Cracow Indological Studies
Vol. XXVII, No. 1 (2025), pp. 267–287
https://doi.org/10.12797/CIS.27.2025.01.10

S. Puja
ps5634@srmist.edu.in
(SRM Institute of Science and Technology, India)

L. Kavitha Nair
kavithal@srmist.edu.in
(SRM Institute of Science and Technology, India)

Grief, Anger, and the In-between

A Rasaic Analysis of Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni*

ABSTRACT: Śurpaṇakhā from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, though she plays a pivotal role in the epic, is often neglected in the main discourse. The character's exclusion from the central narrative typically positions her as the "other" and reduces her to a flat, villainous archetype. To bring her from the margins to the center, it is crucial to reimagine and reinterpret her narrative in order to reclaim her subjectivity. Thus, this paper proposes revising Śurpaṇakhā in Poile Sengupta's play, *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni*, through the lens of the *rasa-bhāva* theory. It moves beyond the aesthetics to view *rasa* as a transformative medium, shaping the character's experiences. It investigates the factors that marginalize Śurpaṇakhā in the traditional narrative and how they instigate dominant *sthāyibhāva*s like *śoka* (grief) and *krodha* (anger), which, respectively, evoke *karuṇa rasa* and *raudra rasa*, shaping the character's internal conflicts and agency. By redefining her emotional complexity, this study challenges traditional *Rāmāyaṇa* narratives and offers new perspectives on the emotional experience of marginalized voices.

KEYWORDS: emotional experiences, Indian aesthetics, mythology, marginalized voices

Introduction

The genre of mythological reinterpretation often centers on marginalized characters' emotional experiences, offering new perspectives that challenge traditional narratives (Singh 2009: 134). In the same line, *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni,* a play by a renowned Indian playwright, poet, and theatre personality Poile Sengupta, is a contemporary reimagining of Indian mythology that brings to the forefront the voices of Śurpaṇakhā from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Śakuni from the *Mahābhārata*. The play is structured as a two-part dramatic monologue, where each character recounts their life story from their perspective, thereby reclaiming their narrative space. Through these monologues, Sengupta provides a platform for these historically vilified figures' emotional and psychological depth to emerge.

The play highlights the emotional journey of Śurpaṇakhā and Śakuni, allowing an exploration of a diverse array of emotions. Both characters reclaim their voice and agency through emotion, reshaping their identity beyond the conventional portrayal of vengeful villains. Central to this transformation is *rasa,* which defines their emotional landscape and serves as a transformative force within the narrative. This study moves beyond viewing *rasa* as merely an aesthetic tool and instead examines its role as a medium that shapes character development and reinterprets traditional storytelling. By doing so, *rasa* transcends its classical function, engaging with deeper emotional experiences and societal realities. Thus, it is highly relevant for understanding emotional dynamics in mythological reinterpretations.

This theoretical framework specifically addresses the following questions: What are the factors that contribute to the marginalization of Śurpaṇakhā in the traditional narrative? How do these factors influence the character's internal and external emotional experiences? How do the character's emotional experiences affect her decision-making?

By exploring these questions, the study highlights how dominant *sthāyibhāva*s like *śoka* (grief) and *krodha* (anger) structure

Śurpaṇakhā's emotional world and motivate her actions. As a result of the *sthāyibhāva*s mentioned above, *karuṇa* and *raudra rasa*s are evoked. This alignment underscores how emotional experiences shape identity, offering a deeper understanding of characters like Śurpaṇakhā as complex, autonomous individuals rather than mere plot devices. This interconnected approach redefines the understanding of Śurpaṇakhā's emotional complexity, thereby challenging traditional *Rāmāyaṇa* narratives while offering new perspectives on the emotional experience of marginalized voices.

Both Śurpaṇakhā and Śakuni play pivotal roles in their respective narratives. Both were stereotyped and epitomized as evil (Mitra 2012). Śurpaṇakhā, on whom this study focuses, is stereotyped as an "ugly vamp" and "the loose bad woman" (Erndl 1991: 68). However, beneath this cloaked layer of stereotype resided a sister whose love was answered with nothing but violence by Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa.

Sengupta deconstructs the traditional image of Śurpaṇakhā and presents her and Śakuni in a postmodern setting. In her own words: "It is for the first time in Indian theatre that Shoorpanakha and Shakuni come together and stories from the two epics are merged" (Sengupta 2010: 217). Sengupta highlights these often-overlooked characters' emotional complexity and agency, offering a counter-narrative to their traditional vilification (Adhya 2019: 63).

Śurpaṇakhā's emotional arc in the play is constructed to present her experiences of love, betrayal, and revenge with empathy. This approach challenges the dominant patriarchal narrative that vilifies her and humanizes her struggles, aligning with feminist retellings that aim to give voice to sidelined female characters in mythology (Chakravarti 2006: 37). Sengupta employs dialogues and monologues to reveal Śurpaṇakhā›s inner turmoil, showcasing her transformation from a wronged woman to a figure of resilience and defiance. By centering her emotional journey, the play highlights issues of gender, power, and social exclusion, thereby contributing to the need to reevaluate mythological narratives (Rao 2011: 2).

