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Recreating a Mythological Performance, Gender and Politics in Asif Currimbhoy's *The Dumb Dancer*

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Abstract:

This article seeks to explore the possibilities of a popular play by Asif Currimbhoy, *The Dumb Dancer*, in the light of gender issues and the subversion of conventional roles of significant characters in the *Mahabharata*. The play is read as a fertile ground that inspires alternative readings of the popular episode in the *Mahabharata*, where Draupadi is but a subservient entity to her five husbands—the Pandavas. Currimbhoy's play-within-the-play projects Prema, who gradually becomes Draupadi as the play proceeds, the superintendent of a mental asylum, in contrast to the mythological connotations that one usually attaches to her person. She not only emerges triumphant over Bhima and the other male characters in the play, but also offers the audience with a fresh insight into the traditional mythological narrative. Currimbhoy's play stands out as a text that almost unsettles the complacency of the patriarchal narrative structure of the epic, and thereby, building petite, postcolonial narratives of subversion, gender politics and deception.

Keywords: gender politics, subversion of epic narratives, psychoanalysis.

It is rather intriguing to see how myths get represented in literature written by various authors at different points of time, from different regions. Myths can be defined as popular beliefs that occur in a tradition and become part of a popular discourse. They are abstract constructs that have evolved with time and continue to loom large in a society as an indispensable part of its belief system. As Don Cupitt says in his book, *The World to Come* (1982):

So we may say that 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 (i.e. last, ultimate) time or in supernatural world, or may deal with comings and goings between the supernatural world and the world of human history are imagined in anthropomorphic (i.e. humanly formed) ways... We can add that myth-making is evidently a primal and universal function of the human mind as it seeks a more-or-less unified vision of the cosmic order, the social order, and the meaning of the individual's life (quoted in Coupe 6).

In the Indian context, the proximity between myths and literature becomes all the more pronounced with the tale of Bharata who created the first ever Indian treatise on dramaturgy, that is, the *Natyashastra*. In his translation of Bharata's *Natyashastra*, Manmohan Ghosh opines thus:

The *Natyashastra* is commonly attributed to Bharata Muni. But Bharata cannot be taken as its author, for in the *Natyashastra* itself his mythical character is very obvious, and the majority of the Puranas are silent about the so-called author of the *Natyashastra*, and there is not a single legend about him in any of the extant Puranas or the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (Ghosh Introduction LXXI)

This paper seeks to argue that by taking these myths out of their epic narratives, the playwright not only formulates his/her own ideologies and notions of certain contemporary socio-political issues that inform his/her times, but also suggests fresh insights into perceiving a familiar myth in an unfamiliar way. Allan Wall offers a relevant observation in this regard:

Why are modern writers so obsessed by myths? Why do they return to mythic themes, rewrite them, effectively create new versions of our oldest stories?... We take the myths, the earliest and most potent stories we have ever told ourselves, and we defamiliarize them. Defamiliarization is frequently an optical device... By seeing something from a radically different angle, we see aspects to which convention had made previously invisible. (Wall 60-61)

India's confrontation with the West had provided the authors with ample materials to practise their chosen genres of literature. The literature of the independence period, irrespective of their generic differences, is imbued with nationalist sentiments and most of them project the common themes of patriotism and resistance to the foreign rule. Indian drama in English is no exception. It has thrived to bring out the spirit of nationalism, and in this pursuit, dramatists have often retraced their steps to the glorious age of the Vedas, Upanishads and the epics. However, with independence came new responsibilities and new challenges to the nation; one of these challenges was to retain her own identity in the face of globalisation. The artists thrived to create an all-new literature that would not only document the contemporary but would also have its own distinctive voice without imitating the West. The focus of this chapter is not so much on whether it is proper to imagine Indian myths out of their epic frameworks, but on whether they can be re-imagined (and most of the time questioned) in contemporary social matrices through literature (here, Indian drama in English). The period after independence has witnessed a proliferation of dramas which has explored various nuances of social life and individual psyche. Naturally, the techniques and themes dealt by this new batch of artists were variegated owing to the fact that they were now exposed to conditions which were not limited to issues like nationalism and independence. This tendency in 'postcolonial' literature has been aptly described by Dharwadker thus:

