

# Ghimire's *Ashwatthama*: A Creative Use of the Ancient Ashwatthama Myth

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## 1. Background

Madhav Prasad Ghimire (b. 1919), popularly acclaimed as *Rastrakavi* or nation poet, is one of the most significant living Nepali poets. Famous in the eye of Nepali critics as the midpoint of Lekhanath's classical grandeur and Devkota's romantic vision, two other great Nepali poets, he has also been a powerful influence to the contemporary Nepali poets. He has written short and long poems, lyrical plays, songs, stories and essays.

He has written a number of lyrical plays—to be specific—song dramas, and *Ashwatthama* (1996) is one of them. According to Padma Prasad Devkota, the English translator of this lyrical play, there were three different sources of inspiration for this work: childhood memories, legends and popular beliefs, and the reality of destructive war everywhere (Introduction, 1998: viii). Like many other Nepali writers who have made good use of the material from the Mahabharata in their literary work, Ghimire in this play has drawn his imaginative power from the existence of the ancient Ashwatthama myth and sought to expose or question the global problems of war, crime and nuclear threats. On publisher's note, Royal Nepal Academy writes "what stands out most is his successful combination of the ancient Ashwatthama myth in Mahabharata with the modern threat of Nuclear Holocaust".

This paper offers a critical examination of the lyrical play *Ashwatthama* (1998), the English rendering by Padma Prasad Devkota, emphasizing the creative use of the Ashwatthama myth in the play. It is divided into six parts:

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## 2. Concept of Myth

According to Don Cupitt,

a myth is typically a traditional sacred story of anonymous authorship and archetypal or universal significance which is recounted in a certain community and is often linked with a ritual; that it tells of the deeds of superhuman beings such as gods, demigods, heroes, spirits or ghosts; that it is set outside historical time in primal or eschatological (i.e. last, ultimate) time or in the supernatural world or

may deal with comings and goings between supernatural world and the world of human history. (Cited in Coupe, 2007:5)

In most literary contexts myths are regarded as fictional stories containing deeper truths, expressing collective attitudes to fundamental matters of life, death, divinity and existence (sometimes deemed to be universal). (Baldick 2004:163)

Mythology, the body of inherited myths in any culture, is an important element of literature and ...literature is a means of extending mythology. That is, literary works may be regarded as 'mythopoeic', tending to create or recreate certain narratives which human beings take to be crucial to their understanding of their world (Coupe, 2007:4)

### 3. The Ashwatthama Myth

The Mahabharata, composed many hundred years ago, is not a mere epic; it is a whole literature in itself, containing the heights and depths of the soul, the trials and tragedy, and the beauty and grandeur of life. " All the floating literature that was thought to be worth preserving, historical, geographical, legendary political, theological and philosophical, of nearly thirty centuries found a place in it (Chakravarti; Preface). Ashwatthama is a great warrior of the Mahabharata, which is the literary source of Ghimire's lyrical play.

Aswastthama is directly associated with a holy war, the *dharmayuddha* which takes place between the Kaurabas and the Pandawas. Though it is termed the *dharmayuddha*, the discipline of war is broken by both sides on several occasions. To observe the rashness of Ashwatthama, here is a story in a nutshell, as summarized by Chakravarti in *Mahabharata* and by Devkota in *Aswastthama* (Introduction)

When Ashwatthama heard how Duryodhana lay mortally injured, and learnt the details of the combat, his anger swelled like the sea. The deception<sup>20</sup>, practised by the Pandavas in order to bring about his father's end, had been rankling in his mind. Now, when he learnt how Duryodhana had been stricken down mortally against all rules of war, he went to the spot where Duryodhana was lying and there took an oath that he would that night destroy the race of the Pandavas. He was restless because of sorrow, indignation and hatred burnt within him. He proclaimed, "I will kill the

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<sup>20</sup> *Dronacharya, Ashwastthama's father, was a mighty warrior of the Mahabharata. The only way to defeat him was by deceit. So, the Pandavas named an elephant "Ashwastthama", and killed it. Dronacharya was then told that Ashwastthama was killed in the battlefield. Even Yudhishthira, known for his truthfulness, replied him elusively that Ashwastthama-whether man or elephant, he was not sure, was dead. Believing now that his son had been killed, Dronacharya threw away all his weapons and sat down in prayer. During this time Dhristhadhyumna beheaded him.*

