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Metaphor and Materiality: Representation of Blindness in Bharati's *Andha Yug* and Tagore's 'Drishtidaan'

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Abstract:

In the Indian literary consciousness, blindness is simultaneously a stock metaphor and a materially embodied experience. My paper will seek to examine these different modes of representation of blindness in the Indian context; specifically by a close reading of Bharati's play, *Andha Yug* and Tagore's short-story, 'Drishtidaan'. I will demonstrate that if Bharati employs blindness as an opportunistic literary device to reinforce normality; Tagore, through his blind female protagonist, decides to unsettle this hegemonic construct. Based on the Epic Mahabharata, Bharati's play depicts blindness not as an embodied experience but an overarching trope. Here, the lack of sight is depicted as a lack of morality, insight and truth. By contrast, in 'Drishtidaan', blindness is a lived-experience. Foregrounding the social construct of disability, the author shows that how medical mentality, visionism and patriarchy can coalesce to cause double oppression. While Bharati reproduces the ableist perspective, Tagore transcends his able-bodied position!

Key Words:

metaphor, materiality, ableism, representation, normality, feminism.

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, in their essay, 'narrative prosthesis', postulate that disability has been employed in our literary narratives as a stock feature of characterization and an opportunistic metaphorical device. Disability, in itself, is not treated as a valuable point of reference. In our English literary canon, we can find many texts that are suffused with stereotypical blind characters and symbolic thematic design of blindness; and thereby a creative representation of abnormalcy, disorder and instability. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Bronte's *Jane Eyre* are prime examples. Such a strategic metaphorical representation involves definite social ramifications as it shapes cultural discourses and perceptions (Hall 2016). It fosters social stigma and alienation. In fact, this emblematic design of blindness bolsters ableist conceptions, and detracts from material concerns of the blind. In our English narratives of non-disabled writers, it seldom happens that social, environmental and attitudinal barriers faced by blind persons, become a cardinal concern. However, in the Indian literary consciousness, blindness has been simultaneously portrayed as both, a stock metaphor and a materially embodied experience. My paper will seek to inquire into these different modes of literary representation of blindness in the Indian context; specifically by a close reading of Dharamvir Bharati's play, *Andha Yug* and Tagore's short story, 'Drishtidaan'. In Bharati's play, blindness is not an actual lived experience but a stereotypical trope which perpetually oscillates from its micro to the macro level registers of meanings. On the other hand, 'Drishtidaan' is based on the material nature of embodied experience of the blind female protagonist, empathetically presented through the first person narrator. I will demonstrate that if Bharati's play negatively equates blindness with an undesirable state of abnormalcy/instability; Tagore's 'Drishtidaan', through its sensitive portrayal of the central blind character, unsettles the construct of normality.

The stock stereotypical image of blindness is deeply rooted in the Indian socio-cultural discourse: the Indian proverbs, folklore, myths and epics metaphorically portray it as an undesirable state of experience. Hindi phrases and sayings like 'andhe ki lathi', 'andha andhe ko rasta dikhata', 'andhon

ke desh me kana raja', 'andhi peese kutta khaye', 'andha bante revdi, fir fir apnon ko de' etc, have decisively shaped the popular perception. A cursory survey can reveal that blindness in India, is often equated with darkness, ignorance, foolishness, irrationality, helplessness, sin, evil, immorality and even sometime mysteriousness. Georgina Kleege's remark that blindness is often conceived as a tomb-like imprisonment or a total absence of light, is very true in the Indian context as well. In the Indian myths and tales, it is not only a lack of sight but a categorical loss of the capacity to acquire knowledge. The ancient Indian parable of 'The Blind-Men and an Elephant', for instance, explicitly projects blindness as synonymous to ignorance. The six blind men miserably fail to apprehend the so called valid knowledge about an elephant. Their subjective interpretations are looked as markers of their naivety and narrow-mindedness. Hence, here lack of sight is depicted as a lack of insight/truth.

