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ONE GOD AND MANY HATREDS: A PAGAN READING OF MEL GIBSON'S APOCALYPTO



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ABSTRACT

Movies are a powerful medium capable of overt and subliminal ideological messages. Mel Gibson's movie Apocalypto (2006) is a great cinematic achievement, but palpably colonial and anti-pagan. Pagan studies is yet to have its academic share in colonized country like India. Even post-colonial studies marginalizes the pagan. The Mayan culture at the time of the beginning of Spanish occupation is depicted as evil and uncivilized in the movie, contrary to historical facts. Mayans are visualized as morally evil indulging in polytheism and

idolatry. The colonialist and the missionary devastated the Pagan lands with their claims of civilizational and spiritual superiority. The movie supports the stereotype of pagan people and their culture. The paper attempts to make a pagan contrapuntal reading of the movie.

KEYWORDS

Colonialism- post-colonialism- ideology-- missionary-Christianity- Pagans- Paganism- Pagan studies- Ideology-monotheism – polytheism- pantheism-animism--gods and goddesses-Red Indians- Indra's Net.

RESEARCH PAPER

Movies can make us move emotionally. They can have overt thematic messages. It can also carry many a subliminal message. Some of them can be ideologically- driven ones. The emotional impact of the movie can make them into good artistic pieces. But they can have sugar-pill effect too. Ideas and ideologies, likely to be met with resistance otherwise, can be conveyed without resistance. Robert Edgar and others point out the significance of locating ideologies in films in the following terms:

“Ideology is pervasive. As with narrative and semiotics, ideology is part of human communication and stretches to every part of life. However, film communicates in a specific way and as such transmits ideology in a particular way and this is what we need to consider.” (101)

They further remark:

“... The most dangerous position a filmmaker can take is to think that they are free of ideology. We all have our beliefs, our views, and our social and cultural positions.

Some of them are known to us, others are so deeply embedded that they appear to be “natural”.” (102)

Mel Gibson’s movie *Apocalypto* (2006) has been acclaimed as a great cinematic achievement with its stunning visceral mages and realistic artistic touch. It has also been criticized for colonial prejudices. This paper is intended to be a pagan critique of the movie. Hence, it is neither desirable nor feasible to make this paper a total study of the movie looking at it from different angles of film studies. It tries to trace out what the movie textually and subtextually tells us and expose its overt and covert ideological messages and finally make a counter-reading of it from pagan perspectives. Despite the claim of the director and his admirers that the movie is about general violence in humans and the need for transcending it, there is an apparent anti-pagan stereotyping in the movie. It will become clearer when we watch his propaganda film *The Passion of Christ* (2004).which the famous movie critic Leonard Maltin rates like this:

“ Despite its often direct and powerful approach, the near-obsessive visceral display – which was absolutely director- cowriter Gibson’s intention -becomes narrow and repetitive particularly since it is devoid of any historical context....However, a film that so strongly speak to those who its belief is difficult to judge objectively.”(1077)

Even this critic does not mention the ideological underpinning of the movie *Apocalypto*, which is Christian theology. He simply criticizes the movie's tendency to go over the top (55). He focuses on the form rather than on the content. The movie has been definitely influenced by the theological convictions of the director whose artistic control of many of his movies makes him a fine example of a modern day auteur. That is why Mel Gibson is considered a highly rated actor and director today in Hollywood. With the Oscars and many awards to his credit, he continues to make movies and has his own production company. The movie *Apocalypto* is mainly the brain child of Mel Gibson.

Produced under Touch Stone Production Icon Pictures in 2006 and distributed by Walt Disney Studio Motion Pictures, the movie was a commercial hit. The plot of the movie goes like this: Though Mayan kingdom has peaked its achievements, the foundations of the empire are shaky. The Mayans think they must build more temples. They are also planning more and more human sacrifices to sustain their prosperity and to save the lives of their citizens. The hero, Jaguar Paw, a peaceful hunter in a remote tribe, is captured along with his entire village in a raid. He is now the victim for a ritual sacrifice. Then he makes a daring escape and tries to make it back to his pregnant wife and son. The movie ends with his running to the sea shore where he and his pursuers meet with the arriving Spanish soldiers and missionaries led by a Christian priest.

