

## POSTMODERNISM IN THE AGE OF DARKNESS: EXAMINING DHARAMVIR BHARATI'S ANDHA YUG

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### ABSTRACT

*Postmodernism has its various versions depending on which culture and literature it is being applied to, therefore, demanding a subjective approach. The dissolution of distinctions, the futility of war followed by disillusionment, scepticism towards generalized views, decentring of notions, and problematizing concepts like rationality are few norms associated with postmodernism. In the case of India, the catastrophic event of the 1947 partition left tremors that were felt in the subsequent years. Taking this into account, the paper explores the mythical play Andha Yug by Dharamvir Bharati (Translated by Alok Bhalla), written after the Partition of the Indian subcontinent, that uses postmodernist and war discourse lenses. The ancient characters of the Mahabharata are (re)created by the playwright to go with the predicament of contemporary times, which is examined to comment on the darkness and blindness of the era. The study applies the concept of metanarrative used in the discourse of postmodernism to deconstruct the narratives that were being promoted. This post-independence retelling of the play metaphorically uses the myth to question the dehumanisation and confusion taking the shape of normal and natural. The paper also discusses how gradually the Western (global) idea of postmodernism has been redefined to suit the (local) narratives, thereby incorporating the aspects integral to Indian culture, which is significant for the understanding of the play.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Postmodernism, War, Partition, Despair, Disillusionment, Blindness, Metanarrative*

### INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism is a complex term to define due to its subjective nature as the concept is constructed at different levels globally. It usually deconstructs the commonly held notions and creates a new understanding by questioning and problematizing the norms which are widely accepted. One of the major works in the field of postmodernism is “The Postmodern Condition” by Jean-Francois Lyotard, where he describes postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (XXIV). A metanarrative is a grand theory/narrative which tries to explain a wide range of notions, disregarding the differences that are present. In this context, even Modernism can be viewed as a metanarrative, signified by ideas such as progress, reason, democracy, science, technology, etc. According to Lyotard, such ideas should be viewed with scepticism, as there cannot be any singular truth or concept that can be applied everywhere because of the presence of different societal structures.

In the case of India, colonial rule and eventual ‘freedom’ that followed require special attention, as the contemporary period in the Indian context involves several aspects to be viewed critically. The idea of progress and freedom was dominant but the Partition of 1947 of the Indian subcontinent also brought forth the suspicion involved in the acceptance of these grand

narratives, which were legitimized by telling and retelling. It destroyed the narratives promoted by the national leaders about progress and independence because of the destruction, hopelessness, and distress brought by this event. Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug*, which was written in 1953, takes into consideration the despair and disillusionment which followed partition as tension still prevailed in the subsequent years. He (re)creates a few characters of Mahabharata in his play, which begins on the evening of the eighteenth day of the war, to highlight not only the atrocities of the war but the inner darkness that encloses the human mind because of it. Though the mythical story is about the *dharma-yudha* between Kauravas and Pandavas, Bharati's retelling is still relevant as the fear of war and its destruction is a constant global concern.

Before the World Wars, the grand narratives of the heroic West and the European enlightenment and rationality were propagated to the rest of the world. However, this metanarrative was challenged after the two World Wars, as the horrors of the wars forced everyone to question the ideas of progress and reason which were put forward because of Modernism. In the case of India, the massacre caused by the partition destroyed the hope and idea of progress initially circulated by the British and even the national discourse of independence promoted by national leaders. Therefore, Bharati's retelling of the myth has a pivotal role. Not only does it partly deconstruct the grand narratives of freedom, truth, rationality, independence, peace, and prosperity, but also replaces them with local narratives of the divine and hope by playing with the absence and presence of Krishna's character.

### Summary of the Play

The verse-play has been divided into five acts, along with a prologue, an interlude, an epilogue, and also uses the chorus to link and comment on different episodes.

The first act starts in the evening of the 18<sup>th</sup> day of the war. The Kaurava kingdom is engulfed in darkness. The guards contemplate their existence as slaves who have been guarding the desolate corridors. Gandhari and Dhritarashtra mourn the loss of their sons, and Gandhari accuses Krishna of hypocrisy. Meanwhile, Vidura comments that the grief over the loss of her children has made her cynical. Moreover, the Old Mendicant who announced the Kauravas' victory initially, admits he is wrong and acknowledges the power of omniscient Krishna.