The *rasa-bhāva* theory, which focuses on eliciting aesthetic and emotional responses, provides a nuanced lens for exploring a character's

motivations. According to this theory, a permanent state (*sthāyibhāva*) is maintained in a text through transitory emotions (*vyabhicāribhāva*s). Furthermore, one of the key focuses of this study is that "the expression and circulation of emotion" functions as "a catalyst for" personal as well as "social change" in the selected text (Davis 2014: 22).

Rasa: An overview

The Sanskrit word *rasa* can be translated into English in various ways—sentiment, juice, taste, emotion, and essence—but it consistently evades its true meaning in translation. V. K. Chari defines *rasa* as an "aesthetic relish," encompassing both an inherent quality of an artistic work as "the emotive content" and the experience it evokes in the reader or spectator. However, this article employs the term *rasa* with an expanded emphasis, transcending the confines of classical aesthetics. As Chari notes, *rasa* represents the "expressed meaning" or "emotive meaning" that conveys information about emotions to the reader or spectator (Chari 1993: 9).

The term *bhāva* carries a dual connotation: it refers both to psychic states (emotional conditions) and to the performative emotions depicted in literature or drama. It denotes the states of a character as well as the emotions that evoke particular states or a series of states in the psyche of a character or a spectator. This study utilizes both interpretations to address Śūrpaṇakhā's emotional journey in the play.

Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (2011) outlines eight *rasas* in its sixth and seventh chapters: erotic (*śṛṅgāra*), comic (*hāsya*), pathetic (*karuṇa*), furious (*raudra*), feroic (*vīra*), terrible (*bhayānaka*), odious (*bībhatsa*), and marvellous (*adbhuta*). Later, Abhinavagupta, in his commentary on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the *Abhinavabhāratī*, introduced the ninth rasa—peace or tranquility (*śānta*).

In the process of *rasa-niṣpatti* (the production of *rasa*), determinants (*vibhāva*s), consequents (*anubhāva*s), and transitory states

(*vyabhicāribhāva*s) combine to give rise to a dominant emotional state or *sthāyibhāva*, which underlies the final aesthetic experience. The oft-quoted *sūtra* of Bharata encapsulates this: *vibhāva-anubhāva--vyabhicāribhāva-saṁyogād rasa-niṣpattiḥ*—"The combination of *vibhāva, anubhāva,* and *vyabhicāribhāva* produces *rasa*" (Mathur 2023).

While a text carries multiple transitory emotions, it always conveys a single dominant/permanent emotion (*sthāyibhāva*), which pervades the narrative. As Chari writes, "The transitory states can exist only as accessories to one of the prime emotions, serving the purpose of intensification or contrast" (Chari 1993: 11). The eight *sthāyibhāvas*—love (*rati*), humor (*hāsya*), sorrow (*śoka*), anger (*krodha*), enthusiasm (*utsāha*), fear (*bhaya*), repulsion (*jugupsā*), and wonder (*vismaya*)—are stable emotional states "innate in every person" and correspond to the eight classical *rasa*s experienced by the audience (Maity 2018: 106). The transitory emotions serve to contextualize, support, and intensify the dominant emotion before they dissolve within the emotional arc of the performance.

Rasa theory, initially conceived to analyze dramatic performance, has evolved into a lens applicable to literary, cinematic, and performative texts. Manjura Ghosh's recent article, "Revisiting Bharata's Rasa Theory" (2022), examines its relevance in modern artistic forms. Scholars such as Gregory Fernando and Ramakanta Sharma (2003) have applied *rasa* theory to analyse classical Western fiction (e.g., Hemingway, Hardy), while Gopālan Mullik and Samān Rizvi have explored its utility in contemporary cinema.

This study, similarly, does not treat *rasa* as a pre-existing or mechanical tool. Instead, it examines how the emotive structure of the play evokes *rasa* through an organic interplay of *bhāva*s, thus shaping both the audience's aesthetic experience and the emotional arcs of the character. Specifically, it investigates how factors that marginalize Śūrpaṇakhā in the traditional narrative instigate *śoka* (grief) and *krodha* (anger) as *sthāyibhāva*s, which in turn culminate in the experience of *karuṇa* (grief) and *raudra* (anger) *rasa*s to drive the character's internal conflicts and agency.

