

ANDHA YUG: EXPLORING THE PERILS OF SELF-ENCHANTMENT IN ANTI-WAR ALLEGORY

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Abstract:

AndhaYug by Dharamvir Bharati is most commonly read as contemplation on the partition of the Indian subcontinent, and the reworking of the final day of the battle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas is also interpreted as an allegory of the war between two modern political states. Rightly so, the play could be taken as an allegory for the war between two technologically modern states, consequences of which doesn't limit to any specific geographical region, instead influence the entire human race. The play deals with the important philosophical questions like, ethics, necessity and consequences of war. The present paper is an effort to bring out the perils of self-enchantment in anti-war allegory in the text. But in the war there has been a reversal of situation so far good was helpless against the force of Evil. But Good is slowly gaining victory over Evil. As a consequence of this unwanted war the common people feel that their whole life has become meaningless.

Keywords: drama, self-enchantment, anti-war, partition

On the 10th day of the war, after Bhishma falls, Drona is named the supreme commander of the armies. He promises Duryodhana that he will capture Yudhishtira, but then he repeatedly fails to do so. Duryodhana taunts and insults him, which greatly angers Ashwatthama, causing friction between Ashwatthama and Duryodhana. Krishna knows that it was not possible to defeat an armed Drona. So, Krishna suggests to Yudhishtira and the other Pandavas, if Drona were convinced that his son was killed on the battlefield, then his grief would leave him vulnerable to attack. Krishna hatches a plan for Bhima to kill an elephant by the name Ashwatthama while claiming to Drona it was Drona's son who was dead. Ultimately, the gambit works (though the details of it vary depending on the version of the Mahabharata), and Dhrishtadyumna beheads the grieving sage.

After learning of the deceptive way his father was killed, Ashwatthama becomes filled with wrath and invokes the celestial weapon called the Narayanastra, against the Pandavas. When the weapon is invoked, violent winds begin to blow, peals of thunder are heard, and an arrow appears for every Pandava soldier. This puts fear into the Pandava army, but Krishna, while stopping the troops, advises that the army lay down all its weapons and surrender to the weapon. As himself being the incarnation of Narayana, he knows about the weapon, as the weapon only targets an armed person while ignores unarmed ones. After getting their soldiers to disarm (including Bhima with some difficulty), the astra passes by harmlessly. Narayanastra failed to harm Arjuna and Krishna as they both were divine persons (Krishna himself is Narayana & Arjuna is Nara). When urged by Duryodhana to use the weapon again, desirous of victory, Ashwatthama sadly responds that if the weapon is used again, it will turn on its user. After the use of Narayanastra, a terrible war between both armies takes place. Ashwatthama defeats Dhrishtadyumna in direct combat, but failed to kill him as Satyaki and Bhima cover his retreat. As the battle continues, Ashwatthama manages to kill King Nila of Mahishmati.

After the terrible death of Dushasana, Ashwatthama suggests Duryodhana to make peace with the Pandavas, keeping in mind the welfare of Hastinapur. Later, after Duryodhana is struck down by Bhima and facing death, the last three survivors from the Kaurava side, Ashwatthama, Kripa, and Kritvarma rush to his side. Ashwatthama swears to bring Duryodhana revenge, and Duryodhana appoints him as the commander-in-chief.

Along with Kripa and Kritavarma, Ashwatthama plans to attack the Pandavas camp at night. Ashwatthama first kicks and awakens Dhrishtadyumna, the commander of the Pandava army and the killer of his father. Ashwatthama strangles the half-awake Dhrishtadyumna by choking him to death as the prince begs to be allowed to die with a sword in his hand. Ashwatthama proceeds with butchering the remaining warriors, including Shikhandi, Yudhamanyu, Uttamaujas, and many other prominent warriors of the Pandava army; many texts put an emphasis on his exploits against those from Panchal. He also kills Draupadi's children in their sleep. Even as some soldiers try and fight back, Ashwatthama remains unharmed due his activated abilities as one of the eleven Rudras. Those who try to flee from Ashwatthama's wrath are hacked down by Kripacharya and Kritavarma at the camp's entrances. After the slaughter, the three warriors go to find Duryodhana. Duryodhana dies in front of them.

