Indian Influences on English, American and European Literature

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These terms are translated to English as:

Artha
"Material"
Economic and Social
Success.

Avatara
"Incarnation"
Early emanation of
Vishnu.

Dharma
"Path"
Refers to the teachings
of a religion or religion
itself.

Kama "Love/Pleasure"

Kala "Cosmic Time."

"Action or deed" The moral balance of the universe

Moksha
"release" from rounds of
rebirth; the goal of
salvation to which
orthodox Hindus aspire

Nirvana
"the blowing out"
The goal of salvation to which Buddhists aspire.

Shanti
"Peace"

Let me first present an intriguing difficulty for all who wish to study the influences of Indian ideas, values, and beliefs on Western literature. Consider that some key words on both sides of the East-West divide have no translatable equivalents.

SANSKRIT: artha, avatara, dharma, kala, kama, karma, moksha, nirvana, shanti

ENGLISH; absolution (of sins), blasphemy, guilt, heaven, hell, incarnation, irony, miracle, religion, resurrection, secular, sin, tragedy

This very much affects how Indian philosophy is represented in Western literature. Words that cannot be translated are given a description that may not represent the true intention or its value within Indian culture. Plus, we may attribute some of our cultural concepts to make meaning of theirs, when actually those concepts may not even exist in the original context. For example, Indian philosophy has no word for "miracle" in Sanskrit or any of the Indian languages. Miracles cannot happen because nothing in this world of matter and *karma* operates outside the orbit of matter and *karma*. Hindu gods have notoriously clay feet and are subject to the laws of cause and effect as are we poor mortals. The gods we worship are the gods we create; we cannot worship the God who creates us.

Hindus have no word for "heaven" in the sense of eternal reward. Our heaven is a temporary abode, after the enjoyment of which one is born again and given another chance to do better than gaining heaven.

Hindus also do not pray in the way Westerners do; to Hindus, prayers granted become curses. Hindus feel one should pray, but not because one wants something. One prays because one has everything—that is, life—for prayer is really a thanksgiving, not a supplication. The tragedy of life is not that we don't get what we want, but that we get exactly what we want—and with its built-in opposite. That's the fearsome catch. You think it, you wish it, you dream it, you reach for it, you get it—and you've had it. The point is that in this ambivalent world, sweets bring stomachache, toys bring boredom, pleasure brings pain; sex, fame, money, and power are dreadfully counterproductive. Our sweetest songs are those that tell the saddest thoughts. Even life brings death, for the only way not to die is not to be born.

"Dharma" does not mean "religion" but "that which is stable," from the root dhri meaning earth. There are four such stabilities operating simultaneously at any given moment in every individual's life: sava-dharma (self-stability, the instinct of

self-preservation, individuality); *kula-dharma* (family-stability); *yuga-dharma* (the spirit of the age); and *sanatana-dharma* (that which is unchanging, eternal, absolute). Like all of us in the conflicts of life, Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra is caught simultaneously in these four *dharmas* and has to choose. His choice will determine the quality of his character. Not choosing is not an option.

"Kala" is Cosmic Time. It's a glorious mystery. It means both yesterday and tomorrow. Its movement, if it can be said to move, is apparently circular, not linear. In kala all is created; in kala all is killed. Kala is mahakala (great time) as well; and mahakala is Shiva, who is Destroyer and Creator. The feminine of kala is, of course, Kali, the horrific, malevolent yet blessed dark goddess, the symbol of all-consuming Time. "Time past and time present/ Are both contained in time future,/ and time future/ Contained in time past./ If all time is eternally present/ All time is unredeemable." Fine, but how do you redeem the redeemer? These lines from T. S. Eliot's "The Four Quartets" make difficult sense to the Indian reader.

Sanskrit has no word for "irony," either. The use of words to express something other than or the exact opposite of their literal meaning is more associated with clever city-based civilizations than with the sentimental forest-based ones. English is so charged with irony that I constantly have to be careful when choosing words to translate sacred and secular Sanskrit or other Indian texts.

Finally, in none of the Indian languages is there a word for "tragedy." Pain, misery, suffering, loss, hurt, despair, downfall, even anguish, but not tragedy. Heaven is a disproportionate "reward" (it's really a punishment!) for good deeds, and hell a disproportionate punishment for bad deeds—or so the Indian sensibility feels. To the Western mind, tragedy is acceptable as extreme punishment of the hubris-ridden hero. Excessive punishment or reward just doesn't work in a culture fine-tuned to the workings of *karma*. The German poet/philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) clarified this idea by saying, "Nature is always correct; man makes right and wrong." An Indian would have liked to add: and good and evil; and venial sin and mortal sin; and permanent heaven and permanent hell; and forgiveness and absolution.

