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The Theme of *Indianness* in the Works of P B Shelley : A Glimpse into Ancient India

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Abstract :

The interest in and enthusiasm for Indian thought and ideas during the English Romantic Period were pervasive. Therefore, a new movement called 'Indianness' was in vogue. The term 'Indianness' reflects and relates to India or to its people, languages, literatures, religions, myths, cultures, geography and so on. Indeed, it is a concept which is universal in scope but Indian in concentration. The practice of retaining India and Indian influences is thus defined as 'Indianness'. Many European writers had been interested in ancient India and were concerned with Indian stories and the way of plotting them into their works and thought. P B Shelley was such a writer in whose works the theme of 'Indianness' is prevalent and influential. This brief paper is an effort to shed light on the Indian influences in Shelley's writings. It aims at offering a glimpse into ancient India through Shelley's poetry, play, prose and essays.

Keywords: Hinduism, India, Indian Caucasus, Myth, Oriental, Ragini, Snake, Vedanta.

While praising India Mark Twain, a famous American writer, once commented that India was :

"The mother of history, the grandmother of legend, and the great grandmother of tradition Whatever sphere of the human mind you may select for your special study, whether it be language, or religion, or mythology, or philosophy, whether it be law or customs, primitive art or primitive science, everywhere you have to go to India, whether you like it or not, because some of the most valuable and instructive materials of the history of man are treasured up in India and India only." (Agarwal 517)

Twain's comment which emphasizes the greatness of India and its valuable resources is true to P B Shelley (1792-1822), a note-worthy name in the History of English Literature and one of the major English Romantic poets. Like many, who had pursued and explored India through the ages, Shelley also quested for these Indian values.

India and its antique character led Shelley to adopt many of Indian aspects in his writings. He had an early knowledge of India and its myths and exploited some of them into his works. He had desired and dreamt to visit India and to "equip himself intellectually" (Ray 75) with his love interest for India. His dream of visiting India had never been fulfilled but he had loved those literary works earnestly which depicted India. To satisfy himself with Indian taste he started reading poems, researches and *Works* (1799) by Sir William Jones. Indian portrayal of Sir William Jones attracted Shelley greatly. He was also interested in reading essays on Indian subjects in the 1770s, Captain Francis Wilford's essay *Mount Caucasus* (1801), and James Henry Lawrence's *The Empire of the Nairs, or the Rights of Women; An*

Utopian Romance (1811). He had intended not only to visit India but also to settle here as an employee of the East India Company. On October 22, 1821 he wrote to his friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg :

“ I have some thoughts, if I could get a respectable appointment, of going to India, or any place where I might be compelled to active exertion, and at the same time enter into an entirely new sphere of action.” (Mills 73)

He also wrote a letter to his close friend and noted novelist Thomas Love Peacock on October 22, 1821 expressing his desire to come to India and for help. But Peacock discouraged him :

“ I should not like your Indian project (which I think would agree neither with your mind or body), if it were practicable. But it is altogether impossible. The whole of the Civil Service of India is sealed against all but the covenanted servants, who are inducted into it through established gradations, beginning at an early period of life.” (Mills 73)

Unable to come to India Shelley was unhappy and replied to Peacock on January 11, 1822 :

“ I wish I had something better to do than furnish this jingling food for the hunger of oblivion, called verse : but I have not, & since you give me no encouragement about India I cannot hope to have.” (Ray 75)

From the exchange of letters between Shelley and his friends Hogg and Peacock it is clear that Shelley had loved India heart and soul. Shelley’s strong urge behind the Indian plan was actually inspired by Peacock’s own work at East India House. Edward Moore’s *Hindu Pantheon* (1810) and Robert Southey’s *The Curse of Kehama* (1810), which depict the Indian life and describe the Indian philosophy, were liked by Shelley very much. Another book of Indian story which interested Shelley greatly was Lady Morgan Sydney Owenson’s *The Missionary : an Indian Tale* (1811). He wrote to Hogg on 19th June, 1811 :

