Will someone who is not blind who is not deformed listen to me and be the saviour of the future of man?

Dharamvir Bharati’s Andha Yug, 160

Chapter IV

War and Dehumanisation

The previous chapters centred on the economic and political motives behind war and presented war as a game of capitalism at the hand of capitalists who attempt to control and exploit the have-nots. This chapter will deal with war and its dehumanising effects on those who are engaged in fighting and it will focus on the dehumanisation associated with war. It will also shed light on the miserable human conditions which take place in war. Bharati’s Andha Yug and Soyinka’s Madmen and Specialists, deal with the predicament of man in times of war bringing out the level which man may come to when he is debased and dehumanised.

War changes the human values of brotherhood and of intimate fellowship between human beings who are engaged in fighting. They become hardhearted killers for the mere satisfaction of trivial physical appetite. They are always suspicious of the motives and intentions of others towards them. They are driven by lust and greed: they feel threatened and afraid of every person, situation or event. Each soldier is turned into a psychopathic creature, feeling insecure and preying upon the feeling of insecurity and instability of others. War is an event that gives a violent shake-up to the whole system and values – moral or social developed in that society or country.

The word ‘dehumanise’ is defined as ‘depriving from human qualities’. Dehumanisation, therefore, refers to the process when the deprivation occurs. This process takes place in various stages of war. In the pre-war stage, dehumanisation occurs when the leaders of a regime begin to belittle their enemy so that their soldiers treat their enemies like animals and small creatures. This kind of preparation gives the soldier a false notion about his enemy. In the action of war, dehumanisation takes care of itself. It is impossible to find a war, especially the modern wars, without an act of dehumanisation as presented in Andha Yug where a soldier is depicted as a beast drinking the blood of his victim. The post-war period is also associated with acts of dehumanisation either in the form of rape, imprisonment, physical torture etc. Madmen gives the spectator an idea about these forms of dehumanisation. The Old
Man is treated like a wild animal chained and imprisoned in a solitary confinement. Dr Bero, his son, is the agent of this system of dehumanisation. No one can stop him since he has become the head.

Michelle Maiese defines dehumanisation as “the psychological process of demonizing the enemy, making them seem less than human and hence not worthy of humane treatment. This can lead to increased violence, human rights violations, war crimes, and genocide” (para. 1). This is exactly what happens in Madmen where the Old Man is excluded and viewed as inferior, subhuman and mad. He has been classified as such so that he does not receive human treatment. Bero has been treating him inhumanely because he has already been dehumanised as a result of being ‘out there’, i.e., the war front. Therefore, the presence of dehumanisation increases the chances of human rights violations and violence.

Michael Pollick looks at dehumanisation as “the deliberate removal of sympathetic human traits when referring to members of an opposing ideology, race, political party or other source of conflict” (para. 1). He points out the reason behind dehumanisation which is justified by the leaders as follows:

Convincing an average citizen to commit a violent act or to murder a fellow human being is extremely difficult. Our moral code tells us that such acts are immoral and indefensible. However, through the skillful use of dehumanization, leaders throughout history have succeeded in doing just that. Once the enemy has been stripped of humanity and becomes an object worthy of punishment, the idea of mistreating or even destroying this threat becomes morally justifiable. (para. 2)

War leads to demeaning behaviour and abnormal conduct. This is what happened between the Old Man and Dr. Bero in Madmen and between Bhima and Duryodhana in Andha Yug. Bhima smashed Duryodhana’s thighs, broke his arms and his neck. The Old Man attempted to resist dehumanisation by adopting an extreme step to confront the military leaders with. He offered human flesh to the leaders thinking that he would bring back to them the human qualities they lost. He attempted to re-humanise them to put an end to war, violence and dehumanisation. Soyinka was an object of dehumanisation during the Nigerian Civil War, placed in a solitary confinement and treated barbarically. He was not allowed to take proper medical care and as a result his health and sight deteriorated in the prison.
The modern dehumanised world and the political events in Nigeria influenced Soyinka and made him a celebrated writer in the African context. The atrocities committed by the military regime debased the Nigerian society and left people crippled, paralysed and blind, internally and externally. Therefore, he turned to the stage to hang the tyrannical military leaders as he told the BBC online:

> The warped aspect of human nature that makes people think they have the right to dominate others and also inflict very agonising experiences on fellow humans is explored in 'King Baabu'. If we cannot hang such people from the nearest lamp post, I can hang them on stage.

(Ibagere para. 8)

Dehumanisation in the Indian context is presented in Train to Pakistan (1998), a film by Pamela Rooks based on the novel by Khushwant Singh. This film depicted the miseries, physical torture that Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs experienced during the Partition. People were killed, smashed, humiliated, and displaced from their roots. The synopsis on the cover of the film points out this human condition which took place during the Partition:

> Tensions run high near the border of British India, which is about to be partitioned with a new country called Pakistan. Sikhs living in this border town have heard numerous stories of Muslims killing, raping, and looting other Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians, and many of whom are their friends and relatives. Enraged at the loss of law and order, they plan their own attack on a train full of Muslims leaving British India. The train is overcrowded with tens and thousands of migrating passengers, who are even perched on the windows and seated on the roof of this train. The plot is to tear the bridge down when the train is on it, and no one will dare stop these men to carry out this horrific task.

(Train to Pakistan)

There are two films which illustrate the terrible human conditions during the violence of war in general. The first one is Casualties of War 1989 which is about the savagery of soldiers against innocent people. It illustrates how soldiers become immoral in their behaviour humiliating, raping and ultimately killing the girl victim during the Vietnam War (1966). The second one is Hotel Rwanda (2004), a recent film based on true events that took place in Rwanda between the Hutu and Tutsis in 1994. The film illustrates the Hutu slaughter of the Tutsis which led to the death of one million
innocent people from both sides in about three months. The Tutsis were regarded ‘cockroaches’ in the eyes of the Hutu. With this label, the Hutu found it justifiable to eradicate the whole people and cut them down. This is how dehumanisation enables people to commit indescribable crimes against other human beings, against their neighbours and against the whole humanity. This film is close in context to Soyinka’s Madmen in which dehumanisation comes to cannibalism where man eats man.

Andha Yug (1954)

The drama Andha Yug – (The Blind Age) – is quite distinct in its treatment of the war theme. The dramatist does not look at war from one particular angle – political or economic or social. He feels that these angles – separately or collectively – cannot help us to understand the nature and cause of war. The first shortcoming of these angles is their negativity. They start with the total rejection of war. To them war is an evil to be completely erased or effaced from the map of the world and the life of human beings. In spite of this understanding and opposition, the war still continues. The danger of war always looms large on the horizon. That establishes the fact that war cannot be erased. This truth belies the hope of man for a peaceful future. Another shortcoming of these angels is that they prescribe a particular way of eliminating war – a social way, a political way, an economic way etc. But, in spite of the best wishes and efforts, the war is as much there standing and staring in the face of the world.

The dramatist – Dharamvir Bharati – does not believe in an isolated or particular explanation of the nature and cause of war. He wants to understand the nature and cause of war in totality apart from any idealism. Here he is helped by the myth of the Mahabharata war. Myth is the best instrument that helps man to realise the universal truth of life. It explains the eternal truth of life. The artists naturally take help of myth to understand this eternal truth and to show it to the world. And when they exhibit it, it comes out in its totality because it appears with its past, present and future put together. These three periods of human life appear before man together in their relatedness and not in separation. They turn out to be time in its comprehensiveness which is beyond the reach of the watch. Hardly any dramatist has taken such a comprehensive approach to war – its nature and its cause. Usually dramatists have taken a time-bound approach to war – war in its context. In Andha Yug too there is the context of a particular war – the Mahabharata war. But since this war has a mythical overtone it spreads out to include time – not a particular time but
past, present and future together – and thereby gives a comprehensive explanation of the nature and cause of war.

Andha Yug was written after the partition of the Indian Subcontinent. The memories of this tragic turmoil were fresh in the minds of the two nations. People were sad when they left each other. How can an arm celebrate while the other one is amputated? During the partition, atrocities and violation of moral values were common. Bharati wants his audience to draw a lesson from their past. He tells them that the past is over with its destruction and violations. His words which introduce the chapter are significant. He is concerned with the future of humanity. He calls upon someone to be the ‘saviour of the future of man’. Man’s existence has become subject to extinction and abolition due to wars and conflicts. As the play dramatises, majority of the people were killed in the battlefield and only few of them had survived. Bharati dreams that the people live together peacefully away from “frustration, dejection, bloodshed, vengeance, disease, deformity, blindness” (Andha Yug, Prefatory Note 17). This is the view of a humanist writer who longs for a time “when the superficial distinction between the ‘self’ and the ‘others’ is erased [and] no longer separate” (Andha Yug, Prefatory Note 17). He knows that when the distinction between the ‘self’ and the ‘others’ is made, wars, conflicts, and loss of human values will surface.