Another example of discretionary translation is that there can be no word for "blasphemy" because genuine blasphemy is a reverse declaration of faith. As Ralph Waldo Emerson says in his poem "Brahma":

They reckon ill who leave me out. When me they fly, I am the wings. I am the doubter and the doubt, And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.ⁱⁱ

While some poets, novelists, and thinkers may take in whole and without question whatever appeals to them in the Indian tradition, the major creative writers of the West do not. They explore, differ, dissect, and when they do accept, make changes they feel are necessary. You cannot be firmly grounded in

your own culture and uncritically absorb the values of another without making your integrity suspect. Plus, mindless acceptance could be seen as a form of disrespect to the other culture's identity.

This is perhaps why W. B. Yeats, in his last years, did a startling about turn and began to criticize what he decided was Rabindranath Tagore's mystic-romantic over-sweetness and flabbiness—the same Yeats who once, riding the top of a London double-decker in 1911, had to "close the MS" of the *Gitanjali* (*Git* means song and *Anjali* means offering, "songs of offering") translations he had been carrying with him "for days" because he feared "some stranger would see how much it moved me."

T. S. Eliot may have come to the same conclusion when after deciding in his youth to convert to Buddhism, he then suddenly withdrew. Eliot gave the reason for his pullout later. He said he had felt he would have to empty himself of all his Western religious and cultural heritage in order to fill himself with the Buddhist ethos—more daunting and risky a task than what he preferred to undertake. Two mature traditions in a face-off situation? The need, perhaps, is to affirm that all mature civilizations offer metaphysical and related attractions, without one mature civilization having to be defensive against another.

The task is to transmute and absorb. The next part of this essay examines how some literary and musical figures have done, or not done, this. Let us look briefly at a few poets, a novelist, and some songwriters—Emerson, Yeats, Eliot, Hesse, and the Beatles—and how they were influenced by Indian culture and philosophy.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

needed is selfless deed.

The American Transcendentalist essayist/poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) did not effect much change in his borrowing from India in his poem "Brahma," which originated from an extract in his journal for 1845. The extract is from H. H. Wilson's *Vishnu Purana*: "What living creature slays, or is slain? What living creature preserves, or is preserved? Each is his own destroyed or preserver, as he follows good or evil." "Brahma" first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* for November 1857, the year of what the British called the Indian Mutiny.

Emerson knows the Brahma he is writing about is the first person singular of the word "Brahman." Brahma is Pure Being, without attributes, without form, unclassifiable, unknowable, the Everywhere Breather who breathes without breath. The advice to the seeker of the True Good at the poem's end is "...And turn thy back on heaven." Heaven is the easy reward of good deeds. What's

Vishnu Purana Stories of Vishnu's lives.

William Butler Yeats

Three Indians, two of them Bengalis, were influential in the life of the Irish poet/dramatist W. B. Yeats (1865–1939). In December 1885 he attended a talk in

Upanishads
Texts that describe the teaching of major concepts in Hinduism, such as Brahman, Moksha, Karma/ Samsara, and Yoga.

Theosophy
The system of beliefs
and teachings of the
Theosophical Society,
founded in New York
City in 1875,
incorporating aspects
of Buddhism and
Hinduism, especially
the belief in
reincarnation and
spiritual evolution.

Dublin on *Upanishadic* philosophy by the *theosophist* Mohini Mohun Chatterjee. He put me in a dream, says Yeats in his essay "The Way of Wisdom." "Ah, how many years it has taken me to awake out of that dream!" Forty-three years, to be exact, because in 1928 he wrote what is probably the only poem in English literature that has for its title the name of a living Indian person: "Mohini Chatterjee."

Chatterjee's explanation of life and love to Yeats in 1885 was absurdly simple: Don't ask for anything, because you will get it—and get fed up with it, sooner or later. Especially don't ask for love. Speak from a position of strength, not weakness; fulfillment, not emptiness; giving, not begging. Only by giving love can you receive it. Life is the greatest gift; life is fulfillment, not love.

This pronouncement apparently placed Yeats in that incredibly long dream. In the third and fourth quatrains of "Quatrains and Aphorisms" (January 1886), Yeats does seem to endorse Mohini's philosophy:

Long for nothing, neither sad nor gay; Long for nothing, neither night nor day; Not even "I long to see thy longing over" To the ever-longing and mournful spirit say. The ghosts went by with their lips apart From death's late languor as these lines I read On Brahma's gateway, "They within have felt The soul upon the ashes of the heart."

