

## Chapter III

### Image of Shoorpanakha and Shakuni in Poile Sengupta's

#### *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni*

Both Shoorpanakha and Shakuni are pivotal characters of two great Indian epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Both were victims. They are considered as stereotypes. Shoorpanakha is a stereotype of ugly and succubus woman whereas Shakuni is a stereotype of backstabbers and evil-minded person.

For us they epitomized 'evil'. Shoorpanakha, and 'ugly' vamp and Shakuni, the shrewd, conspiring and manipulating uncle. However beneath their 'villainous' cloaks resided a brother, who felt betrayed, and a sister, whose love was answered by a violent thrash from two 'godly' brothers respectively, who hardly cared to know. ( Ipshita Mitra, Shakuni and Shoorpanakha Meet to Retell History)

Poile Sengupta has deconstructed these two characters in her play *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* (2001). She brought the two villains from the two great epics together on one stage in the postmodern world. In the disguise of mythical title, the two characters the MAN and the WOMAN present contemporary issues and like those mythical characters want to take revenge. They relate their own condition to the condition of those characters. This play is set in the postmodern time. But time to time, it travels back to two great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and present them in to present context and

relevance. “It is for the first time in Indian theatre that Shoorpanakha and Shakuni come together and stories from the two epics are merged.” ( Sengupta 242)

Even today these two characters are hated. They are considered as negative characters but in the present time, they meet in an airport’s waiting lounge and want to take revenge. Sengupta had tried hard to understand the plight of these mythological characters. The play is in an airport. Because of the threat of terrorism the flight is postponed. A dialogue between two characters begins and after sometime descends into the unseen historical time and space. They are, in fact, victims and vengeance seekers and throughout the play the theme of revenge runs in both of them.

During their conversation, they try to justify that they were not evil characters. They blame for the misrepresentation of their characters in the epics and in other versions of the epics. Both characters played important roles in their epics but they are forgotten once their action is completed. After the incident of chopping of nose and ear and inciting the battle between Rama and Ravana, the writer did not mention her anywhere. He did not tell where Shoorpanakha had gone and what had happened to her.

There are only two characters in the play and they are named as the MAN and the WOMAN. They are not given any specific name and they dressed in contemporary travelling dresses because they are universal characters. They do not belong only to the present time they belong to the all times. They present the old mythical characters as well as the condition of present man and woman.

The WOMAN had a budging handbag and a glossy magazine while the MAN had a heavy briefcase picked up from among the props downstage. She was wearing the spectacles and reading the magazine. She was reading it from upside down. So it is clear that she does not know to read and write. But when she saw the man she hid her spectacles because she thought she was looking ugly when she wore spectacles. When Shoorpanakaha saw two young and beautiful princes in the forest she hid her ugliness and by the magical power turned into a beautiful princess.

When the MAN and the WOMAN started their conversation but they were frustrated. They started quarrelling at the petty things. The MAN was impatient. He started shouting at woman. But the Shakuni of the *Mahabharata* had the patience. He waited many years to take revenge and hatched many plots. Although he himself does not show any sign of patience, he told the WOMAN to have patience like Shakuni.

MAN: That was always your problem, impatience. (Sengupta, 275)

MAN: The worst of all vices. Look at Shakuni. How grandly he planned the whole thing. How patiently he waited. And he got the reward, didn't he?  
(Sengupta 275)

In the *Ramayana*, the nose, ear and breast of Shoorpanakha were chopped by Lakshmana. It means she was disrespected by him. If we consider these words 'nose and ear were cut', it means that she might be assaulted physically. She might be raped. The *Ramayana* is a holy text and for hiding the truth of rape, the author might have used this phrase. In this play,

the WOMAN uses this very word 'rape'. "But as somebody or the other said, if rape is inevitable..." (Sengupta 248)

Like Shoorpanakha, the WOMAN also tells about her brother. She says, "And my own brother, who will do anything for me, is as... as strong and... and powerful as ten men..." (Sengupta 251) Thus for the first time, she reveals that she is a mouthpiece of Shoorpanakha.

In the *Ramayana*, Shoorpanakha did not know that Rama and Lakshmana were married. She proposed them without knowing the truth of their marriage. But there is one difference between this character of this play and Shoorpanakha. The WOMAN said that she wanted a married man and wanted to have sex with him.