Alok Bhalla in “Defending the Sacred in an Age of Atrocities: On Translating Andha Yug” points out the huge destruction which human beings and their possessions had experienced during the Partition: “The ramparts are in ruins, the city is burning, and Kurukshetra is covered with corpses and vultures” (8). The play is full of images that illustrate the human loss in the battlefield. Throughout the action, the image of ‘vulture’ is repeated several times to reflect the miserable level which the human condition has come to. Corpses were scattered everywhere and vultures were waiting to feed on them. This image must have haunted the mind of Bharati since the play was written after the carnage of the Partition. Bharati might have intended to tell the people that they had not yet learned the consequences of war and hostilities from their great history. This happened in the past, but people are still involved in conflicts and wars causing havoc and destruction to the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. Like Brecht, Bharati wants his audience to draw conclusion from the action of the drama without identifying themselves with any particular character. He wants them to reflect on the destruction which the war caused. Jyostna G. Singh remarks on Bharati’s Brechtian technique of alienation which helps the spectators to understand the anti-war message.
of the play: “The play creates a form of Brechtian alienation among the audience, repeatedly forcing them to reflect on the effects of the actions, rather than being lulled by an emotional identification or empathy towards the characters” (177).

A good deal of literature has been written on the atrocities and human rights violations during the Partition. Train to Pakistan (1956) by Khushwant Singh, which was also produced in a film, focuses on the human dimension and the horror of the Partition. Singh explicitly and realistically presented the turmoil of the people who were uprooted, displaced, and suffered all sorts of physical and immoral torture during the Partition. He presented how the two neighbours exchanged trains full of dead bodies and how entire families were completely destroyed. Bharati wrote this play two years before Singh’s novel using the myth of the Mahabharata to reflect the large scale of destruction that two relative clans had suffered as a result of the war. He wants people to look at the destruction of the human lives and the loss of the physical possessions in order to be avoided in the future. This anti-war sentiment based on the myth of the Mahabharata is also present in Bhasa’s Urubhangam (Broken Thighs), a surviving Sanskrit play. In his study of Bhasa, KS Narayana Pillai states that Urubhangam “contains the strongest possible expression of anti-war sentiments” (53). No wonder if Bharati used this epic to convey his message because it is deeply rooted and he felt that it would easily move the people’s anti-war sentiments. He dramatised the violence of war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas so that people would compare the carnage of the Partition with that of the Mahabharata and in this way, the people may think about how to save their future at least.

The first lines of Andha Yug focus on the moral principles which were violated during the war. No party had stuck to the ethics of war as the narrator points out: “Both sides in the war / violated / the code of honour / smashed it / ripped it into shreds / and scattered it – the Kauravas perhaps more than the Pandavas” (Andha Yug 27). This violation of the code of conduct is the result of dehumanisation which the soldiers had undergone before and during the battle. Every party is psychologically prepared to attack the ‘other’ viciously and treat them as inferior creatures. The play explains how soldiers can be beasts as a result of dehumanisation and the loss of morals. Dehumanisation becomes the norm during the war. First, the soldiers get rid of their human values so that it becomes easier for them to dehumanise others. Arnold Wesker’s Chips with Everything (1962) tells the audience how soldiers are being trained to get dehumanised so that they meet their enemy soldiers with ‘heart of steel’.
The lines below illustrate how soldiers are trained not give space to human feelings because, as their commander says ‘it is either you or him’. Kind feelings are to be drained away so that their mission gets accomplished perfectly. The training of the soldiers goes like this:

Everyone, but everyone must know how to stick a man with a bayonet. 
... It’s a horrible thing, this. A nasty weapon and a nasty way to kill a man. But it is you or him. A nasty choice, but you must choose .... Lean forward, crouch, and let me see the horriblest leer your face can make ... And one last thing—the scream. I want to hear you shout your lungs out, cos it helps. A hoard of screaming men put terror in the enemy and courage in themselves. (Chips 51-52)

A bullet can whip through your flesh and knock breath out of you. Imagine yourself dying, you can feel the hole in your body, you can feel yourself going dizzy, you can feel the hot blood, and you can’t breathe. You want to breathe, but you can’t, the body you have relied on all these years doesn’t do what you want it to do, and you can’t understand it you’re surprised, you’re helpless. (Chips 44)

This kind of training leads, of course, to dehumanisation on the part of soldiers and transforms them to wild beasts killing without mercy and also leads to a negative impact on soldiers as well. There are soldiers who can not stand the sight of killing and start developing what is called ‘the after-war trauma’. It is not only the soldiers who are engaged in fighting can suffer from war. Others who are close to war are affected by it. They also develop psychological depression and mental stress as happened with Pavlo Hummel in David Rabe’s The Basic Training (1971). The Vietnam War, for Rabe, was a human loss into which soldiers, like Pavlo, were sent to their death. This human waste which the war leaves behind is also central to Soyinka’s Madmen and Bharati’s Andha Yug. These two plays centre on the human condition during war which destroys man emotionally, physically and mentally. Dr. Bero has become an inhuman creature whose interest is to feed on others’ flesh. The mendicants, former soldiers, are physically and emotionally maimed and have no positive role in the society except to beg and spy. In Andha Yug, soldiers have become monsters enjoying the torture of others.

Rabe’s Pavlo is similar in character to O’Casey’s Characters who were after pride in The Plough. Like them, Pavlo wants to be a hero to fulfil his role as an
American male, which was not achieved as he felt. Like The plough, The Basic Training is full of incidents that took place during war.

Sarah Kane and Edward Bond are also remarkable in presentation of violence on stage so that their audience get the message easily. They confront the audience with horrors of war and different forms of violence from life. They are similar to Arden in his presentation of violence on stage to confront those whom he thinks are responsible for it. Musgrave threatens the audience with a Gatling gun and exposes the corpse of a colonial soldier so that people understand the cruelty of war and react against it. In Kane’s Blasted (1995), different forms of violence are presented on the stage such as raping men and women, having eyeballs and dead babies and shooting through the head. In Bond’s Lear, men and women are shot, beaten, blinded and a woman’s body is dissected on stage. These are concrete and visual reminders of the level of the bestiality of man he has come to. Similar to consuming eyeballs and dead babies as in Blasted, Dr. Bero has a different taste. He prefers to have balls in addition to the human flesh he has brought with him from the war front. Writers like Bond, Kane, Soyinka, and Bharati are stunned by the nature of modern era which is characterised by wars and violence against mankind. The horrible picture they present is an evidence of the dehumanising effects which war brings upon humanity.

O’Casey’s The Silver Tassie, Littlewood’s Oh, What a Lovely War, and Irwin Shaw’s Bury the Dead expose the suffering and turmoil of the soldiers which they face in war. In The Silver Tassie, Harry, a WWI soldier has come under dehumanisation from his close relatives. When he became paralysed, his beloved left him and chose another one. When she came to know about his case she sent him flowers through someone without taking the trouble of visiting him. The moment he became ‘a useless part’ in the society, people neglected him and turned their back to him. The soldiers in Oh, What a Lovely War, are dealt with as a pack of cards. When one pack finishes another is sent. There is a lot of irony and criticism about the leaders whose interest is victory and economic gain regardless of the huge numbers of victims. In Bury the Dead, the resurrection of the dead soldiers terrifies the living brothers-in-arms. The author wanted to send a message to the authority and commanders about the reality of war and its victimisation of soldiers and mankind. This picture of resurrection is present in Death and Resurrection (1969) in which Naguib Mahfouz depicts the political violence posed on Egypt during the 1960s. In the play, Mahfouz presents how the Giant, representing the imperial force of USA and
western powers which intervene in the political matters of Egypt during the conflict with Israel. He depicts the Giant as a dominant force to safeguard peace in the region on the condition that the Man, who stands for Egypt, succumbs to the conditions dictated by the Giant. The Man felt that there was a conspiracy and there was no sincere plan for negotiating peace. The Giant flung the Man to the back stage which was full of dead-like bodies. As a result, all the bodies get resurrected and began to walk after the man signalling another round of violence. Here, Mahfouz depicts the importance of sincere negotiation to establish peace without which war and violence will break again and again.

Back to Andha Yug where the death of Duryodhana illustrates the level of viciousness a human being can come to when engaging in war. This particular death brings out how the codes of conduct (jus in bello) are violated: “The Pandava sense of honour / was on display today / when Bhima / violating all codes of war / threw Duryodhana down / smashed his thighs / broke his arms and his neck. /... The veins on Duryodhana’s head / swelled and suddenly burst. / He screamed in pain./ His broken legs jerked. / He opened his eyes / and looked at his people” (Andha Yug 82). The horrible condition of Duryodhana was narrated later by Kritavarma: “The blood/oozing from his mouth/ has coagulated and formed a thick black clot around his lips. / It must have also choked his throat (Andha Yug 102). One of the examples of cruelty and loss of human values which the soldiers usually experience in the battlefield is narrated by Dhritarashtra: “I can’t picture how blood spurted / from Dushasana’s shattered chest – / how cruel Bhima collected it / in his cupped hands / and raised them to his lips” (Andha Yug 34). Another example is presented by Sanjaya describing Ashwatthama’s horrible condition: “His body is covered / with boils and open sores. / He smells than a diseased dog!” (Andha Yug 120). The following makes clear the destruction, the human condition and loss of values in the ‘Age of Blindness’.

