

Reading Protest in Ratan Thiyam's *Chakravyuha*

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Abstract: A playwright/practitioner uses drama/theatre as a medium to highlight socio-political and cultural issues of contemporary society. The act of writing or staging a play on contemporary issues shows their protest and resistance against any forms of injustice in their society. The paper seeks to highlight how Ratan Thiyam uses an episode from the Mahabharata to relate with contemporary issues of humankind and mark his protest against social injustice. The paper also attempts to show Thiyam's protest against war and violence.

Keywords: drama, contemporary, protest, theatre, violence.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ratan Thiyam is one of the living doyens of world theatre. He is a multifaceted artist and not only works as a playwright and theatre director but also as a music composer, stage lightning expert and painter. His works has received International recognition and has been compared with the works of renowned theatre practitioners like Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook. He is a recipient of Padma Shri (1989) and the International Man of the year award in the field of theatre and humanism (1998-99). Thiyam's works probes into contemporary human conditions and tries to question some of the concerns of contemporary society. His continuous search for peace is reflected in most of his works.

II. CHAKRAVYUHA

Chakravyuhais based on the Dorna Parva episode from the epic of *Mahabharata*. Thiyam uses the story of Abhimanyu to critique war and violence. The play is an attempt by the playwright/practitioner to study the politics of manipulation which happens in our society and to assess the politics of manipulation which targets an individual to ultimately make him the victim. It also tries to question the idea of heroism or patriotism which leads an individual to decide to sacrifice his/her life for the cause. According to Thiyam, *Chakravyuha* was directed for the contemporary audience and it has nothing to do with the era of Mahabharata. He says, "Whatever I wanted to say, speak, express-that was for the younger generation, an IAS officer, a bureaucrat or an IPS officer and so on" (The Audience 72).

At the very beginning of the play, Thiyam tries to relate the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas with the conflict found in contemporary society. Through the character of the Sutradhara, Thiyam compares the war arrangements between the Kauravas and the Pandavas with the building tensions between Nations of the World. Just like the Kauravas and the Pandavas have their flags which represent them, "each and every nation of this world has its own flag by which it is identified" (Thiyam 10). Also the Sutradhara ironically points out that "two flags in proximity mean friendship and flags apart mean..... means enmity" (10). Here Thiyam brings in the politics of flags, where flags become National symbols and has the power to unite as well as divide people.

Thiyam then goes on to highlight the process of manipulation that takes place at many levels of our existence. He describes the manipulation of Drona where Shakuni and the Kauravas try to incite Drona into forming the *Chakravyuha* by questioning Drona's loyalty to the Kauravas. Drona in order to prove wrong the accusations of favouring the Pandavas and to mark his loyalty to the Kauravas agrees to form the *Chakravyuha* - "the cosmic formation of military warfare" (Thiyam 20) and kill one chief charioteer of the Pandavas. Similarly on the Pandava camp, Abhimanyu is manipulated by Bheema and Yudhishtira to make him enter the *Chakravyuha*. Both the Pandavas knew that the young warrior does not know the way out of the *Chakravyuha* but they encouraged Abhimanyu to enter the *Chakravyuha*. We can sense the manipulation of Abhimanyu by the Pandava brothers from their promises and praises for Abhimanyu. Yudhishtira says:

O Abhimanyu, O valiant warrior.....try and penetrate the vyuha by whatever means you know. You enter by one gate and we shall follow you. We will follow and protect you wherever you go. Remember you are as valiant and expert at arms as your father (35).

Bheema also promises full support to Abhimanyu once he enters the gate of Chakravyuha. He says, "if you succeed in breaking through even a slight opening in the Chakravyuha, we will rush in full strength and destroy the Kaurava armies" (35). This clearly indicates both Yudhishtira and Bheema's intention of visiting the young warrior. They even silenced Abhimanyu's grandfather Sumitra who tried to dissuade Abhimanyu from entering the Chakravyuha. Sumitra is helpless with both Yudhishtira and Bheema strongly condemning him from speaking up for Abhimanyu. One can sense from the behaviour of both the Pandava brothers that they had come to Abhimanyu with a plan. Their intention was to use the young warrior in the war and sacrifice him for the cause of the Pandavas. Therefore when Abhimanyu entered the Chakravyuha he faces betrayal and death.

