The Dharma Blues

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Abstract
So much attention was given to the ratings controversy for Stanley Kubrick's film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, that a problem with the film for members of the Hindu faith was almost entirely ignored. So worried were people about the images of the infamous orgy scene at the Long Island Mansion, that they failed to notice that the music composed for that scene generated its own protest - enough protest to cause the film to be altered for its releases outside of the United States and for both video and DVD sales. The Hindu protest, however, might have positive, if unexpected, results. The protest revealed that the music included a shloka from the *Bhagwad Gita*, bringing public attention to this sacred text. But, once this shloka is identified, its connection to the movie can be determined and, on artistic grounds, it seems that the shloka makes an important contribution to our understanding of the movie.

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Stanley Kubrick's last movie, *Eyes Wide Shut*, generated a serious battle over its rating between Warner Brothers and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). Fearing that an NC-17 rating (No Children under 17 admitted) would significantly diminish ticket sales, Warner Brothers pressed for an R rating (Restricted: children under 17 require accompanying parent or adult guardian). The movie eventually received an R rating, but not before scenes from the infamous orgy scene at the Long Island mansion were digitally modified to satisfy the MPAA.

Because of the uproar over the rating of the movie and the explicitness of the orgy scene another protest of the movie went almost unnoticed. This protest was made about the music that accompanied the orgy scene and was made by American Hindus Against Defamation. The following is the letter sent to Warner Brothers by AHAD.

To Whom it may concern at Warner Brothers:

On behalf of American Hindus Against Defamation (AHAD), we would like to express serious concerns about the inclusion of one of the most prominent Hindu scriptural quote [sic], in the movie "*Eyes Wide Shut". Midway in this movie, the character played by Tom Cruise goes to a mansion where what could best be described as an orgy party is taking place. When he enters a large room where several sex acts are taking place, the background music subsides and the shloka (scriptural recitation) from Bhagwad Gita, one of the most revered Hindu scripture is played out. The shloka is: "Parithranaya Saadhunam Vinashaya cha dushkrithaam Dharmasamsthabanarthaya Sambhavami yuge yuge ..." which means "For
the protection of the virtuous, for the destruction of the evil and for the firm establishment of Dharma (righteousness), I take birth and am incarnated on Earth, from age to age.” Hundreds of Hindus have contacted us to express their shock at the use of Hindu scripture as a background for this scene in the movie. There appears to be no connection, or apparent justification for the use of this shloka. It appears to be totally out of context! We, American Hindus Against Defamation are baffled, disgusted and annoyed by the use of the shloka, and fail to understand your intent and the relevance of its usage. We have also been contacted by major media organizations, including BBC-London, NY Post, etc., seeking our comments. Before we make any comments to them, we have decided to first contact you and seek a prompt and honest explanation as to why it was decided to use this scripture during this scene in the movie. We are not launching a protest at this time, however, we do request an explanation as soon as possible.

American Hindus Against Defamation (AHAD) is the pioneer Hindu rights coalition consisting of several major Hindu organizations. AHAD was responsible for movement that successfully sought withdrawal of Aerosmith - Nine Lives album cover, and recent withdrawal of Universal television’s Xena episode "The Way" from circulation. For more information about AHAD, please contact ...

I found this letter on an Internet website nine months after the AHAD protest. On the same website you can find the demands made of Warner Brothers by AHAD.

1. Warner Brothers apologize to the Hindu community for the indiscriminate and abusive use of Hindu scripture.

2. The movie be altered to remove this shloka.

3. CD containing this shloka (verse) be withdrawn and re-released.

4. The video distribution of the movie not contain this shloka (verse).

5. The TV/cable distribution of this movie not contain this shloka (verse).

We certainly hope that Warner Brothers has depicted this shloka as an oversight and not to hurt the sentiments of a billion strong Hindu community around the
world. We are also certain that Warner Brothers will respect the demands we have made above. If Warner does not accept the Hindu demands, the Hindu community will not be a silent spectator to the humiliation of its religious beliefs and scriptures.