Yet Yeats wanted love. He craved for Maud Gonne. When she refused him, and married John MacBride, "a drunken, vainglorious lout," he proposed to her stepdaughter Iseult, who on Maud's advice rejected him also. Yeats did not accept the wise advice of Mohini whom he describes as a "handsome young man with the typical face of Christ," an Indian who taught "all action and all words that lead to action were a little trivial." (What Mohini meant, of course, was "ego-loaded" action.)

The Western twist that Yeats gives to Mohini's Hindu belief is obvious. We are born again and again (as Yeats puts it: "Grave is heaped on grave") to seek and find the perfect love. To argue that love is not fulfillment is self-deception. Love is *moksha* (liberation, or release from the changing world and the cycle of birth and rebirth, *samsara*). Mohini Chatterjee would have smiled at that.

The second Indian in Yeats's life was Rabindranath Tagore, with whom he kept up an on-and-off epistolary relationship until 1930. He found Tagore's prosepoem translations from the Bengali *Gitanjali* good enough for inclusion in his anthology *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*.

The third Indian was a Swami whose poems also found place in Yeats's anthology. With Swami Purohit, Yeats entered the esoteric realm of Hindu religious myth and symbolism. Yeats met the Swami in 1930 and collaborated with him in translating the *Upanishads* and other sacred Sanskrit texts. Faber &

Faber published these in book form through the good offices of one of its directors, T. S. Eliot, who, incidentally, had earlier in his "primer of modern heresy" consigned Yeats to literary hell, along with James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence, for producing morally dubious and corrupting literature. The primer was aptly titled *After Strange Gods*.

Before he met the Swami, Yeats had composed in 1920, two years after the havoc of World War I, a poem titled "The Second Coming." He writes: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold...revelation is at hand...what rough beast...Slouches towards Bethlehem to born?" Yeats transforms St. John's vision of the coming of the Anti-Christ into a fearful image of an *awatar* of Vishnu, Nara-Simha (the Man-Lion), turning him into a Doomsday beast who, at the end of the 2000—year gyre of Christian civilization, crawls toward the Christ-child's manger. In other words, the Christian values of love and innocence have been wasted on mankind. Bethlehem has become Bedlam (etymologically, "bedlam" is a corruption of Bethlehem Asylum in London). Poor Nara-Simha, one of the nine manifestations of Vishnu who restore *dharma* each time it declines in the successive *yugas* (ages). A perfectly sensible Hindu *awatar* saving an age of menlions is metamorphosed (with a touch of the Sphinx) into a world-destroying monster in Yeats's Christian imagination.

In 1934, Yeats wrote a remarkable sonnet titled "Meru." Meru is the mythical Hindu mountain of spiritual realization. Everest is the world's tallest physical mountain, the scaling of which is considered a major accomplishment. Which is better? Neither, concludes Yeats. Spiritual achievement and material achievement ("hermits on Mount Meru or Everest" both lead to "the desolation of reality." Eastern spirituality and Western technology are both temporary and illusory. "Before dawn/ His glory and his monuments are gone." "xiv

So what remains? What is the message, if a poem can be said to have a message? "The Second Coming" was written just after World War I, "Meru" five years before World War II began. Is Yeats saying, when will they ever learn?

T. S. Eliot

Indian influences, both Hindu and Buddhist, are scattered everywhere in the work of the British (American-born) poet/critic/dramatist T. S. Eliot (1888–1965). For instance, the three *shantis* (peace blessings) that close *The Waste Land* transforms the long poem of 1920 into an *Upanishad*, for in the Indian tradition only *Upanishads* are permitted the triple benediction at the end. While acknowledging the *Brihadaranyaka–Upanishad*, Eliot changes the advice of Prajapati to the three kinds of intelligent forms who came to him as disciples: gods, anti-gods, and man. In the original Sanskrit, the gods are given the final advice by Prajapati to be disciplined, to control themselves, because gods tend to

be victims of arrogance; the anti-gods are advised to be compassionate, because they tend to be brutal and vicious; and the men are asked to be giving, because they tend to become victims of selfishness. Eliot turns the sequence into *datta* (give), *dayadhvam* (be compassionate), and *damyata* (be self-controlled). He has

switched the order of the *shastra* (rule), and *shastras* are best not tampered with. What appears to have the words of an *Upanishad* is therefore not an *Upanishad*, but a Christian reworking.

