

# Performative Representation of Myths in Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spakeshoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni*

SANJEEV K. FILMY  
SATINDER K. VERMA

## Abstract

Theatre is performance...It brings together, for a period of time, an aural and visual presentation of an idea or agenda, a given space, and an audience.

—Sengupta, *India International Centre Quarterly*, 113.

The statement of Poile Sengupta, to begin with, points at three things which are fundamental to a theatrical writing. First, theatre is 'performance', that is, it is a performative act in which the players enact and react. Secondly, it presents an idea or agenda within a given space before an audience that could be a single person. Lastly, it involves time—a specified time limit within which this performative act has to deliberate with the audience. This paper aims to analyse *Thus SpakeShoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* in the purview of the statement made by the playwright and to see as to what extent she addresses the contemporary issues through myths and how, through performative representation, they are eventually conveyed to the audience.

*Thus SpakeShoorpanakha: So Said Shakuni* vividly presents the idea as to how it feels to be a persona of evil reputation while, outside the myth, he or she may be a person of positive virtue. The question is how the readers or audience see that character on the written page or stage. The perception of the readers or audience, however, depends on their acquaintance with the socio-cultural background of what is being presented on the

pages or stage. It is pertinent to mention here that, whether one knows it or not, his interpretation of the written word or stage performance is entirely dependent on his learning or knowledge of what is being presented by the playwright and the how of it.

Performance and representation are complementary to each other. Performance is representation of the presentation—what is being presented by the playwright on the pages. Performance, in this sense, cannot be separated from presentation and representation. If there is any difference, it may be the difference of how the performance is being enacted on the stage. An understanding of what ‘performance’ means is imperative here. Performance, Richard Schechner argues, is the broadest yet “most ill-defined disc” and includes the “whole constellation of events, most of them passing unnoticed, that takes place in both performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of performance—the precinct where the theatre takes place—to the time the last spectator leaves” (8). In the third issue of TDR in 1988, Schechner maintains that performance “is a broad spectrum of activities, including at the very least the performing arts, rituals, healing, sports, popular entertainments, and performance in everyday life” (4).

Performance, as a matter of fact, includes all through which the presentation gets communicated to the audience. It is “showing doing,” as Schechner finally asserts (*Performance Studies* 2), which requires people “to train for and rehearse their actions, and that this is true in everyday life every bit as much as it is art” (Reinelt 12). *Drama Studies*, writes Janelle Reinelt, however, started to treat “texts as performance texts; that is, as material for others, in rehearsal and performance, to produce as particular productions” (17). Graham Holderness explains this shift:

There is virtually no focus on the dramatist, and no projected vision of a culture’s ideological totality: the dramatic performance itself, conceived as the physical realization of an enacted relationship with social convention, belief, and ideology, mediates between them (4).

Performance, thus, considers mankind essentially as performative beings. It is, Bert O. States opines, “strictly a metaphor for social

behavior” (5). Performance, in fact, performs. Peggy Phelan argues, “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance ... [it] becomes itself through disappearance” (146). Performance, thus, is transitive in nature.

Representation is both historically and conceptually fundamental to our ideological expression about literature and culture which, in terms, is associated with *mimesis* of Aristotle. It depends on context, intellectual discipline, and the objects of enquiry. Christopher Prendergast opines that representation “is not linked to the principle of distortion but on the contrary to the idea of a fully accurate or faithful reflection of reality (4). This “constitutively depends on psychological intention, for whether one thing represents a second thing constitutively depends on whether a subject ‘takes the first to represent the second’ (Kalhat 19). In a theatrical representation, one must not forget, the production and its understanding exploit the illusion that what (animate/inanimate) represents and what is represented remain identical/similar. Javier Kalhat elaborates this make-believe representation:

What is distinctive about the actor’s representation ... is that, within the context of the theatrical performance, the actor is taken to be *make-believe identical* with ... [the character] ... Actors and audience collude to create and sustain the dramatic illusion ... and each party knows that the other knows that the whole thing is an elaborate game of make-believe. What holds for actors, also holds for sets, props, lighting, and any other representational device or mechanism that helps to create and sustain the dramatic illusion (22).

