

## **Shoorpanakha, a New Woman of Substance: A Postmodern Study of Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni***

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### **Abstract:**

Taking control over women has long been an accepted notion in the everyday society. This paper studies the reworking of Ramayana by Poile Sengupta into a play entitled *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* as an address to contemporary feminist issues. *Shoorpanakha* represents that multitude of women who are sufficiently strong to stay single and announce their desire for male companionship without taking more time to fake modesty. Such women threaten the male world thus they are portrayed as hazardous rakshasis, who should be controlled/contained/rebuffed before they can disturb the patriarchal set-up. This paper investigates the imperceptible, assimilated, miniature level capillaries of patriarchal power that have been smothering women in the cultural space since the ancient age.

**Keywords:** postmodernism, feminine, narratology, gynocentrism, performative, mythology

In collecting the performative discourse of gynocentric drama, the introduction of women, violence and delirium juxtaposingly through the interpretation of semiotic signs draws insightful consideration due to its certifiable way to uncover the textual implications and its socio-political issues of portrayal. From a semiological perspective, the interplay of women, violence and insanity creates a sort of semiotic femaleness to foresee the women's activist course of cultural politics embedded in the stories of women-centric drama. Women, viciousness and hysteria as individual sensational components attempt to build a semiotic consistency for investigating the performative worth of women as a semiotic sign. If one endeavours to investigate woman as meaningful philosophy, brutality as her concealment, delirium as the sensational eruption of her prolonged curbed voice inside a solitary edge, then one can get a connection behind diving out the feminist theatrical aesthetics of semiotics. This relational presentation technique of female dramaturgy follows interlink with the trio while examining the female body and sexual politics regarding dramatic language. Thus, by organizing these heterogeneous dramatic components together, one can see the texts of women's theatre as a network of meanings.

While talking about the presence of women, a show of violence and agitation as semiotic objects of execution, then staging of sensitization through female artist's physical traits alongside her mimetic and performative power itself transforms into a whole arrangement of signs because of its dynamism. Women driven plays look forward to putting this closely resembling women, brutality and hysteria in front of spectators to unravel the social space of women in the cultural domain. The body and voice of the actor being the crucial dramatic symbol should have the capacity to convey some social gests for sensitizing social reaction against the monstrosity experienced by women. In this regard, Indian women's dramaturgy endeavours to depict how the victimized female characters brought about by

violence and resulting brutality, are introduced as semiotic signs under the wrapping of clothing and make-up.

The post-Independence Indian drama is to a great extent concerned about the issues of the subjugated and marginalized class of people who battle to combat the domineering supremacies of the ruling class. The dramatists of this period have investigated contemporary social subjects like a familial clash, individual difficulties and complex human relationships in their artistic works. Over the last thirty years of the twentieth century, complex gender issues, aggressive behaviour at home, the quandary of women and sexual abuse of children are examined by numerous writers across the globe. Dramatists and directors, for example, Vijay Tendulkar, BadalSircar, GirishKarnad, Mahesh Elkunchwar, HabibTanvir and Mohan Rakesh have reverberated through their plays the lopsided sharing of power politics and freedom between the sexes. Another type of theatre-'street theatre' began to acquire strength in the mid-1970s in India and was revolutionary in approach; it explored different avenues regarding the contemporary consuming social issues of the country. A group of Delhi extremist theatre beginners under the initiative of SafdarHashmi framed Jana NatyaManch otherwise called 'Janam' in 1973. In 1979 'Janam' played out a fomentation promulgation road play *Aurat* which reported issues like gender discrimination, dowry harassment and domestic violence.