In the second act, Sanjaya is introduced, who is burdened by the thought of telling the news of the defeat. Ashwatthama, Kritavarma, and Kripacharya are the few survivors from Kauravas' side. Ashwatthama is consumed in vengeance at the loss of his father because of Yudhishtira's half-truth. He considers his only dharma is to kill. Eventually, being mad at the false prophecy of the Old Mendicant, Ashwatthama kills him. In the end, the chorus contrasts the victory of Pandavas and the defeat of Kauravas by commenting on it.

The third act begins with Sanjaya informing Gandhari and Dhritarashtra about the vanquished Kauravas. This is followed by the entrance of Yuyutsu, the only Kaurava who took the Pandavas' side. However, Gandhari mocks and curses him. Ashwatthama brings the news of Duryodhana's defeat. The support provided by Krishna to Pandavas, irrespective of the violation of dharma, makes Balarama label Krishna "an unprincipled rogue" (Bharati 79). Moreover, Ashwatthama witnesses an owl killing a sleeping crow, which gives him the idea to attack the Pandava camp while they are fast asleep.

The interlude features the ghost of the Old Mendicant, who comments on the darkness of the age. Then the characters of Yuyutsu, Sanjaya, and Vidura walk on the stage as if they are in a trance and exhibit their pathetic state even after following the right path.

The fourth act begins with Ashwatthama, who tries to enter the Pandava camp but is stopped by Shankara. Then, he begs for mercy, and Shankara blesses him. Sanjaya, because of his divine power, narrates the destruction caused by Ashwatthama to Gandhari, which pleases her. But later, Sanjaya loses this divine power. When Ashwatthama goes to Gandhari, she removes her blindfold to empower his body by making it as hard as a diamond. To destroy the Pandava clan, Ashwatthama releases the Brahmastra to target Uttara's womb and kill the unborn child. Krishna saves Uttara's unborn child and curses Ashwatthama with immortality. Gandhari initially curses Krishna by claiming the destruction of the entire Yadava clan, but soon releases her mistake and apologises.

The action of the fifth act starts after a few years, where Yudhishtira is restless despite getting the throne, and questions their victory. Later, Gandhari, Dhritarashtra, and Kunti die in a forest fire, and Yuyutsu also meets his tragic death.

The epilogue deals with a hunter mistaking Krishna's foot for deer and releasing his bow, thereby killing him. Then the chorus asserts that now after Krishna's death, the world has finally descended into darkness. However, in the end, the chorus also mentions the seed of duty, honour, freedom, and virtuous conduct, which is there inside everyone, that needs to be nurtured to save the future of mankind.

### **The Alternative Perspective of Retelling**

The opening prologue of the play sets the theme in advance by asserting that in the future, there will be a decline in prosperity and dharma, as everyone is self-absorbed and lost in the darkness of the age. The Narrator comments,

This is a strange war  
in which both sides  
are doomed to fail (Bharati 27).

The degrading conditions of contemporary times when the play was written are highlighted above. Though partition was not immediately followed by war, the devastating effect was of such a magnitude that its ramification was observed in the following years, as the tension between West and East Pakistan and India kept developing. Here, the playwright does not want to focus on the eventual victory of one side but asserts how both sides are doomed to fail, as blindness rules the age. It is not just the moral blindness that is emphasized but the social and political blindness too, as the code of honour was violated by both, "the Kauravas perhaps more than the Pandavas" (Bharati 27). Similarly, the consequences of partition were faced not by one but both the countries. The addition of the two guards in the play has great significance, as they appear from time to time, to state the futility of war from the perspective of the common people. The inclusion of such 'insignificant' characters in the retelling of a great epic is a post-modern take by the playwright for the contemporary audience to relate to and understand. Having been made to march and guard desolate corridors where there is nothing left to defend, the condition of the guards has been described in the play through the following excerpt:

And now  
we are tired  
very tired.  
All our actions

are meaningless.  
 Our faith  
 our decisions  
 our courage  
 our lives  
 are meaningless  
 utterly meaningless... (Bharati 29).

All the actions that were assigned to be meaningful by the narratives imposed on them converted to be meaningless. The guards consider themselves slaves since they have no opinions or choices of their own. For them, it is the blindness that declared the bitter war. The war which was promoted to resolve the problems instead complicates the lives of the people. Thus, the discourse of war is examined through the eyes of the common people, who neither initiate nor participate in the war but suffer the consequences created by a few rulers/leaders. Likewise, the metanarrative of independence was promoted along with the two-nation theory to put an end to all the sufferings. However, the massacre that accompanied riots and chaos challenges these popularised notions.