“ The only thing that has interested me, if I except your letters has been one novel. It is Miss Owenson’s *Missionary: an Indian Tale*. Will you read it, it is really a divine thing. Luxima the Indian is an Angel. What pity that we can not incorporate these creations of Fancy; the very thought of them thrills the soul. Since I have read this book I have read no other – but I have thought strangely.” (Ray 76)

Shelley had also praised travel diaries and works reflecting Indian life by Thomas Medwin, his cousin and friend, who had come to India as lieutenant in the twenty-fourth Light Dragoons in 1819. He was so interested in Indian depiction of Medwin that he suggested revision of Medwin’s *Sketches in Hindoostan* (1821) and encouraged him to send it to Charles Ollier for publication. In his letter to Clairmont on 29 October, 1820 Shelley wrote :

“ I have read or written nothing lately, having been much occupied ... by Medwin who relates wonderful and interesting things of the interior of India.” (Ray 77)

Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), written in response to Peacock’s *Four Ages of Poetry* (1820), had India and colonialism in its background. While working as a civil servant in East India Company Peacock befriended Utilitarian James Mill who wrote *History of*

British India (1817), an early nineteenth century attempt to reassess India's place in the world. Shelley's curiosity in India increased through Peacock and Mill and their writings. In *Defence of Poetry*, Shelley's view about utilitarianism is highlighted and he had been curious enough to obtain employment in India. For that purpose, he had ordered for Mill's *History of British India* and tried to furnish himself with knowledge regarding India. His attraction for India caused in him 'Indianness' which he took from the works of the early English Orientalists of his time.

The theme of *Indianness* has been prevalent in Shelley's works by means of his contemplative literary efforts. He incorporated the Indian picture predominantly in his *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem* (1813), *Alastor, the Spirit of Solitude* (1816), *The Prometheus Unbound* (1820), *Fragments of an Unfinished Drama*, *Ode to the West Wind* (1820) and *Hellas, A Lyrical Drama* (1822). For the Indian representations in Shelley's works Wilson Knight comments, "India is magnetic to Shelley" (Rajan 172).

In fact, Shelley was fascinated by the way in which Owenson "uses Kashmir as a paradisaic image for that ideal interior landscape of the fulfilled psyche" (Hoeveler, Cass 168). In *The Missionary* Owenson's sympathetic handling of the 'skeptical immaterialism' of Vedantic philosophy obviously had some influence upon the growth of Shelley's mind. This effect can be found in his *Zeinab and Kathema*, an Indian Gothic. In it Shelley pictured Kashmir as an Edenic garden. Though Shelley was immersed in the classics the dominant influence of the novel *The Missionary* is demonstrated when the young poet in *Alastor* experiences his vision of the epipsyche in the Vale of Kashmir. It is the place where 'Asia apparently begins her redemptive action and the visionary in *Alastor* begins his self-destructive quest' (Rajan 172).

Shelley, like the poet in *Alastor*, zealously pursues the most obscure part of nature in search of "strange truths in undiscovered lands" (Delphi), journeying to the Caucasus Mountains. The geographical presentation of this land in the Poet's eastward journey is made distinctive by the absence of universal feature and structural concept of the fixed map. Thus, the place has been followed with a 'omphalos syndrome', in which people believe the place to be located at the centre of the world.

To Shelley India was a cynosure, a land of imagination and a favourable place for setting a model. Like his predecessors Shelley took interest eagerly in the Prometheus myth and contemplated a new revelation of ancient India. He believed in the 'healing power of ancient India' with its mythical background. He chose the Indian Mountains as a place for bettering the world in his *Prometheus Unbound* and it is the Indian Caucasus where Prometheus acquires knowledge. Prometheus asks for help from the mountains to rid him of his 'agony' and 'pain':

"No change, no pause, no hope! Yet I endure.

I ask the Earth, have not the mountains felt?" - L.24-25, *Prometheus Unbound*.

Voices from the mountains responding to Prometheus, who hears 'a sound of voices', highlights the fact that Indian Caucasus responds to the sufferers of the world.

