

Aa Manushyan Nee Thanne (You Are That Man): A Retelling of the Biblical Story of King David

Dr. Blessy John

Reimagining mythical themes is a way to place the social as mythical. *Aa Manushyan Nee Thanne (You Are That Man)* by C. J. Thomas narrates the love story of King David and Bethsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite resulting in breaking the sixth and seventh of the Ten Commandments in the Hebrew Bible. The play written in the genre of a classical tragedy gives the writer ample scope for vocalizing his take on the commandments laid down by social institutions like religion which stand in the way of the expression of the spontaneous feelings of an individual. The paper here attempts to analyse the theme and characterisation of the play to understand the dynamics of making classical characters express the modernist angst. It also tries to look at the Biblical notions of sin and redemption. The attempt here is to bring out the prophetic voice of a master craftsman on moral and ethical problems facing contemporary society.

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Myths narrate major events in human existence like war and peace, life and death, truth and falsehood, good and evil. They have influenced artists and poets from time immemorial. The depiction of mythical events and characters through paint or words has always provided opportunities to draw parallels with contemporary social milieu. The artistic representations reinforce that basic human traits remain the same irrespective of time and space. The moral and ethical

problems confronted by yesteryear heroes are the mirrors through which contemporary issues can be viewed. C.J. Thomas employed mythical themes to question the norms set by the society to curtail individual freedom. Malayalam writer and critic George Onakkoor described C.J. Thomas as “a miracle, both as a human being and as a playwright who enriched the language (Malayalam), the society and culture during the short span (41 years and 257 days) of his life”. According to him “With a prophetic voice, he (C.J.) traversed this world ahead of his time.” Born as the son of a Syrian Orthodox Christian priest in Kerala, Chollampel John Thomas was ordained a deacon, but he left the Church to remain true to his beliefs. Later, he was inspired by revolutionary ideas and as a leftist, he published a few books in support of Marxism. Disillusioned by the Marxian ideology in the 1950s, he became a committed anti-Marxist. His plays and articles significantly contributed to the modern literary movements in Malayalam. His plays can be categorized as plays of ideas. He has also translated Sophocles’ *Oedipus King* and *Antigone*, Ibsen’s *Ghosts* and Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* into Malayalam.

C. J. Thomas was heavily influenced by Bertolt Brecht and the concept of epic theatre which assumed that human nature could change and was already changing. His plays dealt with fundamental moral and ethical problems affecting the society. He wanted to bring social change through his plays. The eternal rebel in him speaks through his plays. It may not be a coincidence that his major plays *Avan Veendum Varunnu* (Behold! He Comes Again), *Aa Manushyan Nee Thanne* (You Are That Man) and *1128-ill Crime 27* (Crime No: 27 in 1128) deal with finding love outside marriage. Though his major plays were based on biblical themes, they were not structured like conventional Christian dramas. He employed biblical stories to express his views on contemporary socio-religious condition. He also admired the works of classical masters like Sophocles.

C.J. Thomas wanted to break away from the existing dramatic techniques in Malayalam which is evident in his very first play, *Avan Veendum Varunnu* (Behold! He comes Again). C.J. experimented with the aspects of drama and theatre, the title and the stage setting in the play. C.J. subverts the Biblical description of His (Jesus) Second

Coming, as a reference to the return of a husband who has gone to war. As a devotee, conscious of his sins, trembles at the arrival of the Lord on the Judgement Day, the woman who is pregnant from another man trembles at the prospects of facing her husband. This idea is accentuated by the pictures of Jesus Christ and her husband on the wall. He experimented with the concept of play itself in his play *Crime No: 27 in 1128*. It introduced Meta theatre and Antiplay for the first time in Malayalam theatre. The play made the spectator question the concepts of reality and illusion.

C. J. Thomas was fascinated by the Biblical character David, the mighty King of Jews anointed by the prophet of Jehovah. His story resembles that of the great heroes of classical epics, which provided the dramatist an opportunity to model his play on the great classical tragedies of Sophocles. The shepherd boy who killed the Philistine giant Goliath, the poet, musician, psalmist, the bosom friend of Prince Jonathan, the mighty King of the Israelites who led them by the will of Jehovah in many victories against the neighbouring kingdoms, the royal lover of beautiful Bathsheba, the scheming cold blooded murderer of his beloved's husband and the remorseful devotee begging to be reinstated in the grace of God, David lived his life in epic proportions.

