

## Book Review

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## Manipulated Myth: A Re-reading of the *Mahabharata* through the Lens of Dibyasree Nandy's *Red Soil*

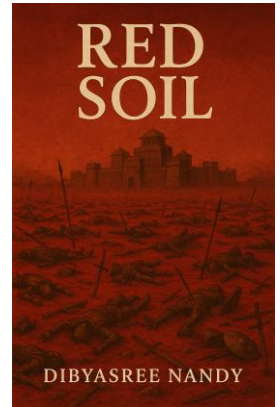
*Red Soil*

Dibyasree Nandy

The Alternative, 2025.

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Dibyasree Nandy's *Red Soil* is a bold reimagining of the Mahabharata, presented as two dramatic works—*Twisted History: Ashwatthama of the Ages* and *Kurukshetra: A Chessboard*. More than mere adaptations, the plays interrogate the very foundations of epic memory, questioning the politics of narration, legitimacy, and power that have shaped India's cultural inheritance. The most popular Indian mythological source, the *Mahabharata*, has always been looked up to as our moral guide, our fixed way of perception of the characters stems from the idealization which shaped the way of narrative style, the way the characters were portrayed by Veda vyasa which made us idealise and blindly accept the narrative rather than looking into the nuances and acknowledging the ambiguity of the plot. How viewing such a popular epic with coloured lenses can completely change our own ethical and moral grounds of judgment.

Far from being a devotional homage to Vyasa's monumental narrative, *Red Soil* dismantles divine authority and questions the very act of myth-making. It stands as an act of literary resistance: a refusal to accept myth as timeless wisdom and a reminder that myths, like histories, are made, remade, and manipulated. The plays strip the *Mahabharata* of its divine embellishments and heroic veneers, exposing beneath them a history of violence, prejudice, and manipulation. Figures traditionally vilified—Duryodhana, Karna, and Ashwatthama—are recast not as villains but as complex, tragic humans caught in webs of propaganda and political expediency. Conversely, the exalted Pandavas and Krishna appear in shades of human fallibility, their supposed righteousness questioned at every turn. At the end of the foreword to her first play, *Twisted History: Ashwatthama of the Ages*, the author says:

Armed with this ancient teaching, while being disillusioned at the plummeting decay of modern society, should we consider the Mahabharata a grey legacy borne by Ashwatthama the Immortal, a repercussion of all that was good, all that was evil and, most importantly, all that was both 'human', yet worthless. (10)

The first play centres on the immortal Ashwatthama, condemned by Krishna to wander eternally as witness to human folly. His voice, part elegy, part indictment, becomes a metahistorical commentary. Moving across centuries, he confronts not only the distortions of epic tradition—children playing with dolls that caricature Karna, minstrels glorifying Yudhishtira while ignoring deceit and betrayal—but also the persistence of propaganda in shaping cultural memory. The play's episodic structure, with vast temporal leaps, emphasises the cyclical corruption of power and the futility of historical "truth."

The second play, *Kurukshetra: A Chessboard*, shifts the focus to the war itself and its aftershocks. Here, Krishna and Karna are imagined as players in a metaphorical game of chess, each acknowledging their own limitations and complicity. The metaphor presupposes that the war is not a righteous struggle between good and evil but a calculated game of power. Krishna and Karna emerge as players entangled in a dialogue of strategy and futility, where morality becomes a dispensable pawn. What makes this play particularly striking is its polyphonic narration. Vyasa, Vaishampayan, Sanjay, Janmejaya, and even ordinary folk intervene as narrators, each layering conflicting accounts of the same events. This multiplicity mirrors what Hayden White has called the "emplotment of history," reminding us that narratives are never innocent; they are always rhetorical, always serving power.

By including not only courtly characters, representing the civilised and learned class, but also powerless witnesses and folk survivors, Nandy produces a "meta-epic"—a text that does not merely dramatise events but interrogates the very act of narrating them. The result is a radical decentring of epic authority, a deliberate exposure of the fragmentation in the Mahabharata's ideology.

The closing acts, depicting the internal strife of the Yadava clan and Krishna's human-like and lonely death, bring down the aura of divinity to the level of mortal tragedy. The god of the Bhagavad

Gita is no longer a cosmic orchestrator but a weary strategist undone by the same forces of violence he once unleashed.

Stylistically, Nandy fuses lyrical intensity with critical distance. Ashwatthama's soliloquies carry a haunting, elegiac rhythm, while the dialogues oscillate between grandeur and modern scepticism. Nandy's Ashwatthama recalls Brecht's Epic Theatre, which resists emotional identification with the characters and instead compels critical reflections upon the characters and incidents. His soliloquies serve not merely as lamentations but as interventions—pauses that force readers and audiences to examine how myths are shaped. The long soliloquies and speeches may be monotonous, but they force the readers to halt and think again. When Ashwatthama sees children playing with dolls of Arjuna as a shining hero and Karna as a grotesque monster, he confronts the tragedy of distorted memory. The episode crystallises one of Nandy's key arguments: history is not only written by victors but also internalised through folk transmission, play, and ritual.

Ashwatthama's voice destabilises the canonical "truths" of the Mahabharata. His critique of Yudhishtira's greed, Krishna's partiality, and the propagandist distortion of Karna's legacy exposes how myth functions as political ideology. For Ashwatthama, immortality is less a divine punishment than a condemnation to witness the perpetual corruption of memory—a curse eerily relevant in today's world of media manipulation and historical revisionism.

What makes *Red Soil* remarkable is its courage to confront the Mahabharata not as timeless wisdom but as contested ground—a red soil watered by blood, shaped by power, and continually reinterpreted. In doing so, it resonates with contemporary anxieties: the manipulation of history, the silencing of dissent, and the dangers of blind hero worship.

Nandy's plays do not seek to invert the binaries of Pandava versus Kaurava but to dissolve them. Heroes and villains alike are stripped of divine justifications and exposed as flawed, desiring, scheming humans. The result is a narrative resistance that refuses to be lulled by myth's grandeur, instead urging us to confront its distortions and reclaim its silences.

*Red Soil* stands as an incisive and necessary intervention into India's mythic tradition. For readers and theatre practitioners alike, it offers not just two powerful plays but also a provocation: to read against the grain of inherited stories, to recognise myth as mutable, and to confront how our cultural foundations are built as much on forgetting as on remembering.