In 1944, "The Dry Salvages" section of *Four Quartets* sets forth the advice by Krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, "Do not think of the fruit of action." Eliot may have been talking here to the Allied soldiers in the Battle of Britain (Eliot was an ARP warden). Was he trying to say that one should fight but forget that one is fighting to save democracy from Nazism and Fascism? The doubt lingers: "I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant... Fare forward... Not fare well,/ But fare forward, voyagers." Maybe not even that, but just fare on. Who can tell if our faring is linear (in the Western sense of time) or circular (in the Eastern sense, *karma*)?

Eliot expressed a similar doubt in 1943 in his poem "To the Indians Who Died in South Africa," written at the request of Miss Cornelia Sorabjee for *Queen Mary's Book for India*:

...action
None the less fruitful if neither you nor we
Know, until the judgment after death,
What is the fruit of action.^{xv}

In 1950, in *The Cocktail Party*, Celia Coplestone, guilt-ridden by her adulterous affair, goes to Sir Harcourt Reilly, the psychiatrist, for analyses and advice. He tells her:

Go in peace, my daughter.
Work out your salvation with diligence.xvi

The words of the Buddha to his disciple Ananda were: "So karohi dipam attano (Be a lamp to yourself. Work out your nirvana.)" The difference between "salvation" and "nirvana" is critical. Salvation suggests self-fulfillment after self-discovery; nirvana implies snuffing-out, self-extinction. What kind of self-extinction can be obtained in the crowded corridors of cocktail party circuits? In comparing poems by Eliot, it becomes apparent that he plays with metaphors and imagery from both Eastern and Western philosophic traditions in creating his world cosmography.

cosmography
A general description
of a world or universe,
which usually includes
geography and
astronomy.

Herman Hesse

A little over 10 years ago, in Calcutta, my wife and sister-in-law Paramita stumbled upon a cache of letters stashed inside a trunk in their family residence.

They were from the German author Hermann Hesse (1877–1962) to their father, the late historian Kalidas Nag, dating around the time *Siddhartha* was being written. In letters to other friends and acquaintances, Hesse describes Kalidas Nag, who was 31 years old when they met at the International Congress for Peace and Freedom at Lugano in Switzerland in 1922, as "a scholar from Bengal...with a brown-golden smile." Nag in his turn compares Hesse to a "true Brahmin from

India." They became close friends. Nag sang Bengali songs for Hesse and talked of "old India." They discussed *Siddhartha* extracts from which Hesse, at the insistence of Romain Rolland, read at the Lugano Conference.

In a long letter to Hesse from Paris in 1930, Nag wrote: "Siddhartha is a book which should be translated in all the European languages for here we feel for the first time the real East presented to the West and not the sentimental East of Kipling nor the romantic East of Loti." It was not until 1951 that Siddhartha appeared in English translation, from James Laughlin's New Directions in New York, and created a sensation in American literary circles, especially among students in colleges and universities.

Let us look at the structure of Hesse's novel. Part One has four chapters, corresponding very loosely to the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha. Part Two has eight chapters, again corresponding loosely to the Eightfold Path recommended by the Buddha.

But that's the skeleton. Let us look at the heart of the novel. Siddhartha, the Brahmin's son, challenges the orthodox faith of his father, and goes on a search of self-discovery. Kamaswami, the merchant, teaches him the art of making money (artha); Kamala, the courtesan, shows him the subtleties of love-making (kama); and the Buddha presumably gives him inspiration to realize the higher values (dharma). But Siddhartha is out to achieve a very personal moksha (liberation), so he rejects them all.

At the novel's end, on the very last page, beside the river, he has what appears to be a mystical experience of the Unity of Being, and he smiles. This smile is supposed to be the same as the serene smile of the Buddha. "He smiled peacefully and gently, perhaps very mockingly, exactly as the Illustrious One had smiled." XVIIII

To the Western reader, this may sound all right. (The German word used is *spottisch*, which means "mocking, scornful.") To an Indian, it is scandalous. Even in the paragraph before this, Hesse rubs it in, using the same word: "...this mask-like smile... this smile of Siddhartha—was exactly the same as the calm, delicate, impenetrable, perhaps gracious, perhaps mocking, wise, thousand-fold smile of Gotama, the Buddha... It was in such a manner that the Perfect One smiled."xix

Why does Hesse use this particular word? Perhaps he created the smile of the dissenting Protestant Siddhartha, who can only see life, even after the "illumination," in terms of irony—a literary tool of abstraction that does not exist in Sanskrit. An Indian would feel that it was a waste of an experience. For this is

not a Buddhist way, nor the Buddha's way.

