



PROTEST THROUGH REVAMPING: MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract- This paper tries to review Poile Sengupta's post-modern play Thus Spake Shoorpanaka, So Said Shakuni as a sturdy work in the discourse of protest and attempts to find out how this particular mythological retelling places itself within the aesthetic realms of rebellion and resistance. It further attempts to explore the hegemony or the concealed politics behind the popular mythological retellings which led them towards the rating and appraisal of particular subplots and omission of certain under plots, with reference to the aforementioned play. Rereading the mythological retellings within the context of popular culture and analysing how powerful and influential are myths to create a significant impact on readers, and thereby finding how mythological characters can be recreated as instruments to raise protest against the contemporary issues are the further objectives of the paper.

Keywords – Epic, Adaptation, Subplot, Hegemony, Myth, Discourse, Protest Literature, Resistance, Popular Culture

Unaccompanied by the assistance of age and social conditions, the epics always held a privileged and entitled position in the nation's cultural and literary realms. This very facet of the epics led to the creation of countless retellings or adaptations of the same. The impossibility or the lack of ingenuity behind the revamping of an entire epic into other work, forced the adapters or writers to pare down the epic into numerous essential subplots and choosing an appealing subplot from it for recreation. Even though each of these retellings differed in its architecture and grade, they all followed kindred criteria and pattern in plot selection and its treatment.

A stratum of plays and performances that came in the post millennium period took a radical break from these parallel patterns. One person's perception of one epic or myth need not be the same as another's. So, they reworked upon myths as tales that they know or would like to know. *The Tenth Head* (2013) produced by Pondicherry based theatre troupe Aadishakti is consequential in this category. The plot revolves around the disagreements of one of Ravana's head with the others. *A Million Sitas* (2011) is another work of the same troupe which includes the inner monologues of different female characters in *Ramayana*. Maya Krishna Rao's *Ravanama* (2013) also has a discussable space in this category. It portrays the journey of an actor in search of Ravana. *Hanuman Ki Ramayan* by the Children's theatre company Gillo tells the story of Hanuman who eats up the Ramayana written by himself, for the world to remember Valmiki's version only. The main similarity between these retellings is the presence of a strong politicized backdrop, thought provoking twists and a very connected and collateral relation with the current socio political atmosphere.

Poile Sengupta's post modern play *Thus Spake Shoorpanaka, So said Shakuni* (2001) (hereafter *Thus Spake Shoorpanaka*) is an apposite literary piece in this context. It is an innovative play, which holds novelty in techniques, theme, and treatment. The name of the play taken from ancient epics is ironic when read with the contemporary issues it addresses. She brought two 'villainous' characters from two Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* together and placed them in a modern context and tried to delineate the unexplored and unfamiliar perspectives of both of these marginalized and disparaged characters.

The play consists of only two visible characters; MAN and WOMAN. And the plot is structured in a manner that the reader can identify these characters as Shoorpanaka and Shakuni only through certain linguistic expressions in their dialogues and bodily manners, which take place only after a notable amount of dialogic exchanges. They never address each other through their names. So the playwright created these dramatic personae as universal characters; one who represent, talk and act for everyone. The MAN and the WOMAN in the play feel that even in the contemporary era they are similarly exploited and neglected and hence find a parallel to the epic characters.

Both the epics considered Shoorpanaka and Shakuni as the driving causes behind the war, destruction, ruination and deaths happened. So, their portrayal in the epics and in most of the retellings follows a homogeneous pattern; Shoorpanaka as an evil, horrible and hideous *asura*,

who fell for Rama and Shakuni as a conspiring or intriguing uncle. As mentioned above, Poile Sengupta rereads these already established identities and composes the tale of a loving brother who took revenge for his clan and his sister and of the sister who became victim of the brutal and barbaric action done by two 'Godly brothers'. Sengupta pulls these situations from the epics in to a current time relevance and travels in a to and fro motion. And further she questions the one side portrayal of them in epics and opens the possibility of conceiving it as a misinterpretation or misrepresentation. Thus this revamping of the tales of Shoorpanaka and Shakuni turns into a protest against or a resistance to the injustices happening to those who do not form the majority, those who are outside the norm. Poile Sengupta remarks in her introduction to the aforementioned play, "As we attempt to secure ourselves in our deeply troubled world, it seems to me that we must closely question ourselves about our received sense of history and myth". (242)

Mythology is always a vast source of exciting tales, events and dramatically powerful characters. Don Cupitt in his work *The World to Come* comments;

