

CHARANDAS CHOR: A STUDY ON THE PLAYWRIGHT'S CLAIM

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Abstract

"The drama is at once the most peculiar, the most elusive, and the most enthralling of all types of literature." (Nicoll.11) Habib Tanvir (1 September 1923 8 June 2009), an undeniable genius in Indian drama, earned worldwide fame, recognition and applause with his unique production Charandas Chor. Presentation of the dark and seamy side of the society tinged with moral debasement while can be easily stressed out as its thematic tempo, its stylistic contour also claims sincere attention from the drama lover. All these empower the play with such a rare uniqueness that the playwright asserts its likeness with the monumental classical tragedies. 'Classicism denotes a set of beliefs, attitudes, and values presumed to be grounded in the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome.' (Bedford 59) The playwright's equivocal declaration though affirms this proximity; his own hesitation overcasts a shroud of ambivalence. This present paper attempts to light up the darkness prevalent regarding this issue by discussing its textural and structural similarity and dissimilarity with a classical one.

Key Words: Classicism, Tragedy, Protagonist, Hubris, Morality, Society, Fate

INTRODUCTION:

"As we have seen throughout history, such people (like Charandas) are always eliminated. So the inevitability was perfect. That was my argument, that is, in the classical sense, a perfect tragedy. It makes you laugh till the last moment and suddenly you're silent." (Katyal 34)

Though few words later in his interview with Anjum Katyal, Habib Tanvir, a shining star in the galaxy of Indian drama, hesitates to define category of his possibly most famous and controversial eponymous play Charandas Chor and gives way to ambiguousness: "No. I don't know what it is. It's difficult to put it in a category" (Katyal 34) – his previous

declaration creates scope for critical study on this play, using the essentialities which constitute classical Greek tragedy.

The undertaking creates opportunity for sincere exploration and deep analysis not only of the dramatic personas but of the issues presented with 'conscious' attempt by the playwright. Though while pinpointing the play's temperamental nearness to a classical one, Tanvir pays extra care to the 'inevitable' tragic ending Charandas has to face, the thematic concerns also demand penetrative focus.

Actually, before Aristotle, there was no theoretical formation regarding classical tragedies. His brilliant and illuminating precept, captured in Poetics, is based on 'the very finest works of tragic inspiration which Greek could offer.' (Nicoll 12) Performances of Athenian tragedy worked as a backbone of his unparallel design. Though his definition of tragedy and other essentialities are based on mainly on Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, and are sometimes appear elusive; their uniqueness and pervasiveness are hard to discredit. He defines tragedy as:

"A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories ... with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its 'catharsis' of such emotions." (Bywater 35)

He gives importance on 'catharsis' (purgation and purification) which would be resulted from the 'pity' and 'fear' of the audience as they become emotionally attached to the 'catastrophe' (change of fortune) of the 'protagonist' (tragic hero) who consequently meet the ending because of 'peripeteia' (reversal of intention) and 'anagnoresis' (recognition). And what happens "[I]n most of the ancient (classical) tragedies, the 'hamartia' causes the protagonist to break a divine or moral law with disaster and misery as the consequences." (Bedford 484)

While discussing about the thematic concerns of classical Greek tragedies, Kimball King opines:

"This is not to say that Greek tragedies did not confront serious issues: rather Greek tragedies confronted some of the most difficult issues of their times, probing questions of race, religion, morality, social justice and politics." (King 13)

A sincere purpose lurks behind these compositions as the tragedians believed, they must conscious and concern the people about ethical distortion and disturbance which may hunt down the mighty civilization. Though a majority of their gems of production have already been lost to the dark cave of oblivion, the surviving ones like, Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound, Oresteia, Agamemnon; Euripides' Medea, Hecuba, The Trojan Woman; Sophocles' Antigone, Oedipus the King, Ajax deal with issues concerning social and individual trajectory between decision and indecision, right and wrong, profit making attitude and self-denial establishment of value. These preoccupation can easily be traced out in Charandas Chor as it in a bird's eye view projects the society with its hollowness, hypocrisy, indiscipline, and indiscretion regarding 'religion, morality, social justice and politics.' This play is a convincing, sincere, industrious and conscious attempt by Tanvir. It perspicaciously deals with issues and situations, persons and perceptibility that are becoming more and more concerning as human civilization is about to catch the zenith.