Over the last seventeen days
all my sons have been killed
one by one

As pointed out in the discussion of The Plough, All My Sons, and Mother Courage, women suffer a lot from war and because of their men. Gandhari as it seems from the above lines is one of those women who suffered and lost her children to war. Her tragedy can be compared to Niobe who grieved a lot at the death of her sons and
was continually weeping by their tombs. Similarly, Gandhari wept and grieved after she had seen the bones of her sons in front of her. She said that she did not give birth to bones but the reality of war and the consequences she ignored had led to such a miserable end. One feels her agony throughout the play. She is also similar to Mother Courage in her grief over the loss of her children. Courage wanted to grow her business amid war and destruction. She kept moving from one place to another with her wagon. Every time she loses a child, she grieves a lot but she continues her business journey. She probably did not get time to grieve or think about her situation. Gandhari’s desire for revenge led her to further and further grievance. The difference between the two women is that Courage did not repent (sincerely) for her action. The play ends with Courage still more determined to join the soldiers alone without her children. Her past business journey in war created strong desire inside her to continue. This is how we get Courage at the end of the play – never learnt that war has taken everything from her. Gandhari, on the contrary, felt sad about her action and realised the evils of war but after she had lost all her 100 sons. She realised the destructiveness of war and blamed Krishna for it. She felt that Krishna as a divine power could have stopped the war: “If you wanted/ you could have stopped the war” (Andha Yug 122). As a mother, she could not tolerate the sight of her children turned into ‘pile of bones’ and she “was bitter/ heart-broken and forlorn” (Andha Yug 124), therefore, she cursed Krishna.

The action of Gandhari proves the words of the mendicant: “what man does/ at each moment/ becomes his future/ for ages and ages” (Andha Yug 58). At one moment of her life, Gandhari was blind with her revenge which brought on her suffering and endless turmoil. It is that moment of revenge which threatened the existence of her clan and the clan of her enemy. Few deformed soldiers had survived the war.

KRITAVARMA. … Did we survive/ this war/ so that/ we could/ hide/ in ambush/ and kill/ old and unarmed men?
KRIPACHARYA. Calm down./ Have you forgotten/ the heroic deeds/ of the brave warriors/ in this war?/ Drona was old/ and unarmed/ but did Dhristadyumna/ spare his life? Did we/ take pity/ on Abhimanyu/ when he was alone/ and trapped/ by seven valiant heroes? (Andha Yug 63)
These are the dehumanising effects which war brings upon soldiers. This is also the kind of dehumanisation which a soldier is trained to possess before the act of killing starts. In war, there is no ethics maintained. Human emotions are drained away and are replaced by viciousness and wickedness. As the above speech illustrates, an unarmed soldier was killed and that the lives of others were not spared. Basically, at the time of killing, if one soldier spares the life of another enemy soldier, his own life might not be spared. This is the kind of training soldiers usually have before they go to battles. In Arnold Wesker’s Chips with Everything, discussed above, soldiers are well trained to confront any human feelings during the battlefield. This play illustrates the ugliness of war which the two soldiers above in Andha Yug speak of. Bharati in his prefatory note to the play speaks of the consequences of creating a distinction between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. Once the distinction is made, dehumanisation and violence is let loose. The commander in the above lines from Chips with Everything attempts to train the soldiers to create a distinction between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ a requirement which the commander considers necessary for achieving victory.

What does this kind of training lead to? It leads to destruction, total annihilation, loss of lives and possessions, psychological and emotional breakdown. Does training work to turn soldiers to beasts? In some cases, it fails as seen in David Rabe’s The Basic Training, in which Hummel could not continue to serve and lived in depression due to the encounter with his sergeants and fellow soldiers.

The soldiers in Andha Yug are physically deformed, which makes the audience restless to see the horrible sight of soldiers maimed, amputated with blood oozing from their wounded bodies. Some of these soldiers are narrated to be dragged away to forests by wild animals. The city of Kurukshetra had become horrifying to live in. It was haunted with ‘a shape-changer’ that began to pray upon the bodies of children sleeping on the terraces’ (Andha Yug 70). This is the image of the city stricken with fear resulted out of war and violence which could have been avoided if Krishna intervened in time. The giant who took children could have not been there if Krishna did not advise Arjuna to “lift up [his] bow [and] fight without fear” (Andha Yug 58). Vultures were taking away the victims of war to feed on them. They were “watching with hungry eyes/... and drooling tongues” (Andha Yug 84). ‘Drooling tongues’ is also used by Wole Soyinka in Madmen, to reflect the state of the leaders after they had tasted the human flesh. Soyinka’s leaders and Bharati’s vultures are the
same. This is what war does to man – he becomes synonymous with wild animals – a cannibal feeding on the flesh of his own kind.

*Andha Yug* is full of images that reinforce the bestiality and brutality of man when he lets the beast come out of him. He becomes exactly a wild beast feasting on his prey with no mercy. This play can be compared to Kane’s *Blasted* (1995) in its horrific content and its disturbing scenes which make the audience sick to follow. *Blasted* gives the audience a visual and explicit scenes of horror on the stage which shock the audience with reality of war. The audience are confronted with direct and immediate war images. Kane stated that she attempted to do something new in *Blasted* and she dismissed that her play is a glorification of violence. She pointed out that it was necessary to stage such acts of violence. Her words explain this view:

Art isn’t about the shock of something new. It’s about arranging the old in such a way that you see it afresh. The press kept asking why it was necessary to show such acts of violence on stage. I think it was necessary because we normally see war atrocities as documentary or news footage. *Andh Yug* is no documentary. So suddenly all those familiar images were presented in an odd theatrical form which provided no framework within which to locate oneself in relationship to the material. For me, that’s an amoral representation of violence – no commentary. (qtd in Saunders 28)

On the contrary, *Andha Yug* does not only focus on the explicit presentation of horrific scenes, it also gives the audience a mental image about the victimisation and the destructiveness of war. The characters narrate some of the horrifying actions that took place between the two clans. Some of the acts of killings would be harsh to bring on stage. The writer confined himself to the narrative aspect of the horrible killings. The following are images which are narrated by some characters. Sanjaya narrates the bestiality of Ashwatthama, ‘whose sword dripping with blood seemed like an extension of his hand’ (100), to Gandhari who enjoys the story:

... reached Dhritadyumna’s tent
with the speed of lightning
dragged him off his bed
knelt on his chest
and wrung his neck
till his eyeballs popped out
like stones from unripe mangoes
and blood oozed
out of the empty sockets.

Dhristadyumna pleaded:
‘At least kill me with a sword.’
Ashwatthama shouted:
‘No
You are a coward
And deserve to die like an animal.
You killed Drona when he was unarmed.
This is my revenge.’
Then he kicked him
again and again
till he died. (Andha Yug 97-98)

This is what happened in war when one is filled with revenge. Cruelty knows no limit. Everything becomes possible. Even the innocent children, old men and women become an easy target for the arrows of the soldiers. This is the chaos created by war which is driven by revenge. Here is another narration which displays the horrible condition of helpless people trapped in a war situation.

Kripacharya and Kritavarma
waited outside the tents.
When children, old men, and servants
ran out in terror
Kritavarma’s arrows
cut them down.
Frightened elephants
trumpeted wildly
smashed the tents
and trampled the women
sleeping inside
to death. (Andha Yug 99)
These mental images are similar to the visual images in their effect on the audience. Mental engagement with acts of killing produced in the play by the characters is to get the audience mentally involved with the horrible action that take place during war. With mental and visual engagement, the audience would be able to reflect on the horrors of the war in the past as represented in the dramatisation of the last day of the Mahabharata. The horrors of the past are still repeating themselves in the modern era through many wars and violence such as the WWII and the violence that associated with the Partition of the Indian Subcontinent. What is more important which Andha Yug attempts to communicate is that the future must be saved since past and present can not be recovered. Humanity will be in danger if the future is not saved.