The Pandavas and Krishna who were away during night, now return to their camp the next day morning. Hearing the news of these events Yudhishtira faints and the Pandavas become inconsolable. Bhima angrily rushes to kill Drona's son. The Pandavas, along with Krishna, went to save Bhima. They found him to sage Vyasa's ashram near the bank of Bhagirathi. The now triggered Ashwatthama invokes the Brahmashirastra against the Pandavas to fulfill the oath of killing them. Krishna asks Arjuna to fire the Brahmashirastra against Ashwatthama to defend themselves. Vyasa intervenes and prevents the weapons from clashing against each other. He asks both Arjuna and Ashwatthama to take their weapons back. Arjuna, knowing how to do so takes it back. Out of rage, Ashwatthama instead directs the weapon towards the womb of the pregnant Uttara in an attempt to end the lineage of the Pandavas. The angered Pandavas want to kill Ashwatthama, but Sage Vyasa stopped them to do this. As a punishment, Ashwatthama was asked by Vyasa to surrender the gem on his forehead to Pandavas. Krishna then curses Ashwatthama that he will roam in the forests with blood and puss oozing out of his injuries and cry for death for 3000 years. Since he had no fear of death during war, death would not meet him.

The author of AndhaYug warns the readers against an age of darkness. He wants them to improve themselves because improvement of their souls is the only way out from the encroaching darkness and evil. He implies that there are at least two ways of improvement: the first is learning through one's own experience and the other is learning through others' experience. At the very beginning of the play, the playwright asserts that the story is meant to enlighten its audience. And that enlightenment or improvement is to be achieved through learning from others' experiences in their lives. The story warns us against several types of blindness: spiritual blindness barring the soul from contentment, deliberate blindness causing people not to accept the reality, and many others produced out of the feelings of indulging affection, anger, contempt and jealousy. In 'Proclamation,' the playwright remarks:

This is the story of the blind—
Or of enlightenment
through the life of the blind.(Bharati 26)

Moreover, the concept of honour and dharma is mentioned frequently throughout the play. Vidura reminds Dhritarashtra that all, especially Krishna, forewarned him about the violation of the code of honour. Gandhari considers these concepts as useless and manipulative. Even the narrator begins the play in the following manner:

Both sides in the war
Violated

the code of honour...
the Kauravas perhaps more than the
Pandavas. (Bharati 27)

The same violation is perhaps the sole reason behind the end of the Dwaparayug and the defeat of “whatever is good and gentle and beautiful” (Bharati 27). What makes this concept weak and manipulative is the fact that it remains vague and unspecified from the beginning to the end of the play. Everyone seems to revere it and want to abide by it. However, it is either manipulated by cunning people suiting their own ends or abandoned by people finding it useless. Immensely disappointed Gandhari comments:

I had seen the ways of the world
and knew
that dharma
duty and honour
were illusions.
When the time of reckoning arrives
wisdom and honour
are always useless. (Bharati 37)

She is of the view that hypocrisy directs all these precepts:
Morality, honour, selflessness
and surrender to Krishna
are mere disguises
—masks that cover our blindness. (Bharati 37)

Gandhari fails to notice her own cynicism and double-standard approach regarding this issue. She wants to abandon whatever that is not useful to her sons and whatever comes between their victory in the war. This may be the reason that everybody seeks the usability of these moral codes. Throughout the war, these unspecified codes are brazenly distorted through the use of clever words. Krishna, Sanjaya, Yudhishtira, Ashwatthama and everyone else use words to compensate for the broken code of honour. Moreover, the code of honour seems only the construct of words. Humans seem to mould this code of honour to suit their subjectivity along with the needs and demands of the times in they are living. In this case, Dhritarashtra frankly admits the reality of his attitudes in his life:

I had spun an illusory world
of dreams and desires and passions
out of the depths of that darkness.
My love, my hate, my law, my dharma
had evolved out of my peculiar world. (Bharati 33-34)

Similarly, the greatest message of the Mahabharata is unnervingly confusing. It tells the mortals to act, to perform their karma and to do righteous deeds. In act 2, the lonely Mendicant recites the words of Krishna to Arjuna that were included in Bhagawad Gita:

Truth resides
in the acts
we perform.
What man does
at each moment
becomes his future
for ages and ages...
The meaning of man’s existence
lies in the actions he performs
not in the refusal to act. (Bharati 58-59)

But there is intense chaos because there is no distinct demarcation between right and wrong. It is said that action should be inspired from one’s dharma and the call of conscience. What if somebody considers that his/her karma is not doing any karma at all? The two guards are addressed as mental slaves because they refrain themselves from any real action. If this be so, then Arjuna is worse than a mere mental slave. The guards are not directed mindlessly in their passivity while Arjuna brushes aside his own opinions and kills thousands of people at the instigation of Krishna. Perhaps the very refusal is his karma that he abandons in the favour of Krishna’s karma of making him kill the so-called evil-doers.