Canonical representation of Śūrpanakhā

A few female figures in epic narratives have exhibited exceptional boldness and defiance of patriarchal norms, yet their stories have often been relegated to the background of dominant discourse (Dirghangi and Mohanty 2019: 8). Characters like Śūrpaṇakhā are frequently cast as transgressive, monstrous, and sexually assertive and are repeatedly marginalized through mechanisms of ridicule, symbolic violence, and narrative containment. In early epic literature, especially the *Rāmāyaṇa*, women aligned with communities such as *rākṣasa*s, *nāga*s, *vānara*s, and *asura*s are framed as "other," suffering triple marginalization based on caste, class, and gender (Iyengar 1985). Though these beings may not have functioned as historical "tribes," their portrayal within epic cosmology marks them as liminal figures associated with disorder and social deviance. These characters are attributed to disruptive endeavors, primarily acting as catalysts for lead characters to achieve their goals (Dirghangi and Mohanty 2019: 9).

Sheldon Pollock, in his essay *Rakshasas and Others*, describes such figures as "night-stalking," "blood-drinking ghouls" with "unrestrained sexuality" and "fascinating metamorphic powers" (Pollock 2016: 171). Śūrpaṇakhā is introduced within this mythic register. Her episode, though integral to the unfolding of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is often positioned as a cautionary interlude that reasserts patriarchal control.

Śūrpaṇakhā first appears in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa* (Book 3) of *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India*, translated by Pollock, where she is immediately juxtaposed against the virtuous male hero:

> The rākṣasa woman was hideous...misshapen and potbellied…her words were sinister and her voice struck terror. But Rāma had long arms, the chest of a lion, eyes like lotus petals… he was young, attractive, and well mannered. (Vālmīki 2021: 284)

Śūrpaṇakhā›s bodily features are repeatedly compared unfavorably to Rāma's, thereby establishing a visual and moral contrast. The grotesque feminization of Śūrpaṇakhā sets the stage for her narrative function:

not as a character with interiority, but as a foil against whom Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa's moral and physical superiority is affirmed. Her sexual agency is depicted as offensive, even threatening. When she proposes marriage to Rāma and later to Lakṣmaṇa, she is mocked, rejected, and ultimately mutilated. Lakṣmaṇa cuts off her ears and nose at Rāma's behest:

> Powerful Lakṣmaṇa, in full view of his brother, drew his sword and in a rage cut off the creature's ears and nose as Rāma looked on.
> (Vālmīki 2021: 286)

This violent punishment is framed not as an act of cruelty, but as a justified restoration of social order. Śūrpaṇakhā is depicted not only as grotesque and hypersexual but also as deserving of bodily mutilation for violating gender norms.

Many critical readings have claimed that Śūrpaṇakhā is "silenced" in the epic. While her subjectivity is indeed diminished, and her portrayal laced with derision, it is important to note that she is far from voiceless. In fact, in Sarga 18, 19, 20, 21, 31, and 32 of the *Araṇya-kāṇḍa*, she speaks extensively and boldly. She expresses grief to her brother Khara:

> I am drowning in a vast ocean of grief with despair for its sea monsters and terror for its garland of waves. Can you not save me?...If you are at all moved to compassion for me, not slay my enemy Rāma today; then I shall not hesitate to take my own life right before your very eyes.
> (Vālmīki 2021: 288)

After the death of her brother Khara, who tried to avenge her, she approaches her other brother Rāvaṇa and urges him to avenge her. She even invokes *rāja-dharma*, critiquing Rāvaṇa's kingship.

> If rulers of men are not their own masters and fail to protect their realm, their prosperity disappears…surrounded by worthless advisers, you are unaware that your people, and Janasthāna, have been destroyed.
> (Vālmīki 2021: 300)

This episode suggests that Śūrpaṇakhā possesses rhetorical force and sense of familial loyalty—features that complicate her reduction to a demonized seductress. Yet, despite her vocal resistance, the narrative framework trivializes her affective depth. Her humiliation is not explored as trauma, and her grief is used only to escalate the plot toward Rāvaṇa's eventual confrontation with Rāma. In contrast to characters like Sītā or even Rāvaṇa, whose moral and emotional struggles receive narrative attention, Śūrpaṇakhā is framed primarily through derision.

The structural silencing lies not in the absence of her voice but in how her speech is framed as irrational, vengeful, and inconsequential. Her emotional state is not treated with gravity or empathy. Her agency is swiftly redirected into male vengeance. Thus, her marginalization operates not through literal muteness but through a narrative economy that devalues her emotions and legitimizes violence against her. This mechanism aligns with broader societal tropes, where women who assert desire or deviate from gender norms are cast as deviant and punished accordingly. Śūrpaṇakhā becomes emblematic of the unruly woman whose punishment reaffirms the dominance of male-coded virtue and rationality.

Such framing reduces her to a catalyst rather than a subject. Her threefold marginalization by gender, class, and cultural coding underscores how her character becomes a vessel for ideological projection. Her *krodha* (anger) and *śoka* (grief) are not aestheticized or interpreted as *bhāva*s; instead, they are dismissed as hysteria. It is precisely this narrative absence of empathy that contemporary retellings, like Sengupta's play, seek to interrogate and revise.

