

## *Charandas Chor: A Study in Paradox*

**Shubhanku Kochar**

Research Scholar

MDU Rohtak

Before a detailed analysis of Tanvir's play *Charandas Chor* as a study in paradox is undertaken, it will be in place to explain the meaning of the term, paradox. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines it as, "a statement containing two opposite ideas that make it seem impossible or unlikely, although it is probably true" ("Paradox").

According to M.H. Abrams, "Paradox is a statement which seems on its face to be logically contradictory or absurd, yet turns out to be interpretable in a way that makes good sense" (201).

Cleanth Brooks also defines it as a term which enables a writer to express his complex emotions. He describes it as a way of juxtaposing two contraries.

What all these definitions tend to underline is that paradox resides in what seems to be self contradictory in statements and situations. The apparent oppositions are however, reconciled to reveal the complexities of life. Wit and irony, which serve as not only a source of delight, but also as organizing principles, are integral to the use of paradox in literature.

The play, *Charandas Chor*, is steeped in paradox. In fact, it is built around the contraries. To quote Javed Malik, "Charandas Chor is conceived in terms of paradoxes and contradictions"(15). Habib Tanvir during his conversation with Anjum Katyal, the translator of the play, suggested the same when he said, "Habits are hard to shake off. So I'd like you to say that just as a drunkard cannot leave drinking, a liar cannot leave lying and a thief cannot leave stealing, truthful men cannot leave telling the truth. If habit is vice and truthfulness becomes a habit, then that too is a vice" (40).

And if a truthful man happens to be a thief, then things become more complex and interesting. Anjum Katyal during a short conversation said that she could not conceive the play, *Charandas Chor*, in any other terms than seeing it as a putting together of truth and lie simultaneously in a man.

The entire theme of the play is constructed around contradictions. There are liars, scoundrels, thieves, but they are men of principles as well. There are custodians of law, but they are breakers of it too. There are saints and sanyasis, but they run after money as well. There are men of intellect, but it is very easy to deceive them. There are rich, affluent people, but at heart, they are the poorest. There are paupers, but at heart, they are very rich. Thus, the theme of the entire play is embedded in a remarkable juxtaposition of opposites, one after another.

In the play, as has been pointed out, truth and lie go hand in hand. People who deceive and cheat others turn out to be humanitarian as well. This paradox is well worked out through the portrayal of the central character, Charandas. He is a thief, who steals golden plates. He is all the time chased by a policeman. He robs the poor farmers, snatches jewellery from a wealthy merchant's wife. He even enters into the temple and steals whatever he finds there. He is even not afraid of anything while robbing the Queen of her five coins. But, stealing and giving go hand in hand in his case. On the one hand, he is a thief, and thieves are not supposed to be humanitarian. They are supposed to run away with whatever they get. But, Charandas never does that, he first steals and then returns. For example, after stealing sattu from a poor peasant, he shouts, "Arrey, sattu, only sattu! Oh sattuwala! Come here! Come on back, don't be scared. Sit down; let's share this like brothers" (Tanvir 60).

He robs a wealthy merchant's wife, he is expected to run away with all the booty, but, instead of this, Charandas cannot see her weep. He returns immediately whatever he has snatched. Actually, he inadvertently takes five vows before the Guru, according to them, he will never eat in golden plate, never presides an elephant procession, never marry a queen and never be a king. He also says that he will never lie in future. Now, on the one hand, he is not ready to abjure stealing, which he calls as his "Dharma" (Tanvir 101), on the other hand, he pledges to remain truthful. No doubt, he does not give up stealing, but he also adheres to his oath of becoming a truthful man. A thief is generally supposed to be selfish, mean and egocentric. But, Charandas is of a helping nature. He robs the landlord not for his own sake, but for the sake of the entire village. He robs the Queen not to enhance his fortunes, but to make his presence felt. Later on, time tests him. He is given opportunity of leading a procession, marrying a queen, eating in a golden plate and becoming a king. But, he refuses to do any of the things. Had there been any other common man, he could have pounced upon this golden opportunity without caring for future consequences. The Queen happens to be young and pretty, and she also offers to pay off all penances: "Do penance, if necessary. We can hold an atonement ceremony and gather all the ascetics and holy men and fulfill all the rituals necessary to absolve you" (Tanvir 110).

He is expected to surrender, but no, he is very firm. This explains the nature of paradox. Here we have a man who is immoral, thief yet he is a man of noble principles and promises. He took vows in a joking way and yet he adheres to them in a serious manner. He prefers to die rather than succumbing to all pressures.