My father-in-law did not know German. He either missed or generously overlooked the telltale "spottisch" that prevents the light of the "real East" from shining at the end of the novel. But the light of the "real West"—questioning, arguing, and rationally refusing to be nirvanically serene—does indeed shine. And that makes Siddhartha a wonderful Western quest for selfhood, which has been argued is what it mostly represents.

This brings us to the layered argument—with a number of sides—of how representation of "the other" (in this case Indian) influences us. If the West exploits the East, using whatever it needs the way it needs it, what's wrong with that? Some say that is one way of influencing. How do we expect people to understand concepts if they do not have a cultural or philosophical reference in which to place them? This is part of the steps to understanding and like any sort of deep study, things become more refined at each step. Another argument is that it is too egregious a process to undertake, and can lead to bold misunderstandings that might never be resolved. Both arguments have merit and should be considered intricate to the process.

The Beatles

The Beatles had two time periods of Indian influence. The first was a stylistic one that dealt with Indian music and instruments, especially the sitar. The album *Help!* has a few sitar notes opening the song, that's all. "Norwegian Wood" was the first pop song to extensively include the sitar. In fact, people wondered what kind of new guitar the Beatles had invented. "Love to You" and "Tomorrow Never Knows" are considered the songs in which the Beatles entered into Indian musical style full tilt.

The second stage was influenced by Indian philosophy. The song "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" is all about *maya* (love/illusion, but in this song they are speaking of it as love). "Would you believe in love at first sight?" gets an off-the-cuff answer: "Yes, I'm certain it happens all the time." "Getting Better" is in its own way escapist. And "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite" is about another kind of *maya* (illusion): the deceptive reality of show business (the circus) and the cloud-cuckoo-land of the imagination (the "kite").

Very obvious Indian philosophical influence is found on two Beatles albums. In reference to "Instant Karma" John Lennon said, "I wrote this in the morning, recorded it that night, and released it the next week. It had to battle with 'Let It Be' and it lost. It was a nice happy-go-lucky song, and has the same chord sequence as 'All You Need is Love."**xxi

Instant karma's gonna get you, gonna knock you right on the head, You better get yourself together, pretty soon you're gonna be dead......xxii

Living in the Material World by George Harrison is the only album by a Beatle that solely espouses Indian ideas and values in any sort of depth. "Give Me Love" chants:

Om M M M M M M M M M M M M M My Lord... Please take hold of my hand. xxiii

That's the opening song on side one. Side one concludes:

I'm living in the material world Living in the material world I hope I get out of this place By the Lord *SRI* Krishna's GRACE My salvation from the material world^{xxiv}

There are two songs on the *Let It Be* album that are miracles of meaning. One is the title song:

When I find myself in times of trouble Mother Mary comes to me Speaking words of wisdom, let it be, let it be.xxv

The other, "Across the Universe," John Lennon said was "one of my favorite songs. I gave it at first to the World Wild Life Fund, but they didn't do much with it, and then we put it on the *Let It Be* album." xxvi

Limitless undying love which shines around me like a million suns
It calls me on and on across the universe

Jai Guru Deva Om

Nothing's gonna change my world

Nothing's gonna change my world.

Xxvii

The Beatles were acknowledged as the first popular Western band to influence people around the world. Their use of Indian music and philosophy has helped spread awareness of Indian culture, especially to those who might not have access through other ways.

In Hindu mythology, Vishnu is represented as reclining on the phosphorescent waves in the clutch of the thousand-headed cosmic serpent *Shesh-naga* whose coils girdle the globe. *Shesh-naga* can be seen as a metaphor for representation and influence, and his thousand heads could be the different ways cultures understand one another through their language and cultural underpinnings. Vishnu reclines amidst it all, possibly signaling that is how we should understand and react to the effects of influence, to "Let it Be."

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xviii Herman Hesse. Siddhartha. Trans. Hilda Rosner. Calcutta: Rupa, 1960. 119.

xix Ibid. 118.

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xxi The Beatles Illustrated Lyrics, Vol. 2. Ed. Alan Aldridge. New York: Dell, 1972. 14.

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xxiii George Harrison. "Give Me Love." Recording: Living in the Material World. New York: Apple Records, 1973.

xxiv George Harrison. "Living in the Material World." Recording: Living in the Material World. Op. cit.

xxv Richard Brautigan. Op. cit. 201.

xxvi Alan Aldridge. Op. cit. 46.

xxvii The Beatles. "Let it Be." Recording: Let it Be. New York: Apple Records, 1970.