Indic Cultural Heritage as Intertexts in Western Discourse

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Abstract

Cultural representations of the Indic or Oriental world in Western discourse form the focus of this study which attempts to present glimpses of a fascinating world offering boundless polyphony of the universe befitting the occasion of the cultural celebration of Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav through vyakta śabda yoga as one of its cultural manifestations. Despite the Eurocentric uncritical exaggeration as voice, in the past, in the colonial expression 'the White Man's burden' we have the scholars and literary artists in the West, who prefer to present moderating perspectives appreciating the objective point of view. The scholars such as Max Muller, Sir William Jones and others who have devoted themselves to Indic studies "have found in the ancient records of India the strongest proves that thence were drawn many or nearly all the favourite dogmas which later theologians have adopted ..." (Bissoondoyal 45). Additively, Will Durant underscores the intellectual debt of India to the West by writing: "India is the motherland of our race, and Sanskrit the mother of Europe's languages; she is the mother of our philosophy, through the Arabs, of much of our mathematics, mother, through Buddha of the ideals embodied in Christianity, mother . . . of self-government and democracy. Mother India is in many ways the mother of us all" (47).

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The culture and language we are born into and nurtured, more or less, influence our ways of seeing and representing the world. Art, literature and the human mind itself are seen as representing reality "according to conscious, semi-conscious and unconscious codes and conventions" instead of reflecting it (Cavallaro 4). We must not forget that though as a social product literature is a cultural manifestation in one sense, it is also the creation of individuals, who by themselves are creatures informed (using Hippolyte Taine's phrase) by – race, milieu, and moment. According to A.W. Green, "a culture becomes civilization only when it possesses written language, science, philosophy, a specialized division of labour and a complex technology and a political system". Thus the advanced form of culture is civilization. Culture is learned by socialization. It is not inborn, and it is gained by symbolic behaviour. It is accumulative in nature, as the older generation passes on their experience through communication to the new generation. The constituents of culture, such as thoughts, values and ideals change over time, place, and situation. In a sense, we can say that culture is the soul and civilization is the body.

The study of linguistics in the Western world has gone through three phases in its development. These stages are marked as – historical linguistics (19th century), descriptive linguistics (early 20th century), and generative linguistics (1950s onwards). Linguistics in the West is said to have been born in 1786 with the comparative study of Sanskrit (the ancient Indian language) by one of the most renowned British philologists/Indologists Sir William Jones. In his historical comparative study, Jones discovered that "Sanskrit . . . Germanic, Latin, Celtic and Greek all came from the same source [Indo-European] language", and his discovery led to "the development of Genetic Classification" (Lowe & Graham 37). Jones is also credited to have

translated Kālidāsa's play *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* into English bearing the title *Sacontalá* **or** *The Fatal Ring* (1789).

Since ancient times, the study of the *Vedā*s, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gitā*, and the *Brahma Sutra* continue to benefit thinkers both of the East and the West. In India from these sources of wisdom, various Vedic (*Samkhya*, *Yoga*, *Mimamsa*, *Advaita* of Shankara and qualified monism of Ramanuja) and non-vedic (Jainism and Buddhism) systems of philosophies were developed. Adi Shankaracharya (788-820 A.D.) developed his philosophy of *Advaita* (non-dualism) foregrounding the views: '*Aham Brahmasmi*' and '*Jagan Mithya, Brahma Eva Satyah*'. The liberated soul in *Advaita* is non-different from Brahma, and it perceives everyone in the self and nothing else.

Consequently, dualism disappears with the knowledge of Brahma, considered as the transcendental or ultimate reality, leading to the removal of all doubts and attachments. This is the state of attainment of *moksha* or *Jeevan Mukti* for the self. To Shankara *moksha* does not mean the destruction of the body but the extinction of ignorance (*avidya*). Accordingly, *moksha* means knowing one's real essence. Shankara's mission was to unify the religious spirits of India in *Sanātana dharma* also acknowledged as Hindu *dharma*, a way of living.

About Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Gandhiji once wrote to his son that his essays to his mind contained the teaching of Indian wisdom in a Western *guru* (cited in Reid 31). Emerson, one of the famous Boston Brahmins and American transcendental philosophers came under the influence of Indian philosophy through his readings of Victor Cousin, the French philosopher. His readings of the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gitā* imbibed in him a strong impact of *Vedāntic* philosophy, the *Advaita* (nondualism) in particular. As per Rao, like all religious thinkers, "Emerson believed that world was an emanation from God. This belief was reinforced by his study of Indian mysticism . . . . Indian classics strengthened his belief that man has the divine spark in him. He was particularly fond of the concept: AHAM BRAHMASMIH. Coleridge is credited with gifting this idea to Emerson" (10-11). Emerson's interest in *Bhagavad Gitā* manifested in his poem 'Brahma', a reworking of its thought-structure and rhetorical pattern, an extract of which is cited below:

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again. (ll. 1-4)

Similarly, the basic *Vedāntic* idea of the soul's immortality as stressed in the *Bhagavad Gitā* is poetically rendered faithfully by Emerson in the same poem as under:

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. (ll. 9-12)

Indic influence on Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965): The above excerpts in appreciation for the land of the Himalayas, as per Rao, inspired T.S. Eliot and the echo of the same is heard in *The Waste Land*. Eliot studied under Babbitt and Santayana at Harvard and did graduate work there in philosophy, read Greek philosophy at Oxford, spent two years studying Sanskrit and Indic philology and devoted one-year studying Indian metaphysics. Eliot was functionally polyglot and besides English, he read five different languages, such as Greek, Latin, Italian, French, and Sanskrit with greater or lesser skill.

In *The Waste Land*, there occurs section V (pp. 36-39) entitled 'What the Thunder Said', which contains a mytho-allusive reference from *Brihadaranyak Upanishad.* Eliot adapts and re-handles the *Upanishadic* myth of *Prajapati.* The invisible Prajapati appears in the guise of Thunder and articulates the monosyllabic sound '*DA*' thrice giving his message of the three-fold path of deliverance to the assemblage of the gods, demons and men. Eliot uses this myth to give his message to the war-torn Western world to listen attentively as a solution to their ailment and malady. The three monosyllabic sounds are interpreted as *DA* (*Datta*, which means to give), *DA* (*Dayadhvam*, which means to sympathize), and *DA* (*Damyata*, which means to control). And the poem ends with the lines: 'Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata./Shantih Shantih Shantih (ll. 432-433). The poem, thus, closes with the *Upanishadic* formulaic ending in the untranslated *Gayatri Mantra*, which lends textural richness to the poem, and also echoes Indic Hindu tradition.

Eventually, Eliot draws strength from the Indic past and establishes it for seeking solutions to the problems of his (present) contemporary Europe. Eliot is once stated to have

written about the ancient Indian philosophers that "their subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys", this statement is taken by some scholars that Eliot was thereby "expressing of at the Indian appreciation of the diversity inherent in tradition. Tradition, no less than truth, is considered sacred in India, China and Japan, and all of the voices that speak within a tradition, even when they oppose one another, are considered facets of the truth" (cited in Kearns 165). It is common knowledge that Eliot "devoted his career to a defence of the European tradition and . . . had studied under Bertrand Russell, Josiah Royce, William James . . ., and Henry Bergson" (Kearns 157). The remark therefore seems to be unexpected, yet his course selection at graduation level of Sanskrit and Buddhist studies "reflected his dissatisfaction with the modes and methods of Western philosophical discourse" (Kearns 158). To Eliot "the founding presupposition of Western philosophy" was "the distinction between appearance and reality"; and he "held that the world of ultimate reality and the world of appearance are not as distinct as had been traditionally held in the West" (Kearns 158-159). One must recall that it was Eliot who once made the remark that "the *Bhagavad Gitā* is the next greatest philosophical poem to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, within my experience" (*Introducing Hinduism* p. 98).

According to Reid another American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) had read a great deal in Indian literature, perhaps more than Emerson and the *Bhagavad Gitā* was one of his favourite books. Reid sees an affinity in style between the Indian classics and Thoreau's writings. While living in ascetic solitude by Walden Pond dipping into Oriental books, and attempting to discover his true self, Thoreau came to the realization as to what the Orientals meant by contemplation and the forsaking of the world (*Walden*, Chapter IV).

Identifying the Indian influence on Walt Whitman (1819-1892), Dr. S. Radhakrishnan categorically wrote about him that Whitman turned to the East in his anxiety to escape from the complexities of [Western] civilization and the bewilderments of a baffled intellectualism (cited in Reid 58). To Whitman, as per Reid, as with Indian mystics and mystics everywhere, time and space become indistinguishable factors in the total mingling of self with the spiritual substratum. Whitman's *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* containing lines "It avails not, time nor place – distance avails not . . ." (ll. 20-23) is an affirmation of and substantial resemblance with Indic philosophical wisdom.

The aforesaid poem foregrounds the shared experience of place, which establishes continuity and the possibility of communication between the poet and others to come after him. Their common humanity forms a basic identity and the inner or spiritual reality Whitman speaks of also joins them. Whitman once spoke about himself that he was simmering, simmering, simmering and Emerson brought him to a boil. Certainly, Reid notices impressive resemblances between Whitman's poetry and the *Vedanta* affirming the mystic element in his thought (Reid 62).