ANALYSIS:

The play, *Charandas Chor*, begins with Nacha (a chorus that provided commentary through song) applauding Truth and Guru. Truth stands up as one of the fundamental issues distinguishing between truth monopolizer and truth practitioner. A guru traditionally is considered as a person having emblematic knowledge of and control over spiritual realm and materialistic world. He is an ideal embodiment of kindness and diligence. The play commences with equivocal verse glorifying a guru as sole guide towards truth:

“Praise the guru, no one greater,
Who alone brings down tons.

The divine nectar of Truth.”(*Mindscapes* 111)

-And few lines later the role and duty of a guru is contextualized:

Our guru does teach us
That Truth is so precious,
Only a handful can
Uphold the truth;

.....
.....

Satyanam! Satyanam! Satyanam!

(*Mindscapes*, 112)

A guru is a seeker of divine truth. He is expected to be the getaway to the divine power to whose sacred altar he immolates worldly pleasure and pursuit; benefit and opportunity. He is a devotee, worshiper, practitioner, and invigorator of truth. Truth forbids him to mess with crime, expels darkness from his understanding, frees him from perplexion, enlightens him to take right decision; without indulging material benefit and emotional fixation. Here the guru practises dichotomical relationship between his words and deeds, between his demonstration and eager expectation. He does what is not expected and does not what is required. He is sometimes misguided by avarice (he misdirects the Habalder, seeking for Charandas) and sometimes ousted by unethical emotion (he deceives the Minister to help Charandas in his stealing). He even does not hesitate to capitalize on the trust the minister bestows upon him: “Don’t worry, maharaj, I’ll be your eyes.”(*Mindscapes* 145)

The Munim though is bound to maintain immaculate account of the royal coffers, proved as a deceiver. For personal benefit he utilizes the stealing, defalcates five mohurs and puts the blame on Charands. Before the judiciary he denies the crime until Charandas’ clinginess to truth makes him naked. Such falsification is not expected from a high class government employee. Once again, here, covetousness cheats responsibility; wickedness cheats truthfulness.

The Queen is another dramatic persona to be scrutinized under the microscope of Truth. Though she dissuades herself from uttering falsehood, her indigence is exposed through her hostile decision to murder Charandas who comes out as truth identified. The Queen privileges personal desire against Charands’ motto of life. Her failure to reciprocate

with Charandas' depth of truth exposes shallowness of her personality. She deliberately kills 'truth' to remain spotless and perfect in public eye.

Morality is 'principles concerning right and wrong, or good and bad behavior.' (OAL 992) Despite its time specific and culture determined relevancy some set standards remain unchanged. Under this universal applicability a guru is designed as selfless, a landlord is expected to be humane, government employees are considered dutiful, a queen is sketched as an unbiased protector and a thief is deglamorized as an embodiment of illegal activity and a skilled liar.

The Guru, infected with materialistic pursuit, is shamelessly candid in self gratification: "Why don't you (Charandas) just devote your days to looking after my welfare?" (Mindscapes 142) He does not preach without 'guru dakshina' and boldly bargains with a drunkard, a gambler, a smoker, even for a single paisa. Prick of conscience remains 'clawless' in his unperturbed acceptance of 'five mohurs' which he neither earned nor is honored but simply 'given'. This not only posits him as an incontinence seeker of royal benefit but also lays bare his moral eunuchism. Despite his occasional attempts to save skin of Charandas, strain of moral lapses is hard to rub out from his personality.

