

Aswatthama - an Entry for
the Dictionary of War at
Graz, October 2006

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Almost every city in the world has a memorial to the unknown soldier. Elsewhere, we in the Raqs Media Collective, have remarked that there are hardly any memorials to unknown citizens. To those felled in the ordinary, banal course of day to day statecraft. But that is the subject of another dictionary, a specialized dictionary, perhaps a sub-lexicon that annotates the civil war of daily life, but to go into that would be to stray from my appointed task today.

We are going to speak to you about a soldier condemned to wander the earth forever. There cannot be memorials to him, because he is not allowed to die. And though he may be relatively little known, he cannot be considered unknown. In some places, like where we come from, he is quite well known. When we speak his name, people recognize him. So, we cannot quite call him the unknown soldier. He is undead, he is not unknown. we cannot memorialize him.

We are speaking of course of Ashwatthama. And we offer you, his name as an entry to the dictionary of war. When a name becomes a word, then the burden of the man who carries that name becomes somewhat lighter. Because

every time someone utters the word, the man whose name it is feels he has a helping hand. So, we offer you an old name, a very old name, and a new word, a very new word - Ashwatthama.

Ash - wa - tthama.

Aswatthama, the man, not the unfortunate dead elephant Aswatthama
Ashwatthama, whisper, rumour, malingering battlefield tumour
Ashwatthama. Ashwatthama, warrior, son of a warrior. Aswatthama,
invincible Ashwatthama. Ashwatthama, accursed. Haunted, hunted
Ashwatthama.

Ashwatthama, womb raider. Ashwatthama abortionist of the future, prisoner
of time.

Ashwatthama, horses stop in their tracks, elephants stumble, tanks rust,
missiles misfire, citadels collapse, cities empty themselves to defeat. Just the
name Aswatthama

Ashwatthama, wandering warrior. Ashwatthama immortal, undead.
Unhappy Aswatthama. Aswatthama, ashen, ashamed, Aswatthama.
Aswhatthama, deserter, deserted, desert Aswhatthama.

We could stop here and say - "There is nothing more that needs to be said
about the man called Ashwatthama. Other than the fact that death is a great
blessing. " But we won't. We will speak more about Ashwatthama.

Ashwatthama, was a famous Kaurava warrior who fought in the mythic
Kurukshetra battle for the throne of Indraprastha (now known as Delhi, the
city I come from) between the Pandava and Kaurava princes, cousins, rivals,
foes in the battlefield and in gambling matches. The narrative of this battle
forms one of the core elements of the Mahabharata Epic.

It is estimated that the Mahabharata was effectively compiled between 300
B.C.E and 300 C.E. This means that the first occurrence of its narration
might have occurred roughly two thousand and three hundred years ago
somewhere in the north western parts of what are today India or Pakistan.
The stories of the Mahabharata have been told continuously since then, and
have found their ways into temple friezes in Vietnam and Cambodia and into

shadow puppet plays in Indonesia or dance drama narratives in Thailand, besides surviving in countless forms (as song, dance, poetry, theatre, folklore, riddles, proverbs, erotica, sculpture, painting, cinema, television and computer games) in different parts of India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. It continues to be possible for the Mahabharata to invade the subject of an ordinary conversation about relationships and work, just as it can inform rhetorical twists in political double-speak. Grandmothers pass the story on to their grandchildren on hot summer afternoons, and grandchildren play at being gods, cross dressing heroes, reluctant warriors, undead soldiers and angry queens, making the Mahabharata live again in their bodies and fantasies.

The Mahabharata war, in the Hindu theory of time, marks the beginning of the age of decline - Kali Yuga - an epoch of strife, unrest and war. We, who live today are the inhabitants of the Mahabharata's vision of the future. We live smack in the middle of Kali Yuga - the age of declining time. This vision of declining time does offer us a thin sliver of relief in the knowledge that at least one apocalypse is already behind us. A world has ended and we are living in the wake of its end. There is some consolation in that. It puts to rest all kinds of echatological anxieties, but it raises some other concerns. We inhabit the paradox of the situation where the end of the world as we know it does not bring with it the comfort of the end of history. War continues, and so much history. In fact, living in declining times means that we always know already that even though the apocalypse is behind us, before even the remotest possibility of it ever getting better it may yet get a lot worse

Today North Korea conducts a nuclear test, tomorrow it could be Iran, or 'once again' India, and the day after tomorrow, it could be Russia or the United States announcing that they did not in fact get rid of their stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons and they have to announce this fact belatedly to the world, because yesterday North Korea or Iran conducted a nuclear test. The fact that tomorrow will be a more or less unpleasant surprise is not in itself surprising.

How can we, inhabitants of the already predicated future future, cope with the poison of badly timed regret? The impossible regret for that which is yet to be?

