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A POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE OF VEENAPANI CHAWLA'S PLAY  
*THE HARE AND THE TORTOISE*

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century movement which continues to have a tremendous influence on art and literature. Postmodern techniques are a constant source of inspiration for the contemporary Indian playwrights. In the plays, varied metanarratives like Mahabharata and Ramayana are deconstructed and readers are given the choice of plurality of interpretations. Adishakti Laboratory of Theatre Art Research is an innovative and radical theatre group who employs myths to question the established norms and ideologies of society.

This study investigates the postmodernist concerns of Veenapani Chawla, the pioneer playwright of Adishakti Productions. Chawla's revolutionary work, *The Hare and the Tortoise* is analyzed for this paper. The play employs myths and legends to address the relevant issues of society including gender inequality, LGBT discrimination etc. India is a cradle of myths and they have become a source of encouragement for the contemporary Indian Theatre practices. The structure of myths are so flexible that they provide the possibility of plurality of interpretations. Thus, *The Hare and the Tortoise* throws light on the importance of hybridity of the polarities of male/female, reason/emotion, time/space, and right/left. This paper studies the theatrical techniques and themes of *The Hare and the Tortoise* and tries to prove Veenapani Chawla's positive contribution towards the concept hybridity, from the perspective of gender, psychological and cultural representation.

Keywords: Postmodern, Indian Theatre, hybridity, *The Hare and the Tortoise*, ideology, gender roles

Postmodernism is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century movement popularized by philosophers including Jean Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault etc. Postmodernism as Lyotard defines "is the incredulity towards metanarratives" (7) and on this regard Hooti and Shooshtarian remarks, "Postmodern theories are highly doubtful about endeavors to establish or comprehend the society on the basis of universal values, methods or ideas" (73).

Postmodern literature adopts different techniques to retain a perspective of disdain towards the established norms and icons and these techniques are a constant source of inspiration for the contemporary Indian Theatre practices. Adishakti Productions is one such Theatre Research group who innovatively employ the techniques to address the relevant issues of society including gender inequality, LGBT discrimination etc.

Renowned playwrights of Adishakti including Veenapani Chawla, Vinay Kumar and Nimmy Raphel are some of the exponents who approached these issues through a different lens and championed the idea of hybridity.

Veenapani Chawla's *The Hare and the Tortoise*, thus, is an innovative work inspired by Nolini Gupta's essay "A Crisis of the Evolving Soul". The mythical and literary characters from East and West like Arjuna, Hamlet, Ganesha, Ekalavya and Kartikeya come together in this play. The play follows no linear narrative structure and the binaries of 'high' and 'low' art are fragmented when the Hare and the Tortoise come along as eponymous protagonists. In "Going beyond the human context: Contemporizing the Past", author remarks, "Their race becomes the main theme and metaphor for the other competing pairs such as Kartikeya and Ganapati, Arjuna and Ekalavya, Hamlet and Arjuna" (194).

The characters are delineated as modern humanized characters. Ekalavya, played by a woman, is seen playing badminton with an unseen partner. She loses her thumb but she plays without her arm, "the body moving like a bow and the eyes as arrows" (2). The play extols Ekalavya not as a failure, but as a victorious warrior as he/she trained himself/herself without an external agency. She declares confidently to Arjuna, "I become the bow, I become the arrow, and I become the target in a single moment of time... That is the difference between us" (5).

Ganapati is portrayed as a shadow puppet and becomes the referee of the race between hare and tortoise. Ganapati then mocks the idea of binaries by singing

The slow and the fastest were gone.

On a race, which seemed all wrong.

For fast and faster can compete, But who can slowest race to beat.

As for me, Old Ganapati- The race began simultaneously.

But I reached my goal instantly". (3)

Ganapati's mythical challenge with Kartikeya to circle the world for three times is thus paralleled with the race between hare and tortoise.

