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Andha Yug: The Age of Darkness by Dharamvir Bharati (review)

Sruti Bala

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directly engaging in the existing scholarly debate over whether or not the two plays embrace feminist causes or ultimately adhere to the patriarchy. Instead, the two chapters pay special attention to the difference in the way the two cross-dressed women comprehend their multiple selves. In *Mulan*, Kwa finds that the lead character's cross-dressing is less transgressive due to an effort to separate her "illusionary" male personae from her supposedly "true" female self. In *Girl Graduate*, however, Huang Chonggu rejects a clear-cut distinction between the two selves and allows the multiplicity to coexist even after she discloses her disguise.

Generally speaking, Kwa's rendering of *Four Cries of a Gibbon* is highly readable, but without sacrificing the stylistic peculiarities of the Chinese texts. As a matter of fact, the translator values and preserves many stylistic features of the original plays. For example, the translations keep the title of the tune at the beginning of each singing passage, thus maintaining the integrity of the Chinese sung dramas' musical structure. The annotations are also substantial parts of Kwa's project, not only making Xu Wei's texts more accessible but also illustrating the extremely rich historical and literary sources upon which Xu Wei's works are based.

Strange Eventful Histories enriches our understanding of Xu Wei's dramatic works by exploring the significant dialectics between identity and costume. The monograph is a crucial addition to the scholarship dedicated to the theatre and literature of late imperial China, especially considering that Xu Wei's important dramas have heretofore been less familiar to English readers.

GUANDA WU

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ANDHA YUG: THE AGE OF DARKNESS. By Dharamvir Bharati. Translated with a critical introduction by Alok Bhalla. *Mānoa: Pacific Journal of International Writing* 22, no. 1. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010. 144 pp. Paper, \$20.00.

The literary journal *Mānoa* publishes English translations of important literary texts from Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas. Judging by the editorial standards, quality of design, and excellent translation, accompanied by rigorously researched essays, this can be considered to be a collector's copy. The issue under review features the translation of an important text by Hindi writer Dharamvir Bharati (1926–1997), the canonical verse play *Andha Yug: The Age of Darkness*, translated by Alok Bhalla, which is a welcome addition to the journal's scope and can be recommended as compulsory reading for anyone interested in modern Indian playwriting. The play was written in 1953, shortly after the violent partition of the Indian subcontinent and after World War II, and the work retells a part of the epic *Mahabharata*, attributed to Vyasa and

focusing on the last days of the battle between the warring factions of the two sets of cousins, the Kauravas and Pandavas. The play's protagonists are some of the most complex figures of the *Mahabharata*, who appear as ancillary figures in most renditions of the epic: Gandhari, the mother of the Kaurava princes, who blindfolds herself for life out of a sense of misplaced solidarity with her husband, King Dhritarashtra, who himself was not only born blind but also refuses to see the truth in every sense; Sanjaya, the chariot driver for King Dhritarashtra, who is given extraordinary powers of vision by the author of the epic, Vyasa, in order to describe to the blind king the atrocities of the battle; Yuyutsu, the illegitimate son of Dhritarashtra born to a slave mother, who fights on the opposing side with his Pandava cousins rather than his Kaurava half-siblings, out of a sense of duty, and is punished with contempt upon his return home, precisely because he was not able to turn a blind eye to the wrongdoings of his brothers; and Ashwatthama, son of the teacher of both sets of cousins who wreaks havoc on the Pandavas in the aftermath of the war, who is constantly confronted with half-truths, the contradictions and dilemmas of which drive him to revenge and unending pain. The title *Andha Yug: The Age of Darkness* could just as well have been translated as *The Blind Age*, for the profound questions of darkness, blindness, complicity, and ignorance resonate at the core of the play and point out that the lack of vision characterizes not just individuals but entire eras. The play transcends its direct reference to the violence ensuing from the partition of India and Pakistan (as the continent struggled with estimated deaths ranging from three hundred thousand to a million, and perhaps twelve million displaced), and speaks to the futility of war and greed everywhere.

