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Rewriting the "Villain": Gender, Desire, and Counter-Narratives in Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni by Poile Sengupta

Santosh Solanki[1]
Ph D Scholar, JNVU Jodhpur
Prof Satish Kumar Harit[2]
HoD of English Department, JNVU Jodhpur

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Abstract:

Poile Sengupta's play Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni constitutes a significant feminist intervention in contemporary Indian English drama through its radical re-reading of two of the most vilified figures from Indian epic tradition. By revisiting Shoorpanakha from the Ramayana and Shakuni from the Mahabharata, Sengupta interrogates the ideological mechanisms through which villainy is constructed, legitimised, and preserved in cultural memory. Set within a contemporary airport lounge, the play collapses temporal boundaries between myth and modernity, allowing suppressed epic voices to enter present-day discourse. This paper examines how Sengupta reclaims Shoorpanakha and Shakuni as speaking subjects whose marginalisation emerges not from inherent moral failure but from patriarchal, political, and narrative power structures. Through dialogic confrontation, emotional testimony, and the representation of bodily and narrative violence, the play foregrounds female desire, humiliation, mutilation, revenge, and historical silencing. The study argues that Sengupta exposes storytelling itself as an act of power and reveals how dominant narratives convert injustice into moral necessity. By destabilising rigid epic binaries of hero and villain, the play urges a critical re-evaluation of cultural memory, ethical judgement, and the authority of myth within Indian English feminist theatre.

Keywords: Poile Sengupta; Indian English feminist drama; myth revision; epic counter-narratives; gendered violence; female desire and body politics; political demonisation; narrative power; silenced voices

Introduction

Indian English drama in the post-Independence period has increasingly turned to myth as a critical rather than devotional resource. Women dramatists, in particular, have revisited epic narratives to interrogate the gendered assumptions embedded within them.

Myths that were once treated as repositories of unquestionable moral truth are now examined as ideological constructs shaped by power, patriarchy, and historical privilege. This shift reflects a broader feminist concern with representation, voice, and authority, especially in narratives that have traditionally marginalised women and dissenting figures. In this context, Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni by Poile Sengupta occupies a significant position within contemporary Indian English drama. Published in Women Centre Stage: The Dramatist and the Play and spanning pages 242–282, the play exemplifies Sengupta's sustained engagement with feminist concerns, narrative power, and silenced voices.

The play is framed through a contemporary encounter between a Man and a Woman waiting at an airport due to a delayed flight. This modern, transient setting functions as a liminal space where time is suspended and moral certainties are unsettled. Sengupta deliberately situates myth in this space of waiting in order to detach it from ritual reverence and relocate it within everyday discourse. The airport becomes a symbolic threshold where inherited narratives are questioned rather than accepted, and where the past enters the present through conversation rather than spectacle. By choosing such a setting, Sengupta foregrounds the act of narration itself as provisional, contested, and deeply political.

The dialogic structure of the play reinforces this interrogation. The Man represents dominant cultural memory, comfortable with inherited epic judgements and resistant to reinterpretation. The Woman, in contrast, functions as the interrogator of received truths, persistently questioning the moral certainties attached to epic figures. Their interaction stages a conflict between fixed belief and critical inquiry. This dramatic tension transforms the audience into active participants, compelling them to reassess their own assumptions about heroism, villainy, and justice. Myth, in Sengupta's play, is no longer a closed story but an ongoing argument.

Shoorpanakha's re-presentation forms the emotional and ideological core of the play. In dominant versions of the Ramayana, Shoorpanakha is remembered as a grotesque embodiment of excessive female desire, often reduced to comic relief whose punishment appears morally justified. Sengupta dismantles this stereotype by restoring emotional interiority to Shoorpanakha's actions. Desire, in the play, is not depicted as predatory or obscene but as a deeply human impulse that becomes transgressive only within patriarchal moral systems. Shoorpanakha's articulation of longing is rendered with vulnerability and intensity:

"To want a man so much that… that the rest of the world disappears.
To feel your body stretch towards another body,
not in shame, not in trickery,
but in the simple, foolish hope
that desire might be answered with desire."
(Sengupta 256)

This articulation reframes Shoorpanakha not as a moral aberration but as a woman punished for speaking desire openly. Sengupta exposes how female desire, when unmediated by silence or modesty, is swiftly coded as dangerous. The epic narrative's condemnation thus emerges not from ethical transgression but from patriarchal anxiety surrounding autonomous female sexuality.

