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Orientalism And Indian Elements In The Poetry Of P.B. Shelley

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ABSTRACT

Romantic orientation coincided with the growth and development of a scholarly discourse about the East in the wake of European colonial expansion. According to Edward Wadie Said, the discipline of scholarly discourse known as orientalism was invented to support the larger imperialist project of making the process of colonization more successful and lasting. It cannot be said to be true in the case of Shelley, whose agenda did not include exporting and universalizing Western culture in the East. In his visionary love of freedom, he transcended Western imperial ambitions and came to be critical of a Western mode for allowing the domination of the orient. His discourse of Orientalism was without the pretension of knowing the East to disseminate distortions about the East; it was rather a sympathetic effort at the understanding and exploration of the East which was a great and old as if not greater and older than the Western sources of knowledge and civilization and needed to be integrated with the latter.

Keywords: The Orientalism controversy, visionary integrations, ancient Indian Civilization, freedom, transcendence.

INTRODUCTION

Shelley, one of the major English romantic poets, was greatly influenced by the Indian thought that reached him through the works of early English Orientalists of his time. Shelley's approach to the East was marked by his love of freedom, purity of ideals, and transcendent philosophy, which led him to view India with admiration and enchantment. Shelley's Philhellenism, as well as his ideals of peace and anti-imperialist values are discussed and explored in light of the aforementioned poems. His Orientalism is an explicit, unspoken orientalism and therefore different from that of his contemporaries.

The Asian world has always been a mystery for the western civilization; the former lives according to its own laws which the European culture conceive completely, envisions the world, its origins and the way its elements intertwine in harmony in a slightly different way than the western civilization does; in addition, the oriental culture uses a range of symbolic which is completely alien to the western world and can be hardly associated with anything while triggering a chain of emotions within the heart of an oriental dweller. Shelley not only adds certain oriental elements of the common environment, but sets his narration in a completely new environment, with its specific features. In *Alastor*, the poet protagonist's journey takes him back through human history (that is Arabia, Persia, over the Hindu Kush Mountains, which form the Indian Caucasus extending from Afghanistan to Kashmir in north-

west India) to the thrilling secrets of the birth of time. He wants to capture the air of the Asian mysteries in a capsule and convey the specific flair of the orient world to the readers. Reading the poem turns into walking across the uncharted universes and revealing its secrets; and with the help of specific details, Shelley restores the specific Asian atmosphere. Shelley uses the typical orientalism strategies to build a fully realistic universe. However, it would be a mistake to think that the elements of the oriental culture which were used by Shelley were completely authentic; these were rather the common ideas of what the oriental world must look like instead of its true portrayal and carefully verified details. He created his own oriental universe rather impressive, yet not necessarily true to the facts. One of the most peculiar features of the poet's creations, that no account should be considered as a drawback which diminishes the quality of his works, but rather a feature of the epoch, with its taste for the unknown and unraveled.

Shelley's ideas, embodied in his verse, his prose and his life, remains as a challenge to the servile acceptance of authority and as a challenge to us to achieve our highest potential to always aspire to higher goals for ourselves and for society.

DESCRIPTION

Shelley, one of the major English romantic poets, was greatly influenced by the Indian thought that reached him through the works of the early English orientalist of his time. Romantic ideals of love and romance, permanence and transcendence and freedom and liberation found expression through a variety of modes and motifs such as Hellenism, Medievalism, Pastoralism and Orientalism. Initially conceived as a fanciful exercise about passing curiosities of the East, Romantic Orientalism came to be connected with the rise and glory of empire and the accompanying challenges, and tensions. Compared with the similar writings of the past, Romantic Orientalism claimed to be more realistic on account of the local details it made use of as that at the same time it became more poetically interesting and suggestive. Moving away from the earlier notion of the Orient as a mere exotic and extravagant fantasy of cheap commercial glamour, they viewed the orient, according to Edward Said, in abstract, extracting terms, as a vogue ideological rather than a historical geopolitical reality. Said, the foremost post-colonial literary critic, observed that western writers set themselves off against the orient as a fort of surrogate and even underground self so that their orientalist texts tell more about their own than our Asian culture. Orientalism has been highly influential in the field of post-colonial study of the relationship between literature, history and culture.

