

Remapping Trauma in Mythic Narratives: A Study of Surpanakha's Story

Shruti Chakraborti

Research Scholar, Dept. of Humanities and Social Sciences, BITS Pilani (Hyderabad Campus)

p20170105@hyderabad.bits-pilani.ac.in

M.G. Prasuna

Associate Professor, Humanities and Social Sciences, BITS Pilani (Hyderabad Campus)

prasuna@hyderabad.bits-pilani.ac.in

Abstract:

The etymological meaning of the word trauma finds its source in the Greek word, Traumatikos (Abubakar 119) which refers to a serious physical injury. The severe physical injury often results in an even deeper psychological wound. The long history of research and studies in psychoanalysis show that trauma can often be caused by an emotional, or/and psychological wound. This research paper explores select texts on Surpanakha in connection to the context of trauma and its aftermath as represented in different mythic narratives. Although Surpanakha suffered both physical and emotional mutilation, yet, her emotional suffering has often remained unheard. Rather, the physical mutilation has emerged to be a cultural construct of punishing a woman who is a potential Other according to the patriarchal cultural values that have been dominating the understanding of Ramayana since time immemorial. Therefore, it is imperative that her emotional wound and its ramification remains unnoticed in the mainstream thinking. This paper examines two short fictional narratives written by two different authors in which Surpanakha's mutilation and its subsequent emotional consequence has been ascribed centrality. The texts are, Ravana's Sister Meenakshi by Anand Neelakantan, and An Infatuation by Amit Chaudhuri. The present paper studies Surpanakha's traumatic experience, as depicted in these texts, in the context of the trauma theory posited by Cathy Caruth and Michelle Balaev. The paper aims to demonstrate the perspective of literary representation of trauma, and its cultural dimension, as analysed by Caruth and Balaev respectively, and as explored in the selected mythic stories.

Keywords: trauma, violence, mutilation, suffering, culture, representation, Surpanakha

Introduction

The study of trauma is interdisciplinary in nature. Although psychoanalysis is the predominant field of research, yet, the perception of trauma has been innately connected to literature, politics, religion, and most importantly, culture. The idea of trauma plays a key role in connecting all these fields and has emerged as a major discipline of study transcending its psychological and pathological domain. Study and research on trauma, and the representation of trauma has become almost inevitable, especially since early twentieth century, because of various political, environmental, social, religious, cultural, ethnic and domestic upheavals that have marked the history of mankind. While the two World Wars, Holocaust, cold wars, civil wars, atomic bomb attacks, genocides, famines and the likes have devastated the external life world-wide, the inner life has been inflicted with a rapid increase in

domestic violence, rape, child abuse, incest, family disfunction and so on (Berger 571). All these have massively resulted in bodily mutilation as well as psychological wound, and therefore, a literary and cultural representation of these experiences has been necessitated to vent out the human emotions and their reactions to the world around. This paper aims at examining the psychological and cultural dimensions of trauma, and also seeks to explore the literary manifestations of these dimensions. The methodology adopted in the paper involves a comprehensive study of Cathy Caruth's analysis of the psychological ramification of trauma and its literary expression, based on her text, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. To comment on Caruth's argument further, Michelle Balaev's ideas on trauma from the essay "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory" which is a commentary on the literary manifestations of the cultural perspectives of trauma, is analysed. Further, this theoretical argument is applied to the two texts, *Ravana's Sister Meenakshi* by Anand Neelakantan and *An Infatuation* by Amit Chaudhuri to examine the representation of Surpanakha's traumatic experience as reflected in these fictional narratives.

Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* is one of the pivotal theoretical texts which demonstrates the importance and significance of literary representation of trauma. Caruth in this text expounds how a 'wound becomes voice' (Berger 577) and comments on its narrativity. Michelle Balaev too elucidates on the same line and further explicates the cultural dimensions of trauma. The mythic texts that are being examined in this paper have a strong underlying commentary on the traumatic suffering of Surpanakha in the context of the prevalent socio-cultural understanding of race and gender. Deviating from the popular representations of the Surpanakha episode of Ramayana, Neelakantan, and Chaudhuri bring Surpanakha, from her peripheral existence, to the centre of their texts. Moreover, they dilute the polarized portrayal of Sita and Surpanakha, in their narratives, and demonstrate that both the female characters of the great epic have been traumatized by the men in their life, either implicitly or explicitly.

