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The Image of India in Shelley (With Special Reference to Kashmir)

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The Poet, wandering on, through Arabia,
And Persia, and the wild Carmanian waste,
And o'er the aerial mountains which pour down
Indus and Oxus from their icy caves,
In joy and exultation held his way;
Till in the vale of Cashmire, far within
Its loneliest dell, where odorous plants entwine
Beneath the hollow rocks a natural bower,
Beside a sparkling rivulet he stretched
His languid limbs. A vision on his sleep
There came, a dream of hopes that never yet
Had flushed his cheek.(Shelley, *Alastor*)

Since ancient times India has remained a great fascination for Europe and a fertile source of inspiration for its creative imagination. This fascination for India has cut across the domains of politics, religion, philosophy and literature and continues to remain a potent area of historical research. Even before Alexander entered India to extend the frontiers of his empire, Indian thought had made a great impact on the Greek metaphysics. Pythagoras the great Greek metaphysician and mathematician is well known in the history of Western philosophy for his theory of the transmigration of souls. This theory is a great hallmark of Indian religious thought. Some researchers believe that Pythagoras has undertaken extensive journeys for the acquisition of knowledge. During these journeys he had come to India as well where it is believed he picked up the doctrine of the transmigration of souls. Alexander's men, according to a legend, are believed to have reached the mountain range of Pir Panchal where they identified the rock with which Zeus had tied Prometheus for his crime of stealing fire from the gods and making it available to man. They also found a similarity between Delphi and the godman of Pir Panchal, describing him as the oracle of the East.

In the earlier literary vision an integral connection existed between the north or West and the East. John Twyne argued in the sixteenth century that the second wave of non-native settlers in Britain were Phoenicians from whom the Celts borrowed their oracles, magic and style of hut-building. John Speed, in his *History of Great Britain* (1611) argued that the people of Cumbria and Wales were the descendants of Gomer, the eldest son of Japeth. Davies believed

that the first man of Druidic tradition, Menyw, was the same person as the Sanskrit Manu. In 1829 a book was published in London entitled *The Celtic Druids* which claimed that the druids were the priests of oriental colonies who had migrated from India.

Thus several centuries of mutual contact between India and the West had preceded the British conquest of India. After India became a part of the British empire, its thought and literature began to influence British writing in a much more comprehensive way. Of this the writers associated with English Romantic Movement of the 19th century supply a striking example. The Romantic poets – Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Southey, Moore and Shelley – assimilated the Indian Influence in a way of which there is no precedent in the history of European literature. The way the Romantics incorporated the Oriental especially Indian influence after appropriately assimilating it made this influence an integral part of British literature that followed the Romantic age. The Victorian poets and novelists – Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Dickens, George Eliot and many other writers exhibit the Indian influence particularly in the thematic domain. In the twentieth century Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Ted Hughes and other writers, have extended this tradition further. This interest had been revived before the Romantics by the work of Edward Pocock (1604-91), the first professor of Arabic at Oxford. His life of the twelfth century Arabic philosopher, Abu Jafer Ibn Tufail, entitled *Philosophus Autodidactus*, opened a new window on the wisdom of the East. About the same time Thomas Burnet's *Archeologia Philosophiae* (1692) was introducing India to the West. These are, however, works dealing with ideas. In the realm of literature pioneering work was done by the French Orientalists like Galland, Petis de la Croix, and Caylus. Galland was the first translator of the *Arabian Nights* into European language. Croix was the editor-translator of the *Turkish Tales* and *Persian Tales*, and Caylus was the inventor of the half-satirical *Oriental Tales*. De Herbelot's *Oriental Dictionary* (1697) served as a reference work to all the Orientalists of the Romantic Period. As a result of this pioneering work, interest in Orientalism became so pervasive that scholars began to trace various kinds of links between the East and the West.

All this led to what is known as the Oriental Renaissance and gave rise to a literature which, though Western in essence, assimilated the Oriental influence to the deepest level. This influence is not limited to the translations of the Eastern classics or works written in their imitation. Nor are the works like Collins' *Persian Eclogues*, Walter Savage Landor's *Gebir*, Beckford's *Vathek*, Count Volney's *Ruins: or Meditations on the Ruins of the Empires*, Southey's *Thalaba* (with a Muslim background) and *The Curse of Kehama* (with a Hindu background), Moore's *Lalla Rookh* and Byron's *Oriental Tales* the only works which Orientalism inspired. It affected English literature in a subtler and more organic way, forming an inseparable strand of it. Romantic poetry, in particular, with its penchant for the strange and the exotic, imbibed this influence readily and spontaneously. Orientalism coloured the vision and the style of the Romantic way of thinking and feeling. Sir William Jones refers to this when in his *On the Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus* he speaks of "the warm imaginations" of the East, and in *On the Poetry of the Eastern Nations*, of "the liveliness of their fancy and richness of their inventions."