Dharamvir Bharati, in his widely acclaimed play, *Andha Yug*, has creatively exploited this stock metaphor, directly drawing from the much celebrated Indian Epic Mahabharata. Based on the last day of the Mahabharata war and its aftermath, this play presents blindness as an emblem of darkness, debility, disorder, abnormality and instability. The title itself introduces this overarching trope which structures the entire play. In the Prefatory Note of the play, Bharati himself equates frustration, dejection, bloodshed, vengeance, disease, deformity, with blindness. In the Prologue, it is clearly stated: "This play is concerned with the age of darkness, which in the Vishnu Purana is described thus: And then in the future day by day there will be a decline in prosperity and dharma and the whole earth shall slowly perish." This association of blindness with darkness stems from the notion that it is a condition of lack of light; and the prevalent perception that the blinds constantly live in darkness. Julia Miele Rodas writes: "it is essential to remember that blindness is founded in seeing and visuality." In this sense, it is understood as a deviant to the norm of sight. Moreover, it is also a lack of reason/rationale, which again symbolizes disorder and instability. "Blindness rules this age not reason and blindness shall prevail in the end" (act 1).

In the line quoted above, blindness is apparently delineated as a general trope, not a lived experience of an individual. Here, one never knows about the day-to-day challenges of Dritarashtra; rather his blindness is metaphorically represented as an Ethicon-moral and intellectual lacunae, narrow-mindedness and diseased mentality. As Miele Rodas also notes that blindness is always laden with moral values. The focus is strikingly shifted from the physical blindness to the moral blindness of the blind character. Thus, Dritarashtra typifies everything that is negative and undesirable. All the stereotypical meanings are attached to him, without taking into account his embodied lived experience. But, in this play, this darkness/disorder/debility/blindness is not confined to one or two individuals; it has seeped into the souls of all who live around. It is hinted that Dritarashtra's blind ambition and blind love is responsible for the moral blindness of others: as if it is he who breeds blind envy in Duryodhana, stirs blind rage in Gandhari and Ashwatthama, and ultimately drives the entire Kaurava clan to be blind. In fact, blindness reigns the entire age. And only, "Blind fear and blind love blind power and blind justice shall prevail in the end." From an attribute of the individual, now blindness becomes a defining characteristic of a society, civilization and age. Thus, in this play, this metaphor constantly oscillates from its micro level meanings to the macro level implications.

Just like the ancient parable of The Blind-men and an Elephant, this play also relates blindness with a lack of insight or incapacity to discern the larger truth. Michalko (1999) also remarked that it is not only deemed as a lack of light but also an absence of independent intellectual acumen. Apparently, Dritarashtra's self-seeking subjective stance and his inadequacy to apprehend the larger truth/reality are analogous to those blind-men's abject failure to correctly/completely perceive the elephant. In the beginning of Act 1, Bharati introduces Dhritarashtra as one who accepts his intellectual circumscription caused by his impairment. "My senses were limited by my blindness." His blindness is as if self-enclosing: "They defined the boundary of my material world." Hence,

Bharati has sketched Dhritarashtra as the typical helpless, senseless and unscrupulous passive blind character who can do nothing but moan his lost sensory capacity and lack of empirical knowledge. As he ruminates: "My love, my hate, my law, my dharma had evolved out of my peculiar world." Bhumika Sharma also notes: "Dhritarashtra's confession exhibits the limitation of subjective perception". Furthermore, Gandhari has been negatively portrayed as lacking intellectual sight to see the full face of the truth. She is also narrowly located in her niche, from where she cannot have an access to other realities. The author indicates that she is blinded not because of her blindfold but due to her blind love for Duryodhana; and her blind rage towards Pandavas prompts her to make Ashwatthama's body adamant. Alok Bhalla is of opinion that it was her utter mistakenness which led her to curse Krishna, the embodiment of compassion, justice and truth. Not only this, Ashwatthama is presented as a threatening blind brute who prides on his possession of half-truth. He emphatically announces:

"I shall live like a blind and ruthless beast and may

From now on my only dharma is:

'Kill, kill, kill and kill again!'"