The past and the present are over now. The future is to evolve from them. That evolution should be stopped – the child in the womb of Uttara must be murdered; the unfinished war calls upon Ashwatthama to finish it so that the future too, with the past and the present, is annihilated. Two chariot-wheels are running one after another. One is the chariot-wheel of Ashwatthama – of total destruction; another is the chariot-wheel of Krishna who wants to save at least the future. Enraged, Ashwatthama brings the final destruction; he starts finishing the Pandavas one by one. At least he uses the Brahmastra (a deadly weapon which is said to be similar in its destructiveness to that of a nuclear weapon) from which the universe can not be saved. Vyasa, the great divine writer has to appear and plead with Ashwatthama:

O you vile man
do you even know
the consequences
of using the Brahmastra?
for centuries to come
nothing will grow on earth.
Newborn children
shall be deformed.
Men shall become grotesque.
All the wisdom men gathered
in the satya, treta, and dvapara yugs
shall be lost forever.
Serpents shall hiss

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from every ear of corn
and rivers shall flow
with molten fire. (Andha Yug 114)

But Ashwatthama has one and only one desire – total destruction of the Pandavas, and if necessary of the whole creation: “let the world / be reduced to ash, Vyasa! / Let there be a cataclysm!” (Andha Yug 114). In reply, Arjuna too releases his Brahmastra. Their two weapons will collide in the sky and create the holocaust: “Soon the two weapons / shall collide in the sky. / The sun shall be extinguished. / The earth shall become / a wasteland / of ash and stones!” (Andha Yug 114-115). Vyasa knows the consequence: “Ashwatthama / do not let your cowardice / reduce the earth to a wasteland / of ash and stones” (Andha Yug 115). In the above lines, Bharati seems to be deeply influenced by the atomic bombs thrown on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This catastrophe was fresh in the memories of the people for many years. Nothing will grow on earth for many years and newborn children will be deformed and earth will be a wasteland. Similar views towards the use atomic bombs are communicated in Tawfiq Al-Hakim’s The World Is A Comedy. Like Bharati, Al-Hakim depicts how the modern age (the Blind Age according to Bharati) has come under the threat of the atomic bomb. In one of the scenes of the play, a fisherman who was living in an island for many years was asked to leave the island as a result of the expected experiment on nuclear weapons. Later he was diagnosed to be suffering as a result of the radiation of the nuclear weapons used in the experiment. Al-Hakim and Bharati share these views about their modern age which is threatened with nuclear weapons.

Sanjaya, Ashwatthama, Yuyutsu are either ‘deformed’, ‘paralysed’, ‘beast’ or ‘blind’. They feel helpless in shaping the future. Who else can do it? There must be some saviour of the future: “Will someone / who is not blind / who is not deformed / listen to me / and be the saviour / of the future of man” (Andha Yug 160)? It is not an easy thing to do. The shadow of the last age is still there: time consists of past, present and future in continuum. The future can not be separated from the past and the present. They have preceded it; the future can not be delinked from them. Yet it should be given a different shape. The chorus looks back and looks into the future. The shadow looms large and yet there is hope. In spite of this shadow the future has to take its shape: “That day the world descended into the age of / darkness / which has no end, and repeats itself over and over / again. / Every moment the Lord dies
somewhere or the / other / every moment the darkness grows deeper and / deeper. / The age of darkness has seeped into our very souls . . .” (Andha Yug 161).

In his treatment of the theme of war, the dramatist swings in between the mythical concept of war and its contemporary relevance. The mythical concept paints it as a hydraheaded monster that swallows every bit of life available in Creation. It creates the sense of the Doomsday. It turns man into a beast with an insatiable hunger for blood. Even the Lord, taking the shape of Krishna – a superhuman man – can not stop it once it is unleashed. He fails or is unable to stop it because he accepts it as a reality of the Creation that swings in between life and death. He cannot tinker with its operation and so he accepts death as a part of his life as much as life is. He dies with a hope of renewal of life after death. The past and the present are lost in destruction but the future life belongs to man. It depends on wit, will and wisdom which abound in man. There will be no Lord in the shape of Krishna yet there will be Lord in every man, in everything and everywhere. It is upto man to accept His presence and create a Heaven in a peaceful world. It is upto him to deny Him and throw the world into the throes of war and destruction. The contemporary world – its existence – is in the hands of man. The Mendicant – “the instrument of His metamorphosis” (Andha Yug 160) has hope. The war clouds are always rumbling in the contemporary world yet we can, like the Mendicant, have faith in the continuity of a peaceful creation: “It is this small seed / that makes us fear / half-truths / and great wars / and always / saves / the future of mankind / from blind doubt / slavery / and defeat” (Andha Yug 162).

This seed is “buried somewhere in the mind of man” (Andha Yug 161) in the shape of his “courage,” “longing for freedom” and “the imagination to create something new” (Andha Yug 161). It lies there “as duty / as honour / as freedom / as virtuous conduct” (Andha Yug 162). These are the positive qualities in the mind of man which save him from swinging to the negative ones. These save him from total defeat and destruction. K M George confirms the importance of these values to man and to humanity:

Bharati has made creative use of the metaphor of blindness to express the agony of our godless world awaiting an atomic holocaust. Nevertheless the saga is not without a glimpse of hope. Bharati underlines the everlastimgness of human values like courage, freedom, creativity and grace. So long man can hold fast to these, he is safe from the evils of blindness. (221)
In his life, the dramatist must have seen many limited wars and felt the tragedy of the partition which had taken the shape of the two brothers turning into beasts for the land of the country. Yet men have always come out of this trauma of beastly bloodshed. The destruction has been followed by creation; the effort to free oneself from the shackles of ‘slavery and defeat’ continues. This effort is continuing wherever war and destruction are looming large over the horizon. The hope of the mendicant and the chorus is still alive and kicking.

Madmen and Specialists (1970)

The play is about the dehumanising effects of war and its impact upon humanity. It centres on two characters Dr Bero (the specialist) and the Old Man (Bero’s father). Both of them have been medical practitioners supporting the troops. The Old Man is brought home and placed in a solitary confinement to rehabilitate the war wounded. Meanwhile, Dr Bero has been promoted to be the head of the intelligence section and he becomes obsessed with power. Against the wish of Dr Bero, the Old Man begins to teach the war wounded to think and to hate the system which is behind the wars that caused their physical disabilities. The important event that unfolds the action of the play is the Old Man’s proposal – ‘not to waste the human flesh’. His intention, of course, is different. He offers human flesh to the war generals with view that they will be filled with self-disgust so that they will attempt to stop war. But the generals find the human flesh delicious and a step to power, as Bero states. The dehumanisation aspects are represented through Bero, the Old Man and the mendicants – visual reminders of dehumanisation which the war leaves in its wake.

The attack on power mongers and the corruption of the tyrannical Nigerian and African rulers clearly marks many of Soyinka’s writings such as The Road (1965), Jero’s Metamorphosis (1973), Opera Wonyosi (1977) and A Play of Giants (1984). Like Madmen and Specialists, Jero’s Metamorphosis (1973), set in post-war Nigeria, satirises the power which is motivated by self-interest to exploit others. Bero takes advantage of the war situation and uses his position to dehumanise, control and exploit others. Similarly, Jero controls the people by playing a series of exploitations. Here are Soyinka’s words which attack the military dictatorship and the power profiteers such as Bero in Madmen, Jero in Jero’s Metamorphosis and Anikura in Opera Wonyosi etc.:
A greater humiliation than the dictatorship which appears too tenuous to challenge the will of a war-weary people ... is power profiteering from the common disaster and mutual sacrifice of war. And the greatest insult to a people’s intelligence as if, as the supreme irony, such power profiteers are not free of a measure of culpability in the fundamental causes of the war itself. My testimony is that only the degree remains arguable; the fact of guilt is obvious and self-acknowledged by today’s power profiteers.

(qtd in Adams 129)

In Madmen, Soyinka stresses this kind of pursuit for power and power profiteers in the context of war, as in the case of Dr Bero, edging aside man’s humanity. With the loss of such human qualities man can be nothing except an animal with a human body. It is this inflated love of power which leads man astray and becomes dehumanized and loses his sanity and mental equilibrium (Pushpa “The Will to Power” 96). Soyinka’s personal experiences in the prison during the civil war years written down in The Man Died reflect how man treats man and how man is reduced and degraded. Here his words express his resentment with the military regime that followed the colonial powers and which caused civil war and violence:

I experience this solidarity only with such of my people as share in this humiliation of tyranny. I exclude and ignore all others. Whatever the factors that made a dictatorship inevitable in the first place, those factors no longer exist. The present dictatorship is a degrading imposition. It is additionally humiliating because, in my knowledge and yours, this dictatorship has exceeded a thousand fold in brutish arrogance, in repressiveness, in material corruption and in systematic reversal of all original revolutionary purposes the worst excess of the pre-1966 government of civilians. This is a shameful admission but it is truth. (The Man Died 15)

It is because of this dictatorship that led to the abuse of power which gave the ‘specialists’ a chance to chain him and humiliate people as reflected in Madmen. Dieter Riemenschneider remarks that the mood of despondency in the play is due to the author’s experience in detention and he also notes that violence, decay of human values, and the loss of the respect for life permeate the action (64). During his imprisonment, Soyinka knew how power corrupts people and that is why he
continued his campaign against the system which made the life of the common man
difficult. He knew that wars were not fought to restore the society to normal:

What is clear, miserably, humiliatedly clear is that a war is being
fought without a simultaneous programme of reform and redefinition
of social purpose. A war of solidity; for solidity is far more accurate
word than unity to employ in describing a war which can only
consolidate the very values that gave rise to the war in the first place,
for now where and at no time have those values been examined.
Nowhere has there appeared a programme designed to ensure the
eradication of the fundamental iniquities which gave rise to the initial
conflicts. (qtd. in Adams 130-31)

Chidi Amuta points out that Soyinka in Madmen criticises the tyrannical system
which gave rise to war and political unrest due to its obsession with power:

… the weight of Soyinka’s moral indictment descends most heavily on
“the system” which is so debased in its obsession with power that
cannibalism, routine amputations and the ability to conflict mental
torture become different rugs on the ladder to power. Dr Bero … is the
epitome of the aberrations of “the system”. He negates the moral
symbolism of profession as a medical officer by not only subscribing
to but in fact “practising” the systemised sadism and mindless
bestiality which Soyinka sees as the distinguishing characteristics of
war leadership. Consequently, the organic bonds of blood and family
between him and his father … dissolve as the war finds them
espousing and championing antithetical moral values.

