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Sakuni in *the Mahabharata* and Iago in *Othello*: Epitomes of Subtle Villainy

Vandana Ravi
Guest Lecturer
Thrissur, Kerala.

Abstract

Subtle villains, unlike normal villains, have captured attention for their intelligent but devious plans and their timely implementation. Their cunning methodology included scheming and plotting to achieve their goals rather than resorting to any violent measures. The two characters, Iago and Sakuni, from the two important works, *Othello* and *the Mahabharata*, are the true representatives of subtle villainy. Both of them make appropriate plans, ensure proper timing, evaluate continuously and ensure flawless implementation till they achieve their goal i.e. destruction of their enemies. This paper focuses on these two subtle villains mainly due to the unique and peculiar path chosen by them to ensure the success of their wicked plans with a visionary planning and meticulous implementation.

Keywords: subtle villainy; planning; common goal.

The concept of villain brings to one's mind as one who is opposite to the hero, creating difficulties and hurdles for the latter to overcome. A literary villain, on the other hand, is one who is unchanging with regards to his goals unless an overwhelming force, physical or psychological compels him to do so. In subtle villainy, the villain is cunning, crafty, intellectual, malicious and harmful. Rather than merely waiting for a tragedy to happen, subtle villains would have developed a clear plan based on a definite objective in mind and would ensure the progress of their plans by devising appropriate strategies, ensuring proper timing, evaluating continuously at various stages and monitoring its meticulous implementation with enough courage, patience and perseverance. Iago from the famous classic *Othello, the Moor of Venice* written by William Shakespeare and Sakuni, from the epic *Mahabharata* written by Veda Vyasa, are the best representatives of subtle villainy.

Iago can be regarded as the most powerful among Shakespeare's evil characters. He is the zenith of villainy one has ever come across. Iago is a military officer who feels that he has been wronged by Othello, his commanding officer. The latter's decision to appoint Michael Cassio for the post of lieutenant instead of Iago had sown the first seeds of hatred in Iago's mind. Iago, the subtle villain is born at this moment. His mind begins plotting against Othello with a sole aim of destroying him and his married life with Desdemona. Iago's utterances are cold and cynical but at the same time so convincing that no one is able to see through his intrigues. He does not wait for an opportunity rather he creates opportunities to put his plans into action. Thus, Othello, Cassio, Roderigo and Emilia become his tools for achieving what he wants. Iago can be regarded as a master of making out plans on the spur of a moment and thereby gradually trapping his victims in his web without being doubted by them. Each of his plans put into action through one of

the characters moves the plot of *Othello* from one level to the next level. These intrigues act and interact on each other and finally lead to a common goal. In his run to destroy Othello, he unflinchingly makes use of Roderigo, Cassio and even his own wife Emilia to attain his target. His first victim, Roderigo is used to provoke Brabantio against Othello and Desdemona so as to destroy their newly married bliss. Simultaneously, Iago robs Roderigo of his money and jewels by promising him to gain Desdemona's favour for him. When Roderigo realises that he is being used by Iago, he demands his jewels back but meets his death by Iago's hand. Iago's next move is against Cassio. He makes Cassio drunk while on duty in the guardroom and incites Roderigo to pick up a quarrel with him. He thus succeeds in getting Cassio dismissed but does not stop there. He sets Roderigo to waylay Cassio at night and murder him. Next, Iago targets the married love and happiness of Othello and Desdemona. Iago makes Cassio believe that it is only Desdemona who can now help him by pleading his case with Othello. At the same time Iago poisons Othello's mind against Desdemona. By his clever scheming and subtle remarks, Iago arranges the eaves-dropping scene. The sight of the handkerchief and Cassio talking lightly to his wife maddens Othello leading him to strangulate Desdemona. Thus it is clear that Iago's scheming forms the basis of the plot thus leading to the tragic ending of the play.

Iago is not what he seems to be. Caryle called Iago "an articulate poet", Hazlitt "an amateur of tragedy in real life" (Kott 86). Iago is not a person who is satisfied with just devising a strategy rather he would play it through and takes part in it himself. Iago leads Othello to his ruin by pretending to be his friend and well-wisher. Iago utters his words with calculating guile; attuning them to the person he has to deal with. This is evident in the way he deals with Othello, Roderigo, Cassio and Emilia. All these four persons realised the wicked strategies and cunning motives of Iago only towards the end. That was the type of planning, conduct and execution of each episode by Iago throughout the drama. It is true that Iago tasted success in all his plans but even he had to come face to face with failure. Iago's failure became evident in the final scene at the moment of his complete triumph. When it seemed that he had won, his plot is given away by his own wife Emilia. Finally even when he is placed under arrest, he remains taciturn when pressed for an explanation of his action. Thus his success is overshadowed by the moment of his failure.

