

Glimpses of Indian Philosophy in the Poetry of William Wordsworth

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Abstract

There is no denying the fact that Indian philosophy has directly or indirectly influenced the poetic creations of William Wordsworth, P.B. Shelley and John Keats among the Romantic poets, of Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson among the Victorian poets, of T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats among the modern poets, and of Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost among the American poets. While the Romantic and Victorian poets were greatly influenced by the philosophy of the Bhagawad Gita, the modern poets felt irresistibly drawn to the philosophical ideas unfolded by Rabindranath Tagore in the Gitanjali. John Keats sensualized nature with the help of his knowledge of the five senses and their objects. He owed this knowledge to his study of the Bhagavad Gita. Shelley intellectualized nature with the support of the wisdom that flowed to him alter his study of the great Indian epic. Likewise, William Wordsworth spiritualized nature by virtue of his keenness to spirituality that he developed as a result of his deep interest in the philosophy of the Bhagawad Gita. Having been greatly influenced by the Indian concept of death, John Donne, Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson and Emily Dickenson have devoted some of their poems to the treatment of death.

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According to Indian philosophy, the mental state of man is governed by three gunas - *tamoguna*, *rajoguna* and *satoguna*. In the *tamoguna* state of mind man is guided by his uncontrolled passions. This state of human mind has been represented by William Wordsworth in the presentation of the first stages of his love for nature when like a deer he jumped over the mountains, by the sides of the rivers and streams and went wherever he found beauty in nature. In the *rajoguna* state of mind, man is guided by the controlled passions and thoughtfulness. Describing his experiences of this stage, the poet says:

The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite; a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, nor any interest
Unborrowed from the eye. (*Tintern Abbey*)

William Wordsworth has represented this state of human mind in the treatment of the second stage of his love for nature when he hears “the still, sad music of humanity. At this stage, he realizes:

That time is past,
And all its aching joys are now no more,
and all its dizzy raptures. (*Tintern Abbey*)

The dominance of *satoguna* marks the third state of human mind in which man feels irresistibly drawn to divinity. This state has been represented by William Wordsworth in the presentation of the third stage of his worship of nature when he feels a presence that fills him with extreme joy and

a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. (*Tintern Abbey*)

At this stage, he also finds in nature the anchor of his divine thoughts, the nurse, the guide and the guardian of his heart and soul. The fourth state is the state of *trigunatit* in which man transcends the limits of *gunas* and attains immortality. William Wordsworth has portrayed this state of mind in the ninth stanza of his *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality* wherein he says:

Hence in a season of calm weather,
Though inland far we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither. (*Intimations of Immortality*)

William Wordsworth had received the ideas about *gunas* from Wilkins’ translation of *The Bhagawad Gita*. While expressing his diverse experiences that he felt in the four stages of his devotion to nature he perhaps had in his mind, in addition to *gunas*, the Indian concept of four ashramas – *brahmcharya*, *grahastha*, *vanaprastha* and *sanyasa*.

William Wordsworth owes to Indian philosophy his belief in the immortality of soul and God. He fully subscribes to *The Gita* doctrine that soul is the child of God, gifted with attributes God stands for. Separated from its home, it transmigrates from life to life according to the load of karmas attached to it. The earth is a temporary sojourn for soul and heaven is its final destination. In its long journey marked by thousands of births and deaths, countless trials and tribulations, the soul never experiences the closeness of God as it ever remains covered in the layers of the physical, astral and casual bodies. God is the fountainhead of joys and bliss. He is all pervasive and all inclusive. Being the child of the omnipotent and omniscient God, the soul possesses matchless divine attributes and pristine glories. The soul of a child is nearer to God than the soul of a man. This is because the child retains the traces of divinity so long as it does not grow up. The coverings of mind, matter and illusion begin to cloud its divinity as the child

marches ahead towards its youth with the result that it gets oblivious of its divine source. This reality about human soul has been expounded by Shri Krishna in the Bhagawad Gita so as to remove the clouds of delusion hovering over the head of Arjuna at the beginning of the battle. William Wordsworth has portrayed this reality in the fifth stanza of his *Ode on Intimation of Immortality*:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting,
The Soul that rises with us, our life star,
Hath had elsewhere its settings,
And cometh from afar.