The Mayan culture at the time of the beginning of Spanish occupation is depicted as evil and uncivilized in the movie. The Mayan people are lost souls wallowing in polytheism, animalism and idolatry apart from ritual human sacrifice. As in the case of *The Passion of Christ (2004)* Mel Gibson creates artistic verisimilitude by using the native tongue in the movie. He also employs native actors as the cast of the film. The very opening scene of the movie is historically inaccurate. Mayans are shown as hunter gatherers and murderers. The truth was that they were established agriculturists at that time. They were not country bumpkins walking into unchartered jungles even from their astonishingly built cities with temples and pyramids to gather food by hunting animals and even eating them raw. Their village life was politically organized too.

The jungle people in the movie are depicted as awestruck at the sight of Maya city. But, it is not true since the pyramids were common in Mayan world. The depiction of Mayan city people as violent die-hards preying on innocent villagers for human sacrifice and enslaving women is wrong. There are no archaeological, historic or ethno- historic data to suggest that

any such ritualistic mass sacrifices took place in the Maya world. The colonial and missionary interferences in the pagan lands were under the pretext of spiritual and cultural betterment of the natives. In the movie, tension is built up around human sacrifices which the director insinuates that it is part of their religious rituals. There are gods who can be propitiated only by human blood. Mass human sacrifice has never been the central part of Mayan culture for political or religious reasons. Not being centralized spiritual traditions, pagan cultures differed on individual, tribal and cult basis from place to place even in regions with certain homogeneity. .

Things do not end at that. The portrait of the 15th century, pre-Colombian Mayan civilization as morally evil indulging in polytheism and idolatry is a classic example of how western colonialists in cahoots with the Christian church devastated the Pagan lands with their claims of civilizational and spiritual superiority. .

In the final scene of the movie when the protagonist escapes the evil city and is chased to the edge of the sea by his antagonists, with literally no place to turn, Spanish ships appear, complete with a small, lead boat carrying a stalwart friar hoisting a crucifix. The thematic implication is that it marks a new beginning for the spiritually lost Mayan people, as evident in the advent of the Spaniards and Christianity to the Americas.

The very word ‘pagan’ is problematic. Originally intended as a term of abuse coined by the Roman Christians to refer to the non-Christian spiritual traditions of Rome, it etymologically means a villager and comes from Latin *paganus*. Ken Dowden points out:

“Paganism’ is a misnomer. With its Latin first element (*paganus*, a ‘villager’) and Greek second (-ism, as though it were a system of belief), it is an impossible contradiction..... Paganism, a singular religious environment, is a word invented by the fourth-century Christians so that they can talk about ‘it’ in the same breath that they talk about Christianity and Judaism. Thus overwhelmingly ‘paganism’ refers intolerantly to the pre-Christian religious practices of Europe and that is what it was originally designed for. A *paganus* is a ‘villager’; why this should come to mean ‘pagan’ is not clear. Zahn suggested in 1899 that it extended the sense ‘local people, non-combatants’ in reference to the ‘soldiers’ who fight the good fight in the metaphorical army of Christ”. (3-4)

In Modern English, it can mean a person holding religious beliefs other than those of the main world religions. It can also in common parlance mean a non-Jewish, non-Christian and

non-Muslim person. The word 'heathen' which literally meant "dweller on the heath, one inhabiting uncultivated land was also used later to refer to non-Christian people.

But there is striking differences between Abrahamic and non- Abrahamic religions including Indic and Chinese religious traditions. In fact, these Indic traditions like Hinduism have more affinity with pagan spiritual traditions across the world. Their highly polished philosophies can also serve as theoretical explanations for many pagan practices.

