Lourens Minnema

Tragic Views of the Human Condition: Cross-cultural Comparisons between Views of Human Nature in Greek and Shakespearean Tragedy and the Mahābhārata and Bhagavadgītā. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

“Can tragic views of the human condition, as known to Westerners through Greek and Shakespearean tragedy be identified outside European culture, in the Indian culture of Hindu epic drama?” (1) Lourens Minnema insightfully explores this big and interesting question in his well-researched and carefully argued book. While there is much literature on the genre of tragedy, Greek tragedy, Shakespearean tragedy, and the relationship between the last two, Minnema’s specific question is original: In what respects can the Mahābhārata epic’s and the Bhagavadgītā’s views of the human condition be called “tragic” in the Greek and Shakespearean senses of the word? Avoiding the temptation of providing a *theory of tragedy*, Minnema focuses on *tragic views of the human condition*, and extricates these views with great subtlety from their narrative contexts in stories and plots. Understanding the human condition then, and not an artificial debate over categories and their justifications, makes this book an enlightening and enjoyable read.

Among the challenges Minnema confronts is the great divide between Western and Eastern—especially Indian and Hindu—views, which he negotiates with great subtlety. Aware that our approaches and tools for the study of foreign cultures (including past cultures of the Western canon) are themselves contingent and problematic, he proposes interrogating each text with a variety of analytic rubrics, which he calls “aspects.” There are seven such rubrics, each analyzed in a separate chapter: Narrative Aspects, Artistic-communicative Aspects, Socio-political Aspects, Literary Cultural Aspects, Martial Aspects, Psycho-ethical Aspects, and finally Religious Aspects. In each case, culturally and textually distinct aspects of the human condition are identified in terms of their contexts, and then compared cross-culturally. Some of these features of the human condition are: coping with evil, suffering, loss, death, power, gender, injustice, fate, freedom, and so on. While the basic approach is one of phenomenological observation and description, Minnema uses a variety of theories and conceptual analyses to shed light on his findings. The book is extremely erudite, and the contributions of scholars from nearly every field of the humanities are brought to bear in this intellectual project. In each chapter, Greek tragedy remains the first point of reference. Minnema offers an overview of scholarly views on this least contested tradition in tragedy. He carefully applies these notions to Shakespearean tragedy, broadening the Greek notion of “tragic” into “tragic views of the human being.” With this initial comparison,

Minnema takes up the challenge of cross-cultural comparisons beyond the boundaries of Western culture.¹ Here he runs into the institutionalized impasse of the impossibility of translation, much less comparison of cultures. This book elegantly avoids cultural exclusivism, orientalism, and Western normativism, on the one hand, and easy reductionism, on the other. Although the queries made into Indian materials originate from within Western academic perspectives, the patterns that emerge are decidedly derived from within the Indian cultural landscape. In fact, Minnema focuses on the clarification of the Indian landscape at greater length than the Western one. This serves two purposes: the Indian textual and cultural tradition is clearly explained to a Western reader, and also provides a basis for the cross-cultural comparative project of the book. This project is to extend the discussion beyond the study of tragedy as a genre to reveal the tragic views of the human condition beyond its Western intellectual boundaries. The book focuses on the basic question: Are Indian views of human nature very different from Western views of human nature? The answer is, well, yes.

Under the rubric of *narrative* aspects, Minnema investigates the strategies by which tragic narratives are constructed out of ordinary life-stories. “Typically tragic” themes of “suffering, loss, death, evil and transgression” which we readily recognize in Greek and Shakespearean works are “omnipresent in the *Mahābhārata* epic” (52-53). But such cross-cultural comparisons are never reductive and forced. Minnema illuminates many subtleties of Hindu theology and cosmology. Rightfully ignoring a long tradition of prejudice, orientalism, and evangelism in Indological scholarship, he presents Kṛṣṇa (Krishna) as he appears in the text.² His nuanced reading offers an illuminating analysis of this

