

CROSS CULTURAL FERTILIZATION OF IDEAS: THE UNIFYING THREAD UNDERLYING WORLD LITERATURES

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ABSTRACT

Ideas migrate to uncharted lands and impregnate different cultures with unforeseen concepts. The huge cultural exchanges that took place over millennia in the infinite flux of time have resulted in a synthesis of ideas, a Spiritus mundi, from which have sprung many classics in world literature. Literature is the perfect window through which one can see, understand and explore the myriad forms of world cultures, traditions, ethos and credos. This paper brings under spotlight a few potential samples of this 'Cross Cultural Fertilization of Ideas', viz, the 'Brihatkatha – Panchatantra – Suka Saptati – Arabian Nights connection, the Greek and Indian consultation, the Indonesian paradigm and the Sufi amalgamation of Hindu and Muslim theological precepts. This study hints at the immense benefits that the exploration of this blending of ideas, concepts and narratives could bestow upon the readers of literature by engendering in them a spirit of oneness of all human understanding through ages.

KEYWORDS: Cultures, Exchange, Fertilization, Literature, Synthesis, Renaissance etc.

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INTRODUCTION

Like the silt which travels a long way and fertilizes far off lands yielding sumptuous crops, ideas also make unimaginably long voyages and enrich the cultures and languages that they come across. While the apparent causes for these gigantic cultural exchanges might be trade and politics, the real carrier of ideas, expressions and concepts is language and literature. Literature is the perfect window through which one can see, understand and explore the myriad forms of world cultures, traditions, ethos and credos. Wells (1986) says that literature, a major carrier of content, is a powerful medium for understanding the world. Literature is also a 'time capsule' by looking into which we can have a wonderful assimilation of the bygone blendings of races, cultures, religions and civilizations for a more mature understanding of humanity's inner evolution down the ages, which is the acute need of the hour.

Hellenistic Glory and the Heterogeneous Harmony

It is a known fact that renaissance meant a rekindling of interest in Greek thought, manners, aesthetics and its civilization in general. But whence did this Greek thought come? Was it of an independent origin as distinct from the other cultures of those times is a question of far-reaching consequences. It was in fact a cross-fertilization of ideas, belief systems and various ethnic traits that have culminated in the flashpoint which we call the Greek civilization. Will Durant illustrates this:

"Who were the ancient Greeks, and whence did they come?" They come from all directions: from western Asia, from the islands of the Aegean Sea, from Crete, Egypt, and the Balkans, some even from "Scythia"-

i.e., southern Russia. They pastured flocks, tilled the earth, traded, built villages and towns, fought wars, and submitted to chieftains or kings like Agamemnon of Mycenae and Codrus of Athens.” (Durant 2001, p .67)

This heterogeneous blending of races and their traces has projected, over a time, a self complete civilization with a Hellenistic identity of its own. While the latter part is obvious to the world, the former part remains obscure giving an impression that the Greek civilization is single unit, a picture of unity and originality. Durant portrays more historical details pertaining to this mystic blend of diverse elements at work behind the glory of Greeks.

“The Mycenaeans probably derived their civilization from Crete and Egypt, while the settlements of eastern Greece seem to have imported their cultural elements from western Asia and the Aegean isles. The mating of Asiatic and Cretan subtlety and Egyptian refinements with the barbaric vigor of the tribes that had come down into Hellas from the North seems to have set the biological basis of “the glory that was Greece.”” (Durant 2001, p.67)

Now, we come to the unmistakable Indian contribution to a few principle tenets which characterized the Greek thought and sciences. We know from history that Pythagoras of Greece who lived in 6th century B.C was the giver of geometry to the western civilization. W.B.Yeats, the celebrated Nobel-laureate poet of 20th century, proclaims in one of his poems, “Measurement began our might”. This proud assertion of the Western identity loses its solid ground when the great exchange that happened in the past which gave geometry to the west is made known. Durant exposes the link. Pythagoras “was born on the Aegean island of Samos about 580 B.C. and travelled inquisitively in Gaul, Egypt, the Near East, and India. He never recovered from India: he accepted the theory of Karma - retributive rebirth...” (Durant 2001, p.70).The very word ‘geometry’ bears testimony to its Indian connection as the Sanskrit equivalent of it ‘Jyamiti’ or ‘Jyamatra’ reveals this beyond any doubt. ‘Miti’ or ‘Matra’ became ‘Metra’ in Greek and finally found its way into the English ‘Meter’.