The play *Aa Manushyan Nee Thanne* (You Are That Man) depicts the sinful love between King David and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite and the daughter of Eliam, given in 2 Samuel 11 – 27. The Biblical narrative is presented in the play as a forbidden love story of the King with his officer's wife. In the Induction Scene we see a child reading a gigantic Bible lay open on a table placed at the centre of stage. Instead of her voice we hear a strong manly voice with soft organ music in the background. The play is structured as a dream sequence of the child falling asleep on the Bible. The gigantic Bible symbolizes how an individual is choked by the power of state and religion. Though the child is reading the page by pointing lines with her finger her voice is not heard, which makes the audience realize how the power centres silence us. Sounds of galloping horses and kettle drum from the battlefield replaces the soft music of organ, preparing us for the events in the subsequent scenes where individual

lives are drowned in the mighty voices of power. The rules set by the centres of power start conquering individuals.

The Induction Scene also lends a classical dimension and mood to the play which is happening in four acts. The dreaming child is a reminder to the spectators that what they witness before them is only a play. C.J. Thomas intended his plays to be an intellectual exercise for the viewer rather than appealing to his/her emotions. His intention is to make the viewer question the institutions like marriage which choke individual freedom. The story, in the grandiose style, begins and ends at the palace of King David. The narrative of the play which deals with the 'fall' (breaking the commandments by committing adultery and subsequent murder) and redemption through repentance of the principal protagonist enables the playwright to make the spectator experience the turmoil of a distressed soul mirroring the mental state of the dramatist.

When the play opens, David has already become the King of both Judah and Israel. He has consolidated his kingdom and has made Jerusalem his capital city. He has built his palace and is planning to build a temple. He has conquered most of Israel's neighbouring nations. He is battling with the Ammonites and enjoys an upper hand over them, but has not yet completely defeated them. The Ammonites have retreated to the royal city of Rabbah, and as the time for war approaches, David sends the Israel army, led by Joab, to besiege the city and to bring about its surrender.

While his army is at the battle field at Rabbah, David strolls in the rooftop of his palace and happens to see bathing Bathsheba, wife of Uriah and is instantly smitten by her beauty. He summons her servant Hannah and expresses his desire to have Bathsheba. The very same night he visits Bathsheba at her residence to profess his love for her. In the following scenes the relationship develops and she becomes pregnant. In order to save his beloved from the punishment (stoning to death) meted out to an adulteress David summons Uriah from the battlefield, gets him drunk in the feast and grants him permission to go home. But he refuses to go home saying that he can't go to his wife while his friends are in the battlefield facing death. When he goes back, David sends a message through him to his

Commander Joab to put Uriah in front to attack Rabbah. David also instructs Joab to ask the other soldiers to withdraw from Uriah if the attack fails. The much-awaited news arrives the King that Uriah is killed in the attack after a valiant fight. David sends orders to vanquish and plunder Rabbah. After the customary mourning period, he marries Bathsheba.

A son is born to Bathsheba and David. Amid the festivities on the victory over Rabbah, Prophet Nathan comes to David. He starts narrating the story of a rich man blessed with great many flocks and herds who took the only little lamb of a poor man. The enraged King declares that the rich man deserves death for his heinous crime.

Nathan says, “You are that man!You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites”. The wages of sin is death” (62).

After Nathan’s departure, the new born baby becomes seriously ill. Absalom, his first born, reaches his courtyard to usurp the kingdom. His officers are frightened for the safety of the King and the future of the kingdom. They urge him to take up arms to defend his position, but he declines saying he will succumb to the will of God. David fasts and prays in repentance before the Lord, yet the baby dies paying the price for his father’s sins. When his officers lose all hope, David emerges out of the royal chamber as the King in all his glory, purged of his sins through repentance, ready to fight with his enemies. The play ends with the confident David again singing a psalm for the Lord reiterating his duty to the subjects. Here the playwright comes back to the Biblical notions of sin and redemption where man lives in constant temptation to commit sin and redemption is possible only through “a broken and a contrite heart”. As the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Heavenly Shepherd is waiting for His lost sheep with open arms.

The playwright, through the Biblical narrative raises questions about the established notions of morality. His David is a solitary man with an aching heart in search of a soul mate after the death of his bosom friend Jonathan. The stage direction in the opening scene describes the big harp kept near his throne. The royal musician and

poet tells his beloved, “If love makes a man small, I would like to be a grain of sand” (29). But he is a man of contradictions too. The advice which he gives to Uriah, “Eye is there not only to keep it open, but to close it too” (13), becomes ironical when his own eyes become the cause of his sin. He also says, “no war is fair” (14) to Uriah and later gets him killed in battle to clear his way. When he does this taking solace in the dictum, everything is fair in war and love, the audience is pushed into a moral dilemma. The protagonist, in fact, closes his eyes to the duties of a king and gets carried away by the dictates of his flesh.

