

A DIFFERENT TAKE ON WOMEN'S SEXUALITY: 'THUS SPAKE SHOORPANAKHA, SO SAID SHAKUNI'

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Abstract: Suppression of women and their sexuality is at the core of a patriarchal social structure. The stereotypes of the 'Madonna' and the 'Whore' are deep-rooted and dominant in the societal mindset. Feminism and Gender studies have extensively dealt with this aspect of women's subjugation in an androcentric society. If one observes everyday life, these gendered double standards are not hard to miss. Indian English writer and dramatist Poile Sengupta has tried to shed some light on this whole dilemma of the sexuality of a female from a liberal, non-patriarchal perspective in her play 'Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni'. The dramatist here has taken a mythological character from an epic, generally considered as a villain - Shoorpanakha. Sengupta has tried to show the different side of Soorpanakha; as a woman ostracized and punished by the society for displaying so called deviant behaviour which went against the strict moral code of conduct that patriarchy imposes on women. 'Teaching a lesson' is a common strategy applied by the androcentric society and its moral police to punish anybody who dares to cross that artificial line, especially women. The play makes the case for love and free expression of feelings and brings out the different story, retelling the epic from the point of view of Shoorpanakha.

In an ideal society an individual should have the freedom to construct and express his/her identity as per his/her own understanding and as "feeling", "reasoning" person, beyond the constraints of class, caste, race or gender. But the society is far from ideal and it consciously tries to mould and construct an individual's identity as per its convenience. In a patriarchal society women form the major class which has to pay the price of being female. As patriarchy itself is based on gender divide and etymologically means 'the rule of the father (male)', it is not a surprise that women are generally at the receiving end of injustice and oppression in such an androcentric socio-cultural set up. Feminism and Gender studies have time and again revealed that how Patriarchy limits and restrains women's mobility and freedom of expression in several ways. 'Rule of the father or male' is balanced and maintained by controlling the other half of the population, which constitutes of women. In a patriarchal society a woman is always given a secondary status to the male. In her seminal work Simone de Beauvoir (1997) refers to women as the 'Second Sex' (which is also the title of her work), to emphasize the subjugated and secondary status of women. This male dominated system not only controls the minds and the bodies of the women, it also distorts their identities by imposing an ideology on them, which objectifies women and reinforces feeling of inferiority in them as a class. It is true that women do not constitute a homogeneous class and can have differences and differing degrees of oppression on the basis of class, caste and race. Nevertheless, patriarchal ideology affects each and every woman in differing intensities.

Toril Moi observes, ".....patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women, in order precisely to make us believe that the chosen standards for 'femininity' are natural. Thus a woman who refuses to conform can be labeled both unfeminine and unnatural.Patriarchy in other words, wants us to believe that there is such a thing as an essence of femaleness, called femininity" (Moi, 1989. p.123). These artificial standards of 'femininity' are what every female strives to achieve and fails to realize her true identity and potential. Gayle Rubin correctly states, "The realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression. As with other aspects of human behavior, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. They are imbued with conflict of interests and political maneuver, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political" (Rubin, p. 143). With same political intent female sexuality is one of the major aspects of a female identity which patriarchy tries to control and objectify. Several scholars have tried to investigate this control over female sexuality. Coontz and Henderson (1986) have proposed that the stabilization of property rights and need to create male line of inheritance, man at some point in the history of civilization felt the necessity of controlling the sexual behavior of their female partners. According to Engels (2010) when human moved from free society to monogamy so that male property rights could be secured, was the 'historical defeat of matriarchy'. Lerner (1986) contends that commodification of women where "women themselves became a resource" was an important step

in the process of evolution. Through this patriarchy controls, regulates, exchanges and uses female sexuality. Baumeister and Twenge (2002) point out, "It could, however, be simply that men do not want women to be autonomous creatures, who make their own decisions and seek their own fulfillment, because such activities could potentially undermine male control" (168). Thus patriarchy strives to maintain its control through several means to subjugate the women population and internalize this secondary status in the women as well as the society in general, so that it should seem natural. To sum up, "An extensive feminist literature (nonetheless) has portrayed female sexuality as an unfortunate perversion of human potentials resulting directly from male dominance. It claims that women suffer an alienated and objectified sexuality. The culture controlled by men imposes this restrictive sexuality" (Jackson, 2014, p. 162).