(“The Ideological content” 104-05)

Power is central to many of Soyinka’s writings which preceded and followed
Madmen. The difference in his early writings is that he was not explicit in his attacks
against the military leaders and power abusers. In his later writings, he becomes so
courageous in tackling the themes of power and corruption that swept the Nigerian
society during and after the civil war years. He began to attack real corrupted leaders
and places in his plays. Madmen is a continuation of Soyinka’s other works such as
The Strong Breed and Kongi’s Harvest which deal with corruption and power. It is a
beginning for more violent and explicit attacks that come in his later plays such as
Opera Wonyosi and A Play of Giants. In Madmen, Soyinka exposes the dehumanising
effects of power on people who dreamt that Nigeria would progress after its independence. This play was shaped in his mind while he was in prison where he came face to face with the dehumanising power and dictatorship of the repressive ruling regime. Martin Banham remarked that, as quoted by Lois Adams, Madmen is well understood if it is read in conjunction with The Man Died:

[...] Again and again one text echoed the other, and one or other [sic] character in constantly changing guise in both works. It seems abundantly clear to me that Madmen and Specialists is not only a fearful study of the corruption of mankind, and thus relevant to so much of the contemporary experience, but is also a deeply personal comment upon Soyinka’s own suffering in the specific circumstances of the Nigerian tragedy of the last few years. (qtd in Adams 138)

Soyinka’s criticism of the abuse of power in his society has developed a step further in Opera Wonyosi. In Madmen, he satirises the post-civil war Nigeria and the military regime associated with it. In Madmen, he tells his audience how war can mutilate the man psychologically and emotionally. In Opera Wonyosi, he exposes how peace and wealth in the Nigerian context can dehumanise and humiliate man. In Opera Wonyosi, Soyinka’s protest against the tyranny and dictatorship becomes explicit and direct. He uses real names and places from the Nigerian society to mock them and ‘hang them on the stage’. In the forward to the play, he mentions actual names such as ‘President-for-the-life, Idi Amin; Emperor-for-life, Jean-Bedel Bokassa, and President-for-keeps, MarciasNguema (i). This is how Femi Euba remarks on Opera Wonyosi: “The play centres on the corruption of power and Wonyosi as a symbol of decadence relates, by association, to the crimes committed by the ‘power-drunk soldierly’” (177). In his last statement – “power is delicious”, Anikura in Opera Wonyosi becomes similar to Bero. Bero stated almost the same: “It was first step to power you understand. Power in its purest sense” (Madmen 241). Bero initiated the first step to power which was enhanced by Anikura and his likes. The power in Bero’s terms was in the form of tasting the human flesh. Power becomes more ‘delicious’ to the tyrannical Nigerian leaders when they control others and force them to act as Anikura, Jero and Bero etc., choose. Here lies the ‘deliciousness of power’ according the Nigerian leaders whom Soyinka despises and abhors throughout many of his writings.

Soyinka’s attack and protest against the Nigerian and African leaders becomes ferocious with the passage of time. After Opera Wonyosi, comes A Play of Giants.
(1985) in which Soyinka with an exceptional courage attacks the African leaders for their ill-deeds and the corruption they practice with the help of some external and internal forces. Brian Crow and Chris Banfield point out that *Opera Wonyosi* and *A Play of Giants* “are coruscating attacks on the African dictators of the time, the vicious comic-opera ‘emperor’ of Central Africa, Jean-Bedel Bokassa, Idi Amin of Uganda, Macias Nguemo of Equatorial Guinea, and the military regime of General Yakubu Gowon in Nigeria” (93).

Back to *Madmen and Specialists* which is about one of those leaders who climb up the power ladder to abuse others. The would-be leader is Dr Bero joins the army as medical practitioner. In his search for power he is elected the head of the intelligence section, the state’s worst instrument of death, torture and dehumanisation. He shifts his profession from that which cures people to one which kills them. Because of his relentless pursuit of power, Bero abuses others even his own father whom he has sent at the darkness of night along with the four mendicants to his home surgery (the setting of the play) for further action.

Soyinka’s use of this setting reflects his disturbed state of mind during the war years. The surgery is used as a solitary confinement where the Old Man is detained and mistreated, a situation which Soyinka experienced in his prison – “Old Man … is Soyinka’s alter ego reacting against the sadism of dictatorship in war and post-war period” (Maduakor 106). Dr Bero’s home surgery is a place where the suffering of the human beings is supposed to be reduced and healed. But Dr Bero has turned his home surgery into an intelligence office where he appoints the four mendicants to spy on his father, the Old Man. As the action moves forward, one gets to know how the son mistreats his father turning the surgery into an animal laboratory where he can practice his experiments:

BERO. To me you are simply another organism, another mould or strain under the lens. Sometimes a strain proves malignant and it becomes dangerous to continue with it. In such a thing there is only one thing to do.

OLD MAN. Are equipped for that here?

BERO. Even though I have no control over accidents. Just now I came through that room of herbs, I saw something I recognized.

OLD MAN. Something to sap the mind? Or destroy it altogether?

BERO. It depends on the dose. I brought you some. [He brings some
berries from his pockets and drops them gently over the Old Man’s head.] If you ever get tired and feel you need a nightcap like a certain ancient Greek you were so fond of quoting, just soak a handful of them in water. (Madmen 262)

In this dialogue, Bero is disrespectful to the Old Man. He is nothing more than an organism in a chemical lab where he can be given a dose to silence him so that Bero can continue his experiments on other underdogs without interruption of the ‘Octopus’ i.e., the Old Man. The lens of Bero’s system control the Old Man and watch the growth and development of this ‘organism’ which could be a threat to the environment which Dr Bero serves. According to Bero, this organism has to be eliminated when proven dangerous – “infectious diseases are isolated” (Madmen 255). Here Soyinka makes reference to the exploitation and abuse of the common man by the authority and the system in post-civil war Nigeria. People are disrespected and despised and reduced to tiny insects. Soyinka makes also an important remark about the abuse of the intellectuals in Nigeria through Bero who makes fun of the Old Man comparing him to the ancient Greek thinker, Socrates. He offers the Old Man a handful of berries to put on his head, suggesting to him to commit suicide – an easier way which the system adopts.

In addition to the home surgery of Dr Bero, Soyinka introduces the four mendicants, the visual reminders of the human condition in post-civil war Nigeria. The mendicants’ argument with each other reflects the dehumanised and brutalised world they live in and their cannibalistic society. This is made clear through the Old Man’s philosophical arguments about cannibalism and the ‘As’ cult. The four mendicants seem to overcome their horrible disabilities by joking and betting on their remaining parts. The mendicants’ physical appearance is what the war demands and leaves in its wake. They seem to be madmen when they stake their parts – eyes, arms but they give the audience a horrifying image about the nature of man – ‘Man eats man’ – a bitter reality of Nigeria in particular and the whole world in general. The man’s human qualities change when he goes ‘out there’ i.e., the war front which can be anywhere and not only in Nigeria.

BLINDMAN. In that case wee permit you to be buried.
GOYI. You are generous, gentlemen. I have a personal aversion to vultures.
BLINDMAN. ... Nice birds they are. They clear up after the mess.
CRIPPLE. Not like some bastards we know. [He spits.]
AAFAA. In a way you may call us vultures. We clean up the mess made by others. The populace should be grateful for our presence.

(Madmen 220)

The language of the mendicants here and elsewhere in the play reflects their hidden feelings about their bodies that are maimed and crippled in the civil war which uprooted the ethical and moral values in the society. These mendicants have no 'sufficient' parts to work with – some lost eyes and some lost arms and some legs. If they put their parts together they may make 'a complete man' and hence can work. Physical work is not easy for them and they have to find easy alternatives such as begging or spying. Aafaa, a mendicant says that he can use his mouth to work with. But he wonders how his friend can work: “if it weren’t for the iron rod holding up his spine he would collapse like a toad you step on” (Madmen 218-19). The image of burial and vulture mentioned in the above dialogue is a horrible reflection of the Nigerian society during the years of civil wars. It mirrors the intensity of fighting and the wicked bestiality of man towards his own kind. Corpses are left for vultures.

