

The Influence of the Bhagwad Gita on the English Romantic Poets Particularly On William Blake

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Abstract: In the beginning of the Romantic Movement with the publication of the lyrical ballads, the joint venture of words worth and Coleridge, the role the Gita in molding the thoughts of these two older romantics cannot be minimized. It was in 1796 when Coleridge, in all likelihood, came across the contents of the Gita for the first time. This is particularly recorded by the eminent John Drew in his book 'India the romantic imagination'

Keywords: Intellectual potential, Western outlook, Hindu mythology, Indian philosophy, Cultural heritage, Romantic Movement.

Date of Submission: 02-07-2019

Date of acceptance: 17-07-2019

Since the time immemorial India has been regarded as the land of great intellectual potential and spiritual depth - the land of great rishis and munis who once upon a time led the whole world with their superb knowledge and strength of character. But this ancient glory of India was eclipsed during the Middle Ages when this was beclouded by the phase of foreigners' invasions and servitude of the foreign rulers - first of the Mughals and then of the Britishers. Being a slave country the foreigners, particularly Europeans looked India with a jaundiced eye - a land deeply submerged into poverty, ignorance, superstitions and orthodox practices of religion. These Europeans looked down India as the land of ghosts, demons, magic and witchcraft. But after the late 18th century and in the beginning of the 19th century. The western outlook to India transformed greatly when the west came in contact with rich treasure of wisdom contained in some Hindu scriptures like Vedas, Upanishads and the Bhagwad Gita. Some of the great European scholars discovered this rare wealth of wisdom through assiduous learning of the Hindu mythology and philosophy. Scholars like Max Muller, Sir Mortem Wheeler, Vincent Smith, A. L. Basham, Sir William Jones, H. H. Wilson and Charles Wilkins etc. This serious ideologist broke the European myth that Indians were incapable of any serious metaphysical insight and spiritual depth.

When this western outlook was revised by few of the esteemed western scholars a new craze was developed in the western European countries for understanding and appreciating Indian philosophy and culture. So the most minds - the intellectual and the poets were particularly came under the influence of rich cultural heritage of India. The most significant event in the context of directing their attention to drink deep the nectar of India's superb conscious knowledge was the translation of the Bhagwad Gita, the Hindu Bible by Charles Wilkins in 1785 under the aegis of the British East India Company at the recommendation of Warren Hastings, the governor general of British India (1774-85) who had felt the need of understanding the spirit of India enshrined in one of its most popular scriptures (the Gita). In fact Hastings believed that it was imperative for any British ruler of India, aspiring to rule effectively and completely over his Indian subjects. This translation of the sacred Gita deeply influenced the thought content of the romantic poets - how and in what manner - that is the theme of our argument in this paper. The subject itself is very wide therefore I shall be treating it in fragments.

Even if we take 1798 as the date of the beginning of the Romantic Movement with the publication of the lyrical ballads, the joint venture of words worth and Coleridge, the role the Gita in molding the thoughts of these two older romantics cannot be minimized. It was in 1796 when Coleridge, in all likelihood, came across the contents of the Gita for the first time. This is particularly recorded by the eminent John Drew in his book 'India the romantic imagination'. This is also evident from some of the earlier poems of Coleridge like "religious musings", "ode on the departing year" and "the Elia harp". These poems are thoroughly pervaded by the vedantic thoughts which can be traced to the Gita which he was reading avidly during the year of their composition. The prime pieces of lyrical ballads namely "Tintern Abbey", is vedantic through and has a perceptible impact of the Gita on many of its passages. It must be noted that the famous friendship between words worth and Coleridge whose knowledge of Hindu scriptures is indisputably borne out by the fact that he

quotes rather long passages from its eleventh chapter in the version Wilkins in his philophsic lecture no. III. But it is neither Wordsworth and Coleridge who is today recognized as the first of the English romantics ;the title is attributed now to William Blake who had emerged as a major poet in the eighties of the 18th century soon after the publication of Wilkins's Gita , and it is an established fact that Blake was one of the most ardent lovers of the Hindu poem which he has read in Wilkins's version .this is confirmed by his drawing of Charles Wilkins's as an Indian Brahmin in the process of translating the gita , this drawing formed item no. X in the poets of ` descriptive catalogue ` which provides an account of the exhibits that had been displayed in an exhibition of the poets own drawings organized in London in 1809 with a view to making mystics like burno , Jacob Boehme, Swedenborg and the author of the gita popular in England .