In the feminist movement study of literature by male authors has been one of the first ways to understand how male gaze has historically objectified female identity. Finding the female tradition in the literary canon, analyzing works by women writers to search for the voice of dissent and then striving to develop a new female identity through literary works has been at the centre of the literary feminism. Literature not only propogates new thoughts, it also presents complex thoughts and alternative mode of thinking in action effectively. Indian English writing has a formidable tradition of writers who have written about women's issues. Mahashweta Devi, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan, Dina Mehta etc to name a few. These dramatists have been seminal in shaping the field of Indian English drama. Poile Sengupta is such a dramatist who has successfully tried to bring women and their issues at the centre stage through her dramas. She is a well known Indian English dramatist and children's writer, she is also an actor and has her own group in Bangalore. She has many plays to her credit. Her first play 'Mangalam' was awarded first prize in the Hindu-Madras Players paly-script competition in 1993 for its socially relevant theme. Her collection of plays has been published as 'Women Centre Stage' in 2010 by Routledge. The collection contains 'Mangalam' (1993), 'Inner Laws' (1994), 'Keats Was a Tuber' (1996), 'Samara's Song' (1999), 'Alipha' (2001), and 'Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni' (2001).

'Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni' is an ambitious play which tries to bring in an alternative perspective from the traditional Indian epics. It tells the stories of two Indian epics from the point of view of two negative characters from each epic- Shoorpanakha from 'Ramayana' and Shakuni from

'Mahabharata'. These two characters who are picturised as utterly villainous in the original epic are humanized to a considerable extent. The dramatist brings them together in the modern background where they meet as fellow travelers at an airport. The woman is the one who first identifies herself as Shoorpanakha. She seems quite insecure as a modern woman, eager to please and reach out to the man after being uneasy with him at first, whereas the man keeps rejecting her attempts. She is picturised as quite clingy and irritating in the beginning. Once she starts telling her story as Shoorpanakha the dimension of her personality changes and suddenly she becomes really attractive-an enchantress. Standpoint theory has been one the important contributions made by feminist theoretical discourse. It states that a person who has actually lives the life or faces particular circumstances can give an authentic account of it, not an outside observer. Here the woman reinforces the same point when she starts telling her own account of what had happened with her as Shoorpanakha:

Woman: Anyway, there they are in the forest living in a pretty little cottage when this absolutely stunning woman comes along. The two brothers, especially the older one, is bowled over. Totally bowled over.

Man: That's not what I've heard.

Woman: Were you there?

Man: Of course not.

Woman: Then how do you know what happened?

Man: And you were there.

Woman: It's my story. (Pause.) I was her." (Sengupta, 2010, 254-255)

In spite of all her insecurities and clumsiness which are really apparent in her behavior, the woman has a kind of wildness in her which surfaces abruptly without any occasion. This might be an indication of how a woman tries to suppress what she deeply feels, but is unable to express because of the standards of "femininity" she is expected to follow. For example, she is to an extent reserved with the man at first, she doesn't want him to sit on the chair next to her, she also feels offended by his uncivilized manner of behavior, but as she starts talking with him which is totally one sided, she suddenly becomes personal and taunts him about his sex life, as if to invoke him to talk back to her. This kind of behavior of her is really enigmatic and unexplainable. Maybe the bold Shoorpanakha in her is trying to break open whom she has suppressed because of the censure of society.

A sexually expressive woman is always considered as a threat to a society which is patriarchal in mindset. A woman's sexual desire is always looked down upon. According to the patriarchal standards a woman should be sexually demure and non-expressive socially, but the same society wants her to be a slut

while in bed. As women are trained to treat and look at their sexuality through the male eyes, they believe a world of false symbols and fantasy, in which lack power, agency and submission are considered erotic (Phelps, 1994). These double standards are part and parcel of an androcentric society. For example, a male can be overtly sexual just because he is a 'man', but if a woman even attempts to express her desire she will be labeled as a 'slut'. Jackson contends, "The ideology of female sexuality has long emphasized virtue. A loss of virtue could expose women to the whims of men and eliminate their right to a respectable place in society, understood to mean a good marriage. While men learn to prove themselves through sexual conquest, women learn to achieve virtue through sexual denial" (Jackson, 2014, p. 164). According to dramatist's interpretation of the epic, this must be the reason why Shoorpanakha was punished and persecuted by the brothers who represented the patriarchal society. Shoorpanakha never aspired to be an ideal disembodied passive body of a woman, she wanted to be "actively embodied" (Hollond, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe and Thomason, 1994).

