Inventing the Gods: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Ethical Imagination

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I

The Los Angeles-based poet Chris Abani, a Nigerian by birth, tells a story about his father's people. "The Igbo," Abani says, "used to say that they built their own gods":

> They would come together as a community, and they would express a wish. And their wish would then be brought to a priest, who would find a ritual object, and the appropriate sacrifices would be made, and the shrine would be built for the god. But if the god became unruly and began to ask for human sacrifice, the Igbo would destroy the god. They would knock down the shrine, and they would stop saying the God's name. This is how they came to reclaim their humanity.[1]

"Every day," Abani adds, "all of us here, we're building gods that have gone rampant, and it's time we started knocking them down and forgetting their names. . . . All it requires is to recognize among us—every day, the few of us that can see—that we are surrounded by people like those in my story."

Abani's story is a parable for our present situation, of course—the worship of false and harmful gods of our own making. And as in Abani's parable, our task as world citizens is to try to frame our wishes so that they make us fully human in the present, produce the framework for an ethical covenant with the future, and ensure a degree of self-reflexive vigilance, so that we can recognize when our wishes cause harm.

Who and what are the gods we have given our loyalty to? Which of them have required blood sacrifice, and which must be knocked down and forgotten? "All it requires is to recognize them," Abani says, but of course that is the difficult, urgent, and terrifying point. Unless our wishes are wise, again and again we will treat like gods our misguided desires and nightmares.

The intention of this brief essay is to nominate certain false gods for extinction, and to underline the importance of the ethical imagination as a means and methodology for framing the wishes that will create a more humane, less bloodthirsty world.

I am not speaking here of the gods of any particular religion. Abani's story is a parable, as is my meditation on it; he speaks of gods with a thousand faces. Particular gods will do to make a point, but the universality of the issue transcends the particular. I wish to assert early on that one of the necessities in formulating the wishes of our better natures is that we keep in mind the distinction between the literal and the parabolic, the doxological and the metaphorical. The gods we need to repudiate have been fashioned by ourselves, they are idols with faces of stone (or gold, etc.) and with incantatory voices that are all too human. Their high priests speak in the tongues of the gods, but they echo voices that are already familiar to our souls, or else we would not so readily understand and respond to them. As the authority of the gods in Abani's parable expand in power, they make anything possible, including the rite of human sacrifice. In the case of such gods, their demands are believed to be good because they are godly, rather than godly because they are good.

My first nomination for extinction are the god of nationalism and its near twin, patriotism. No gods were more responsible for the atrocities of the last century. Neither religious fervor nor political ideology (though these demons are surely implicated) was ever as unruly and lethal. In his 2008 essay "What Have We Learned, If Anything?" historian Tony Judt points out that, despite being on ideologically opposing sides, the most efficient killers of World War Two were the nation-worship of Hitler's Germany and the Father-worship of Stalin's Soviet Federation. National Socialism convinced Germans to draw sharp distinctions between the nation's true (Aryan) citizens—who had rights and legal protections—and non-citizens, to whom these were denied and to whom anything could be done.[2] Within

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the geographically sprawling USSR, Stalinism, for its part, identified nationalism other than that which carried official sanction with treason, and the punishment was deportation, starvation, and execution by the millions; in the end, not even the surrender of one's will to the Patria, Papa Stalin, could defer death.

One of the problems that accompany nationalism, Judt points out, is that it is almost always based upon a false narrative, and is therefore threatened by facts and authentic memory; national unity is constantly on the offense against alternative histories, deviating voices, and inappropriate questions. When a nation's unity is based on grievances or shame—that is, on narratives of victimization or (often unspoken) victimizing—the nation's official historical narrative is most rigid and rote; being vulnerable to empirical truth, it is acutely watchful for, and deals severely with, the appearance of any form of imagination: a subversion (Latin: "a turn from below") which gives rise to forbidden wishes.

