

Desire, Transgression and the Moral Order: A Psycho-Analytical Reading of Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor*

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Abstract -- Habib Tanvir's remarkable play *Charandas Chor* (1975) has been conventionally analysed through anti feudal satire, Marxist Materialist critique, and the folk performance aesthetics, i.e., Nacha. Although these structures constructively explain the socio-political aspects of the play, they neglect the complicated psychological dynamics regulating its social institutions and protagonists he confronts. The paper explores the psycho-analytical reading of the play *Charandas Chor*, by putting in the concepts of Lacan and Freud, particularly the Id, Ego and Super Ego, and Lacan's behavioural imperious of *ne pas céder sur son désir*, i.e., "not ceding on one's desire". By exploring the chief contradictions of a thief unable to lie, this study claims that the journey of Charandas reflects an implacable conflict between an interiorized Ego- Ideal embedded in truth and stringent, sanctimonious Super Ego incorporated by the feudal elite. Charandas's final execution by the Queen foregrounds the systemic importance of suppressed desire and obligatory deception in supporting the already accepted socio-moral order.

Keywords-- Satire, Marxist, Aesthetics, Psychoanalytical, Id, Ego, Superego

Charandas Chor by Habib Tanvir, reworked from a Rajasthani folklore written by Vijaydan Detha, inhibits a huge space in the contemporary Indian theatre. Organised with the colloquial Chattisgarhi artists of Naya Theatre, the plays recognised for destabilizing bourgeoisie Proscenium arch and focussing on subordinate class. Many scholars have continuously appreciated the play's incisive analysis of institutional corruption, religious hypocrisy and class privilege.

Nevertheless, restricting *Charandas Chor* to a socio-political setting imperils demolishing of psychological architecture. Underneath the dynamic Chattisgarhi folk tales, satirical vignettes and improvisational humour rests a deep psychic tragedy. The story is of an astonishing psycho-analytic oddity: a persistent criminal whose whole identity becomes attached to the inflexible, outright commitment to truthfulness.

By engaging with the structural psycho-analysis by Lacan and the drive theory by Freud, this paper investigates the psychic techniques of transgression, desire and moral constraint in *Charandas Chor*.

It presents the struggles of Charandas as a misfit against the state, and as a lethal crash between an individual's corrupting demands of the Symbolic Order, i.e., the Law of the Father, and the internal moral structure, i.e., Ego Ideal. According to the Freudian Principle, Id is employed on the pleasure principle soliciting instant satisfaction of involuntary drives regardless of law, social convention or moral taboo. In the beginning of the play, the practicing of theft by Charandas works as a countenance of uncontrolled, foremost drive.

Charandas does not filch because of malevolence, greed, or any complicated criminal intention, but because of basic instinctive necessity and a frisky sabotage of property ownership. For Charandas, theft is an impetuous, secondary response to poverty, an unmediated demonstration of survival drives employed outside the feigned boundaries of feudal law. When followed by the police, Charandas sees the chase as a game of wits instead of a life, or death struggle. His lawlessness is liberated by guilt because he has still not incorporated the manorial legal code as his own moral conscience. The state considers property as sacred, but to Charandas's Id, the property is entirely accessible, fluid and subject to reallocation. Hence, in its primary, state, Charandas lives in a raw, subversive relation to authority, segregated to moral framework of the elite.

The significant modification in the play happens when Charandas meets the Guru. Looking for an interim shelter from the police, Charandas vows to conciliate the religious figure. Presuming the thief to offer modest compromise, the Guru is astounded when Charandas nonchalantly takes four vows that are improbable and absurd. The vows were:

CHARANDAS. My first vow, guru-ji!... I'll never eat off a golden plate... My second vow, guru-ji!... I'll never mount an elephant and lead a procession... My third vow, guru-ji!... If a queen says, 'Marry me, marry me!' I'll refuse to oblige her. No matter how young, how pretty. I won't ever marry a queen, guru-ji... My fourth vow, guru-ji!... 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.' (Tanvir 153-54)

The Guru imposes a fifth vow on him, "Give up telling lies" (155). All of this just began as a pleasantry, but who knew that Charandas had to carry this for the whole of his life. After a while, everything that he had forbidden, will happen for sure.

In the psychoanalytical perspective, this moment is recognised as the creation of Charandas's Ego-Ideal. According to the Freudian concept, while the Super-Ego is a punitive and critical agency, the Ego-Ideal is the self-created standard of brilliance to which Ego endeavours to comply. It depicts the interior image of the subject of the ethical clarity:

From the point of view of instinctual control, of morality, it may be said of the id that it is totally non-moral, of the ego that it strives to be moral, and of the super-ego that it can be super-moral and then become as cruel as only the id can be. It is remarkable that the more a man checks his aggressiveness towards the exterior the more severe that is aggressive he becomes in his ego ideal. (Freud 56)

The fifth oath, for Charandas, ceases to be an external burden, yet he completely incorporates it. The vow becomes the anchoring point of his subjectiveness. While the society labels him as a thief, Charandas reevaluates his internal reality through truthfulness, i.e., fidelity to the interior ideal. He sets up a distinctive psychic parity, he remains a thief in the materialistic world, but attains the ethical purity in the symbolic domain. To tell a lie would cause a complete termination of his Ego, depriving him of the striking virtue that concedes his existence dignity.