...practitioners of the new drama have forged a reactive cultural identity for themselves by disclaiming colonial practices and by seeking to reclaim classical and other precolonial Indian traditions of performance as the only viable media of effective decolonization. (Dharwadker 1)

This was a period of experimentation in dramatic techniques and playwrights started developing their skills with a wide range of social and individual issues that coloured their times. The symbolic technique used by playwrights of the independence period compelled the action to take place more in the mind of the characters than in the actual stage. The plays of Tagore and Kailasam remained mere philosophical expositions that unfortunately failed to reach out to the audience. But the 60s saw a new surge of experimental plays where the function of myths was not confined to mere symbolic expression of the playwright's concerns. Moreover, the

universality of plays written during independence that commonly embraced the ‘anti-British’ or ‘nationalist’ themes got replaced by various other issues that featured independent India. Indian myths were performed in the English plays of this period, with interesting twists and turns. While symbolist method used by playwrights of the earlier two decades got replaced by action-packed, tangible and a comparatively visual form of theatre, drama in India considerably moved its thematic paradigm from wide, nationalistic issues to more complex themes concerning the society, and eventually, it shifted to the individual self in all its complexities. After Tagore and Kailasam, there does not seem to be another noteworthy Indian playwright writing in English to fill the lacuna between the 40s and the 60s. The 1960s saw a potential playwright whose plays were greatly influenced by the changing socio-economic and political face of the country, and these plays in turn influenced the theatre-lovers of that time. He is Asif Currimbhoy whose works like *The Tourist Mecca* (1959), *The Restaurant* (1960), *The Doldrums* (1960), *The Dumb Dancer* (1962), *Goa* (1964), *The Bengal Trilogy* [including *Inquilab* (1970), *The Refugee* (1971) and *Sonar Bangla* (1972)], *Darjeeling Tea* (1971) and *The Miracle Seed* (1973), gave a fresh dose of entertainment to the theatre goers. They were received with a critical viewpoint and ironically, they were performed mostly outside India.

Currimbhoy’s huge body of dramatic works includes one play that experiments with a well known episode from the *Mahabharata*. It is *The Dumb Dancer* that re-enacts the ‘Duryodhana Vadh’¹ episode or the ‘Slaughter of Duryodhana’ where Bhima avenges Draupadi’s disrobement by the two Kaurava brothers, and after slaying Duryodhana, Bhima dips Draupadi’s tresses in his blood. Currimbhoy transforms this scene into a full-fledged psychological thriller revolving around themes of obsession and possessiveness.

Act I Scene I of the play recreates the ambience of a true mythological where the stage is occupied by a character wearing ‘the Man-Lion (Narasimha) make-up— a hair, fearsome figure—to characterize the mythological figure of *Bhima* from the famous ancient epic *Mahabharata* in the traditional dance of *Kathakali* from South India’ (Currimbhoy 11). The music also plays an important role that builds up the atmosphere of the play and it is comprised of ‘drums, cymbals and gongs as used in the battle scene of the play’ (Currimbhoy 11). *The Dumb Dancer* opens with a Kathakali dance recital of the dumb artist, Bhima. The narration of the play oscillates between Bhima’s childhood and the present. Bhima’s obsession with this art form (Kathakali) makes him cut his tongue and offer it to his Guru, who had once unconsciously told him that a person who lacks in one sensory function excels in another, and his other senses become more powerful than those of ordinary individuals. Bhima’s cutting of his own tongue bears faint reverberation of the scene where Ekalavya had cut off his thumb to appease his guru, Dronacharya, and offered it to him as his ‘guru dakshina’.

Bhima’s childhood friend, Shakuntala, understands him and his obsession. There seems to grow a silent intimacy between the two.