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- 1 Indeed, given the rich resonances between Greek and Indian texts considered here, one would wonder why Minnema introduces Shakespeare, who is much further removed conceptually from Ancient Greece. Moreover, the reception of Greek thought in the West is complicated by Christianity. The answer is simple: Shakespeare broadens the analysis sufficiently to allow Minnema to speak of a “Western” tradition and compare it to an “Indian” tradition.
 - 2 Minnema’s acceptance of Kṛṣṇa as he appears in the text stands in marked contrast to the work of an earlier generation of scholars. Many orientalist, especially those from deeply pious Protestant and Pietist backgrounds, struggled to come to terms with Kṛṣṇa’s divinity (this discomfort reached an extreme in the case of the evangelical fundamentalist Paul Hacker, who insisted that the claims of the “pagan” and “satanic” Indians, especially those made on behalf of the incarnation [*avatāra*] of Kṛṣṇa, had to be rejected as a prelude to effective missionary activity). Hiltebeitel notes that “most scholars . . . would never have admitted that their ‘literary’ studies of the epic were laden with religious and theological presuppositions. It [therefore] makes an instructive chapter in the history of ideas to examine the varied Indian and Western responses to these inextricable questions: What

character in particular. “Krishna’s presence in the epic is full of irony in every respect. His irony is not just a figure of speech or a tricky intervention in disguise and recognition, but an attitude to existence.” Divine irony is a properly philosophical attitude towards the phenomenal universe unfolding in “the terror of time and history” (62). “Krishna’s tricky interventions are saving, moral interventions, not egotistical, amoral, ludicrous (trickster) or moralistically ridiculing (jester) interventions”(53).³

Minnema’s ability to decode the significance of literary elements such as plots, settings, and dynamics between different levels of narrative is impressive. Here is an example: “The *Gītā*’s plot shifts from the immanent world to the transcendent world and back again to the heavenly world. The juxtaposition is upheld. Both perspectives remain valid. By juxtaposing instead of opposing them [as Platonizing Christians do?] tragedy is upheld on the immanent level and simultaneously, tragedy is recognized and overcome on the transcendent level” (62). In Minnema’s hands, the epic and its seminal text the Bhagavadgītā provide one avenue for thinking about the human condition in the West after Nietzsche. Compare Minnema’s intelligent reading here with Slavoj Žižek’s, who misunderstands the fictional/phenomenal equivocation at work in the narrative. Žižek thinks that the *Gītā* is a “justification for the burning of Jews in the gas chambers to their executioner. . . .”⁴ Ironically, while Gandhi was using the *Gītā* non-violently for freedom from a horrific colonization, it is the German Indologists, “experts” in the field at the time, who were complicit in a

is this literary immensity? And who is Kṛṣṇa?” Alf Hiltebeitel, “Kṛṣṇa and the *Mahābhārata*: A Bibliographical Essay,” *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 60, no. 1 (1979): 65–66; see also Joydeep Bagchee, “Inversion, Kṛṣṇafication, Brahmanization: The Explanatory Force of Some Extraordinary Figures of Speech,” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 19, no. 2 (2011): 127–41; Hacker’s evangelism is discussed in Joydeep Bagchee and Vishwa Adluri, “The Passion of Paul Hacker: Indology, Orientalism, and Evangelism,” in *Transcultural Encounters between Germany and India: Kindred Spirits in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. Joanne Miyang Cho, Eric Kurlander, and Douglas T. McGetchin (New York: Routledge, 2013), 215–29. Minnema’s acceptance of Kṛṣṇa thus marks out his purpose as originally philosophical and unencumbered by theological anxieties.

- 3 Minnema’s sophisticated interpretation contrasts favorably with Emily Hudson’s vapid interpretation of Kṛṣṇa in her recent *Disorienting Dharma: The Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) (see especially the section “Kṛṣṇa: The Enigmatic Deity”). Hudson’s interpretation demonstrates the continuing influence of nineteenth-century scholarship (see preceding note), though she outdoes this tradition in the depth of her nihilistic conclusions.
- 4 Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), xlvii–xlviii. The claim is repeated in Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

much more proximate cause of “burning Jews”: rabid Germanism. Because he reads the epic rather than construct an *Urepos* and because he goes beyond the errors of the Mahābhārata specialists, we ought to take Minnema’s comparative study of the Mahābhārata and Western tragedy seriously.⁵ He shows how tragedy ruptures mundane expectations. “The disruptive force of cosmic disorder” unleashes “the terrifying occurrence or menace of disorder,” threatening “a relapse into chaos” (34). No wonder, then, that the great war in the epic is explicitly overlaid with cosmological and *dharmic* overtones. This sense of disorder that needs to be rectified at a terrible cost, the oppressive mood of suffering and loss, the sense of unavoidable necessity, the distant consequences of destruction underscore the tragic worldview with despair, obscurity, irony, and a sense of finality (64-73). These analyses are presented in this book as learned discussions within pertinent scholarship.

