and subaltern framework. These writers reinterpret her not as an adulteress but as an assertive and confident woman who resists the subjugation of women and Aryan supremacist ideology. These alternative perspectives on Surpanakha subvert the mainstream narratives and reimagine her as a figure of resistance who challenges patriarchal, gendered, and racial subjugation. This study examines a revisionist theatrical representation of Surpanakha in *Surpanakha: A Search* (2025), a solo performance by theatre artist Parshathy J Nath. Parshathy undertakes an inquiry into one of the marginalised characters of the *Ramayana* and reimagines Surpanakha's mutilation as the result of a chauvinistic attitude towards female sexuality. By foregrounding questions of agency, bodily autonomy, space, and choice, *Surpanakha: A Search* connects the epic past with contemporary realities. The performance highlights how the constraints

imposed on Surpanakha continue to shape the lived experiences of women today, thereby reclaiming her as a symbol of resistance against patriarchal, racial, and cultural domination.

Keywords: Body, Space, Gap, Feminist perspective, Aryan-dravidian, Racial conflicts.

Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana in the epic *Ramayana*, is depicted with exaggerated and grotesque features, including sharp teeth, claw-like nails, a pot-bellied physique, dark complexion, and immodest behavior. She encounters Rama and Lakshmana in the Panchavati forest during their exile. She immediately falls in love with Rama and approaches him and openly expresses her desire for him. Rather than responding directly to her advances, Rama and Lakshmana treat her as a source of amusement. They repeatedly send her back and forth, and after being humiliated and rejected, Surpanakha attempts to attack Sita. At this point, Lakshmana, under Rama's instruction, mutilates her nose and ears. This episode serves as the catalyst for subsequent events in the epic, including the abduction of Sita, the ensuing conflict between Rama and Ravana, and Ravana's defeat. Once her narrative role function is fulfilled, Surpanakha disappears from the story. Recent developments in anthropological and feminist scholarship have reinterpreted Surpanakha's character from multiple perspectives. Feminist writers such as Kavita Kane, Anand Neelakantan, Volga, Sara Joseph ---, etc highlight the representational politics underlying the marginalization of female characters in the *Ramayana*. Surpanakha's identity is often reduced to that of a demoness, adulteress, or violent figure, with little attention paid to her pain, agency, or individuality, thereupon reinforcing her othering.

This study attempts to examine a feminist and cultural re-examination of Surpanakha, particularly through performance and recent literary retellings, subvert her traditional depiction and contribute to reclaiming her space, agency, and bodily autonomy. In this context, the present study analyses

Surpanakha's representation in the solo performance "Surpanakha: A Search" (2025) by Parshathy J Nath, who explores Surpanakha's story through feminist revisionist lenses.

The episode of the mutilation of Surpanakha is a key turning point in the *Ramayana*. In the essay titled, "The Mutilation of Surpanakha", Kathleen M. Erndl examines five Hindu religious versions of the *Ramayana*, and opines that the episode of the mutilation of Surpanakha is significant from ethical, narrative, and cultural perspectives. She analyses that the episode reflects "a deep suspicion about women's power and sexuality when unchecked by male control". Erndl observes the larger scheme of cultural practices in the context of which, violence against women often finds its root in the socially ascribed identity of women. The Vedic ideal of Indian womanhood inflicted on real female bodies, and fixed codes of chastity, behavior, and choice (Austin). This creates rigid binaries—such as good versus evil, purity versus impurity, chastity versus promiscuity, auspiciousness versus inauspiciousness, and divinity versus humanity. Thereby, patriarchy strategically uses the *Ramayana* as a political instrument to reinforce hegemonic ideologies. Sita is the epitome of beauty, an obedient and passive wife, whereas Surpanakha is the antithesis and a transgressive figure. Surpanakha is othered and is punished for transgressing chastity norms. She expresses her desire for Rama openly and shifts her attention immediately to Lakshmana, when Rama directs her to him. Though the explicit reason for her mutilation is her attack on Sita, it is her gender, race and sexual explicitness are the reasons for the disfigurement.

