

Shurpanakha and Modern Feminism: A Comparative Analysis with Divine Feminine Ideals in Valmiki Ramayana and Other Scriptures

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Abstract

This research paper examines the character of Shurpanakha in Valmiki Ramayana, portraying her as a symbol of unrestrained behavior, and draws parallels with certain aspects of modern feminism. Shurpanakha, described as a rakshasi with the ability to change forms (kamarupini), long nails (shurpanakha), and a penchant for free movement and promiscuity, is compared to modern women who, under the banner of feminism, embrace behaviors such as provocative attire, liberal sexuality, and dominant political roles. In contrast, the paper highlights the divine feminine ideals embodied by goddesses like Sita, Parvati, Lakshmi, Anusuya, and Savitri, who represent simplicity, fidelity, and grace. The paper critiques modern feminist practices, arguing that they deviate from the pious examples of historical figures like Lakshmibai, Ahilyabai Holkar, and Sarojini Naidu, and instead pro-

mote vulgarity and immorality, as evidenced by social media platforms and the Indian film industry. References from the Mahabharata and Puranas are used to identify characteristics of rakshasi-like behavior in women, such as quarrelsomeness and disrespect toward elders. Contemporary cases, such as the Muskan murder case, are cited to illustrate extreme outcomes of such behaviors. The paper argues that modern feminism, in the name of empowerment, often mirrors Shurpanakha's rakshasi traits, leading to societal degradation.

1 Introduction

The Valmiki Ramayana, an ancient Sanskrit epic, serves as a cornerstone of Indian culture, offering insights into dharma, morality, and human behavior through its characters and narratives [1]. Among its complex figures, Shurpanakha, the rakshasi sister of Ravana, stands out as a character whose traits provoke reflection on gender roles, autonomy, and morality. Her name, derived from "shurpa" (winnowing basket) and "nakha" (nails), signifies a woman with long, claw-like nails, symbolizing her fierce and unrestrained nature. Described as kamarpini (one who can change forms at will) and swachchhanda vicharini (one who roams freely), Shurpanakha embodies a persona that challenges traditional notions of femininity in Indian scriptures. This paper posits that Shurpanakha's characteristics find parallels in certain modern women who, under the guise of feminism, exhibit behaviors akin to her rakshasi nature, such as liberal sexuality, provocative appearances, and assertive political dominance.

In contrast, the divine feminine ideals represented by goddesses like Sita, Parvati, Lakshmi, Anusuya, and Savitri in Hindu scriptures embody simplicity, fidelity, and grace, aligning with the traditional expectations of womanhood. The paper further critiques the misuse of feminism, which often invokes revered historical figures like Lakshmibai, Ahilyabai Holkar, and Sarojini Naidu to justify behaviors that these women never endorsed. Drawing from the Mahabharata and Puranas, the paper identifies rakshasi-like traits in women, such as quarrelsomeness and disrespect, and connects these to contemporary issues, including the influence of social media and the Indian film industry, as well as recent cases like the Muskan murder case.

2 Shurpanakha in Valmiki Ramayana: A Symbol of Unrestrained Femininity

Shurpanakha's introduction in the Aranyakanda of Valmiki Ramayana highlights her as a rakshasi with distinctive traits. A key shloka describes her arrival and behavior:

tatah shurpanakhaa naama rakshasii kaama rupinii |

raamaaya darshanam praadaat kaamaartaa sahasaa abhavat || (Aranyakanda, 17.1)

(Translation: Then Shurpanakha, a rakshasi who could change forms at will, approached Rama and was instantly overcome with desire.)

This shloka establishes Shurpanakha as kamarupini, capable of altering her appearance to seduce men, akin to modern women who use makeup to transform their looks dramatically. Her long nails, implied by her name, mirror the aesthetic choices of contemporary women who maintain long, manicured nails as a symbol of beauty. News anchors shouting like rakshasis, political women, social influencers, and models follow the same path. Shurpanakhas free movement in the forest, as described in the following shloka, reflects her autonomy:

swachchhandam vana madhye tu vicharati nishaacharii |

kaamaartaa purushaan drshtvaa tatra tatra pralobhati || (Aranyakanda, 17.5)

(Translation: The night-wandering rakshasi roams freely in the forest, enticing men she encounters with her desire.)

This unrestricted movement parallels modern women who, under the banner of feminism, advocate for freedom to roam without societal constraints. Shurpanakhas overt sexuality, as she propositions Rama and Lakshmana, suggests a belief in free sexual expression, a trait the paper argues is mirrored in some modern feminist ideologies that normalize casual relationships. The word described in scriptures, 'Nishachar' stands for people wandering in nights. Modern night life and night clubs, waking late night on mobile is the same lifestyle of Nishachars.

Shurpanakhas political influence is evident when her mutilation by Lakshmana incites Ravana's army to retaliate, as seen in:

tasyaah karnasya naasaayaah chedanam shurpanakhayaa |

rakhasaan sampravrttaan vai raavanaaya nivedati || (Aranyakanda, 19.2)

(Translation: The cutting of Shurpanakhas ears and nose was reported to Ravana, prompting the rakshasas to mobilize.)

Her ability to command an army underscores her leadership, akin to modern women in politics who wield significant influence but may exhibit domineering behavior reminiscent of Shurpanakhas rakshasi nature.