Hindu mythology and Indian geography are reflected in the fourth act of *Prometheus Unbound* :

“And guide this company beyond the peak
Of Bacchic Nysa, Mænad-haunted mountain,
And beyond Indus and its tribute rivers, ..” - L.153-155, *Prometheus Unbound*.

‘Nysa’ is connected to India as Sir William Jones says, "Meros is said by the Greeks to have been a mountain in India, on which their Dionysos was born, and that Meru, though it generally means the north pole in Indian geography, is also a mountain near the city of Naishada or Nysa, called by the Greek geographers Dionysopolis, and universally celebrated in the Sanskrit poems" (Wikipedia). Nysa was also a place where Hindus lived and worshipped God in the temples erected around the city. Graham Philip says in his book *Alexander the Great* :

“According to the *Historia*, when Roxanne accompanied Alexander to the Hindu temple at Nysa, she was the one who told the scribes the true name of the god whose statue was there Roxanne was excited by the plants and animals of India, captivated by the local customs, and intrigued by the Hindu religion.” (Phillips 240)

The name of the river Indus occurring in *Alastor, The Fragments of an Unfinished Drama* and *Prometheus Unbound* shows Shelley’s concern with Indian geography. Besides, the most historical fact is that the name *India* is derived from the Indus river which flows through a part of India. According to Curran, geography is the most important allegory Shelley develops throughout the poem *Prometheus Unbound*. To demonstrate the way in which landscape works prophetically in Shelley’s poem Curran points to the play’s opening scene where “legendary” Indian Caucasus was “a focus of history and myth ... a landscape of fertile suggestiveness ...” (Gladden 265).

John Drew writes, ‘neither the protagonist nor the total mythos of Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* is wholly explicable in terms of the Greek tradition of which it appears to be a part. Both are explicable in terms of the Indian tradition’ (Johnson 219). Shelley’s syncretism is sharply stressed in the study of Drew the same way in which Shelley’s Gnosticism in *Prometheus Unbound* ‘derived from India...[and] the Indian tradition of non-dualism which Sankara developed’ (Johnson 219). It refers to the Vedantic tradition which is granted privileges repeatedly by Jones in his *Hymns* and works on Hinduism.

Shelley’s knowledge of Hindu hymns influenced him variously in his *Prometheus Unbound*. Drew observes that the fourth act of *Prometheus Unbound* is framed with *raginis*, the music of ancient Hindus. He argues that the fourth act may have been an effort to ‘give shape and form to “the most pleasing invention of the ancient Hindus”, the *raginis*, the aerial beings which allegorize Hindu melodies’ (Franklin 180). The voice like a *Bhairabi raga* in morning describes the dawn. Panthea describes it as "the deep music of the rolling world/ Kindling within the strings of the waved air/ Æolian modulations." (L.186-88) This Indian music for Shelley is a way to unify the idealized world and materiality and is the expression of romantic India. His imagination was also captured quite particularly through the Indian music charming the snake. Shelley efforted at finding words for imagined Indian music through which he was interested in ‘the power of Indian culture and its subalterns to seduce the imperialist’ (Alvey). In this regard Jallal Uddin Khan commented about Shelley’s *Orientalia* :

“Infact, the Indian influence was not just a matter but of stylistic embellishment away from the traditional but an indirect yet powerful means of attacking the Western political system he so passionately rebelled against.” (Khan 175-76)

In his *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (1997) Clarke comments :

“Mirroring the philosophical preoccupations of the time, Indian thought became selectively identified in the minds of European intellectuals with the monistic and idealist philosophy of the Vedanta, an attitude which inevitably gave rise to the myth of the exalted spirituality of India by contrast with the materialist West ;” (Clarke 56)

Shelley was such a European whose works showed Oriental influence evidently. His Orientalism was a mixture of Vedantic philosophy, Indian spirituality and liberal imperialism. Shelley expressed about India unequivocally in a short passage in *A Philosophical View of Reform* which envisions the progress of the Indians in India. While exploring the characteristics of Shelley’s liberal imperialism with regard to the British Mission in India Nigel Leask found the repressed Indian diaspora in Shelley’s works and argued that “Shelley was already a confirmed Orientalist and liberal imperialist before Medwin’s arrival in Pisa” (Leask 70). Thus, Shelley’s interest in India goes beyond the limit of biographical sketch.