Another paradox dealt within the play is: Spiritualism V/s Materialism. This is evident from the conduct of the Guru and the Priest. On the one hand, there is religion represented by the Guru and the Priest. As Guru is supposed to be a man of restraint, a man who has renounced all worldly considerations, a man who is selfless and benevolent. The Guru in the play also asks his followers to give up their vices, and yet he is a man of this world, he is more concerned with money than with salvation. The song which he sings constantly proves this:

That's all you have to do, just  
Give the guru his due.  
Is it salvation you want? Just  
Give the guru his due (Tanvir 64).

The Priest is also supposed to be a man of pious nature. He is expected to be well versed in the Vedas. Now, the priest in the play does perform ceremonies yet reading of many religious scripts fail to turn him into a man of wisdom. He is not able to penetrate beneath the mask which Charandas is wearing. His heart leaps when he sees a basket full of golden ornaments. He is not here motivated by any humanitarian instinct. His eyes are set simply upon the precious booty which forces him to make Charandas stay there.

Affluence vis-a-vis Poverty and Poverty vis-a-vis Affluence is yet another set of contraries that one encounters in the play. Here one meets people who are rich yet poor, and poor who are paradoxically rich. The landlord in the play is a rich man. He has fields in various villages. His fields are full of crops. He also possesses a tube well and electricity connection. He is expected to share his fortune with the suffering lot in the time of crisis. But, he turns out to be too mean and miserly. He may be rich, but only in the worldly sense. From humanitarian perspective, he is the poorest of all. Then, there are poor peasants who have nothing to eat. When they get food, they are expected to fill their bellies first. But, instead of

that, they distribute the entire food in the village first. Thus, the poor turn out to be rich than the so called rich.

The contrastive interplay of the oppositions like: Defending and Offending, Making and Breaking, Preserving and Violating, however, constitute another interesting paradox. These contraries are central to the character of the Havaladar. He is a policeman. He is supposed to preserve the law, punish the offenders and maintain peace in the town. He enters the stage chasing Charandas, he threatens him at his mischief, and he even warns him against going astray. But, he also violates the law. He instead of catching the thieves, takes commission from them and lets them go. He befriends them and aids them in their unlawful deeds. For example, he says to Charandas, "If you have, just tell me and I won't report. We'll share the booty" (Tanvir 57).

Yet another set of oppositions that captures attention and is a source of delight lies in the counter play of the oppositions such as: Sublimity and Pettiness, intellectuality and foolishness, Wisdom and Buffoonery. The case of the Munim and the Minister can be cited to substantiate these paradoxes. First there is the Minister, who is expected to have some integrity in him. He is also supposed to be a worldly wise man, since he is next to the Queen. So, one expects in him an amount of dignity and intellect to see through the pranks of unsocial elements. He enters the stage with his head high, as if he will never be trapped. But, how easily he is trapped and befooled by the Guru and the Havaladar. A man who is supposed to run the country along with the Queen is reduced to an easily manipulable fool. He condemns the Munim at his incapability of differentiating between a Chor and a Minister. But, ironically enough, he himself is not able to dissect beneath the incognito of the tricksters. Then there is the Munim, an accountant, who is expected to be again an intelligent person, that's why, he is hired to maintain the accounts. But, ironically, he also turns out to be a good for nothing fellow. His wisdom and intellect never enables him to see whether he is talking to a minister or a chor. On the other hand, he is hired to preserve the accounts, but he himself steals five golden mohurs and later on is sacked.

The contrast between the dominator and the dominated, the ruler and the ruled, the commander and the commanded is yet another set of contraries that is enacted in the play. The Rani perhaps is the best example for this kind of paradox. On the one hand, she is Rani, the Queen, ruler, commander, authoritative, dominator of the country. And yet she is ruled, controlled, dominated by not only physical passions but her personal concerns as well. She is supposed to command everyone, but see the irony, she herself falls down at the feet of Charandas. She implores him to marry her. Later, she beseeches him not to tell anything to the outer world whatever had passed between them in that closed compartment. Charandas, though a thief he is, is ready to die in order to preserve his vows and dignity. The Queen, paradoxically, is out to kill others- a ruler and yet so weak in her character! As a Queen, she is expected to save the life of her country folk, but for her personal gains, she takes the life of her people, even the one she loves and admires.

To conclude, it can be said that *Charandas Chor* is a remarkable play steeped in paradox. These paradoxes not only make the play interesting, but make it complex as well. What Tanvir is trying to prove is that, perhaps, nothing is final and nothing is absolute. Truth becomes lie and lie becomes truth. Preserve becomes offender and offender becomes preserver. Meaning is never fixed. It is determined by the context. Secondly, these paradoxes also surprise and amuse the readers because of the innate irony which they carry in them. One expects one thing, but something quite different and surprising happens. This constant shifting from one meaning to the other makes the play a delightful and illuminating reading.

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