Trauma is an extremely disruptive experience which shatters the survivor's whole existence. It results in the fragmentation of one's identity and self-esteem. Trauma, although often remains unspoken, yet, affects the victim's perception of the world around. The traumatic experience that Surpanakha suffered has a dual significance in the context of the narrative of Ramayana and its socio-cultural underpinning. The episode of her mutilation has a momentous bearing on the Rama tale from a narrative point of view as well as from a cultural perspective. Surpanakha's disfigurement is considered to be the catalyst that led to the abduction of Sita which eventually resulted in the war between Rama and Ravana. Therefore, it contributes highly to the plot development of the Ramayana narrative. From the popular cultural perspective, she was a demoness who was assertive about her sexuality, who dared to exhibit her sexual preference, and therefore, deserved to be 'punished'. This dominant cultural perception, however, has ignored the trauma that Surpanakha experienced. The texts, that the present paper critically examines, represent Surpanakha's trauma, traces the emotional turmoil that she endured as a survivor of a traumatic experience, and also subtly depicts how she processed the whole experience and survived its aftermath.

Literary Representation of Surpanakha's Mutilation and her Trauma

Caruth has demonstrated her notion of trauma and its representation in *Unclaimed Experience* based on her thorough analysis of the Freudian psychoanalytic study of trauma. She refers to Freud in defining the nature of trauma, "Freud describes a pattern of suffering that is inexplicably persistent in the lives of certain individuals" (Caruth 1). She highlights Freud's understanding of the factors that subject individuals to experience excruciating pain for reasons over which they have no control. Caruth, in alignment with Freud's notion on the connection between literature and

psychoanalysis, attempts to transcend the premise of psychoanalysis and emerges with the idea of probing how the survivor can voice the suffering. She writes that the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out its wound offers a strikingly interesting phenomenon which can be scrutinized to study the plight of human trauma (Caruth 2). The medium of literary representation of trauma becomes significant in this context.

“It is the moving quality of this literary story, I would suggest—its striking juxtaposition of the unknowing, injurious repetition and the witness of the crying voice—that best represents Freud’s intuition of, and his passionate fascination with, traumatic experiences” (Caruth 3).

As Caruth demonstrates, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud posits that the psychological injury is “the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” (Caruth 4) which is the primary source of trauma. Even if the body heals, the mind often fails to accept and negotiate with the overwhelming wound and the survivor’s psychological fragmentation becomes a permanent element in their life. Surpanakha is one such individual who survived with persisting trauma since neither her corporeal disfigurement nor her emotional disruption ever healed.

Kathleen M. Erndl, in her essay “The Mutilation of Surpanakha”, presents a comprehensive comparative analysis of the Surpanakha episode as depicted in different prominent, mainstream narratives of Ramayana. Her study includes the versions of Valmiki *Ramayana*, Kamban’s, *Iramavataram*, Tulsidas’ *Ramcharitmanas*, the *Adhyatma Ramayana*, and the *Radheshyam Ramayana*. Erndl suggests that all these versions (except *Iramavataram*) portray Surpanakha as the ugly, shameless, sexually driven she-demon who was rightly punished by the ideal man Rama and his brother, Lakshmana. Kamban in *Iramavataram*, although exhibits sympathy towards Surpanakha, yet the act of mutilation appears to be even more violent in his text. Kamban depicts that Lakshmana punished her by cutting off her ear, nose, and breasts. This act of the mutilation inflicted a graver wound on Surpanakha, both physically and psychologically. Erndl postulates in her essay, that punishing the woman who exhibits her sexual desire is a major implicature of the episode of Surpanakha’s mutilation. She refers to the larger scheme of cultural practices in the context of which violence against women often finds its root in the socially and culturally ascribed identity of a woman.