Unlike the Bathsheba in the biblical narrative, the principal female character of the play is presented as one who speaks her mind out. She tells the King who comes to her home at night that if he had come seeking a soul mate, the method he adopted is wrong. Though a devoted wife she is taken in by the charisma of the King of the Israelites, whose voice becomes music to her ears. When Bathsheba and her husband Uriah are presented together in Act I, scene ii the audience is made to feel the differences in their temperaments rather than similarities (17-18). David is alluded to even in the conversation between the husband and wife, before Uriah departs for the battle field never to return home. When Uriah enters his house to take leave of his wife, she is singing psalm 23 composed by David with the accompaniment of harp played by Hannah, her servant. Through the scene, the playwright shows us a woman who longs for a passionate lover. We don't get to see any tender leave taking between the husband and wife. When she declares that she is on the side of life, the audience is made to feel the irony of the choice being taken.

When the news of his death arrives, David is with her. When he tries to comfort her, she tells, “Your Highness! I loved him.” (56) Heartbroken, he asks for her forgiveness and tells Hannah to take care of his Queen. He assures Bathsheba, “forget death, life is there for tomorrow”. (56) Bathsheba chooses life (David) over death (Uriah). It may be the play of fate that the baby born out of her union with David dies.

When David sees the bathing Bathsheba, she is singing a song about passionate love making. (21). No wonder the aging poet-king is drawn towards the beautiful owner of the sweet voice. When her servant voices her suspicion that King David might have seen her naked, she doesn't seem to be angry. The dramatist seems to suggest that just like many other women in Judea, it is quite natural for her to be enamoured of their heroic King David.

She tells him on their first meeting, "Your voice is music to my ears! But I get consumed in that" (29). If these are not the words of a passionate lover, then what else. She tells if he is in search of a soul mate, he has that already. But she reminds him that they are not free to do what they like, "we are not alone in a desert" (31). When he professes love to her and departs, unable to control her feelings for him, she asks her servant Hannah, "Where does Jordan end?" She replies, "let it end anywhere. Anyway, all things end somewhere" (32). Bathsheba is not left with any options than succumbing to the King. He has already told her to open her eyes and see the wealth and power he can bestow her. She accepts his proposal not because of the fortune that awaits her, but for identifying in him a man longing for the love of a woman. The playwright clearly makes both David and Bathsheba responsible for their action. He presents them as two individuals drawn to each other because of their physical and emotional needs, well aware of the consequences of their actions.

A great admirer of Sophocles, C.J. created his David in the likeness of Oedipus. As a victim of fate, King Oedipus sins by killing his father and marrying his mother. The great King falls from his glory as a consequence and blinds himself. David, expressing helplessness before the strong pull of his flesh, closes his eyes to the obvious outcome which becomes the reason for his downfall. He tells Bathsheba, "I am unable to flow against the current. Closing my eyes, I am surrendering before it – before you" (31). David's internal strife mirrors that of the playwright whose life is described as a constant struggle against the set rules of the society. He believed in the right of the individual over the will of the society. His David tells Bathsheba: "Dear Bathsheba, don't consider me as a King. Don't see me as an

aggressor or a poet, but just take me as a man longing for the love of a woman”. (30)

C. J. articulates his artistic convictions through David when says, “When he (poet) is at his creative best, albeit for a short span, he feels himself to be omnipotent, omnipresent, blind and supreme – like God. He lives only in intervals. Like shining meteors. In between two light beams there may be utter darkness. (31) Through these words the playwright is talking about the angst of a creative artist. His David declares, “I will flow like Jordan, free flowing and strong.” (32)

At the beginning of the play David tells Uriah, that he felt being in paradise on the meadows with his flute and the sheep of his father. He expresses his willingness to exchange his sceptre for that flute (14)

The play examines the concept of sin at the personal, religious, political and the social level. We can perceive different yardsticks applied to sin for the ruler and the subject in David’s response to Nathan’s story. The voice of the Prophet reminds us the problem of our times where the accused and the judge become one. David is sure that the rich man who stole the poor man’s lamb deserves to die. But the King doesn’t consider his own action of snatching another man’s wife as a sin. One has justification for one’s actions (sin) at the personal level. He tells he is taken in by the flow of events, not just a passing desire of the flesh. The voice of the religion regarding sin is strict and clear through Nathan’s words: “the wages of sin is death” (62). The weakness of a ruler for women may be overlooked in politics because of his glorious victories for his kingdom. But at the social level when you snatch another man’s wife you are committing a serious crime.