The humiliation Shoorpanakha endures further reveals the violence embedded in epic storytelling. Before physical mutilation occurs, she is subjected to sustained ridicule and manipulation. Sengupta transforms what is traditionally presented as harmless teasing into a scene of psychological violation:

"They laughed.
They teased me.
Mocked me.
Tossed me this way and that,
as if I were a game,
as if I did not deserve any more respect than that."
(Sengupta 258)

Ridicule functions here as a disciplinary mechanism, stripping Shoorpanakha of dignity and agency. Sengupta reveals how laughter becomes an instrument of power, enabling cruelty while maintaining moral legitimacy. By foregrounding humiliation as violence, the play challenges the audience to reconsider the ethical foundations of epic humour.

The act of mutilation that follows is presented not as righteous punishment but as symbolic erasure. Sengupta frames the cutting of Shoorpanakha's nose as an attempt to discipline the female body and silence dissent:

"They cut off what stood out.
What marked her.
What made her visible.
What refused to stay in place.
A body must be disciplined,
a voice must be silenced."
(Sengupta 260)

Through this moment, Sengupta connects bodily violence with narrative violence. Shoorpanakha's disfigurement ensures that her story will be remembered through shame rather than suffering. Her pain is absorbed into cultural memory as moral necessity, revealing how patriarchal narratives convert injustice into virtue.

The inclusion of Shakuni widens Sengupta's critique by shifting attention from gendered desire to political marginalisation. Traditionally remembered as the mastermind of deceit in the Mahabharata, Shakuni is reduced in epic memory to a symbol of manipulation and moral corruption. Sengupta resists this flattening by contextualising Shakuni's actions within a history of dispossession, humiliation, and strategic survival. Rather than presenting Shakuni as inherently evil, the play foregrounds the conditions that shape his antagonism. Shakuni repeatedly draws attention to the selective morality of epic storytelling, where cunning employed by the powerful is celebrated as wisdom, while similar strategies used by the marginalised are condemned as treachery. He questions why violence committed openly in the name of righteousness is legitimised, while resistance enacted through strategy is demonised (Sengupta 271). Sengupta thus exposes how power determines ethical judgement. The play further links Shakuni's actions to historical injury rather than personal ambition alone.

His resentment is rooted in loss—of kingdom, dignity, and voice. Sengupta allows Shakuni to reflect on how defeat fixes moral identity, while victory grants absolution. His role in the dice game becomes a lens through which epic hypocrisy is revealed, as manipulation is condemned only when it threatens dominant authority (Sengupta 273).

Unlike Shoorpanakha, whose body becomes the site of punishment, Shakuni's punishment is narrative. His legacy is shaped entirely by how history remembers him. Sengupta highlights that Shakuni is denied interiority in dominant versions of the Mahabharata; his motives are never explored, only his outcomes judged. By restoring voice to Shakuni, the play challenges the erasure of complexity and insists that history is written by victors. His observation that morality follows power underscores the play's central concern with narrative authority (Sengupta 275).

By placing Shoorpanakha and Shakuni side by side, Sengupta reveals how villainy is gendered yet structurally similar. Shoorpanakha is punished for sexual autonomy, while Shakuni is condemned for political intelligence. Both transgress boundaries established by dominant power, and both are reduced to cautionary figures whose complexity must be erased to preserve moral order.

The Man's resistance to both reinterpretations mirrors the audience's discomfort when familiar narratives are unsettled. Sengupta transforms listening into an ethical act, compelling spectators to confront their complicity in accepting inherited judgements without scrutiny. Interpretation itself becomes a site of struggle where meaning is negotiated rather than inherited.

Ultimately, Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni critiques patriarchy not only as a social system but as a narrative force that governs memory, morality, and legitimacy.

Sengupta demonstrates that stories are instruments of power that determine whose suffering is acknowledged and whose is erased. By granting speech to historically silenced figures, the play reclaims myth as a space of resistance and ethical questioning. It urges readers and spectators alike to reconsider epic authority and to recognise that moral categories are not timeless truths but ideological constructions shaped by power.

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