Moral debasement of administrative persons corresponds to the corruption and disloyalty contaminating this sphere. The Havalder's honest arresting intention is proved phony in his sharing proposition: "Have you (Charandas) done it? If you have, just tell me and I won't report it. We shall share the booty" (Mindscapes 113)

The Minister, an easy prey to praise and eulogy, becomes personal while treating Charandas. The Munim also slips and is exposed as treacher. Self possessiveness and parsimony makes the Landlord so deaf and dumb that lamentation of the suffering fails to moist his heart. The Priest is another faulty character in this regard. Being a worshiper of God he should not put value on wealth and judge honesty of a person on the amount of his donation: "You've made such a generous donation, how can you be a thief?" (Mindscapes 139) Actually, his mind is not directed towards God rather worshiping is for him just a money making profession. Hence, his eyes catches first looting of gold- God comes only second: "Arrey, everything's gone! Everything! (Notices that the idol is missing) Even you, my lord, have left me! Thief! Thief! Thief!" (Mindscapes 140) The Queen too is not up to the mark. She orders her attendants to murder Charandas despite knowing him 'innocent'.

Scarcity of social justice under beneficial politics comes to the surface and is perceived through the tragic consequences Charandas has to undergone. Neither the Queen nor her administration nor the landlord is free from this crime. Even if the Munim and the Minister are proved inefficient and threat to the sovereignty for their respective truthfulness and overstepping of authority; they are not sentenced to spine chilling punishment. The Queen who 'is not simply tyrant but a politician' takes advantage of her superior ruling position and misuses power of both word and muscle for materializing personal desire and caprice. For integrity with truth she admires Charandas and untraditionally makes marriage proposal. But when her bold advancement is about to divulge because of his inclination to truth, love is transformed into angst – soft petals become shining swords. To secure crown and to remain spotless she unhesitatingly plays a dirty and bloody game and this once again

dismantles façade of social justice. Hands expected to custom unbiased and objective social order and justice ruin them in a second for personal vantage.

Vivacious Charandas holds the magic key in both unlocking the vice and meanness in the world of Reliogenicity, Administration and Affluence and in captivating the audience till the end. Where as his confidant assertion: “My name is Charandas and my profession, thieving. Taken together, that makes me Charandas the thief!” (Mindscape.133) echoes his truthfulness. “Good or bad, everyone steals rani-sahib... Others steal on the sly, while I do it in broad daylight. That’s the only difference.” (Mindscapes.150) - configures his condensed comprehension of the hypocritical ploy always playing under the furnished carpet of society. He is a hard to catch thief with essential humanity. Though he loots others he is not stone hearted. Playing with words is his forte and he humorously harasses the Havalder with false impression. Thieves are generally synonymous with cheating, falsification and are considered opportunity seeker. But Charandas in spite of his professional negativity denies fitting in such abysmal categorization. He steals a peasant entirely but becomes compassionate with him “Arrey, what’re yoy blubbering about? I’m asking you what’s happened? Say something!” (Mindscapes.131) He deceives a wealthy merchant’s wife but gets melted by her weeping. As the guru saves him from the Havalder’s lathi, he falls at his feet in supplication. To be his disciple Charandas casually undertakes four vows:

“I’ll never eat off a golden plate.”; “I’ll never mount an elephant and lead a procession.”; “If a queen says, ‘Marry me, marry me!’ I’ll refuse to oblige her”; “If all the people of a country get together and beg,’ Charandas! Be our king, take the throne,’ I’ll refuse. I’ll say,’ No I won’t be your king.” (Mindscapes.126-27)

But the Guru demands serious sacrifice “Give up telling lies.” (Mindscapes 127) Delineating deceptivity of lying – discovering it as reservoir of all evils, the Guru instigates Charandas to live with truth. Uncompromising with occupation Charandas after certain disapproval gives acquiesce, “Guruji, I swear in front of everyone gathered here from now on I’ll never tell a lie. That’s a solemn vow. I stand by it.” (Mindscapes 128) Then almost remaining true to his solemn vows Charandas continues his robbery by dint of his shrewdness and unparallel presence of mind. He loots a landlord and a temple. In the first case he even emerges as a Robin Hood prototype as the chorus sings, “Oh listen, brothers and sisters, to what we have to say. Charandas is not a thief, not a thief, no way...” (Mindscapes 136) He is not a weak hearted thief whose strength lies in beguiling ordinary simple people. To leave a signature of his professional excellence and efficiency he steals only five mohurs from the royal coffers. When the Munim, to hide own avarice, blames Charandas for stealing ten mohurs, his own reputation of truthfulness saves him. The Queen is impressed by his truthfulness and honesty and is attracted by his physical charm. Meanwhile, Charandas does not pay traditional homage to the Queen and denies her preferential benefit. Though this hurts her emotion and pride, the Queen orders the Minister to honor him and she decides to award him. The Minister asks Charandas to ride on the elephant and to lead the procession. But he declines remembering his vows to the Guru. He even refuses to eat food on golden plate, a