Let us at least try and come to terms with the idea that nothing we can say can arrest the decline. Ashwatthama's shadow only lengthens, it never fades. The battlefield shifts location, but the war never ceases. Yesterday it was Lebanon, tomorrow it will be elsewhere. Yesterday on the tube in London I saw a man reading a paper that said that the death toll in Iraq was 650,000 people. It always is Indian Occupied Kashmir, where the Indian military and insurgents are together responsible for the deaths of something like 80,000 civilian non-combatants in the last twenty years, tomorrow it will be elsewhere. The question is, how can we stay sane, knowing that the markets are buoyant when widows are in mourning. How can we watch television and maintain our dignity? How do we read the signs of your times and still go to bed at night? How do we find it in ourselves to awaken in the morning?

Aswatthama's shadow falls on us all. It touches us everytime we hear and see a spin doctor on television talk about peace when they actually mean war. In the epic, Yuddhishtira the Pandav prince famous for always speaking the truth is persuaded to utter a half truth to disarm Aswatthama's father the Kaurava General Kripacharya. A battle elephant, also called Ashwatthama, is felled, and Yudhishtira is heard within Kripacharya's earshot to say - 'Ashwatthama hata', (Aswhatthama is dead), and then in an undertone, he whispers, 'iti Gaja' (I mean the elephant). Stunned with grief, Kriapacharya the Kaurava general ceases fighting, and is easily despatched with a series of well timed volleys of arrows from the Pandava formations. The tide of the battle turns. Enraged at the duplicity that felled his father, Ashwatthama makes his way later into the Pandava camp at midnight and attacks pregnant women, aborting their fetuses. He takes revenge for the death of his father by destroying the unborn children of his enemies. Ever so often, war is an attempt to erase the future of a people in revenge for a percieved assault on the past. Anyone who has thought about the history of war in the Balkans and in Sri Lanka where war has meant, among other things, the burning of libraries and assaults on women and children will recognize the continuing rage of Ashwatthama.

Ashwatthama's midnight raid into the tents of the Pandava camp to abort the fetuses in the wombs of the pregnant Pandava women is perhaps an early act of mass biological or chemical warfare. The history of eugenics in

the twentieth century in whichever form it has taken, whether as the result of eugenic policies in the United States or in social democratic Scandinavia, or Nazi Germany or in pursuit of development and family planning goals is a recapitulation of Ashwatthama's raid, with the children of the poor, or of particular sets of social or ethnic minorities seen as the enemies of the future.

Do you recognize Aswatthama now? Can you not see his tired haggard features. He is everywhere, harvesting coltan through war in the Congo, so that our mobile phones and laptops might work, he is a doctor in a forced sterilization camp somewhere, he is sometimes a GI in Iraq, sometimes an insurgent in Afghanistan, he is a zombie undead suicide bomber in Gaza and an Indian secret police torturer in Kashmir. He is an infantry soldier manning the cross roads in Bangkok as the military take on the mantle of saviours of democracy. He is a war correspondent who brings you profitable news of distant wars, he is a diplomat, an armaments merchant, he maybe your local member of parliament.

Aswatthama does not die, because war is a way of life. War is a life form that capitalism has learnt to incubate and clone from its predecessors and spread like a virus over the planet.

If the war that seems to be without end does not end, If there comes a time when the last soldier and the last civilian are both dead and the pastures and forests have all turned to desert. there will still be the lingering shadow of Ashwatthama, waiting for the chance beginning of new life on the planet, and the renewed possibility of discord.

Once, on a battlefield, Yuddhishtir, (he who is calm in the middle of battle), who was famous for always speaking the truth, uttered a famous and deadly lie, He said Aswatthama is dead, and then he tried to cover it up by pointing to the still warm corpse of a dead elephant also known as Ashwatthama. Aswatthama did not die that day. He cannot die.

Today, we too, sitting here in Graz, could lie. We could say - 'the war is over' and point to the possibility of a lack of belligerence in our selves, because

we, are not fighting. Our war-elephant sleeps peacefully within us. The war is elsewhere - in Kashmir, in Nagaland, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Palestine, in America, maybe in London or in Delhi or Bombay - not here, not in tranquil middle Europe, not in Graz. There was a terrible war here once, but now it is over. Finished. We could then go on to refuse to have anything to do with the war, because the lie would take on the status of a mythic truth for us - we would say, sorry, the war is over. It ended for us the moment it began, wherever it began. We had no part to play in it. We refuse it. We categorically refuse this war. It does not matter to us. We could even do this as people who are against wars. With clear, good consciences.

Our worry is, this will do nothing to release Aswatthama from the punishment of never ending life. The denial of war, and the denial of the death that war brings with it, wherever it occurs, is the one thing that keeps war going. We have to say, unfortunately, tranquil middle Europe is involved. Your mobile phones ring because of the harvests of war in the congo. Your laptops shine in the afterglow of battles. Your ever constricting idea of citizenship is a stained negative mirror image of the figure of the refugee, fleeing war elsewhere, whom you try and keep out at the border. Her exclusion defines the terms of your participation in this society. Without her, you cannot be what you are today. Ashwatthama is here. And the battlefield is in front of your nose. In this room. Recognize Aswatthama when you see him next, the next time you look at your reflection in a mirror. We see him everyday.