The meta-narratives like Mahabharata and Ramayana are thus deconstructed and the oppressed characters are given a voice. Their psychological dilemmas are also discussed vividly using modern terms. Hamlet is delineated as a victim of paranoia. "It is one of the Postmodern Issues. Paranoia is a thinking process assumed to be deeply influenced by worry or anxiety, frequently to the point of illusion and illogicality (Hariharasudan 46). Arjuna and Hamlet get in to a disillusioned state when they fail to meet the expectations of society. They are traumatized by the societal codifications of gender roles as they are expected to resort to violence and vengeance to manifest masculinity.

H: Once upon a time—

The times were rotten—

A: My hand trembled

H: I couldn't kill my enemy...

A: I shrank from the burden of living

Hamlet's and Arjuna's mindset is confined within the ideologies of society and they struggle within the bounds in vain. Their predicament is vivid when Hamlet asks Arjuna, "Is my depression due to a chemical imbalance? Or an emotional conflict? Do I need medication or physiotherapy? Or both?" (8). Author uses these modern terms because "postmodernist literature is admittedly 'populist'. It avoids elitist, literary language prompting the arbitrary and the playful" (Hariharasudan 69).

"Language in an Absurdist play, is often dislocated, full of clichés, puns, and repetitions" (Encyclopaedia Britannica 3). In *The Hare and the Tortoise* characters often repeat their dialogues which makes it verbal

nonsense. This can be seen in Act I, Scene 3 when the tortoise taunts hare when he explains the reason for his failure in the race.

H: Because I went off course

T: Off course?

H: Of course

T: Of course

H: Off course

T: Of course you went off course. And why was that? (2).

Language plays a key role in the play as it addresses the postmodern ideas. The Hare and the Tortoise champions the idea of plurality by incorporating different Indian languages in to the play. The characters speak Hindi, Telugu, Tamil and English during the course of the incidents in a casual manner. The hare switches his language from Marathi to English and then to Hindi with peculiar ease when he cries "Ai guh! Vissarlo! I forget the zero! Side parking mein laude lage (3).

The play also blurs the boundaries of elitist and popular culture by including popular movie dialogues during serious discussions. When Ganapati advocates the need of breaking the binaries, the hare is seen crying in despair, "Tortoise won the race? Are Mera Kya hoga Kalia? (3) Tortoise, on the other hand, outwits hare with his exceptional numerical abilities. Tortoise immediately answers the numerical questions asked by hare and says that he does it with the help of intuition. Hare ironically replies,

H: AY! Ramanujan ke bache, these are mathematical problems. They have to be solved using the principles of mathematics. Where are the immediate steps, the sequential calculations, the logical conclusions? Kha gaye?

T: Those are only software subsystems. Besides, they take too long. I love immediacy.(3)

Through the expert use of verbal puns and ironic statements, *The Hare and the Tortoise* promotes the idea of hybridity and plurality. Hamlet is conditioned by the societal norms and it is clear when he asks, "Is there answers outside knowledge" (1)? His knowledge is limited this leads to disillusionment and depression. Arjuna overcomes this predicament with "meta soliloquy", i.e. "a soliloquy about a soliloquy". Arjuna instructs Hamlet to transcend the boundaries of knowledge and "to go beyond the soliloquy to the infinity"(201).

There was a knowledge seeker

Hedged by human limits

He sacrificed the main road

To take a zig zag by lane.

And though he lost much time

He grew a wiser man. (10)

Veenapani Chawla effectively mixes ancient mythical characters and ideas in to a contemporary setting and advices us not to limit ourselves within the bounds of ideology. Adishakti also employs innovative theatrical techniques in *The Hare and the Tortoise* to prove that hybrid is a potent creative force. They introduce the balletic and masculine movements from Kalaripayattu, along with the music patterns of Koodiyattam and contemporary jazz music which enhances the creative performance expressions of the actors. Veenapani Chawla comments, "The answer is in being hybrid...to always be pluralistic-not to be conditioned by ideologies" (Anima).

The Hare and the Tortoise can thus be regarded as a postmodern work of art which celebrates plurality and eliminates totalitarianism. It breaks the foundations of the metanarratives like Mahabharata and Ramayana to champion a new vision.

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