In the wake of pagan movements and resistance, modern paganism began to have social and intellectual influence and gradually received academic attention. Pagan studies is the multidisciplinary academic field devoted to studying Paganism, especially contemporary Paganism. Like the subject matter, this field of study too is a broad approach. It deals with spiritual traditions of pre-Christian times in Europe and their modern revivals and manifestations. Pagan Studies employs a variety of different scholarly approaches mostly drawn from history, religious studies, folkloristics, and sociology etc. Though earliest academic studies of contemporary Paganism began as far back as the 1970s, it is in the 1990s that Pagan Studies as a proper discipline began to develop. Most of the destruction of pagan cultures occurred in colonized worlds. But, unfortunately, post-colonial studies or criticism does not focus on paganism. Ant-paganism was one of the main forces behind the civilizational prejudice and the destruction of the cultural and spiritual edifices of colonized people. For example, *Post-Colonial Studies The Key Concepts* compiled by Bill Ashcroft and others does not have any entry for pagan or paganism or pagan studies. It has entry for words like negritude. The missing pagan is a sad omission in postcolonial studies, .So is the *The Postcolonial Studies Dictionary* by Pramod K. Nayar. It does not find pagan and paganism as worthy of having separate entries. Pagan Studies in India is virtually absent form academic circles.

Now we will look into the title of the movie. Gibson defines the title as "a new beginning or an unveiling – a revelation"; he says "Everything has a beginning and an end, and all civilizations have operated like that". The Greek word 'apokaluptō' is in fact a verb meaning "I uncover", "disclose", or "reveal". Only at the end of the movie, the beginning or the revelation intended by Gibson becomes clear- the end of paganism and beginning of the 'cultured' era by white Christians. It is a question of alterity. Pramod K. Nayar notes:

“There are several layers to this postcolonial use of the term. First, colonial culture constructs the native as the radical Other of white cultures. Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) argued that the European sense of self is constructed only in its pairing with this African, Arab or Indian Other. Second, this African or Caribbean Other is not simply Other, it is an inferior Other. The African or Indian native is primitive, pagan and non-modern as opposed to different from the modern, advanced, Christian white. Thus within the pairing of the self Other, colonial cultures place a certain set of values on each of the categories:”

The title of the movie also raises the question of linearity of time. The Semitic religions consider time and space as absolutes. Both of them have a beginning and an end. The apocalyptic vision of Christianity which has inspired many artistic and philosophical works stem from it. This linearity of time gives way to what Rajiv Malhotra calls (55, 83) history-centrism which, along with monotheism, is the cause of spiritual and theological exclusivism. As such, the Apocalypse becomes a theological necessity in the Semitic religions. Here God creates the world *ex nihilo*. It does not matter what comes before the creation. But, in Indian and pagan spiritual traditions, creation is an endless process. Like endless waves in an ocean, the universe springs up, sustains itself and dissolves. If god is the ocean, the innumerable waves that spring up are the universe. Here the binary of the creator and the created are illusionary- only a perspectival measuring points. God is both transcendental and imminent. It is not a god who stays away from the created once the creation is over like a Patriarch whose whims and fancies ultimately determine the fate of man and in whom the faithful have to have absolute faith. But, in pagan traditions, they accept a universal all-pervasive presence throbbing in everything and every living creature. That’s why the sun and the moon are called visible gods in the Upanishads, which can be called the highest philosophical dialogues in the world. Incidentally, it is the ancient pagan cultures that contributed greatly to astronomical knowledge including planetary and stellar knowledge and, yet, it is them who called these planets and stars gods both in symbolic and actual sense. The theological argument that it is the creator of the world that is worthy of worship has a logical flaw. If the world is the effect of the cause called god and then god himself must be an effect whose cause must be sought somewhere else. It leads to an endless act of regression. Theologians, especially belonging to the Semitic religions, escape this conundrum by calling God the uncaused cause, which is a cosmic oxymoron.