The philosophical ideas unfolded by William Wordsworth in *Tintern Abbey* and *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*, constitute the core teachings of *The Bhagawad Gita*. This shows that William Wordsworth wrote his best poems under the influence of esoteric experiences that flowed to him as a result of his recollection of the ideas that he derived from Charles Wilkins' translation of *The Bhagawad Gita*. Thus, it is evident that Indian philosophy influenced William Wordsworth a great deal and moved him to represent its fundamentals in his poetry.

The Immortality Ode is the best poem of William Wordsworth. His popularity as an immortal poet, to a large extent, rests on this poem. According to Professor G. Wilson Knight, "the poem is Wordsworth's most finally satisfying 'Human Work'." (The Starlit Dome, 37) The poem was written under the influence of Indian Philosophy as propounded in the Gita, the English version of which was rendered by Charles Wilkins and published in London in 1785 at the recommendation of Warren Hastings, the first Governor General of British India. The Visada Yoga of the Gita is reflected in the gloomy mood of the poet as presented in stanzas I-IV of the poem. When the poet recalls his childhood full of the glory and freshness of a dream, he is sad to think that the divine light which was once discernible in meadow, groove, stream and earth has now gone. He ruefully utters,

It is not now as it hath been of yore
Turn wheresoever I may
By night or day
The thing which I have seen can see no more.
Whither is fled the visionary gleam
Where is it now the glory and the dream? (*Immortality Ode*, stanza I)

In the fifth stanza of the poem, the soul has been shown as a traveler that "Hath had elsewhere its setting and cometh from afar" (*Immortality Ode*, stanza V). The trailing clouds of glory accompanying the soul begin to disappear as we grow mature. The poet laments over the disappearance of haven "That lies about us in our infancy". The Samkhya Yoga of the Gita prompted the poet to give a poetic voice to the experience of soul inhabiting the human body during the early phase of life on the earth. The *maya* represented by the earth in stanza VI bestows all kinds of pleasures on man so as to make him forget "the glories he hath known" and go far from the majestic palace or the kingdom of God whence he came. Later on, he puts aside all toys and illusory pleasures he depended upon for his happiness during his childhood and looks forward to the old age. The first line of the fifth stanza "Our birth is but a sleep and a

forgetting” reflects Wordsworth’s belief in the Hindu doctrine of the transmigration of soul. The third line of the stanza “Hath had elsewhere its setting” bears resemblance to the Hindu belief that our soul after its separation from God has been restlessly travelling before it entered the human body. The trailing clouds of glory confirm the reality about the soul’s passage through countless births. The philosophy underlying this stanza owes its origin to the twenty second verse of the second chapter of the Gita which has been translated by Wilkins in the following words:

As a man throweth away old garments and putteth on new, even so the soul
having quit its mortal frames, entereth into others which are new. (Shrivastava, 137)

The second line of this stanza “our soul that rises with us, our life’s star” corresponds with the Upanishadic concept that the soul is without a beginning and without an end; it is neither born nor does it ever die, for it is eternal and everlasting. In agreement with the Gita, Wordsworth holds the view that the soul that rises with us neither takes birth nor does it ever die. Birth or death occurs not to our soul but to our body. The word ‘us’ in this line refers not to the universal soul but to the individual soul which experiences misères at the birth and death. Various physical transformations from the childhood to the old age occur to the individual soul with the universal soul witnessing them like an objective and passive onlooker and all the time beholding the light whence it flows. It is this passive onlooker in us who gravitates towards God like a river running towards the ocean. In the Gita, the onlooker has been referred to as *atman*, the conscious entity which, like God, is unchanging, ageless and eternal. The individual soul has been referred to as *jivatma*, subject to birth, death, joy, misery and laws of nature.

The *mohini* or *apara prakriti* of the Gita corresponds with Wordsworth’s earth whose aim, according to the poet, is not unworthy. Why the poet considers the earth as having no unworthy aim? The answer to this question can be found in the Hindu belief that the final goal of human existence is the attainment of *moksha* or release from the shackles of birth and death. All the philosophical schools of India hold the view that this release can be obtained if the individual soul utilizes the earthly opportunity of achieving the goal of self-realization through the realization of the earthly realities. *Apara* and *para*, the two natures of God, characterize the world of matter and the world of spirit respectively. Earth used in the poem represents the *apara prakriti* of God and the individual soul inhabiting the body of man has been referred to as *Purusha* in the seventh chapter of the Gita. This *Purusha* is the inner self, “smaller than the small, greater than the great, hidden in the hearts of the creatures.” (*Yoga*, P 123) The symbiosis between the *Prakriti* and *Purusha* corresponds with William Wordsworth’s treatment of relationship between the earth and her foster child in the sixth stanza of the poem.