By the time Warner Brothers released *Eyes in England*, it had altered the music, with the consent of Christiane Kubrick and executive producer Jan Harlan. I compared the disputed passages of Jocelyn Pook's music during the orgy walk in the HBO version, to the CD, which I had bought before the protest, and recognized a difference. The film's music sounded similar but in what I can only describe as a Musak version of the original. In response to an e-mail query, Jan Harlan wrote that the disputed passage was replaced by a similar sounding but innocuous passage.¹¹

It was clear from its statement, however, that AHAD left open the possibility of a significant connection between the music and the movie. AHAD said, "There appears to be no connection, or apparent justification for the use of this shloka. It appears to be totally out of context." And, then, AHAD said that before it goes to the press it was seeking "a prompt and honest explanation as to why it was decided to use this scripture during this scene in the movie." This suggests that there would be no protest if some explanation could be given for the use of the music. In what follows, I will give such an explanation.
The shloka controversy revealed a significant theme of *Eyes* that would not have been noticed otherwise. The presence of the *Gita* links the film to the Hindu caste system or, more generally, to the shadow of a rigid hierarchy impervious to attempts to leave or destroy it. The specter of the caste system, while profoundly negative in most respects, in Kubrick’s filmed world represents unquestioned hierarchy handing down orders and plans from "above." Kubrick has criticized this hierarchy constantly and consistently since *Paths of Glory* (1957). He has depicted those in charge of a society as living on the inside, in a "closed world," one into which no one shall enter without approval from those already there. Kubrick’s closed worlds have included Army Generals (Mireau and Broulard; Dax is the outsider); Roman patricians (with slaves on the outside); a pornographer (with Humbert on the outside); the men of the War Room; Scientists (Dr. Floyd and his superiors); criminals and politicians (Alex and the Minister of the Interior); 18th century British aristocracy (Redmond Barry is the outsider trying to become Barry Lyndon); the Overlook Hotel (Jack is the perennial outsider); and the Marines (Joker is and is not a member of this club).

*Eyes Wide Shut’s* Kshatriyas (the caste-system "insiders") are the masked figures at the Long Island Mansion led by a red-cloaked man. Many of the orgy participants wear masks resembling the aristocrats of Barry Lyndon, in a mansion much like those in *Barry Lyndon* (1975) and *Paths of Glory* (Claire Quilty lived in...
a castle). Bill Harford has witnessed secret rites of the "best people" pleasuring themselves, and he must be sent away into the night, warned off the trail. The participants may seem to overreact in wanting to scare him, let alone kill him or, Harford's old buddy, pianist Nick Nightingale, but the absurdity of the threat's extreme nature fits perfectly with our potential apprehension of the real power that these "best people" have.

The "hierarchy" theme is not predominant in this movie nor does it represent the sole reason for the shloka during the orgy scene. It is the context of the Gita itself that has a bearing on the shloka's presence during an orgy. In this Hindu sacred song, Arjuna searches for the meaning of his actions in the midst of a war. Bill Harford's search for sexual meaning in the midst of a sexual battle with his wife parallels Arjuna's search. Mrs. Harford has just unloaded a barrage on her husband, which knocks him senseless. When he is called out of his apartment, Bill uses this as opportunity to embark on a sexual odyssey. He clearly wants sex with anyone in his path, and women continually thrust themselves toward him. Trying to make sense of his wife's desires, he wants to explore (or runs into) all aspects of sexual desire (his and others). As in 2001, though, the odyssey transmigrates from the character to the viewer. We are watching what Bill is watching. Watching the movie becomes a parallel practice to the following passage in the Gita (chapter 6, verse 10):
Once, someone asked, "Why is it said that the eyes should be half-open and half-shut?" I said, "The answer is easy. If you shut the eyes completely, you fall asleep. If you keep them fully open, they turn on all sides and prevent concentration."