The narrative shift

In Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, Śūrpaṇakhā's portrayal is predominantly filtered through male perspectives, rendering her a grotesque figure whose desire and agency are framed as threats to social order. In stark contrast, Poile Sengupta's play centers on Śūrpaṇakhā's voice and agency, reframing her story to challenge her vilification in the classical narrative.

The historical marginalization of Śūrpaṇakhā sets the stage for a crucial narrative shift in Sengupta's retelling, where she reclaims her voice and interrogates the structural mechanisms that dehumanized her. The two protagonists—Śūrpaṇakhā and Śakuni are, as Sengupta notes, "modern in their speech, attitude and behavior," and the play "challenges the conventional vilification of Shoorpanakha and Shakuni and presents them differently, not only in the narrative but also in stage technique and structure" (Sengupta 2010: 221). Although they exist in a contemporary setting, they carry within them the trauma of historical memory—the scars of misrepresentation, marginalization, and mockery (Verma and Singh 2024: 20). Unlike in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, where Śūrpaṇakhā is reduced to an agent of chaos, Sengupta's retelling invites the audience to empathize with her experience. Her grief (*śoka*) is not treated as comedic or excessive, but as the foundation of her emotional arc. She becomes the narrator of her trauma, breaking free from narrative containment and speaking directly to the audience. Her tone is at once ironic and assertive. In recounting her humiliation at the hands of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, she remarks:

> There they are in the forest living in a pretty cottage when this stunning woman comes along. The two brothers, especially the older one, are bowled over. Totally bowled over.
> (Sengupta 2010: 263)

Here, she refers to herself in the third person, signaling a self-aware narrative distancing that blends irony with anger, a stylistic hallmark of postmodern dramaturgy. This technique subverts conventional tragic monologue and dramatizes the dissonance between how she was perceived and how she now reclaims herself.

The shift in narrative voice is radical: Śūrpaṇakhā no longer functions as an object of ridicule but emerges as a subject whose emotional interiority is richly examined. This revision underscores *karuṇa* and *raudra rasa*s as dominant emotional modes, crafted not through classical prescriptions but through affective testimony and psychological depth. Sengupta's play also critiques the societal and cultural

forces that delegitimize female autonomy. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Śūrpaṇakhā's desire is framed as monstrous, her punishment as necessary. Sengupta's Śūrpaṇakhā, however, directly confronts this logic. She asks Śakuni:

> So? You were from hills. Does that make us both less human? Do our hearts not know love?
> (Sengupta 2010: 265)

This rhetorical question humanizes the monstrous and dismantles the mythic binary between civility and savagery. By reclaiming the right to feel, desire, and speak, Śūrpaṇakhā challenges both the narrative and cultural frameworks that previously constrained her.

The mutilation she endures to her ears, nose, and breasts symbolizes not only physical violence but also epistemic erasure. In the original epic, this act is depicted as righteous. Sengupta reframes it as an act of brutal patriarchal dominance. This thematic revision is consistent with the *Manusmṛti*'s ideological underpinning, which asserts male control over women's bodies and choices:

> In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent.
> (Manu 1886: 5.148)

Sengupta's Śūrpaṇakhā actively critiques this internalized cultural violence. In one striking dialogue, she reflects:

> They tossed me this way and that, as if... as if I did not deserve any more respect. As if I was a... broken plaything.
> (Sengupta 2010: 261)

Her pain is not portrayed as a tragic spectacle but as a politically charged response to systemic injustice. In voicing her experience, she not only reclaims emotional agency but also restructures the audience's affective

alignment, transforming *rasa* from classical aesthetic distance into modern political empathy. She openly critiques the hypocrisy embedded in the portrayal of gender roles:

> What was Shoorpanakha's crime? That she approached a man with sexual desire? Shoorpanakha merely wanted love. They assaulted a defenseless woman.
> (Sengupta 2010: 247)

The binary oppositions foundational to the *Rāmāyaṇa,* virtue vs vice, purity vs pollution, hero vs villain, are destabilized in Sengupta's retelling. Śūrpaṇakhā is not reformed into a victim, but recast as a subject with emotional, moral, and intellectual autonomy. By integrating *karuṇa* and *raudra rasa*s, the play does not merely generate sympathy but calls for critical reflection. The aesthetic experience of *rasa* is merged with a feminist ethic of witnessing, agency, and structural critique.

Karuṇa rasa **(grief): Exploring Śūrpaṇakhā's internal conflict and vulnerability**

Poile Sengupta's retelling pivots on empathizing with Śūrpaṇakhā, exploring the emotional undercurrents of her actions, particularly her grief (*śoka*), which emerges as the dominant emotional state (*sthāyibhāva*) that shapes *karuṇa rasa.*

In contrast to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, where Śūrpaṇakhā is denied subjectivity and ridiculed, Sengupta presents her as a traumatized woman attempting to reconcile her past with the image imposed upon her. Her grief is not simply psychological but socially structured. She becomes the voice of a woman who mourns the loss of her agency, dignity, and the right to love without retribution. In the play, Śūrpaṇakhā narrates her story with layered tones: melancholy, irony, bitterness. Her emotional experience is driven by *śoka*, a result of *vibhāva*'s causal factors such as rejection, humiliation, and violence. These are heightened

by *anubhāva*s, her physical expressions of grief: pauses in speech, distant gazes, quivering voice, and *vyabhicāribhāva*s, the transitory states like despair, shame, helplessness, culminating in the evocation of *karuṇa rasa* for the audience.