Of the entire all the romantic poets, Blake is the most independent and original. Though the most extraordinary literary genius of his age, he had practically no influence upon it. He was guided by his own intuition for which all nature was a vast mystical spiritual symbolism. As a child he has visions of God and the angels and under the spells of such transcendental mysticism he saw strange , elves fairies and devils –he had the illusion that he received visits from the souls of the great dead , Virgil, homer , Dante , Milton - ``majestic shadows , gray but luminous `` , he calls them . Naturally a man of such mystical and unworldly temperament , the spiritualistic essence of Hindu philosophy had a great fascination and appeal , therefore , Northrop Frye correctly observes in his study of William Blake entitled `fearful symmetry`

“Blake was among the first of the European idealist able to link his own tradition of thought with the Bhagwad Gita “

This candid remark of Frye is very significant because it highlights the role of the gita in shaping the thoughts of the eldest romantic poets of England who had wielded a very great influence on a very long line of English poets of the romantic era – Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats.

Blake seems to have caught hold of the Sanskrit text in its English translation by Sir Charles Wilkins as soon as it was printed in London by Messer's c nourse in the year 1785. This is clear from the fact that Blake had made a drawing of Wilkins in the process of translating the Indian text. This drawing formed item no. X in the exhibition of the paintings organized by Blake himself in London in the year 1809 – the reference of it had already been made in the aforesaid commentary of Blake in this article. Another authority on Blake , P. Berger , Professor of English language and literature at the university of lycee , in his book entitled ``William Blake ; Poet and Mystic ``where the professor acknowledges in the 13th chapter of Blake philosophical doctrines the similarity between the thoughts of the Bhagwad Gita and those expressed in the poetry of William Blake .3

Blake paid a rich tribute to the sages of ancient India indirectly when he challenged the monopoly of the sacredness the Jewish religion: ``the antiquities of every nation under heaven, are no less sacred than that of the Jews. How other antiquities came to be neglected and disbelieved, while those of Jews are collected and arranged, is an enquiry worthy both of the Antiquarian and the Divine ``. As early as 1783 he had formed a very favorable impression of India which he articulated in his poem entitled “ To the Moses “, a piece in the volume of poems called ``Poetical Sketches ``. I quote the relevant lines:

``Whether on the ides shady brow,
Or in the chambers of the east,
The chambers of the sun, that now
From ancient melody have ceased “

(Stanza 1)

The poet seems to have enamoured of India for the allots that country a very prominent position in plate 31 of the epic `Milton book ii where he sings:

``And all the nations wept in affliction family by family;
Germany wept towards France and Italy: England wept
And trembled towards America: India rose up from his
Golden bed: as one awakened in the night. “

The use of the expression `` golden bed “ in the above quotation in the above underlined line points to Blake's awareness of ancient India's superiority –material, religious, cultural and spiritual. The analogy of an awakened man in the night , used for India , clearly shows Blake's acknowledgement of India's intellectual and spiritual advancement much ahead of the nations of Europe which were only weeping and bewailing and suffering from utter inertia . This is indeed, a very fearless appraisal of India's past glory by the poet whose country was trying to establish its sway in India by denying it it's just priority in the field of ethics, religion and civilization and by painting it as a country of savages, bereft of all moral and civil codes as well as literary and cultural traditions.

Blake seems to have acquired some knowledge of the mythology of India .this is clear from his use of `Brama' (i.e.brahma a member of Hindu trinity, the other two being Shiva and Vishnu) in the song of Los : Africa : Rintrah gave abstract philosophy to Brahma in the east.’