Shelley was the most distinguished among the second generation of the Romantics as far as imbibing the Oriental especially the Indian Influence is concerned. He was particularly affected by the Indian mystical tradition. It is noteworthy here that unlike the neoclassical writers, who modelled their works on the classics of ancient Greece and Rome, the Romantics were enlightened, receptive and liberalized enough to assimilate divergent influences and transmute them into engrossing works of art. There were two cardinal reasons behind this. First, the classical myths had been exhausted and worn out by repeated literary use. The English creative imagination was in search of a new repertoire of mythology and fiction. The Orient, particularly India, opened itself up precisely at this time to Britain and Europe. Secondly the essence of the Romantic Movement was a return to the inner self, the exotic and the supernatural and India alongside the Middle East of the Arabian Nights was an inexhaustible treasure-house of the esoteric, the mystical, the exotic and the superhuman.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the ancient Indian texts continued to fascinate a host of influential Westerners writers. German Idealists like Kant, Hegel and Fichte too felt drawn towards them and believed that these texts provided some illuminating insights into profound philosophical problems that confronted them. Schopenhauer's works were also immensely influenced by the wisdom of the *Vedas* and this has continued to engage many researchers of the West and the East.

In Shelley's day there was a profusion of books and articles written on ancient Indian texts. Many of these texts were also available in translation. Apart from some noted German philosophers we had writers like Jones, Wilkins, Southey and Moore working on these texts. Shelley had every reason to follow suit. His brochure *The Necessity of Atheism* had established him as an atheist and led to his expulsion from Oxford. Demoralized by the hostile atmosphere at home Shelley, in a letter to his friend Thomas Love Peacock, had even expressed a desire of getting himself established in India. Although Shelley could never make it to India yet Indian thought and mythology was to have a great impact on many of his celebrated poetical and dramatic works.

Shelley like other great writers evolved and matured slowly and gradually but throughout his growth he consistently retained his penchant for Indian themes and imagery. It hasn't been difficult for the critics to discern the similarity between Shelley's *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* and Jones's *Hymn to Narayana* or to recognize the close verbal and thematic affinity between Shelley's *Hymn to Apollo* and Jones's *Hymn to Surya*. In *The Indian Girl's Song* Shelley verbalizes his musings in an utterly Indian flavour:

The Champak odours fail

Like sweet thoughts in a dream; (*Poetry and Prose*, p.,466)

Ostensibly it is Shelley's genius and imagination alone that inspires him to handle alien images like 'champak' so effectively. Presumably, his only source of information about Indian flowers could have been one of Sir William Jones's essays in which he describes various Indian flowers. The poem *The Indian Girl's Song* had been published thrice under the names: *Song*, *Written for an Indian Air*, *Lines on an Indian Air* and *The Indian Serenade*,

before it came to be published under its final name. This information became available only after Shelley's own fair copy of the poem re-emerged. Many critics now believe that the correct title of the poem has proved vital in understanding the theme of the poem and putting it in proper perspective.

Jones's greatest influence, however, is most discernable in Shelley's first major poem *Queen Mab*. Like Jones's other works, his *Palace of Fortune* was also written under the influence of Indian thought and mythology. Professor E. Koepfel has argued in his perceptive critical work, *Shelley's Queen Mab and Sir William Jones's Palace of Fortune*, that Shelley's poem shows clear traces of Jones's *Palace of Fortune*. In his poem Sir William Jones recounts the wonderful adventures of the beautiful Maia who is discontented with her fate and whom the goddess Fortune takes to her fairy palace while the maiden is asleep in her shining car (Shelley's pearly and pellucid car). Then follows the revelation of the supernatural apparition (in Shelley's poem the apparition says that it knows all thoughts of mankind). There are other particulars where Shelley seems to be indebted to Jones like the favour that is bestowed on Ianthe and the removal of the maiden's soul to the cloud palace. Now the complete edition of Jones's poems appeared in 1807. Thus Shelley was influenced as far as *Queen Mab* concerned more by Jones's poem than by Volney's *Les Ruines* as Kellner argues in his *Shelley's Queen Mab and Volney's Les Ruines*. In Connection with *Queen Mab* it is also noteworthy that Shelley was well-acquainted with Edward Moore's *Hindu Pantheon*.

In some critical circles Shelley's major poem *Triumph of Life* has also been seen to have a significant Indian connection. Close similarity has been detected by some critics between, the thought and style of the ancient Buddhist text, 'Dharmapada' and *Triumph of Life*. On close scrutiny it appears that any similarities that exist between the two may be coincidental. Lloyds N. Jeffrey, in *Notes and Queries* (March 1956), draws our attention to a striking resemblance between certain lines in Shelley's poem and a passage in 'Dharmapada', but adds: "My researches indicate that in 1822, when *The Triumph* was composed, 'Dharmapada' was not extant in any language read by Shelley. And it is, though possible, unlikely in the extreme that Shelley had some indirect knowledge of Buddhist doctrine.