One poignant monologue reveals her anguish:

> I watched them laugh at me, two brothers in perfect harmony. One with a bow, the other with a blade. Both with their righteous love for one woman. Not me.
> (Sengupta 2010: 249)

The scene invokes profound alienation. Śūrpaṇakhā›s longing for intimacy is punished with grotesque mutilation. In Bharata's concept of *rasa*, this emotional configuration, deep suffering caused by social injustice, betrayal, and moral abandonment, serves as a fertile ground for *karuṇa rasa*. Through repeated reflections on being treated as subhuman, Śūrpaṇakhā reveals how grief intersects with caste, gender, and race. Her statement, "They treated me like an animal. No, worse" (Sengupta 2010: 250), draws attention to how myth constructs a caste-coded dehumanization. Her lament can be read as an indictment of the social order that punishes female desire when it deviates from purity, caste, or lineage norms (Chakravarti 2006: 77).

In *Nāṭyaśāstra, karuṇa rasa* arises when the permanent emotion of *śoka* is cultivated by aesthetic distance, but Sengupta complicates this. She reduces the distance, pushing the audience to not merely aesthetically experience her grief, but also to ethically respond to it. Śūrpaṇakhā's sadness is not ornamental; it is a political critique of masculine righteousness. Śūrpaṇakhā says:

> I was never told that wanting love was a sin. Until I did. And then it was too late to un-want it.
> (Sengupta 2010: 251)

This moment marks the internalization of grief, where desire transforms into shame. Sengupta shifts Śūrpaṇakhā's identity from a seduc-

tress to an affective agent, not a victim who passively suffers, but a speaker who questions the legitimacy of punishment. The play brings the audience face-to-face with *bhāva*s that evoke not just sadness but uncomfortable recognition of biases they have inherited through epic narratives. For instance, in one poignant monologue, she is annoyed with how people are always categorizing her and not acknowledging the fact that she is simply a woman, reflecting on how her grief stems from being dehumanized and denied agency. She vehemently asserts:

> Oh, fuck you. Do you have to classify me? ... (wearily.) I am a woman, don't you understand? A woman. Not a saint. Not a whore. Not just a mother, a sister, a daughter. I am a woman.
> (Sengupta 2010: 265–67)

This introspection reveals the depth of her emotional world, countering the traditional narrative that dismisses her as a one-dimensional antagonist. While *karuṇa rasa* highlights Śūrpaṇakhā's vulnerability, it also becomes a catalyst for her transformation. Sengupta uses grief not to portray Śūrpaṇakhā as a victim but to show how her pain fuels her resistance. Śūrpaṇakhā's grief is not static; it evolves into a powerful force that challenges the patriarchal structures of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Her grief drives her to question the societal norms that perpetuate her marginalization, allowing her to reclaim her narrative.

Sengupta's Śūrpaṇakhā becomes a site of such recovery. By revising how we engage with her emotions, the play enables a re-experiencing of *rasa*, not as detached aesthetic pleasure, but as critical empathy. Thus, *karuṇa rasa* in the play is not static. It begins with *śoka* but also interacts with other states like *smṛti* (memory), *autsukya* (anxiety), and *nirveda* (disillusionment), which all serve to intensify the pathos. The result is a *rasa* that is not merely pitiful but transformative, positioning Śūrpaṇakhā as a symbol of wounded agency rather than victimhood.

Raudra rasa (anger): Śūrpaṇakhā's response to injustice and transformation through anger

In Poile Sengupta's reimagining, Śūrpaṇakhā becomes the embodiment of feminist resistance, foregrounding anger (*krodha*) as the dominant emotional state (*sthāyibhāva*) from which the audience derives *raudra rasa*, the aesthetic emotion of fury. However, to fully appreciate Sengupta's intervention, one must contrast it with how Śūrpaṇakhā›s rage is depicted in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, particularly in the *Araṇyakāṇḍa*, where her emotional complexity is ridiculed, and her fury is delegitimized.

