POILE SENGUPTA’S THUS SPAKE SHOORPANAKHA, SO SAID SHAKUNI AS A POSTMODERN TEXT

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INTRODUCTION:

LITERARY CRITICISM AS SUCH PERHAPS BE CALLED THE ART OF RE-READING.

__Barbara Johnson

By mid-fifties the modernist tendency in literature has run its course, as it were. Modernism in the hands of Eliot, Joyce, Faulkner and their imitators had practically turned the pursuit of literature into a ‘criticism industry’ for the enlightened academics. With Modernist text like The Wasteland or Ulysses, with its invitation to enormous textual exegesis and New Criticism, for all its rejection of biographical and historical criticism, literature and criticism were increasingly becoming something especially meant for academic consumption and it intended to entertain less. Hence is the postwar artist’s frustration with regard to Modernist art. The passing away of Modernism was mourned / celebrated by W.B. Yeats in 1919 in the following lines.

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world…
The best lack all convictions, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Leslie Fiedler (1982) would be a good representative who first coined the term Postmodernism. And his essay Cross the border – Close that Gap: Post modernism is still a good introduction to the subject. Edward Arnold (1992) argues that Modernism and Postmodernism give great prominence to fragmentation as a feature of 20th century art. The modernist laments fragmentation while the Postmodernist celebrates it. The current use of the term Postmodernism was used in 1930’s by Jean Francois Lyotard in his essay the Postmodern condition: A Report on Knowledge. Lyotard’s essay ‘What is Postmodernism?’ (1982) breaks the meta-narratives that purport to explain and reassure are really illusions, fostered in order to smother difference, opposition and plurality. Derridian Deconstruction, Lacanian Psychoanalytical Criticism and the Feminist Literary Criticism of the 1960s and later are the Postmodern support of Lyotardian petite-narratives.

Decline of faith in the key-stone ideals and ideas of the Enlightenment like liberty, truth, subjectivity, humanity, progress etc are the Postmodern out look which completely believes in fragmentation and plurality. Gyno-criticism and Gyno literature along with the minority and subaltern voices became an important postmodern phenomenon. Not only do the postmodern texts vary in form and content but postmodern outlook gives a new meaning and interpretation to the old and established renowned epics and texts.
Poile Sengupta was born in 1948 as Ambika Gopalakrishnan. She is one of the foremost Indian writers in English especially well known as a playwright and writer for children. In addition, Poile has been an accomplished actor on stage and in film (The Outhouse). She is the founder of Theatre Club, a Bangalore-based amateur theatre group. *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* (2001) is one of the six plays included in her book *Women Centre Stag: The Dramatist and the Play* (2010) in which, Poile Sengupta brings in the two villains from the two great Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata together at one platform in the modern world. Shakuni from Mahabharata, hated even today as the man who fanned the conflict and later led to war between Kauravas and Pandavas and Shoorpanakha from Ramayana, a villain who is more seen with ridicule and contempt because of which Sita was stolen by Ravana, Shoorpanakha’s brother and there by led to the war between Rama and Ravana, meet in the modern age in an airport at the waiting lounge. The entire play is set in the airport, within the context of delayed flight and the threat of terrorism. During their talk with each other, another angle of their personality is brought out while also justifying their actions and blaming the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of their respective characters in the epics and by the people later. Infact both are victims and vengeance seekers and through out the play the theme of vengeance runs in both of them.

From the dramatic technique point of view, the play is highly innovative, for, the stage has the centre stage with two chairs, which is the acting area and the down stage with the left and the right two clearly defined areas. The down stage is in the full view of the audience, each of which holds the props and costumes needed for the action. What is more interesting is that it also has a make-up kit and a mirror so that make-up is done to the artists either by the make-up artistes or by the actors themselves on the stage itself. The director is also free to place chairs behind the acting area on the centre stage to simulate the airport waiting lounge and what ever happens behind, the actors are not to be disturbed. The very stage craft of the play is novel and postmodern in its approach, with the touch of the Brechtian model of Epic Theatre.

There are two characters in the play, the WOMAN and the MAN. They are not named and are dressed in contemporary travelling clothes. This is how the characters are universalized and belong to the past, present and of all times. The WOMAN has a bulging hand bag and a glossy magazine, while the MAN has a heavy brief case picked up from among the props down stage. The WOMAN sits very comfortably in the chair seriously examining the cover of the fashion magazine. From her appearance, her eagerness to hide her spectacles and the way she tries to read the magazine from up side down, it is clear that she does not know to read and write. The MAN tries to sit by her side and looks as if serious and dislikes every thing around him. The very erotic and feministic talk of the WOMAN makes him even more irritated. The language of the play is contemporary and postmodern and the idea of the occurrence of a bomb in the vicinity is floated in the beginning of the play by the WOMAN.

**WOMAN:** You know these people who’ve got late for the flight and they call and tell the airport that there is a bomb on the plane. And of course everybody knows it’s a hoax but you can’t take a chance, can you? You have to search the aircraft and everybody waiting. (248)
Both these characters strongly feel that they have been wrongly interpreted by history and they are made villainous by unfolding partial truths related to them. Both feel that they are innocent and they played an important role in the respective epics but are not given due importance in the epics; on the contrary they are portrayed as vicious, villainous and neglected. Both the characters are with anger and vengeance to undo the injustice by history and prove their innocence. The MAN and the WOMAN feel that even in the contemporary era they are similarly exploited and neglected and hence find a parallel to the epic characters of Shakuni and Shoorpanakha. In fact, the MAN carries a bomb in order to take revenge. They come down to the down stage and pickup from the props so as to make them look like the epic figures. This type of stage craft, transformation of characters on the stage where the characters move continuously from present to the past and vice-versa reminds the audience of Salman Rushdie’s magic realism. Like Rabindranath Tagore (as in Chitra) and Girish Karnad (as in Yayati) mythology is perfectly blended with the contemporary situation. The play rather is a retelling of the epics in a contemporary situation with the help of two characters who are the icons of the two minor but villainous characters from the respective epics, who move continuously between the past and present. This very idea is postmodern in its origin.