The chorus ends the first act and begins the second act describing the predicament of Sanjaya 'the neutral one'. The prophetic Sanjaya who reports the events of the war to the blind king and queen is lost and confused by the end of the war. The chorus reports,

Even Sanjaya  
 -that rational sculptor of words-  
 is bewildered in this forest  
 of doubt and confusion (Bharati 47).

Along with the guards, Sanjaya's position accentuates the sad state of the people who do not participate but suffer the repercussions of the 'inevitable war'. He further contemplates the hollowness of telling the truth to the blind. However, the main focus of the act is Ashwatthama, one of the few survivors from Kauravas' side. He is enraged because of the unfair means adopted by Pandavas to kill Dronacharya and Duryodhana. The half-truth of Yudhishtira affects him immensely, and he considers himself lost in "the blind cave of defeat" (Bharati 53). The half-truths mentioned can refer to the ones told by authorities, concealing instances like how the glory of war is often accompanied by desolation, and how the final independence was followed by partition riots. Further, Ashwatthama asserts that he will live "like a blind and ruthless beast" (Bharati 52). The beast is metaphorical more than literal as it presents the psychological scars produced by such events. He exclaims,

From now on  
 my only dharma is:  
 'Kill, kill, kill

and kill again!' (Bharati 54).

He gets immersed in vengeance and hatred to such an extent that in his frenzy, he tries to strangle Sanjaya, mistaking him for a Pandava. Ashwatthama was ready to kill anyone who belonged to the other side. Parallely, the frenzy to kill whoever belonged to the other side of the border was pervasive right after Partition. Ultimately, the fanatic desire to kill in the play results in the death of the Old Mendicant, which Ashwatthama rationalizes by saying that it is not a sin to kill. And this absurd act is interrogated when Kritavarma mockingly asks if they survived the war to kill old and unarmed men. Here the playwright wants to focus on how the lines are blurred between right and wrong, good and evil, rational and irrational. The chorus consequently ends the act expressing,

This is a night of pride  
when heads are held high.  
This is a night of shame  
when hands lie paralysed (Bharati 64).

Sanjaya finally narrates the painful story of the defeat of the Kauravas to Gandhari that engulfs her into darkness and blindness. A sudden chaos grips unexpectedly where the guards describe an enemy soldier entering the city. He is described as a sorcerer, a shape-changer, a giant, a child-eater, and a vulture. However, the man is revealed to be Yuyutsu, the only surviving son of Dhritarashtra who took the side of the 'truth'. Yuyutsu is welcomed neither by the people of Kaurava Kingdom nor by his mother. Gandhari mocks him by asking to prepare a bed of flowers for him to rest his strong arms, which must be tried after slaughtering his relatives. This examines the detrimental results of finding glory in a war. He laments,

As if my mother's curse  
and the people's hate  
will save me  
from damnation!  
In the final analysis  
whether you uphold truth  
or untruth  
you are damned.  
Vidura  
what did I gain?  
What did I gain? (Bharati 75)

Thus, Bharati wants to bring attention to how disillusionment along with despair and anguish is the companion of everyone involved in such events, irrespective of the stand taken. The concept of peace is not available to 'anyone'. The people who were displaced because of Partition endured many obstacles for many years and could not lead a peaceful life

even after being on the ‘right’ side of the border. Furthermore, in the play, Vidura acknowledges that he is confused as “where righteousness ends and falsehood begins” (Bharati 77). And when Sanjaya finally brings the news that Duryodhana has been defeated, Ashwatthama is again consumed by anger and revenge and wants to wipe the Pandava army, including Abhimanyu’s son carried by Uttara. Following this, an interlude is added in the play titled ‘Feathers, Wheels, and Bandages’ which presents the ghostly Old Mendicant on stage who describes the blindness of the age and is followed by the inner contradictions of characters like Yuyutsu, Sanjaya, and Vidura. Yuyutsu claims that he was once like a firm wheel that was fixed to a chariot, but now contemplates if he spun the wrong axle. Sanjaya considers himself a small ‘useless’ decorative wheel which in the end is vulnerable because of instability. Using the symbol of the wheel, the creeping desolation and scepticism experienced by these characters are exhibited. Moreover, Vidura who views himself as a devout and righteous follower of Krishna is also full of doubt and confusion. The predicament of these characters highlights the lamentable state of people as the playwright wants to emphasise how the damage is inevitable, be it at the physical or mental level.