Unfortunately, the concept of karma is capable of justifying almost any heinous crime or evil that is possible in this world. Countries can wage wars considering it their karma. People will rob, torment and kill one another claiming it to be their karma. They can easily assert that souls are immortal and they are damaging merely the physical aspects of a person. Murders can be justified in the name of sending people to supreme soul of Krishna after freeing them from this

illusory world created by Maya. This is how Ashwatthama defends himself that he sees no sin in killing others. He formulates his own dharma:

From now on
my only dharma is:
'kill, kill, kill
and kill again!'
Let that be
the final purpose
of my existence! (Bharati 54)

Not only Ashwatthama who refuses to take the responsibility of his actions, there are certain other characters who blame others for their own actions. Nobody contemplates their own motives for taking part in the war. There arise so many questions when we find no person ready to take the responsibility of the atrocities occurred in the war. How the war started in the first place? Is it simply happened while no one wanted it to happen? Is the war the only option to restore dharma and honour? Do Pandavas participate in the war only for the sake of righteousness? Do the Kauravas get involved in the war just to claim their right on the throne? Or they desperately want to teach the Pandavas for being somewhat superior in everything and being favoured by the elders of the Hastinapur. And perhaps Pandavas want to check the level of their powers. Still, they blame each other for their ruin. They do not mention their own sadistic inclinations, but curse Krishna for not stopping the war. They are doing their karma to much extent willingly, yet assert that others urged them and so they are not responsible for the havoc that accompanied the war. It is easy for Gandhari not to analyze her own role and to curse Krishna saying, "If you wanted/you could have stopped the war" (Bharati 122). It is quite easy to blame a word (i.e. God) for the foul actions of humans. The major character with considerable supernatural powers in AndhaYug is Krishna. His thoughts and opinions are verbalized for only once. Rest of the time, he is merely reported by various characters, namely Sanjaya, the Mendicant, Vidura, Yuyutsu etc. If the mythic structure of the play inspired from its originating epic is overlooked, Krishna seems perfectly human. His humanitarian attempts to avoid the war fail and he reluctantly finds himself with one of the warring sides. They use his name to veneer their own hatred and insensitivity. The Kauravas continually evade accepting their own complicity in evil while they continue to dismiss Krishna as a war-loving, capricious and manipulative god. Bhalla, in his introductory preface to his own translated version AndhaYug, comments on the attitude of the Kauravas taking Ashwatthama as leverage:

Ashwatthama embodies what the Kauravas have stood for all along—ambition instead of peace, power instead of companionship, avoidance of responsibility instead of justice, contempt for everything instead of hope for the well being of all things. (Bhalla 11)

There is only one shadowy appearance of Krishna and only once he directly speaks for himself in the whole play. If we judge him by his talk to Gandhari, he seems benevolent, loving, sincere, sensitive and caring. He not only accepts the wrongfully inflicted curse by Gandhari but also takes responsibility of all the good and evil deeds, the only person to take some kind of responsibility for his own and others' actions. Although when the Chorus says that "the wars that gods promote" (Bharati 44), we are enticed to agree with Shakespeare's immortal lines that appear in King Lear (Act 4, Scene 1, lines 36-37), "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods, /they kill us for their sport" (Shakespeare 77). But we have to be courageous enough to take the responsibility of our own actions. We cannot expect some imaginary creatures all the time to take this burden for us.

Although every character in the play shows some awareness of the futility of human actions, desires, and motives, but the two old guards seems highly aware of this futility. They know that they are guarding nothing valuable and indeed nothing is valuable in this world. Still they march up and down the desolate corridors of the Hastinapur palace all their lives. Chorus mistakenly calls them "the two old guards with the mentality of slaves" perhaps misdirected from their own statements acknowledging that they have no opinions and faith and subsequently they make no choices (Bharati 161). This cannot be true because they have opinions because they think and comment upon the conditions belonging to their rulers and other people. Moreover, they made choices though they are slave. They choose to stay slave, whether it is mental slavery of not changing their attitude to life or physical slavery of not leaving the place where they lead purposeless and meaningless lives.

The old guards could have opted to rebel against the authorities for making them march endlessly day after day in the dark corridors. Strangely, they stick to their mundane job. They can be interpreted as the most stoic and enlightened persons who impart the spiritual message that eventually we have to accept the commonality and ordinariness of our lives. Life is meaningless and trying to find meaning and purpose in it is a meaningless project. Contrary to them, people with purpose, honour and faith are tormented by the very possession of these phenomena: Some of them like Yuyutsu think that they lived their lives for a wrong purpose, the likes of Yudhishtira feels betrayed as they find their desired destination agonizing and the so called detached and neutral like Sanjaya and Krishna are never at peace. Aware of this meaninglessness, the two guards continue to live with a stoic attitude, while others who realized their existential meaninglessness in the hard way attempt suicide. The guards use a very important existential refrain throughout the play:

All our actions
are meaningless.
Our faith
our decisions

our courage
our lives
are meaningless
utterly meaningless. (Bharati 29)