*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* represents two characters who perform their two roles independently—one as a contemporary man and woman and the other as represented or misrepresented in two myths derived from two Indian epics. The plot of the play is set in a crowded airport where the two characters, Man and Woman meet while waiting for a delayed

flight. The two characters are “modern in their speech, attitude and behaviour,” Sengupta asserts, and the play, “challenges the conventional vilification of Shoorpanakha and Shakuni and presents them differently, not only in the narrative but also in stage technique and structure” (*Women Centre Stage* 242). The play reveals that beneath the old-fashioned title, there is a focus on the contemporary issues through merging of the stories from two dissimilar epics—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

In the beginning of the play, the readers/audience find that the airport is full of “highly inflammable people” who are waiting for the indefinitely delayed flights (*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha* 247). Soon enough one hears Woman saying “to be a woman...to want a man so much that...that the rest of the world disappears” (*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha* 252). She narrates the incident and adds that “there they are in the forest living in a pretty cottage when this absolutely stunning woman comes along. The two brothers, especially the older one, is bowled over. Totally bowled over” (*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha* 254). Man in the play, doesn’t understand what is going on till Woman says, “It’s my story...I was her” (*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha* 255). It is here that Man and the readers/audience come to know that she is Shoorpanakha who is retelling her tale of suffering and how she was abused and made “the other woman” (*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha* 56). She describes ‘the older one’:

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...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 I also wanted him to be tender and melting. I would suckle him (*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha* 256-57).

In the mythical story of the *Ramayana*, it is here when Shoorpanakha gets bewitched with the radiance of Ram and goes closer to him to express her love and desire for him. This was not a common scene then, but in the contemporary world, a woman is accepted and admired to be straight and given respect for her genuine thoughts and expression. Shoorpanakha was rejected,

however, on the ground that Ram was already married and he asked her to go to Laxman and seek his yes. She feels humiliated and expresses her anger and resentment:

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...a broken thing (*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha* 261).

The younger brother, Shoorpanakha painfully explains, chopped off whatever “stood out” from her, whatever “stuck out”— her breasts, her ears and her nose (*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha*262). She breaks down and says:

I was bleeding...all down my face...my chest...bleeding...Was it so wrong to tell a man ‘I love you’?...I was wailing. I was raging, I was sobbing. I wanted to hit him...I wanted to squeeze him. I wanted to lie under him and watch his face change...I wanted love...just a little love...for a little while (*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha* 262).

It is here that the audience feels akin to her and feels sympathy for her. This dramatic representation of myth is somewhat different from what is presented in the epic the *Ramayana*. It is here where we find the mingling of fact and fiction. It is for this representation for performative act that the original story line is altered and the audience feels sympathy as well as empathy for the character.

Sengupta has always been aware of the fact that “a play in the pages of a book is not a finished product (*India International Centre Quarterly* 116). She adds that the “acting area, however big or small it may be, however formal or informal, is, for a time, a sacred, creative space” where the characters enact their given roles that gets influenced by several factors as they have diverse background and ideology (*India International Centre Quarterly* 116). Badal Sircar, another noted playwright, opines in this connection:

The people in action are people like us, but also different from us, detached from us. They did not come through the same doors that we used, and they would go out by a different way when the event would be over. Even now, they are not aware of our presence, or are pretending that they are not—which means that are ignoring us, that we are useless to them. But at the same time we *know* that we are not useless; whatever they are doing, they are doing for our sake. Without us, *they* would be useless (12).

The audience may or may not affect the performance at the stage. One can turn the page back but not the performance. The performance on the stage has a series of performances at its back—the repetitions of dialogues, expressions, gestures, mapping the space, etc. during rehearsals. Though the spectators come to the theatre prepared to be illuded, the playwright has always to be mindful of the chosen words and the challenge of choosing it for the play is mostly written to be performed and it has to communicate through the fourth wall. Sengupta elaborates it:

The overarching challenge to the playwright is that the play must work on stage. The transfer from page to performance requires that the writer be clear about the central aspect of theatre. Unlike other performing arts, where the aesthetics of the form is paramount, a dramatic script relies heavily on the spoken word. It is this spoken word that takes us into the private thoughts and emotions of characters who are apparently not performing for us, who are leading their lives in their different ways while we, the audience, watch and hear them through a peephole, a window, a pair of binoculars. We are, in a sense, voyeurs (*India International Centre Quarterly* 115).

The spoken word itself is not sufficient and also not a guarantee of successful communication of message/idea to the audience and the playwright has to remain alert, throughout the process of writing the play, regarding the how of it. Sengupta elaborates it further:

I must remember not only the inherent cogency of my writing, but must be aware, always, that my play is meant for performance, that I must be conscious of the logic and the laws of the stage. I must also be aware that my writing will be conveyed to an audience through a ‘middleman’; that it will go through another and a different creative process through the theatre director. Perhaps the most important element that I must be mindful of is that a dramatic narrative has a direct impact on an audience with a powerful and potential impetus for action. A play also has another important dimension to its impact in performance: its pages cannot be turned back. The playwright cannot be too nuanced or subtle for a motley audience (*India International Centre Quarterly* 114).