The theme of conflict between Oriental and Western runs through the poem *Laon and Cythna* (1817) in which the narrator narrates the fight in the mid-air between an eagle and a snake representing tyranny and resistance respectively. A beautiful woman, witness to this fight, was waiting for this wounded snake and creating a supernatural affinity with the natural world through her musical powers:

“She spake in language whose strange melody
Might not belong to earth. I heard alone
What made its music more melodious be,
The pity and the love of every tone;
But to the Snake those accents sweet were known
His native tongue and hers (.....)
And she unveiled her bosom, and the green
And glancing shadows of the sea did play
O'er its marmoreal depth--one moment seen,
For ere the next, the Serpent did obey
Her voice, and, coiled in rest, in her embrace it lay.” - Lines 289-306, *Laon and Cythna*.

These lines are fundamentally concerned with the Indian music, Hindu belief and Liberal Imperialism of Shelley. The music created by the woman’s ‘strange melody’ and ‘accents sweet’ charming a snake shows the power of Indian music. Hindu belief of sympathy for and non-violence to non-human creature are expressed as the woman ‘unveiled her bosom’ and tried to save the snake which is ‘coiled in rest, in her embrace’. The snake fighting an eagle symbolizes the resistance by the oppressed against tyranny of the Western power. In this regard Franklin comments:

“... the power ascribed to Oriental women and to their musical charms was associated for Shelley with contemporary questions of empire.” (Franklin 187)

In *Alastor* Shelley’s early knowledge of European representation of Indian music is exhibited. Indeed, the mythology of romantic ‘Cashmere’ with its richly supernatural musical

tradition provided Shelley an indelible effect which he relates in *Alastor* as he was familiar with Indian music by the time he came to write *Alastor* in 1815.

Shelley's contemplation and taste of *Hindustani* music were conceivable and concentrated through the contact with Thomas Medwin and Robert Southey. And it was Indian music which came to represent the point of contact for Shelley between the idealized world and materiality, especially as sung by Magical Oriental women, forming the most powerful means of harmony. Shelley had developed the harmonic expression through the contact with Jane Williams, an Anglo-Indian and an accomplished musician in the Oriental style, who spent several years in India as a child and spoke *Hindustani* quite fluently. Some poems were written in the context of Shelley's infatuation with Jane Williams who became a version of the Indian maiden and had figured prominently in Shelley's earlier Orientalist compositions. The poem that develops the connection between Jane as an Oriental enchantress and as a musician is the short lyric fragment *Music* (1821):

"I PANT for the music which is divine,
My heart in its thirst is a dying flower;
Pour forth the sound like enchanted wine,
Loosen the notes in a silver shower; (...)
As one who drinks from a charmed cup
Of foaming, and sparkling, and murmuring wine,
Whom, a mighty Enchantress filling up,
Invites to love with her kiss divine..." - Lines 1-22, *Music*.

Tilar J. Mazzeo believes that Shelley heard the music of Indian culture before his meeting with Jane Williams, possibly as early as 1804, since it was fashionable for English women to play it, dressed in Indian clothes. Curran believes Shelley was familiar with 'eastern tonalities and versification' and describes the *Fragments of an Unfinished Drama* (1822) as 'an attempt to adapt the perfumed, fantastic, and amorous atmosphere of the *Sakuntala* of Kalidasa' (Mulhallen 204).

Elements of *Sakuntala* are prominent in *Prometheus Unbound* and there are instances in the *Fragments of an Unfinished Drama* which resemble not just the style but the story. The Indian Youth and Lady may have had a similar memory loss as Dushmanta and *Sakuntala* :

Indian : "Oh! my friend,
My sister, my beloved! - What do I say?
My brain is dizzy, and I scarce know whether
I speak to thee or her." - L.34-36, *Fragments of an Unfinished Drama*.