Woman: I'm an enchantress.

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

Woman: Everybody. Every heterosexual man. Even... even married man.

Especially married man. (Sengupta 252)

Shoorpanakha was cheated by the two brothers. They did not refuse her. They played pranks on her. They instigated her to become rude. She proposed Rama but Rama sent her to his brother and said that he was alone there and could become a better mate for her. Then the WOMAN said, "Who the hell is bothered about the brothers?... Though I must say that as a substitute..." (Sengupta 254) If they do not cheat her the story of the *Ramayana* might have been different. The 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 brothers consent... ask him.... They tossed me this way and that, as if... as if I didn't deserve more respect. As if I was a... a broken plaything. ( Sengupta 261)

Shoorpanakha expressed her sexual desire to Rama first and then to Lakshmana. They disrespected her. Lakshmana chopped her ear and nose. So she pondered what wrong she had done. “ I was bleeding... all down my face.. my chest... bleeding.... Was it so wrong to tell a man ‘I love you’?” ( Sengupta 262). Expression of desire is not an assault. In this world, we celebrate woman day. We always talk about the rights of woman. But if we look back in our literary texts, they are itself full of the humiliation of woman, even our two great epics also. In the *Ramayana*, Shoorpanakha was mutilated and humiliated. In the end, Sita was also insulted. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi was also disrespected by Kauravas. They tried to disrobe her.

In our society, if a woman does something wrong, she will be punished. She is not allowed to express her emotions. Emotion or desire is a characteristic of a woman. And if she is hurt, hurt is also her emotion. But in this patriarchal society, man can do anything what he likes. He is not questioned. The expression of desire of Shoorpanakha created that mess. Her fault was that she wanted love. She says, “I wanted love.... Just a little love.... For a little while” (Sengupta 262).

If we shift the centre of the text and study this text without taking Rama in centre, then we will find that Shoorpanakha was not wrong. Her husband was killed by her brother, Ravana. Now she was alone in that forest. Every man or woman has sexual needs. If these needs do not

fulfilled, they will create disaster. Shoorpnakha was also thirsty for sex. On seeing two beautiful men in the forest, her desire became more intense. So she did nothing wrong. She proposed them. But they did wrong, they dishonoured her. We expect that if Rama and Lakshmana had not played pranks on her and had not reasoned with her, whole matter could have been resolved very well without fight. Chopping the nose and ear of a man just for a proposal is quite non-chivalrous thing to be done by a warrior.

Both of these characters were angry and were seeking vengeance to undo the injustice. They wanted to prove their innocence.

MAN: They were conspirators.

WOMAN: Violators.

MAN: They violated all human rights.

WOMAN: They assaulted a defenceless woman.

MAN: They waged a wrongful, a totally unjustified war. (Sengupta 278)

The MAN and the WOMAN feel that even in the present time, they are similarly neglected and humiliated and hence find a parallel to epic characters of Shakuni and Shoorpanakha. The MAN said that his land was snatched, his brother was taken away and his thirteen years old sister was insulted, raped and murdered.

MAN: My home... my land is being torn apart. They took away my brother.

Said he was an Informer. (Sengupta, 279)

MAN: Then my sister.... My thirteen-years-old sister... they... (Shouts.) You think I have any... bleeding... love ... left in me? ( Sengupta 280)

So he thinks that his story is equal to Shakuni. The WOMAN thinks that love, hate and bomb, these three words are equal. They are four lettered words. So for taking the revenge of hate they wanted to use bomb. The MAN carries a bomb in his briefcase. They came down to the stage and dressed themselves like epic characters. Like Girish Karnad's *Naga Mandala*, *Hayavadna* and *Yayati* and Ravindranath Tagore's *Chitra*, mythology is perfectly blended with contemporary situations. The play uses two minor characters who move continuously between the past and the present.

In this play, Sengupta writes about the plight of a married woman in the contemporary world. Shoorpanakha got married to Dustabudhi who was killed by her brother Ravana. So she came back to live in Lanka. But at this point, the character of the WOMAN is different from Shoorpanakha. The Woman is still unmarried. She did not get married because she did not want to be a typical type of married woman. She categorized married women into two types. The first type of women is considered as pigeon. They work all the day with cooing. So they get headache when they go to bed.