Thus it is not only facts and empirical truths that are dangerous to the gods of nationhood and patria, but also memory, wishes, and dreams. "Nations are necessarily exercises in remembrance and forgetting," Saumya Gupta writes in a recent essay on Indian nationhood. "They remember through ritual commemoration and forget through collective amnesia."3 Nations attempt to solidify their official narratives with public memorials; the deaths of particular individuals or groups become the public property of the living, who are free to interpret in marble and stone the meaning of their deaths. Memorials reduce the deaths of many to numbers, and can become "an instrument in the international competition for martyrdom," writes historian Timothy Snyder. Such memorials allow a nationalist "to hug himself with one arm and strike his neighbor with the other."[4]

In his 1917 collection of essays, *Nationalism*, Tagore imagined India as a civilization that, before its independence, had been wise enough to live without memorials. "Our history has not been of the rise and fall of kingdoms, of fights for political supremacy," he wrote. "In our country, records of these days have been despised and forgotten. For they in no way represent the true history of our people. Our history is that of our social life and attainment of spiritual ideals." Tagore was writing this as Western nations were entangling India in the mechanized butchery of The Great War. He was expressing a wish— assuming that Asian cultures in general were wiser and more civilized than the West.[5]

When Tagore visited Japan in 1916, however, he reported witnessing an Asian nation's transformation from an ancient land of high moral ideals—as he described Japan—into a Westernized nation-state; that is, militaristic, authoritarian, and hungry for an empire. By the time the war in Europe subsided, there were 35 million casualties and 17 million deaths, many of those who died were Punjabis fighting for the Commonwealth. "When this organization of politics and commerce, whose other name is the Nation, becomes powerful at the cost of the harmony of the higher social life, then it is an evil day for humanity," Tagore wrote angrily. "When it is turned into a perfect organization of power, then there are few crimes which it is unable to perpetrate. Because success is the object and justification of a machine, while goodness only is the end and purpose of man."

We might amend Tagore's judgment only by noting that for Japan, as for the West, nationalism was ultimately sustained among the populace by an appeal to higher organization of power—the Nation's identification not with its machines but with its Gods. And as we know, through Abani's parable, gods and demi-gods are shape-shifters, like Ravana, with his ten heads, some of them smiling, some pandering, and some devouring. The issue for Japan was not merely "The West" but "The Gods."

II

In 2010, in far-off Honolulu, a man dressed in everyday clothes walked out onto a nearly bare stage and began to speak:

Tataschanudinamalpala haras
vavachchhedada-dharama-arth-ayorjagatas-samakshayo
bhavishyati.

...And then in the future
day by day
there will be a decline
in prosperity and dharma
and the whole earth shall slowly perish.

Tatascharth evabhijan hetu.

The one who has wealth
shall rule.

Kapatavesha dharanameva mahatva hetu.

The one who wears
a false mask
shall be honoured.
Evam chati lubdhak raja
sahaas-shailanam-antaradroneeh praja samsriyashyanti.
The one who is greedy
shall be king.

And weary of misrule

the people
shall hide in dark caves
and wait
for their days of misery
to end.

Hide
in real caves
or in the caverns of their souls.

This is, of course, the prologue to *Andha Yug*, the great post-Partition play (1953) by Dharamvir Bharati, translated into English by Alok Bhalla.[6] On that evening in 2010, the play's major scenes were performed—actually, they were read aloud with minimal acting—by a cast of Chinese, Japanese, Native Hawaiian, and Filipino Americans (in addition to Alok Bhalla himself) before an audience of Americans. The performance was riveting, even though those who saw it had the most minimal knowledge of the *Mahabharata*, or even of the history of Partition. In this instance, the details were not essential. The gods were recognizable and familiar enough, the individuals displayed familiar enough human passions—evil, vengeance, virtue. The play required no period costumes or stagecraft.