The most spiritual and traditional idea of Indian origin for Shelley was Hinduism. Edgar Quinet looks on Shelley as "completely Indian" for his attraction for Hinduism. H.G. Rawlinson gives credence to this belief and observes Vedanta philosophy in Shelley's *Adonais* to be advocated splendidly. *Prometheus Unbound*, *Ode to the West Wind* and *Adonais* (1821) describe Shelley's Hinduism, one aspect of diverse religious beliefs in India. As he had owned William Robertson's *Disquisition Concerning the Knowledge the Ancients Had of India* (1791) he developed images from ancient India with enthusiasm. Robertson's work also provided Shelley an effective fascination for India and its Hinduism.

In *The Sensitive Plant* (1820) Shelley anticipated to meet the 'lovely lady' Jane Williams as an antidote in his melancholy. She is portrayed as an Indian gardener with 'basket of Indian woof' working in an Indian garden. While portraying the lady Shelley had in mind the soothing balm of Indian nature. The natural setting of India, which Shelley put in the poem, was an attraction for him and his lady took care for the welfare of the garden banishing threatening creatures from there:

“And all killing insects and gnawing worms,
And things of obscene and unlovely forms,
She bore, in a basket of Indian woof,
Into the rough woods far aloof,--
In a basket, of grasses and wild-flowers full,
The freshest her gentle hands could pull
For the poor banished insects, whose intent,
Although they did ill, was innocent.” - Lines 155-62, *The Sensitive Plant*.

The 'basket of Indian woof' symbolizes the Hindu belief of Indian tradition not to kill insects and animals but to preserve them. In Hinduism and Jainism killings of cows, snakes, monkeys, rats, mice, elephants, peacocks and insects are avoided and they are worshipped. Shelley had retained this Indian thought of non-violence and reflected it through his writings. And it is Gandhiji who was inspired by Shelley's non-violence which he followed in his passive resistance in protest and political action. Gandhiji also kept basket in his Wardha ashram and released the poisonous snakes, who entered there, into the nearby forest. Gandhiji often quoted Shelley's *Masque of Anarchy*, which has been called "the first modern statement of the principle of nonviolent resistance." (Sharma 24)

The Hindu philosophy and ideas of oneness in all lives had much to do with Shelley's thought. In 1812, he was converted to vegetarianism by his friend Frank Newton who had himself been converted while living in India. Shelley echoes the same ideas of flesh-eatings as the cause of both physical and mental illness which his friend Newton propounded in his *Return to Nature or Defence of Vegetable Regimen*. Shelley wrote essays like *A Vindication of Natural Diet* and *On the Vegetable System of Diet* on the subject of vegetarianism. His conversion to vegetarianism made him worship nature and non-human life. In a letter (*Letters: PBS I, 35*) to Hogg Shelley wrote:

“I think that the leaf of a tree, the meanest insect on which we trample, are in themselves arguments more conclusive than any which can be adduced that some vast intellect animates Infinity.” (O'Neill 505)

In *The Revolt of Islam* (1818), which was originally published under the title *Laon and Cythna* in 1817, Shelley's portrayal of Hindu iconography of serpent as a complex symbol was drawn from Moore's *Hindu pantheon*. He drew the Hindu notion of snake for his re-conception of the serpent. Cobras (Nagas) are worshipped as royal forces and the snakes are the symbols of destructive forces controlled by devotion in Hinduism. These forces are expressed and visualized in the figures of Hindu preserver God Vishnu standing on a thousand-headed snake and the God Shiva having snakes coiled around his neck and upper arms. In this connection, John Drew writes :

“ in *The Revolt of Islam* as in Indian mythology the magical cycle of creation within which we exist is ultimately reduced (or expanded) to an archetypal pattern, or mythical triad, of male, female and snake.” (Paolo 106)

In *Ode to the West Wind* Shelley appealed to the west wind for ‘self-abnegation’ which is a practice of meditation and inner purity for the realization of God in the Hindu philosophy:

“..... I would ne’er have striven
As thus with these in prayer in sore need.....
I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed.” - Lines 51-54, *Ode to the West Wind*.