Taking cognizance of a number of jottings from Whitman's notes for the poem "Passage to India", V.K. Chari *et al.* comment that Whitman was impressed by the "vast and mighty poems the *Rāmāyana*, the *Mahābhārata,* the *Vedās* with all their hymns and sacred roles" (cited in Kearns 179). To substantiate this point of view one may quote Emerson, who described Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* as a "remarkable mixture" of the *Bhagavad Gitā* and the *New York Herald*, even Henry David Thoreau remarked about this work as "wonderfully like the Orientals" (Kearns 178). Notwithstanding that, one cannot deny that "Whitman may well have been one of the many Westerners who have found it unnecessary or disadvantageous to make direct reference to Indic texts, but beyond dispute, there are remarkable parallels between his views on freedom or liberation, of the nature of reality, and of the role of the deep self and those found in the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*" (Kearns 179). The following excerpts give a glimpse of Whitman's relation to Indian thought:

> To us, then at last the Orient comes . . .
> The Originatress comes,
> The nest of languages, the bequeather of poems, the race of eld,
> ……..
> With sunburnt visage, with intense soul and glittering eyes,
> The race of Brahma comes.

(cited in Kearns 160 and "A BROADWAY PAGEANT. (Leaves of Grass (1891–1892)) - The Walt Whitman Archive.")

W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) is said to have "assimilated whatever he knew of Indic traditions to his own strange mixture of Celticism and idealism, and only in his later years did further exposure to Indic traditions in a more authentic form [which] lead him to alter or deepen his understanding of them" (Kearns 186). In his September 1912 Introduction to Noble laureate Tagore's *Geetanjali*, W.B. Yeats wrote, "just as we fight and make money and fill our heads with politics – all dull things in doing – while Mr. Tagore, like the Indian civilization itself, has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to its spontaneity". Yeats also records his observation on the translated manuscript *Geetanjali* that these "lyrics – which are in the original . . . full of subtlety of rhythm, of untranslatable delicacies of colour, of metrical invention – display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long" (*Geetanjali*).

British mission in August 2014 organised a UNO programme on the occasion of the completion of one hundred years of the First World War (1914-1918), in which participants were asked to select, recite and document the war-connected poems of reputed writers of their nations. Mr. A.K. Mukherjee, the Indian Ambassador to the United Nations on that occasion recited the 96th song/lyric drawn from the *Geetanjali*. He also spoke to the Augustus gathering that Tagore's celebrated poem was a forewarning to mankind nearing the brink of the World War, and against the shackles of materialism. To the world community, the poem promoted faith in the common man and divinity; it disseminated to humanity the message of truth and beauty and appealed to retain patience, truth and hope intact. It will suffice to cite one incident to prove the impact of *Geetanjali*. The then war-torn Britain's famous trench poet and soldier Wilfred Owen was a war casualty. After his death, a notebook was discovered by his mother in his luggage. The notebook contained the 96th song of *Geetanjali* handwritten and the name of Tagore captioned on it. The song used to be an inspiration and solace to Owen. The poem's selected segments are cited below:

When I go from hence let this be my parting word,
that what I have seen is unsurpassable.
……
In this playhouse of infinite forms I have had
my play and here have I caught sight of him that is
formless.
My whole body and my limbs have thrilled
with his touch who is beyond touch; and if the end
comes here, let it come - let this be my parting
word. (*Geetanjali*, Song 96)

As one of the theories of Western metaphysics, pantheism has its own significance. A pantheist believes in seeing all things in god and god in all. In the Indian philosophical system, one comes across a similar view in the verses of *Bhagavad Gitā*, such as "He who sees Me everywhere and he who sees all in Me, I am never lost to him, and he is never lost to Me". *Isavasy Upanishad* also explains the same view, "He who sees all the animate in God and sees God in every living thing, can hate none". In Indian philosophical systems, Adi Shankaracharya, the Upanishadic seers and Buddhistic thinkers upheld such views. Western thinker Spinoza held the view that God is the ultimate or universal substance, and without him, nothing can be conceived, and therefore he concluded that God is in the world and the world is in Him. Accordingly, we notice that the key concept that explains pantheism is 'immanence'. They think that God pervades the whole universe in the form of its indwelling spirit, in the sense of vitalising, moulding, sustaining and indwelling power. To substantiate the argument we can trace Wordsworth's oft-quoted poem 'Tintern Abbey' manifesting a pantheistic element in the poem by articulating ubiquitous and omnipresent attributes of that pervasive and indwelling spirit.