The separation between the creator and the created thus leads to endless philosophical and theological dualities causing individual and societal strife. It also deprives the world of any divinity. This creator concept necessitates a single god which leads to monotheism which has been the root cause of religious wars and genocides. Pagan philosophy, available in written form in Indic spiritual traditions and mostly in oral form in pagan traditions in America and Europe and Africa, emphasises the oneness of existence and not god. It is not a top-down approach but a bottom-up approach. It is not tantamount to saying that there is only one God but to perceiving that only God is. The phenomenal world of multiplicity and plurality is just an external manifestation of it. The tremendous spiritual literature of India right from the Vedas bear witness to it. To put it in other words, the existence at the subtle level is unitary and varied at the level of manifestation. The all-encompassing and all-becoming pure consciousness is the Great Spirit of the Red Indians. The diversity of the pagan world should be accounted for in this philosophical concept. But the Christian and Islamic theologians consider it as some kind of deviation from the original monotheistic principle. Godhood in pagan traditions is an immense presence, not the personal God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The creator God concept reduces matter to the level of something devoid of divinity. Hence, respecting anything other than the Supreme God becomes an act of sacrilege. The fundamental reason for the wholesale destruction of nature in general and the pagan world in particular emanates from this skewed world view. While the mystic streams in pagan cultures were given prominence, the mystic elements in the Semitic religions were side-lined and even suppressed. The difference in the fundamental world view of the White Europeans and the Red Indians must be understood in the light of the above spiritual view. *Encyclopaedia of American Indian History* edited by Bruce E. Johansen, et al. refers to this incompatibility on social level:

“The significance of the pre-1492 worldviews of Indian America, American Indians and invading Europeans possessed very different worldviews. The specific details of the worldview held by each American Indian nation and each European nation were varied and complex, but one of the basic differences in overall philosophies related to the nature of creation itself. The spiritual foundation of most American Indian nations was that the world was made up of interdependent and equal beings: Humans and all other beings had separate mortal functions but equal spiritual identities (what might be termed equal “souls”). In contrast, Europeans believed that only humans had souls. For Europeans, the

world was a divinely ordained hierarchy—what might be termed “the Genesis Pyramid.”

Humans, the only beings possessing souls, were atop this ecological pyramid..” (15)

Furthermore, Stuart Banner quotes Robert Williams in his book *How the Indians Lost Their Land: Law and Power on the Frontier*

“The most thorough study of the legal beliefs underlying the English colonization of North America, Robert Williams’s *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought*, reaches the same conclusion. Williams traces European “discourses of conquest” back to the Crusades, to demonstrate that the earliest English settlers considered themselves justified in seizing the Indians’ land. English colonists believed that the Indians “possessed no rights that civilized English monarchs or subjects were bound to recognize, “Williams argues.”(16)

So far as pagans are concerned, this sacredness of existence is reflected not only in their spiritual world view but also in their social view. The whole existence is interconnected, not disparate entities. An ordinary Red Indian pagan may not have been able to argue this point, but, he was the living example of such wisdom handed down generationally through social and familial life. They intuitively felt that whole life is a web. This idea of interconnectedness is no more expressed beautifully than in the Vedas. Rajiv Malhotra notes:

“The conceptual matrix of integral unity is illustrated in the metaphor of Indra’s Net, which is common to many dharmic traditions. The Vedic deity Indra is said to have an infinite net consisting of a jewel in each node, arranged so that every jewel reflects all the other jewels; there is no separate self-existence of any jewel. Each is unique in its reflection of all others. Indra’s Net symbolizes a universe with infinite dependencies and relations interwoven among all its members, none of which exists apart from but only in the context of this collective reality. The original idea of Indra’s Net is found in the Atharva Veda (one of the four Vedas), where the world is seen as the net of the great Shakra or Indra. Later, Buddhist texts use the metaphor of Indra’s Net to describe an infinite universe with no beginning or end, in which every member is mutually related to every other member.

The metaphor of Indra’s Net also suggests a creative intelligence which is omnipresent, permeating all life. All appearances of separateness are maya (illusory). The capacity of one jewel to reflect the light of all others within this infinite net is difficult for the linear mind to comprehend but it serves as an apt precursor to an understanding of multidimensional theories which have emerged in physics and metaphysics.”(114)

The description of the Vedic idea of interconnectedness of existence subsumes the spiritual view of the pagan traditions across the world, however varied they may be. That is why in Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and pagan traditions of Red Indians and Europe, the whole nature with its all animals, birds, plants, air, water and rock became sacred. But the Semitic religions and materialists dismiss it as primitive animism. But to the Red Indian pagan, it is part of his life philosophy. Paula R. Hartz remarks are noteworthy here:

“Although the ways of expressing spiritual belief vary widely from region to region and tribe to tribe, certain basic concepts or ideas do occur in most Native American religions.

