

Giving Voice to the Voiceless: A Study of Poile Sengupta's "Thus Spake Shoorpankha, So Said Shakuni"

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| Article Detail: | Abstract |
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| <p>Received on: 28 Mar 2025 Revised on: 20 Apr 2025 Accepted on: 25 Apr 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— <i>post-modernist, subvert, rupture, ideals, treachery, grand narratives.</i></p> | <p><i>As a result of monolithic systems and beliefs founded on the ideas and ideals of the grand narratives, the voice of the weak and the marginalized is muffled and stifled both in society as well as its grand narratives. As we know, the post-modernist texts seek to question, subvert, challenge and even rupture the structures, ideals and ideologies established for centuries by grand narratives.</i></p> |

Postmodernist texts seek to question, subvert, challenge and even rupture the structures, ideals and ideologies established for centuries by grand narratives. Lyotard defines postmodernism as "incredulity towards meta narratives" (Habib 115), because they impose a system of monolithic beliefs and systems of cultural domination. Thus, postmodernism is "symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief" (Berry 81). As a result of monolithic systems and beliefs founded on the ideas and ideals of the grand narratives, the voice of the weak and the marginalized is muffled and stifled both in society as well as its grand narratives. The socially and culturally dominant organisations like patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism have consistently and consciously smothered and muted the voice of the "Other". Now, these organisations "no longer command credibility, and lie in ruins" (Habib 115) as the postmodernist texts give "the other a voice." (Thus 115)

And that is exactly what Poile Sengupta's "Thus Spake Shoorpankha, So Said Shakuni" seeks to achieve- *to give voice to the voiceless*. Shoorpankha and Shakuni, the two most despised and hated villains of our canonical texts, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata occupy the centre stage of the play. There are no heroes in the play, there are only villains as heroes whose voices we hear for the first time. Poile Sengupta probes the soul of the victims of a dominant

cultural domination who have become synonyms of evil, betrayal, treachery, lust and villainy. No Hindu would name his son Shakuni and daughter Shoorpankha -so complete has been the cycle of domination of a canonical text.

The Ramayana has played a decisive role in moulding the cultural sensibilities of the people not only of India but also of other parts of the world. Diwali and Dussehra are celebrated all over India with great devotion and dedication to celebrate the return of Rama and beheading of Ravana. Sasvati Sengupta rightly observes that "the tale celebrated elite masculine prowess, desire and goals. The ideals of a *purushottam* man, the bonds of brotherhood and duties of kingdom tutored by Brahmins (48). Whereas the Ramayana celebrates masculine power, it tends to undervalue, or even marginalise the role of females. There are hardly any strong female characters in Ramayana. It excludes the possibility of the full blossoming of a female power. Even Sita is the extension of Ram's personality. She hardly has her own voice. The other female characters that come to the mind of an avid reader of Ramayana are the names of Kaikeyi, Manthara and Shoorpankha all associated with evil, trickery and treachery. One hardly knows the names of all the Queens of Dasrath or even of Laxman's wife who was Sita's sister and sister-in-law. Such is the world of Ramayana peopled with men with masculine power, goals and desires.

It is, therefore, but natural that no woman exists on her own in the Ramayana. The only woman who expressed her hearts' longing for the lotus-eyed Rama meets a violent fate because Shoorpankha is an aggressive female whose sexual proclivities pose a threat to the patrilineal and the patrifocal world. Shoorpankha is a female mover and shaker because she roams the forest on her own "going where she pleases" (Aranyakand 18.2) and doing what she likes. A good woman according to Brahminical cannons, achieves her salvation only through her servitude to her husband. On the other hand, "in the forested world of the epic, where a sage has five apsaras as wives" (Aranyakand 10.16) and the visiting Ikshvaku soldiers have 'every desire gratified [by] troupes of apsaras (Ahodhyakand 85.54), Shoorpankha is damned for her sexual overtures to two men, though "one after the other." (Sengupta 53). Ram rejects her sexual overtures saying that he is married and she should try her luck with his younger brother who is untrammelled with a wife and is as good looking as myself" (Rajgopalachari 138). In this way, Shoorpankha is treated like a shuttlecock by two royal brothers. Ultimately Lakshman chops off her "ears, nose, breasts" (Sengupta 262).

In her postmodernist play, Sengupta takes up Shoorpankha's sexuality and her violent, unfortunate fate to question the received and dominant sense of history and myth. Through Shoorpankha, Poile Sengupta puts before us very unsettling propositions regarding the legitimacy of our canonical text. The playwright transposes the forested world of the Ramayana into the glitzy airport lounge to impart a modern look to her play. Both the characters MAN and WOMAN are modern in their speech, behaviour and attitude. It is really significant to note that MAN and WOMAN have not been given any particular name; they are, in a sense, universal figures. Both these characters move swiftly and with ease between space and time assuming the form and character of Shoorpankha and Shakuni respectively. They raise the most pertinent question of the play: Are we the villains in the real sense of the word or are we the wronged ones? Have we been wronged by the male-centred and male-authored history and myths? Why have we been abused and vilified? Why has nobody listened to our stories?

Shoorpankha is "less a villain than an object of ridicule and contempt, not given the dignity even her villainous brother Ravana was granted in the epic" (Shashi Deshpande, Introduction, Women Centre Stage). The WOMAN is the modern convent educated and fashionable avatar of Shoorpankha. She is a threat to the Brahminical system of values which debunk female sexuality. Manusmriti's censure of female figure whose movements are unrestricted is strong and unequivocal: "She should not have independence" (5.149). The woman openly confesses and

displays her sexuality. She shows her 'free' nature when she describes herself as "beautiful...sexy... (pause)... Hot(Thus 256). She calls herself as "beautiful and sexy" "enchanted" "who specialises in seducing married man" (Thus 252). Shoorpankha, the enchantress, herself gets enchanted on seeing Ram's physical beauty in Panchvati in Dandakvana:

"He was alone, standing at the door of his cottage. He ... how do I describe him? He was the most desirable man I had ever seen and yet it was not his eyes or lips, or his fingers or his wide shoulders that took away... took away the breath in my throat." (Thus 256).