Sanskrit language today is considered the foremost computer-friendly language. Going back to *Astādhyāyi* by Pānini (c. 5th century B.C.), we know that it provides us with a systematic analysis of the structure of the Sanskrit language covering its phonological and grammatical aspects. In Linguistic description, it offers us a kind of synthesis of both generative and analytical grammar. American linguist Bloomfield hailed this work as a 'monumental work of human intelligence'. The work is also said to have impacted the linguists in the West, which is affirmed by the remarks, "Panini's formal style of phonological analysis looks ahead 2000 years to Noam Chomsky's approach in the 1960s – and, in fact, Chomsky has acknowledged his tribute to the Indian grammarian" (Trask & Mayblin 5).

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), who is considered the father of modern structural linguistics in Europe, held the position of professor to teach comparative linguistics at the University of Geneva. He held this position for more than twenty years and was a famous 'Sanskritist'. It is commonly held that "Bhartṛhari [b. 450 A.D.] and Saussure are associated with the same branch of study and the one (Saussure) has also read and taught the other's (Bhartṛhari's) conceptions, unknowingly forming the foundation for his own concepts. Bhartṛhari's *upādāna śabda* is actually the primordial signification of Saussure's linguistic unit" (Dwivedi 53). The very idea "Saussure obtains only through the association of the sound image (signifier) and concept (signified) like Bhartṛhari" (*ibid.*). According to Dwivedi, "Bhartṛhari says that *śabdavids* (linguists) identify two *śabdas* in a *upādāna śabda* (which conveys some meaning), one which is known as a *sphota*, is the cause/source of the other one that is *śabda* in the functional sense and is known as *vaikhary*" (53). These constituents are seen as correlated thus: "*sphota* causes *vaikhary* and *vaikhary*, *sphota*, and together they form a *upādāna śabda*", which is a 'two-sided' linguistic unit. The diagram that follows gives a simplified version of resemblances between Bhartṛhari's *sphota* theory and Saussure's sign theory (essentially encasing the similar features):

Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadiya*	**Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics (tr.)***
Sphota	Signifier
Vaikhary	Signified
Upādāna śabda/*vacaka śabda*: a functional or expressive word	Sign: comprises association/sum total of signifier and signified

(after Dwivedi 52-55)

In Indian grammarian tradition Sphotayana, Panini, Patanjali and Bhartṛhari are associated with the *sphota* theory. Some scholars believe that *sphota* theory resembles some extent with modern 'Gestalt psychology'. Gaining insights from their Sanskrit studies, the European Sanskritists broke new ground in descriptive linguistics that led to the growth and development of structuralism providing a new way of looking at language, and how it does relate to the real world, lying outside it.

As in the case of Emerson, the *Upanishads* (c. 800-500 B.C.) were also influential on Schopenhauer. The two great epics *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* are acknowledged as the treasure-house of the Indian cultural heritage, both secular and sacred. They form the copiously cited source books from the fifth century B.C. onwards till date for the saints, poets, dramatists and scholars. The *Mahābhārata*, a vast work of eighteen *parvas*, is nearly eight times longer compared to the Greek masterpieces the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* put together. It is nearly three and a half times bigger than the Bible. *Mahābhārata's* almost one lakh verses are composed in the *śloka* meter. Sanskrit scholars and Indologists all over the world grant that Sanskrit literature in its magnitude is many times larger than Greek and Latin combined. The world's biggest epic, the *Mahābhārata* in its present form generally dates back to a transition period between post-Mauryan to Guptas.

Gone are the days of the British Raj when Winston Churchill had stood against the transfer of power (sovereignty) to the Indians. Churchill had then articulated a boastful apprehension that if India were granted independence, the country would go into the hands of rascals, rogues and freebooters. This prejudice was the vicious outgrowth of the colonial mindset and Western hegemony. Ever since 15th August 1947, the once-advertised myth of the white master race has exploded in the light of India's running for over 75 years as the Sovereign Democratic Republic under the parliamentary system of governance. Need we not proud to be the world's largest and thriving democracy? Moreover, the English, who once ruled over India, has elected Mr. Rishi Sunak (of Indian descent) as the Prime Minister of the U.K.

It would be appropriate to conclude this discussion with Will Durant's remark that "Schopenhauer does not think that Christianity will ever displace Buddhism in the East. . . . Rather, Indian philosophy streams into Europe, and will profoundly alter our knowledge and our thought" (*ibid.*). Moreover, "the influence of the Sanskrit literature will penetrate not less deeply than did the revival of Greek letters in the fifteenth century" (*ibid.*). Western literary and cultural heritage is seen as an amalgamation of three

sources: the Greco-Latin, Judaic, and Christian. These three roots mark the cultural specificity of the Western tradition from that of the Indian tradition. Despite, granting the differences in the two divergent traditions – the Occidental and the Oriental – one may not deny the fact that "the universal human condition that finds expression in all literatures bind them together" (Kapoor, *Preface*). These are but a few of the instances showcasing the anticipatory echoes of Indian cultural heritage on the Western mind and writings.

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