

Chapter I

Assessing the Image of Shoorpanakha in the *Ramayana*

In this chapter I study the character of Shoorpanakha in different versions of the *Ramayana*. In the great Indian epics, the *Ramayana*, she is presented as an evil character and main cause of destruction. From then she is taken as stereotype. There are various versions of the *Ramayana*. So the characters should be studied not only from the point of view of Rama as Valmiki did, but all other versions should be studied.

Shoorpanakha is the main character of Valmiki's epic, the *Ramayana*. She was the youngest daughter of Vishrava and kaikesi and sister of the antagonist of the *Ramayana*, Ravana, the king of Lanka. In Sanskrit, the word 'Shoorpanakha' literally means 'sharp, long nails'. Valmiki himself claims that if there had been no Shoorpanakha, then there would have been no *Ramayana*. She was ugly, ill-formed and repulsive looking.

I am Shoorpanakha. My name is synonymous with Sin for many, encased for eternity in the pages of the epic *Ramayana*. I am not the role model parents would point their daughters towards. Why is that? You may ask. Because I admitted to lust. My name is pitted against Sita, the embodiment of purity and womanly virtues. She was everything I was not. (Drishna Kalita, The Untold Tale of Soorpanakha)

She could work many miracles by the magical powers and was wicked and mean. Valmiki describes Shoorpanakha,

सुमुखम् दुर्मुखी रामम् वृत्त मध्यम् महोदरी ॥ ३- १७ -९

विशालाक्षम् विरूपाक्षी सुकेशम् ताम् मूर्धजा ।

प्रियरूपम् विरूपा सा सुस्वरम् भैरव स्वना ॥ ३- १७- १०

तरुणम् दारुणा वृद्धा दक्षिणम् वाम भाषिणी ।

न्याय वृत्तम् सुदुर्वृत्ता प्रियम् अप्रिय दर्शना ॥ ३ -१७ -११

शरीरज समाविष्टा राक्षसी रामम् अब्रवीत् | (JesseR, 7 Untold Facts about Surpanakha from

Ramayana)

She that demoness who is facially unpleasant one with that pleasant-faced one, pot-bellied one with the slim-waisted one, wry-eyed one with the broad-eyed one, coppery-haired one with the neatly dressed one, ugly featured one with the charming featured one, brassy voiced one with the gentle-voiced one, deplorably oldish one with the youngish one, crooked talker with the pleasant talker, ill-mannered one with the well-mannered one, uncouth one with couth, abominable one with amiable Rama spoke, besieged by Love-god. (JesseR, 7 Untold Facts about Surpanakha from Ramayana)

In Indonesia she is known as 'Sarapanaka'. She is delineated as ugly, pot bellied cross-eyed, brown hair, a grating voice that is unbearable and oversized breast that means a heart full of wickedness. When she grew up, she secretly married to a rakashasa, Dushtabudhi (in some texts his name is Vidyutjihva), prince of Kalkeya clan. Ravana was not happy with her sister's marriage and wanted to punish. But Mandodri, his wife, requested him to respect the decision of her sister. So Ravana accepted Shoorpanakha and her husband. Ravana wanted to conquer the

world. But unfortunately, when he set out to conquer the world, Vidyutjihva was killed by Ravana . Thus she became a widow.

Her brother was the cause of her sorrows and sufferings. She cried bitterly, she came at Ravana's door, cursed him and said that there could be any brother who would be responsible for making his sister widow. Ravana repented and he said that he could not bring his brother-in-law back but to compensate for her loss, he gave her rule over Dandaka forest. She might go with her maternal cousin Khara and will be protected by fourteen thousand rakshasas. Khara would do as she wished.

So Shoorpanakha roamed freely in Dandaka forest with rakshasa and started to disturb the sages in their meditation. Soon Dandka forest became a fearful place because of their sway over it. Because they started to eat up the sages. In the forest, everywhere bones and skeletons were scattered.