According to the Hindu concept of death, the soul after leaving the body assumes the subtle form and is carried to another gross body as per its karma committed in its physical form. This shifting of soul from one gross body to another finds expression in the first two lines of the stanza IX.

O joy! That is our embers
Is something that doth live. (*Immortality Ode*, stanza IX)

The word embers draw our attention to the Hindu mode of disposing off the dead body, which is called cremation. The subtle body that the soul assumes after death has been referred to as something that does live. The mind or intellect that dominates the subtle body has been referred to as nature in the third line of this stanza. The adjective ‘fugitive’ has been used to mean the fleeting nature of the embers of life which haunt the traveler soul after death and disappear as soon as it develops an awareness of its new life. The Hindu concept of the transmigration of soul finds full expression in this stanza. In the process of transmigration of soul, Purusha and Prakrati play an important role. The lines “High instincts before which our mortal nature/ Did tremble like a guilty thing surpassed” speaks of this role of Purusha and Prakrati in creation. The high instincts stand for Purusha and our mortal nature signifies Prakrati. Purusha being inactive forms the basis of creation and Prakrati being active allures Purusha by means of attraction and thereby brings about birth of living beings. Purusha is none other than soul which has been described by Wilkins rendering of the verses 23-24 as hereunder,

The weapon divideth it not, the fire burneth it not, the water corrupteth it not,
the wind drieth it not away, for it is indivisible, inconsumable, incorruptible
and is not to be dried away; it is eternal, universal, permanent, immortal.”
(Shrivastava, 195)

The above translation corresponds with the following lines of the ninth stanza of the ode:

Truth that wake;
To perish never;
Which neither listlessness endeavours, nor mad
Nor man, nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy
Can utterly abolish or destroy. (*Immortality Ode*, stanza IX)

A season of calm weather has been referred to in this stanza as the moment of deep meditation or yoga as described in the verses 10-20 of the Gita. The immortal sea occurring herein stands for God, the universal soul. Perhaps the poet has referred to immortal sea as God under the influence of Lord Krishna’s declaration in the twenty fourth verses of the tenth chapter of the Gita that he is the ocean among the floods. The serenity and blessedness touched upon by the poet in the following lines of *Tintern Abbey* correspond with the joy born of *samadhi* as described in the second & sixth chapter of the Gita:

Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift
Of aspect more sublime: That blessed mood
In which the burthen of the mystery,
of all this unintelligible world is lightened.
(*Tintern Abbey*, Lines 15-20)

Lord Krishna tells Arjuna, “When the flagging senses are brought under control and the yogi sits firm in yoga wholly given up to the divine, clam, peace, clearness and happy frugality

settle upon man.”(Bajpai, 87)In the blessed state of equanimity and tranquility, the yogi peeps into the divine realm and experiences an ineffable joy which enables him to transcend the physical boundary and reach the higher plane where he is able to visualize the source of all joys. Wordsworth felt mesmerized by this yogic experience described in the Gita and gave expression to it in these lines:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts,
A sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting sun,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thoughts,
And rolls through all things. (*Tintern Abbey*, lines 94-104)

The sixth chapter of the Gita speaks of the attitude of equality and impartiality resulting from the yogic blessedness. The yogi having experienced the spirit pervading all objects of nature becomes neutral to the world and its paradoxes.

He is seated in the serene immutable self and from spiritually awakened state of oneness, he beholds the same self in all creatures, whether they are his friends or foes,
whether they are hateful or related and whether they are saints or sinners. (Bajpai, 214)

As is evident from the above discussion, Wordsworth wrote his popular poems under the influence of the teachings of the Gita. The concept of soul and over- soul, karma and dharma, yoga and meditation which occupy an important place in the Gita exerted a deep impact on the poet and led him to make his poetry a vehicle of conveying to the western world his perception of mysticism which he owed to Wilkins’ translation of the Gita.

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