The principal complaints are that Said's conception of orientalism is monolithic and his methodology too rigidly dichotomized between East and West. These limitations result not only in an accidental stereotype of the racist Westerner but leave little scope for the multiplicity of orients imagined by hosts of writers, artists and scholars. It is true that Said's somewhat over generalization at times ignores the other side of the coin, that oriental writings do indeed open up an exploration of the rich and complex cultural history of the East and do betray a sense of ironic doubt, ambiguity and mixed feelings not only about the East life but also its occupation by the West. It needs to be pointed out here, that Said himself warned against reductionist readings of his argument that tended to be confined to a fixation on the binary opposition between the West and the orient and a tendency to homogenize both categories.

All orientalist writers were not equally comfortable about Western colonization of the East. This is especially true of Shelley, whose love of freedom, purity of ideals and transcendent philosophy rise far above the racist, ethnocentric and imperialist construction of an Indian East. Shelley's singularity idealistic, humanist, selfless and morally unalloyed attitude to society together with the influences that helped him learn about the greatness of ancient Indian civilization, made him look at India with unequivocal admiration and enchantment. In critiquing Said, my contention is that orientalist writers, be they travelers or diplomats, merchants or missionaries, instead of misrepresenting as a way of their radically motivated strategy, were in fact truthful to their experience and to what they saw. And what they saw was indeed largely true about the culture of their colonized lands in the East as a whole. Instead of being prejudiced, they may have depicted a part only, just like any writer, which does not mean they were intentionally fragmenting, splitting, bifurcating, dissecting, slicing the East to inject race or power or were so weak and shortsighted that they were blinding the truth and beauty of the whole. No writer is ever under the obligation of understanding and speaking the whole truth and nothing but the truth. A writer's business is to be revealingly suggestive and insightful about part or otherwise and thereby evoke the possibilities of the rest within the demands of his craft and space.

European orientalist writers were learnt about India and let Indians learn about themselves and their Eastern heritage rich and long and complex and it was both from within and without, as far as they could, significantly contributing to the artistic utterance about the East. It was not the wholesale monopoly of only the native writers of one culture to educate and enlighten their people.

Western orientalists made a difference to this effect more to the advantage of Indians than their own, and provided the very important dimension of how outsiders from the vantage point of a ruling position could afford to safely detach and distance themselves and look at Indians and examine them dispassionately and disinterestedly. They had the power and skill to rule and so they did. They said what they said about Indians without fear and favour and they were starkly true in what they said. Deprived of healthy freedom of expression and with doubtful moral transparency and much deep-seated fear and conflict of loyalties and interest either under the home-grown dynastic or dictatorial rulers or 'divide and rule' foreign occupiers.

India was one of the major 'Easts' that occupied the attention of most orientalists. It was ridiculed for its polytheism and other superstitious practices by the classically minded Western intellectuals, they had a high regard for India as one of the most ancient civilizations of the world. While Indian metaphysics and the Indian bent towards nothingness inwardness and passivity were, philosophically speaking, conflict with enlightenment reason and reason and rationalism was precisely these qualities that had a great appeal for the romantic frame of mind and with which the romantics engaged with great enthusiasm. "Stick to the East. The North, South and West have all been exhausted the public are orientalizing, and pave the path for you," that was what Lord Byron wrote to Thomas Moore in May 1813, quoting his 'Oracle' Madam de Stael, who advised him about "the only poetical policy" left to the poets.

Of all English romantic poets, Shelley's handling of Indian thought, in line with his treatment of platonic or any other body of thought, is characteristically most idealistic, imaginative and psychologically internalized. He uses both Eastern and Western machinery in a syncretic manner to convey his abstract visionary ideas about the historically and political realities of his time. Shelley has interest in India transcends the level of biographical

anecdote and has quoted Edgar Quinet's remark that "Shelley is completely Indian." Many Indian critics such as H.G. Rawlison, Stoppord Brooke, James Cousins, Amiya Kumar Sen and G. Wilson Knight stressed Shelley's interest in Indian lore and experience of things of the spirit.