Some years later, during their exile Rama, Lakshmana and sita came to Dandaka forest to stay. A sage told them about the rakshasa. One day they were returning from the river Godavari after taking bath. Rama was extremely beautiful. Shoorpanakha saw them in the forest. She was attracted towards Rama. So she wanted to make him her husband. According to Valmiki, she had transformed herself into a beautiful woman. She lost her usual terrifying shape. She approached Rama and proposed him. But Rama has taken vow of one wife. He was faithful to his wife Sita. He said, "I am already married and have my wife here. Perhaps you should ask Lakshmana to be your mate." So he said that his brother Lakshmana was living without a wife now. He suggested her to approach Lakshmana. Lakshman said,

Don't be foolish. He is trying to cheat you. What is your status and what is mine? I am here a slave to my brother, while you are a princess. How could you become my wife and accept the position of a slave's slave? Insist on Rama taking you as his second wife. Don't mind Sita. Soon Rama will prefer you to her and you will be happy with him. (Rajagopalachari 197)

They decided to play a prank on her. At last, Shoorpanakha realized they were making her a laughing stock. She couldn't tolerate it. Hence, she tried to attack Sita because she thought Sita was the reason why Rama didn't become her husband. That was her bad luck and error. Lakshman, who saw her sister-in-law as the mother, became angry. He chopped her ears and nose. "Lakshmana at once took his sword and maimed Soorpanakha and drove her out. Disgraced and mutilated Soorpanakha uttered a loud wail and disappeared into the forest". (Rajagopalachari 198) Shoorpanakha got embarrassed and wounded.

OH MY GOODNESS! My ear was cut off by Lakshmana today for attacking his sister-in-law Sita. The reason was because I saw the most gorgeous man I have ever seen in my life while I walking in the forest, and his name was Rama. Oh how I want to marry this man! But I went into some obstacles that I just could not overcome. It was terrible. First, I approached Rama and told him how I would make a good wife. He told me that he was already married and he would never have more than one wife. Then he told me to ask Lakshman whether I could be his wife, and he rejected me as well. They started laughing at me, and I was so embarrassed so I decided to make matter in my own hands. At this point, I had

reached an ultimate low, so attacked Sita, who I must admit is so beautiful it is ridiculous. (THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY)

Insulted Shoorpanakha first went to her brother Khara and Dooshan. Kamban writes that she ran in to the forest rapidly, bleedingly and loudly appealing to her kinsfolk, “Oh, brother Khara! Oh brother Raavana! Oh Indrajit! Oh kings of the *Raakshasa* race! Are you all asleep? A mere man has insulted me and cut off my nose. Do you not hear my lamentation?” (Rajagopalachari 204) Khara along with Trishala and fourteen thousand rakshasas attacked Rama. But Rama killed all of them with his arrows. Now wounded Shoorpanakha went to his brother Ravana. She knew that woman is the weakness of Ravana. So she described the beauty of Sita. He became obsessed with Sita. He wanted to take her in his palace. He sought the help of Mareech to take Sita away to avenge his sister’s insult. Then he kidnapped Sita. Now battle of this epic started. Shoorpanakha caused this massive destruction and end of her race.

Here Valmiki ended the story of Shoorpanakha. After this, he didn’t tell about this character. What happened with her in the end? Where did she go? Did she get married again or not? Valmiki did not give answer of these questions. Maya Angelou Says, “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you” (Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sing). In his epic the *Ramayana*, he introduced Shoorpanakha in the mid of epic. He told us about her physical appearance. And the error what she had committed. She was presented against Sita. Sita was beautiful and virtuous while she was ugly and obsessed with her sexual desire. She was presented as a free woman who wanders alone in the forest. She told Rama that “...that I am a free person—free to do what I like and please myself. Everybody in this forest is, as a matter of fact, afraid of me” (Rajagopalachari 196). She blamed her freedom for her disgrace. “ My

freedom was my sin, as was my open sexuality. I dared to invite a man, the exiled king of Ayodhya , to make love to me”.(Drishana Kalitha, The Untold Tale of Soorpanakha)

The character of Shoorpanakha is described differently by various writers. Some Hindu texts say that she was very beautiful as her mother. Parents gave her the name Meenakshi at birth which means one who has the beautiful eyes of fish. This shows that she was pretty. We can say that she was most misunderstood character in the *Ramayana*. “Don’t believe those terrible sketches of me with sharp fangs. I was a peerless beauty with large fish shaped eyes, for which my mother had named me “Minakshi” at birth.”(Drishana Kalitha, The Untold Tale of Soorpanakha)

Kamban , a Tamil poet gives a different description of Shoorpanakha from Valmiki. The Tamil poet thought that there is something wrong and wanting in Valmiki’s story. So he has woven a new episode in which he describes her most charming personality. He delineates her as beautiful women with long beautiful, fish-shaped eyes, a perfect figure and charming personality. Kamban writes,

...appeared before him like a full moon. Her slender frame was like a golden creeper climbing up the *Kalpaka* tree in Heaven. Her lovely lips and teeth matched her fawn- like eyes.