The implication is that in their blind rage, both Gandhari and Ashwatthama are incapable to comprehend the gross objective truth. 'Blind rage' technically means that one is so angry that one cannot see (Rodas 2009). If Duryodhana is blinded by his hatred and envy towards Pandavas; Yuyutsu also ultimately turns out a blind spirit, even though he fought from the side of Pandavas in accordance with his subjective conception of reality. Yuyutsu's subjective truth is already fractured and therefore cannot accord him a life of dignity. As a result, he commits suicide; but only to be "doomed to wander aimlessly through dark worlds". As he muses on his predicament: "I committed suicide and broke the adamant doors of death only to find myself once again in the caves of darkness.". Then, an escape from darkness/blindness is tantamount to escape from the existential trap? In fact, according to the author, blindness/darkness/ignorance is the dominant trait of the entire age from which no escape is possible. Even Sanjay, the gifted seer, finds his visionary powers rapidly diminishing, while he shows truth to the blind Dhritarashtra. He doubtfully remarks: "Trying to show the truth to the blind must I too become blind?"

This dominant imagery is also informed by the backdrop of the partition of India against which the play is based. Bharati wrote it just after the carnage of partition. In his Prefatory Note, he underscores the immediate compulsions of the time: "Andha Yug would never have been written if it had been in my power not to write it!" In the context of partition, *Andha Yug* is a strong indictment of the blind politics of violence, bigotry and aggressive selfhood. It alludes not only to the senseless destruction of lives during the partition but also vividly images the ruined socio-cultural fabric of the newly born nation. The catastrophe of the shattered ideals and the destroyed ethical values of the Indian civilization, are duly reflected here. Thus, firmly situated in its contemporary context, this play becomes a national allegory. Davis' conviction that "much of literature is part of a national project in which representative character types are exploited into narrative situations", is appositely corroborated! Surely, the blindness of these epic characters mirrors the blindness of the numerous frenzied rioters during the massacre. The blind rage and bloodshed in Mahabharata became actualized in the pogrom of partition. The figure of the blind beast, Ashwatthama, launching the ultimate weapon of destruction, Brahmastra, well exemplifies the rampage. Bhalla even goes on to compare Krishna's death with the assassination of Gandhi. Then it can be argued that Bharati's rhetorical use of this metaphor turns out to be a fairly creative, tactful and opportunistic literary device to narrate the tragedy of the nation. This central trope crucially helped him to structure this

allegorical play. The age of blindness/darkness certainly highlights the dark realities of those violent times. Evidently, the undesirable state of chaos, rupture, instability and disintegration, precipitated by partition, has been represented through this emblem.

Finally, this metaphorical strand as a state of abnormalcy and instability, is crucially instrumental in the portrayal and projection of the normal and the stable. All the stock characterizations and metaphorical meanings in the play are aimed at privileging that universally desired state of sight, stability and normality. Bharati declares in the prologue: "This is the story of the blind or of enlightenment through the life of the blind." Of course, this story of enlightenment cannot be presented without the story of the blind; since blindness is traditionally considered to be diametrically opposed to intelligence. Understandably, the norm of sight/light can be established only by dubbing blindness/ darkness to be an aberration. That is why all the major characters in the play, have been portrayed to be metaphorically blind, as against the visionary figure of Krishna who alone is delineated to be an embodiment of all the desired virtues of love, compassion, justice and truth. All the blind characters ultimately act as props to uphold these normative ideals championed by him. In Bhalla's words, "Krishna is the man of justice and truth we can all become." In stark opposition to the abnormalcy of all the characters, Krishna emerges as the normal and stable. He is only one who is detached and free from narrow-mindedness; who possesses both sight and light to discern the larger objective truth. The prologue of the play explicitly points this polarity between Krishna and others:

"Krishna alone was dispassionate and detached.

All the others were blind self-absorbed depressed and confused lost in the dark caverns of their souls."

This deliberate juxtaposition of insight with blindness and hence normal with abnormal is running throughout the play. The curse of Gandhari to Krishna is suggestive of the onslaught of blindness/darkness/abnormalcy over vision/light/normalcy. "From the moment Krishna accepted Gandhari's curse the stars began to grow dim." The final Epilogue 'Death of the Lord' (Krishna) comes to signify the departure of light, justice, Dharma, order and the objective truth. "Death of the objective truth results in the incomprehensibility of the meaning which is suggested through the intensity of the darkness" (Sharma 2013). Hence, the author implies that darkness/blindness is a result of absence of light, reason and truth. The confrontation between Gandhari (the blind/abnormal) and Krishna (the sighted/normal) stands in the centre of the play. And Bharati willfully reinforces normality by taking the side of Krishna. Before his hegemonic truth, all the subjective truths are rejected as mere attributes of blindness.