In the classical text, after being brutally mutilated by Lakṣmaṇa on Rāma's command. Śūrpaṇakhā reacts in horror and rage. However, her anger is presented not as righteous indignation but as demonic vengeance. She is described as roaring and weeping wildly:

> Mutilated, spattered with blood, and now even more terrifying, the rākṣasa woman roared incessantly, like a storm cloud when the rains come. (Vālmīki 2021: 286)

The narrative tone is dismissive. Śūrpaṇakhā's anger is not explored as an emotional consequence of injustice but as a justification for further conflict. Her rage is mechanistic, stripped of ethical depth, and used merely as a narrative trigger to escalate the action toward Rāvaṇa's intervention. Her wrath is not explored as a legitimate emotional response to the injustices she endures but as a narrative device to propel the epic's conflict. Śūrpaṇakhā remains a villain, and she feels that the epic did not give her justice, and as a result of this injustice, she wants to take revenge (Rao 2011: 2).

By contrast, in Sengupta's retelling, Śūrpaṇakhā›s anger is articulated, embodied, and politically framed. It is rooted not in demonic instincts but in systemic betrayal and the denial of dignity. Her fury is built on the memory of violence, rejection, and mutilation—not only of her body but of her autonomy. Her *krodha* emerges through specific *vibhāva*s like humiliation, bodily violation, and emotional dismissal,

amplified through *anubhāva*s like changes in tone, accusatory gestures, and *vyabhicāribhāva*s like *amarṣa* (indignation), *dainya* (despair), and *garva* (pride). These elements culminate in the audience's experience of *raudra rasa* but this time, as empathy, not derision. She exclaims:

> You call me Rākṣasī, as if that is all I am! Who made me so? You, with your bows and blades? You think it is honourable to cut a woman's body? Then let me tell you—your dharma is not mine.
> (Sengupta 2010: 258)

This monologue directly contests the righteousness projected in Rāma's response to her advances in the epic. The heroic aura surrounding Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa is stripped away, revealing an unacknowledged brutality that Sengupta exposes through Śūrpaṇakhā's voice. Sengupta questions,

> What was Shoorpanakha's crime? That she approached a man with sexual desire? Shoorpanakha merely wanted love. They assaulted a defenseless woman.
> (Sengupta 2010: 247)

In Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *raudra rasa* is evoked by *krodha*, usually arising in kings or warriors in combat. It is considered a masculine *rasa*, dependent on heroic aggression. Sengupta subverts this by centering it in a mutilated woman, whose anger is not warlike but ethical. Her anger is not evoked through battlefield violence but through the assertion of moral outrage, a denunciation of dharmic hypocrisy. This reversal is radical: in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Śūrpaṇakhā›s rage is used to trigger Khara's ill-fated attack on Rāma, which is quickly neutralized. In Sengupta's play, her anger is neither punished nor contained. It expands, resists resolution, and challenges the audience to confront how rage has historically been gendered, vilified, and neutralized.

Sara Ahmed writes that "[…] feminist anger often gets in the way of comfort. But that is precisely its work" (Ahmed 2014: 3). Sengupta's Śūrpaṇakhā is that discomfort personified. Her anger disrupts the

aesthetic distance traditionally required for *rasa* to be enjoyed passively. Instead, it compels the audience to reflect. She says:

> Let them call me mad. Let them write verses about my shame. I will sing my own story in the cracks they forgot to close.
> (Sengupta 2010: 264)

This is no longer the disfigured demoness running to her brother with blood on her face; this is a rhetorically precise, emotionally articulate woman who claims authorship over her rage. The shift from *Rāmāyaṇa* to Sengupta's play is not merely narrative; it is epistemic. Furthermore, *raudra rasa* in this play does not eclipse *karuṇa rasa*; it builds upon it. The transition from *śoka* (grief) to *krodha* (anger) parallels a feminist model of emotional transformation—from woundedness to resistance. Rather than seeking redemption, Śūrpaṇakhā demands reckoning.

Sengupta thus retools *raudra rasa* as a feminist aesthetic, reclaiming it from the domains of kings and warriors and returning it to a figure historically excluded from the affective imagination. In doing so, the play enacts a form of aesthetic justice, where anger is not silenced but centered, not pathologized but politicized.

Interconnection of *rasas*: Revealing Śūrpaṇakhā's emotional complexity

In the classical dramaturgy of Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, each dramatic moment typically orients itself around a dominant emotional state (*sthāyibhāva*) that gives rise to a corresponding *rasa.* However, in contemporary postmodern adaptations like Sengupta's, these emotional threads do not operate in isolation. Instead, they are interwoven, oscillating, and sometimes deliberately unresolved. Śūrpaṇakhā's emotional journey cannot be confined to a single *rasa*. The play instead creates a rasaic two-strand braid—where *karuṇa* (the pathetic) and *raudra* (the furious) intersect and transform each other, drawing from *śoka* (grief) and *krodha* (anger) as *sthāyibhāva*s.

