

Oriental Thoughts in Shelley's Poems

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Abstract

*Oriental means Eastern thought and philosophy. Eastern ideologies or oriental thoughts have attracted rather influenced many poets of all ages, poets not only of Indian origin but many belonging to the other side of the globe too. Oriental philosophy has been a major inspiration for many poets especially the romantics. P. B. Shelley is one of those romantic poets of England, who were widely influenced by this thought. His interest lies chiefly in the philosophy of poetry thus he prepared and provided a small treatise entitled, 'Defence of Poetry', in which he attempts to prove that a poet is always a philosopher. He claims that poets is a creators of moral or civil ethics, they should introduce and maintain morality. Shelley believes that the moral effect of poetry lies in the enhanced value it gives to ordinary human life. This paper is an attempt to provide an account of the influence of oriental thoughts in the major poems of P. B. Shelley. The poems have been analyzed through their theme, style and setting. The poems taken up in the paper are '**Love's Philosophy**', '**Ode to the West Wind**', '**Adonais**' and '**The Indian Serenade**'. We know that as a revolutionary he was influenced by the forces of liberation and freedom. He was expelled from Oxford for writing a paper on 'The Necessity of Atheism' but later we find in many of his poems, that he is very close to the truth manifested and realized in India through ancient times. The beauty lies in observing the journey of the poet from an atheist to a pantheist.*

Keywords

Oriental, freedom, transcendence, ancient Indian civilization.

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One of the younger groups of the Romantic period, Shelley is known as the most lyrical poet. This celebrated lyrical genius is no doubt known for his philosophic faith and idealistic vision. He believed that poetry must have those elements which are supplied by the human mind. According to him there is a network of ideas and complex structure of thoughts that roll through the mind and then out on a piece of paper. Every writer has his own ideals, beliefs and perceptions from which he is regulated and later on expressed. This paper focuses on the philosophy and prophetic vision of a romantic poet - P. B. Shelley, "a beautiful and ineffectual angel" as Mathew Arnold puts it.

Shelley puts it in the last line of 'Mont Blanc' that,
"And what were thou, and Earth and stars and sea
If to the human mind's imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy?"

Through this oblique question Shelley has made it explicit that the earthly experience attains value through the transcendental vision of man, who manages to discover the unifying principle, as he says to mountain that your silence and solitude are empty without admiration of a human mind. It is believed that Charles Lloyd's remark, "mind cannot create; it can only perceive", stirred Shelley's spirit and influenced his thoughts. "As far as literature is concerned, orientalism is concerned to the discourse by the West about the East, which comprises a vast corpus of text: literary, sociological, scientific, historical, philosophical and political" In fact it is "watching the East and endeavouring to explain and interpret it".¹

At the end of 1819 Shelley moved to Pisa and it was now that he wrote some of his finest lyrics including Ode To The West Wind, To A Skylark, The Cloud etc. He was a poet of the Romantic period who was deeply influenced by the oriental thoughts and its philosophy. Shelley incorporated his thoughts of love, nature and spirituality in his poems as reflected in his oriental way of thinking. Shelley had developed an interest in oriental lore. In early 1818 he and Mary visited the Indian Library in the British Museum. Shelley even recalled his debt to Dr. Lind, when he says, "I owe to that man for more than I owe to my father; he loved me and I shall never forget our long talks, where he breathed the spirit of the kindest, tolerance and purest wisdom."² Shelley was highly influenced by Dr. Lind. He tutored Shelley around 1809 at Eton College and proved to be his mentor. One more fact about Shelley is that, the poet was converted to a vegetarian diet, not only for a small period of time but he even sustained it for the rest of his life. Shelley even wrote two essays on vegetarianism. One is 'Vindication of natural diet' (1813) and 'On the

vegetable system of diet' (first published in 1929). One may argue that Shelley adopted this system of life because of its health benefits or rejecting the animal suffering. But following the vegetarian way of living is for sure the reflection of a sane and sensitive mind. Maybe his oriental thoughts provoked him to do so, believing in the presence of God in all living organisms. It may be based on the concept of Ahimsa – Non-Violence and Compassion. It is believed that the Indian system of life makes a better version of human beings.