The WOMAN first divulges her identity as Shoorpanakha with the words ‘It’s my story. (Pause.) I was her. (255). She narrates the incident that was responsible for the Epic to commence. While Rama, Sita and Lakhshmana were in the forest, it is Shoorpanakha who expresses her love and sexual desire for Rama first and then to Lakshmana, but both the brothers refuse her.

WOMAN: 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 were a broken plaything. (261)

The ridicule of the two brothers and the chopping off her nose, ears and breasts raged Shoorpanakha who says that ‘I wanted love…just a little love…for a little while.’(262). Her brother Ravana was filled with anger and went to take revenge for her sake, but soon ‘fell in love with Sita and took her away to his palace’ (269) and as a result the epic turned around the triangle of Rama, Sita and Ravana and finally ended with the death of Ravana. In this entire epic, Shoorpanakha remains as a villain and she feels that the epic/history did not give her justice and so she wants to take revenge.

WOMAN: What was Shoorpanakha’s crime? That she approached a man with sexual desire?

Shoorpanakha merely wanted love. (277)

They assaulted a defenseless woman. (278)
Since then Shoorpanakha wanted revenge on history and on people; she also wanted a justified place to be given to her. The MAN joins the WOMAN and says, ‘I wanted revenge too. Hot…bloody…fanged revenge.’ (262). The MAN identifies himself with Shakuni, the villainous character from Mahabharata and announces, ‘I am an illusionist. Like you.’ (263) Long before Drutarashtra married Shakuni’s sister Gandhari, the Kuru soldiers defeated the Gandhara princes, of whom Shakuni was the youngest. The Kurus imprisoned the Gandhara princes and fed them all with a handful of grains. The brothers fed their youngest brother, Shakuni with all the grains and they died one after another in front of him. Shakuni was filled with revenge for the Kurus, but when he was released, he was very surprised to see the blind Kuru prince, Drutharashtra getting married to his own sister, Gandhari, who willingly blinded herself for the sake of husband, by wearing ‘a dark, thick, bloody bandage over her eyes’ (265). As Shakuni was destined to take revenge on the Kuru clan, he accompanied his sister to Hastinapur and pretended to be a friend of the Kurus.

MAN: When you want revenge, you should be completely focussed…every part of you must plan the revenge. (269)

: I pretended I was the friend of the Kurus…that I was on their side. (269)

: But when plotting revenge, nothing else is important…not my nephews…not me…Finally…not even my sister…I wanted to turn everything to dust. Dust and ashes. (269)

To play the game of chance, i.e., the game of dice with Pandavas was also according to the plan of Shakuni. Shakuni played on behalf of the Kurus and he doctored the dice as the dice was made of his brothers’ bones, naturally the Kurus won and the Pandavas were easily defeated. Shakuni started the war and got the Pandava brothers to kill all the Kurus.

MAN: It was all part of my plan anyway. The five brothers and the wife were exiled for thirteen years and they left city as the crowds wailed… But I did not let my bloody nephews forget their hate. I coaxedit their hatred…fed it…I inflamed it and finally there was war. (271)

WOMAN: I started a war too. But it was not fought for my sake. (271)

MAN: I felt that Shakuni hadn’t been given his due……

…I realised that he was a victim. (276)

WOMAN: Like Shoorpanakha.

The revenge motto brings both the characters together. While the WOMAN feels that Shoorpanakha merely wanted love and she was not only disappointed but neglected by history, the MAN feels that the second epic was only because of the Aryan greed, their striking race superiority and their arrogance like a blood thirsty sword where Shakuni played an important role but not given due place in history.
The MAN and the WOMAN in modern times also are the sufferers still. The WOMAN still doesn’t get true love for which she has been searching for centuries. The MAN’s land, in the modern times, has been torn apart and his brother has been taken away by branding him to be an informer and killed him later. His thirteen year old sister has also been kidnapped, raped and killed. Hence the MAN decides to take revenge by exploding the bomb at the airport.

WOMAN: Love. Hate. Bomb. All four-letter words. (279)

Sengupta has finely blended the modern terrorism with the old revenge. By making the marginal characters of the epic to be the important and emphasizing, Sengupta brings out the central place for the subalterns. The dramatist has finely fused the past and the present; the illusion of the modern characters with the epic characters; the marginal and the minor characters of Shoorpanakha from Ramayana and Shakuni from Mahabharata to dominate the entire drama where both are filled with the feeling of injustice not only in the respective epics but in the recent times; and their revenge to be exercised in the world with bomb blasting is the postmodern way of looking at the epics. The skillful handling of the plot, merging of the two epics, the domination of the plot by the minor characters of the epics, the blending of reality of the modern times with the illusion of the past, the continuous movement of the characters between present and past and the modern use of the language by the characters adds to the stunning effect of the play. The play abandons the nostalgia of the epics for the ‘one and all’ and realizes the intervention at the micro and local level in the Lyotardian sense. Both the characters are consumable, in which the medium becomes the message, and truth is just another illusion in a Baudrillardian dictum. If the postmodern age is full of simulations and the ‘loss of the real’, the text represents a typical postmodern condition.

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