Through the mendicant, Soyinka gives his audience a window into the Nigerian society in the post-civil war period. He did not have the audio-visual media to broadcast those appalling events that take away human values and leave the man dehumanised, maimed and internally and externally paralysed. Like a TV reporter, Soyinka is able to penetrate the minds of his spectators with war-like images by employing characters who apparently seem to have firsthand experience with war. The characters like the mendicants make references that the war that had led to their physical handicap. The Blindman lost his sight in a blast during the war and the Cripple lost his legs as well. These mendicants have been dehumanised further. To Dr Bero, their physical handicap is not enough and does not invite pity and mercy. He uses them to spy on his father because they are the cheapest commodity the specialists can use for their mean purpose in a society ravaged by war. They are victims living in a world devoid of human values. No body cares for them and they sit by the road side begging. The loss of human rights is another important aspect which Soyinka introduced here through these mendicants. They have already lost their own rights, and thus what rights one expects from them to guard. So with little money they accept to spy on the Old Man, their teacher. This erosion of humanity is a natural outcome in an authoritarian society swept by war and bloodshed. No wonder to get people like...
the mendicants shedding away their human feelings because they have been treated in
the same way. They eat the old man’s food, steal his watch and glasses. In Madmen,
Soyinka criticises the human madness which searches for wars and dehumanisation –
Eliane Saint-André points out this idea:

He prefers to lay the emphasis on the dehumanising impact of the war,
the sower of death and madness. In their insanity, which is the
consequence of war, the characters give themselves up to
cannibalistic orgies with a view either to seeing how far human
madness can reach or to absorbing the powers of the dead. This
anguished meditation on the frenzy of men thirsting for power in a play
teeming with metaphysical preoccupations does not show any
particular evidence of political commitment; it betrays an attempt to
exorcise rather than an effort to fight evil. (39)

War changes values to the degree that a son humiliates and kills his father. In
war, the humanitarian professions become a means of utter meaness. This is what
exactly happens to Dr Bero. His abnormal transformation is horrible to follow in the
play. He was a medical practitioner who was healing the wounded people in war
fronts. But the moment he went ‘out there’, he completely underwent a huge
transformation – “It is the war that has turned Bero from one who cured people to one
who abuses them. Ironically it was his father who gave that transformation the coup
de grâce” (Etherton 247). In his own words, Bero admitted this change: “you are
everything once you go out there” (Madmen 237). This statement implies Dr Bero’s
new profession. He had one profession but now he can have many under the cloak of
‘medical practitioner’ – a doctor, a killer and a cannibal. Under his medical profession
he can do anything. That is a natural course to some of those who get used to the
sights of killing corpses and amputations. Their human qualities would fade away. In
discussing Madmen, M Pushpa remarks that war lead to the loss of human values.

War is one major influence on society. There is a breakdown of moral
machinery, and any snag is overlooked, as all is declared fair in the
game of war. Even people involved in humanitarian professions fall a
prey to the money-making devices of war time. War can bring out the
worst in man. This is seen in Madmen and Specialists (1970). Even the
innate cannibalism in man is brought out during war time. Doctors turn
murderers, and herbs with medicinal value are in danger of being used as poison. (The Plays of Wole Soyinka 53)

Bero becomes the head of the intelligence section and at the same time he wants to keep his home surgery functioning to the advantage of his new profession. The home surgery will help him to get “the favourite food of As” (Madmen 254) made and served easily away from the eyes of the public. Death is ‘a natural cause’ so is the transformation as a result of being ‘out there’. This kind of undesirable transformation is associated with the dehumanisation – a perfect job of ‘As’. For Dr Bero there is one more step which stands in his line – his father, the Old Man. What does Dr Bero have to do to move towards this step?

To achieve his goal he has to adopt dehumanisation. He first has to get rid of his human values and then start his mission without any remorse. The first thing to begin with is to transform his home surgery into an intelligence office where he directs the mendicants to spy on the Old Man. The pursuit of power takes him to such extreme. His violence and his abnormal behaviour are ‘natural causes’ to the pursuit of power and the involvement in politics. The words of C Wrights in this regard are relevant: “All politics is a struggle for power; the ultimate kind of power is violence” (qtd. in Arendt 35). Hanna Arendt also says: “… there exists a consensus among political theorist from Left to Right to the effect that violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power” (35). The violence that Dr Bero creates is nothing but a natural consequence of the power pursuit. This is the power which he craves for: “I control lives [and] Control belongs only to a few with the aptitude” (Madmen 264”). So Dr Bero has the aptitude and the skill to make others act as he chooses. This is one of the attributes of ‘As’ as one of the mendicants states – “As chooses, man accepts” (Madmen 244). He attempts to possess the qualities that ‘As’ has and which the Old Man constantly criticises. So the first thing Dr Bero does is that he imprisons the Old Man whom Bero thinks will transform the system – the system of war and dehumanisation. The Old Man is against the practice of war which is of course an erosion of humanity. His story is similar to that of Soyinka since both opposed the war and both were jailed and badly treated.

In a very extreme reaction to the war mongers, and as a part of a re-humanisation process, the Old Man legalises cannibalism and considers it a solution to the wastage of the human flesh. He serves human flesh to the leaders so that, as he thinks, they will be filled with self disgust. He wants to shock those leaders with this
horrible act of feasting on human flesh so that they react and stop this war and the destruction of humanity. James Gibbs considers cannibalism a central image in the play which reflects man’s tendency to feed off and draw power from his fellow man and also explains the kind of relationship between man and man in post-civil war Nigeria (104). But the Old Man’s anticipation did not come true. The war generals developed an appetite for the human flesh. They found it delicious, especially the balls as Dr Bero states. Here is the Old Man describing the war leaders’ reaction after having the meal:

Your faces, gentlemen, your faces. You should see your faces. And your mouths are hanging open. You’re drooling but I am not exactly sure why. Is there really much difference? All intelligent animals kill only for food, you know, and you are intelligent animals. Eat-eat-eat-eat-eat-eat-Eat! (Madmen 254)

In a conversation with the Priest. Dr Bero confirms this transformation and his animal-like desire for the human flesh.

BERO. ... It’s quite delicious, you know.
PRIEST. ... What did you say?
BERO. [reaches out and pulls out the Priest’s cheek.] This. Delicious.
PRIEST. [struggle free.] You’re joking, of course.
BERO. No. Your friend will confirm it when he comes.
PRIEST. [increasingly horrified] You mean he …
BERO. No, not him. He never meant anything. At least, not that way.
But we found it delicious just the same.
PRIEST. You?
BERO. I give you the personal word of a scientist. Human flesh is Delicious. Of course, not all parts of the body. I prefer the balls myself.
PRIEST. [vehemently.] I don’t believe you.
BERO. You don’t? Well, then, why don’t you stay to dinner?
PRIEST. Dinner? [cheering up.] Of course. I see all you want is an argument like your old man. Delighted, of course. Only too delighted to oblige … [He is stricken by sudden doubt.] Er … dinner … did you say dinner?
BERO. Dinner. I came well-laden with supplies.
The Old Man challenges the system which is responsible for the maimed and the wounded in the Nigerian society. It is the power of this system which led to all kinds of afflictions upon people. The Old Man did his best to change this system and teach the mendicants not to accept and rise against ‘As’. But things turned upside down particularly after Dr Bero’s return. His sister could not understand him and became doubtful about his behaviour. Many of the villagers anticipated his return to do his job to help people adjust to their illnesses. But he did not want any one to know that he was back because he had a new profession – an activator of human suffering. His intention was to abuse his home surgery and the herbs gathered by the Earth Mother for inhuman purposes. Instead of curing the patients, he would turn them into corpses so that he could live on their ‘delicious parts’. The home surgery will function as a laboratory where he would fully ‘practice’ on human beings.

The Old Man’s proposal to legalise cannibalism did not bring about any positive change but it worsened the situation. For Dr Bero, it was a further step to power and control. Here, he narrates his experience after testing the human flesh:

Afterwards I said why not? What is one flesh from another? So I tried it again, just to be sure of myself. It was first step to power you understand. Power in its purest sense. The end of inhibitions. The conquest of the weakness of your too too human flesh with all its sentiments. So again, all to myself I said Amen to his grace.

The above quotation is significant because it explains that violence is an immediate consequence to the pursuit of power. Dr Bero representing this stream attempts to bend everything to his will and power. He finds pleasure to control others including his father. Violence plays a significant role in determining human relations. Dr Bero is an embodiment of this violence and his relation with others around him gets worse. His pursuit of power edges aside all his human qualities and became an active instrument of ‘As’. When ‘As’ chooses Bero to be the head of the intelligence section, he accepts ‘with aptitude’.