In his *Andha Yug: Path aur Pradarshan* (Andha Yug: Text and Performance) Jaidev Taneja is correct that the play is of course most dense and meaningful to a South Asian audience; but it is clear that wherever it is seen there will be local meanings which are profound for the very reason that they are so familiar. As Taneja writes:

> Degeneration, blindness toward values, the absence of principles, selfishness, the lust for power, characterless-ness, barbarity, skepticism, and resentfulness may belong to the time of the *Mahabharata*, the First and Second World Wars, or at a national level, the period following the achievement of independence, around 1950-51—it does not make any difference. In any country or time, the disfigurement of minds and souls, misdirection, dysfunction, and disaster are what give birth to an age of blindness."[7]

To have *Andha Yug* on a stage in Honolulu is remarkable though not implausible given our era of rapid globalization. As a result of globalization, there may well arise a number of evils, but hopefully a new cosmopolitanism may be created, presaged by what Ashis Nandy calls "a new politics of knowledge and politics of cultures." Indeed, there is potential for a new form of cosmopolitanism which will not impinge upon local interpretations of culture, and instead will simultaneously encourage "self-reflexivity and self-criticism": in Nandy's phrase, we might hope for "a pluricultural universe where each culture can hope to live in dignity with its own distinctiveness."[8] Ulrich Beck has correctly pointed out that such a wish will be difficult to conceptualize and bring into being. There is already a strenuous reaction against the crossing of boundaries and borders. In particular, Beck suggests that a basic feature of *globophobia*—the resistance to a new relationship among cultures, peoples, and individuals—is the "metaphysical essentialism of the 'nation'."[9]

In his 1882 essay "What is a Nation?" Ernest Renan, observed that modern nations are created by force and coercion; their man made borders along with their definitions of citizenship are continually contested.[10] While "nation" implies an essential unity or homogeneity, Renan wrote, shifting borders create a citizenry with diverse identities which compete with national identity; indeed, while national identity implies or demands commonality, it may also proscribe many diverse identities.

Renan cites the hazards of having a common language or religion as the test of citizenship or national identity and loyalty. "This exclusive concern with language, like an excessive preoccupation with race, has its dangers and its drawbacks," he writes; "nothing could be worse for the mind; nothing could be more disturbing for civilization."

If we have learned anything from the twentieth century it is that the old nationalism does not work, neither externally in the realm of international relations nor internally when it is used to determine full citizenship of people within a nation's borders. As I suggested at the beginning of this essay, one high function of literature is to show us when our false gods have become unruly, and to imagine an appropriate wish upon which to build new codes of moral conduct as a covenant with the future. Whether there can be a new cosmopolitanism and a transnationalism depends partly on the globalization of the wish we are charged with making. Today, unfortunately, writers concerned with such issues are outsiders among many literary scholars in the West. The Australian ethical philosopher Raimond Gaita, in his 2008 essay "The Pedagogical Power of Love" recounts a conversation he had with a fellow professor. He writes:

> Over the last few weeks I've been thinking—brooding actually—about a remark attributed to a professor of English at one of the universities in Melbourne. "Now that I've disposed of the illusion that there are great books," he told his students, "it remains only for me to dispose of the illusion that there are good ones." "Surely he was being provocative," I suggested to my informant. "No, he was quite serious," was the reply.[11]

Yet it should be clear that literature can help us make distinctions between psychic health and destructive illusions; great books are those that can make a difference by fostering what Ari Sitas terms an "internationalization of affect."[12]

III

Chris Abani tells a story about his mother, who was English. She met Abani's father at Oxford, where they married before moving back to Nigeria in the 1950s. This was during Nigeria's struggle for independence from Britain. Abani was born in Afikpo, grew up in the 1980s, and so was old enough to be among the students who were protesting the military dictatorship that later came to power. He was imprisoned in 1985 for having written his first novel, a political thriller, at the age sixteen, and was placed on death row for a time.

The part of Abani's story I want to retell involves the run up to the Nigerian-Biafran civil war. In July and September of 1966, large-scale massacres of Igbo occurred, primarily of those living in the north. Perhaps 30,000 were killed, many of them beheaded. The southern part of the country tried to break away and form an independent country, the Republic of Biafra. The Nigerian Armed Forces attacked, and by 1968 had created a blockade around the Biafran south, which led to the humanitarian disaster that we remember from the images broadcast around the world of starving infants. By the time the Biafran independence movement was defeated, in 1970, perhaps three million people had died, most from hunger and disease.

