

## Shakespeare in *Chutti*: Review of *Charudattam*,(Kathakali, Julius Caesar) by Sadanam Harikumaran.

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**ABSTRACT:** There are many adaptations of Shakespearean plays. Cinema, poetry, novel, painting etc are the recurring modes for such adaptations and, rarely, artists have made use of dance forms too. Here, in Kerala, one of the most impressive Kathakali artists, Sadanam Harikumaran has adapted Julius Caesar into Kathakali and performing it in various parts the world. The Kathakali is christened as Charudattam (tale of Charudatta, Julius Caesar). This paper is a performance review of Harikumaran's Charudattam.

**Key Words:** : Kathakali, William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Performing art

Sadanam Harikumaran has written many Kathakali plays based on Puranas and Indian epics before attempting a Shakespearian play. He was very much enthusiastic to adapt a historical play into Kathakali for most Kathakali plays are human love stories. He named it as *Charudattam*, play of Charudatta: as he names Julius Caesar. All the characters have given Malayalam names and the most impressive of them is the performance of Marcus Brutus as *Jayasenan*. Apart from writing this *kali*, he did the composition of songs, choreography and direction. Later he played the role Marcus Brutus many times.

*Julius Caesar* is one of the shortest plays of William Shakespeare which has got five acts and nineteen scenes. Following the tradition of Kathakali, Harikumaran has reduced its length into half. There are almost thirty characters appear in the original play but in this adaptation uses nine. The Soothsayer, Brutus's wife Portia and other unimportant characters are omitted for the dramatic economy. Scene progression as in *Julius Caesar*, Octavius's first appearance, the ghosts and omens are also not included.

All characters in *Charudattam*, except Cassius, perform in the standard Kathakali attire. Julius Caesar and Marcus Brutus are in *pachavesham* (Fig.1). *PachaVesham* symbolizes the nobility of the characters. Calpurnia is shown in *minukku*, a customary costume for female roles. *Chuvannathadior* red beard is the marker of stereotypical negative roles. Casca's is presented in red beard which signifies his villainous nature. Mark Antony has given *Pazhuppu* (ripe) costume which is the signifier of highly noble personality. The anomalous dress code for Cassius is marked by an irregular, zigzag edged *chutty* which, in fact, invited criticism from the traditional practitioners of Kathakali (Fig.1). From *chutty* the audience can able to purport the moral nature of each character. But here we can't judge Cassius by using traditional means of performance properties and costumes. Some of the critics opined that for Cassius, *kathi* costume is more appropriate, but here it is given to Decius.

One of the notable characteristics of Kathakali is the freedom that it gives to its actors to improvise with in the norm. In Charudattam, we see characters play their roles by coalescing their own creativity along with following the standard rules of Kathakali, which in turn begets more pleasure to the viewers. To narrate the tale, they make use of instruments like *vaadyam* (*chenda* and *maddalam*) and use vocals. Harikumaran, in this performance, introduces drums instead of *vadayam* which gives a Western touch to the entire representation. Selected short passages from the original text of the play become more than thirty minutes piece of performance in this Kathakali adaptation. The whole performance, nevertheless, intends to engender *rasa* (essence).

Deviating from the real play, Harikumaran gives more importance to the character of Calpurnia. The description of her waking up in terror is indeed a deliberate fluctuation from the text of Shakespearean play, which goes as thus: " I dreamt many venomous snakes emerging from your ornaments, I saw them biting you and tearing you apart. Your glorious crown turns to a thorny ornament. The cleansing waters of ablution burn your skin" (translation of Malayalam text). She seems happy when Caesar decides not to go out but, when Decius arrives, Caesar goes out with him to visit the Senate.

The most impressive scene in *Charudattam* is the last moments of Caesar and his murder. Casca starts the proceedings by 'striking from behind'. Decius and Cassius join him. The most laudable scene of Brutus's finishing stab and Caesar's "*Eu tu, Brute*" is presented in terrible silence and in extreme slow

motion. The pointing gesture of Caesar towards Brutus encapsulates the thread of the play which needs no further explanation. Antony arrives in *pazhuppumake* upand mourns at the death of his friend. The scene ends with Antony's decision to take revenge upon Brutus and others. The scene remarkable for the magnificent solo performance of the actor as Antony.

The presentation goes on with the depiction of the conflict between the forces of Brutus and Cassius on one side, and those of Antony and Octavius on the other. It is indicated by the presence of all the leaders of both side on the stage. The battle between them is presented is brilliantly choreographed like the Japanese Noh theatre performance.

*Charudattam* concludes with the portrayal of the death of Cassius and Brutus. Cassius commits suicide, and that prompts Brutus to do the same. Suicide is not made explicitly visible on the stage as it is against the traditional rules of Kathakali. Towards the end, conventionally, all the characters become noble. Final scene of the original play is deliberately omitted. Here, the *kali* ends the performance with the regular benediction song which is a blessing to Krishna.

Even though the original play is cut short into half, this Kathakali version of *Julius Caesar* is an invaluable contribution to the art of Kathakali, theatre and literature.

As Cassius says in the play

How many ages hence  
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over  
In states unborn and accents yet unknown (Act 3, Scene 1)

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