I do not know if Blake was aware of the Vedic concept of 'Rta' which signifies cosmic order but what he says about the imparting of metaphysical knowledge to Brahma by Rintrah is really amazing for Brahma, the originator of all four Vedas must have been instructed by the cosmic order itself if this interpretation is correct, we cannot help marveling at Blake's knowledge of the intellectual and religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent.

Blake's famous doctrine of 'Emanation' is ultimately to be traced to the 'ansha – anshi' relationship that exists, according to the Hindu belief, between God and the soul. The doctrine of 'emanation' purports to state that all things emanate or flow from some supreme principal of which they are partial and inferior copies. Enitharmon, for example, is the emanation of Los. Similarly, Urizen is the emanation of Eternity, having torn himself from it the doctrine in its essential, is foreshadowed in the seventh verse of the 15th chapter of the Gita which runs as follows:

ममैवांशो जीवलोके जीवभूतः सनातनः ।
मनःषष्ठानीन्द्रियाणि प्रकृतिस्थानि कर्षति ॥ 7॥

Wilkins has rendered his prose translation of the above lines as follows:

"It is even a portion of myself that is the animal is the universal spirit of all things. It draweth together the five organs and the mind, which is the sixth, that may obtain a body, and that it may leave it again" 4

In the verse given here Lord Krishna explains to Arjuna that all the embodied Souls are only manifestations of a fraction of his being. Thus, the verse contains the seeds of the emanation doctrine and in all probability it encouraged Blake to formulate his theory and exploited it poetically on a very grand scale.

Allied to the doctrine of emanation in Blake's eloquently proclaimed view that god is Man and exists in us and we in him. Blake may have learnt it from the Sufi saints of the middle east whose views had become available to Europe, specially to German mystic Jacob Boehme whose works in the English translation reverend William Law (published in 1764) were read avidly by our poet. But the theory is basically upanishadic: the formulae such as तत्त्वमसि (tattvamasi) अहं ब्रह्मस्मि (Aham Brahmasmi) शिवोहम् (Shivoham) are the earliest recorded statements of the mystical experiences of the Indian sages. But the Bhagwad Gita 6.29 is the most powerful expression of the view -

सर्वभूतस्थमात्मानं सर्वभूतानि चात्मनि ।
ईक्षते योगयुक्तात्मा सर्वत्र समदर्शनः ॥

Wilkins rendered this verse in the following words:

"The man whose mind is imbued with this devotion, and looketh on all things alike, beholdeth the supreme soul in all things and all things in supreme soul" 5

In the verse here, the word Atma has to be understood as synonym or 'Brahma' or God, the supreme soul; in many Upanishads and most prominently in the 'kathopanishads' 'atman' and 'Brahma' have been regarded as signifying the same thing thus, Blake's assertion that 'god is man and exists in us and we in him' is truly upanishadic and is deeply rooted in the Bhagwad Gita.

There is also a very solid reason to believe that Blake was familiar with the Hindu concept of 'Maya' as enunciated in the Bhagwad Gita in the creation of 'Vala' who in various forms such as 'Great Whore' (माया महाठगनी), 'Cybella' the mother of nature, 'Mary', the mother of Christ, the 'Scarlet Woman' of apocalypse attracts and enchains the spirit of man. In the poem 'Jerusalem', for example albino the symbol of man, feels himself enveloped and dominated by her so much so that he has become:

"The Tabernacle of Vala and her temple,
And not the tabernacle and temple of the most high"

It is 'Vala' who slays humanity by subduing it to the natural processes of all description and preserves its lifeless body by embalming it in moral lawlike 'Maya', 'Vala' is all deceptive and baffling.

