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Hindu Themes in M. Night Shyamalan's *Unbreakable*

Raised in Penn Valley, Pennsylvania, Manoj "M. Night" Shyamalan was born Indian parents. Wishing native citizenship for their son, his parents chose Pondicherry, India for his birthplace. Soon after the birth, Manoj and his mother returned to the United States. The affluent parents, both doctors, sent Manoj to a private Catholic school. At the all-boys Waldron Academy, Manoj, the only Hindu enrolled, learned the rudiments of discipline and solid work ethic. Manoj later attended the private Episcopal Academy, where again he was the religious minority, but was intellectually solidified by the rigorous academics (Bamberger).

Shyamalan's interest in film surfaced at the early age of ten, when he began amassing what would become a collection of forty-five home-made short films by age sixteen (Shyamalan). From grade school, Manoj moved ahead to the film program at New York University, despite his father's wishes for a medical career launched at Princeton (Bamberger 17). Around this time, Shyamalan coined his own middle name, Night, chosen for its relation to Native American culture. Shyamalan's professional film

career began while still attending college, though his first two works were commercially unsuccessful (Bamberger 19). His breakthrough came in 1999 with *The Sixth Sense*, a film amassing over \$600 million worldwide (Business). His inherent knowledge of Hindu tradition presents itself in various forms throughout all five of his prevalent Hollywood films.

Shyamalan's second major film, released in 2000, which drew the least income of his five titles, depicts a man's discovery of his hidden identity. In *Unbreakable*, David Dunn (played by Bruce Willis) survives a train crash that kills everyone else on board. The event serves as the basis for a crippled superhero-seeker's quest to locate his physical antithesis. In the process, the superhero in Dunn develops, but not without his own resistance and insistence upon normality. Until his striking revelation, Dunn thinks nothing of his superhuman capabilities that range from an uncanny sense for impending danger (hence his career as a security guard) to invulnerability to illness.

Like Dunn, the Hindu figure Rama carries out his daily activities without knowledge of his true extraordinary destiny: "Although Rama was Vishnu, his human incarnation made him unaware of his identity at the moment" (Narayan 14). Dunn's "human incarnation" takes the form of a husband and father of one. To his son Joseph, he clarifies the disbelief in himself: "We can both get hurt. I'm just an ordinary man." After witnessing Dunn spontaneously bench press about one hundred pounds more than ever before, and hearing of his father's lifelong resistance to disease, Joseph is convinced of his father's invincibility. So confident is Joseph that he threatens to shoot Dunn with a

pistol as proof. So confident is Viswamithra in young Rama's destiny that he separates him from his father for a journey of training and establishment of authority.

The presence of Maya clouds Dunn's restrained inner strength. It conceals his real nature, instilling in him a sense of bondage by nature's law of mortality: "walking down the darkened road of ignorance, we see ourselves as mortal creatures" (Vrajaprana 7). But if Dunn uncovers the veil of Maya, he can understand his invincibility and make humanitarian use of it.

Dunn inevitably realizes himself with the help of the city's comic book enthusiast, Elijah Price (played by Samuel L. Jackson), who carefully observes Dunn's behavior. He tells Dunn, "Do you know what the scariest thing is? To not know your place in this world. To not know why you're here." Dunn slowly acknowledges that he can censor his strengths neither physically nor honorably. Dharma demands of his exceptional abilities service for the goodwill of mankind, achieved by his capability to sense criminal actions, both past and future. Dunn expresses a perpetual, subtle sadness prior to his self-realization, and Price suggests that "you're not doing what you're supposed to be doing." Once Dunn understands the nature of his strength, he seeks guidance from Price. He asks how to utilize these skills, to which Price responds: "Go to a place where people are. You won't have to wait very long." Dunn's newfound life purpose as a protector to society motivates him to exploit his abilities, and his sadness diminishes accordingly.

Dunn's role parallels that of a Ksatriya warrior sent to enforce justice. Price persuades Dunn to employ his God-sent powers in the way Krishna persuades Arjuna to

fight on the basis of his Ksatriya duty (Bhagavad-Gita 2:31). Furthermore, from The Laws of Manu: “To Kshatriya he commanded to protect the people” (24). Dunn must fulfill this duty by safeguarding the innocent from the wicked, and as Viswamithra guides Rama, Price plays an invaluable role as mentor for Dunn.

