

## RE-READING HINDU EPICS: A STUDY OF POILE SENGUPTA'S PLAY "THUS SPAKE SHOORPANAKHA, SO SAID SHAKUNI"

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper is an analysis of Poile Sengupta's play "Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni" which nuancedly examines Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata from the perspectives of gender and power dynamics. Indian epics, mythology and literature are replete with cultural and gendered narratives that reinforce power dynamics. The study explores how power and patriarchy affect narratives and socio-cultural norms. To prove this, the paper further adopts a multidisciplinary approach to analyze texts in the light of feministic strand, power hegemony, theoretical and mythological interpretations of two iconic characters namely Shoorpanakha and Shakuni. The paper explores the retelling of Indian epic Ramayana from the perspective of a subsidiary character, Shoorpanakha and studies Mahabharata from another marginalized character, Shakuni's perspective. The character of Shoorpanakha also stands as a symbol of contemporary woman who is strong enough to speak up her mind, stay single and can manifest her desires for male companionship without any pretended modesty as expected from an Indian woman. There are two unnamed characters in the play who eventually become Shakuni and Shoorpanakha because of their own tragic stories of contemporary times. Thus, the play is a story of marginalized people whose stories we have not heard in our history and mythology. We have categorized some characters as bad, some as good. Now it's high time to revisit our myths to grow as a civilized society. Sengupta through this play tries to break the stereotype and deconstruct their reputation that is based on prior assumptions.

**Keywords:** mythology, hegemony, patriarchy, marginalized

### INTRODUCTION

The paper delves into the retelling of the Indian epic Ramayana from the perspective of a subsidiary character, Shoorpanakha, and examines the Mahabharata from another marginalized character, Shakuni's viewpoint. Shoorpanakha's character also symbolizes the contemporary woman, who possesses the strength to voice her opinions, remain single, and express her desires for male companionship without feigned modesty, as societal norms expect of women. Such women pose a threat to patriarchal structures. She declares, "I'm kaamvalli... the goddess of desire..." (Sengupta 260). In the play, two unnamed characters eventually embody Shakuni and Shoorpanakha. It narrates the stories of subaltern individuals whose tales have been overlooked in our history and mythology. We have traditionally categorized characters as either good or bad. Now is the high time to reevaluate our myths and the incorporation of these moral binaries. It is imperative for us to evolve as a civilized society.

Sengupta endeavors to dismantle stereotypes and challenge preconceived notions that shape their reputation.

Poile Sengupta, the dramatist, situates women at the forefront of the stage in her plays. The current play “Thus Spake Shoorpankha, So Said Shakuni” offers a nuanced exploration of Indian epics from the perspectives of power dynamics and gender. Indian epics, mythology, and literature abound with cultural and gendered narratives that perpetuate power imbalances. This study delves into how power and patriarchy influence narratives and socio-cultural norms. To substantiate this argument, the study takes a multidisciplinary approach, analyzing texts through the lenses of feminist theory, power hegemony, and theoretical and mythological interpretations of two iconic characters Shoorpankha and Shakuni.

Poile Sengupta, in the play, embodies two characters from the great Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, bringing them together to voice their respective parts of the story. Both converge at an Indian airport to narrate their tales from their individual perspectives. She assigns the roles of two characters, Man and Woman, who serve as the mouthpieces for epic characters Shakuni and Shoorpanakha. In their narratives, they both emerge as victims. This marks the first instance in the history of Indian drama where these two villains from our great epics share the stage. The play features only two characters, Man and Woman, who, disguised as mythical figures, intermittently journey back to mythology before returning to the present day to intertwine their stories with those of Shakuni and Shoorpanakha. Shashi Deshpande, in her introduction to *Women Centre Stage* states;

The myths have been upturned very casually, with no attempt at solemnity, yet very effectively. And both these villains show us another side of themselves, without shedding their murky pasts. They are victims as well as vengeance seekers. And while seeming to replay the roles allotted to them by history, they struggle to redeem themselves and do so in the end. (xiii)

In our religious and mythological stories, Shoorpanakha, the sister of Ravana from the Asura clan, is often depicted as a grotesque figure who instigates her brother to take revenge on Rama. Shakuni in Mahabharata, the uncle of the Kauravas, becomes the chief reason for the war between brothers. These two characters are forgotten and marginalized. The play retells the epics from their point of view, portraying them in a tragic rather than evil light, aiming for audience sympathy. The play challenges the marginalization of certain groups or classes, which persists even today, and reinterprets epic characters from their perspective. The playwright questions whether they should be seen as tragic rather than evil and highlights the injustice against those outside the norm.