Theft is a crime and everybody wants to conceal it. The lie spoken in the theft works as a defence mechanism, as the thief denies that he is not involved in any wrongdoings. But once he accepts his actions, his behaviour becomes transparent for himself and for the society as well. The society that insists to be honest and keep one's promises, the same virtue act as a punishment for the thief if he tries to speak the truth and stay honest in his behaviour and sometimes it is the reason for his death too. The identical situation appears before Charandas, as he keeps on denying about his lie; which lately transforms into his Ego and then quickly to Superego:

GURU. Beta, don't do it, or you'll never be back. There's a new minister due.

CHARANDAS. Let him come, maharaj. I have just one desire left to rob the royal treasury. If I can't do that, then I'm not Charandas Chor, I'll change my name. What's that you said, guru-ji? There's a new minister expected? (Tanvir 173)

Charandas, earlier has so many attempted so many thefts, he even attempted thefts after telling his guru about this honestly, as per the promise made to his guru.

He had made enough money for himself, so much so that he could just sit and enjoy comfortably, but because of his superego, and having a conversation with his guru, he only steals five coins from the treasury, "One two three four five-that's enough...Five mohurs are more than enough for her to know that she was robbed" (177). This brings him into the eyes of the state and drags him to death.

Charandas Chor can be analysed through the shadow concept of Carl Jung. Guru shows the path of renunciation, but on the other hand, he tricks people making it a source of his earning. The guru is full of greed and that's when Charandas meets him and tries to make him understand that the society and the guru act like a shadow to each other.

CHARANDAS. I'm thinking, guru-ji, to each his own. You're flourishing in your own way-

GURU. What d'you mean?

CHARANDAS. Well, I steal at night, in the dark, stealthily, entering homes through holes in the wall-while you sit here in broad daylight, openly, with a crowd of people around you. And you make much more than I do.

GURU. Shut up!

CHARANDAS. You're the one who told me not to lie, guru-ji. (156)

Guru, on hearing this, represses his own greed by projecting holiness. The guru uses Charandas as a tool so that Charandas can absorb all the guilts of his guru. Charandas assures his guru that he would never lie. He strictly abides by his words, that makes him the only character having the real rectitude. In the meantime, the guru was on the take, the policeman was unscrupulous or gullible, the affluent landlord is filled with greed, and the Queen acted out of revengeful deceitfulness. The social order for integrity is entirely overturned.

The peak of Charandas Chor, brings the main character into direct encounter with the feudal Super-Ego. In the psychoanalytical theory, the Super-Ego is not intrinsically noble; it can be hypocritical, tyrannical and overly destructive. In the play, the Queen and the Guru portrait this repressive structure. They ask for public conformity with the ethical norms while discreetly engaging in duping coercion and corruption.

The appearance of the Queen introduces the play's most clear dynamics of repressed desires and Lacanian projection. Directing at the peak of feudal power, the Queen is the chief overseer of societal decorum. Nevertheless, her status needs the entire vanquishing of her internal desires in the service of state duty and ethical purity.



When Charandas victoriously steals from the royal treasury and afterwards written the stolen goods out of his commitment to oath, he interrupts the Queen's understanding of human nature. He typifies something completely outside her controlled world; a man who is concurrently unmanageable and entirely bound by honour.

This encounter awakens the suppressed libido of Queen. Charandas becomes a Lacanian objet petit a, i.e., the unachievable object of desire that swears to satisfy her lacking existence. Enthralled by his truthfulness and audacity, she offers him everything demarcated in his four oaths: Power (Kingdom), wealth (gold plates), public honour (processions) and her hand in marriage. Herein, the irony of Charandas's frivolous oaths becomes clear. What started as a comic amplification transfigures into an exact prognosis of his psychic test. When the Queen proposes, Charandas goes through a deep conflict between the stipulations of the exterior authority and his interior Ego-Ideal. The Queen requests him to break his oath, marry her, and maintain their secret. To save her communal reputation, she needs him to tell a lie.

When Charandas rejects Queen's proposal, supplicating his oaths, he reveals the basic hypocrisy of ruling class. The Queen can't bear a subordinate thief who owns massive moral rectitude than the crown. His utter truthfulness to reveal her suppressed desires and pull apart ideological aspect that substantiates her rule.

Confronted with his threat, the moral order exposes its vigorously suppressive nature. The Queen demands Charandas to assure never to speak about her proposal. When Charandas declares that he cannot lie if asked about the event, the Queen demands his instant execution.