rare fortune for a common man, though it puts him behind the bars. When the Queen offers to him both herself and the thrown:

“My life is empty without you, Charandas! I want to marry you... You’ve refused me everything I’ve asked of you so far. Please agree to this one request. The Kingdom needs a king like you...What do you say? Think well before you answer. Don’t refuse me, Charandas.”(Mindscares 160)

Charandas remains entangled by his solemn declaration: “I can’t break my vow. I just can’t.”(Mindscares 161) Angst, disappointed queen asks words of concealment from Charandas but he confesses: “You’re forgetting something... I’ve taken a vow to always tell the truth.”(Mindscares 161) Finally, she lashes out to punish him by death sentence. Charandas, at the cost of remaining truthful, embraces death.

The punishment Charandas has to endure, the penalty he has to subsidize for his fixity with truth, paves way for his ‘inevitable’ tragic ending. On this ground of inevitability, Tanvir positions his tragedy within the domain of classical tragedies: “So for me the tragedy in the sense was perfect because tragedy has to be inevitable.”(Katyal 34) Following Aristotelian precept of a tragic hero ‘an intermediate kind of person’, Charandas is a conglomeration of inhumanity and kindness, avarice and generosity, declivity and protection, treachery and loyalty, pretention and genuinely. Though in most cases the protagonists of classical tragedies belong to royal and aristocratic family, Charandas is a “common man- a heroic, simple man.”(Katyal 34) Yet for his awful predicament and the helpless way of suffering avers his association with them. Charlotte Witt in his essay ‘Tragic Error and Agent Responsibility’ skillfully points out:

“Aristotle thinks that in the finest tragedies the moments of recognition and reversal of the main character are brought on by the agent’s own actions. The agent causes his own downfall, but he does so unknowingly.”(6)

‘Hamartia’ or the ‘error’ or ‘mistake of judgment’ committed by the tragic protagonist constitutes the disastrous consequences which he faces and eventually is doomed. Hubris or ‘over winning pride’ triggers the protagonist towards ‘tragic flaw’, resulting ‘error’ – his / her downfall from ‘happiness to misery’. Charandas’ ‘hamartia’ fits into Charlotte Witt’s convention on this highly disputed term: “Tragic error in an exemplary drama occurs in the space called by a fact of human existing, namely that our own actions can unintentionally occasion extreme reversals of fortune.”(13)For his cataclysm the responsibility goes to his own stiffness with truth.

Despite an eye-washing intention of first four vows, conformability with truth compels Charandas to value those. If thieving is his ‘dharma’, truth is his life. It modifies his ‘telling’, sanctifies his soul. It empowers him to loot the landlord, strengths him to deny the Queen’s unobtainable benevolence, makes him dispassionate to her enticing, amorous, fortunate call. His truthfulness is put in an acid test in his courageous disobey of sovereignty and unprecedented sacrifice of personal benefit. This glorifies his honesty.

But this acceptance demands more meticulous penetration. Inclination to truth works as his 'hamartia'. Though truth fails to disassociate him from thieving, it sharpens his professional expertise and establishes him as a prodigy: a truth speaking thief – a perfect paradox. Avid ambition of 'to get noticed' let his ball of tragedy rolling. Though never telling a lie certifies him as virtuous, his habit of telling only the truth contaminates him, Tanvir pursues: "If habit is a vice and truthfulness becomes a habit, then that too is a vice. As vice sticks to you, so does habit." (Katyal 32)