Padavas and Dhirshtheadhyumna while they are asleep. He reached the Pandava camp. Dhirshtheadhyumna was in deep slumber in his tent. Ashwatthama leapt on the sleeping warrior and before he could put himself into a posture of defense, cruelly kicked him to death. The same process was relentlessly repeated. All the innocent sons of Draupadi were killed one by one when they were plunged in sleep in their tents. Having done this deed, Ashwatthama came out of the tent and set fire to the camp. When the fire spread, the sleeping soldiers were awakened and fled hither and thither in confusion and they were mercilessly slaughtered by Ashwatthama. Draupadi was overwhelmed by inconsolable grief. "Is there no one to avenge my children's slaughter, by destroying this great sinner Ashwatthama?" She cried. When she said this, the Pandavas immediately went out in search of the murderer. When Ashwatthama saw Pandavas approaching, he desperately used *brahmastra*, a very powerful weapon, with the intention of destroying both the enemy and the rest of the world. It went straight to the womb of Uttara who bore in her the son of Abhimanyu. Lord Krishna protected the child in the womb since it was to be the sole survivor of the Pandava clan. To punish such crimes in the battlefield, Lord Krishna permitted the Pandavas to cut Ashwatthama's pig-tail along with the jewel. Taking the deep wound, Ashwatthama went away to the forest.

The Mahabharat story doesn't speak whereabout of Ashwatthama thereafter. Despite being war criminal, he is worshipped as "*Astachiranjibi*" in Hindu culture. It is believed that he roams here and there in the form of the *kancho-vayu* or the unpurged soul. In a fruitful discussion with Ghimire, Padma Prasad Devkota, the translator of this lyrical play, comes to explore how deeply Ghimire's sensibility was enmeshed in the spectrum of traditional beliefs, myths and legends. Devkota writes", In his young days, shepherds reported seeing hermits and shamans in the forest; but villagers who heard their stories would say that the person the shepherd had really seen was no other than Ashwatthama himself. Thus myths and legends of the Mahabharata still persist and pulsate in popular beliefs which holds that Ashwatthama appears and disappears at local water springs, in forest, and in mountains. He supposedly roams the Himalayan heights where deities reside (1998: viii).

#### 4. Synopsis of the play

The great warrior of the Mahabharata, the long-lived Ashwatthama appears in the play, boldly confessing – "I am a war criminal". He is crippled at heart and in quest of peace and liberation from his present state of existence. He arrives at Gosainkunda, a lake on the high northern mountains in Nepal. There he comes across an old father waiting the return of his son from the war. Ashwatthama consoles this old man by telling him that his son will return victoriously, but also reminds him of the fact that his son will also carry the agony of the war with him.

Here, Ashwatthama, the *Kancho-vayu*, observes the traditional ceremony of hero-worship, a ceremony of a sword-dance, which still persists among certain tribes of Nepal, at the end of which performers leave behind an offering for the hero (*pako-vayu*). In another part of the mountain, Ashwatthama soliloquizes on the tragedy of life. In a village a pregnant woman, overcome with fear, waters the ashok tree and

weeps. Men of the village complain of someone who is shooting arrows at wombs of pregnant woman and also at innocent trees. Thirsty and tired, Ashwatthama arrives at the local water place which is crowded with the village women. But he cannot drink water. When asked why he does not drink despite his immense thirst, he tells these women that he has dipped his hands in blood. Ashwatthama feels that he is unworthy of any compassion. The women, however, help him drink water from their hands and, as they do so, they also notice the wound on his head. Overcome with grief, they begin to nurse him and this life-giving gesture of women moves Ashwatthama from within. He regrets that he will not be able to repay them. Thereafter Ashwatthama is seen at the mouth of a deep cavern, observing the horrible scenes of war. He observes the fate of a mother with a child in her arms who, as she runs away from danger, is smitten into two halves by a weapon. The child continues sucking the breast of the dead mother. A soldier appears with ears plugged and eyes blindfolded. A bitch suddenly drags the human child away and starts feeding the breast. Here the All-In-All arrives celebrating his victory but the people who have been transformed into people of the defeated country, are excited and want to punish him, for he has killed so many. They call him a tyrant. Next, at the same deep cavern, Ashwatthama observes the demoniac frenzy of maniacs. Widows who have lost their senses come with loose hair and lament over the loss of their husbands. They suddenly burst out into laughter. War crippled youths look like half-human. Angry maniacs come with stones and weapons in their hands. Their madness leads them to rip off their own skins. Ashwatthama makes his final appearance in the night sky outside the poet's window. As a poet stares at the star through the window of his room, it gradually takes the shape of Ashwatthama who appears to the poet and describes the situation of his birth with a jewel on his head which he had lost because of his own rashness. Ashwatthama requests the poet to sing of war agonies for him and for those who can't give expression to their anguish. He tells the poet that as long as war continues taking place, he will haunt on earth. Then Ashwatthama embraces the poet and becomes one with him.