Cousins noted the reflection on Prometheus's transcendental philosophy of the Indian transcendental meditation represented by the system of yoga. The yoga system involves the discipline of devotion (bhakti-yoga), practice of the control of the body and mind, and the path of action (karma-yoga) as it leads to the powerful final stage of what is called raja-yoga, the full expression of the will and the generation of the complete individual in the realm of the spirit of wisdom.

Sen founded a deep resemblance between the Upanishadic thought to be the progress of Prometheus' lover Asia to the limit of ultimate reality and Shelley's use of the veil image throughout to imply the difference between appearance and reality, inner truth and outer illusion. He also described about the parallel between the passive Indian goddess Ishwara and the passive Prometheus between the active Shakti and the active Asia, whose radiance fills the universe creating a new heaven and new earth.

Shelley was highly influenced by the royal physician Dr. James Lind, who in early life was a surgeon to an East India man, a wanderer in strange lands and who had a love of Eastern wonders and a liking for tricks, conundrums and queer things. There was a genuine pursuit of knowledge about classical India and its languages and literatures as a seat of one of the most ancient civilizations of the world. He praised the ancient Indian poetry for its exulting tone and expressive ideas and recommended the study of oriental models to instill new life into the worn-out neoclassical European literature. Jones said, "in the liveliness of their fancy and richness of their invention" and while "Reason and Taste were the grand prerogatives of the European mind, the Asiatics have soared to loftier heights in the sphere of imagination." Jones works celebrated the revival and rejuvenation of Hindu culture.

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries mythology and comparative religion were among the most discussed fields, questioning the notion of a solely Christian state and implying an obvious challenge to the idea of Europe as representing the only dominating cultural or religious tradition. The questions of the origins of the European peoples had been the subject of intensive debate for sometime especially during French Enlightenment tradition. Jesuit missionaries such as John Holwell and Alexander Dow, among other Western pioneers in Indian scholarship, had an enlightenment inclination towards deism and a tolerant, universalistic outlook which made it possible for them to give a highly possible account of the religious and philosophical ideas of India. They encouraged the belief that India was the source of all wisdom and that it had influenced the philosophical traditions of ancient Greece. Their writings were influential with Voltaire and helped him form his views on the antiquity of Indian religion and civilization. Voltaire held of Hinduism as an example of natural deistic religion with origins older than those of Judaism and Christianity. Indian classics be treated as studied with equal importance as given to those of Greece and Rome and that the teachings of the Upanishads be taken seriously rather than read for merely antiquarian interest. He made the connection between Indian Brahmin philosophy and the German philosopher Kant's transcendental idealism. Jones had explored the matter in his deeply syncretic 'On the Gods of Greece, Italy and Inda', which established a direct relationship between the romantic interest in Hellenistic culture as shown by Shelley, Keats, Peacock and Barry Cornwall and the 'oriental renaissance' inaugurated by himself and his fellow

scholars of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Jones liberating ideas opening of a new world of knowledge and learning about the East, especially India, were to have a great influence on the contemporary European mind and forced it to rethink about its sense of complacent superiority more critically. Jones's translation in 1790 of Kalidasa's 'Sakuntala', the most famous specimen of dramatic literature from classical India, profoundly influenced European poetry from Shelley's "Alastor to Goethe's Faust." The curse, the spirits, pastoral settings, defeat of the enemy, and the final reconciliation Dushmanta and Sakuntala in the realm of the immortals have been variously worked out in "Prometheus Unbound."

