


## Chapter 15

# “It’s My Story”: Revisioning of Myth in *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni* by Poile Sengupta

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### ABSTRACT

*The imposing corpus of Indian mythology has long stood uncontested and unquestioned as a repository of narratives that demarcate the heroes and the villains with the collective sympathy leaning towards the former. The depiction of the antagonists in epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were carefully constructed to cement their positions as figures that would incite hatred and disgust and as foils to their infallible hero counterparts. The purpose of this chapter is to reconsider the character of Shoorpanakha as a victim of circumstance and masculine domination as opposed to the malevolent individual that she is portrayed in the epics, through the lens of subalternity and feminism, as represented in Sengupta’s play Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni. The conscious decision of giving a voice to those who were vilified and shunned is an instance of revisioning. It defies conventional knowledge of the two crucial metanarratives and the dominating discursive practices. It does not lend itself to the restricting binary of good and evil and allows agency to own their narrative.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The epic as a genre has been extensively defined in academia and has a set of distinguishing characteristics that demarcate it from other genres. It is accepted that a long narrative work that delineates the heroic deeds and adventures of an individual(s) can be classified under this terminology. Romila Thapar furthers this definition by critically looking at the genre in her essay *The Historian and the Epic* (1979) and comments, “(...) the epic is essentially a literary crystallisation of the heroic ideal. By its very nature, therefore, it is not to be taken as factual evidence but as the representation of an ideal.” (p.199) Epics, therefore, act as an agent of consolidation for the ideals that a particular society upholds and strives to attain.

The *Ramayana* is subjected to the same treatment as characters are portrayed as the epitome of perfection by the juxtaposition to an ‘evil’ and ‘deformed’ counterpart. Ram and Ravan have been moulded to create an intensive polarity that cements their positions in the hero/villain binary. This is doubly suppressive to the female characters as patriarchal ideology dictates that they have to be subservient and demure in order to add credibility to their femininity.

The concept of the Ideal Feminine is a common theme among the literatures of the world, both ancient and modern. An appropriate example that can attest to this is the verse-novel *The Angel in the House* written by Coventry Patmore (1866) that spread the Victorian idea of the perfect woman which was later heavily criticised by feminists; Virginia Woolf going so far as writing, “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.” (*The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays*, 2012). This behavior would not be acceptable to the largely conservative audience that metanarratives like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, whose core values were seen as an essential way of Hindu life.

This paper aims to scrutinize the way revisioning aids in providing a voice to the marginalised female character of Shoorpanakha. She is a mythological figure that went down in the annals of history as a despicable character who incited the war between Ram and Ravan and responsible for thousands of casualties on both sides. It will also inspect the harmful projection of the ideal onto the same and how Sengupta untangles the prejudice and judgment that is woven around the mythical figure, through her play.

### **The Subaltern Speaks: Revisioning as a Tool of Agency**

Kiran Budkuley in *Mahabharata Myths in Contemporary Writing: Challenging Ideology* says, “Myths continue to inspire/provoke the contemporary writer’s creative impulse and pose for him/her the challenge of analysing, questioning, countering or subverting their apparent and or/concealed ideology by re-working or re-visioning

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