In his short-story, 'Drishtidaan', Tagore brings out an alternative mode of representation. If Bharati negates all the subjective truths as markers of sightlessness, and privileges the normative truth of visionary Krishna; Tagore favorably asserts the subjective reality of the blind, critically interrogating the hegemonic values of the sighted culture. Unlike *Andha Yug*, here blindness is a real lived experience of an individual rather than a common stereotypical trope. The material condition of the blind female protagonist is the primary concern of the author, not the stock metaphorical overtone. Tagore has empathetically delineated the trials and tribulations of Kumu who has to constantly confront social stigma and exclusion, along with the disabling patriarchal stranglehold. While reading this story, the reader can sympathetically understand the quotidian challenges of a blind. This is something that is not possible when we read Bharati who has merely reproduced the ableist perspective. As opposed to Bharati, Tagore exhibits an acute awareness of the consciousness of his blind protagonist. Malashri Lal opines that "In his literary practice Tagore enters the world of the 'othered' beings, seeking unification with his own sensibilities and

sympathies.” The author strongly believed in the Hindu concept of ‘Ardhnarishvar’ (Lal 2010). This union of sensibility takes place because of the author’s sagacious choice of the first person narrator, Kumu, the blind heroine who narrates her story in her own words and ways. “The able-bodied, male authorial voice is sacrificed, and Kumu recounts her story in first person.” (Ganguly 2019). Although her narrative is decisively shaped and filtered by the author’s mind; her voice distinctly and authentically reverberates throughout the story. The identity and agency rendered to the blind female through this narrative technique, and her central position in the story, is rarely found in the writings of other non-disabled writers. As Davis also notes, “It is unusual for a main character to be a person with disabilities”. Indeed, Bharati’s play is a fine example of this strategic marginalization of disabled characters, as all the metaphorically blind characters act as foils to the central sighted figure of Krishna. Here fundamental difference between the approaches of Bharati and Tagore is that one presents blindness from the perspective of the sighted while the other paints blindness from the perspective of the blind! For Bharati, blindness is a literary device which projects the normal; for Tagore, it is an embodied experience which interrogates normality. Their varied viewpoints are reflected in the titles as well: the heavily loaded word ‘Andha’ in the *Andha Yug* Points to the stereotypical negative perception of blindness; whereas *Drishtidaan* (the gift of vision) positively refers to the disability pride of the blind protagonist.

While Bharati ignores the lived realities of his blind characters, Tagore has sensitively brought out the plight of the principal persona, Kumu who is doubly oppressed, both as a woman and a blind. For her husband, Avinash, she is a personal property which he has acquired in marriage. He finds this property imperiled when she starts to lose her sight. Subsequently, as a medical student, he reduces her wife into a permanent patient subjected to frequent medical experiments; which further exacerbates her condition making her completely blind. This is an epitome of medical violence. In fact, both her brother and husband take her as an object of medical gaze. This is a glaring example of the medical mentality which treats a disabled as an eternal victim, and locates the entire fault in the individual. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson also held: “The ideology of cure directed at disabled people focuses on changing bodies imagined as abnormal and dysfunctional rather than on exclusionary attitudinal, environmental and economic barriers.”. Avinash deliberately neglects the socio-cultural construct of disability by counting her blindness as a purely medical condition. For him, Kumu is no longer his wife or a living woman, rather she now becomes a dysfunctional and diseased blind body in an urgent need of cure. He alone represents the oppressive medical authority and the patriarchal powers. Hence, in this story, Tagore has sensibly demonstrated that how visionism, medical bureaucratisation and patriarchy, all can coalesce to marginalize a blind woman. By foregrounding the disabling socio-cultural structures, the author intends to predicate that Kumu’s visual disability is not a medical phenomenon but a social one.