The remaining rubrics enrich our understanding of the tragic human condition from other perspectives. The chapter on *artistic-communicative* aspects deals with three formal aspects: literary genre, dialogue, and audience response. Audience responses influence whether a narrative is perceived as tragedy or as comedy. Dialogues that appear doomed to fail, inner dialogues, and staged monologues presuppose the participation and pedagogy of the audience (75-126). The chapter on *socio-political* aspects investigates how civic, political, religious, and artistic institutions perceive, interpret, and present conflict in the three literary traditions (127-57). While in the case of Greek tragedy, the religious context and experience is available for reconstruction; in the case of the Sanskrit epic, Hinduism offers a more or less continuous tradition and development of the religion contained in the epic.⁶ These insights

5 Fernando Wulff Alonso, *The Mahābhārata and Greek Mythology* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2014) catalogues the mythic motifs common to both Homer and the Mahābhārata. Charles Kahn (and also Walter Burkert) thinks that the theory of the immortality of the soul may have reached Greece from India (“The only religious tradition in which the doctrine of transmigration is at home from a very early period is that of India in pre-Buddhist times . . . the later legend of Pythagoras’ journey to India in search of the wisdom of the East may very well contain a grain of allegorical truth”; Charles H. Kahn, *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans: A Brief History* [Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001], 19, see *ibid.*, n. 36 for Burkert’s communication). A philosophical approach such as that of Minnema’s remains best, however, for dealing with the richness of both traditions.

6 As “the principal monument—and no doubt the most ancient—of *bhakti*,” the Mahābhārata engenders the religion known as classical Hinduism. Madeleine Biardeau, *Hinduism: The Anthropology of a Civilization*, trans. Richard Nice (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 78, n. 1. The sectarian bibles, the Purāṇas, carry forward this role of the epic in shaping specific aspects of Hinduism within the overarching framework of the ontology and cosmology

are developed more fully in the final rubric. In the chapter on *literary-cultural* aspects, we see how norms and values shift in a transition from stories about “doers of great deeds” to heroes who begin reflecting on these deeds, revealing the internalized conundrums of the tragic human condition (159-216). The chapter on *martial* aspects investigates the complicated nexus of violence—the codes of honor and duty, by juxtaposing them to the victim’s perspective (217-71). The rubric titled *psycho-ethical* aspects raises the issues of personal moral responsibility, individual freedom and social constraint, the weight of human intention and action, the power and powerlessness of passion, will and reason, the available vocabulary for attitudes of mind and heart, and the acquisition of human self-knowledge (273-359). The chapter on *religious* aspects touches upon the tensions and interactions between human freedom and supernatural necessity, fate and fortune, and upon the issue of divine intentions and interventions, and ultimately, salvation (361-403).

The results of this intellectual effort are rich. I will highlight just one area: the psycho-ethical and religious aspects, which the author frames as the following question: “What is the moral and psychological weight of human intentions and actions . . . how are human actions and intentions linked in tragedy?” (273)

1. Greek, Shakespearean, and Indian texts shift their focus from human action and its consequences to human intention and reflection (344-49). In the Greek and Hindu texts, the starting point and focus is not on intention but on action. However, the Gītā and Shakespeare share a greater interest in the agent’s intention and his potential for an inner identification with his actions than the Greek case.

2. Wrong doing, in Greek tragedy and in the more archaized sections of the Hindu epic, is understood in terms of *miasma*: pollution and lack of insight or, put differently, in terms of blemished mistakes and conscious mistakes (349). There is no separation between “the inner man” and externally visible

established by the epic, while specific literary motifs (the invoking of Vyāsa as the authorial figure, the setting in the Naimiṣa Forest) explicitly link them to the Mahābhārata. (The continuity of the epic in Hinduism was also reinforced by the fact that there has been an almost unbroken tradition of commentary on it since at least the eleventh century CE extending well up to the seventeenth century CE and that Sanskrit legal, literary, dramatic, and philosophical texts all cite from it or make it the preferred object of exegesis; for an overview, see Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, *Philology and Criticism: A Guide to Mahābhārata Textual Criticism* [London: Anthem Publishing, 2015], appendix 17 [“Commentaries on the Mahābhārata”].) There is thus a continuous tradition of commentary and intellectual effort over two thousand years of striving for a refinement of Hinduism on the basis of the social, ethical, psychological, and philosophical/soteriological principles clarified in the epic.