For her, Ram is the "idol of male perfection" (Thus 257) and Shoorpankha madly lusts after him. Ram spurns her lustful offer saying that she should try her luck with Laxman. Both Ram and Laxman tease her playfully. Poile Sengupta echoes the pathetic wail of a scorned woman in the play:

You know what they did to me... the two brothers ...they laughed. Laughed at me. They teased me. Mocked me. The older one said, ask my brother ... he might want you.... the younger one said...I can't marry without my brother's consent ... ask him They tossed me this way and that, as if ... as if I did not deserve any more respect. As if I was a ... a broken plaything. (Thus 261)

When the MAN tries to simplify but Shoorpankha's fascination for Ram as nothing but lust, her rebuke is strong and spontaneous :

MAN: Why don't you tell the truth? You lusted for him. You wanted sex with him. (Thus 266)

Such a strong assertion of female sexuality is anathema to the established norms of the patrilineal and patriarchal system of our society. But she calls herself "Kaamwali...the Goddess of desire" (Thus 260).

Shoorpankha seems to demolish the male centric Hindu scriptures which prominently position a male Kaam Devta as the god of desire. Shoorpankha declares herself to be Kaamvaali i.e. the goddess of desire. She is so consumed by her desire for Ram that she dissolves herself completely in him and there is no separate Shoorpankha. She says :

"But then something strange happened. Has it happened to you? You think of somebody all the time ... all the bloody time ... while you are working ed. eating... travelling... even when you are asleep.... And then it's not just sex anymore. It's ... (Softly.) It's as if I am dissolved in him, his body

outlines mine, his fingertips awaken everything I touch.” (Thus 266).

Love in its purest form is sublime and enriching. Shoorpankha has been reduced to an object of hatred, malice and vilification without understanding her side of the story. Poile Sengupta, for the first time in the literary history of India, probes the psyche of the most vilified character of our religious scriptures to understand her motives and her desires. Love for Ram for Shoorpankha was the most defining moment of her life.

After teasing Shoorpankha, Ram instructs Laxman to teach her a lesson: “Now, tiger among men, mutilate this misshapen slut, this pot-bellied, lustful Rakshasa woman” (Aranyakand 17.20).

Poile Sengupta raises the most pertinent question regarding violence directed against helpless and hapless women. However hard masculine and Brahminical structures of dominance and power may try, there is and can never be any ground of justification or violence against the women whose only crime was to pronounce her sexuality unreservedly. “I wanted love... just a little love... for a little love” (Thus 262). The pathetic wail of a scorned woman finds a powerful echo in “THUS SPAKE SHOORPANKHA, SO SAID SHAKUNI”: “I...love you” (Thus 262). The maiming of Shoorpankha by Laxman “tiger among men,” is the direct result of open declaration of her sexuality which in its purest form, poses threat to objectification and disempowerment of women in our male-centred and male-authored discourses of religion and history. The silencing and marginalisation of women is a recurrent and dominant theme in historical and religious texts. A representative sampling of the way woman has been viewed and represented can be taken from Tulsidas Ramcharitramanas:

At the sight of a handsome man, be her own brother, father or son, O Garuda, a woman gets excited and cannot restrain her passion. (16.3)

Much against the representation of woman as merely a sexual object is Shoorpankha’s representation of her love which, according to her, is purely of romantic, sublime and ennobling nature: “I would hold him in my arms in the darting sunlight, in the light of the moon and the stars and I would kiss those feet that held all the sunsets of the universe” (Thus 257).

Love is just not for sex for her. Poile Sengupta pertinently questions the normative Brahminical texts which punish direct violence against a woman for her audacity to love. Woman has been caged by our religious scriptures since ages. She has been assigned the well-defined roles of a sister, wife or mother. She has no freedom to define herself in our patriarchal society. Shoorpankha emerges as a fierce

feminist when she demolishes the ‘given’ roles of women by our closed society:” Oh, fuck you,... I’m a woman” (Thus 267). Why Shoorpankha has not been seen as a strong womanist in critical studies remains the most moot point.

Poile Sengupta ruptures the halo and challenges the ideologies of our grand narratives namely Ramayana and Mahabharata. Shoorpankha is not a villain, but a fiercely independent character who defines her own course and personality. For her, Ramayana is not a sacred and hallowed religious scripture. It is simply a romantic novel with the traditional hero, heroine and a villain. She calls it a Mills and Boon novel:

WOMAN: Of course I have. I went to a convent school. Oh, the Ramayana... I just love the Ramayana, don't you? It's so (Pause.) cute... so romantic (Thus 253)

For her, Ram and Laxman are not ideal characters. She holds them responsible for unleashing unspeakable violence against a “defenceless woman” (Thus 278) she calls them conspirators and violators of human rights. (Thus 278).

CONCLUSION

Thus, by giving voice to the voiceless vamp of the Ramayana, one of the central texts of Indian culture and religion, Poile Sengupta ruptures the hegemonic power structures associated with and promoted by the grand narrative. Shoorpankha emerges as a wronged woman rather than a vamp. It is through this process of mythopoetic process that old myths are re-interpreted, re-imagined and revitalised and therein lies the literary significance and value of “Thus Spake Shoorpankha, So Said Shakuni”.

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