In her article, "Sita, Surpanakha and Kaikeyi as political bodies: representations of female sexuality in idealised culture", Sara Austin observes, "middle-class Indian society has adopted an ideal of perfect Indian womanhood set in the Vedic golden age, this idealized woman has become a symbol for Hindu nationalism, and the attributes of this feminine ideal have been imposed on to real female bodies" (1). Women who transgress the idealized model are constructed as 'other' and, as Austin further asserts, "have

to be taught a lesson which includes acts of violence, such as cutting off of Surpanakha's nose and ears."

According to Austin and Erndl, patriarchy always restricts women's sexuality, behavior, chastity and individuality.

The feminist revisionist readings of mythological characters such as Sita, Surpanakha, Mandodari, Kaikeyi ---, etc provide narrative agency, identity and bodily autonomy to these marginalized characters. By reimagining the story from a different standpoint, the writers introspect the characters and the particular episodes by departing from mainstream ideology. Parshathy asserts that women, even in contemporary society, are not afforded the freedom to express their affection for men openly. Patriarchy controls female sexuality, and prohibits women from openly expressing their love. When a woman does express her affection for a man, she is often stigmatized—a dynamic that has been critically examined by feminist writers. For instance, in the play "Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni," the character of Surpanakha questions the inhumane, violent treatment she received just for expressing her love to a man. She asks, "I was bleeding ... all down my face ... my chest ... bleeding ... Was it so wrong to tell a man 'I love you'?" (Sengupta). This also questions the cruelty of mutilating a woman's body parts and making her undesirable to others.

In her interview, Parshathy says that "there are many Surpanakhas around us" in the modern times (Kothari). It illustrates the ongoing violation of women's bodies and the persistent denial of bodily autonomy, both historically and contemporarily.

The solo performance of Parshathy presents an exploration of her own body that parallels Surpanakha's traumatic narrative. The play is structured with live music, dance, and delicate acting, drawing on diverse local art forms, including Kattaikkuttu, Koodiyattam, Mizhavu, Oppari, and Parai. The

artist spent eighteen months portraying the character of Surpanakha, granting her individual narrative agency to explore her identity beyond the episode of mutilation.

The performance makes deliberate use of music, movement, and staging to both embody and challenge Surpanakha's marginalization. For example, the rhythmic relationship between drums such as the Mizhavu and the Parai underscores Surpanakha's shifting emotions and her struggle for agency; the use of folk traditions like Oppari expresses collective grief and loss, connecting Surpanakha's personal pain toward broader histories of violence against women. Movement choices highlight Surpanakha's defiance and physicality; instead of restrained classical gestures, the choreography allows for expansive, raw movements that resist the conventions imposed upon female bodies in both the epic and traditional performance genres. Staging places Surpanakha at the center, frequently isolating her in pools of light while the periphery remains shadowed, visually strengthening her marginalization while reclaiming space for her account. Surpanakha recalls her childhood and familial relationships with Tataka, Sumali, Khara, and Dushana.

Surpanakha: An Inquiry, Reclamation

The play "Surpanakha: A Search", subverts the mainstream narrative by telling the story from Surpanakha's perspective rather than Rama's. The dominant tellings of the *Ramayana* focus on Rama's life, lineage, and culture, whereas this play explores the life of Surpanakha and her lineage. In mainstream versions of the *Ramayana*, Surpanakha's disappears from the narrative following her mutilation. Parshathy undertakes a search for Surpanakha's individual, traumatic, sexual experience to understand who Surpanakha is beyond her mutilation and monstrosity. She asks, "How is she as a woman? How is she as a living spirit?" This search is to understand whether she is a human or demon, beautiful or grotesque. She

says that the play is, “attempt to liberate her and many women who face similar situations in the contemporary world” (Kothari).

The play “Surpanakha: A Search” undertakes a self-exploratory journey and examines the author’s own relationship with her body. In addition, she creates the link between her corporeal body and Surpanakha’s body and the mutilation. The approach is very interesting, providing voice and agency to Surpanakha, simultaneously confronting and redefining her own embodied experiences on stage. The process of embodying Surpanakha’s trauma and resistance permits the artist to make parallels to her personal struggles with bodily autonomy and social expectations. In doing so, the performance operates as both a reclamation of Surpanakha’s narrative space and a powerful act of self-assertion by the artist herself. This shows how personal and mythic stories may intersect to challenge and reshape dominant cultural norms. Through this synthesis, the work not merely reclaims Surpanakha’s story but also elucidates the performer’s journey to surpass conventional modes of physical expression (Apurva).