When the woman goes into the persona of Shoorpanakha unlike her modern self she becomes highly confident, sensual, full of vigor and takes control of the situation around her along with the people. The man who is extremely rude and offensive in the beginning while talking to the woman becomes visibly affected by her charms once she takes the bearing as Shoorpanakha. She is expressive of her desires, physical attraction towards men. She acknowledges her feelings and doesn't shy away from talking about them with another person. She holds nothing back:

Woman: He was alone, standing there 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 the breath in my throat. It was what happened to me in that instant. I wanted him to tear my clothes off and tear through me and yet also I wanted him to be tender and melting. I would suckle him. 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.

(Sengupta, 2010, pp. 256-257)

It is also apparent from her criticism about the role of the wife that she is an unorthodox woman, who is not interested in customs and rituals. Who doesn't believe in structured and socially controlled relationships, but only values feelings and desires. She doesn't want to be a 'wife', she doesn't want to look like one. She thinks that love can be bestowed or

accepted without having to be in a socially sanctioned relationship. Many scholars have been critical of the marriage institution as it is based on unequal treatment of the two individuals involved. This social relation is constructed in a patriarchal mould which expects a woman to be submissive and devoted to the man, but man is not supposed to reciprocate this devotion. Simone de Beauvoir (1997) once related an anecdote from her visit to a village in Tunisia where she felt that the traditional role of a wife has totally distorted the lives of the women in village, for whom their whole world was limited to their home. Compared to these withered women men seemed better off. Quoting this anecdote Gilbert and Gubar commented on it as, "Destroyed by traditional female activities- cooking, cleaning, knotting- which ought to have given them life as they themselves give life to men, the women of this underground harem are obviously buried in (and by) patriarchal definitions of their sexuality. Here is immanence with no hope of transcendence, nature seduced and betrayed by culture, enclosure without any possibility of escape. Or so it would seem" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984, p. 94). This should not be taken as a generalization of all the marital relationships, but to some extent this holds true. As a married woman is expected to sacrifice her own self for her husband and his family, the submission which is demanded of her in this relationship can affect her in a manner which can distort or compromise her individuality. Shoorpanakha is a different kind of woman. She despises constraints and undue expectations of submissiveness. It is not that she is a self-centered person who is incapable of dedication and devotion, she actually is absolutely in love with Rama and is dedicated to him, but she loves her independence, individuality and freedom of choice as well and that is what which troubles the society.

Woman: You don't have to be married to know what a wife looks like. They are all over the place. Wives. (Spits out the word.) Bloody wives.

(Sengupta, 2010, p. 255)

This must be the other major reason for her being an outsider in a society which seeks social sanction for each and every other thing. Generally such kind of disrespect for social dictates is considered desirable in a man or at least not punishable. A man's reputation remains effectively unblemished even after he violates any such unwritten law of the society, but for a woman even to think in this direction means humiliation and loss of reputation. In such a society a highly independent, unconventional and unorthodox woman as Shoorpanakha will be ostracized or persecuted without an iota of doubt. All she asked for was unconditional love and passion which was natural

and according to her didn't require any social sanction, but what she gained through free expression of her feelings was an intolerant response which disfigured her self, her body, which was one of her invaluable possessions.

As mentioned earlier when she takes on the role of Shoorpanakha, the man who was showing nonchalant attitude towards her in the beginning becomes fascinated with her overall confidence and personality. He is visibly shaken and starts to persuade and please her. She enjoys her power over him and exploits it to the fullest. As she tries to lure him in and entice him to have physical encounter with her, he abruptly stiffens. His reaction reminds her of Rama from the epic and she starts wailing and cursing him, losing all the control over herself as the pain of rejection kicks in. As soon as she loses control over herself and starts wailing the man takes control of the situation. He assaults her physically forcing her to stop wailing. This must be a reference to the past events of the woman's life as Shoorpanakha. She must have acted the same after Rama and Laxmana's rejection of her, resulting in her persecution and deformation by them. The brothers must have been enchanted by her confidence, bearing and attitude at first like the man, but as soon as she became emotional, baring her weakness in front of them, they transformed into the patriarchal male subjugators. Stricken Shoorpanakha describes how the duo taunted, humiliated and deformed 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 was a... broken plaything.

Pause.

Woman: And then the younger one... you know what he did?

Man: Yes.

Woman: He chopped off my breasts.

Man: Your breasts.

Woman: (Whispers) And my ears and my nose.

Man: (Laughs) Your nose... your bleeding nose.

Woman: Whatever stood out from me. Whatever stuck out.