Sakuni can be regarded as one of the greatest villain of the epic *Mahabharata*. He was the brother of Gandhari, wife of king Dritarashtra. He was born to king Subala of Gandhara. As per legend, Gandhari's horoscope revealed that her husband would die soon after her marriage leaving her as a widow. In order to avoid such a calamity, as per an astrologer's advice, king Subala makes Gandhari marry a goat and then quickly sacrifices it. Technically this made Gandhari a widow. Then she gets married to Dritarashtra. Many years later, Dritharashtra becomes enraged on learning the truth about his being Gandhari's second husband and imprisons Gandhari's entire family including king Subala. In prison, they were served just one fistful of rice every day. King Subala realises this as Dritharashtra's trick to starve them to death. He declares that only his youngest son would eat the sparse food so that at least he would survive to avenge the death of the rest. This youngest son was none other than Sakuni. He survived and swore to destroy the whole of Kuru kingdom. He used the bones of his father to make the dice

with which he was able to defeat the Pandavas in the gambling match which eventually led to the war at Kurukshetra and also to the destruction of the entire Kuru clan. Sakuni has been portrayed as an extremely intelligent but devious old man, who was very fond of his nephew Duryodhana. He won the kingdom of the Pandavas for his nephew, as a wager in a rigged game of dice. The character of Sakuni can be better seen in the light of various incidents happened as well as attempts made by him at certain crucial occasions. He played a major role in instigating the Kauravas towards taking various steps to humiliate and destroy the Pandavas. With the support and wicked moves from Sakuni, the Kauravas kept the Pandavas in a house made of wax and burned the same. By mere luck and with god's grace the Pandavas escaped unhurt. Again as directed by Sakuni, Duryodhana made an attempt to kill Bhima with poison. The latter escaped unscathed. Sakuni's wicked moves had even prompted Duryodhana to ignore the kind words and advice of Lord Krishna during the latter's visit as a messenger of peace. Moreover Duryodhana had even walked out from the Assembly hall as a mark of protest which amounted to total disrespect and humiliation to the Lord. In short the character of Sakuni in *the Mahabharata* was so conspicuous as it was solely responsible for the development of enmity between the Kauravas and the Pandavas culminating in the war at Kurukshetra.

Sakuni was Duryodhana's chief confidant and was known for his intelligent yet devious ways. Iago, pretending to be Othello's friend, works against the latter without coming into the open and mostly working from behind. On the other hand, Sakuni determines the strategy for Duryodhana by giving proper directions and hints at relevant occasions. He comes into action straight away many times to extend help to Duryodhana. He alone determined the strategy of dice challenge and possesses the knowledge and skill to defeat the Pandavas at dice and win for Duryodhana all he wants. Sakuni is a man of action. This power and strength is the central point rather than the turning point in the whole story of *Mahabharata* leading to the Kurukshetra war and destruction of Kaurava clan. This power was described many a times. "I shall take no risk", says Sakuni of this strategy contrary to Iago's statement, "I am not what I am".

The major differences in the act of villainy of these two unique villains pertain to the manner in which their schemes were implemented. While Iago was controlling the entire execution of his plan from the backseat or rather through remote control, Sakuni was very much along with Kauravas in the whole execution. Occasionally prompting and persuading them into action and sometimes directly active on their behalf too, he was very much visible on the field. Iago was using Roderigo as a puppet in his hand to destroy the other characters by taking the latter into confidence and motivating him by arousing illusions and in the process made the latter also victim thereby. But Sakuni mostly used the honesty and straightforwardness of Yudhishtira to agree to comply with the request to play the game of dice which was the turning point in the series of events that unfolded in the epic of *Mahabharata* culminating in the destruction of the Kaurava clan.

There is a contrast as far the ends of these villains are concerned. Iago's character is another confirmation of the truth that "crime never pays". Nemesis overtakes him and he is caught in his own web. Cassio, whose downfall and disgrace he had sought, is appointed as Governor of Cyprus and is assigned the duty of inflicting on him a cruel

death through slow torture. Iago is the cause and source of the tragedy in *Othello*. It is he who is responsible for all the sufferings of Othello and Desdemona. He deserves death and ultimately he suffers it. Like Iago, Sakuni's case is also almost similar. In fact Sakuni was responsible for inflicting the seeds of jealousy in Duryodhana and went on nurturing it continuously through appropriate intervention at the required time. He kept on provoking Duryodhana and motivates him to invite Yudhishtira for a game of dice through which he could create a lot of hurdles and problems for the Pandavas. At the end of Kurukshetra war, Sakuni was killed by Sahadeva, one of the youngest Pandavas. Iago was kept alive to be tortured slowly and continuously till death whereas Sakuni met with a quick death.

Both Iago and Sakuni had in common one thing i.e. the destruction of the so called enemy in respect of both. They planned their programme well ahead, monitoring the execution carefully till they smelt success. But in execution, both of them had different approaches. While Iago had throughout ensured playing from the backseat pretending innocence till the end, Sakuni through covert and overt methods appeared on the scene and was very much active in the whole execution. Both of them were sure of themselves as to how to proceed in their mission of taking revenge. They were always on alert and did not leave matters lightly. They made sure that their plans were implemented properly.

Unlike the normal villains, subtle villains are by and large very intelligent, highly shrewd and exceedingly cunning in whatever they plan to do. They keep a certain objective and prepare a mental plan befitting their way of thinking. Perhaps we can attribute, to a certain extent; the present day concept of planning almost similar to the subtle villain's planning. In other words, these villains prepare their mental plan very carefully, devise appropriate strategies, ensure proper timing, evaluate continuously the progress at various stages, modify the strategies if needed suiting the occasions and ensure flawless implementation till their goals are achieved. Perhaps the very reason for their success might be due to their unique style of planning and implementation which makes them more popular and immortal. Also this could be the distinctive feature making them more popular than the respective heroes. What we observe in these two cases, is that the respective stories are based on typical themes related to the concerned heroes. However the course of action and the culmination mostly depend on the thinking and the consequent action of the villains under review.

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