The plays written in English during the last thirty years of the twentieth century by women dramatists like Dina Mehta, Manjula Padmanabhan, Mallika Sarabhai, Tripurari Sharma and Poile Sengupta look to survey the men-centric power by testing phallogocentrism of the contemporary Indian literary and artistic works. Moreover, they make their very own dramatic phrase by creating a new sort of story within the framework of theatre. Helen Keyssar in her book *Feminist Theatre and Theory* (1996) states that Indian women's drama in the late twentieth century presents "productions and scripts characterized by the consciousness of women as women... and the creation of women characters in the 'subject position'" (9). Women's theatre in India has advanced to empower the investigation of undiscovered accounts of women and their lives which are set apart by viciousness, discontinuities, fragments, haphazardness and shocks. Among the women dramatists writing in English, Dina Mehta, Uma Parmeshwaran, Poile Sengupta and Manjula Padmanabhan, specifically, address complex layers of violence against women in their works. Dina Mehta in *Brides Are Not for Burning* (1979) and *Getting Away with Murder* (1989), Manjula Padmanabhan in *Lights Out* (1984), *Harvest* (1996) and *Hidden Fires* (2002), and Poile Sengupta in *Mangalam* (1993) manage issues of violence at home, bride-burning, exploitation of women's sexuality, molestation and exploitation of girl-child. Women face brutality and embarrassment in numerous aspects of their regular routines. Brutality is by and large considered a physical act and people frequently neglect to perceive that it can likewise be psychological and emotional. The modes of violence against women are complicated and varied and they leave profound, unsalvageable effects on women's minds and cannot be overcome easily. C. S. Lakshmi in her introductory essay "And Kannagi Plucked Out a Breast" to *Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival* (2000) explains the miserable truth of controlling a woman's body and violence incurred in our society:

The notion of controlling the female body, shaping, re-forming and rerouting its work, movement and space, is a constant and persistent one. It is so deeply ingrained that certain forms of violence, such as beating, are considered a natural part of a woman's life. Imposition of control over the female body through various forms, including violence, is such an accepted notion that it becomes a part of everyday life. (vii-viii)

Lakshmi here discusses the violence on the female body and its pathetic consequences: “The violence in a woman’s life often has no outward signs, like a gash on the body or a bullet in its crevices. It can seem bloodless, often... In whichever way it enters a woman’s life, it remains a collective memory of experiences, where we are both participants and viewers” (xiii).

It cannot be denied that women have been presented and expected to be in stereotypical male-centric jobs which build up female enslavement and subjugation. Attack on the body and psyche of women is taken as normal; consequently, the brutality forced on women turns out to be a part of the language and lifestyle of a culture. Theatre has been a democratic medium to establish a collaboration of opposition and activism and it permits its illustrative mode to epitomize issues like gender violence with fervour and intensity. It has been utilized to move the cultural production of the feminine gender and thus to make an alternative canon of female dramatists. It has been a mode for appropriating the conventional social portrayal of women for a space for the opposition. Elaine Aston in “Finding a Tradition: Feminism and Theatre History” shows how “theatrical conventions... can be regarded as allies in the project of suppressing actual women and replacing them with the masks of patriarchal production” (36). Female writers, in a similar dramatic system, face the test of rethinking the dramatic shows previously organized in the male-centric ideology.

Poile Sengupta, born Ambika Gopalakrishnan is one of the foremost Indian authors in English particularly notable as a dramatist and author of children's writings. She has been a refined actor in drama and Indian films. She is the founder of the Theatre Club, a Bangalore based theatre group. She has composed sections for kids in the renowned daily English newspaper *Deccan Herald*, *The Times of India* and *Midday*. Her first full-length play, *Mangalam*, won the honour for the most socially relevant theme in the Hindu-Madras Players play scripts contest in 1993 and was subsequently published in *Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival* (2000). Exceptional notice was made of *Keats Was a Tuber* at the 1996 British Council International New Playwriting Competition. Sengupta got a senior fellowship from the Department of Culture, Government of India in 1999-2000 for composing plays for children. Her plays are set in Indian contexts and include *Inner Laws* (1994), *A Pretty Business* (1995), *Collages* (1998), *Samara's Song* (1999), *Alipha* (2001) and *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* (2001).