In *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha*, the playwright communicates, in addition to words, expressions and gestures, through the costume and the set—the restroom, which remains before the eyes of the public to be seen and felt, is used for costume change and, when the characters come out of that, how s/he is changed in mood and expression. “I realized,” Sengupta emphasises in an interview, “how important it was to give specific tones and speech patterns to characters so that they do not speak the same way, so that their thinking itself is particular to them. This distinctness makes for sharpness in character delineation” (*Asian Theatre Journal* 87) The audience takes it for granted that every time the restroom is used for costume, the person that comes out of it is a changed man—either a contemporary man/woman or Shakuni/Shoorpanakha. “It’s a recognition game,” Sircar asserts, and the playwright “knows the man he has put in his play as a character, the director recognizes the man and helps the performer to recognize him, the performer copies the man in his performance so that the spectator can also recognize him” (17).

Shakuni wanted revenge, as he asserts, “[h]ot...bloody...fanged revenge” (*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha* 262). He calls himself “an illusionist,” like Shoorpanakha (*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha* 263). His bone of contention, however, was the marriage of her sister to a blind king: “They brought her

ceremoniously...grandly...for a royal wedding...a grand royal wedding...to be married to a...blind man..." (*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha* 264). He did nothing but "ranted and raved" (*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha* 265). Out of anger, he adds, his sister also blindfolded herself. A look at the conversation between Man (Shakuni) and Woman (Shoorpanakha), at this point, is worth noticing:

MAN: You? Shoorpanakha?The demoness?

WOMAN: I belong to the mighty asura clan.

MAN: And you know all the tricks. You use beauty, the illusion of beauty, don't you, to trap all those poor fools? Like that purple flower with an exotic Latin name...and then when they get close they smell the garlic. And the blood of the men you have gorged on.

WOMAN: How dare you say this to me?

MAN: What do you have to be angry about, ogress? You tried to seduce a married man...he repulsed you. So what? You could always have tried your art on other married fools.

WOMAN: I fell in love with him, don't you see? I was all open to him...like the earth receiving the rain. And he...he was entranced too. He talked to me as if...as if he needed all those arguments...about respectability and fucking commitment... to keep away from me. Otherwise if I so much as touched his elbow, he would crumple into my arm and suck the breath out through my lips.

The MAN snorts.

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

WOMAN: Yes. I did. Is that wrong?

*Pause.*

WOMAN: But then something strange happened. Has it happened to you? You think of somebody



all the time...all the bloody time...while you are working... eating... travelling... even when you are asleep...And then it's not just sex anymore. It's... (*Softly*)it's as if I am dissolved in him, his body outlines mine, his fingertips awaken everything I touch.

*Pause*

WOMAN: Your sister lost only her sight. I lost myself...I lost me.

*Pause.*

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

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

WOMAN: Oh, ... 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. (*Thus Spake Shoorpanakha*265-67)

This dialogue between Shoorpanakha and Shakuni points at several aspects of myths that have never been, perhaps, known or explored but represented in the play by the playwright. Shoorpanakha, though she admits to be a part of 'mighty asura clan,' she objects to be called a 'demoness' or 'ogress'. The audience also witness how she expresses her love and infatuation—being 'lost' in love. Another important point that the audience notes is her objection against not being recognized as a woman. But a more important point is her statement 'I can't hurt anyone anymore. I have lost the need to hurt' which is in contradiction to her later behaviour when she picks up the suitcase carrying explosives and almost starts marching for another havoc—another massacre of contemporary mankind. Thus, the audience notes, her character is unreliable and one cannot completely agree with what she says about the incident that took place between her and the two brothers,

and the depth and dignity of her expressed love becomes doubtful.

Shakuni, to come back to the ‘illusionist’, remained engrossed in making plots to avenge the wrongs done to his sister and, indirectly to him. He asserts:

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 (*Thus SpakeShoorpanakha* 269).

So he started the war between the brothers, between the teacher and the taught, and between friends. He becomes the reason of the “mother of all wars” (*Thus SpakeShoorpanakha* 269). The audience, then, comes to know the earlier story of Shakuni—of how he, along with his brothers, was taken a prisoner and cast into a dungeon. His brothers would give him their ration to let Shakuni live and take revenge. His brothers died one by one and when he was unexpectedly released, he found everyone busy with the preparations for his sister’s marriage with one of the clans that imprisoned him and his brothers. This part of the play, the audience know, is not a part of the myth associated with the *Mahabharata* and hence they do not trust the character. In this way, the character of Shakuni has dubious authenticity and cannot be taken as a genuine representative of the myth. The reality, as the playwright has successfully presented in the play, is that he is the one who has brought the suitcase having explosives in it for a mass destruction. He is “the villain ... the sly, cunning manipulator” (*Thus SpakeShoorpanakha* 274).