Alok Bhalla's translation does full justice to the cadence of the Hindi verses; it retains the vernacular quality of Bharati's retelling of the Sanskrit epic, intensely aware that the epic is in fact never told in some pure form but always retold, adapted, and interpreted in different contexts and times. Compared to earlier, no less intriguing translations of the play, such as the one by feminist theatre director Tripurari Sharma, Bhalla's version seems to be more accessible to a reader unfamiliar with the *Mahabharata*, as well as to those who read this as a literary text rather than as a script for performance. It also pays careful attention to the ethical dilemmas and inner contradictions of the characters rather than elaborately describing the gory details of the war alone. The contextual essays by University of Hawai'i professor and journal editor Frank Stewart are a useful introduction to the *Mahabharata* and the work of Dharamvir Bharati. Bhalla's own introduction does what a translator's introduction should avoid doing: explaining the play to the reader. His unnecessarily heavily footnoted essayistic commentary is distracting and random in its associations, though giving evidence of his erudition and wide knowledge of literature and philosophy. One wishes instead to learn more about the fascinating history of the staging of the play, which was first broadcast on All India Radio in the turbulent early years of Indian independence and later staged by theatre directors of great caliber, such as Ebrahim Elkazi at a historic site in Old Delhi in 1963, and recently re-enacted by Nepalese director Bhanu Bharti

in a commemorative production in 2011, tying together the history of the partition with the 1996–2006 civil war in Nepal.

Andha Yug: The Age of Darkness also consists of a visual translation, namely a selection of images that illustrated the Persian translation of the *Mahabharata*, titled *Razmnama* (The Book of War), commissioned by Mughal emperor Akbar in the sixteenth century. These beautiful images printed on fine transparent paper provide another dimension of complexity to Dharamvir Bharati's play, as they place his work in a long-standing tradition of a secular interpretation of the epic, promoting it as shared cultural heritage between Hindu and Muslim communities. The images translate the epic using a visual vocabulary that is rich, subtle, and open-ended. A well-documented essay by Yael Rice, art historian and former assistant curator of Indian and Himalayan Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, closes the book, guiding the reader through the complex history of Akbar's Persian translation of the *Mahabharata* and the aesthetics of the images. The publication deserves a place in every university library and archive of Asian theatre and performance.

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HINDI THEATRE IN KOLKATA: SHYAMANAND JALAN AND HIS TIMES. Edited by Pratibha Agarwal and Samik Bandyopadhyay. Kolkata, India: Thema, in association with Natya Shodh Sansthan, 2011. 123 pp. Paperback, 200 rupees/US\$3.65.

Shyamanand Jalan (1934–2010) is the most recognizable name in Hindi theatre in Kolkata. He is credited for the renaissance period of Hindi-language theatre in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) as well as India between the 1960s and 1980s. Jalan was the first director to stage plays by the modernist Mohan Rakesh (1925–1972), beginning with Rakesh's magnum opus *Asadh ke Ek din* (One Day in Asadh) in 1960. Jalan is credited with introducing the now celebrated Badal Sircar (1925–2011) to the rest of the country with his Hindi-language adaptations of Sircar's Bengali classics *Evam Indrajit* (And Indrajit) in 1968 and *Pagla Ghoda* (Crazy Horse) in 1971. Jalan is also remembered as a powerful actor of stage and screen, including for his performance as the Don in Roland Jaffe's 1992 film *City of Joy*.

In the early 2000s Jalan suffered a massive stroke, which paralyzed him, and in 2009 he was diagnosed with cancer. Jalan bore these illnesses courageously and kept working in theatre as well as his legal practice. I fondly recall Shyamanand ji (ji is a gender-neutral honorific equivalent to sir/madam) attending staged readings and performances at his Padatik Buildwell Theatre, in spite of being unwell. Shyamanand ji had opened up the doors of Padatik for young people for experimental work and helped emerging artists with