## **5. Creative Use of the Ashwatthama Myth**

### **5.1. An elaboration on the traditional story**

About the story of Ghimire's Ashwatthama, Bhanubhakta Pokhrel writes,

There is not the story of the Mahabharata in the play; its story is woven joining the scrapes of events after the end of the Mahabharata war. It is based on the imaginative but original prediction of the poet. Ghimire creatively predicts that after the Mahabharata war, Ashwatthama who was left without the jewel of his head, haunted several places as *kancho-vayu*, and that such and such happened to him as he suffered and regretted his crime (2062:43).

After the Mahabharata war, we are told, Ashwatthama had to lose the shining jewel, which was an essential part of his head, and went away to the forest. He can't die because he is long-lived. He can't live a normal life as he is jewelless-he has a deep wound throbbing on his head. The Mahabharata story thus throws Ashwatthama

into a state of limbo between life and death. Ghimire forces him of a transformation; that is, the mythological crime becomes the sole cause of his suffering, and repentance purifies him to be assimilated with the poet in their desire to put an end to all wars.

Ashwatthama of the Mahabharata, said to have gone away to the forest, appears as a traveler in the play who climbs to Gosain Lake of his country and then begins his descent to the foothills of the northern mountains.

Ghimire says, “ I have recreated the mythological story of Ashwatthama in this play and equalized Ashwatthama’s ‘*Bramhastra*’ with today’s atom bomb. I have considered atom an evil force that destroys the entire humanity.....The particles of atom are spreading across the world and in the sky, the life on earth is deteriorating and the ozone layer is also depleting. The humankind is diluting it as a slow poison. Since the pain of war is unfathomable, the humankind will be safe if they experience a foretaste of the agonies of war through art (cited in Niroula, 2009:39).

Thus, the elaboration on the story, the forecast of the poet, is one of the most original aspects of this lyrical play.

## **5.2. The Character of Ashwatthama in a new light**

Ashwatthama, finally a defeated warrior of the Mahabharata, said to have gone to the forest, appears as traveler in Ghimire’s play. He begins his voyage from the northern Himalayan heights, arrives at the deep cavern and observes the war-torn human society, and finally appears in the night sky outside the poet’s window. During his journey he meets old and young people who are, in one way or another, affected by war.

Each person he meets see him as someone different. As *kancha-vayu*, he has no specific form. Fathers, widows, and young girls await their sons, husbands, and lovers. Ashwatthama takes the form of the person that each character expects to see. He appears as a war-returned soldier to old father, as a hero to novice, as a shaman to village women, and as a spirit that has returned to bid adieu to sisters and lovers to women at the local water place. In reality, he is little more than a mental projection of those he meets (Introduction, 1998: xii).

Ashwatthama knows what war has meant for him. He says,  
I cannot bear unbearable pain though I try;  
Despite what I want, I can neither live nor die. (4.2.9-10).

So he laments over the effects of war upon people and the world. Continuous degeneration of humanity has led him to grieve beyond measure.

Let me embrace you and weep tonight  
like the hot sea weeps as rain over Himal.  
In the pre-agony of war, create humanity  
with one glimpse of death, create immortality (7.5.11-14).

Ashwatthama requests the poet to sing the sorrows of war. In so doing he resembles the poet's self willing to saturate other hearts with compassion so that it may avoid another war. The poet consoles Ashwatthama thus:

Chief of all the eight long-lived ones,  
you turn even suffering into a blessing,  
where others defeat by immortal acts,  
you defeat it by immortal suffering (7.6.9-12).

Devkota writes, "unlike Ashwatthama of the Mahabharata who apparently has no qualms of conscience, Ghimire's Ashwatthama is condemned to an eternity of anguish" (Introduction, 1998: xiv). Ashwatthama suffers his crime thus:

I have dipped these hands in unwashable blood  
I cannot drink from these cupped hands though I try  
Water will turn to blood if I try to wash my hands;  
Should I force myself to drink, I might thirst for blood. (4.3.7-10).

Ashwatthama sees the possible disaster imminently in the absence of reasoning, love and compassion. The place he visits and the scenes he comes across resemble the post-war world. His foreknowledge of the agonies that await human beings in the condition of another absolute war shows that he has a vision of the future of the human world.