“action.” The *Gītā* valorizes a different perspective (somewhat resonating with Shakespeare) by making a strict distinction between the inner intentions and outer world of actions and consequences. It recommends *Gelassenheit* towards the “fruit” of action, a pure action uncontaminated by hankering for results, which is difficult to see in the case of Shakespeare. Minnema does not mention it, but if we read the *Tempest* autobiographically, as it is often read, then we see that Prospero recognizes the limits of action (vengeance), but does not desist from conjuration.

3. Both in the Greek and in the Indian context, action and wrongdoing are *not* understood in terms of an autonomous will imposing its rationality on desires or passions. The struggle in the epic is not between passion and reason, as in Shakespeare, but between attachment (e.g., egotism and avarice) and dehiscence achieved through an ontological analysis resulting in a “spiritual consciousness” (351-54). Minnema sees similarities between the epic and Shakespeare in their understanding of desire as inexhaustible (282).

4. In Greek and Indian epic and tragic literature, the protagonist is a *paradigm*, and his actions reveal a general sphere of possibility (354). In Shakespearean tragedy, however, an agent is a highly idiosyncratic individual and his particular action is generalized (180). In the Indian context, the protagonist’s true identity is a de-egotistic but ethically bound and socially participatory, transcendent “Self,” while in the Shakespeare context, the individual’s true identity is a de-socialized “person.” In Kṛṣṇa’s dissociation of action and identity, the identification with one’s social role is presented as an expression of ontological confusion and, plainly, ignorance. On the contrary, in Hamlet’s dissociation of action and identity, his lack of identification with his social role is an expression of a confused state of mind and of a lack of passion (355). Greek and Shakespearean views of man presuppose the near identity of responsibility and freedom, whereas Hindu views of man presuppose the virtual juxtaposition between (social and immanent) responsibility (*sva-dharma*) and (individual and ultimately de-individualized, transcendent) freedom (356). The reader will note that this characterization of the “Greek” view does not take into account Plato’s analysis of transcendence and freedom. This is a direction in which this work could be further enriched. Focusing specifically on Greek tragedy, Minnema comes very close to showing that in the epic, self-knowledge means absolute knowledge and ultimate liberation; in the Greek case, self-knowledge means self-discovery and the recognition of human fragility. This is in essence one way of looking at Plato’s criticism of the tragedians. In a way quite distinct from Plato’s Socrates, self-knowledge in Shakespeare means self-exploration and doubting oneself (301-2). Each of these points requires, of course, further thinking and investigation. That is the

best thing about this book: one puts it down to think, and picks it up again to continue reading.

Lourens Minnema has written a bold book and an important one that, after the fiasco of academic Mahābhārata studies,⁷ offers a new way forward. His work proves that there is a way to approach Indian texts without the standard academic blinders of the German Indologists (their so-called historical reconstructions, their vapid generalizations about the nature of Indian culture, their projection of their own anxieties over the struggle between authority and faith onto the “Brahmans,” their discovery or invention of fresh “layers” at every turn, and the integration of these “layers” into a priori schemes for interpreting Indian history). Most importantly, his work shows that the expulsion of philosophical and ethical concerns from the study of Indian texts was misguided and yet only a temporary Teutonic aberration. Overcoming the balkanization of topics in the humanities, departmental super-specializations, and risking criticisms of minimalist experts, who say more and more about less and less and nothing at all about what it means to be human, Minnema shows us what it means to read these seminal texts meaningfully and to use them to interrogate modernity in valuable, productive ways. His work gives us reason to hope for a new and thoughtful beginning to Mahābhārata studies and a reinvigoration of the humanities.

Vishwa Adluri

Hunter College

vadluri@hunter.cuny.edu

⁷ This fiasco is explored in Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). The authors trace how contemporary Mahābhārata studies arose in Germany out of an absurd confusion of race and prejudice, suspicion of Brahmanism, antipathy to theology and philosophy, evangelistic agendas, anti-Semitism, rampant Aryanism, valorization of a blood-thirsty warrior code, and a contemptuous disregard for what the epic means to a living tradition.