In Hindu myth Gajendra, the Elephant King, struggles hard for long to free himself from the clutches of the crocodile in water, and prays to Lord Vishnu only, after all his energy is exhausted. When he surrenders his self to the Lord, he is freed from the danger by the Almighty. Shelley, like Gajendra, in his youth could compete with the West Wind in strength, now feels all his energy exhausted and surrenders himself with prayer. Another religious myth is that the West Wind is both Shiva and Vishnu of the Hindu triad, destroyer and preserver together :

“ which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear!” - Lines 13-14, *Ode to the West Wind*.

Rigveda, an ancient Indian collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns, has also an influence on Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind*. Agastya Rishi’s *Sukta 165* opens dramatically with a conversation between Indra and Wind Gods. Indra in a friendly voice asks the Wind Gods to put him out of sight and yet to exhibit him. The *Sukta* ends with Agastya invoking to Wind Gods. Such invocation is predominantly used in Shelley’s poem. The Wind Gods are said to have caused to sound the caves in the hills in *Sukta 166*. And it is by the Wind Gods that the plants are moved from one place to another like women placed on chariots. Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind* has its parallel in:

“ O thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed
The winged seeds,” - Lines 5-7, *Ode to the West Wind*.

Nine English Hymns by William Jones addressed to nine Brahmanical deities reflect Jones’ insight and wisdom in Sanskrit mythology. Some of these hymns influenced Shelley. Shelley’s *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* and *Hymn to Apollo* show striking similarities with Jones’ *Hymn to Narayana* and *Hymn to Surya* respectively.

Another remarkable poem *Adonais* by Shelley, dedicated to Keats, refers to Hindu Upanishads. Here the poet gives expression to his thoughts on Death and on the immortality of the human soul:

“ 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,
Until Death tramples it to fragments.” - Lines 28-32, *Adonais*.

The 'One' is here Brahma who, according to the sages of ancient India, is the eternal super human being. Shelley's idea of oneness of all things is close to *Bhagabad-Gita*. Much like Shelley, Charles Wilkins invoked animals both as symbols and as real beings to pay attention to the equal divinity of all in his translation of *Bhagabad-Gita*. The poem *Adonais* also propounds the doctrine of *Maya*, a term in Hindu thought that registers the universal acceptance, acknowledging the unavailability of constructions, and supplies it as a background for the forms of the mind.

The theme of oneness of divinity also recurs in Shelley's *Song of Proserpine* (1839). Shelley postulated and placed individual Gods as manifestations of one mother Goddess. In fact, he advocated the thought of Hinduism that all living things are the manifestations of the divine in this short poem:

“Sacred Goddess, Mother Earth,
Thou from whose immortal bosom
Gods and men and beasts have birth,
Leaf and blade, and bud and blossom,..” - Lines 1-4, *Song of Proserpine*.

Thus, Shelley had praised mythical India with an idealistic attitude to Indian society but criticized the British for its colonizing attitude to India. According to Shelley, the British colonization of India was as unworthy as its tyranny of Ireland. He wrote in “*An Address to the Irish People*”(1812) that the glory England has gained by “(t)he conquest in India” is “a glory which is not more honourable than that of Bonaparte” (Yamanouchi 64). While discussing on the discomfort of Orientalist writers about Western colonization of the East Jalal Uddin Khan commented about Shelley:

“He created an India exactly – a storehouse of transcendent mythic philosophy and visionary ideals to reach out to..... His approach to the antique India was not just the classical but mythical, original and Sanskrit India ...” (Khan 178)

From Shelley's works, which had countless borrowings from India and the great influences of Indian philosophy, it is vivid that India was enchanting to Shelley. He looked at ancient India admirably as he had knowledge about the greatness of ancient Indian civilization. His knowledge about Indian antiquity and Indian character fostered in him an inescapable 'Indianness' which is delineated in his works meditatively and sympathetically.

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