Bill Harford's quest becomes a literal and metaphoric opening of the eyes. At the heart of all of Kubrick's movies is an ambivalence toward the moviegoing experience; the very things that transfixed one to the screen molded the viewer into a passive receptor to myths and the authority of the screen. Kubrick slowly but surely detonated story and genre to shake people from their stupor and managed to entertain filmgoers. Maybe *Eyes Wide Shut* went too far in its contemplative mode. I cannot help thinking of the way Nicole Kidman spoke throughout much of the movie, in a near agonizingly slow and affected cadence, which tended to draw attention away, not toward, her words. Just as Dr. and Mrs. Harford must sort out their marital differences, so too the viewers must come to grips with the movie's meaning and heed the *Gita*'s verse:

- Sacred stories send us to sleep;
- Care keeps us awake in bed;
- Obscure is the way of karma;
- Why weep?

"Dharma" may not have an exact equivalent in the English language but it has generally been defined as 'righteousness' or 'duty.' Much of the critical, economic, and religious pieties thrown against this movie do not have the same spirit of
"dharma" that the *Gita* speaks about. Yet Kubrick could have been alluding to the shallow righteousness of our reigning, bumbling, "high-caste" commentators and censors by choosing this particular shloka from the *Gita*.

Besides alluding to the caste system, the verse indirectly references one of Eyes' cast members, Thomas Gibson, who had the nearly speechless role of Miranda Richardson's fiancé. Gibson currently stars in the sitcom "Dharma and Greg." and his presence in the movie seems justified by two factors. Kubrick often selected look-alike cast members - especially vivid doublings can be seen in Barry Lyndon - and Gibson makes a competent physical double for Tom Cruise. The most profound doubling in a Kubrick film probably took place in *Lolita* when Claire Quilty hovered around on the life of Humbert Humbert (a man with a double name no less). The kind of doubling in Eyes, though, is nearer to the kind in The Shining when Jack Torrence is being interviewed and is seated next to Bill Watson, whose brief function in the movie seems nothing more than to resemble Jack.

Yet, the "Dharma and Greg" allusion only comes into play when the viewer becomes aware of the meaning of the shloka in the chant during the orgy scene. Such a remote allusion is not uncommon in Kubrick's movies and usually functions as an added detail of character or depth, not exactly necessary but helpful in understanding a character's psyche or filling out a motif in the film. For example, in *The Shining*, there's an infamous scene when Jack Torrance enters the bathroom...
and sees the naked women in the bathtub. They eventually embrace, and Jack kisses her. When he glances in the mirror, the woman becomes a decrepit hag and Jack recoils in horror. An early movie in Jack Nicholson's career, *The Terror*, ends with a scene in which he is kissing a beautiful woman who turns into a skeleton in his arms. Putting a similar scene in *The Shining*, accentuates the narcissistic core of Nicholson's character, in the sense that Torrance's delusions are inspired, in part, by the films of the actor who plays Torrance!

Only with the presence of the now displaced shloka does Gibson's casting make sense. He serves as a near invisible pun - maybe AHAD should have been wailing about this desecration of their holy verses as well - and a statement on the shallowness of the television culture of which Gibson was a part, the same television culture that the main characters of *Eyes* (and *The Shining* and *Full Metal Jacket*) are refractions. When *Eyes* incarnates Kubrick's pessimistic vision of contemporary Americans grappling with themselves, their sexual desires, and their understanding of reality, Dr. Bill and his wife come up short. In a sense, this television culture perpetuates a superficial dharma or righteousness over its people.

*Eyes Wide Shut*, in particular, but also all of Kubrick's output, strive for a deeper more elusive spirit that will not eschew the superficial but, rather, uses it for protection, the way an "animal mother" protects its brood, and as a means for more serious spiritual explanation, without actually saying the word "spiritual." This very
superficiality had infected the critical response. Too many critics carried shallow notions and expectations of "great art" by which to judge a film, whereas the mass of filmgoers become frustrated over the film's lack of an easy understanding. Many modes of trite righteousness have washed over *Eyes Wide Shut* and led to fundamental perplexities over its intentions and meaning. This shouldn't daunt those trying to understand and value the film. In a sense, this has become the traditional approach to Kubrick's art.

\[\text{3 Harlan also said that the intent of the music was purely for its exotic atmosphere. Pook had recorded the shloka a few months before and nobody knew what the verses were.}\]