QUEEN. Never reveal what has passed between us to anyone, otherwise I will be ruined! Promise me this.

CHARANDAS. Rani!

QUEEN. What is it?

CHARANDAS. You're forgetting something.

QUEEN. What?

CHARANDAS. I've taken a vow always to tell the truth.

QUEEN. Vowed to tell the truth! Vowed to tell the truth! You can do that only if you live to tell the truth!

CHARANDAS. Rani-ma!

QUEEN (rushes to the platform). Dead men tell no tales! Have you lost your desire to live, Charandas? (Tanvir 194)

Jacques Lacan, in his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis, puts forward that only the right ethical failure is to come to terms on one's desire (ne pas céder sur son désir). Charandas denies to compromise. Confronting death, he denies the opportunity to save his life through fraud. By opting for execution over a lie, Charandas transforms from the pleasure principle to Thanatos, i.e., the death desire. His embracing of death is not the act of submission, but the eventual contention of his moral autonomy. Hello demolishes his physical self to save his psychologic individuality. Javed Malick in his "Introduction" of *Charandas Chor and Other Plays*, by Habib Tanvir, looks into this play from Bakhtin's carnivalesque reversal frame of reference and expounds:

Charandas Chor is constructed on the principle of carnivalesque reversal, the principle of a world turned upside down. There is a reversal of hierarchy, particularly on moral and ethical levels. Truthfulness, honesty, integrity, ethical values, and even professional efficiency are shown to belong exclusively to a thief, leaving the upper echelons of society devoid precisely of these values and virtues. Through his acts and deeds Charandas debunks religion, the state, and class economy. (126)

Each of the higher officials of the state is corrupt, but Charandas Chor is different because of his rational intellect. In the world full of corrupt officials, Charandas is attempting thievery in society's welfare. He has now become famous for the fact that he is a thief who never lies. To honour Charandas, the Queen calls him, but he denies all the kingly comforts, as per the promise he vowed in front of his guru. He also rejects queen's proposal of marriage because of the promise. The queen offers to waive his punishment he would never mention the queen's proposal in public. Here comes the concept of Superego by Sigmund Freud as Charandas rejects her offer by saying that no matter what he will say the truth, which becomes the reason for his death.

In melancholia the impression that the super-ego has obtained a hold upon consciousness is even stronger. But here the ego ventures no objection; it admits its guilt and submits to the punishment. (Freud 52)

In this corrupt world, Charandas chooses to walk on the path of truth. For this reason, his death cannot be considered as strong vs weak, or state vs individual, instead, his own psychological behaviour was the reason for his death. He was so adamant on his belief because of his mental conduct that the authority had Charandas killed. The religious institutions and state officials are plundered by their terrifying power over mockery, slapstick comedy, and satire. The policeman chasing Charandas acts to be a part of entertainment, displaying Authority to be unskilful and unsafe for the lower classes.



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The higher officials, state authorities and gurus should be virtuous in nature. The bottom orders such as thieves are always considered to be of low standards.

We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the "inside out" (à l'envers), of the "turnabout," of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and un-crownings. (Bakhtin 11)

This is what society has been taught to comprehend, but Bakhtin's carnivalesque reversal flips the complete order. As Lacan states, "the real as always connected with a mistake and an impossible encounter" (Miller 14). For Lacan, anybody who denies to act against his ethical duties and volitions, this upriser above the simple rules of life. The superego of Charandas does not allow him to concede on his desires. Lacan refers to this as two kinds of deaths: symbolic death, wherein, if Charandas would have accepted the queen's proposal by telling a lie, then it may lead to the death of veracious Charandas; and the Physical Death, wherein, the death of Charandas occurs because he just spoke the truth.

Charandas Chor by Habib Tanvir, attains its power by building psycho-analytical depth into the thread of folk theatre. The play psycho-analytically moves beyond a simple narrative of a thief to expose a deep study of human psychic resistance. The calamitous ending of Charandas reveals a harsh truth regarding the social order. Society can easily allow materialistic theft, institutional corruption, and economic exploitation, but it can't get through someone who denies to be a part of its falsehood.

The ruling class, represented by the feudal tyranny of Queen and religious hypocrisy of Guru, demands obligatory falsehood to maintain its power. Atharv Sheth in his essay titled, "Analysis of 'Charandas Chor' Themes" declares that:

What Tanvir is trying to prove is that, perhaps, nothing is final and nothing is absolute. Truth becomes lie and lies becomes truth. Preserve becomes offender and offender becomes preserver. Meaning is never fixed. It is determined by the context. (Seth 3)

Charandas, the thief, becomes the solitary moral subject in the era of ethical putrefaction. His capital punishment reveals the disastrous mechanisms of Super-Ego, assuring that while his body is demolished, his resolute probity smashes the ethical authority of the stars forever.

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