Great Spirit: A Great Power, sometimes called Great Spirit or Great Mystery (Wakan Tanka, Manitou, Orenda, among other names) underlies all creation.

Spirits in the universe: All things in the universe are alive and contain spirit within them. Spirit forces actively affect human lives in ways that can be both good and bad. The Earth, which nourishes and sustains life, and to which people return after death, is particularly endowed with spirit and is to be respected and revered. All forms of life interact and depend on all others.

Walk in the sacred way: The individual is called on to “walk in the sacred way”—that is, to live in balance and harmony with the universe and the spirit world. People find their own sacred way by seeking clues to the sacred in dreams and visions.

Oral tradition and ceremonies: Values, beliefs, morals, ethics, and sacred traditions are passed on through an oral tradition and through ceremonies. Cultural bonding takes place through rituals developed by each group over centuries. These often include dancing, singing, drumming, and feasting, as well as purification rites, fasting, and physical ordeals.
(Page 15)

Paula R. Hartz further identifies some key factors of pagan religions which the colonial and missionary narratives often demonise :

“Everything in the world is inhabited by spirits, which can be grouped into several different kinds:

The sky beings, such as if star gods, the Sun, and the Moon.

Spirits of the atmosphere, such as the four winds, whirlwinds, rain, and Thunderbird, a huge bird—perhaps like an eagle—whose flapping wings create thunder and whose flashing eyes create lightning.

The rulers of animals and plants, such as Buffalo Spirit or Corn Spirit; also those connected with natural places such as mountains, waterfalls, and the sea.

The powers of the underworld, such as Mother or Grandmother Earth, snakes and cougars, and the ruler of the dead.”(102).

Hence, the word belief does not make much sense in pagan traditions. So the word blind belief does not arise at all. Belief is a word bandied about by the Semitic religions with its dire philosophical and historical consequences. So, it is not the believer versus the non-believer in pagan traditions. Pagan traditions do not condemn the no-believer to an eternal hell, either. In pagan traditions, it is *sankalpa* (auspicious mentation) in preference to *vikalpa* (inauspicious mentation). So the pagan has got a positive morality. A belief can be generally proven right or wrong. Sometimes, it is undecidable as well. Anyway, it has, often, to be proven right for political or theological purposes. In the case of *sankalpa* (say creating a god of time or a goddess of learning), one can accept or reject it according to one’s temperament and spiritual needs.

So gods and goddesses are born not just in intellectual realms but in psychological realms too. So we have the multiplicity and polyphony of godhood in pagan traditions. It helps to make our spiritual, psychological intellectual and cultural life varied and flourishing. Ram Swarup evokes Aldous Huxley in his book *On Hinduism: Reviews and Reflections* to point out the stunted growth of creativity in monotheistic culture.

“Huxley always distrusted monotheism from the earliest days of his intellectual life. And even when his views changed radically, monotheism was no beneficiary of this changed outlook. In an article ‘One And Many’ written in an early phase he says that “monotheism, as we know it in the West, was invented by the Jews”. Living in a desert, they found nothing in the surrounding bareness to make them suppose that the world was richly diverse. And their belief in monotheism “prevented them from having any art, any philosophy, any political life”, and that “except for a little literature, the Jews and Arabs produced nothing valuable until they left their deserts, and came into contact with the polytheistic races and absorbed their culture.”(140)

Pagan spirituality is starkly in opposition to monotheist traditions which are responsible for making religions a bloody affair. They believe in history-centrism that the truth was revealed to some messiahs or prophets in the past and that it has to be believed in and that there is no question of other people ever knowing the truth or re-realizing it. It is a close-ended and a

third-party revelation. So, belief becomes all the more important. If you believe, you are in and if you do not, you are out. In pagan traditions, on the other hand, any spiritual truth and experience are individually variable at any time and for all time by any person. Hence, their spiritual tradition is experiential and in higher spiritual traditions like Indic religions, it implies the transcendence of even the highest mystical experience to be in man's natural state, which they call moksha.