Shelley's romantic orientalism avoids being realistic and defies categorization in terms of the elements of typical and general cultural traditions. His orientalist quest romances such as 'Alastor', 'The Revolt of Islam' and 'Prometheus Unbound' are all internationalized versions of the drama of cultural encounter taking place in the realm of dream and exhibiting a psychological quest for the feminized 'epipsyehidion' or 'soul within a soul'. His visionary thoughts and ideal show a great influence of Jones's well-received allegorical 'Hindu Hymns' over a number of years before they were first published in 1785, then 1810, 1816 and 1818. The nine Hymns addressed to nine Indian deities take their subject matter from Indian mythology and religion but in spirit and style they are a reworking of elements from diverse sources such as Plato, Pindar, Milton, Pope, Gray and the Bible. Eight Garland cannon is of the opinion that the Hymn of Lakshmi, which was inspired by the Bhagavad-Gita foreshadowed Shelley in its allegorization of Lakshmi's qualities as the world's great mother and preserving power of nature. The reconciliation of the dreadful Durga with Shiva in a mystic wood, the tribute paid to the Sun God Surya by using many of his Sanskrit epithets, the description of Ganga's fabulous birth, her wanderings and nuptials with Brahman's son, the vision of wonders of Indra, God of the abode of immortals in the firmament and his "empyrean train mounted on the Sun's bright beam," and the beautiful allegorical pictures of Kamdev, the Indian cupid and his being reduced to a mental essence when he attempts to wound Mahadev suggested to a possibility that the hymns were an influence behind the formation of much of Shelley's symbolic expression used to convey his ideal dreams and abstract ideas. The description of love as a 'planet-crested shape' with 'lightening braided pinions' is reminiscent of Jones's 'starry-crowned' Kamdev with "looks in braids ethereal streaming." Shelley's Queen Mab arrives to curb her swift coursers by the use of her "lines of rainbow light" which was probably hinted at by Jones's "such heaven-spun threads of colored light". The last and best-known Hymn to Narayana with its description of the most divine attributes of the Supreme Being and His manifestation in different forms suggesting various archetypal ideas and the perception of primary and secondary qualities through Narayana's chief epithets was perhaps the most influential with Shelley. Shelley was also influenced by Captain Francis Wilford. He was a fellow member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, who represented the most extravagant development of Jones's linguistics research. Wilford claimed that all European myths were of Hindu origin and that India had produced a Christ whose life and works closely resembled the Christ Bible. Shelley owes a great debt to James Henry Lawrence, a friend of William Godwin, both of whom were members of the radical Newton-Boinville circle in the early 1800s. Shelley was to adopt and incorporate Lawrence's critique of Christian marriage and other elements of his plot and imagery of 'Queen Mab', 'Lean and Cythna', 'Rosalind and Helen'.

ARGUMENT

Shelley's discovery of the common linguistic roots of Sanskrit and European languages, compared the Hindu with the Greco-Roman classical Pantheon, concluding that the gods worshipped under different names were in fact identical. Shelley, although having a liberal attitude towards marriage and the insistence that unions be bonded by love and affection rather than by financial consideration were common. Here motherhood of any type was highly rewarded and the concept of father was unknown. In their free-love utopia, like most of the utopias of discovery, primitivism was equated with virtue and the path of 'nature' formed the basis of a romantic ideal of love. But this same ideal also implied a turning away from the tradition of impractical and artificial courtly love and chivalric romanticism, with its inflated conception of female virtue or male constancy. The synthesizing argument had a powerful influence on Shelley who exploited the analogy between Greek and Hindu deities.

CONCLUSION

Shelley's version of the erotic encounter in the vale of Kashmir, Leask argues, is clearly a dream vision in which the visionary maid is represented as a prophet of secular republican, rather than orientalist, enlightenment. In the syncretic fabric of "Prometheus Unbound", again to follow Leask's observations, Shelley's quest romance takes place in the oriental setting of Hindu Kush, far away from the setting of his source, Aeschylus' tragedy, with the Caucasian Prometheus's lover named Asia. Romantic orientation coincided with the growth and development of a scholarly discourse about the East in the wake of European colonial expansion. According to Edward Said, this discipline of scholarly discourse known as orientalism, was invented to support the larger imperialist project of making the process of colonization more successful and lasting. Shelley's visionary love of freedom, transcended Western imperial ambitions and came to be critical of a western mode for allowing the domination of orient.

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