Pursuit for truth prohibits an ordinary from simple way of living and induces extraordinary achievements. Both the denial and rejection of the Queen's originates from this obligation. Charandas emerges not only as an honest person but as a person hypnotized by truth. Behind his preoccupation, a 'pride' works on- a message is delivered asserting his honesty, truth and integrity. Though he can discern causality behind his vows, he dissipates the Queen's earnest proposition of arranging penance. It's reflects Charandas' inseparable unification with truth as well as his incapability to discern a difference between his personal preoccupation and her eagerness, idealism and necessity, 'self' pride and 'selfless' stooping. If Oedipus' hamartia lies in unintentional wrongdoings, Hamlet's in procrastination, Faustus' in overreaching ambition, Charandas' in entanglement with truth. His own action catapults his tragedy. Here lies magnificence and uniqueness of Charandas- a 'chor' both by chance and choice; a perfect practitioner of Truth as well as a martyr to the same. That's why Nancy Sherman's comment: "tragic error holds the ends and interests of a character" (13) looks catchy and relevant.

Use of Nacha device like the 'chorus' is also significant to establish Tanvir's deep relationship with Chhattisgarh culture and his purpose to mould it as a classical tragedy. Though later 'chorus' lost its usefulness with gradual pleading for onstage enactment, its importance in setting and comment on the action is undeniable. Here Nacha is introduced not only to clear out thematic quintessence but also to leave remark on the actions already done and are going to be done by the protagonist and others. Conclusively the Satnami folk lyrists avoiding their faulty 'reformist vein' materializes Tanvir's dream project.

Hitherto discussion though points to the play's attachment with the traditional classical tragedies, it is tinged with some elemental faults like; on stage presentation of attack, bloodshed and death; the protagonist is not descended from a prestigious high class family, the 'hamartia' can be redeemed on point selfless devotion and sincere dedication to truth. And most importantly, if 'inevitability' to downfall causes it's proximity, Charandas' 'intentional' and 'knowing' action cause the remoteness. Unlike them, here, the protagonist knows what he is going to face. He is very conscious of his actions. Actually he finds no way out. Again, quite ironically Charandas is doomed not because he breaks 'moral law', rather his inclination to truth and morality is not prized in a society where whole system is corrupted, and infringement of rule becomes popular practice. As a whole, it turns out to be a promising but not perfect example of Greek tragedy.

However, it excels in Aristotelian dictum of 'pity' and 'fear'. 'Pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.' (Bedford 484) Whereas 'social construction' disallows us to be with a thief, Charandas' fervent relationship

with truth, sacrifice and consequent downfall allure us to shed tear for him as his death and sacrifice reminds us of Socrates, Jesus Christ, Gandhi and so on devotee of truth and like whom we always dream to become and whose pain and blood touches our heart- shivers our souls.

Tanvir's plan to capture a melodramatic effect for enhancing the tragic intensity is resulted from his deep involvement with Shakespeare. The blood soaked ending works as anti-climax as the piece is imbued with amusement and joviality. This unexpected ending is essential to catch attention of the audience and to squeeze out 'cathartic disposal' from them. Hence, Tanvir himself acknowledges: 'To this day I'm convinced that the death is the secret of its success.' (Katyal 34)

CONCLUSION:

In his interview with Anjum Katyal, Tanvir also fails to determine the generic classification of this play. He labels it as neither tragedy nor comedy. While the breeze of comic costumes it as a comedy; the sudden and unexpected horrible death of Charandas pours tragic effect in it. This ambiguity is not misleading rather a mingling that strikes the audience, satisfies the critic, makes the playwright proud. Interestingly enough, his conjecture is solely mapped on Charandas' 'inevitable' encounter with his 'Fate' and resulting death. The play focalizes on the prevalent unjust and hypocritical practices within a social sphere and counts what is the 'predestined fate' of a person who dares to break this 'law.' Tanvir is subtle enough to sense immediately the imperfection of his claim in positioning the play with the standard examples of classical tragedies. This attempt, keeping all these hesitation and suspension in mind tends to squeeze out the play's thematic, temperamental and structural proximity with the classical ones as well as the cause(s) working behind his unwilling suspension.

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