The burden of existence is not that easy to endure. In Act 3, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's play Hamlet, the eponymous character expresses his qualm about living in this world, "To be, or not to be? That is the question..." (Shakespeare 59). Everything humans do in their lives is essentially meaningless. Whether they live for hundred years or twenty years, the end is inevitable. Nothing is permanent. So-called footprints of name and fame produced by mighty or good deeds do not last forever. Cosmic reality belittles everything that is earthly or humanly for that matter. The play under consideration explores the same unsavory truth. Life seems a curse to most of the characters in Andha Yug. They are either dissatisfied with the present situation of their lives or compelled to choose death after realizing the futility of their lives. At a point in the play, Ashwatthama thinks aloud:

Should I commit suicide?
At least I shall be released
From this impotent existence.
Even if I were to burn
in the fires of hell
I would not
have to endure
so much torment. (Bharati 53)

When considered deeply, AndhaYug is essentially an anti-war play. It undoubtedly deals with other themes such as spiritual blindness and subsequent degeneration before the advent of mythic Kali yug, dehumanization during a holocaust, blurred boundaries between right and wrong in critical times, meaninglessness of life, justification of violence in the name of religion etc. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the anti-war sentiments occupy the central place in the play.

In addition to the massacre in battles, there is a massive collateral damage of the great Mahabharata war. The ecological balance gets imbalanced because of the use of lethal weapons in the war. Future generation gets affected for centuries. Innumerable innocent citizens supporting the soldiers from outside the battlefield are killed. Vidura's description of one of such killings is the best example of this mindless and blind slaughter:

When children, old men, and servants
ran out in terror
Kritavarma's arrows
cut them down.
Frightened elephants
trumpeted wildly
smashed the tents
and trampled the women
sleeping inside
to death. (Bharati 99)

Directed by the feelings of hatred, jealousy and contempt, humans are allured to think that war can bring solutions to their material-cum-existential problems. The playwright strongly gives his message that wars provide no solutions, temporary or permanent. Ironically, they create some more problems. AndhaYug borrows some of the incidents from one of the great epics, the Mahabharata. It takes readers into the middle of the eighteenth day of the great Kurukshetra war supposed to annihilate adharma from the world. A plethora of events have already been passed that led to the war. They are not included because the playwright seems to highlight the conclusion of the war. What happened after the victory of 'dharma/virtue'? Do the remaining humans get into the state of livedhappily-ever-after?

In reality, the new rulers lose their peace and sensitivity after this large-scale slaughter. Yudhishtira is the most representative of the disillusionment even after getting the desperatelydesired victory. He finds that it was nothing more than a kind of self-destruction:

And what is
victory then?
Is that not also
a long and slow act
of suicide? (Bharati 143)

He finds himself dejected, spiritless and helpless. He is disappointed to observe his brothers behaving ignorantly and foolishly. Some of them have become arrogant and intellectually dull and some other are "grown old and weary" prematurely (Bharati 127). The statement by chorus regarding the war beautifully sums up the whole anti-war argument using the character of Yudhishtira:

Day by day Yudhishtira grew increasingly dejected.

slowly he lost faith in everything hope in everything and in the ever-increasing darkness understood that his victory in war was hollow. (Bharati 127)

It can be easily inferred from the growing decadent state of the new rulers that the end of the war is not a happy one for even those are victorious in it. It is not just the character of Yudhishtira that represents the hollowness of the result of war, all other characters equally represent its grim outcomes to more or less extent. Gandhari, who loses ninety-nine of her sons, can be even stronger character to represent the havoc that a war wreaks upon the participants and their relatives. To cite Gandhari in the context of after-war scenario of Hastinapur:

Suicide
Violence
Adharma
and family strife
have grown
a hundredfold
all the cities and forests. (Bharati 140)

Therefore, a war cannot be justified in the name of religion, gods, truth or honour. Nobody can claim that war is necessary, in some incomprehensible divine way, to maintain peace, dharma and prosperity in the world. The attempts to destroy 'evil' or 'vice' from the surface of the earth are illogical and nonsensical as virtue and vice are intricately entwined in human nature. There exists no pure form of any of them. AndhaYug asserts this point of view unequivocally.

The Kurukshetra war, occurred to settle down the dispute of the succession of the throne of Hastinapur, can be compared to the partition of Indian subcontinent in the summer of 1947. There was a similar kind of genocidal civil war in the country between the two major religious sects of the country. Does that division or murder of about a million people brought peace and prosperity in India? The answer is simple that people were killed and peace became a mirage never to be achieved in the future ages. Besides continual blame-game, the fact that precious human lives were butchered brutally remains unpalatable yet true. In his heartrending novel about partition, Train to Pakistan, Khushwant Singh remarks:

Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to blame. The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured....

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