In analyzing the behaviour of the two Pandava brothers towards Abhimanyu, Kavita Nagpal is of the opinion that "what Ratan tries to do is discover the blackmail involved in the relationship. Abhimanyu is not born of Draupadi but Subhadra. Bheema and Yudhishtira are not really responsible for him as their own son" (xxx). Also we can agree with Pinak Sankar Bhattacharya who observed that the behaviour of the two Pandava brothers towards Abhimanyu symbolizes the war mongering leader, who out of his own interest compels his entire army and countrymen towards apocalypse. Further he opines that they even symbolize the corrupt political leaders who spin the web of false promises and grip the general public before elections to attain authoritative power (in Bhattacharya). Hence we can argue that through these two characters Ratan Thiyam tries to present the selfish side of human beings which drives them to take any measure to fulfil their motives.

We can find Abhimanyu's contemporaneity with the youths of today who are at some point of time manipulated by those in power and in the false notion of nationalism/patriotism are used as tools to meet their demands. Abhimanyu's last speech to the audience "Am I a scapegoat or am I a martyr?" (Thiyam 51), brings into questioning our own existence in relation with the various system/authorities surrounding us. If we consider Abhimanyu's case he is more of a victim than a hero. He is an individual who succumbs to the violence of war and also against the violence committed by his uncles.

Generally we understand violence as the intentional cause of physical harm by a person to any living or non living things. But in the broader sense violence would also include any behaviour of a person against another person which is liable to cause physical or psychological harm. As Gregg Barak says violence is any action or structural arrangement that results in physical or non physical harm to one or more persons (quoted in Haan 32). Also according to Johan Galtung violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations (quoted in Govier 64). Further Galtung and Tord categorizes violence into different types –direct and structural violence. Direct violence is the violence which kills quickly and structural violence that kills slowly (Galtung 73). In *Chakravyuha* we find these two types of violence: direct violence-that is happening in the form of war and structural violence- that is committed by Yudhishtira and Bheema to his nephew.

Chakravyuha can be considered as a protest against direct violence and structural violence which is very common in our contemporary society. Like Abhimanyu who trusted his techniques unwisely and became a victim, there are many youths who have been reduced to victims working for the cause of the organizations or the institutions which have manipulated them. In Manipur there have been many cases where youths have died fighting for a cause. In 2015, the Inner Line Permit (ILP) demands in Manipur stirred protests across the Imphal valley and many students came out on the streets demanding the implementation of ILP. What is disturbing is that young students mostly of Government high school and higher Secondary's were leading the many protests related with the demands of the Joint Action Committee ILP system. The protests had resulted in Student/Police clash and the death of Sapam Robinhood, a student of Ananda Singh Higher Secondary School, Imphal. On May 30, 2016, The Sangai Express editorial ran an article "Letting young students lead the protest: Leave the kids alone" in which the authority of using the school students at the fore front of the protests was questioned. It wrote:

What is stopping the adults from taking over the issue and leading from the front instead of letting the young students take the lead role?

Similarly *Chakravyuha* questions the politics of the "power grabbers" (Thiyam 13) which makes the younger generations victims of violence. It is a protest against the system and the authorities which threatens the survival of the younger generations.

Again the concept of Truth/Dharma is contested in *Chakravyuha*. Ratan Thiyam is quite sympathetic towards the character of Duryodhana who is otherwise considered to be the embodiment of evil. Duryodhana becomes the mouthpiece who questions the conventionally accepted notion of truth/dharma and he is presented as a righteous warrior. He says:

If I have transgressed, ever crossed the bounds of behaviour, a king's rights and duties even by a half breadth during my tenure, if I have spoken untruth, done injustice or been corrupt, then I swear in the name of

the Sun, you may drag me along the main street of Hastinapur tied to the wheels of a chariot drawn by hundred horses, till my bleeding body is tattered in shreds and I meet my end (Thiyam 18-19).