*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* is an ambitious play that appeared in the collection *Women Center Stage: The Dramatist and the Play* (2010). It treats characters from two distinct legends, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in a contemporary scenario. The play evokes compassion toward the 'demons' of the epics that are here humanises in depth and detail. The play explores the injustices done to these characters. The two characters from various stories meet as travellers at an airport and are named Man and Woman. By making the peripheral characters of the epic to be significant, Sengupta draws out the focal spot for subalterns. The playwright has finely intertwined 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 overwhelm the whole play where both are loaded up with the feeling of treachery not only in the individual sagas but in the new times as well. The skilful treatment of the plot, the converging of the two legends, the domination of the plot by the minor characters of the epic, the blending of the truth of the modern times with the deception of the past, the unending movement of the characters between the past and the present with the modern age utilization of the language by the characters add to the stunning impact of the play. The play abandons the sentimentality of the legends for 'the one and all' and understands the mediation at the miniature and local in the

Lyotardian sense. Both the characters are consumable, in which the medium turns into the message, and the truth is simply one more deception in a Baudrillardian decree.

Poile Sengupta's plays are largely distinctive, yet one can observe the overall concern for women's issues - in family, society, political frameworks and culture-that illuminates her plays. Women like Shoorpanakha are frequently displayed to undermine the male world, so they are portrayed as perilous *rakshashis* who should be controlled, contained or rebuffed before they can disturb the patriarchal arrangement. A woman who expresses her sexuality is marked as a fallen woman. Indian culture frequently rehearses double standards - men can communicate their sexual longings, it is viewed as ordinary and natural, however for women it is an indecent, corrupt and offensive way of behaving that will be held within proper limits and control. This paper shows how Poile Sengupta in her play *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* moor on the dramatic conventions while relocating them by changing this as a method of ironic self-reflection. She underlines the patriarchal creation of women's part in the theatre space and unfurls how a woman is subsumed inside the male-centric arrangement of narratology of abuse and violence. What is intended to mean by narratology of violence is that the voyeuristic construction of knowledge given conventions, images and portrayal of brutality is appreciated as a display and within this interaction; it is standardized by the spectator or reader.

Sue Ellen Case in her paper "Towards a New Poetics" says,

New feminist theory would abandon the traditional patriarchal values embedded in prior notion of form, practice and audience response in order to construct new critical models and methodologies for the drama that would accommodate the presence of women in the art, support their liberation from the cultural fictions of the female gender and deconstruct the valorization of the male gender. (7)

The recent hypothesis of woman's subjectivity in the Indian postcolonial setting has outfitted a few huge discussions around the issue of portrayal, resignification and obstruction that attempt to foreground native standards for determining separated states of woman's subjugation. As it is manifested from these engagements, these theorizations have called for new optics, new components to peruse the specificities of the Indian inquiry in the sorts of gender hardship extant and evident in tandem with different boundaries of class, sex, position and community identities. The issue of violence against women has found scholarly articulation in exhibits in dramatic portrayals. This paper endeavours to reconfigure new modes, new standards to address the backwardness and the profoundly instilled practice of gender discrimination that has appreciated different philosophical and social legitimating; a result of the sort of self-resistance that patriarchal society has established itself in Indian culture. The violence in this way has developed into becoming the accepted mode of residing where patriarchy has inconspicuously saturated itself in urging that legitimization, a social agreement. Not just Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* fills in as literary references to show how brutality is assuming different structures to persecute not only the body but in addition the mind, the existence of women, how the body blows are naturalized as something fundamental to comprehend the identity of women, how violence inflicted on the female body turns into a part of the language, literature and portrayal of the culture.

The historical backdrop of Shoorpanakha is notable to the vast majority of Indian readers. Shoorpanakha, sister of Ravana, was a vamp with dark composition, however, had the power of changing her appearance at whatever point she needed. She was an enchantress. She was the goddess of desire. When she was meandering in a lavish green forest, she encountered a man with passionate eyes, a massive chest, and a regal look. His appearance