The Brihatkatha-Panchatantra-Suka Sapthati and the Arabian Nights Circuit: The Oriental Splendour

The entire world knows about the supremely reputed ‘Arabian Nights’ which are actually ‘Tales from 1001 Arabian Nights’. It is accepted by scholars and researchers across the globe that ‘Arabian Nights’, a collection of wonderful stories from the middle east, India and a few other Asian countries, rose from the ‘mummy wheat’ of the basic stock of ‘Brihatkatha’ which in turn influenced the ‘Panchatantra’. This extremely influential work originally belongs to the centuries preceding the Christian era. It was translated from Paisachi original into Pahlavi by the famous physician Burzueh in the 6th century A.D. As the legend had it, he came to know about a great treasure that existed in India and he came to India in search of it under the royal patronage of the Persian king Anosharwan. Panchatantra was translated into Syriac and into Arabic around 570 A.D. The Arabic name ‘Kalilah wa Diniyah’ represents ‘Karataka and Damanaka’ of Panchatantra. This great work was translated into Hebrew, Greek and Latin and all the European languages by the middle of 8th century A.D. This work formed the basis of Aesop’s fables and also the Arabian Nights. It is observed that this work is the source for fables of Law Fontaine as well as Boccaccio’s Decameron. Even Canterbury tales of Chaucer were inspired by this Indian classic.

The Arabian Nights presents a beautiful synthesis of many cultural and linguistic exchanges that have happened in the past. The ‘Sind’ in Sindbad tales is the ‘Sindhu’ of India and Sindbadh, it was found, “was wrecked at the mouth of the Ran of Kachch (Cutch) and was carried in a boat to one of the islands there formed during the rains and where the wild ass (Equus Onager, Khar-gadh, in Pers. Gor-khar) still breeds. This would explain the ‘stallions of the sea’ and we find traces

of the ass blood in the true Kathiawar horse, with his dun colour, barred legs and dorsal stripe.” (Burton 2000, p.393)

One of the characters in Arabian Nights was king Meharjan, whose name was derived from the ‘Hindu Maharaj’. Following is the explanation for the origin of the word.

“Lane (iii.83) would make this a corruption of the Hindu “Maharaj” =great Rajah: but it is the name of the great autumnal fete of the Guebres; a term composed of two good old Persian words “Mihir” (the sun, whence “Mithras”) and “jan” = life. As will presently appear, in the days of the Just King Anushirwan, the Persians possessed Southern Arabia and East Africa south of Cape Guardfui (Jird Hafun). On the other hand, supposing the word to be a corruption of Maharaj, Sindbad may allude to the famous Narsinga kingdom in Mid-south India whose capital was Vijaya-nagar; or to any great Indian Rajah even he of Kachch (Cutch), famous in Moslem story as the Balhara (Ballaba Rais, who founded the Ballabhi era; or the Zamorin of Cameons, the Samdry Rajah of Malabar). For Mahrage, or Mihrage, see Renaudot’s “Two Mohammedan Travellers of the Ninth Century.” In the account of Ceylon by Wolf (English Transl. p.168) it adjoins the “Ilhas de Cavalos” (of wild horses) to which the Dutch merchants sent their brood-mares. Sir W.Jones (Description of Asia, chapt.ii.) makes the Arabian island Soborma or Mahraj = Borneo. (Burton 2000, p.392)

Another striking feature of the Arabian Nights is its beginning. It commences with one Shahriyar, a king of India, who suspects his wife’s fidelity and executes her. He then resolves to take revenge on the entire women folk in his kingdom. With this end in view, he marries a beautiful girl each night and kills her the next morning. Shahrazad, the daughter of his minister comes forward voluntarily and marries the King. She tells him an interesting story every night and avoids telling the climax by postponing it to the next night. This way, she enthrals the king for 1001 nights and finally the king gives up his cruel practice of killing women. This bears a marked resemblance to the plot of the Sanskrit work ‘Suka Sapthati’ of India in which a house wife, whose husband is away on a business, is prevented every night by their pet parrot from breaking her marital fidelity when she tries to go out of the house every night. The parrot holds the woman back for seventy consecutive nights by narrating seventy stories of consequence when at the end of it the housewife’s husband returns and she remains loyal as ever.