The performance consists of five chapters: “Seduction,” “Trauma,” “Surpanakha Balakandam,” “Singam Returns,” and “Protest.” The first chapter shows Surpanakha’s meeting with Rama and Lakshmana, followed by her humiliation. Parshathy uses various musical instruments, such as the Mizhavu (a large drum from Kerala used in Kutiyattam), the Parai (an old drum from Tamil Nadu made from neem wood and animal skin), the Kutti (a traditional wooden drum from Kerala), and folk songs from Koodiyattam.

Parshathy’s solo performance brings together dance, music, and live singing. She is trained in Koodiyattam with Aparna Nangiar, Mizhavu with Kalamandalam Rajeevan and Kalamandalam Harihara Guptan, Kattaikuttu with P. Rajagopal and Hanne M. de Bruin, and Paraiattam with Gangai master and Manimaran. With guidance from Sharanya Ramprakash, the main mentor for the production, Parshathy

combines these local art forms in her performance. This makes the show both original in its manner and deeply connected to regional culture.

Body: 'A Calculated Chaos'

Surpanakha is often portrayed exaggerated, grotesque features – a large belly, horns, long teeth, and sharp nails, whereas Sita is described as beautiful, gentle, and delicate. The construction of the dichotomy of beautiful and ugly leads to portray ugliness as moral depravity. It also shows how to look at the character who is beautiful or ugly. Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita are regularly portrayed as fair-skinned and represent politics behind the interconnectedness of physical appearance with morality.

Film, popular media, fashion, and dance have created and enforced limited ideas of female beauty. These standards praise slim bodies, controlled posture, certain skin colors, and specific styles. Such media-driven ideals lead to unrealistic and sexualized expectations for how women should look, and often leave out women who do not fit these narrow definitions—notably in domains like fashion. As Parshathy notes, “cinema glorifies women who are petite, measured, pleasing, and cute as the heroine, while women seen as sexually attractive are often given roles as ‘item number’ dancers. We need to question the rigid ideas of beauty that exist in popular culture” (Kothari). Society also expects mothers to look like ‘Santoor Mummies’ and criticizes women’s bodies, frequently ignoring their health or personal situations.

Parshathy interrogates the rigid beauty standards imposed on Bharathanatyam dancers. Mainstream institutions often require compliance with particular postures, such as ‘Tribhanga,’ thereby restricting alternative forms of movement and self-expression. Through her choreography and intentional movement choices, Parshathy challenges these traditional expectations, illustrating her personal struggle to conform to such ideals. This pressure ultimately led her to cease dancing at the age of fourteen. She draws parallels between her own embodied experience and that of Surpanakha, describing her body as “a

calculated chaos,” “measured,” and “cut into pieces.” By critiquing contemporary beauty standards, Parshathy highlights the impact on women’s lives as well as the wider consequences of internalizing such norms.

Surpanakha questions the dominant ideological construction of depicting Rama as the God who mutilates a woman. The mutilation of Surpanakha is not an isolated act, there are other incidents such as Tataka’s (Surpanakha’s grand-mother) mutilation of her body parts before her killing and Ayomukhi’s (a rakshasa woman) mutilation in the *Ramayana*. In this context, mutilation of women in the epic is a common punishment meted out to the transgression of patriarchal norms which is considered cruel and undignified in modern times.

Surpanakha wraps a white cloth around her breasts and attaches a plastic red nose to symbolize her mutilation and struggles to speak. The traumatic experience of a woman who has lost her body parts as well as her dignity is a significant perspective to look at Surpanakha’s story. This also makes the audience to rethink the violence meted out to a woman and arouses sympathy toward Surpanakha’s condition.