Śūrpaṇakhā's grief is not static; it morphs into resistance. Her tears are not signs of helplessness but of accumulation, storing years of marginalization, misrecognition, and symbolic erasure. As Anjali Verma and Prerna Jatav observe, Śūrpaṇakhā becomes a mirror to "a modern woman's quest and sufferings" (Verma and Jatav 2014: 120). At one moment, she mourns the cruelty of her mutilation:

> I bled, but not like a woman in a battlefield—no. I bled like a joke walked away from a song.
> (Sengupta 2010: 250)

In the next scene, she erupts with anger at being denied emotional legitimacy:

> They say I seduced a god. What did I do? I wanted to love. I wanted to speak. And they cut my face for it.
> (Sengupta 2010: 252)

Here, the juxtaposition of emotional states is deliberate. Grief and rage bleed into each other, complicating any effort to isolate a single *sthāyibhāva*. This emotional simultaneity leads the audience to oscillate between *rasa*s, resulting in a compound affective experience, one that challenges the classical tendency toward *rasa* singularity.

In contrast, in Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, Śūrpaṇakhā's emotions are flattened. Her expressions of desire and outrage are weaponized as narrative tools to justify divine retaliation. As Pollock translates, even after being mutilated, she is described less as a grieving woman and more as a "terrifying rākṣasa woman," seeking revenge (Vālmīki 2021: 286). The aesthetic distance maintained in the original epic prevents the reader from accessing her emotional depth. The text rarely invites *karuṇa* for her suffering or *raudra* as a morally grounded emotion.

Sengupta's dramatic choices reverse this. Śūrpaṇakhā's body becomes not only a site of punishment but also a repository of memory, and her voice transforms the audience's emotional stance from apathy to empathy, from contempt to confrontation. This shift aligns with

Abhinavagupta's idea of *rasa* as an immersion, where the audience, freed from their associations, enters into a state of emotional identification and aesthetic contemplation. However, in Sengupta's revision, that immersion is politically activated. The audience is not only aesthetically moved but also ethically unsettled. As Mohanty argues, she "[…] disrupts the conventional dichotomy of women as powerless 'objects who defend themselves' and men as powerful 'subjects who perpetrate violence'" (Dirghangi and Mohanty 2019: 15). By embracing acts of vengeance and rage, Śūrpaṇakhā enacts agency in ways traditionally coded as masculine, challenging the idea that women's power must remain within the realm of passivity or suffering.

Śūrpaṇakhā's character thus reveals how *rasa*s can interconnect dynamically, especially in postmodern retellings that refuse closure or catharsis. Her story becomes a canvas for simultaneous and shifting emotional states, where compassion is laced with indignation, and grief is inseparable from rage. This emotional duality does not dilute the impact of *rasa* but deepens it, encouraging the audience to dwell in ambivalence, to experience complexity without resolution. By destabilizing the boundaries between *karuṇa* and *raudra*, Sengupta elevates Śūrpaṇakhā beyond archetype. She is not merely the othered temptress nor the victimized sister; she is a woman with voice, emotion, and political consciousness. This rasaic complexity foregrounds her as a subject of meaning, capable of unsettling the structural tropes of epic representation.

Conclusion

This study has examined the character of Śūrpaṇakhā through the lens of Bharata's *rasa-bhāva* theory, using it not as a static aesthetic tool but as a dynamic emotional framework to re-evaluate how affect, agency, and narrative voice function in Poile Sengupta's play, *Thus Spake Shoorpanakhā, So Said Śakuni*. In the epic tradition, Śūrpaṇakhā›s emotions are flattened—her anger (*krodha*) and grief (*śoka*) are presented as dangerous, unregulated forces, quickly dismissed or

punished. She is not permitted emotional depth. Her rage is monstrous, her sorrow absurd, and her body a site of justifiable mutilation. These responses uphold the moral order of the epic and reinforce the gendered logic of punishment and exclusion.

By contrast, Sengupta's dramatic revision restores emotional legitimacy to Śūrpaṇakhā through a deliberate reordering of *rasa* production. Her *śoka* becomes the foundation for *karuṇa rasa,* while her *krodha* anchors *raudra rasa*, not as irrational eruptions, but as morally legible responses to systemic violence. Through the careful orchestration of *vibhāva*s*, anubhāva*s, and *vyabhicāribhāva*s, the play evokes not passive pity or horror, but an active, politically charged empathy. Furthermore, Sengupta's interweaving of *karuṇa* and *raudra* avoids the trap of *rasa* singularity. Her Śūrpaṇakhā is not just a sufferer or a rebel—she is both. Her emotional journey captures the paradox of wounded agency: to grieve what one has lost and simultaneously rage against the structures that caused that loss. This multiplicity of emotional states creates a rasaic simultaneity that reflects the complexity of lived experience, especially for those pushed to the margins of dominant narratives. The paper also emphasizes that *rasa*, in postmodern feminist dramaturgy, does not exist in a vacuum. It operates alongside ethics, memory, and politics. In Sengupta's play, *rasa* becomes not only a mode of aesthetic reception but a method of emotional recovery, enabling marginalized characters like Śūrpaṇakhā to re-enter the narrative not as monsters or victims, but as subjects of feeling, thinking, and speaking.

