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Charandas Chor: A Critique of ‘Society, Religion and the State’¹

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Habib Tanvir, one of the leading Urdu dramatists of the twentieth century, portrays multifaceted features and epidemic behavioral flaws of his age through the masterpiece drama “Charandas Chor”. The present article is about the fundamental issues relating to religion, society and the state, hidden in the drama. It also focuses on Tanvir’s critical approach to these issues, and on his power and technique in handling the characters each of whom is conceived to represent each sector of human life of the time. Here my primary aim is to show how much the author is successful in dealing with, and bringing into light, various defects and follies of the people of the age.

Charandas Chor has a universal appeal. It is a miniature of the world whose very existence depends on the three unavoidable human institutions—society, religion and the state. Habib Tanvir chooses and adopts the important leading persons from each of them as his main characters in the drama to criticize the world order and system, particularly in Indian context through a medium of ‘Touchstone’-like Charandas whom, whoever comes into contact with, unconsciously exposes his own vices and faults. The playwright lampoons the thoughts and activities of such persons associated with these institutions, and highlights hypocrisy and roguery, dishonesty and untruthfulness, gradual moral degradation and loss of social values.

The word ‘guru’ evokes a conventional sense of self-restraint and selflessness, benevolence and dedication, miraculous power and deep religious knowledge. The guru who is a religious leader and who ‘leads by example’ has some good qualities along with some bad ones. The guru in the drama is paradoxically somewhat rogue and liar. He does not follow what he preaches. Guru teaches his devotees:

“That Truth is so precious
Only a handful can
Uphold the Truth...”²

And surely he is not among the ‘handful’: he lies to the havaladar—though to save Charandas no doubt—that “Just as ditch water gets purified when it mingles with the Ganga, in a sadhu’s akhara, thieves, loafers, drunkards, gamblers, rogues, ruffians all get purified”³ - to its greater falsity Charandas has not left thieving; the drunkard, the gambler and the smoker, who vowed to the guru to renounce their evil habits, resume their old

¹ Malick

² Mindscapes p.112

³ Mindscapes, p. 124

habits at the back of the guru. Again, the guru lies to the new minister of the queen in making him inaugurate unimportant shops and stalls, and thus becomes an accomplice of Charandas in stealing the five gold coins from the royal treasure. Whatever the guru lies for, a lie is a lie. Unlike the guru, Charandas is a man of his words. He embraces even his death for the sake of truth. But the guru forsakes truth for his own benefit: to be served by Charandas: “Why don’t you just devote your days to looking after my welfare” (142). He is also intemperate and haughty while thrashing the smoker with his tong. He exerts that he helps people renounce gambling, drinking, smoking, and stealing. But the irony is that he himself takes the chillum from the smoker. That this guru is a pretender having many behavioral flaws is clearly evident in the fact that he fears the minister, but a true and honest guru fears none.

A guru is expected to have given up the worldly affection and affairs. To the contrary he is self-centric and materialistic—

Is it salvation you want? Just
Give the guru his due
All learning is a sham till you
Give the guru his due
Nothing will work for you till you
Give the guru his due.⁴

Guru’s pretension is that he takes the role of correcting sinful people but actually he is more concerned with ‘gurudakshina’ than salvation. Getting gurudakshina is his ‘brass tacks’. To the smoker, he says, “Nothing happens without gurudakshina. It’s a must” (123).

Charandas truly estimates guru’s character: “you’re flourishing in your own way”⁵ or, “while you sit here in broad daylight, openly, with a crowd of people around you. And you make much more than I do”⁶.

The priest, another representative of religion, is doubtlessly benevolent and helpful but at heart he is also avaricious and worldly—a flash of greed is reflected in his face when Charandas offers him a basketful of jewellery and gems--“Aare baap re! That’s a fortune! Are you giving it all?”⁷. He is supposed to be wise and well-versed in the scriptures. But his wisdom fails to penetrate into the mind of such a notorious thief as Charandas in spite of his warning against a great loss.

The play is also a critical analysis of state laws and its protectors in the persons of the queen, the munim, the minister, the havaldar and the landlord. The economical imbalance is highlighted. There is an apparent paradoxical contrast between exuberance and wanting. As Subhanku Kochar states “Affluence vis-a-vis Poverty and Poverty vis-a-vis Affluence is yet another set of contraries that one encounters in the play”⁸. Inhumanly

⁴ Mindscapes, p. 119

⁵ Mindscapes, p. 128

⁶ Mindscapes, p. 128

⁷ Mindscapes, p. 139

⁸ Kochar, p. 02

self-centric like Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, the landlord treasures much wealth while the peasants starve to die due to the famine. The state authority may be said to be responsible for this pecuniary imbalance. It pays no heed to the pathetic and heart-rending condition of the peasants, and remains blind to the unlawful treasuring of the landlord. The queen who is a symbol of state power misuses her omnipotent power only for her own interest when it is at stake. She admires the truthfulness and integrity of Charandas; wants to honour him, and even falls in love with him. But it is this queen who lies and gets Charandas killed because she fears revelation of her advance towards him. Above all she is a politician and diplomat, and fears her position and honour.