Michelle Balaev in her essay, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory” refers to the massive role that culture has to play in connection to the violence inflicted on the victims, their subsequent suffering, and their perception of the world around them that alters as an aftermath of the traumatic suffering. She writes,

“Trauma is both a personal and cultural experience linked to place because the reorientation of the self is paired with a re-evaluation of one’s relation to society, thus expanding the identification between self and world” (Balaev 165).

According to Balaev, the place where the traumatic experience takes place is not a mere geographical locale. Rather, it plays a crucial role in shaping the feelings and memory of the survivor. It refers to the site of intersection between the survivor’s cultural identity and that of the perpetrator’s. The forest dweller Surpanakha seemed to be a threat to Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita. She was a potential Other who had to be dominated and subjugated. The gap in cultural orientation might be considered as a reason for the inflicted violence she suffered. The factors of Surpanakha’s gender identity and the tendency of phallogocentric dominance also play a key role in this whole issue. Balaev opines that the fundamental assumptions regarding the socio-cultural relationship between the self and the other is disrupted by a traumatic experience and its remembrance. The characters’ personal and cultural identity happens to be deeply connected in shaping the meaning of the suffering. Surpanakha’s

experience has a cross cultural perspective. She was the demoness who was not supposed to engage with humans, moreover, she was a widowed female who was expected to lead a life devoid of any sexual desire. As Surpanakha chose to deviate from these set norms, she was subjected to excruciating physical pain.

According to Caruth, an individual's experience of trauma is potential enough to transform it into a shared cultural experience, since, traumatic experience is contagious, transhistorical, and therefore, intergenerational in nature(Balaev 152). It is a perpetually lived experience which is more likely to result in a 'cognitive chaos'(Balaev 150). She further suggests that a traumatic experience often disrupts a person's consciousness and it seems to be unrepresentable because the brain fails to perceive and process the whole experience in a coherent manner(Balaev 151). While the unceasing negative impact of trauma on individual's psyche deters their expression, trauma fiction becomes instrumental in lending a voice to the victim.

"Meenakshi was broken, bent and old"(Neelakantan 3), this is the opening line of Neelakantan's text, *Ravana's Sister Meenakshi*. The text is a short fictional narrative that depicts a day in Surpanakha's life. Neelakantan refers to Surpanakha as Meenakshi in his text. In his narrative Meenakshi appears as an old woman who recollects her memory, narrates it to others and in that course, attempts to negotiate with the world around her. She is placed in Ayodhya, but Lanka's splendour never ceases to fade away from her memory. She has lost her nose, ears, and breasts, yet, her bodily sensations have not died. Meenakshi's character, in this text, has been portrayed in the context of a Chandal woman, and of Sita. The Chandal woman is the narratee to whom Meenakshi narrates her traumatic experience which entails the psychological healing process of venting out and connecting to the world. A traumatic experience is never a chosen one, however, one can still attempt to transcend it through repetitive remembrance and mourning. According to Geoffrey Hartman, the knowledge of trauma consists of two factors – the traumatic event, and the memory of it(Goarzin 1). Neelakantan has appropriated the traditional temporality and narrative elements of Ramayana. His narrative captures Meenakshi's interaction with Sita on the day Sita was to be taken away from Ayodhya after being abandoned by Rama. They both empathize with each other's trauma. While Meenakshi exhibited physical signs of her wound, Sita's was perhaps an even deeper emotional injury, none of which was ever to be healed. In this text, Meenakshi's experience and the eventual memory of trauma is constituted by both individual and collective suffering. She relives her mutilated corporeal existence as intensely as she relives the devastation that befell Lanka. In her recollection of her traumatic past, these two become one and inseparable. In her narration, her physical, geographical, and cultural space emerge as interconnected. She suffered as an individual as well as an epitome of any female who has been othered, dominated, and mutilated. In Neelakantan's narrative, Meenakshi emerges as the representation of the microcosmic Other while Lanka exemplifies the macrocosmic Other, both devastated and traumatized.