Price, in the process of persuading Dunn of his inward abilities, teaches him a general concept applicable to all comic book heroes: every one has at least one weakness. The two of them deduce the exposure of water as Dunn’s weakness based on past, nearly fatal, water encounters. Much like the golden deer lure that reveals Rama’s weakness of fulfilling all his beloved wife’s desires (Narayan 88), Dunn’s weakness acts as a red herring. At first, the belief of water susceptibility disqualified Dunn as a superhero, thus stalling the process of discovering the true superhero within. Revealing the significance of Dunn’s weakness proves vital for revealing his inner powers.

Perhaps divine intervention bestows flaws upon every superhero. Superheroes must not attain perfection because their overabundance of power would tip the balance of karma on Earth. The abilities of superheroes and their will for goodness and peace in the world would lead to the destruction of all evil. Without evil, wicked deeds would not return to their perpetrators*. The god of law and supreme keeper of order, Varuna, oversees the regulation of superhero powers, guaranteeing them a weakness.

* One might argue that the absence of a root evil would avert the necessity for a return evil. The flaw in this argument is the failure to acknowledge that a superhero’s ability is limited to eradicating persistent evil-*doers*, rather than evil itself. Therefore, a typical human from whose mouth is uttered a lie will continue unscathed, and karma will inevitably play its role in the future.

Despite initial skepticism in Dunn, Price assembles clues that convince him of Dunn's superhero personality. He continually insists that Dunn's flaws (e.g. vulnerability to water) indicate, rather than invalidate, the presence of a superhero within.

Viswamithra, too, voices his certainty of a superior destiny in Rama: "O great one, you are born to restore righteousness and virtue to mankind and eliminate all evil" (Narayan 22). The confidence pervading the mentors of both Dunn and Rama contribute to the students' forthcoming heroic endeavors.

Soon after Dunn's realization of his Achilles' heel, it threatens his well-being at the most inappropriate time. During a heroic mission to rescue the family kidnapped by the murderer of their husband and father, Dunn finds himself submerged in a swimming pool in the pouring rain after the criminal knocks him off a porch balcony. Unable to reach the surface, and quickly sinking to the peril below, it appears Dunn's fate is arrived. Suddenly, two traumatized children he just freed arrive and pull him from the depths of the water.

Immediately Dunn regroups, returning without hesitation to slay the kidnapper, for "the Kshatriya who is slain in battle, while he turns back in fear, takes upon himself all the sin of his master" (Laws 231). He completes the mission, taking the life of the kidnapper, and in turn releasing the last captive. Dunn's practice of karma yoga abides by the teachings in the Bhagavad-Gita – selfless action not for personal gain but offered up to a higher power: "But men intent on me renounce all actions to me" (Bhagavad-Gita 12:3). Varuna has again addressed the law by sending wrath upon the kidnapper through

Dunn. The significance of the swimming pool at the scene is not by coincidence, for Varuna not only governs order and law, but also water and rain. His intervention not necessarily involves crippling Dunn by exposing his weakness, but simply indicates his presence during the rescue and the bringing of justice to the wrongdoer.

Dunn's inability to live as a normal father in the vaisya caste proves the difficulty, if not impossibility, of mobility within the traditional caste system. The Hindu/Indian caste system's measure of importance at one time was so great that "without the social system of caste all other aspects of the religion can effectively be called into question" (Stroup 58). Dunn bears a yellow button-down shirt at the start of the film; the color is symbolic of a vaisya (Stroup 155). However, he must not only remain faithful to his God-given ksatriya caste, but must fulfill his responsibility within the caste. Stoup believes that in the teachings of Krishna, no morality supersedes that of caste obligation, which is essentially a practice of bhakti yoga (95).

In M. Night Shyamalan's *Unbreakable*, David Dunn, initially disbelieving of his superhero powers, obtains help from comic book guru Elijah Price to fully grasp his supernatural talents and recognize his precarious weaknesses. Along the way, the characters and their actions relate closely to Hindu concepts. The film portrays well the ideas of Maya, caste system, and duty. Shyamalan's proficiency in this area stems from his Indian background, and he is likely to continue using imagery from Indian culture in future works.

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