The havaladar and the munim who are appointed to protect the laws appear to be fools and breakers of laws. Charandas, an eye-opener of society, exposes inexperience and professional inefficiency, hollowness and dishonesty of the administrators: "Good or bad, everyone steals rani-sahib"⁹. "Others steal on the sly, while I do it in broad daylight. That's the only difference"¹⁰. It is absolutely true in our society. From top to bottom our administrative system is tinged with corruption and lacks honest intention of the administrators. The munim pockets five gold coins. The havaladar proposes to share the booty: "There has been a theft in this village. A golden plate has been stolen. Have you done it? If you have, just tell me and I won't report it. We'll share the booty"¹¹, and in another situation slyly picks up the money lying before the gambler. In a sense it may be said that the queen also steals Charandas's life 'on the sly'. Thus it suggests that position or power or class does not certify a man's character. But it is his deeds and acts that characterize him good or bad. That is why Charandas has become a famous man even after his death and is sung in praise like the famous Robin Hood of England:

An ordinary thief is now a famous man,
And how did he do it?
By telling the truth.¹²

They thieve for their own interest but Charandas steals for his villagers. A lowborn ignorant uncultured trickster may turn out to be a humanitarian and philanthropist, honest and truthful, helpful and kind-hearted whereas a so-called cultured educated rich man or governmental officer may be ignorant and fool, dishonest and miser at heart. What is to be carefully noted is that the munim and the minister are, to some degree, responsible for the theft of the 'royal coffers' but they go with impunity, perhaps because they are good position holders and more or less closer to the queen in rank. But Charandas, as he is a lowborn thief, is slaughtered at the queen's order because "dead men tell no tales"¹³.

How cruel and inhuman a man can be the landlord is its salient example. He does not "spare even a kilo of rice"¹⁴ to the peasant whose "children have not eaten for three

⁹ *Mindscapes*, p. 150

¹⁰ *Mindscapes*, p. 150

¹¹ *Mindscapes*, p. 113

¹² *Mindscapes*, p. 162

¹³ *Mindscapes*, p. 161

¹⁴ *Mindscapes*, p. 132

days”¹⁵ and now are “half-dead of starvation”. His stone-heart does not melt at the helpless and miserable, poor and pathetic condition of the peasant. Rather he threatens him away by his indignity and hateful nature when the peasant apologizes for a mistake: “Mistake! Nonsense! You don’t know your place”¹⁶ is the retort of the landlord. When he sits closer to him, he flares up his anger and hatred, reveals his scornful nature as if the peasant is not a man: “come, sit closer, sit on my head! Fool! Sit down there on the floor....My guddy is all ruined”¹⁷. How pathetic and heart-rending is the condition of the poor people who, instead of getting due respect and help from the rich people, are shamefully humiliated in the society. Here the behavior of the landlord is questioned.

It is evident throughout the play that Havib Tanvir “shows up existing social order as a disorder”¹⁸, religion and administrative system as corrupted ones. To quote Tanvir’s own comment, “Through his acts and deeds Charandas debunks religion, the State and class economy”¹⁹. Tanvir envelops a serious subject in a comic tone with the help of irony and paradox, wit and humour to make a greater contrast between the opposites and contradictions hidden in a man. Transformation of Charandas like O’ Henry’s Jimmy Valentine from a mere thief to a respectful honest hero, a ‘god’ to the queen, and transformation of the queen from a ‘loving’ queen to a politician, cruel murderer-suggests that no man should be underestimated or overestimated: anytime at any stage of life one can change. So the play is about all of us and the world we live in, where nothing is absolute, perfect or pure. And man’s nature is always dynamic. Here Habib Tanvir like Geoffrey Chaucer who in *The Canterbury Tales* exposes the features of the fourteenth century people, has masterly depicted and brought out the habits, behaviours and idiosyncrasies of the characters in *Charandas Chor* and of the people of the 20th century world which, to conclude it is worth-noting, is a world of topsy-turvy where:

The thief is a king, and the king is a thief
The gods and the thieves, they dance cheek to cheek
The doctors themselves are too sick to take care.²⁰

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¹⁵ Mindscapes, p. 132

¹⁶ Mindscapes, p. 132

¹⁷ Mindscapes, p. 132

¹⁸ Malick, p. 01

¹⁹ Tanvir,

²⁰ Mindscapes, p. 141