Voltaire says: “power consists in making people act as I choose” (Scheper-Hughes 236). This is the power which has chosen Bero to be its new agent after the death of the earlier head of the intelligence section as a result of ‘natural causes’. And
Dr Bero has to work according to the dictate of ‘As’ and make people act as he chooses, because it is basically the choice of ‘As’. In fact ‘As’ does not have specific cult. According to the Old Man’s philosophy ‘As’ refers to god, the system, authority, that makes man an inflector and an activator of the suffering of others as well as of his own. The main conflict between Dr Bero and the Old Man is ‘As’. Dr Bero thinks that ‘As’ is the new religion of the poor taught to the mendicants by the Old Man. Bero is eager to know the identity of ‘As’ so that he stops it early before it ‘contaminates’ his own system. But the Old Man thinks that ‘As’ is the system and the corrupted power which Bero and his fellows represent. Soyinka introduced the symbol of ‘As’ with an unspecific nature to let the audience have their own interpretations which suit their situation anywhere.

Dr Bero’s slogan in his new profession is to bend the nature to his own will. To do this he has to have a strong heart and to get rid of his human feelings so that he can move forward with his new profession without any compunction. He is now in the ‘track’ of dehumanisation which goes only in one direction. The Old Man tells Bero: “Once you begin there is no stopping. You say, ah, this is the last step, the highest step, but there is always one more step. For those who want to step beyond, there is always one further step” (Madmen 253). The Old Man knows that the ‘track’ is moving in one way and has to pass through various stations. From the Old Man’s words it appears that the ‘tunnel’ which the ‘track’ goes through is endless. The Old Man knows that he is the next station which Dr Bero will come to. Bero has already started his first step by eating the ‘delicious’ human flesh and he comes back “well-laden with supplies” (Madmen 240) to enjoy it with those who wish to. The Old Man drives Bero to come to his second step which the Old Man describes as “… the last proof of human … the last shadow [in Bero]” (Madmen 253).

Therefore, the Old Man decides to sacrifice himself to save the humanity. This is because, as Michael Etherton says, “he is most deeply aware of the scale and magnitude of the crisis which humanity in general and his society in particular has entered” (246). He is sure that if Dr Bero takes control of the store which is full of herbs he will abuse them for his own inhuman practices. Therefore, the Old Man distracts Bero from going to the other direction towards the Earth Mothers who are taking care of the store. His provoking argument with Bero is to expose him to others to save the community from his evils. The Earth Mothers burn the store of nature remedies and the Old Man is shot dead at the same time by his son. This particular
image explains the conflict between good and evil on earth. The Old Man’s death will bring life back to the society which is controlled by Dr Bero and his system. The words of the Old Man’s student, Aafaa: “Humanity is the Ultimate Sacrifice to ‘As’, the eternal oblation on the altar of As” (Madmen 255) reflect the kind of relation between the Old Man, simply the embodiment of Humanity, and Bero – an agent of ‘As’. The Old Man offers himself as an oblation to ‘As’ when his face falls upwards on the table of ‘As’ as Bero fires his shot.

Soyinka puts to his audience a significant issue through the Old Man’s philosophical arguments about ‘As’. ‘As’ stands for God in Norse mythology. Soyinka employed this symbol to represent God and different forces in the society, especially those which are evil-driven. Etherton emphasises this idea:

As today is all the other parts of the system as well: political and economic orthodoxy, science, the law, the judiciary, the arts. As is, in fact, hegemony: the development of the institutions of the state specifically to keep the elite in power, to perpetuate the power-base of the ruling class. ‘As’ was, ‘As’ is, ‘As’ will always be. (256)

The Old Man and the mendicants made a lot of references to ‘As’ which they think is responsible for agony imposed on humanity. The Old Man defined ‘As’ as the various layers that constitute the system – political, economic, scientific and metaphysic. The political ‘As’ is communicated through Bero’s transformation into the head of the intelligence section. This apparatus consist of the mendicants who agree to spy on the Old Man. On the political aspect of ‘As’ and its connection with cannibalism, Obi Maduakor remarks:

In the political field, As’s relationship to cannibalism becomes immediately meaningful: its favourite dish is human flesh. Man’s history is riddled with wars and, if so much slaughter is to be permitted, so goes Old Man’s Swiftian logic, then we might as well legalize cannibalism. (107)

The scientific ‘As’ can be understood through Bero’s attempt to use the poisonous herbs to ‘treat’ his patients including his father. He advises his father to soak some of those herbs in water if he wants a nightcap. The scientific ‘As’ also appeared in Bero’s diagnosis of the human flesh when talking to the Priest: “I give the personal word of a scientist. Human flesh is delicious” (Madmen 240). This ‘As’ is behind all sorts of dehumanisation that happen in an authoritarian society like Nigeria. The Old
Man looks at the mendicants as cysts in the system which ‘As’ controls. That is, people are themselves part of ‘As’ and they can be activators of their own suffering if they continue to be passive. This idea reflects Soyinka’s Marxist view of the social change manifested in the Old Man’s teachings to the mendicants to rise against the system. Soyinka in The Man Died (1972) expresses his socialist concerns with the common man – “I address this book to the people to whom I belong, not the new elite, not to that broad stratum of privileged slaves who prop up the marble palaces of today’s tyrants” (qtd in Amuta, “The Ideological content” 107). To rebel against those tyrants, the Old Man did not only help the mendicants adjust to their disabilities but also taught them to think and be active cysts working against the system of ‘As’ and not to surrender to the system of tyrants. The Old Man’s words to Aafaa are about ‘As’ and cyst:

... we are together in As. [He rises slowly.] As Is, and the System is its mainstay though it wear a hundred masks and a thousand outward forms. And because you are within the System, the cyst in the System that irritates, the foul gurgle of the cistern, the expiring function of a faulty cistern and are part of material for reformulating the mind of a man into the necessity of the moment’s political As, the moment’s scientific As, metaphysic As, sociologic As, economic, recreative, ethical As, you-can-not-es-cape! ... (Madmen 271)

The Old Man grows furious to bring the maximum effect on the mendicants. In the following speech, which displays Soyinka’s linguistic competence, addressed to the cripple who is placed on the ‘altar of As’ to be operated, the Old Man vents his resentment on various beliefs and political ideologies. The Old Man’s state of mind reflects Soyinka’s attitude against religious fundamentalism which operates at different levels. He feels that even religious beliefs are part of ‘As’ network when religion is abused for narrow and mean practices. Soyinka criticises those beliefs and religious ideologies by words they contain such as ‘dog’ in dogma, ‘mock’ in democracy, ‘mar’ in Marxism, ‘boo’ in buddhism etc.

... you cyst, you cyst, you splint in the arrogance, the dog in dogma, tick of heretic, the tick in politics, the mock of democracy, the mar of Marxism, a tic of the fanatic, the boob in buddhism, the ham in Mohammed the dash in criss-cross of Christ, a dot on the i of ego an ass in mass, ash in ashram, a boot in kibbutz, oh how dare you raise
The Old Man attempts to practise on the cripple to distract Bero from taking control over the store of herbs. When he sees Bero perplexed which way to go, the Old Man shouts “Fire! Fire! Hot line! Riot! Armageddon” (275)! Bero becomes speechless. He does not expect that the situation has gone out of his control. The mendicants at the end of the play explain the message which Soyinka conveys – good always versus evil. People stand against the system and burn down the home surgery which might have been used as a camp to dehumanise people. Although the situation culminates in the death of the Old Man, the mendicants end the play singing. The old women feel satisfied after they burn the home surgery so that it will not go to the evil hands. The Old Man is killed and the herb store is burned down but the characters [other than Bero] are quite satisfied since they have fought the evil and have destroyed its means.