WOMAN: All over the world like pigeon. Cooing (coos.) like bloody pigeons. Come home soon darling... I have cooked you your favourite dinner. Do you know your son has come thirty-first in class? Such an improvement. Just like his father.

WOMAN: And they get headaches, these wives. They always get headaches when they go to bed....

MAN: Ah! Now I know why I didn't get married.

WOMAN: Who would want to be a wife? To be a pigeon. Grey and stupid and cooing... cooing all the time. (Sengupta 255)

Another type of women is like that of a crow. She always caws before her husband for realizing him his duties. She says:

Oh yes, there are. Those are the crows. Caw! Caw! Why are you so late? What did you do with your salary? Caw.... Why haven't you pay the school fees? Caw.... Caw. Who is that bitch I saw with you that. Caw!... caw... (Sengupta 256)

In this play the WOMAN reveals her identity first. She says, "It's my story. (Pause) I am her." (Sengupta 255) In the *Ramayana*, Shoorpanakha is presented very ugly with long nails, pot belly, heavy breast and fat. But in some other versions of the *Ramayana*, she was presented extremely beautiful. In this play also, she is presented as a most beautiful woman. "I am the other woman. Beautiful.... Sexy... (Pause.) Hot." (Sengupta 256). In Kamban's *Ramayana*, she introduced herself as 'Kaamavalli'. In this play also when the MAN asked her about her name then she replied, "I'm Kaamavalli... the goddess of desire...." (Sengupta 260)

Shoorpanakha pleaded to her brother to take revenge of her ill-treatment. But in some other versions, it is written that Ravana had killed her husband whom she loved very much. So she wanted to take revenge. She made Rama and Lakshmana prey of her plan. Because she knew that Rama was very skillful in archery and can kill his brother very easily.

But Sengupta writes that when Ravana went to fight with Rama and Lakshmana, he saw beautiful Sita. Woman was his weakness. He fell in love with Sita and took her away in his palace. But he did not even touch her robes. Shoorpanakha was very disappointed by seeing her brother lovesick. She tells, "My brother went to take revenge for mysake. Instead he came back lovesick... an elephant in masth...." (Sengupta 269)



In this play, the MAN introduces himself as an illusionist. He says:

MAN: I am an illusionist. Like you. (Pause.) In the other epic.

WOMAN: You mean...

MAN: Jaya, also known as Mahabharata.... The story of that damn Kuru clan. They brought my sister all the way down from the hills and they... (Sengupta 263)

In some folklores of the *Mahabharata*, there was a story that Kuru attacked and defeated Gandhara. Bheeshma sent proposal for the marriage of king Subala's daughter, Gandhari, with Dharitrashtira who was blind. Kurus kidnapped and made all the male members of king Subala's family prisoners. They gave them a fistful of rice. They starved them. So Shakuni's father decided to give whole grain to Shakuni. He thought that he might remain alive and take revenge. But in the *Mahabharata*, there was no mention of this story. It is written that all the members of Shakuni's family were happy with the marriage. But in this play, Sengupta has written that he accompanied his sister to Hastinapur and stayed there for revenge. Shakuni did not like Kurus but for taking revenge, he became a caring uncle. He did not reveal his reality. Like Shakuni, the Man also hates people. "I don't like people. I hate people." (Sengupta 249) Shakuni did not show that he hate people. Opposite to Ravana, Shakuni was determined to take revenge.

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

WOMAN: Is that what you did?

MAN: (Laughs.) I was so clever.... You should have seen me. I pretended I was a friend of the Kurus... that I was on their side. My... my

brother-in-law was such a dummy, just an uncrowned bloody king. His sons were not even in the direct line of succession. The rightful heir was actually his brother's eldest son Dharamputra.... So I...

WOMAN: But your brother-in-law's sons were your sister's children too, your own nephews, weren't they?