A myth is typically a traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship and archetypal or universal significance which is recounted in a certain community and is often linked with a ritual; that it tells of the deeds of superhuman beings such as gods, demigods, heroes, spirits or ghosts; that it is set outside historical time in primal or eschatological time... The work of a myth is to explain, to reconcile, to guide, action or to legitimate. (29)

Thus mythology cannot always be considered as some foregone or defunct tales. It needs to be approached with caution, for it has used to shape the ways of seeing the world, perceiving the world and responding to the world. In many situations myth or epic even stands as an alternative to nationalist history. So the influential character of mythology or epics can be considered as a major reason for the large number of retellings. Timberlake Wertenbaker's in his play *The Love of the Nightingale* included an interesting chorus section, trying to find out or state what exactly myth means:

- What is a myth? The oblique image of an unwanted truth, reverberating through time.
- And yet, the first, the Greek meaning of myth, is simply what is delivered by word of mouth, a myth is speech, public speech.
- And myth also means the matter itself, the content of the speech.

– We might ask, has the content become increasingly unacceptable and therefore the speech more indirect? How has the meaning of myth been transformed from public speech to an unlikely story? It also meant counsel, command.

Now it is a remote tale.

– Let that be, there is no content without its myth. ... (315)

So mythology or epics always have a countable amount of ascendancy over the apprehension of the readers. This makes the readers vulnerable in front of the notions put forwarded by epics and myths. In a way, Sengupta here tries to create a resistance against such beliefs and suppositions.

The tendency exhibited by the legends and myths to normalize and celebrate the act of violence happening to woman's body is being questioned here. The humiliation happened to Draupadi in the Kaurava court, Sita sacrificing herself to the fire to prove her chastity, the curse and transformation into stone of Ahalya and her long wait for Rama for deliverance are only a few examples. These stories played a vital part in identifying violence as an indispensable element of being a woman.

Numerous numbers of folktales also fall in to this same category, beginning from the tale of wild uncontrollable women being tamed by handsome and valorous men. The Telugu folk tale which talks about an untamable wild woman is important here. Later a 'courageous and heroic' man tamed her by hooking her nose and dragging her along. After that she wore that hook as a piece of jewellery. C S Lakshmi in her introduction "And Kannagi Plucked Out a Breast" to *Body Blows* commented that, "That a nose hook can become jewellery is probably an ultimate acceptance of attack as deliverance, of punishment as kindness, of invasion of one's body as an outcome of the guilt of being a woman". (7) Shoorpanaka's tale also falls into this same genre. The myth considered her as an untamable asura woman and appreciated Laxman for his heroic action of controlling her by cutting off her breast and nose. But we never tried to talk for or embrace Shoorpanaka to this grade. *Thus Spake Shoorpanaka* tries to view this same action from the perspective of Shoorpanaka and silently raises the question, why Shoorpanaka? and why Shoorpanaka now? Jane De Gay in her essay "Seizing Speech and Playing with Fire: Greek Mythological Heroines and International Women's Performance" observes that, "Classical mythology may be seen as the record of the suppression of a female culture: put very simply, it provides a set of narratives in which women are the victims." (14) The play gives an enraged or a

wrathful response to this unremitting line of representation by portraying Shoorpanaka as the “Goddess of desire”, a character with her own powerful opinions and decisions, bursting out her anger and frustration towards Rama and Laxman for mocking and questioning her pride;

You know what they did to me... the two brothers... they laughed. Laughed at me. They teased me. Mocked me. The older one said, ask my brother... he might want you... the younger one said, ask my brother... the younger one said I can't marry without my brothers consent... ask him... 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. (261)

Sengupta asserts that Shoorpanaka only wanted love and she questions the ‘wrongness’ behind it; “I was bleeding... all down my face... my chest... bleeding... was it wrong to tell a man ‘I love you’? I wanted love... Just a little love... for a little while”. (262) The play also portrayed Shoorpanaka’s deep pain and huge frustration, because nobody acknowledged her intense emotional pain. Her anger towards Ravan is also pictured. Because he was supposed to take revenge for the brutality that happened to his sister. But instead of that, he fell for Sita.

The actions of Shoorpanaka are never highlighted in the epic, except for depicting her as gross, almost grotesque. Comparing this with the general illustrations of Sita and Gandhari, the difference is highly visible. The epics always have this practice of making clear the border between ‘good’ and ‘bad’. In the play itself there are instances where Shoorpanaka is not able to find out the disparity or the reason for the polarity between herself and Sita. She tries to answer why Shoorpanaka is called as a ‘demoness’. And she finds;

WOMAN: Because she was dark and big. She was not in the way men like women to be. Fair complexioned. Delicate. Shy... biddable. Look at Ramayana. The hero is tall... straight nosed... handsome. The villain is grotesque with ten heads. The heroine is slender- waisted, dazzlingly fair. The vamp is dark, swarthy, big. Outspoken. Coarse. Therefore the vamp is demoness. Because she speaks her mind. Because she takes up space. (277)

This makes Shoorpanaka even now a fitting character. She tried to openly acknowledge her desires and feelings and then she becomes a demoness. According to the popular notions, a woman from a marginal space, who always being questioned for her excessive nature, is not expected to create her own space or to assert her yearnings and cravings.