The Old Man’s lesson before his death is to teach his humanity, i.e., the mendicants to raise their voices in the face of ‘As’ even if that leads to one’s own death. The people in the republic of ‘As’ are not allowed to ask question but to be silent and answer the questions asked to them. The Old Man asked questions and gave rise to issues which ‘As’ did not appreciate. Therefore, he was made silent for good. Maduakor points out how people are treated in the republic of ‘As’: “In the republic of ‘As’, those who dare to raise a voice of protest must be guillotined. That is the lesson behind the Old Man’s determination to operate upon the Cripple, who insisted on being heard” (106-107). Under such a totalitarian system, it was a crime if one dares to instigate people to rebel or even think about it. The moment Dr Bero felt the threat and the rebellious mood of the mendicants he reacted violently. To stop this ‘undesirable note’, he approached the Old Man to find an answer to the mendicants’ noticeable awareness of the system. Akomaye Oko comments on this point:

… his [the Old Man’s] greatest crime against the system was the attempt to create an awareness of the system in the war victim he was supposed to look after. In the scheme of the system there must be selective exposure to knowledge or awareness. By recalling E-Epilepsy i.e. Ecstasy or possession, then it would be a serious crime indeed to rouse the possessed in order to teach them a rational appreciation of what is happening to them. It was for this that he became a wanted
man, declared insane in order to discredit him and his philosophy which is not in the interest of the system. (100-01)

The conflict increased between the Old Man and Bero over ‘As’ and its agents. The Old Man became aware that Bero was corrupted and contaminated. This would spread to community if not stopped and exposed. That is why the Old Man grew furious and mad when he felt that Bero was about to control everything. Bero with gun in his hand, attempted to stop this unpleasant situation. He could not ‘bend nature to his will’ and could not force the Old Man to reveal the identity of ‘As’. He felt that the Old Man was an advocate of ‘As’ which he kept teaching to the mendicants. He thought that ‘As’ was the new religion of the underdogs which could be a threat to his system. Therefore, he killed the Old Man thinking that he would end ‘As’. Here, Soyinka criticises the leaders when they come to power. They use power according to their own wills and not to the wills of the people. They force people to obey their orders or else they would experience physical and mental torture.

The state of confusion and total loss of human values, which ends the play, took place in a warring society. People became dehumanised and turned to be a ‘spoiled’ cyst in the system and that led to further dehumanisation and cannibalism. The war front with its continuous killings, amputation and maiming definitely took away the human qualities of those who were engaged in this business. Hearts became cruel and hard. Dr Bero must have undergone all those experiences and the human flesh he had had must have increased his bestiality. He killed the last ‘shadow’ of human in himself. Therefore, he “breaks the ultimate taboo, he joins Oedipus and Isola and all those who are condemned to go through life with their father’s blood on their hands (Gibbs 105).

Dr Bero is one of the leaders who corrupted power and was corrupted by power in the Nigerian society after independence. Soyinka, like many African writers such as Ngugi, is concerned with the leadership issue—a serious problem in Africa and in many third world countries where the abuse of power is common. After the independence from the colonial powers, African countries, Kenya and Nigeria as examples, sank into another new form of colonialism represented by the dictator leaders of the countries. For Soyinka, as it is for Ngugi, the leaders have become more dangerous to the nation than the colonisers. The Nigerian people were happy with the independence but they were confronted with military dictatorship that torn the country and the people apart, exploited the natural resources throwing people in utter poverty.
Mutilation, assassination and physical torture were common under the repressive military regime in Africa as a whole and Nigeria in particular. Here are these lines by Soyinka expressing his views on the dictators of his country and the military rulers who became worse than their colonial masters:

It isn't so much that I became more of an activist after my imprisonment, it's rather that the situation in Nigeria deteriorated to such an extent that the degree, the intensity, of my activism had to be elevated correspondingly. There is nothing which I would have loved more when I came out of prison than to be able to say to myself, and I believe I did say to myself, if this is what people want [...] remember there was a military dictatorship at the time when I came out. it was still under Gowan, General Gowan. That was the first time I went into voluntary exile and that act was to distance myself from an environment which I felt had failed to come to grasp with the significance of the civil war, its immorality, and the future consequences. In other words, everybody had a sense of euphoria. The war was over, the nation had stayed together. Unity became a virtue. The ills, the anomalies, the contradictions which led to the war in the first place, the civil war, no longer existed. And then there was an oil boom. People expected the country to be impoverished as a result of the war. But the opposite happened. There was money. And I saw society all around me and I felt, it wasn't a question of being a voice crying in the wilderness, it was just a sense of isolation. I didn't even bother to cry out in the wilderness. I just knew that something was very profoundly wrong, that the platform on which the nation was sitting was worm-eaten and was going to collapse very soon. (Kriesler. “conversation”)

Similar to Madmen, Irwin Shaw’s Bury the Dead (1935) deals with the horrors of war and its impact on man. A group of soldiers who were killed in the battlefield refused to be buried and rose from the dead. This portrayal makes the spectator aware of the human condition of soldiers in times of war. Their refusal to be buried explains their rejection to war and their insistence to join the living. The mendicants, in Madmen, are former war veterans and are reduced to such a miserable condition. They are living but with physical disabilities. The dehumanisation of war is also seen
through the character of Courage. Like the Old Man, the mendicants, Gandhari, and many other women characters in the selected plays, Courage suffered a lot but she was obstinate and passive. One can see how war treated and tormented her right from the beginning of the war. One can not forget her extreme turmoil when the soldiers brought her son on a stretcher to recognise him. She suffered inside when she could not say that the dead body was her own flesh. One knows what she was thinking about. She was afraid that if she confessed, the regiment would harm her, her daughter and the Chaplain. Therefore, she had to accept these hard emotions and continue her life. There are many accidents that illustrate how war dehumanises and debases man as a whole. One knows how she suffered when she found her daughter shot dead. What could she do? Could she protest or accept or keep suffering and suffering? Suffering became normal to her and she got used to it, therefore, she did not mind to continue her business amid war.

The most sadistic abuse of power is when it attempts to kill and destroy the future and the would-be generation who can stand against the wrong practices of power. As one can see in the case of the Old Man who was shot dead because he was a threat to the abusers of power, Soyinka again portrays the most grotesque abuse of power in Opera Wonyosi. This is presented through Bokasa’s agents in massacring the schoolchildren “who had dared to protest the personal profiteering by the dictator from inflated costs of school uniforms and school supplies” (Jeyifo 95). Bokasa wanted to kill this young generation to protect his ‘Republic of As’, his dictatorship. The destruction of this young generation is an invitation for the ‘age of blindness’ and it is the destruction of the future which Bharati calls upon people to save in Andha Yug. Bokasa’s act of destruction is similar in nature to Ashatthama’s attempt to kill the unborn son in his mother’s womb – a destruction of the future: “I will not even spare/ Uttara/ who is carrying Abhmanyu’s son/ and the future/ of the entire Pandava clan/ in her womb” (Andha Yug 88).

The two humanist writers, Soyinka and Bharati, depict how war dehumanises man and debases the society as a whole. They use similar images to reflect how the human beings can be beasts killing each other. The image of vulture is repeated several times in the two plays. In Andha Yug, “That cloud of hungry vultures will soon / descend upon the corpses and devour them” (32) reflects the human condition during the Mahabharata war and which also took place during the Partition of India. In Madmen, the dialogue between the four mendicants mentioned earlier in this
chapter referred to ‘vulture’ to reflect the state of killing and murder during the violence of Nigerian Civil War. This dialogue illustrates the big number of deaths as a result of the political system which Dr Bero develops and adopts. The total loss of human values marks the action of the play from the beginning till the end. The play begins with the mendicants staking at the ‘remaining parts’ of their bodies and ends with the killing of the Old Man a horrible image about the Nigerian society ravaged by the Civil War. The image of vulture used by the mendicants could refer to the leaders of the political system who had become beasts as Dr Bero. People were not buried but became a delicious food to them and to the ‘political As’. War crushes the human values of man who becomes a mere agent of destruction and bloodshed. Man becomes a beast feeding on the flesh and blood of his brother: “I can’t picture how blood spurted / from Dushasana’s shattered chest – / how cruel Bhima collected it / in his cupped hands / and raised them to his lips” (Andha Yug 34).

Another image which the two plays share together is that of the ‘crippled soldiers’. Bharati introduces to his audience a miserable soldier who lost his tongue and hearing. This is how he puts it: “meanwhile, a soldier, whose tongue has been cut out and who has lost his hearing, crawls onto the stage. He grabs Vidura’s feet to draw attention to himself. He cups his hands and begs for water” (67). Soyinka also gives his audience visual reminders of the horrible conditions which some soldiers (the four mendicants were soldiers) experience during the war.

CRIPPLE. You’re just a rubber ball, Goyi. You need a hand to throw with, anyway.

Goyi. I can use my mouth.

AAFAA. To throw dice? You’ll eat sand my friend.

...

BLINDMAN. The limbless acrobat will now perform his wonderful act – how to bite the dust from three classic positions. (222)

The mendicant in Andha Yug is worried about the future of humanity. He is not worried about the past or the present state of affairs. He wants someone to save the future of mankind from further destruction and blindness. The mendicants in the two plays convey the dramatists’ views of society which is ravaged by wars and loss of human values. Bharati feels that at least one should be concerned about the future of the humanity which has come under the threat of extinction and annihilation by nuclear weapons. Soyinka through the mendicants tells his audience that society has
to be confronted with shocking images of war to realise its follies. He steps further when the Old Man attempts to trick the army leaders to eat human flesh meant to re-humanise them and remind them of the human condition the war leaves behind.

Despite the playwrights’ critical view of war which is based on various ideologies such as Marxism, Humanism etc., there are playwrights who are partisans of war. The next chapter which deals with pro-war writings will illustrate the other view which justifies and supports war for a just cause.