was so amazing that Shoorpanakha was wildly drawn in towards him. He was Rama in exile. She chose to give herself up at his feet and be an admirer of that encapsulation of adoration. Sadly she was dismissed by Rama as he was wedded and was bound in promise. Anyway, he proposed to Shoorpanakha that she could ask Lakshmana, who was Rama's sibling and had the same characteristics which Rama had. Initially, she regretted Rama's negative reaction yet in the wake of seeing Lakshmana, her dead cravings stirred. Unfortunately, Lakshmana dismissed her as well as shamed her for being a demones. He embarrassed her by saying that she had an awful smell of *Rakshasi*. No man could wed a woman like her as she is neither delightful nor alluring. At last, Lakshmana cut her nose and chopped off her breasts. Shoorpanakha shed tears of agony that nobody acknowledged. She returned to her brother Ravana, who further got Sita, Rama's better half for vengeance. Subsequently, Ramayana occurred.

*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni*, a Lyotardian micronarrative, not just alludes to the development of a woman in the stereotypical role of the men-centric culture but likewise brings up the construction of the historical backdrop of a race subjugating the aboriginals as Other. Indian legends unfurl the sublime history of Aryans who conquered the land vanquishing the dark-skinned natives who were addressed as evils of the society. As they were detestable they were frequently called demons and were dealt with gravely and intended to be smothered and curbed down by the Aryans and this story was introduced brilliantly in two incredible Indian epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

Woman: Shoorpanakha merely wanted love.

Man: The Aryan greed.

Woman: She wasn't beautiful in the ideal way. So?

Man: Their stinking race superiority.

Woman: she did not behave like a well-bred woman. So?

Man: They came all the way south carrying their arrogance like a bloodthirsty sword. (Sengupta 277)

The dramatist talks at large about the distortion of the natives in the legendary history and finds the disparity and differentiation that are made during their depiction in the epic.

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 demones. Because she speaks her mind. Because she takes up space. (Sengupta277)

The play unfurls the encounters of a woman belonging to a different race and class of society. The subject of gender and female sexuality continually responds all through the play. It uncovers how women are persecuted and segregated with the assistance of a few social practices and how they are dealt with differently for becoming the Other. It additionally features how the developed desultory practices make the existences of the Other exceptionally confounded and contesting. As the legendary figure of Shoorpanakha did not exactly measure up to in the ideological meaning of a woman, her love proposition had been dismissed by the Aryan siblings and she was embarrassed and tormented by slashing off her nose, ears and bosoms.

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 play thing. (Sengupta 261)

Being a woman from a demonical race, the mythical character of Shoorpanakha is doubly marginalized - firstly, she was impeded as an individual from the demonical family who were viewed as obscene and evil and as a woman; and when one is brought into the world as a woman she should not communicate her desire, especially the desire to have sexual relationships and it is expressed she should be called as an evil presence or Other:

Man: Why don't you tell the truth? You lusted for him. You wanted sex with him.

Woman: Yes. I did. Is that wrong? (Sengupta 266).

Sengupta's plays portray the interior landscape of the marginalised woman. In this society, a woman is only characterized by her roles of mother, daughter, wife and sister which are her prescribed designations according to men. The identity of her 'self' as a woman is generally disregarded and considered unimportant in androcentric culture/world. Consequently, the spirit of Shoorpanakha in the disguise of an advanced woman yells at the segregation and double standard role of our society: "... 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." (Sengupta267)

Sengupta's plays investigate the imperceptible, assimilated, miniature level capillaries of patriarchal power that have been smothering women in the cultural space since the ancient age. Shoorpanakha represents that multitude of women who are sufficiently strong to stay single and announce their desire for male companionship without taking more time to fake modesty. Such women threaten the male world thus they are portrayed as hazardous *rakshasis*, who should be controlled/contained/rebuffed before they can disturb the patriarchal set-up. A woman who communicates her sexuality/sexual longings is marked as a fallen woman. Sengupta additionally compares Shoorpanakha and Sita, who is considered an embodiment of chastity and womanhood. Shoorpanakha is conferred as a devil woman because of her actual appearance and expressive nature while Sita's appeal and resigned nature make her an ideal woman. Sengupta has illuminated the generalization of beauty made by predominant culture to subjugate and embarrass the marginalised section of the society. Thus, patriarchy not only victimizes women but restricts an individual to choose a different path. Shoorpanakha does not fit into the norms of male-centric society- she is an expressive woman and subsequently peered down and severely brutalized by men in power. In her plays, Sengupta projects the voice of the underrepresented that are pestered, killed and alienated by the harsh powers of patriarchy.