One more story which figures in the 1001 tales is more closely connected to the Indian original where in the husband employs a she parrot to keep a vigil on his wife’s morality. In this story, the parrot doesn’t try to stop the wife but witnesses her adulterous escapades and narrates them to her master on his return. Sir Richard F.Burton in his world famous translation of Arabian nights gives the following pertinent observation:

“This parrot-story is world-wide in folk-lore and the belief in metempsychosis, which prevails more or less over the entire East, there lends its probability. The “Book of Sindbad” (see Night dLXXIX. and “The Academy”, sept.20,1884,No.646) converts it into the “Story of the Confectioner, his Wife and the Parrot:” and it is the base of the hindostani text-book, “Tota-Kahani” (Parrot-chat), an abridgement of the Tuti-Namah (Parrot-book) of Nakhshabi (Circ.A.D.1300), a congener of the Sanskrit “Suka-Saptati,” or “Seventy Parrot-stories...”

Thus, this cross-cultural tilt made possible the voyage of the silt of ideas and narratives to distant lands and brought out a wonderful tapestry of composite culture, literature and civilization to remain forever.

The Sufi and the Synthesis

One of the enduring manifestations of cross cultural fertilization is the advent of Sufis. This movement, apparently, started influencing people and society from 14th century onwards though it had its beginnings centuries before

its historical recognition. Sufi philosophy was considered an outcome of the Hindu Vedantic influence on Islam and this movement influenced both Hindus and Muslims at a deeper level of things. It brought in its trail a gallery of saints, poets, scholars and savants over centuries who achieved a synthesis of the core spiritual precepts in both the religions, stripped off the ritualistic and regionalistic attributes. This benefic phenomenon is solely responsible for the creation of a platform of world thought from which have sprung masterpieces in world literature which are universal in their import and which have been accepted by one and all cutting across the cultures, religions and races.

The illuminating interpretation of ‘Omar Khayyam’s The Rubaiyat’ by Sri Sri Paramahansa Yogananda, illustrates Omar’s spiritual goals that have a striking resemblance to the aphorisms of India’s ancient science of Yoga. The aspect of belief in which the followers of a religion seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God is of prime importance in the Sufi way of communion with the Ultimate.

“Robert Arnot writes in the Introduction to The Sufistic Quatrains of Oman Khayyam: “Khayyam’s philosophical and religious opinions were in certain essential points based upon the teachings of the Vedanta. He must have been familiar with the general scope of their philosophy, although attaching himself, as we have seen, to the ranks of the Sufi mystics. In his way he was a beacon light, not only in the history of Sufi mysticism, but in the annals of God-seeking””. (Yogananda 1997, p.xiv)

The Islamic philosopher and poet Muhammed Iqbal (1877-1938) says that “Sufi teachers enumerates four stages of spiritual training through which the soul has to pass if it desires to realize its union or identity with the ultimate source of all things” : 1) Belief in the unseen; 2) Search after the unseen; 3) knowledge of the unseen; 4) Realization. After describing the traditional religious methods, Iqbal goes on to say that “some later Sufi fraternities (e.g., Nashbandi) devised, or rather borrowed from the Indian Vedantist, other means of bringing about this realization. They taught, imitating of Hindu doctrine of Kundalini, that there are six great centers of light of various colors in the body of man.” (Yogananda 1997, p.xiv)

The above lines by Robert give a vivid picture that Persians and Indians of those times, though divided geographically, employed similar methods to achieve spiritual enlightenment. Only the regions are different but not the ideas and this resemblance between two major religions can be known to all only by means of literature as this is the shell of all profound and divine knowledge.