The woman enters carrying a bulging handbag and a glossy magazine from the stage props. She takes one of the two available chairs and places her handbag on the other. Pretending to be absorbed in the magazine, although unable to read it, she occupies herself. Another character, a man with a stern expression, enters and requests the woman to move her bag from the chair so he can sit. He appears preoccupied with his briefcase, keeping it closed. He displays irritability and rudeness towards the woman. The looming threat of bombings and terrorist attacks intensifies as the story progresses. Despite the woman's attempts to engage him, he remains reluctant. The setting is filled with highly inflammable individuals awaiting delayed flights, heightening the tension.

Shoorpanakha epitomizes a woman who is sexually demanding. She is the one who initiates sexual advances toward Ram, who is a stranger to her. She is a demoness who changes her form to lure a man. Thus, her conduct is not acceptable in a society that views such women as immoral or bad. Shoorpanakha was the youngest daughter of Vishrava and Kaikesi. She introduces herself in her untold tale:

I am Shoorpanakha. My name is synonymous with Sin for many, encased for eternity in the pages of the epic Ramayana. I am not the role model parents would point their daughters towards. Why is that? You may ask. Because I admitted to lust. My name is pitted against Sita, the embodiment of purity and womanly virtues. She was everything I was not. (Drishna Kalita, *The Untold Tale of Shoorpanakha*)

Indian epics and legends glorify the Aryans, portraying them as a superior race that conquered regions inhabited by dark-skinned aboriginals. The aboriginals were often regarded as barbaric or negative for civilized society. Shoorpanakha faces double marginalization, first for belonging to the demonical race, and second for being a woman who openly communicates her desires, deemed obscene. The dramatist contrasts Sita with Shoorpanakha, portraying Sita as the epitome of a perfect woman who is humble, decent, and the embodiment of womanhood. Shoorpanakha, on the other hand, is depicted as the opposite, with an expressive nature.

Though Shoorpanakha belongs to the Asura's clan, she has human feelings within her. Her love for Rama and her compassion towards him prevent her from harming him and his brother. However, Lakshman's unwarranted attack on her is entirely unjustified and immoral. This illustrates how power defines and justifies individuals' roles in society, akin to how patriarchal societies prescribe and confine women's roles. The assault on a woman's body by a man is legitimized by male hegemony and societal power structures. Therefore, Lakshmana's act of disfiguring her nose is not perceived as sinful or wrong, as it is supported by social and religious norms. Despite this, Shoorpanakha's expression of love is deemed sinful.

Man and Woman transform into Shakuni and Shoorpanakha before the audience, with Shoorpanakha recounting the violence inflicted upon her by the two brothers, illustrating her plight and the brutality she endured. Woman: "You know what he did?... chopped off my breasts" (Thus Spake 261). She explains the pathetic wail of a scorned woman and then the extreme violence faced by an unarmed woman. Shoorpanakha does it for love and asks them for love, but she suffers a lot for it. She remarks that they cut "Whatever stood out from me. Whatever stuck out" (Thus Spake 262). She was bleeding and was in pain, she pathetically questions herself and the two men, "Was it so wrong to tell a man I love you?" (Thus Spake 262). Her feeling of love changes into a feeling of revenge when they inflict so much violence on her.

Gandhar, primarily known as Kandhar and situated in Afghanistan, is featured in Devdutt Pattanaik's book *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, which provides background on Shakuni's quest for vengeance. His sister Gandhari is considered a manglik, and according to Hindu beliefs, a manglik cannot marry a non-manglik. To mitigate the ill effects of this, she initially marries a goat, which is later sacrificed when Dhritarashtra discovers her first marriage. This revelation angers him greatly, leading to the imprisonment of Gandhari's family members. Dhritarashtra punishes them by starving them, providing only

a handful of rice. In desperation, they decide to sacrifice their own food for Shakuni's survival. This hidden tale of Shakuni turns the heroes of the epic into villains.