In the case of Shakuni, Poile Sengupta gives him voice to tell why he became the master player behind the fatal war, and it disclosed the heart of a brother who took revenge for his sister

and clan. The play highlights the loving side of Shakuni and clearly reveals his journey from a simple man to that of a crooked one. Further the play talks about how important is the idea of revenge in Shakuni's perspective.

MAN: The Aryan greed... Their stinking race superiority... They came all the way south carrying their arrogance like a blood thirsty sword... they thought they were invisible... they were conspirators ... They violated all human rights... They waged a wrong, totally unjustified war. (277-278)

So, through the tale of Shakuni, the MAN stands for all those whose rights are denied. The play creates a literary driving force with the motivation for action. By particularly looking at the character of Shakuni, this work can be included in to the group of "Engaged Literature" formulated by the French writer and philosopher Jean- Paul Sartre. According to Sartre, literature plays a double function; as a mirror for the one who oppresses and as a source of guidance and inspiration for the one who is oppressed.

The portrayal of Gandhari also becomes remarkable here. Gandhari was always heightened for the action of blindfolding her own eyes. She is always celebrated for her selfless love towards her blind husband. When epics and almost all retellings romanticized Gandhari's action, Poile Sengupta read this action as her protest for being married off to a blind man without her knowledge.

MAN: She... she did something terrible.

WOMAN: You mean she... killed herself?

MAN: No. Nothing as cowardly... She deliberately blindfolded herself. She wore a dark, thick, bloody bandage over her eyes...She who was as free as the birds flying across the hills... why did she choose... choose to blot out the sun?

Pause.

WOMAN: She was that angry.

MAN: Yes.

Pause.

WOMAN: As angry as I was. (265)

Poile Sengupta further questions the sacredness and integration of the epics. And her scoffing reaches its peak when she describes *Ramayana* as cute and romantic and compares it to *Mills and Boon*. She also tries to differentiate between history and myth. But the characters are

unable to do that. They become confused and stand between both of these, unable to differentiate the difference between them. And finally the characters acknowledge whether it is a myth or history we all carry a Shoorpanaka and Shakuni inside us.

Conclusion

In *Thus Spake Shoorpanaka*, myth undergoes the role of a wingman and positions the distance between the central issues it addresses and the way of perception underwent by the reader. The writer uses mythology and mythological character itself as an apparatus to revise and rewrite all the normalizing actions put forward by the mythology. This mythological retelling propagates a strong politics; a method of protest or resistance against the primitive notions which are still prevalent. And the writer chose the mode of violence for it. The world has always questioned the excessive nature of Shoorpanaka and the playwright has used this same characteristic to build the character of Shoorpanaka and asserts violence as a mode of resistance or protest.

Another strand which makes this particular retelling different from the others is the author's experiment on how to re-write demonized figures as sources of strength. The protagonists are both villains and victims at the same time, through two different perspectives. By portraying both Shoorpanaka and Shakuni as round characters, Sengupta easily explained their motives, sought sympathy and understanding, and explored, criticized and justified the circumstances which led them to their fate or misinterpretation. So altogether Sengupta put forward a strategy of deconstructing the original stories, drawing attention to the retold narrative, silently placing them in the current socio-political scenario and thus paving the way for radical re-writings. She exploded the mythology, denied those tales and created her own narrative. The play reflects the mental landscape of both characters, enabling the readers to share and respond to it. It also tries to place Shoorpanaka and Shakuni as archetypes and the important thing is that the images of strength, chaos and contradictions inside are still prevalent in our modern psyche. And it unconsciously creates a link with the personal experiences and personal images of the readers.

The selection of Shoorpanaka and Shakuni as protagonists is the major facet which makes this play radical. Thereby it questions the general tendency of retellings related to the repeated selection and omission of some particular subplots in the epics. The influential nature of mythological retelling over the readers might be a reason for rendering this play through the perspective of two mythological characters. The steady increase in the number of retellings each

year has given mythological retellings a notable position in the realm of popular culture, turning mythology also in to a powerful kind of ideology.

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