Caught in the Biafran violence, Abani's mother—this small, white woman—attempted to escape the country with her five mixed-race little children. Abani says:

> It takes her one year, through refugee camp after refugee camp, to make her way to an airstrip where we can fly out of the country. At every single refugee camp, she has to face off soldiers who want to take my elder brother, Mark, who was nine, and make him a boy soldier. Can you imagine this five-foot-two woman, standing up to men with guns who want to kill us? All through that one year, my mother never cried one time, not once. But when we were in Lisbon, in the airport, about to fly to England, a woman saw my mother, wearing this dress that had been washed so many times it was basically see-through, with five really hungry-looking kids. The woman came over and asked her what had happened. And she told the woman. And so this woman emptied out her suitcase and gave all of her clothes to my mother, and to us—and also the toys of her kids—who didn't like that very much. But that was the only time she cried. And I remember years later, I was writing about my mother, and I asked her, "Why did you cry then?" And she said, "You know, you can steel your heart against any kind of trouble, any kind of horror. But the simple act of kindness from a complete stranger will unstitch you."[13]

"All utopias and visions of the future are a language," Nandy writes. "Whether majestic, tame, or down-to-earth, they are an attempt to communicate with the present in terms of the myths and allegories of the future."[14] I am reminded that Iris Murdoch observed, "words themselves do not contain wisdom. Words said to particular individuals at particular times may occasion wisdom." [15]

We can claim the same thing for stories: we never know when the wishes in our stories might be heard by particular individuals at critical times. So we must keep telling them, even if the world seems deaf.

Notes

[*] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference "Historical Legacy and Contemporary Writing in the Commonwealth," at the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, held on October 8-10, 2010.

1. Abani Chris on the Power of Story. www.ted.com/talks/chris_abani_muses_on_humanity.html.
2. Tony Judith, "What we Have Learned, If Anything." *New York Review of Books,* Volume 55, Number 7 (May 1, 2008).
3. Saumya Gupta,. "The "daily" reality of Partition: Politics in Newsprint in 1940s Kanpur." In Ravikant and Tarun K. Saint, eds., *Translating Partition,* Katha: New Delhi, 2001.
4. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin.* NY: Basic Books, 2010.
5. Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism.* NY: Macmillan, 1917; rpt. *The English Writings of Rabindrnath Tagore.* Ed. Sisir Kumar Das. Vol. Two: Plays, Stories, Essays. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996.
6. Dharamvir Bharati, *Andha Yug,* trans. Alok Bhalla.Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press and *Manoa: A Pacific Journal of Internatinoal Writing,* 2010.
7. Jaidev Taneja, *Andha yug: path aur pradarshan* (Andha Yug: Text and Performance). New Delhi: National School of Drama, 1998.
8. Ashis Nandy, "Defining a New Cosmopolitanism:Towards a Dialogue of Asian Civilisations."First published as "Defining a New Cosmopolitanism: Towards a Dialogue of Asian Civilisations", in Kuan-Hsing Chen, ed., *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies.* London: Routledge, 1998.
9. Ulrich Beck, "The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies." *Theory, Culture & Society.* Volome 19, Numbers 1-2 (2002).
10. Ernest Renan, Lecture delivered at the Sorbonne, 11 March 1882. "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" *The Social Contract* Volume 16, Number 3 (Spring 2006).
11. Raimond Gaita, "The Pedagogical Power of Love." Keynote Address, Victorian Association for the Teaching of English, 4 May 2001.
12. Ari Sitas, "Beyond the Mandela Decade: Reconcilitaion or Polarization?" *Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Foundation Day Lecture 2010.* Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. New Delhi: Teen Murti House, 2010.
13. Abani. *Op cit.*
14. Ashis Nandy, "Towards a Third World Utopia," in *Bonfire of Creeds: The Essenteial Ashis Nanady.* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004. Quoted in "Afective Cosmopolitanism: Ashis Nandy's Utopia" by Pramod K. Nayar, Working Papers/ eSocial Sciences, 2008-2010.
15. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals.* London: Chattos and Windus, 1992.