Love's Philosophy

Shelley was essentially a poet of love. His idea of love was a platonic conception of the feeling. The poet presents love in its highest form which is the ultimate beauty of the feeling, from the bottom it rises and reaches the top. This love prepares a human being, reach to the virtue, wisdom and happiness of life.

This poem 'Love's Philosophy' was written by Shelley in 1819. The title is very apt because the depth of the philosophy of love is beautifully exhibited. The poem is based on Anacreontic Drinking Song³. Shelley was influenced by original Greek as well as by the translation of the metaphysical poets Cowley and Moore. Shelley in various poems attempts to define the nuances of the word love. For him love always means ideal or platonic love. For him love is total merging of the identities of the two as the elements in the nature do. The poet presents his philosophy and oriental thought in the very first stanza of the poem,

*“the winds of Heaven mix forever
with a sweet emotion;
nothing in the world is single;
all things by a law divine
in one spirit meet and mingle
why not I with thine?”⁴*

The poem comprises of just two stanzas. It is a poem that gives a divine stamp to the notion of free love. As a true romantic poet he believes in the importance of the natural objects having a set of logical natural laws. The poem suggests that love itself must abide to these laws passionately.

Shelley's fascination with the oriental world can be traced back to his readings of works such as the Bhagavad Geeta and the Persian poet Hafez. Here a connection can be made somehow with The Holy Geeta. Chapter IX [verse 4]. It presents the yoga of royal secret where the infinite and the finite have been discussed:

“All the world is pervaded by Me in my unmanifest form (aspect) all beings exist in Me, but I do not dwell in them”⁵

It explains further that the subtleness of a thing is measured in terms of its pervasiveness. The subtlest must be all-pervasive. As all limited things must have forms, then all-pervasive can be eternal or infinite. If the finite rose from the infinite or infinite produced the finite, then what is the relationship between the two? When “*all things*” mingle in “*one spirit*”, then dualities can be mingled and indulged in a fancied picture. There must be an existence for the finite in the Infinite. The kingly teacher in Krishna gives a vivid example to Arjun to imagine a substance that exists everywhere, allowing everything to exist in it. This concept of universal soul was a great fascination for the Romantic poets. All the great romantic poets like Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats not only read Wilkins Geeta, but imbibed its spirit. Its impression found creative expression in their great works.

Ode To The West Wind

One of his perfect lyrics ‘Ode to the West Wind’, was written in the autumn of 1819. It was published with Prometheus Unbound in 1820. “*O wild west wind, thou breath of autumn's bring*”, these opening words of the poem attain a deeper meaning through the second part of the line which establishes the wind as the agent of seasonal change and adds a special significance to its presence. The first stanza describes the effect of the wind on land. The next stanzas describe the effect of wind on land, sky and sea through leaves, clouds and waves. In the fourth stanza he wishes to be one with the west wind, with the spiritual reality it embodies. The poet found in the West Wind a fit medium of expression of what is called “the key of truth”. Hence there is an expression of prophetic character when Shelley talks about the return of the spring season in the last line of the poem.

When in the first stanza he says, “*wild spirit, which art moving everywhere; / destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!*” He explained that wind is a destroyer because it drives the last signs of life from the tree, and it is a preserver because it scatters the seeds which would come to life again in spring. Like Shiva's rule to destroy the universe in order to recreate it, West Wind is also given these two attributes. It sounds convincing because the personification of the west wind as an active principle presents the spiritual reality of nature or pseudo-God. As Hindus believe that Shiva has the power of destruction and recreation, which is used to destroy the illusion and imperfection of this world paving the way for better change. In the same way Shelley's west wind is involved in the cosmic cycle of creation, destruction and evolution. West wind has both the power to take life and give it back too. This optimistic view turns out at the end of the poem when he says that spring will return, “*be through my lips to awakened earth / The trumpet of a prophecy!*”

O wind, / if winter comes, can spring be far behind?”⁶ Through this poem Shelley beautifully and prophetically expresses the truth about life.

