Revisioning the *Mahabarata*: Analysing Bhasa’s *Urubhangam* in the context of Peacebuilding

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Abstract

*Urubhangam* is one act play that delineates the after-effects of war and is a revisioning of one of the final episodes in the epic *Mahabarata* and features the eldest Kaurava prince Duryodhana. Duryodhana lies wounded with his thighs shattered due to the blow administered by Bhima, awaiting his impending death. In the final moments before his death, Duryodhana is remorseful and tries to make peace with his cousins. This paper attempts to examine the various ways in which the play is able to humanize the villain Duryodhana and to offer an alternative perspective to the grand narrative - *Mahabarata*.

Key words

Revisioning, peacebuilding, anti-war, violence.

*Urubhangam* is one of the oldest surviving plays by the Sanskrit dramatist Bhasa and it can be called the first ever anti-war play of India. The one act play is a narrative that delineates the after-effects of war and is a revisioning of one of the final episodes in the *Mahabarata* and features the eldest Kaurava prince Duryodhana. Duryodhana lies wounded with his thighs shattered due to the blow administered by Bhima, awaiting his impending death. His companions in war, Balarama and Ashwatthama, are present by his side and express their disappointment and discontent at the unjust and unlawful ploys of the Pandavas led by Krishna. However, Duryodhana does not express any resentment for his cousins nor does he cry foul. He accepts his fate and realizes the tragic mistake he committed, which eventually led to the war and the death of...
all the Kaurava Princes. He realizes that it was his greed and arrogance that led to his downfall. This paper attempts to examine the various ways in which the play is able to humanize the villain Duryodhana and to offer an alternative perspective to the grand narrative -Mahabharata.

Duryodhana, according to the Mahabharata was an expert in mace fighting. As described in the epic, he was a brave warrior who strictly adhered to the Kshatriya traditions. Even in his last combat, he chose to fight justly and chooses Bhima who is also an expert in yielding the mace. In the original version of the epic, Duryodhana is portrayed as someone who is wholly resentful of the Pandavas and the enmity is so steadfast that it never diminishes even for a second. However, Bhasa, through the act of revisoning is able to portray Duryodhana in a positive light. He is depicted as a tragic hero, a victim of circumstance. He is also able to depict the tender side of Duryodhana in his capacity as a son, husband and father.

In the final moments of death, Ashwattama and Balarama arrive at Duryodhana’s side to express their displeasure at the unjust practices adopted by the Pandavas. They swear to take revenge on the Pandavas. However, Duryodhana rebukes them and tells them not to. He pacifies them and tells them that the war has already taken many lives. The war transforms him completely as there is a complete shift in his character. His fierce hostility is converted to remorse. He realizes that a war can only have negative effects and it does result in anything positive. The large number of fallen soldiers and animals, the brutal killing of his brothers, his wives who will soon become widows and the sight of his young son makes him realize that all the enmity and hatred was not worth it. Duryodhana realizes that his over ambitious nature was the cause of this calamity and hence he is filled with remorse. In his final moments he is seen deeply reflecting on his past actions and his demeanour completely changes. He accepts his defeat complacently though he knows it was unfair for he understood that he was primarily responsible for the war. Bhasa portrays him as a noble prince, who is not evil by nature, but a victim of fate and destiny.

By portraying Duryodhana in a positive light, one gets to see his sentimental side. As his son Durjaya approaches him, he gently advises him to respect Kunti and honour the Pandava brothers. By asking his family to forgive the Pandavas, he is seen extending a hand at mending the strained relationship. He feels remorseful about not being the best father to Durjaya and gently calms him as he approaches him. He also asks his wives to mend their relations with the Pandavas.
Duryodhana also feels sorry for his parents and he expresses his love and respect for them. In the process he also pacifies them and feels sorry for their plight. As Dhritarashtra vents out his concern over the death of his children, Duryodhana consoles him. Bhasa here shows Duryodhana’s tender side, where he cares for the well-being of his family and that of his aged parents. He is overcome by remorse and regrets his actions. His transformation is not just the result of the fatal blow, but the worries of his parents and the concern of his wives and son moves him. In the process, he realises that the war was a futile endeavour as it only led to irreparable losses for both sides.

Duryodhana does not engage in mud-slinging. He does not blame anyone for the war or for his death. He accepts his death with grace and humility. Bhasa rehumanizes the character of the Kaurava King. He is no longer the arrogant and defiant Prince but a mortal man facing death. He describes himself as a fallen man, which is a very uncommon thing for a warrior. Duryodhana realizes that he has the power to break away from the vicious cycle of violence that led to the war. He realizes that this break is required for change and hence he tries to reconcile the warring factions. The breaking or shattering of the thigh is hence symbolic of the breaking away from the cycle of violence and by doing so, Duryodhana is extending a hand at peacebuilding.

Gandhari’s monologue in the play is also significant. As a distraught mother, who has lost all her sons to war, she expresses her displeasure to Krishna and curses him for letting the war happen. She speaks not only for herself but all the women and children who are left helpless and fatherless. These themes are still relevant even in contemporary times as the trauma caused by war continues to exist long after war is over. The play opens with the depiction of a battlefield, corpses strewn along with wounded soldiers and dismembered body parts. War not only leads to economic losses for both sides, but also the loss of valuable human resources.

Vilification of the enemy is very common in a war narrative. In this play, Duryodhana does not try to portray his cousins or their actions in negative light. He in fact praises them for their brave deeds and even as Ashwattama and Balrama swear to take revenge, Duryodhana rebukes them and says that Bhima’s actions are justified for he had the wit to escape from the fire in the house of lac and he also killed the demon Hidimba. He also says that it was the work of the gods and hence no one is to be blamed. He blames Krishna and forgives Bhima. Duryodhana does not show any resentment towards his cousins and accepts his death with dignity. The inevitability of death drastically changes him. He also does not regret striking Bhima as he lay fallen.
In this act of revisioning of the Mahabarata, the villain is portrayed as the moral hero. As a revisionist text, it challenges the age-old notions of war and successfully reinterprets the decisions and motivations of the people involved. One of the key features of a revisionist text is its ability to challenge and reverse moral findings. The play raises questions about moral ambivalence. ‘The end justifies the means’ is the advice Krishna gives the Pandavas, however the question of who gains by the war is prevalent throughout the play. The characters in the play act, without thinking of the consequences and the implications that the war causes.

By portraying Duryodhana as the tragic hero and by using the genre of a tragedy, Bhasa is able to challenge the existing legend and create a new one, one that speaks from the margins and for their cause. As with Sanskrit theatre, the play does not end on a note of despair and there are signs of hope for the future.

WORK CITED