Amit Chaudhuri too, in his short story, *An Infatuation* portrays Surpanakha's character with care and sympathy. He deviates from the traditional versions, and depicts her as a shy, adolescent girl who fell deeply in love with Rama. Chaudhuri beautifully captures the anxiety, nervousness, and yet the pleasure that a young girl experiences while approaching a man. Although she was aware of the difference between her racial and physical features and that of her beloved's, still she mustered up courage to express her feelings towards Rama. Rama reciprocated it with deception and sarcasm and finally instructed Lakshmana to 'teach her a lesson' that she would remember forever(Chaudhuri 249). Chaudhuri's story ends depicting the initiation of Surpanakha's traumatized existence for the rest of her life. Her emotional debilitation overshadowed her bodily wound,

“Even when the pain had subsided a little, the bewilderment remained, that the one she’d worshipped should be so without compassion, so unlike what he looked like”(Chaudhuri 249).

And thereafter, the trauma had changed her perception of the world in which she lived.

Conclusion

Neelakantan and Chaudhuri, both in their respective narratives, connect the traumatized protagonist’s individual suffering with larger social factors and cultural ideologies. In their texts, Surpanakha’s trauma evolves to be representational of the trauma that the marginalized vanquished is subjected to suffer. In their subversive interpretation of the authoritative versions of Ramayana they aim at portraying Surpanakha as a wronged individual who was inflicted

with violence that she never deserved. Surpanakha’s traumatic wound finds a voice in these texts. Neelakantan and Chaudhuri depict her painful yet transcendent emotional state and aim at demonstrating how her traumatic experience restructured her perception of the world around her. Their narration also aims at exploring how Surpanakha processed the meaning of the traumatic event and constructed her response to it through her subsequent suffering. Trauma refers to an inner catastrophe that remains deeply rooted in the subconscious. However, as depicted in these texts, Surpanakha’s terrific urge to survive poses a resistance to her traumatic memory and she sustains the wound by stoically enduring it.

Works cited :

- Abubakar, Sadiya. “Art as Narrative: Recounting Trauma through Literature.” *International Journal of Management and Social Sciences* 8.1 (2017): 118-123. electronic. 18 8 2020. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318928889_Art_as_Narrative_Recounting_Trauma_through_Literature>.
- Balaev, Michelle. “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory.” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical journal* 41.2 (2008): 149-166. electronic. 12 8 2020. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44029500>>.
- Berger, James. “Review: Trauma and Literary Theory.” *Contemporary Literature* 38.3 (1997): 569-582. electronic. 15 8 2020. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1208980>>.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Chaudhuri, Amit. “An Infatuation (From the Ramayana).” *In Search of Sita*. Ed. Malashri Lal and Namita Gokhale. Gurgaon: Penguin Random House India, 2018. 246-249.
- G, Beena. *VISION and RE-VISION*. Chennai: Notion Press, 2019.
- Goarzin, Anne. “Articulating Trauma.” *Etudes Irlandaises* 36.1 (2011): 11-22. electronic. 17 8 2020. <<https://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/2116>>.
- Luthra, Rashmi. “Clearing Sacred Ground: Women-Centered Interpretations of the Indian Epics.” *Feminist Formations* 26.2 (2014): 135-161. 15 8 2020. <<http://www.jstor.com/stable/43860745>>.
- M. Ernlld, Kathleen. “The Mutilation of Surpanakha.” Richman, Paula. *Many Ramayanas*. Ed. Paula Richman. University of California Press, 1991. 67-88.

Mambrol, Nasrullah. *Trauma Studies*. 19 December 2018. electronic. 18 8 2020.
<<https://www.literariness.org/2018/12/19/trauma-studies>>.

Neelakantan, Anand. *Ravana 'a Sister Meenakshi*. New Delhi: Westland Publications Private Limited, 2018. ebook. Kinle edition

Richman , Paula, ed. *Many Ramayanas*. University of California Press, 1991.