Moreover, the writer has also successfully highlighted the ableist assumptions embedded in the sighted culture, which views blinds as abnormal, undesirable and asexual. This perception is manifested through the attitude of Avinash towards Kumu. Avinash expresses his aesthetic nervousness when he becomes afraid of her company. “‘I am telling you the truth,’ he answered gently, ‘I am afraid of you.’” He is afraid of his own wife, precisely because he cannot imagine her as the same familiar sighted woman he had wedded once. For him, her lack of sight implies her lack of womanhood. Thanks to her blindness, now she is not that old Kumu, but someone abnormal, different and ‘other’. Tracing a common ground between gender and disability, Thomson posits that both women and disabled have been imagined as medically abnormal.” In Avinash’s mind, Kumu is that medically abnormal woman whose blindness is an aberration from the standard norm of the well-shaped able-bodied sighted femininity. To borrow the famous phrase of Davis, she turns into a ‘deviant body’ by flouting the idea of a norm to the human body. At most, Kumu can be a goddess for Avinash but never his life partner. As he claims: “You are my god, you are as fearsome as a god,

I cannot live my life every day with you.” Jernigan pertinently said that the blind can be conceived extraordinary but never ordinary. In addition to this, Kumu is even deemed as undesirable and asexual. This is evident through Avinash’s words when he says, “I want an ordinary woman, someone I can scold, someone I can be angry with, someone I can love, someone I can buy jewellery.” Both Renu Addlakha and Nidhi Goyal have shown that it has become a prevalent perception in India that women with disability lack desires and therefore they are asexual. These women are expected to relinquish their desires/sexuality. “A woman with a disability is considered incapable of fulfilling the normative feminine roles of homemaker, wife and mother.” (Addlakha 2007).

If Bharati blends abnormality with blindness, Tagore through this female protagonist, willfully debunks this hegemonic construct of normality and ableism. This new woman of Tagore displays her indomitable courage and insight by critically questioning her husband’s ableist assumptions, which are responsible for her predicament. She neither wants to be seen as subnormal nor supernormal. She emphatically asserts that she is not a goddess: “No, I do not wish to be a goddess”. She insistently claims to Avinash that she is just an ordinary married woman. “I am an ordinary woman, deep inside I’m nothing but your young bride; I want to trust you, I want to depend on you, I want to worship you; do not raise me to a higher pedestal than yourself”. She vehemently argues with her husband to aver her desires, sexuality and womanhood at large. “What sin have I committed, where have I gone wrong, why do you need another wife?” “Tagore’s narrator and protagonist is not in need of pity, she is in need of companionship, camaraderie.” (Ganguly 2019) Through these statements of Kumu, as Ganguly contends, “Tagore counters the typical desire to represent the disabled as asexual, as beings without desires”. Furthermore, contrary to morally blind Dritarashtra of Bharati, Tagore has consciously invested his blind character with moral superiority; as Kumu, out of her magnanimity, forgives her husband twice, firstly when he makes her totally blind and secondly when he returns to her after his failed marriage. Besides, by endowing his protagonist with a perceptive mind, the author also rejects the dominant proposition (manifested in *Andha Yug*) which links blindness with absence of insight/vision. Kumu incisively remarks: “Now I began to feel that sight distracts us more than it helps.”. Instead, she celebrates her gift of vision, hence vindicating the title of the story. Needless to say that through this penetrating comment of Kumu, Tagore ultimately challenges the normative culture of sight! Through his protagonist, he decisively reverses the hegemony of the normal, and exhibits an alternative way of thinking about the so called abnormal.

Thus, it is clear from the above discussion that in the Indian literary consciousness, blindness has been represented as a popular stock metaphor and on the same time, a materially embodied experience. The two texts analysed here bring out two distinct modes of representations. Bharati and Tagore strikingly differ in their treatment of their blind characters. For Bharati, blindness is an opportunistic general trope to reinforce the dominant notion of normality; while Tagore decides to destabilise this hegemonic construct. In *Andha Yug*, blindness is a disembodied imagery; in ‘Drishtidaan’, it is a tangible lived reality of the blind. In this way, Bharati’s representation is essentialist, reductive stereotypical and exclusionary; whereas Tagore’s depiction is dynamic, progressive, realistic and inclusive. Hence, Bharati has merely reproduced the already rooted ableist assumptions, while Tagore crucially transcends his able-bodied perceptions and prejudices towards the blind and the disabled at large. Eventually, these two Indian writers represent the two disparate attitudes towards the blind/abnormal and the so called sighted/normal.

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