(Sengupta, 2010, pp. 261-262)

The last segment of the dialogue quoted above is particularly important where she claims that they chopped off whatever stuck out. This sentence has high metaphorical content as it might refer to more than just limbs or body parts. It has a connotation that the men were not able to tolerate her boldness, her outspoken personality and independence. They

not only assaulted her physically, but they did quite more than that. Their act was symbolic and extremely brutal. It imposed humiliation and deformity on her for a lifetime, she was not able to let go of it. Their act was an age old patriarchal strategy of 'Teaching a Lesson' to a deviant, non-conformist woman. A simple rejection would have been enough, but they went beyond that and punished her for her desires. Shoorpanakha was just a woman who was not subdued, a woman who was true to her feelings and desires, a woman who didn't have any concern for 'man'-made traditions and customs, a woman who was honest enough to express what she felt without any scruples. But this is the kind of woman who frightens patriarchy, as "...Any discourse which legitimizes her pleasure, acknowledges her sexual knowledge, values her performance and places it under her control, is potentially threatening to his (the man) masculinity" (Hollond, Ramazanoglu, Sharp and Thomason, 1994, pp. 29-30).

It is peculiar that the man or former Shakuni who considers himself as the victim of injustice fails to sympathize with Shoorpanakha, who can also be called a person at the receiving end of injustice. She understands his sister Gandhari's anger, his own anger and desire for revenge, but he fails to understand her agony, because he looks at her through the patriarchal male perspective. He accuses her of seducing a married man, of 'being a demoness'. The way Shoorpanakha answers him is really revealing of her unconditional love, which had started in desire but then transcended it. She also justifies her desire to have physical intimacy with Rama. She sees nothing wrong in it. He judges her through an orthodox point of view. He calls her 'ogress' which shows the audience a point of view limited by patriarchal construction and in contrast the woman's point of view transcending every limitation put on her by the same patriarchal construct. What he fails to understand is how the feeling of unconditional love has affected her to the core. Though she was deprived of the love she was seeking, the love she still feels for the man who has deformed her has transformed her completely. She has forgiven him and her need for revenge has vanished. The only thing which has remained is a all encompassing love. When the man sarcastically calls her saint, she expresses her desire to be not categorized under any title. She wants others to think of her as only a woman and nothing else.

Woman: Can't you see? Because I love him...I've forgotten how he hurt me. And I...(Softly) I can't hurt anymore. I have lost the need to hurt...

Man: For god's sake, you sound like a bloody saint.

Woman: Oh, fuck you. Do you have to classify me?... (Wearily) 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.

(Sengupta, 2010, p. 267)

The dramatist has also tackled the stereotype of beauty through the difference between the two women- Sita and Shoorpanakha. The man comments on her being an asura, being different. These kinds of stereotypes affect an individual to a deep extent. The sense of not belonging, being an outcaste or not fitting in with the standard norms can create low self-esteem and inferiority complex in people, leading them to depression, anti-social/ asocial behavior and in some cases even suicide. This 'Beauty Myth' (Wolf, 2002) has had deplorable effects on innumerable women. Aian case of the play and even in the contemporary world these stereotypes are hidden form of racial discrimination. Such stereotypes are created by dominant groups to subjugate and humiliate the marginalized section of the society. Here in the play, when Shakuni is referring to her clan or race he means the same racial point of view and his hatred, the urge to take revenge is also born out of such feeling of inferiority, as he also belongs to a marginalized group. It is the woman who asks him about his own origin and what makes him inferior. She makes him realize that being different and being inferior are two drastically different things. Emphasizing on the universal feeling of love she reclaims his and her own humanity.

Woman: So? You were from the hills. Does that make us both less human? Do our hearts not know love?

(Sengupta, 2010, P. 268)

Through this play Sengupta is not advocating any kind of immoral society, where people can choose whatever they desire. All she wants to show is an alternative point of view of a free woman who had been degraded brutally for showing courage to think differently than the rest of the crowd. Dramatist only wants to express that, that she should have been considered from the point of view of respect and kindness instead of brutal censure and harassment. This becomes extremely important in today's world where people have started to explore different lifestyles and relationships and many of them are facing censure and banishment and have to live in a general atmosphere of hostility, prejudice because of it. Conflicts over sexual values and norms are becoming more and more intense as we are moving into a new era every moment. Along with the increasing scope to exercise one's freedom of choice, one has to face the consequences for doing so from different strata of the society. The LGBT movement is demanding the same consideration, acceptance and respect from the so called 'normal' society. Patriarchy is such an institution which not only victimizes women, but also any individual who dares to question its restrictive standards and goes into a different direction. Shoorpanakha stands here for many people who have been persecuted, ostracized, harassed, killed and deformed, for they refused to conform to the patriarchal norms of our society.

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