The characters of Poile Sengupta perform and represent not only through words, expressions or gestures but also through pauses and silences. The strategy, it seems, is the fact that when words fail, pause/silence communicates better. The playwright maintains in this connection:

Apart from the words, however, theatre uses movement and gesture and also, paradoxically, silence as elements of communication. In fact, among all forms of literature and the performing arts, it is theatre that uses silence as a significant, powerful and effective device (*India International Centre*

*Quarterly* 119).

The play is full of pauses and silences with pregnant meanings. Look at the this short dialogue:

WOMAN: I better warn you. I have high connections.

*Silence.*

WOMAN: One of my brothers ... my stepbrother actually ... is rich enough to buy up all the Middle East.

*Pause.*

WOMAN: And my brother, who will do anything for me, is as ... as strong and ... and as powerful as ten men ...

*Silence.*

Man does neither speak nor respond as if he is a patient listener or a person being silenced after the threats. He is, in a way, in the process of othering and is being turned into a subaltern. The more important point to note here is the use of ellipses. Woman, it seems, gropes for words to threaten Man and, during this process, represents her mind or, in other words, her character. The play is full of such pregnant ellipses, pauses and silences that fill the gap between the spoken words and adds to the sparking performative representation of the characters, their mind, and their postmodern inability, if we dare to say so, to express well through words.

The play keeps oscillating between present and past. The entire play takes place at the airport but the characters keep going to ancient times through their memory lanes and recollect their past and how they had been ostracized and subjugated to social periphery and, forgotten entirely after their roles got finished in the scheme of things. The focus of the playwright to weave in the diverse stories into a single one is to highlight how the society, then and now, relegates those people to marginality that become vehicles in overturning the storylines and bring tragedy to humanity. Shoorpanakha and Shakuni are idols of evil, as the myths go, who, by their evil designs, bring twists to the otherwise linear stories and heighten the climax leading to tragic events that bring mass destruction. Shashi Deshpande, in her introduction to *Women Centre Stage* writes:

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 victim 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).

Though Sengupta seems to take sides of these two characters in the narrative, she fails to eschew the truth that evil minds rarely change and, thus, the contemporary Shoorpanakha and Shakuni are shown to become vehicles in bringing destruction and human casualty toward the end of the play. Though they leave the briefcase having explosives at the airport, this representation is once again dubious as the audience remains suspicious whether the explosion will take place or not.

## WORKS CITED

- Deshpande, Shashi. "Introduction". *Women Centre Stage: The Dramatist and the Play* by Poile Sengupta. Routledge, 2010.
- Kalhat, Javier. "Varieties of Representation". *Philosophy*, vol. 91, no. 355, January 2016, pp. 15-37. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26419247](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26419247). Accessed 26 February 2022.
- Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Routledge, 1993.
- Prendergast, Christopher. *The Triangle of Representation*. Columbia UP, 2000.
- Reinelt, Janelle. "Introduction". *Key Words: Journal of Cultural Materialism*, 2017, no. 15, pp. 9-22. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/26920433](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26920433). Accessed 26 February 2022.
- Schechner, Richard. "Behavior, Performance, and Performance Space". *Perspecta*, vol. 26, 1990, pp. 97-102. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/1567156](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1567156). Accessed 10 March 2022.
- . "Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance". *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 17, no. 3, Sept. 1973, pp. 5-36. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/1144841](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1144841). Accessed 26 February 2022.

- . “Performance Studies: The Broad Spectrum Approach”. *TDR*, vol. 32, no. 3, Autumn 1988, pp. 4-6. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/1145899](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1145899). Accessed 10 March 2022.
- Sengupta, Poile. “Theatre: A Playwright’s Illusion”. *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 2, Autumn 2014, pp. 113-20. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/24390754](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24390754). Accessed 24 February 2022.
- . *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha: So Said Shakuniin. Women Centre Stage: The Dramatist and the Play*. Routledge, 2010.
- Sengupta, Poile & Anita Singh. “An Interview with Poile Sengupta”. *Asian Theatre Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1, Spring 2012, pp. 78-88. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/23359545](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23359545). Accessed 24 February 2022.
- Sircar, Badal. “The Changing Language of Theatre”. Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1982.
- States, Bert O. “Performance as Metaphor”. *Theatre Journal*, March 1996, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 1-26. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/3208711](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3208711). Accessed 26 February 2022.