Years later, when Prema, a psychiatrist, decides to work as a superintendent of a mental asylum where Bhima is a case study, her colleague (and her, admirer) Dr. Dilip is reluctant. But Prema is too obsessive a psychiatrist to allow Dilip to interfere into her matters:

Dilip: [...] Now that’s what comes out of a being a psychiatrist. You know other people’s mind so well that you forget your own.

[Prema laughs invitingly.]

You laugh like a woman. What are you doing in a uniform?

Prema: I work, doctor.

Dilip: Yes, in a bloody mental asylum.

Prema: Dilip!

Dilip: Why can't you work like any other psychiatrist in some fashionable place or the other instead of being superintendent of a mad-house? (Currimbhoy 17)

Dilip's assessment of Prema as a 'woman' in all its 'conventional' interpretations is what gets flouted in the course of the play. He believes that she works because she fancies so, and she can never be serious of her occupation. But as the play proceeds, one finds the danger of being too over obsessive with one's work. She deliberately arranges a Kathakali performance in the interiors of the same mental asylum, and the dance demands it to be a recreation of the famous scene from the *Mahabharata* of the 'Slaughter of Duryodhana' by Bheema.

Dilip: [...] The Superintendent of a mental asylum takes the trouble to arrange a private Kathakali show in the amphitheatre of a hospital. It doesn't make sense.

Prema explains Dilip that she had arranged the show to introduce him to one of the inmates of the asylum.

Dilip: [...] Bhima? [...] ... yes... Bhima.

[...]

Dilip: Bhima... is that his real name?

Prema: That's what he calls himself.

Dilip: that's the name of the character too...no?... from the *Mahabharata*... the scene... (Currimbhoy 19)

Things become more shrouded in mystery when Prema expresses her desire to have Bhima enact the 'Duryodhana Vadh' episode of the epic with Bhima playing the role of 'Bheema' in the *Mahabharata*. She admits that she had Bhima enact this particular scene to bring him back to his senses as a part of 'shock theory' and Bhima being a schizophrenic:

Prema: This is not the first performance he's given since he was confined. I made earlier... experiments, to see the reactions. It came close, but it was never there. Its intensity... was never close enough... never graphic enough...to make him live through it again. Therefore the shock never registered to bring him back to his conscious level. (Currimbhoy 22—23)

Prema then suggest that perhaps the sight of 'real blood...of real guts being torn out' would 'wake him' to his consciousness (Currimbhoy 23). Dilip explains Prema that whatever she was doing was not safe. But like Bhima, Prema is equally obsessed with her experiments. She decides to re-enact the 'Duryodhana Vadh' scene among the interns of the mental asylum. But no amount of coaxing would convince Prema to stop her dangerous experiments. The twist

occurs only when there is a murder and Bhima is seen caressing the tresses of Prema with real blood. Prema confesses before Dilip, almost in a trance, ‘One of us had to die. And Bhima had already accepted me’ (Currimbhoy 78—80). Prema gradual descent into madness is wonderful brought out in the following conversation between her and Dilip:

Dilip: Prema! Prema! What are you saying? [*He slaps her violently.*] You’re hysterical. You don’t know... your state of mind. [*slaps her again*] Now! Come out of it! What’s the truth? What happened?

[*the slap shocks the edge of sanity back to her momentarily.*]

Prema: [*voice low, shaking appealing, then far away again*] Who is sane, Dilip, and who is not? Remember, I tried, Dilip. Really tried. But it drew me closer instead of further. The vertigo... the vortex... I found myself slipping into the terrifying abyss of darkness... slipping, slipping without being able to hold myself back. (Currimbhoy 80)

Prema persists that she could understand the silence of the dumb Bhima and could ‘lip-read his mind’. Bhima acquired the status of a ‘stalwart God’ who sought Prema’s oblation. Bhima had already identified himself with the mythological Bheema, and Prema found herself drawn towards the character of Draupadi, so that she could stay near her ‘God’. Her attraction slowly had the better of her conscious mind and she eventually identified with the mythological Draupadi. But she understood that her complete identification had was not possible with Shakuntala around (Currimbhoy 81). And the enactment of the ‘Duryodhana Slaughter’ scene required real blood to make it look more convincing.