The play shows the chosen man of God, King David, struggling with the temptation to sin. He not only sins but also induces another one to sin. Breaking of one commandment (adultery) leads to another (murder). Jesus Christ tells in the Sermon on the Mount:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’.

But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye

causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell". (Mathew 5: 27-30)

In that sense David commits adultery when he sees bathing Bathsheba, what follows is only the physical enactment of that sin. While performing the sin he breached the trust the Lord and Uriah had on him. He abused the power bestowed on him by Jehovah and used it for selfish motive by intentionally sending his soldier to death in order to marry his widow. Sin actually begins in one's mind and the greatest control one should have, is over one's own senses.

When he is made to realize his mistake, David fasts and prays for forgiveness. When he is urged to fight against his enemies, he remains confused and inactive.

David: No, Joab, I am not sure of my way. Death has to come. I don't know for whom. All these days I was praying. But even after repentance the messenger of death has not gone out of this house. My sin is not washed out. It has to burn down. Life for life – that is the law of Israel; and sin. Let it be on me. That is my prayer. (63)

After the death of his new born baby, David believes and make others believe that he is purged of his sins. He comes out with drawn sword to fight Absalom and declares.

David: No, Isaac. King David will not forsake you. You may be surprised. My repentance is over. I cried for my sin. Death has taken the fruit of sin. What has to happen has happened. Now my duty is to you and to my subjects, Jehovah is with me.

.....

David: My son died. Let Jehovah's name be praised! (Looking inward) A psalm for the Lord of Hosts. (64)

It helps him to stabilize his crown. He tells Bathsheba, on their first meeting: "All wrong doers have divine justifications for their actions" (31). Those who are familiar with the subsequent events mentioned in the Bible know that his union with Bathsheba, brings

forth Solomon, who finally builds the magnificent temple for Jehovah in Jerusalem. Jesus, the Messiah, also comes in this lineage to redeem the world from sins trough his Supreme Sacrifice at the Cross. But the loss that Uriah, who is described in 1 Chronicles 11:40 as an ‘outstanding soldier’, suffered is not revoked: his life is not counted. Uriah was a more honourable man than David who refuses to even go into his home while his fellow soldiers are in harms-way, while David commits adultery with the wife of his own officer who is fighting for him. The words of Nathan reveal that Uriah loved his wife dearly and trusted her completely. But the play teaches us that merely to love was not enough and he failed to make his wife realise his love for her.

King David is perhaps one of the most complex characters in the Bible whose dichotomy astonishes even his own ardent supporters. Though David believes that his sin is forgiven he has to face the consequences of his sinful action. True to the word of God, Bathsheba’s son dies. His firstborn son Amnon rapes his half-sister Tamar and then abandons her. Tormented by his own guilt David is unable to punish him. Instead, her brother Absalom kills him. Absalom manages to win the favour of many people and tries to make himself King. He also sleeps with ten of his father’s concubines, in the palace roof top in full public view, which can be considered as a tenfold divine retribution for David taking another man’s wife in secret. But David manages to win the war against Absalom, who gets killed in the battle. Truly the King has enough enemies in his own palace with an army of more than 300 wives and a brood of rebellious children.

Bathsheba gives birth to a son, who is favoured by the King and his God. “Even though Bathsheba names the child Solomon, Nathan comes...and names the child Jedidiah, “beloved of the Lord” (Koenig 74). When David is old and sick, his son Adonijah tries to make himself King. Then David asks Za’dok, the Priest to pour oil on Solomon’s head to anoint him as the King. Soon afterward David dies at the age of 70 years. He ruled Israel for 40 years and by the grace of God peacefully joined his ancestors. “For David had done what was right in the eyes of the Lord and had not failed to keep any of the Lord’s commands all the days of his life—except in the case of Uriah the Hittite. (1 Kings 15:5).