But, ordinary, day- to- day life requires spiritual practices to clean oneself morally on our journey to higher destinations. These practices differ in accordance with place, time and temperament of the devotees. This is where multiplicity of *ishta devatas*, local deities, tribal deities and phenomenal deities like time and sky and space, come into play making the pagan spiritual life a celebration of polyphony. Accordingly, theo-diversity becomes as important as biodiversity for human existence. It finally takes the devotee to pantheism. This secret was known to the ancient pagan civilizations. So, perceiving godhood was not basically 'one versus many' but perceiving the fact that 'many' and 'one' are the creations of human psyche. One contains many and many contain one. Hence, there are and can be as many gods as there are the spiritual needs of individual and collective mind. It is a natural unity and not the uniformity of a singular tribal god being imposed on the people through collective intellectual or armed coercive campaigns. Historically, Semitic religions' fight against the pagans has resulted in widespread cultural destruction and loss of human lives. Gore Vidal, an American thinker and writer, coins a beautiful phrase 'One God and his many hatreds' in order to refer to the dangers of monotheism in his Harvard University lecture delivered in 1992. He also calls monotheism' the great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture'.

Therefore, the question of one true god or many false gods is the creation of religious narrow-mindedness and theology. The Semitic mind-set is unable to comprehend the creative 'functional anarchy' of the plurality of godhood as practised by pagans. While pagan traditions accept the practice of *ishta devada* (a god of one's choice), they think that a concept of all-powerful jealous, wrathful single (often male) creator god is a superfluity in spiritual life. So, the question who made the world is also a meaningless one. Because it has an implication that the world is a thing made by someone. A more meaningful question is how the world came into being. In India where much of its spiritual literature is still left, there are two answers to this problem .One is relative and the other one is ultimate. On

ultimate level the whole cosmos is of one essence. It is called 'Brahman' in India. The Red Indian tradition calls it 'the Great Spirit'. On a relative level, the world is in a ceaselessly repetitive creation --dissolution process, each creation lasting for billions and billions of years. The waves-ocean analogy can be used to better explain the relationship between the cosmos and Brahman. The waves have no separate entity from the ocean. Waves are the ocean in movement. So the proposal that the creation of the world is the handiwork of a certain god (originally tribal and now globalized) is not in tune with the pagan spiritual traditions.

Monotheistic principles are in effect like materialist concept of matter which regards matter as inert solid things devoid of either consciousness or divinity. P. Kesavan Nair in his spiritual evaluation of the tenets of materialism notes the following. His words can be used to sum up the pagan position beautifully:

“So, subjectivity and objectivity, as enunciated in western philosophical thoughts, are unacceptable to the Indian way of thinking. It does not approve of the division of the world into the spiritual and the material. They are not divisible, either. Spirit is the subtlest form of matter and matter is the grossest form of spirit.... As such, what is called God and Nature is not two different entities. There is no conflict between God and Nature. Nature is the gross side of God and God, the subtle form of Nature. Nature itself in its subtle dissolution becomes god. God itself becomes Nature through gross manifestation.”(16 - 17)

Historically speaking, human blood shed by the Christian establishments and countries over centuries for furtherance of their religious and political interests has been unimaginable. It included fellow non-conformist Christians too. So their justification of domination over pagan lands in the name of social and natural justice cannot hold water.

So, the portrayal of Mayans in the movie is a case of simplistic treatment of colonized lands and their cultures. The pagans can be only saved by the seeds of Christian beliefs sown by the swords of Spanish conquistadors. Their civilization may be mighty, but needs western and Christian values for moral alleviation. As Zachary X. Hraby points out in his brief review of the movie:

“As archaeologists struggle to accurately reconstruct ancient Maya society, obstructed by their decimation via Western diseases; destruction of their books, art and history by

Spanish friars; and their subjugation and exploitation by the conquistadors, such films as "Apocalypto" represent a significant disparagement of that process.

Further, inaccurate representations by Hollywood of indigenous peoples as amoral, inhuman or uncivilized can only lead to greater misunderstanding and strife in contemporary society. This may be particularly important in a modern world, where common ground is increasingly difficult to come by."

To conclude, movies like *Apocalypto* are not a malady as such, but they are definitely a symptom-- a symptom of deep-rooted racial arrogance, theological intolerance and contempt for the pagan still masquerading as general civilizational concerns in various narratives including visual and literary ones.

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