Parshathy criticizes the caricature of Surpanakha in Kodyattam, where she is named as Lalitha, a beautiful woman who is described as a “husband-finding machine.” Lalitha goes to heaven and considers eight different male suitors, rejecting them all for various reasons, such as the wind being unreliable or Agni being quite intense. After turning down these heavenly figures, she comes to earth, meets Rama, falls in love, and confidently asks him to marry her. Further, Parshathy also appreciates Surpanakha’s representation as a strong and assertive woman who expresses her desires.

Surpanakha's Childhood

In most versions of the *Ramayana*, Surpanakha only appears for a short time to serve a specific role in the story and then disappears. Only a few modern retellings try to explore her childhood and background. For example, Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* (2017) tells Surpanakha's story as the daughter of Kaikeshi, an Asura princess, and Sumali and Vishravasu, a Brahmin descended from Brahma. In her family, Surpanakha is shown as a neglected child who is humiliated by both parents and faces gender and racial discrimination from Kaikeshi. Her marriage to Vidyutjiva ends in widowhood when her own brother kills him, pushing her to start a war to get revenge for her loved ones. Kane's version gives Surpanakha more depth and presents her as a complex woman with her own choices, rather than just a side character.

Parshathy also notices the lack of information about Surpanakha's childhood in the epic. The artist moves, coming off the stage toward the audience for the information, highlighting the gap in the story.

Surpanakha is shown as a lively child who wants the same freedom as her brothers—Khara, Dusana, and Ravana—but is often strictly disciplined and punished by her mother, Kaikeshi. This kind of upbringing has a strong effect on Surpanakha's emotions, making her feel unhappy, alone, and lacking parental love. Her only comfort comes from her grandmother, Tataka, who encourages her by saying, "Why be a clown, Kannai? And you can be a storytelling fool."

Parshathy tells Tataka's story from a different point of view, showing how Tataka's life is destroyed by the invaders. The story places Tataka in a tree house in the forest, living with her husband Sumali, her granddaughter Surpanakha, and her brothers Khara and Dusana. This perspective is rarely highlighted and challenges the usual portrayal of Yakshas, Gandharvas, Kinnaras, Vana Naras, and Asuras as demons or cannibals. In this version, Rama follows the rishis' orders without question and kills Sumali. Tataka then questions the violence against her family and the destruction of their forest home. Parshathy sharply

criticizes this pattern, saying, “They’ll be killed first. And that’ll be the icing on the cake. Served in a platter for the amusement of men.” “Was it her nose? Was it her voice? Was it her song? Was it her spirit?”

Parshathy provides narrative agency to the characters Surpanakha and Tataka to tell their own story. Surpanakha embraces her individual agency and autonomy at the end of play, where Surpanakha breaks the shackles and boundaries and reclaiming her space in the *Ramayana* discourse. In other hand, Parshathy’s dance moves also symbolize her bodily autonomy and celebrating her freedom by accepting her body as it is.

Works Cited

- Austin, Sara. "Sita, Surpanakha and Kaikeyi as Political Bodies: Representations of Female Sexuality in idealized Culture." Vol. 5, Issue 2, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, Online, 2013.
- Erndl, M. Kathleen. "The Mutilation of Surpanakha," *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. Edited by Paula Richman, 1991.
- Kothari, Sonu M. *A Solo Act Brings Surpanaka to Life*, The New Indian Express, www.newindianexpress.com/amp/story/cities/chennai/2025/Jun/17/a-solo-act-brings-surpanaka-to-life. Accessed 15 Feb. 2026.
- Nanda Nanda. "Thought Factory: Reclaiming Shoorpanakha, Rewriting Epic Silence." June 19, 2025.
- Nath, J. Parshathy. "Surpanakha: A Search". 2025.
- Apurva, P. "Reimagining Shoorpanakha: This Solo Play Challenges Patriarchal Myths." *Indulge*, The New Indian Express, www.indulgexpress.com/culture/2025/Jun/20/reimagining-shoorpanakha-this-solo-play-challenges-patriarchal-myths. Accessed 15 May, 2026.
- Sengupta, Poile. "Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni". *Women Centre Stage: The Dramatist and the Play*. 2001.