That Shelley remained vitally engaged with India is substantiated by references to Southey's *The Curse of Kehama* in two different letters to Stockdale and Elizabeth Hitchener.

"When do you suppose that Southey's *Curse of Kehama* will come out? I am curious to see it." (*Letters I*, 24)

"The *Curse of Kehama* which you will have is my most favourite poem" (*Letters to Hitchener I*, 13)

Subsequently the poems *Thalaba the Destroyer* and *The Curse of Kehama* were to have a profound influence on many of Shelley's masterpieces like *Fragments of an Unfinished Drama*, *Hellas*, *The Triumph of Love* and *Queen Mab*. *Fragments of an Unfinished Drama* is through and through Indian in colour. The setting, the locale and the characters are

representative of quintessential India. Similarly, the poems *Queen Mab* and *Alastor* bristle with references and allusions to various Indian places, mythological episodes and characters.

Like Southey poems *Thalaba* and *Kehama*, Miss Owenson's novel *The Missionary* had held Shelley under a spell. He writes in a letter to Hogg:

Have you read a novel – *The Missionary*, by Miss Owenson. It is a divine thing. Luxima the Indian Priestess, were it possible to embody such a character, is perfect. *The Missionary* has been my companion for some time. I advise you read it. (*The Letters* I, 112)

The scene of *The Missionary* is laid, for the most part in Kashmir. Its heroine Luxima is a Brahmin girl who converts the hero, Hilarion, to her Brahmanic faith which sets little store by the material reality and upholds a metaphysical Vedantic ideal. Shelley's reading of *The Missionary* is significant in that it inspired *Zeinab and Kathema*. Shelley turns the entire story of *The Missionary* on its head to recast it as *Zeinab and Kathema*, a tragic tale of a naïve Kashmiri damsel and her paramour, who in spite of their innocence, have to suffer at the hands of unjust imperial ethos. Zeinab is a Kashmiri maiden who is seduced by British deception to England. Her betrothed Kathema follows her and both are consumed by the tragic situation that ensues. Zeinab is forced into Prostitution and ends her life in despair. Kathema follows her by bribing some British sailors to conduct him to England. The sailors rob him of all his capital and lead him into the dismal situation where he ends his life in the same way in which Zeinab has done before him. In essence *Zeinab and Kathema* is a bitter elegy on the ravages of British imperialism in the then world. As in many others places in his prose, poetry and plays, Shelley bitterly criticizes even Christianity and the God which British imperialists invoked in their imperialist adventures.

Yes! they had come with their holy book to bring
Which God's own son's apostles had compiled
That charity and peace, and love might spring
Within a world by God's blind ire defiled,
But rapine, and war and treachery rushed before
Their hosts, and murder dyed Kathema's bower in gore. (*Poetry and Prose*, p., 7)

Thus Like its God, unjust and pitiless,
Crimes first are made and then avenged by man,
For where's the tender heart, whose hope can bless
Or man's, or God's, unprofitable plan –
A universe of horror and decay,
Gibbets, disease, and wars and the hearts as hard as they. (*Poetry and Prose*, p., 10)

Kashmir appears next in Shelley's *Alastor*, which is the story of a bemused poet, who keeps searching high and low for the secrets and truths of the universe, but gains nothing except consternation. Once he lands in Kashmir he comes across a 'veiled maid' who, in the end, turns out to be his own visage. He does succeed in grappling with the problems and questions

that used to haunt him but ultimately meets a harrowing end. In connection with *Alastor* it is also remarkable that Shelley's *Thalaba* casts its shadows here. Thus the maiden in *Alastor* has its prototype in *Thalaba's* *Oneiza*. Also like *Thalaba* the young poet in *Alastor* sees a vision and journeys forward in a boat.

In *Adonais* Shelley projects the idea of the One and many in a forceful manner:

The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity. (*Poetry and Prose*, p., 426)

This is a clear transition from atheism to a sort of pantheism. What were the influences that brought about this transition? Earlier this change was imputed to Shelley's Platonism but recent researches have demonstrated that it was the direct and indirect influence from India that brought about this transformation. V. de Sola Pinto has concluded, with the help of appropriate evidence, that Shelley's transition from atheism to pantheism was a direct result of William Jones's writings inspired by India. This is corroborated by Joseph Barrell in his 'Shelley and the Thought of His Time'. He writes:

But in the coalescence of the individual spirit with the world spirit, in the monistic return of the particular soul to the matrix of all souls, Shelley is modern (or Oriental) and not Greek. In Plato's Spirit world, for instance, souls take their place with Ideas as ultimate essences. The farthest continuity that Plato can trace (as readers of the *Phaedrus* or the myth of Er will remember) is from man to man or from man to beast – never from the individual soul to the World soul, from the Many to the One, or from the One to the Many. (p., 174)

In *Alastor* Shelley has made a passing reference to India by bringing in the Vale of Kashmir. This preoccupation with Kashmir became more and more pervasive as he matured. *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley's most significant literary work returns to Kashmir and treats it in a serious symbolical mode. Shelley does not merely allude to the valley of Kashmir but elevates it to the stature of a profound symbol. He calls it 'A Vale in the Indian Caucasus' and masterfully portrays its splendour and gorgeousness. Asia, although a bit different in disposition and demeanour, is a character drawn along the lines of Ms Owenson's *Luxima* or Southey's *Kailyal*. Shelley's treatment of Kashmir is however symbolically much deeper as is the figure of Asia in comparison to the female figures of Owenson and Southey.

Kashmir had appeared before Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* in Southey's *The Curse of Kehama* which, as seen above, fascinated Shelley, and Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*. In *Kehama* Kashmir appears as *swerga*. Though not given the name Kashmir, *swerga* represents all the charms attributed to Kashmir in various travelogues and books about India such as those of Tavernier, Bernier, Alexander Dove and Thomas Maurice. In Moore's *Lalla Rookh*,

however, Kashmir receives a definitive treatment in the last poem of the book, 'The Light of Harem'. This is how it is described by Moore:

WHO has not heard of the Vale of Cashmere,
With its roses the brightest that earth ever gave,
Its temples, and grottos, and fountains as clear
As the love-lighted eyes that hung over their wave?

Oh, to see it at sunset,—when warm o'er the lake
Its splendour at parting a summer eve throws,
Like a bride, full of blushes, when lingering to take
A last look of her mirror at night ere she goes!
When the shrines through the foliage are gleaming half shown,
And each hallows the hour by some rites of its own.
Here the music of prayer from a minaret swells,
Here the magian his urn, full of perfume, is swinging,
And here, at the altar, a zone of sweet bells
Round the waist of some fair Indian dancer is ringing.
Or to see it by moonlight,—when mellowly shines
The light o'er its palaces, gardens, and shrines;
When the waterfalls gleam, like a quick fall of stars,
And the nightingale's hymn from the Isle of Chenars
Is broken by laughs and light echoes of feet
From the cool, shining walks where the young people meet.
Or at morn, when the magic of daylight awakes
A new wonder each minute, as slowly it breaks. (*Poetical Works*, pp.,437-38)

Shelley's goes beyond both Southey and Moore and probes beneath the beautiful exterior of Kashmir to reach its still more beautiful mystical core. Here is how Shelley describes Kashmir with all its beauty and mystique in *Zeinab and Kathema*:

Yet Albion's changeful skies and chilling wind
The change from Cashmire's vale might well denote.
There, Heaven and earth are ever bright and kind;
Here, blights and storms and damp forever float;
Whilist hearts are more ungenial than the zone —
Gross, spiritless, alive to no pangs but their own. ...
There flowers and fruits are ever fair and ripe;
Autumn, there, mingles with the bloom of spring,
And forms unpinched by frost or hunger's gripe
A natural veil o'er natural spirits fling. (*Poetry and Prose*, pp., 8)

This mystique, which is at a low key in *Zeinab and Kathema*, gathers thick layers in Shelley's description of Kashmir as a valley in the Hindu Kush in *Prometheus Unbound*. Prometheus suggests to Asia that they will take up residence in a cave of the Valley and live eternally beyond space and time. The mystique is further deepened by resemblance of the couple to Shiva and Parvati who too are associated with a cave. This is how the cave is described by Prometheus as he addresses Asia:

There is a cave,
 All overgrown with trailing odorous plants,
 Which curtain out the day with leaves and flowers,
 And paved with veined emerald, and a fountain
 Leaps in the midst with an awakening sound.
 From its curved roof the mountain's frozen tears
 Like snow, or silver, or long diamond spires,
 Hang downward, raining forth a doubtful light:
 And there is heard the ever-moving air,
 Whispering without from tree to tree, and birds,
 And bees; and all around are mossy seats,
 And the rough walls are clothed with long soft grass;
 A simple dwelling, which shall be our own;
 Where we will sit and talk of time and change,
 As the world ebbs and flows, ourselves unchanged. (*Poetry and Prose*, p., 259)

It is amazing how Shelley gets his mind round profound Indian themes and reworks them into great works of art. Undoubtedly Shelley's recasting of the themes is more refreshing than the original versions. It is Shelley's intuitive power, imagination and artistry which makes this possible and his works will surely continue to impart delight and wisdom to their readers.

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