Her gait was that of a peacock. Her anklets made music as she came near. Raama looked up and his eyes beheld this creature of ravishing beauty.
(Rajagopalachari 202)

Kamban then writes that when Rama asks her who she is, then she replies that “ I am the daughter of the grandson of Brahma. Kubera is a brother of mine. Another is Raavana, conqueror of Kailaasa. I am a maiden and my name is Kaamavali.” (Rajagopalachari 202) When Rama asked about her purpose, then she replied, “ It is not proper for a women to speak out trouble in her mind. And yet I suppose I must speak it out. The god of love has invaded my heart. You can and should save me.” (Rajagopalachari 203) Many of us think her appearance was not good enough. Referring Kamban’s Ramayana will surely change your mindset. She was beautiful and had magical power too.

This is Kamban’s version of this episode. There are some variations here. Shoorpanakha is presented as a beautiful woman whereas Valimiki has presented her ugly. One more variation is that she did not directly propose Rama for marriage in Kamban’s text. But one similarity is that both presented her as ‘Kaamaroopini’ or ‘Kaamavali’, that is, she was able to assume what form she liked.

In Indian movies also, her character is delineated as one of the most beautiful and charming characters of Indian Cinema. In Ketan Mehta’s 3-D animated movie *Ramayana the Epic*, Shoorpanakha was looking similar to our own Bollywood star Priyanka Chopra. Director Chetan Desai says,

In Hindu Mythology, Shurpanakha was known as the most beautiful woman of her age. We had to find someone as stunning as Shurpanakha. No Indian celebrity could be found to match to her face. It was then that I remembered Priyanka Chopra in *Aitraaz* and how she looked then. I referenced Shurpanakha’s character from Priyanka’s basic look in *Aitraaz*.

In the Rajasthani folk narratives of Ramayana, there are some stories about the rebirth of Shoorpanakha. “In the folk epic, Ravan is reborn as Jindhav khiji, Surpanakha is reborn as the princess Phulvati while Laxman is reborn as Pabuji”. (Rebirth of Surpanakha) In this folk narrative, she is named as Phulvati, as the name indicates she was very beautiful and delicate like a flower. In spite of being a demoness she was soft and delicate by heart. She said Khara to leave Rama alive. “He was so angry that he sent the Rakshasa warrior to kill the brothers, but I told him to make sure he keeps Rama alive because I loved him.” (THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE EVIL) But in our country or society, we consider her mere a stereotype of ugliness.

There are many interpretations and re-writings of the epic the *Ramayana*. There are many facts about Shoorpanakha which are not known to us. So these books suggest that Shoorpanakha is the most misunderstood character in the *Ramayana*. When she went to Rama and expressed her desire, then her intention was not to get a husband. She didn't want to hurt Sita. And some poets and critics rightly said that her intention was not to get Rama and Lakshman as her husband. She proposed them and expressed her desire because her brother, Ravana, killed her husband Dushtabudhi. Her brother was the cause of her sorrow. Shoorpanakha loved her husband more than everything so she wanted to take revenge of his death.

I have been thinking about my husband all day. He was such a great man, and he treated me like a princess. I know that he was getting a little money-hungry, but that was no reason for my brother to kill him. He was the only man I have loved except for Rama of course. I must have him, or I am going to go crazy. (THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE EVIL)

So she waited for an apt occasion to end the monarch, Ravana. Ravana was a very powerful and intelligent king because Lord Brahma has given him the boon. So she herself could not harm her. She knew it well so waited for many years for an occasion. When she came to know about Rama, it was known to her that no one could defeat her. She instigated Rama to become prey of her plan. Hence Shoorpanakha brilliantly made a reason to begin a fight between Rama and Ravana. Everything went as she thought.

Today was a very sad day! Rama killed General Khara and Ravan's army, and I watched the whole thing. If Rama can kill an army he could definitely kill Ravana as well. I must devise a plan to get my brother killed for having killed my husband because he is the reason why I am miserable and lonely. (THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE EVIL)

She knew it very well that woman was the weakness of her brother. So she described the beauty of Sita. Ravana took away Sita. So she was the main reason of that battle of Rama and Ravana and death of her brother.