Further, Ashwatthama enters Pandavas’ camp in the wilderness, and the events are narrated by Sanjaya to Gandhari where she expresses the wish of watching this ‘heroic’ scene. This brings forward the question of what is heroic and how subjective its connotation can be depending on the perspective used. Eventually, the hunger for vengeance results in the release of the Brahmastra while blaming Krishna and Pandavas for not being satisfied. The annihilation mentioned in the play is reminiscent of the geographical, social, moral, and economic devastation by nuclear weapons known to all after the Second World War. Thus, through the voice of Vyasa, Bharati brings forward the catastrophic picture.

O you vile man  
do you even know  
the consequences  
of using the Brahmastra?  
For centuries to come  
nothing will grow on earth.  
Newborn children  
shall be deformed.  
Men shall become grotesque.  
All the wisdom men gathered  
in the *satya*, *treta* and *dvaparayugs*  
shall be lost forever (Bharati 114).

Moreover, when Vyasa commands Ashwatthama to recall his Brahmastra, he answers that he does not know how to recall it. Bharati is emphasizing how the destruction is known to ‘rational beings’ but the conservation is not. Then Vyasa calls him a beast, and Ashwatthama cries wildly saying that he was not born a beast but made one. The degeneration of the human mind as a result of war is displayed here, along with the hopelessness experienced. After he is cursed by

Krishna for the sin of infanticide, Gandhari in her cynicism curses Krishna, where he along with his clan will be destroyed. It is later accepted by Krishna in the hope to end the cycle of revenge, followed by Gandhari's regret.

The fifth act begins with the chorus reporting that years have passed after the war, but the old city of Kauravas never regains its days of glory, and the victorious Pandavas' self-confidence has been shattered. The prediction of the doomed future with both sides facing consequences is fulfilled here through the predicament of different characters. Yudhishtira, engulfed in sorrow, contemplates the futility of the war as his brothers and kinsmen for whom he fought the war are either foolish or insolent. Paradoxically, the victory turns into defeat and loneliness. The stagnant situation of the guards again displays the hopelessness involved for common people in wars.

Guard 1: Some went mad.

Guard 2: Some were cursed.

Guard 1: Yet we remained...

Guard 2: as always we were.

Guard 1: The ruler changed

Guard 2: but the conditions remained the same (Bharati 132).

Moreover, Yuyutsu who suffered the most, dared to stand alone against his own family and risk his life, is constantly insulted by Bhima and abused by others. This eventually results in his suicide, which highlights how the time of 'peace' can also involve bloodshed. Again, his death marks the fate of innocent people. Gandhari, Dhritarashtra, and Sanjaya all perish in the forest fire, and the news of Krishna's death follows it. This results in Yudhishtira deconstructing and decentering the term 'victory' by questioning if it is a long and slow act of suicide. Thus, the chorus comments,

Thus the reign of the Pandava kingdom came to an end.

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 141-142).

The epilogue describes the death of Krishna and presents the perspectives of Ashwatthama and Sanjaya and ghostly Yuyutsu and Old Mendicant. Ashwatthama finally understands that the blindness of the age had flown through his veins, which made him mad and ignorant. Sanjaya claims that he remains neutral but has slowly forgotten the meaning of existence. Yuyutsu, trapped in the dilemma of his actions, calls himself a coward and an imposter. The Old Mendicant considers them dejected, paralysed, and monstrous and cries if there is anyone to listen to him repeating the last dying words of the lord. The absence of any listener reflects the emptiness at the existential and psychological level after a great war.

Bharati's retelling has multiple layers as the familiar story of every household has been created to suit the consciousness of every contemporary man. Every character is engulfed in the darkness of some kind irrespective of the

side taken including those who did not side with anyone and were mere spectators. The play starts after almost major actions of the war have taken place, as it is the outcome that is made the focus instead of the victory. The war which was supposed to uphold the *dharma* provides only perturbation and chaos. Dhritarashtra and Gandhari's self-imposed blindness leads them to their disastrous end but the confusion and sufferings of Sanajya, Vidura, Yudhishtira, and Yuyutsu make the created discourses of war utterly meaningless and absurd. The incorporation of the two guards presents the unprecedented degradation of common people who are more concerned about their immediate existence than knowledge and morality. The anti-war sentiment is visible when the victory in war is declared as hollow by the chorus.