3 Divine Feminine Ideals: The Contrast of Sita and Other Goddesses

In stark contrast to Shurpanakha, Sita in the Valmiki Ramayana embodies simplicity and fidelity. Her life in the forest with Rama reflects her commitment to dharma, as seen in:

pativrat aa dharma patnii raamasya priyadarshanaa |

vanavaase sukhaasinaa sarvam tyaktvaa sukham priyam || (Aranyakanda, 9.2)

(Translation: The virtuous wife of Rama, pleasing to behold, lived contentedly in the forest, renouncing all comforts.)

Sita's simple attire and unwavering devotion to Rama contrast sharply with Shurpanakha's provocative behavior. Similarly, other goddesses exemplify divine feminine virtues:

- **Parvati**: Known for her austerity and devotion to Shiva, Parvati's penance to win his love, as described in the Shiva Purana, highlights her selflessness and spiritual depth. - **Lakshmi**: As the goddess of wealth and prosperity, Lakshmi is depicted in the Vishnu Purana as eternally devoted to Vishnu, embodying grace and humility. - **Anusuya**: In the Ramayana, Anusuya, the wife of sage Atri, is revered for her chastity and wisdom, guiding Sita on the duties of a devoted wife. - **Savitri**: The Mahabharata narrates Savitri's unwavering resolve to save her husband Satyavan from death, showcasing her loyalty and courage.

These goddesses represent ideals of simplicity, fidelity, and respect for familial and societal roles, starkly contrasting Shurpanakha's unrestrained behavior.

4 Modern Feminism and the Rakshasi Paradigm

Modern feminism, often termed "nari shakti," claims to empower women but, in some manifestations, mirrors Shurpanakha's rakshasi traits. The emphasis on provocative attire, liberal sexuality, and assertive behavior in public and political spheres aligns with Shurpanakha's characteristics. Long, manicured nails and heavy makeup, akin to Shurpanakha's kamarupini ability,

are common among modern women, often celebrated as expressions of autonomy. However, this paper argues that such practices deviate from the divine feminine ideals embodied by Sita and other goddesses.

Feminists often invoke revered figures like Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi, Ahilyabai Holkar, and Sarojini Naidu to justify their actions. Lakshmibai, a warrior queen, fought for her people with grace and dignity, never resorting to public displays of vulgarity. Ahilyabai Holkar, known for her just rule and temple restorations, prioritized her subjects welfare. Sarojini Naidu, likened to Saraswati for her poetic masterpieces, embodied intellectual and moral purity. These women, unlike modern feminists, maintained modest attire and focused on societal welfare, never engaging in behaviors akin to Shurpanakhas *mujra*-like displays.

Social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram have become avenues for what this paper terms "digital *veshyaavritti*" (prostitution). Women post provocative content, instigating impressionable viewers toward immoral acts, including rape and acid attacks. The Indian film industry exacerbates this trend, with item songs and music videos glorifying nudity and sensuality, influencing young women to emulate such behaviors [2]. This normalization of vulgarity contrasts with the divine feminine ideals and contributes to societal degradation.

5 Rakshasi Traits in Scriptures and Modern Contexts

The Mahabharata and Puranas provide insights into rakshasi-like traits in women, which resonate with modern behaviors. The Mahabharatas Shanti Parva describes women with rakshasi tendencies as quarrelsome, disrespectful to elders, and prone to violence:

striyo yaa lalati vadati sadaa sasuraan na maanyati |

pati vadhaaya ca samnaddhaa ta rakshasi svabhaavatah || (Shanti Parva, 144.12)

(Translation: Women who speak harshly, disrespect in-laws, and plot against their husbands are of rakshasi nature.)

The Garuda Purana further lists traits such as fighting, disrespecting elders, and infidelity as

indicative of rakshasi behavior. These characteristics are evident in modern cases, such as the Muskan murder case in 2024, where Muskan killed her husband, dismembered his body, and stored it in a drum to maintain an illicit relationship [3]. Such acts reflect jealousy-driven violence and infidelity, akin to Shurpanakha's aggressive pursuit of Rama and Lakshmana.

Modern women, under the guise of feminism, often exhibit these traits by engaging in public quarrels, disrespecting family structures, and pursuing multiple relationships. Cases of women driving husbands to suicide or enduring abusive relationships with extramarital partners are increasingly reported, mirroring the rakshasi paradigm of disruption and immorality.

6 The Impact of Media and Film Industry

The Indian film industry, through item songs like Munni Badnaam Hui, promotes the objectification of women, encouraging young girls to adopt provocative personas [2]. These portrayals, coupled with social media content, normalize nudity and liberal sexuality, transforming domestic women into figures resembling Shurpanakha. When questioned about their attire or behavior, such women often react aggressively, akin to Shurpanakha's retaliation against Lakshmana's rejection, further entrenching their rakshasi-like demeanor.

7 Conclusion

This paper argues that Shurpanakha's traits—long nails, form-changing abilities, free movement, liberal sexuality, and political dominance—find parallels in certain modern women who misuse feminism to justify behaviors that deviate from the divine feminine ideals of Sita, Parvati, Lakshmi, Anusuya, and Savitri. While revered figures like Lakshmibai, Ahilyabai Holkar, and Sarojini Naidu exemplified piety and societal welfare, modern feminists often promote vulgarity and immorality, as seen in social media and the film industry. Scriptures like the Mahabharata and Puranas highlight rakshasi traits that resonate with contemporary issues, such as the Muskan murder case. The paper calls for a return to the simplicity and grace of divine feminine ideals to counter the societal degradation driven by misguided feminist practices.

References

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