In some texts, she questions about her appearance and fate. She was given worse fate . her husband was killed and now she was alone. "Why am I so ugly? Why was I born with yellow skin, big ears, a pot belly, and terribly messy hair? Is that why nobody wants me? Will I ever find a husband again that will treat me like my first husband Dushtabuddhi."(the good)

Shoorpanakha is considered as a stereotype of succubus. Everybody sees her as a mere succubus. But I didn't read anywhere that she appeared in the dream of Rama and had sexual intercourse with him. Did you ever read that Shoorpanakha was very cruel and she killed many?

We didn't read anywhere it so how she can be called a succubus. Although she was born in a Rakshasa family, she had not much nature of demon. She was gentle by heart. She was a lady who could feel like human being. She was fond of Rama and attracted towards his beauty. It is natural for a man or woman to fall in love. So she proposed Rama. But he did injustice to her. He played a trick on her with his brother. He hurt her feelings because she was thirsty of love. She expressed her desire and I think expression of desire is not an offence.

What Lakshman did with Shoorpanakha was not right. It should not have been the reply of her expression of feelings. He cut her nose only because she proposed them and tried to attack Sita. It was pure injustice. How indecent the proposal might be, doing this to a woman was not at all right. And if we look on the written words of text or deconstructed texts, it is written that nose of Shoorpanakha was cut. There is a phrase of cutting of nose which means wrong spot on someone's character or disrespect and molestation. She may be raped by Lakshman. Valmiki has written everything from the point of view of Rama, the Lord. So he didn't describe this incident and named her cut of her nose. But it is quite clear from this line that she was ill-treated and mutilated by Lakshmana which is wrong. In reply of the proposal, this insult of a woman is not at all right. Now-a-days, we celebrate women day and argued for women rights. But if we look back on our ancient text and even on our two great epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, they themselves are a proof of molestation against woman.

Valmiki has presented Shoorpanakha an ugly woman. She was not much beautiful as young Sita. It is said that beautiful and submissive can lead a happy life. She was a middle aged women when she approached Rama and Lakshman with proposal. Being a member of Rakshasa family, she was not submissive also. This might be a reason that she suffered a lot.

Shoorpanakha met Sita after the war. In Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of The Ramayana*, there is a chapter in which Shoorpanakha sees Sita. Sita was abandoned by Rama because people of his kingdom doubted her chastity. Rama was a religious person. But he doubted her wife and said her to go through the ordeal. In our ancient texts also women had to give ordeals. Why does a woman always have to give ordeals? Why does a woman have to prove her innocence? After ordeal also, he abandoned Sita in the forest. Rama, inspite of Shoorpanakha, insulted his own wife. So since ancient time, woman was not given due respect. Devdutt Pattanaik writes that after war, Shoorpanakha saw Sita in the forest. "There were hatred and Revenge in her mind but she didn't hurt Sita. Instead she said that Rama and Lakshman dumped Sita as they did to her." (JesseR, 7 Untold Facts about Surpanakha from Ramayana) Then they became friends and enjoyed each other's company. Later on Shoorpanakha expressed her concern towards Sita, "I was sincerely filled with sadness for the girl. Later on, this same husband would force her to walk through fire to prove her 'purity' and she would commit suicide by jumping in to a pit. She did not know this then, neither did I." (Drishna, The Untold Tale of Soorpanakha)

There are most of the facts about Shoorpanakha are unknown. In Bhramavaivrata Purana, it was written that Shoorpanakha penance Bhrama to get Rama as her husband in her next birth. She meditated, then Bhrama was pleased by her and gave her the boon. In the next birth she takes birth as maiden who served Krishna (the Avtar of Rama) with devotion. In the next birth her name was Kubja who had three stoops on her backbone. Shri Krishna made those stoops to disappear and then she became more beautiful later she became wife of Lord Krishna. She was one among 16008 wives of Lord Krishna.

In Rajasthan's folk tales, there are some other stories of the rebirth of Shoorpanakha. According to these stories, Lakshman was responsible for killing Ravana and in a future life Lakshman was killed by Ravana. In the next birth, Ravana was reborn as Jindhav Khichi. Shoorpanakha was born as a beautiful princess so she was named Phulvati while Lakshman is reborn as Pabuji.

