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(Re)presentation of Shoorpanakha and Shakuni in Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni*

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The epics- The Ramayana and The Mahabharata represent the tale from the perspective of the victor and hence his/her story of the vanquisher's side is reformed, moulded, re-told, twisted and thereby misrepresented in these texts. In Thus Spake Spoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni, Poile Sengupta, in a postmodern manner of dealing with myth and history, makes the villains occupy centre stage. As the focaliser changes so does the focal point and ideas of right and wrong. She takes poetic license and makes villains of the two epics meet and as they converse with each other, the politics of/behind representation comes to the forefront of discussion. The paper critically analyses their stand points, queries and counter logic as their 'mini narratives' interrogate grand narratives put forward in these two celebrated epics.

In The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge Jean Francois Lyotard defines the postmodern condition by its "incredulity towards meta narratives" (xxiv). Postmodernism critiques, interrogates and problematises grand narratives as it regards grand narratives as illusory, which are nonetheless backed by those in power of controlling, dissipating and propagating knowledge to erase "difference, opposition and plurality" (Barry 83). In place of meta narratives, postmodernism advocates for a "series of mini narratives, which are provisional, contingent, temporary and relative" (Barry 83). Thus, Postmodernism 'deconstructs' (to use Derrida's term) ideas of History, absolute truth and up held the postmodern view of the same as perspective based.

The Indian epics- The Ramayana and The Mahabharata are still our contemporary. In Mahabharata Now editors Arindam Chakraborti and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay elaborate on the contemporary resonance of the text and are of the opinion that the text can never be relegated as too old and insignificant. On reading the text one can get feelings of déjà vu- "an inescapable feeling that the 'present' s/he inhabits is only a re-play of 'happenings' already recorded; an eerie sensation that most of the ethical dilemmas, the logical puzzles and the unavoidable impasses which baffle the modern man, as well as the mood of irresolution following every resolution that keeps plaguing him/her have already been punctiliously check-listed" (xix).

There are several versions of The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. Many versions of these texts are there in Sanskrit and in regional languages of India. Peter Brooks' film version of The Mahabharata is well known. Again, there are prose re-telling of Indian epics from multiple standpoints such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions, Anand Neelakantan's Asura, Ajaya and Rise of Kali, Kavita Kane's Lanka's Princess. These are some interesting and thought provoking works in this field.

Postcolonial Indian drama has time and again focussed on the epics or popular stories taken from the epics. Girish Karnad's Yayati is one such example. In Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni Poile Sengupta looks at the two Indian epics from the standpoint of the two villains- Shoorpanakha and Shakuni respectively.

The epics- The Ramayana and The Mahabharata represent the tale from the perspective of the victor and hence the his/her story of the vanquisher's side is reformed, moulded, re-told, twisted and thereby misrepresented in the text. Poile Sengupta, in a postmodern manner of dealing with myth and history, makes the villains occupy centre stage. As the focaliser changes so does the focal point and ideas of right and wrong. She takes the poetic license and makes villains of the two epics meet and as they converse with each other, the politics of/behind representation comes to the forefront of discussion.

From our reading of The Ramayana we know Shoorpanakha as Ravana's lustful, ugly sister whose insult initiated the conflict between Rama and Ravana which finally culminated in a battle between the two and was instrumental in bringing about the downfall of Ravana and his mighty Asura clan. Poile Sengupta conceives a meeting between Shoorpanakha and Shakuni, the two villains of the epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata respectively, to present their side of the story.

Shoorpanakha is constructed as a strong, confident and sexually charged woman. She is not ashamed of her sexuality and can also be abusive if verbally insulted. When Shakuni calls her a whore she replies back almost instantly without an iota of shame by calling him a sexually frustrated man. Her choice of words reveals her aggressive nature:

MAN: ...Where did you ply your trade? In the back kichen?

WOMAN: What happened, lover? No sex in the last six hours? (Sengupta,WCS 249)

Unashamed of her sexual desire she introduces herself as an enchantress:

WOMAN: Did you hear? I'm an enchantress

MAN: I heard you... And you enchant whom?

WOMAN: Everybody. Every heterosexual man. Even...even married men. Especially married men.   (Sengupta, WCS 252)

She tells (her) story and points out that Rama too was seduced by her charms:

WOMAN: ... The two brothers, especially the older one, is bowled over. Totally bowled over.

MAN: That's not what I've heard

WOMAN: Were you there?

MAN: Of course not.

WOMAN: Then how do you know what happened?

MAN: And you were there.

WOMAN: It's my story. (Pause) I was her. (Sengupta, WCS 254-255)

To tease her Shakuni asks whether she was Rama's wife. It is almost an insult to her sensibility as she is no timid, docile wife. Angrily she asks, "Do I look like a wife?" (WCS 255) She compares wives with pigeons and crows; either they are soft, cooing and sexually passive or nagging, suspicious and complaining in nature. She is proud to be the other woman:

WOMAN: I am the other woman. Beautiful...sexy...Hot. (Sengupta, WCS 256)

She unbuttons her blouse and tries to seduce Shakuni. Shocked at a woman taking an active lead in a sexual encounter, Shakuni too uses the discourse of morality to come out of the situation. It hurts his manliness to play second fiddle to a woman's sexual advancement and Shoorpanakha points out that similar reason were put forward by Rama:

WOMAN: I'm Kaamavalli... the goddess of desire...Come... I'm all shivery for you... Come.