He also questions the validity of the war tactics used by the Pandavas in order to win the war. In doing so he criticizes the Pandavas who are conventionally regarded as the embodiment of truth and righteousness. Duryodhana observes:

We have never traded untruths. When this war of Mahabharata becomes a legend, the future generations, who survive this age of Kali, will bear witness to what I say: Those who are swayed by the superficial will side with the Pandavas, but those who delve to understand the intricacies of and subtleties of life will opt for the Kauravas. I shall be vindicated, for I have done no wrong (19).

We can say that *Chakravyuha* let us question the universally accepted notions about truth/dharma. What is truth/dharma? Duryodhana's search for truth/dharma is indicated through his "floor sweeping gestures" (16). Here Thiyam tries to highlight the futility involved in the search for truth/dharma. Also Abhimanyu's speech in the epilogue expresses his doubt in following the path of truth/dharma. He says, "Dhushasana killed me by my foul names. Yet I have never sinned and always firmly followed the path of truth" (51). He questions truth/dharma and therefore in his final speech to the audience he says "the search for truth will remain unfulfilled" (51). Abhimanyu's last speech is directly addressed to the audience and the audience are left to think about their ideas and concepts of truth. If Abhimanyu has never sinned, why did he have to die so young? What will the path of Truth lead us to? Thus we are made to think about the manipulation happening in and around our surroundings. We are to think if we are being manipulated at any point of our life and act accordingly.

When *Chakravyuha* was first produced the pundits came down heavily on Ratan Thiyam for representing Abhimanyu as a scapegoat rather than a martyr. Doren who played Abhimanyu in the play was stopped in the middle of the bazaar after one of the shows by a group of angry people. They threatened Doren for showing Abhimanyu as a scapegoat. For them Abhimanyu was the symbol of martyrdom and sacrifice¹. This incident proves that Thiyam's *Chakravyuha* was successful enough to disturb the minds of the audience. *Chakravyuha* was well received at the national theatre festivals as well as international festivals. In 1987, it received the First Fringe Award in the Commonwealth Arts Festival. We can also say that it was *Chakravyuha* which brought Ratan Thiyam into the mainstream of the National Theatre.

However, many theatre critics in Manipur felt that *Chakravyuha* failed to bring in the conflicts and tensions of the contemporary society of Manipur. Nongthombam Premchand observed:

I did not find his *Chakravyuha* very meaningful or relevant to the reality that Thiyam himself was facing here in Manipur; he was trying to escape from his immediate reality (Still searching 120).

S.K Mangang, another theatre director and critic of Manipur is also of the opinion that Ratan Thiyam's earlier play *Imphal Imphal* directly voiced all the things happening around him but *Chakravyuha* does not represent the tensions of the reality that Thiyam was living in (Still searching 122). It is true that Thiyam was not directly addressing the socio-political concerns of his time in *Chakravyuha*, but it is also true that he was experimenting with form around this time and in *Chakravyuha* there was a symbolic expression of the sufferings of humankind under power politics which not only related to his society but universally to all individuals and Nations. Through the play he gives an assessment of war and violence and tries to relate with the conflicts and tensions of contemporary society. The play provides a recasting of myth to critique the present.

III. CONCLUSION

Thus we can conclude that Ratan Thiyam's *Chakravyuha* is a protest against war and the ongoing circle of violence found in our contemporary society. It is a protest against the System which sacrifices the younger generations to meet their goals. By showing Abhimanyu as a victim, the play allows us to judge our own position in society.

Endnotes

¹This is an account given by Kavita Nagpal in the pre text of *Chakravyuha*.

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