Shakuni was one of the mysterious, ambiguous and integral parts of the Mahabharata. He was the one who plotted the great war of Mahabharata. He was the Prince of Gandhara, brother to Gandhari, and uncle of the Kauravas. Primarily depicted as a deceitful and evil character, in reality, he was an impeccable genius. She was smitten by Rama and made the first sexual advancement. She is a demoness who changes her form to lure a man. She is sexually demanding, and a man cuts her nose and chops her breast. She deserves a story of her own.

Man identifies himself as Shakuni proclaims, "I am an illusionist. Like you" (Thus Spake 263). As the youngest Gandhar prince and the sole survivor after Gandhari's marriage, he resolved to take revenge on the Kurus but pretended to be their friend. He orchestrated the Kurus' demise by the hands of the Pandavas in the great war of Mahabharata. However, the story's focus shifts from Shakuni to the Kuru Kingdom and its destruction. Shakuni's role remains unknown, neglected, and marginalized, as expressed by Man's sentiment: "Shakuni had not been given his due" (Thus Spake 276).

The playwright empathizes with these characters in her narrative, while also conveying the notion that a vengeful mindset remains unchanged. They are resolute in their intent to cause widespread destruction through a bomb explosion at the airport. Although whether the bomb is detonated or not, remains uncertain. The playwright leaves the play's ending to the audience. The play is without conclusion and has an open and ambiguous ending. It delves into two significant postmodern issues concerning power dynamics and hegemony between genders, as well as between social classes, challenging their traditional representations dictated by the wielders of power. The placing of these characters at the forefront reveals a reversal of roles, where the heroes of epics become the villains and vice versa. By bringing these characters together characters from the past, the play highlights the enduring injustice they face in the modern world. Their voices have long been suppressed, as history and literature have predominantly been written from the perspective of the dominant class. They lack a platform to express themselves; they are often misrepresented and vilified by writers from the dominant class. The character of Shoorpanakha symbolizes any woman seeking genuine love but encountering neglect and mistreatment. Similarly, the character of Shakuni represents the common man yearning for a peaceful existence, only to face tragedy and misery at the hands of those who are in power. Thus, the trauma experienced by both characters persists from ancient times to the present, with revenge and violence becoming their sole means of expressing long-suppressed anger. They are portrayed as being "more sinned against than sinning".

The play conveys the message that truth and reality are merely illusions, as per Baudrillard's perspective, with history concealing partial truths, much like the modern world. It emphasizes that responsibility for each other's actions extends beyond just the powerful class, as "We are responsible for each other's crimes" (Thus Spake 280). Despite being conventionally represented as the antagonist of the epic, Shoorpanakha questions the manipulative strategies of society, where a woman is often seen only in connection with a man. She rejects the authority of both her brother Ravana and her love interest Rama, disrupting the traditional

notion of male supremacy. Sengupta, in this play, attempts to deconstruct the unquestioned heroism and virtuousness attributed to male characters. Our epics and mythology mostly celebrate males, focusing solely on their goodness. The characters like Rama and Yudhishtira embody excessive goodness and all human virtues. The play delves into power dynamics and their consequences, highlighting how this power-based superstructure limits women and marginalized voices, resulting in inequality and reinforcing stereotypes in society. Shoorpanakha's and Shakuni's experiences, along with the perspectives of the Man and Woman, depict an ever-existing power imbalance and demand reforms to create a more inclusive and equitable society.

The playwright evokes audience sympathy to rethink traditional narrative and women stereotypes and expectations from women. In the traditional narratives of the Ramayana, Shoorpanakha is portrayed as a villainous and revengeful character, a temptress solely driven by her lust for Rama. However, Sengupta's keen observation and analysis of her desires and motives behind her actions make her a relatable and normal character. She is represented as a multidimensional character with human desires and actions, illustrating its universality. The play emphasizes that mythology and history are superficially misinterpreted by those in power, who then dominate the narrative. To pursue his ambition, Shakuni exerts emotional manipulation to achieve his goals, exploits the insecurities and vulnerabilities of others; his agenda is the key to preying on them. This emotional manipulation is also frequently directed towards women. Thus, the play examines the impact of manipulative patriarchy and power in shaping society and history further.

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