Prema: [...] Shakuntala interfered. She kept returning... reminding. And all the time I was thinking of what was missing... the blood that had to be warm and flowing... red as the blinding sun. [...] (Currimbhoy 81)

Prema’s identification is complete in the last lines that she articulates in a trance:

[*distant voice*] No... he can’t hear you any more... and neither shall I. we can only hear each other... living in the same world. Listen! He calls out to me again. Listen. Listen. Hush. Let the whispers die... (Currimbhoy 82)

The ‘same world’ here refers to the dark world of the human psyche. It also refers to the subconscious mind that is believed to be a mysterious abode of myths and things which are inaccessible to the human rationale. This play-within-the-play technique adopted by Currimbhoy lays bare the psyche of human minds and tampers with the impulsive actions of one who is thought to be in control of herself, being a psychiatrist. First staged in the mid 60s by La Mama, ‘an off-off-Broadway coffee house experimental theatre in New York, and then by the Cytringen Players at the British Drama League Festival, this play unsettles the patriarchal framework of the original scene in the *Mahabharata* which involved Duryodhana, Dushasana, and their slayer, Bhima. Here, even Bhima is manipulated by a woman. She directs him to be interested in her and she yearns to become ‘his Draupadi’. She knows that as long as Shakuntala is alive, and who has been playing the role of Draupadi since her childhood, she cannot own Bhima. Bhima’s Guru, Dr. Dilip and Bhima himself remain passive before Prema’s manipulation. Towards the end of the play, it becomes difficult to ascertain whether it is Prema or Bhima who is a case under study. Currimbhoy’s other plays remain social commentaries on the aftermath of Indian

independence and urban life. Other than the myths, Currimbhoy's tactful handling of the Kathakali art form and his merging of it with psychoanalytical concepts which are quite modern and off-beat for a Kathakali performance, he has taken this play quite ahead of his time. His 'Preface' to *The Dumb Dancer* reads thus:

Here (La Mama off-off-Broadway theatre), two of my plays were done: *The Dumb Dancer* and *The Hungry Ones*. Somehow the timings and mood fitted it all. A "live" experience in total theatre.

The first play was a spectacular success with crowds in the theatre and long lines standing outside in the bitter winter cold.

There was colour, Kathakali dancing, excitement and screams galore in the suspenseful bloodthirsty play based on the Mahabharata and psychological madness. (Currimbhoy, 'Preface' to *The Dumb Dancer*)

The play was not premiered in English in India and Currimbhoy does not say much about its success story in India when it was translated and produced in Kerala by Dr. K.M. George. Whatever it is, *The Dumb Dancer* remains a successful experiment with Indian myths in the post independence theatre scenario, and its success, perhaps, lies in its adaptation of a real, identifiable performance genre, the Kathakali, and its performer Bali Ram, who performed in both the *The Dumb Dancer* and *The Hungry Ones*. It is not so much the reenactment of the famous scene from the epic but the remodelling of it so as to blur the fine line that separates illusion from reality, sanity from insanity, infatuation from obsession. Phillip B. Zarrilli aptly estimates Currimbhoy's device of using this plot from the epic:

The obsessive/compulsive Prema can be read as both Currimbhoy's [male] fantasy as well as a reflection of the Western/cosmopolitan 1960s counter-cultural view of the allure of 'madness'- a kind of South Asian 'Marat/Sade'. Currimbhoy translates the kathakali play's title *Duryodhana's Slaughter*, emphasizing the killing not as a sacrificial rite linked to traditional notions of kingship and duty central to *ksatriya* identity ... but as a part of a quasi-Jungian reading of the attraction of the bloody 'gore' representing the 'dark side' of our experience and persona to be explored fully in order to understand more deeply one's inner/existential dark side or 'reality'. (Zarrilli 183)

Understanding the limitations of knowledge of an audience who is ignorant of stories from Indian mythology and the history of Indian performance genres, Currimbhoy provides ample information in the form of footnotes on the particular episode from the epic and on the art of Kathakali. The play achieves its highest recognition as a Kathakali dance performance, and with Currimbhoy's efforts, this dance form gets an international stage.