MAN: Listen. Please...listen. You look like an educated woman...and from...from a respectable family.

WOMAN: I've heard that fucking argument before from that Vishnuavatara.

MAN: I'm sure...its not right for you to...to...

WOMAN: To what?

MAN: You know...to...

WOMAN: To have casual sex with a stranger?

WOMAN: Is that it?

WOMAN: Is that it?

MAN: Yes

WOMAN: Oh god! What a wimp you are...just like that one.

MAN: That one?

WOMAN: I told you... the married one...he had the same fucking scruples...wouldn't let me get near him... (Sengupta, WCS 260)

Shoorpanakha narrates her story of humiliation and assault. Lakshman "chopped off her breasts" (Sengupta, WCS 261) and nose. They wanted to teach her a lesson in morality by making her look ugly and deformed. The horror of sexual violence shocks the

audience/readers of the play. Thus, Poile Sengupta intertwines issues of violence, sexuality and morality in the play.

Shoorpanakha repeatedly points out that she was not the only one charmed at the encounter with a handsome man. Rama too was seduced and entranced at her beauty. "He talked to me as if...as if he needed all those arguments...about respectability and fucking commitment...to keep away from me" (Sengupta, WCS 266). She challenges the moral codes with her frank admission of her desire:

MAN: You lusted for him. You wanted sex with him.

WOMAN: Yes. I did. Is that wrong? (Sengupta, WCS 266)

She does not want to be caged in gender roles and hates classification. She is bold enough to speak her mind, without cushioning her words in the discourse of morality. Her words, "Do you have to classify me? I am a woman, don't you understand? A woman. Not a saint. Not a whore. Not just a mother, a sister, a daughter. I am a woman" (Sengupta, WCS 267) are also directed towards patriarchal society.

Shoorpanakha brings in the important element of racial difference in narrating her tale of abuse. She was an Asura woman and hence structurally, physically very different from the beautiful, fair complexioned petite frame of Sita. She was projected as a demoness owing to her racial difference:

WOMAN: Why do you call her that? A demoness?

MAN: Oh god! Because...Because...

WOMAN: Because she was dark and big. She wasn't the way men like women to be. Fair complexioned. Delicate. Shy...biddable.   (WCS 277)

Shoorpanakha urges audience/readers to re-read The Ramayana keeping in mind the politics behind demonising the vanquished side:

WOMAN: Look at the 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 a demoness. Because she speaks her mind. Because she takes up space.   (WCS 277)

Thus, racial hatred for a sexually charged woman fuelled the abuse. Her abuse leads her to desire for revenge. It is both ill-treatment meted out due to racial prejudice and desire to seek revenge that unites the tale of Shoorpanakha and Shakuni in spite of their difference in race, class, gender, history and background. Shakuni opens up before Shoorpanakha and shares his anger at losing his kingdom of Gandhara, his royal line as Bhishma attacked and plundered the hilly kingdom of Gandhara, captured Sakhuni and his brothers along with his father and forced Gandhari to enter into a matrimonial alliance with the Kuru prince Dhritarasthra. But they were not informed of the blindness of the bridegroom. Powerless to back out from a publicised marriage with a powerful Kuru

prince, Gandhari decided to blindfold herself to remain in darkness, a fate shared by her husband. But this decision made Shakuni all the more hardhearted. Unable to protect her beautiful sister from accepting a life of denial and darkness, he could neither forgive his offenders nor forget the incident. Revenge and destruction of the Kuru clan seemed the only possible avenue left for him. Cunningly, he made the cousins-Kuravas and Pandavas fight with each other, humiliated Draupadi in court and finally engineered the battle of Kurushetra which lead to the destruction of the Kurus.

Together, Shoorpanakha and Shakuni urge the audience/ readers to look at the Indian epics from their perspectives. For them, heroes of the two epics are violators, abusers and plunderers of human rights who showed racial, gender abuse. They question their representation as heroes in these two epics. "And what does history make them out to be? (WCS 278). Answering to the debate that epics are mythical tales and not historical documents, they question the difference between the two as we carry the stories of The Ramayana and The Mahabharata in our "bloodstream" (WCS 278).

It is this intertwining of issues of violence, sexuality, hatred, racial difference and absence of absolute truth in any portrayal/ representation of History and truth that contemporanises the tale of Shoorpanakha and Shakuni and connects it to modern day violence, racial hatred, acts of terrorism or State sponsored violence in the name of suppressing terrorist intentions. Aware of these connections, Poile Sengupta makes the play shift back and forth in time with the same set of characters."Love. Hate. Bomb. All four-letter words" (WCS 279). Thus, the play makes us re-think re-read, re-visit and re-orient both our ideas of mythical past and our immediate present.

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