In the fourth stanza of the poem poet is seen in a totally disappointed state. He utters out in self-pity and tenderness, “*I fall upon the thorns of life ! I bleed / A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed / one too like thee : tameless and swift and proud.*”⁷ The change of the tone, mental state and suggestions of the poet suggest an oriental thought that the whole world is striving to win the highest joy and all energy of the humankind should be focused on attaining the absolute happiness. It all happens when all strives end. When Shelley says he bleeds by falling on the thorns of life, he is not totally hopeless. The weariness of body and thought should soon end when that joy is attained. He would have believed in what Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita , “*The ignorant, the faithless, the doubting self goes to destruction there’s neither this world, nor the other, nor happiness for the doubter*”.⁸ It means that those who have faith and knowledge will soon reach the supreme peace. The emphasis is on faith. The poet might have condemned the men of doubt and pointed out their tragedy in life. Lord says in this verse that the doubting man can never find happiness anywhere.

Adonais

Shelley’s pastoral elegy was written after the death of his friend John Keats. The beauty of the poem lies not only in the charm of an elegiac form but also in its philosophical speculations. Keats, who led a very unfortunate life, has the finest memorial poem. In stanza XXI of the poem Shelley reflects upon the transitoriness of life. Regrettably, we all are mortals. The poet says that life begs from death a brief space of time. Even our grief for the dead ones is not permanent. It fades rather than terminates with the passing of the time. The poet says, “*alas! That all we loved of him should be, / but for our grief, as if it had not been, / and grief itself be mortal!..... Great and mean/meet massed in death, who lends what life must borrow.*”⁹

Later in stanza 42, the poet speculates that the dead is now one with nature. Nature has mingled with him her own spirit. Shelley presents it beautifully with the universal concept of all powers of nature, that what she gives is later on mingles with it. There is no doubt that Keats lost his physical self but nature brings him back in a different form. His voice is present in thunder and the sounds of birds or the moon. Under day and night his presence is to be felt. Nature shares the crude material of the world into ideal form. Adonais’ spirit is not gone, though his body is no more felt.

In the xvth adhyay of The Bhagavad Gita we find a systematic development of the idea and a logical building up of the theory that the ever-changing, perishable

and finite world is just a projection of one infinite energy, which only remains in this ever-changing phenomenon of the world. In chapter XV verse 12 Krishna asks to realise all confusion which is because of the limitations of our intellect. This confusion we have cultivated by the study of intellectually limited sciences, which beholds us to realize the ultimate truth, i.e.:

“ the light which is residing in the Sun and which illuminates the whole world and that which is in the Moon and in the Fire know that light to be mine”.¹⁰ In other words the manifestations may be different because the tools are different but the power, the source called electricity, is the same everywhere.

This fact remains the ultimate truth that the Lord can come in any form to play the game of plurality.

In paragraph fifty-two of the poem, Shelley imbibes the platonic philosophy of eternal and individual sources of things. The power which ‘is’ and which ‘becomes’ is not easy to understand. But one should know that the former is real while the latter is temporary. Shelley puts it this way:

*The one remains, the many change and pass:
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadow flies;
Life, like a dome of much-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of eternity*¹¹

The poet's visionary input paints a very vivid picture in these lines. He says that life on this earth is full of beautiful though transitory forms. These forms on earth put a hazy veil upon the unchangeable clearness of eternity. He further puts it clearly with the help of an example, where he says that life as the colored glass dome, cannot feel the true light, which is the heavenly light. Only death can shatter the deceptive appearance and can reveal the true light, which can lead us to the original form.

The Indian Serenade

When Shelley was leading a quiet life in Florence in 1819, a lady happened to visit him. She was Sophia, gifted with the art of singing. Once she very politely asked Shelley for some of his songs to be sung in her favourite tune. Poet obliged her by writing poems like ‘To Sophia’ and ‘The Indian Serenade’. The earlier title for The Indian Serenade was ‘Songs Written for an Indian Air’. It is a love poem, which is told from the perspective of a desperate lover. Shelley might have written this song as he was attracted towards Indian air or he might have a liking for it.

Oriental is that Indian thought that enlightens you on the spiritual plain. These values are ageless and timeless, which makes our lives more enriching and

empowered. Shelley in many of his poems is similar to the truth explained in India through ancient times. Poets like him found out about the Asian philosophical culture through a Western perspective. Self is an illusion and we all are interconnected is the oriental thought we can clearly point out in Shelley's poems. Though Shelley does not provide us with the guidelines for our earthly existence, it certainly offers us something more precious. He gave us through his songs some philosophical and visionary ideas about spirituality, infinite, love, frustration and beauty too.

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