Blake is very close to the Hindus so far as this world view is concerned. Philosophically speaking, his attitude to the world is that of a Vedantist, pure and simple. Professor Berger summarizes Blake's attitude as follows:

"For him (i.e. For Blake) even more than any other idealist; the world has no real and independent existence; it is only made of human spirit spontaneously produced, without external cause, subsisting entirely in itself. Nothing exists except the spirit: the actual world is a dream"

In support of his thesis regarding Blake's world view Berger quotes the following passage from the poets' a vision of the last judgment ':

“Mental things alone are real what is called corporal, nobody knows
Of its dwelling place are fallacy and its existence an imposture .what is
the existence, out of mind of thought? Where is it but in the mind of fool? “

Blake's thinking matches the thinking of the Gita expressed in the 16th and the 17th verse of its second chapter:

नासतो विद्यते भावो नाभावो विद्यते सतः ।
उभयोरपि दृष्टोऽन्तस्त्वनयोस्तत्त्वदर्शिभिः ॥ 16॥
अविनाशि तु तद्विद्धि येन सर्वमिदं ततम् ।
विनाशमव्ययस्यास्य न कश्चित्कर्तुमर्हति ॥ 17॥

Wilkins rendered these two verses as follows:

“A thing imaginary hath no existence, whilst that which is true, is a stranger to non
Entity by those who took it into the principles of things, the designs of each is seen. Learn that he by whom all
things were formed is incorruptible, no one is able to effect the destruction of these thing which is inexhaustible
“

Here lord Krishna is enlightening on the insubstantiality of the world represented by the
Body and on ultimate reality and a immortality of the soul . This is well known doctrine of the advait vedant
school of Indian philosophy, summed up in the famous sutra of Shankaracharya: (‘Brahma satyam ,
Jagatmithya’)

Bhagwad Gita is best known for its doctrine of metempsychosis or reincarnation the doctrine is of
Indian origin though other cultures too seem to subscribe to it. In the second chapter of Gita , lord Krishna
expounds it at length to Arjuna with a view to allaying the fears of the latter regarding the deaths of his near and
dear ones in the war ;this the lord does in verses 11-30. Blake, it appears has learnt the doctrine with renewed
interest and vigour from the Indian text, though in all probability he had read of it in the works of kabalist
andgnostics Blake followed this belief from the following verse of Gita :

बहूनि मे व्यतीतानि जन्मानि तव चार्जुन ।
तान्यहं वेद सर्वाणि न त्वं वेत्थ परन्तप ॥ ५ ॥

In this verse Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that the yoga doctrine he had explained to Vivasvan (i.e. The sun) at the
beginning of the creation and the latter in his turn had expounded it to Manu . At this Arjuna becomes aurious as
to how this could be possible; then the lord uttered the above mentioned verse which is rendered as follows by
Wilkins in his translation:

“ Both I and thou have passed many births .mine
are known unto me :but thou knowest not of thine”

Blake shared this Hindu belief of long chain of births and rebirths with the human beings living on
earth. This is quite clear from the following extract from ‘Vala or the four Zoas’ (Night the Eighth)

“(Man) stores his thoughts

As in a store house in his memory. He regulates the forms of all beneath and all above He rises to the sun ,
and to the planets of the night , and to the stars that gild the zodiac , and the stars that sullen stand to north and
the south he touches the remotest pole , and in the centre weeps that the man should labour and sorrow ,and
learnt and forget return and to the dark valley whence he came , and begin his labour a new”

This adverb ‘a new’ at the end of this quotation leave us in doubt regarding the
Idea expressed in it; it is clearly about the cycles of births and deaths – (Hindu's believe them to be 8400000
yonis)

Thus under the light of the above mentioned facts and the text rendered here prove undoubtly that
Blake not only corresponds in the thought but also in the spirit to the contents of the sacred Hindu Bible , the
Gita .of course he might have been greatly indebted to Wilkins translation of it . Like Blake the other romantics
like Coleridge and Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley owe much from the Hindu text that we shall be dealing in
our next chapters.

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IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Dr. Shikha Shukla. " The Influence of the Bhagwad Gita on the English Romantic Poets Particularly On William Blake." IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 24 no. 07, 2019, pp. 73-77.