The reason for His downfall was the failure to have control over his senses. “Just as the rich man (in Nathan’s parable) had many sheep, so had David many women. But like the rich man, David was unsatisfied and stole what belonged to his neighbour” (McKenzie 160). A person with more than 300 wives coveting someone else’s only wife is greedy by any standard. If one is not satisfied with what is in one’s possession that may cause ruin of oneself and others. The saving grace can come only from God, who is willing to wipe away the sins of his erring children. “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. (Isaiah 43:25).

The Biblical notion of sin and redemption is clearly given in the following verse: ‘The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.’ (Numbers 14:18). Biblical David faces the consequences of his action. But the playwright ends the play with the victorious David, purged of his sins through repentance, praising the Lord.

The background of the play is war and it voices C.J.’s ideas on the meaninglessness of war. “No war is fair. We have been waging wars since we returned from *Mizraim* (Egypt). When we forcefully take the land, they have been inhabiting for generations, how can it be termed as fair?” (14). This may sound prophetic in the present-day Israel- Palestinian conflict. The play is also a quest to find out the nature of sin and who is a sinner. Since it was originally conceived as a radio play the dialogues are forceful and highly effective in presenting the internal conflicts of the characters. Since he was also an artist the playwright has given detailed stage directions giving importance to minute details regarding the backdrops and time of action. The play also abounds in poetic language and irony which provide ample scope for a director.

“The play was not staged during C.J.’s life time. The first staging of the play was in 1968 at a drama workshop in Koothattukulam. Not many attempts were made to stage the play either. Diversity in the background, stage directions which required the presence of too many objects, more than one action taking place

at the same time All these posed challenges to the staging of the play,” says John Paul in his introduction to the collection of essays titled *Aa Manushyan Nee Thanne Oru Punarvayana*. As a challenge to setting the play on stage, Act I, Scene iii takes place in two planes. In the first plane David is strolling on the roof of his palace. Judah is pouring him wine. In the second plane Bathsheba and Hannah are bathing. They are singing and talking about love. David sees them and enquires about them to his servant. The play happens simultaneously at both planes. The playwright could visualize such a scene only because he was also a director, artist and thinker.

The reader as well as the spectator, at the end of the play, is forced to ask how a son can atone for his father’s sins. Can it be a justification to the ways of God to man? What is adultery when two people join their mind and soul in love? Is it justifiable to shed the blood of the blameless? Whether the rigid laws and social convention themselves lead to heinous crimes (sins)? Will there ever be a society treating all its members equal? When we try to ponder over these questions the play succeeds. In his foreword to a collection of original plays and theatre translations by C.J. Thomas, edited by John Paul published by the Kerala Sahitya Akademi, critic M. Thomas Mathew quotes from *Aa Manushyan Nee Thanne*: “There are several hills in Israel, but Mount Hermon is unique.” He goes on to add, “there are several good plays in Malayalam, but *Aa Manushyan Nee Thanne* is unique” (28).

The retelling of the biblical theme helped the writer to give a new dimension to the contemporary issues of individual freedom and invasion of mighty powers over less powerful ones. The Marxian ideology in which he was trained enabled him to see the sociological perspective of the Biblical themes – seeing the Biblical as social. This is amply illustrated by his characterisation of Bathsheba, whose existence is not simply as a foil for King David. It is intended to make us realize the pointlessness of war, to tell us that all these have happened before. Same individual is capable of good and evil – love and betrayal, self-sacrifice and vengeance.

Unfaithful wife bringing calamities to the country is a constant thread in many folklores as in the story of Guinevere, and Lancelot

which leads to the destruction of Arthur's kingdom in the Arthurian legends. The dramatist views the relationship between David and Bathsheba as the union of two unsatiated souls rather than as mere physical attraction. But the attempt by the King to cover up the incident by trying to bring Uriah back to his wife's bed shows how complicated human mind is. Though attracted to each other, the king and his paramour is afraid of the consequences of challenging the system. Hence, Bathsheba points out his powerlessness before the legitimacy of the institution of marriage. Marriage makes a private relationship as a public affair. They marry at the end to legitimise their relationship and to save her from imminent death. All other marriages of King David are presented as marriages for cementing political alliances or winning allies. As a public social institution, marriage was a means through which heirs were produced and wealth and political power were transferred. But, his marriage with Bathsheba ends his longing for the love of a woman. The dramatist suggests that marriage is a private companionate relationship arising from the partners' mutual affection.

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Dr. Blessy John

Assistant Professor

Department of English

St. Stephen's College

Pathanapuram

India

Pin: 689695

Ph: +91 9446806446

Email: blessyjohn1@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-3183-4097