Currimbhoy's play becomes interesting not only for its thematic aspect of having installed a scene from the epic and engaging it in the present-day scenario of the play, but also because of the theatrical innovation that the playwright introduces. The play-within-the-play technique allows the characters to enact the *Mahabharata* episode not in a usual auditorium or any other platform of entertainment. Rather, the scene is enacted in the mental asylum, where on one side of the wing, the play becomes visible to the interns in the mental asylum, and on the broader aspect, it stands in full view to the audience. There are two spectrums of audience watching the play—the larger audience formed by actual spectators of the play and the smaller

audience including the doctors, interns and other characters within the play. The stage division is tactfully done with the help of light:

The light shows that to the right and left of the central line on the stage there are two separate groups of audiences witnessing the dance-play. They are oblivious of each other, as though the line in-between was a dimensional separation of time and space.

Those who are placed on the right are contained in a strange cage-like structure. They scream and howl, and tear at their clothes and hair, in the despair of madness. They are, in fact, mad, and reflect the habitat of the insane, curiously impelling the dancer [Bhima] to their side from time to time.

Those who are quietly seated on the left, seeing the dance, represent the world of the sane. They are well-dressed, and appear politely interested, as though gracing the social occasion of the dance, which has been arranged for them. (Currimbhoy 11-12)

There are apparently two dissimilar settings on the stage— one, a rural setup where the vigorous training sessions of Kathakali take place, and where one sees Bhima's childhood with his companions, his Guru, Shakuntala and the blind singer, Madhu; two, the setup of an asylum with Dr. Dilip, other interns, doctors and insane people, shrieking and howling. Prema becomes a character who has access to both the worlds. By complete identification with Draupadi, Prema not only stupefies Dilip, but she even manipulates the actions of Bhima, her powerful other. This gender subversion takes place at the unconscious level, but it occurs nonetheless. There are times in the play when the two settings merge with each other, or to put it this way, they melt into each other so perfectly that this merging is seldom noticeable. Currimbhoy's choice of a mythological theme allows him to experiment with issues of complex psychology. The alternate scenes of present reality and the lure of myths in the form of narration by Madhu facilitate easy oscillation between the present and an ancient past. The scenes that involve the shrieking and howling people inside the mental asylum and the obsessive dance of Bhima are purely gestural spectacles which indicate Currimbhoy's adoption of the Artaudian technique of theatre of cruelty. Thus, by recreating a scene from a mythological, Currimbhoy succeeds in staging a play that is remembered as a psychological thriller.

Notes:

¹ In Volume VII of Pratap Chandra Roy's *The Mahabharata of Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa*, in the 'Salya Parva' of the *Mahabharata*, the narrator Janamajaya narrates Duryodhana's eventual death in a mace-fight with Bheema: '...That mace, endured with the force of the thunder and hurled by Bhima of terrible feats, fractured the two handsome thighs of Duryodhana. [...] Beholding Duryodhana felled the Earth like a gigantic Saal uprooted (by the tempest), the Pandavas became filled with joy' (Roy 173—174). Bhima (or Vrikodara) recalls Draupadi's disrobement thus: 'They that had dragged Draupadi, while ill, into the assembly, and had disrobed her there, behold those Dhritarashtras slain in battle by the Pandavas through the ascetic penances of Yajnasena's daughter!' (Roy 174) Since, I had to familiarise myself with the 'original story' in the epic, this English translation of Pratap Chandra Roy has been considered.

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