The play deeply reflects the social and political condition which prevailed at the time when it was written. It was visible to the entire world after the two World Wars that the idea of progress and reason as promoted by the West had flaws. The British rule in India led to the spread of such ideas and even the national leaders encouraged the narratives of freedom and progress followed by peace and stability. However, the partition which was supposed to resolve the issues of the two communities resulted in massacres, terror, and violence. Millions of people were, thousands died, and hundreds were left all alone as the only surviving member of the family. Therefore, Alok Bhalla comments that "...the play, written soon after the carnage of the partition of the Indian subcontinent, which nearly erased a form of life and civilization, and being read once again in our *rakshas* times of hysterical unreason, still had the power to make us realize how close we live to the borders of nightmares" (5). The 'borders of nightmares' do not only refer to the partition but the years that followed it as tension still prevailed between both the countries because of which there was a constant fear of possible war. The metanarrative of independence which was said to bring freedom, prosperity, and peace was completely crushed during the partition riots and massacres. Moreover, reading the play in contemporary times is also relevant, as international conflicts between different countries have become a global concern.

### Shift from Global to Local Narratives

Postmodernism as a discourse tends to displace and dismiss certain narratives, like moral, philosophical, and scientific concepts of Modernism. As wars led to degradation in moral and ethical values, objectivity could not be maintained due to differences in societal structures and science was not able to answer every question as it claimed initially. Though these narratives are applicable in the East, not every aspect can be examined using Western discourse lenses. Because of the different versions of postmodernism available, Wang Ning comments that "the grand narrative of (global) postmodernism has finally been relocated to different (local) "*petiteshistories*" (Lyotard)" (264). Thus, the discourse of postmodernism has evolved over the times with continual redefining and redescription while travelling from west to east where the role of culture comes into the making of the meanings. The grand narrative of freedom followed by progress and rationality can be replaced by the local narratives of hope and divine, which can be integrated into this postmodernism discourse of India.

The moral and ethical degradation is pivotal to the powerful story of Mahabharata. The concept of *dharma* is significant as the war revolves around it. Krishna, who is the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, can understand its actual meaning and rises above it. However, in *Andha Yug*, Krishna does not appear as a physical character but his presence is marked by the music of the flute, floating feathers, and shadows. This postmodern take on depicting the presence/absence of Krishna comments how the reading of the play provides flexibility in interpreting the divine which may be present/absent to humans. Moreover, it may also refer to the idea of the divine being present within each one. The chorus



thus ends the play with some hope: though the age of darkness has begun, there is a seed buried in each one which grows every day as duty, honour, freedom, and virtuous conduct. Thereby adding,

It is this small seed  
that makes us fear  
half-truths  
and great wars  
and always  
saves  
the future of mankind  
from blind doubt  
slavery  
and defeat. (Bharati 162)

The place of the divine and hope accessible by the end of the play is usually incompatible with Western postmodernist discourses, where the world is portrayed as gone through multiple disasters, that are far away from hope and recovery. Therefore, these inclusions made by the author take into consideration the significance of the epic along with the culture it belongs to. It does not dismiss the idea of redemption for mankind. Though the theme of darkness and blindness dominates the play, Bharati in his prefatory note exclaims that since he has shared the sufferings of the world, he cannot keep to himself the truth discovered by him. The truth he wants to share is the destructive spirit of mankind which is often disguised under the image of rationality.

## CONCLUSIONS

Thus, by (re)creating the myth, Bharati compares and contrasts the Kurukshetra war with the partition of the Indian subcontinent, as the promise of peace and prosperity promoted in either case was destroyed eventually. Through the play, the playwright focuses majorly on the transformation seen in the society after such events which resonate subsequently in the years to come. *Andha Yug* depicts how mankind can work towards their destructions thereby associating meaninglessness with their existence. This post-independence play truly caters to the reading consciousness of a contemporary reader. It can be perceived as a ring of the warning bell for mankind which the author is trying to produce so that the sound can vibrate the human mind, aiming to displace and decenter the 'ideal narratives' presented to them.

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