According to this folk epic, Pabuji was about to marry Phulvati but Jindhav Khichi stops him to marry. Pabuji gave Phulvati a parrot and said, "If it dies know that, I am dead too. (rebirth) After sometime, Pabuji (incarnation of Lakshman) was killed by Jindhav Khichi (rebirth of Ravana) " ... the parrot in Phulvati's hand died. Surpankha incarnate realized Pabuji had died. She decided to become a Sati by jumping into fire. She was his wife even though he was never her husband." (Rebirth of Surpanakha)

In the end of this epic, Lakshman had to pay for killing Ravana and mutilating Shoorpanakha. The story of Pabuji restricted to a small community in a corner of India shows the impact of the great epics on the imagination of Indians. Ramayana belongs to the Great Tradition that overarches across the subcontinent. Pabuji's epic is restricted to the Little Tradition. It is through the latter that the simplest of men in the farthest corners of India learn the most complex of Indian thoughts such as rebirth and karma. In the end even Lakshman was killed by Ravana. No one is spared in the wheel of life. . In Jain tales also Lakshman kills Ravana. But in the end, Ravana could not kill Lakshman.

...according to the Jain way of thinking, a pair of antagonists, Vasudeva and Prativasudeva -- a hero and an anti-hero, almost like self and other --are destined to fight in life after life. Lakshmana and Ravana are the eight incarnations of this pair. They are born in age after age, meet each other in battle after many

vicissitudes, and in every encounter Vasudeva inevitably kills his counterpart, his prati. Ravana learns at the end that Laksmana is such a Vasudeva come to take his life. Still overcoming his despair after a last unsuccessful attempt at peace, he faces his destined enemy in battle with his more powerful magic weapons. When finally he hurls his discus(cakra), it does not work for him. Recognising Laksmana as a Vasudeva, it does not behead him but gives itself over to his head. Thus Laksmana slays Ravana with his own cherished weapon. (Ramanujan, 145)

This folk epic is parody of Ramayana. In this epic the new form of Shoorpanakha is shown to us. She was a princess. She was virtuous lady. She was also given a good name 'phulvati'. She was about to marry the man who mutilated her in previous birth but the person who was his brother in the previous birth murdered the man. So in this story Shoorpanakha is shown as a victim not a vice character. She was disgraced by Lakshman, so he had to pay for it

Krittivas Ojha, a Bengali poet of fifteenth century, described that Shurpanakha changed herself into a beautiful princess to seduce Rama and Lakshman. "At first Rama thought that she could be a daughter of god but he understood that she was a rakshasi by her nature." (Surpanakha, wiki.)

In the end, she again remain lonely and started to roam in the forest. "Rama finally got Sita back by killing my brother Ravana. I guess I will just returned to the forest and be lonely and miserable. I guess it can't get any worse than what it already is." (THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE EVIL)

But true fact is that in the end, no one knows where she disappeared. Some authors of various versions of the *Ramayana* writes that she lived in Lanka with Vibheeshana, the new king after Ravana. But after some years, she and her half-sister Kumbini were found dead in a sea.

Either she instigated her brother to take avenge of her mutilation by Lakshman or she made a plan to take avenge of her husband's murder by Ravana, it is said that she seeded the main incident of the battle between Rama and Ravana. If Shoorpanakha has given a chance to speak about herself, she might have told her story in a different way.

There are three hundred versions of Ramayana and telling of them differs from one another. In South Asian folktale Ramayanas, we find the mention of Shoorpanakha's daughter who comes to Sita to take the revenge on Sita of her mother's molestation. And it is said that she was the reason of Sita's banishment.

The daughter of Surpanakha is waiting in the wings to take revenge on Sita, whom she views as finally responsible of her mother's disfigurement. She comes to Ayodhya, enters Sita's service as a maid, and induces her to draw a picture of Ravana. The drawing is rendered indelible (in some telling, it comes to life in her bedroom) and forces itself on Rama's attention. In a jealous rage, he orders Sita killed. The compassionate Laksmana leaves her alive in the forest, though, and bring back the heart of a deer as witness to the execution. (Ramanujan, 149)

She is a stereotype of succubus and ugliness. But in various Parody writing of Ramayana, writers tried to break these stereotypes. She was neither ugly nor succubus. She was a tragic character whose fate conspires with lust to drag her in the presence of Rama. She was made villainous by unfolding partial truth related to her. Evil characters becomes evil because they are

the victim of circumstances. She has a spot of negativity because Valmiki, who was a creator of this tale, has shown her as a negative character. We feel that if Rama and Lakshman had not made fun of her and reasoned with her whole matter could have resolved well. Also, severing the nose of a woman for a proposal is quite non-chivalrous thing to be done by a warrior. Lakshman has also cheated her. He didn't refuse her proposal by telling her about her marriage. So they themselves are the reasons of this battle.

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