Sensing rain, ants carry eggs  
They know pain who presage the agony of pain.  
Awaken the pre-agony of war, create humanity  
with one glimpse of death, create immortality (7.5.7-10).

"Ashwatthama in the Mahabharata lacks such a vision. Ashwatthama of this play not only has the vision but also attempts to share it with the rest of the world (Ibid, xvi). Towards the close of the play, Ashwatthama appeals the poet thus:

I am a war criminal, grieved by experience of war;  
you are a pure soul, grieved by knowledge of war  
I shall always wail in the sarangee, poet dear,  
I shall haunt this place as long as war lasts here (7.6.13-16).

Ashwatthama of the Mahabharata was blind with passion. Ghimire's Ashwatthama repents his crime and suffers much for it. Moreover he has determined to roam the world as long as he doesn't learn to live in peace and harmony. His confession and suffering make us agree with the compassionate women who say, "No one remains a criminal forever" (4.4.14).

Thus, the character of Ashwatthama has been rendered in a new light.

### **5.3. Use of Ashwatthama myth for new meaning**

Myths, as old stories are always in the process of being recreated. So, there is an intimate connection between myth, narrative and imagination. *Ashwatthama* is a product of Ghimire's imagination that draws upon an ancient character from the *Mahabharata*. Treated cruelly by Lord Krishna – left without the jewel of his head-

Ashwatthama was left only to suffer indefinitely. Ghimire picks him up and makes him wander across villages, forest, mountains and caves. Ashwatthama, the abandoned psyche, gets purged through such wandering. It might be said that it is a reinterpretation of the primal crime. Unlike the Mahabharata Story, the play exposes Ashwatthama as a repentant of his crime and ends up glorifying him – letting him to be assimilated in the poet, as the poet believes no one remains criminal forever.

What fascinated Ghimire about this story was the implicit identification of the soul with the soul of post war humans and his agonies with pre-war agonies of the post war human society. He uses the Ashwatthama myth for two purposes. First, he wants to issue a warning quite implicitly, about the possibility of a destructive nuclear war. For Ghimire, Ashwatthama of the Mahabharata, who used *brahmastra* to destroy both the enemy and the world, is symbolic of modern tyrants and leaders blind with passion and power. Second, he wants to reminds us the real value of love and compassion. Ashwatthama, who dipped his hand in unwashable blood, is treated with love and compassion in Ghimire's hand. To kindle a vision of avoiding all future wars, the poet embraces Ashwatthama, who was unworthy of any compassion in the *Mahabharata*. Through the assimilation, Ghimire is trying to tell us that we can win everything through love and compassion. War invites another war. Hatred strengthens hatred. So we must learn to be compassionate so that we can create a war-free world. Thus Ghimire uses the Ashwatthama myth to express his deep concern for the future of humanity.

## 6. Conclusion

Ashwatthama is a literary elaboration on primitive myth. The rationale of this elaboration is to communicate love, passion and humanity. Ghimire has created it by fusing the Ashwatthama myth and his own intuitions, visions and intellect. The play, culminating in a creative vision of love, peace and beauty, while obviously indebted to the story of crime and guilt in the Mahabharata, is original and powerful enough to be recognized as a myth in its own right. With the poet's observation that "Even without understanding the pain I am distressed" (7.4.1-2), it would not perhaps be inappropriate to regard this play as mythic in the sense of its effort to evoke pre-war agonies through Ashwatthama of the Mahabharata, as he is "Long-lived agony, grief incarnate"(7.6.8). Putting all his effort into extending the ancient myth that was left dead, the poet has been successful to proclaim it alive. The poet says,

I cannot watch destruction, nor listen to pure silence,  
I cannot tolerate too much the much that happens today;  
yet why do you, distant shadow, come here to me  
and touch sad tunes on the strings of the *sarangee*? (7.4.11-14).

The play's focus is on the figure of Ashwatthama, who is not merely a war-criminal in Ghimire's hand but ultimately the one who wants to awaken the pre-agony of war in the poet's *sarangee* so that consciousness will rise against all sorts of absolute wars. If the function of myth, as German intellectual historian Hans Blumenberg puts it, "is to help human beings cope with the inexorability of reality and the course of events – a need that is not outmoded by scientific advances and

rationality" (Abrams et al, 2009:180), Ghimire's *Ashwatthama*, the dramatic manipulation of the old subject matter, is very powerful in its attempt to explore the post war reality of human society which is astonishingly timely.

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