Women in India lead a lifetime of subjugation. Hunger, chronic weakness, absence of education, overwork, outrages, dowry-related murders and powerlessness are some of which are noticeable. All markers, including having lower proficiency, higher school dropouts, little command over fertility and reproductive wealth and higher maternal mortality highlight a more profound social malaise. Brutality against women starts before birth, as sex-selective foetus removals, female foeticides and child murders, and it goes on all through their lives. Social predispositions and strong patriarchal orders, with their misplaced ideas of manhood and masculinity, find reflections in violence against women and the controlling behaviours of men. Simone de Beauvoir in her Introduction to *The Second Sex* says that one is not born a woman but becomes one, and in this process, it seems that the absorption of violence into the identity-formation of women has turned into a norm built up by numerous patriarchal techniques and ideologies. Learning theories, for example, socialization, social learning and components of feminist ideology declare that the ways of behaviour are learned all through individuals' lives through their communications with others. These associations show people, in most unpretentious ways, what behaviour is not appropriate, as well as what rewards and results would be achieved because of their actions. Kate Millet opines, "Gender is the sum

total of the parents', the peers', and the culture's notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression" (31). Feminine and masculine genders are not biological but rather socially acquired traits that can be untaught and unlearned by spreading mindfulness and reducing the impact of socialization.

Contemporary Indian women playwrights have picked performative art as a reliable stage to spread awareness regarding gender conditioning which produces gender bigotry in society. By this theory, people become familiar with the emotional and physical strategies of violence against women and fuse them into their lifestyles. Learning and generational models claim that emotional, physical and sexual brutality is an acquired way of behaving upheld by postmodern thinking by M. J. Markward in "The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children" which says that people "create the social reality for their behaviour according to how they interpret norms in particular milieus" (66).

Theatre is one of the basic ways through which thoughts, attitudes, convictions and emotions of diverse individuals throughout history. Women writers have utilized the foundation of theatre to scrutinize patriarchal regulations that have been stifling and underestimating women in all walks of life. While different mediums of popular culture have been censured for their backward subjects and stereotypical portrayals, Indian theatre has frequently been appreciated for its focus on women's issues, with striking stories and progressive portrayals. Women dramatists have destroyed the split between private/public arenas and examined the social issues related to gender disparity in front of an audience. Anita Singh expounds on feminist theatre that it was as much a political undertaking as a dramatic one. It was revisionist in spirit and it doubted conventionality. It doubted Phallogocentrism - a male-focused perspective on life. It was an avant-garde development that deconstructed patriarchal metaphysics. Production, content and dramaturgy were recognized by awareness of women as women; it tested the thought of portrayal on the politics of portrayal and uncovered how implications are socially delivered and historically adapted. Plays that interceded in the fictional space as real individuals utilizing genuine encounters changed the theatre space into a luminal space for learning. The knowledge acquired turns into the building blocks for actions in actuality that prepare and test the elements of obstruction against oppression, and practice more egalitarian relations. (22-23) Feminist theatre is a social portrayal made by women and is educated by the point of view of its producers, its actors, its onlookers and its critics whose goal is a positive reassessment of women's role and to implement social change. The substances of the plays have gone from re-working of myths to being concerned with contemporary women's issues. Feminist plays deconstruct the weakening designs of old legends and condemn the feminine fantasies that are pervasive in the public eye. Women dramatists have explored different avenues with novel strategies and dealt with the sensitive women's issues in front of an audience that has been neglected since hundreds of years. They have questioned the oppressive role of culture, religion and society that diminish the individuality of women. By focusing on women characters and setting them in the subject position, women writers have given another shape to Indian theatre and hence augmented its degree and approach.

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