MAN: They were my nephews, yes... all of them. 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. (Sengupta 269)

Shakuni in the Mahabharata became the king after the death of his father. He belonged to royal family. But the MAN belongs to the hill folk. He wanted to take revenge of her sister's plight. He says:

No. Nothing as cowardly. She merely...she... deliberately blindfolded herself. She wore a dark, thick bloody bandage on hereyes... kept it there all twenty-four hours, all her life. Blinded. Living in constant darkness.... She who was as free as the birds flying across the hills... why did she choose... choose to blot out the sun? (Sengupta 265)

Shakuni was the mastermind behind the game of dice. He played on the behalf of his nephews. He was an illusionist. By the illusion of him, Kauravas were won and Pandavas were defeated easily. Shakuni started the war and got Pandavas to kill Bheeshma and all Kauravas.

MAN: It was all part of my plan anyway. The five brothers and the wife were exiled for thirteen years and they left the city as the crowd wailed.... I did not let my bloody nephews forget their hate. I coaxed their

hatred... I fed it... I inflamed it and finally there was war. (Sengupta 271)

Both of these characters were illusionist. By illusion, Shakuni won the game of dice. "... I was an illusionist. I doctored the dice." (273) He said the WOMAN that she also used illusion to trap the princes. "And you know all the tricks. You use beauty, the illusion of beauty, don't you...." (266)

These two characters strongly feel that they are wrongly interpreted in history. They were made villainous by hiding partial truth related to them. In the *Mahabharata*, it was not mentioned that Shakuni and his family was imprisoned and starved to death.

WOMAN: But that's what everybody think. That Shakuni was the wicked uncle, the powermonger who wanted his sister's son on the throne. And therefore started the war.

MAN: (Quietly.) I know. That's what I was told too. But when I began reading the Mahabharata... I felt Shakuni hadn't been given his due. So I did some more reading and finding out, and I heard the story of his imprisonment and his brothers dying and then... I realized... That he was a victim.

WOMAN: Like Shoorpanakha.

MAN: .... Oh, all right. If Shakuni was a underdog, Shoorpanakha was a ... bitch. (Sengupta 276)

He was not happy with his sister's marriage with a blind prince. He could not bear his sister's insult. So he wanted to take revenge. He was made villainous by not revealing the reality

about him. But now they both think that they are innocent. They played a vital role in the respective epics. But they were not given due respect in the epics. On the contrary they were portrayed as villainous, evil and neglected characters. The MAN says, “In Shakuni’s world nobody is innocent.... What I’m doing is not a crime.” (280) The WOMAN also says, “ We are responsible for each other’s crime.... Neither was Shoorpanakha a criminal. (280)

So, in the both epics and in the play, the theme of revenge runs throughout. They are gathered on one stage because they are connected with revenge. They were considered as mere evil characters. In this play also the MAN and the WOMAN did not get what they want. They were still unmarried. The WOMAN searched for true love but she did not find and the MAN was cheated by his brother-in-law and his family. His brother has been killed and his thirteen years old sister was kidnapped, raped and murdered. Hence the man decided to explode a bomb in the airport. Poile Sengupta has brilliantly presented the fusion of the past and the present and the modern characters and the mythical characters.

The camaraderie shared between the two forlorn characters from two different epics represented one essential fact that no one is born 'evil', only irreconcilable circumstances and conditions force one to change. A Shakuni was born as a result of breach of trust and a Shoorpanakha, when violation and ruthlessness mutilated her innocent love.

Besides addressing gender dynamics, challenging historical truth and deconstructing the theory of 'good vs bad', Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni delved into the soul of a victim inside the body of a 'villain'. (Mitra, Shoorpanakha and Shakuni Meet to Retell History)

## Work Cited

Mitra, Ipshita. *Shoorpanakha and Shakuni Meet to Retell History*. The Times of India Life. May 11, 2012. Web. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/people/Shoorpanakha-and-Shakuni-meet-to-retell-history/articleshow/13065122.cms>

Rao, Dr. L.V. Padmarani. *Poile Sengupta's Thus Spake Shoorpanakha So Said Shakuni as a Postmodern Text*. The Critarian: An International Journal in English. ISSN 0976-8165. Web. <http://the-criterion.com/V2/n1/Padmarani.pdf>

Sengupta, Poile. *Woman Centre Stage: The Dramatist and the Play*. "Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni" New Delhi: Routledge, 2010. Print.

Singh, Sushina. *Feminism: Theory, Criticism, Analysis*. Delhi: Peneraft International, 1997. Print.