Future research could profitably extend this approach to other female characters in epic literature, such as Hiḍimbā, Āhalyā, and Urmilā, whose emotional and psychological complexities remain underexplored. Employing the combined frameworks of *rasa* theory and intersectionality would facilitate a more nuanced dismantling of binary characterizations that confine women to categories of either virtuous paragons or villainous transgressors. By interrogating these portrayals, scholars can uncover deeper insights into the enduring influence of mythology on contemporary discourses concerning gender, agency, and emotional subjectivity.

References

Adhya, A. 2019. Revisiting Soorpanakha: The Changing Narrative of a Mythological Character in Indian Literature. In: *South Asian Review,* 40(2): 59–73.

Ahmed, S. 2014. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd edition. Routledge.

Bharata. 2011. *Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharata*. With the Commentary *Abhinavabhāratī* by Abhinavagupta. Edited by M. Ramakrishna Kavi. Open Source Archive.

Chakravarti, U. 2006. *Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories: Beyond the Kings and Brahmanas of 'Ancient' India*. New Delhi: Tulika Books.

Chakravarty, C. and S. K. Chaudhuri (eds). 2017. The Dichotomies of Body and Mind Spaces: The Widows in *Chokher Bali* and *Chaturanga*. In: C. Chakravarty and S. K. Chaudhuri (eds). *Tagore's Ideas of the New Woman: The Making and Unmaking of Female Subjectivity*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications: 125–149.

Chari, V. K. 1993. *Sanskrit Criticism*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

Davis, R. G. 2014. Writing the Erasure of Emotions in Dystopian Young Adult Fiction: Reading Lois Lowry's *The Giver* and Lauren Oliver's *Delirium*. In: *Narrative Works*, 4(2).

Dirghangi, A. and S. Mohanty. 2019. De-mythifying the Ramayana: A Study of the 'Devoiced' Surpanakha. In: *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Arts and Humanities*, 6(1): 8–15.

Erndl, K. M. 1991. The Mutilation of Surpanakha. In: P. Richman (ed.). *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 67–88.

Filmy, S. K. and S. K. Verma. 2017. Performative Representation of Myths in Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni*. In: *Indian Writing in English: Contemporary Trends and Concerns*: 66–78.

Ghosh, M. 2022. Revisiting Bharata's Rasa Theory: Relevance, Applications, and Contemporary Interpretations. In: *Research Hub International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 9(12): 37–41.

Iyengar, K. R. S. 1985. *Indian Writing in English*. Sterling Publishers.

Maity, A. 2018. Genre Fiction and Aesthetic Relish: Reading Rasa in Contemporary Times. In: B. Chattopadhyay, A. Mandhwani and A. Maity (eds). *Indian Genre Fiction: Pasts and Future Histories*. London: Routledge.

Manu. 1886. *The Laws of Manu*. Translated by Georg Bühler, *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 25, Clarendon Press.

Mathur, P. 2023. Natyashastra: A Study of the Underlying Unity of All Arts. In: *The Raaga Room*.

Mitra, I. 2012. Shoorpanakha and Shakuni Meet to Retell History. In: *The Times of India*.

Mohanty, C.T. 1984. Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. *Boundary 2*, 12(3): 333–358.

Mullik, G. 2020. Bharata's Theory of Aesthetic Pleasure or Rasa: Classical Indian Theories of 'Aesthetics' and Their Relation to Cinema. In: G. Mullik (ed.). *Explorations in Cinema through Classical Indian Theories: New Interpretations of Meaning, Aesthetics, and Art*. Palgrave Macmillan Cham: 197–278.

Pollock, S. 2016. Rakṣasas and Others: The Demonology of the Rāmāyaṇa. In: S. Pollock. *Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination in India*. Permanent Black: 163–187.

Rao, L. V. P. 2011. Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* as a Postmodern Text. In: *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 2(1).

Rizvi, S. 2023. Locating Natyashastra: The Warp and Woof of Indian Cinema. *Jamshedpur Research Review*, 4: 10–15.

Sengupta, P. 2010. Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni. In: P. Sengupta. *Women Centre Stage: The Dramatist and the Play*. New Delhi: Routledge: 242–282.

Sharma, R. K. 2003. *Hardy and the Rasa Theory*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons.

Singh, A. 2009. Aesthetics of Indian Feminist Theatre. In: *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 1(2): 131–139.

Singh, S. 1997. *Feminism: Theory, Criticism, Analysis*. Pencraft International.

Vālmīki. 2021. *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: The Complete English Translation.* Translated by R. P. Goldman, S. J. Sutherland Goldman, R. Lefeber, S. I. Pollock, and B. A. van Nooten. Revised and edited by R. P. Goldman and S. J. Sutherland Goldman. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Verma, E. and B. Singh. 2024. Recovering 'Lost' Voices in Mythology: A Study of Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni*. In: *Theatre International*, 20.