“Ah, my Beloved, fill the cup that clears

TO-DAY of past Regrets and future Fears –

To-morrow? – Why, To-morrow I may be

Myself with Yesterday’s Sev’n Thousand Years”. (Yogananda 1997, p.39)

Spiritual Interpretation

“O my Soul! fill my consciousness with the ambrosia of bliss, flowing from the cask of ecstasy. Naught but divine communion can dispel the haunting memories of past errors and the fear of future wrongs, with their yield of evil consequences.

“I dare not wait to find the all-freeing Cosmic Beloved! Tomorrow I may be with time’s infinite yesterdays. Today with all my devotion I will intoxicate myself with the love of the Beloved. Today I will make Him my own”.

(Yogananda 1997, p.39-40)

Yogananda, the Indian Yogi and mystic, is able to see and bring together the poetic and spiritual insights of Khayyam not because of his learning and scholarship but having experienced the inner truth which is beyond all mental depictions or verbal descriptions.

The Cultural Confluence of India and Indonesia

The world culture is a conglomeration of diverse races. Some convictions connecting to the core beliefs of citizens of a state travel through the long voyages and, over a period of time, exert a strong influence on people belonging to a different region and become part of their credos. The conspicuous similarities between Indian and Indonesian cultures show that the neighbouring country(Indonesia) shares most of India's culture and history. "Visits of merchants and immigrants over centuries, into this region, helped founding of Indianised but indigenous kingdoms that practised the arts, customs and religions of India". (Sivananda Murty 2008, p.1)

"Zaide(Philippine Political and Cultural History, Manila 1957, Vol.I-p.45), an eminent historian of Philippines, establishes the racial affinity between Indians and Filipinos and also their racial qualities like endurance, stoical outlook to life and indifference to pain and misfortune, which are inherited from the Hindus." (Sivananda Murty 2008, p.1). This signifies that the immigrations, visits and voyages taken long ago have resulted in the amalgamation of different cultures and races. A.L.Basham (The wonder That Was India, Fontana Books, 1984, p.487) asserts that the whole of Southeast Asia received most of its culture from India. (p.4, Sivananda Murty 2008). India has a significant amount of influence on Indonesia and they have accepted and adopted various Indian numerals, Indian mythology, culture and religion. The influence of Sanskrit on the most essential proper nouns, names of Indonesia which are part of their regular colloquy shows the deep impact of Indian culture. Sanskrit forms the crux of the Indonesian words given below.

Sanskrit and the Indonesian Lexis

Djakarta (Capital City of Indonesia)

Puri (city)

Pariwisata (Tourism)

Adi Putra (Name of the bus)

Purna Bhakti (Complete devotion)

Malikota (Administrative Building of Djakarta)

Kridagriha (Temple of dance, music and other sports)

Pura (Temple in Balinese)

Garuda (National bird and state symbol)

Putra (Son)

Putri (Daughter)

Bhumiputra (Son of the soil)

Rasa (Taste)

One more fascinating fact is that Muslims can be seen kneeling in prayer before beautifully sculpted Hindu-Buddhist images of the ninth century in Jogjakarta (Yogya Karta) and Surabaya (Sivananda Murty 2008, p.6). This presents a unique picture where the basic cultural ethos remained undisturbed by the later political and religious changes in the Indonesian history. It is obvious that culture of different races undergoes various changes over centuries and people keep adopting new traditions and conventions. If a proper assimilation of the existing culture and the new elements takes place, a peaceful nation ensues and if the opposite happens, there will be conflict, chaos and destruction as we witness today in the world. It is literature that helps readers understand the perceptible changes that have taken place in the process of the progress of world cultures and civilizations. When this information is presented within the structure of a story, the readers will get to explore the similarities, differences, close resemblances and typical features of different community groups living across the world. The literature used should accurately portray the history, customs, values, and language of a particular cultural group (Sims, 1982). The Indonesian sample could be emulated for better understanding and peaceful co-existence of nations today and literature is the key to unlock this great historical amalgamation.

CONCLUSIONS

W.B.Yeats, in his most renowned poem 'The Second Coming', writes "A vast image out of Spiritus Mundi troubles my sight". This term used by the poet describes the collective soul or knowledge of the universe containing the memories of all time and to which everyone has access irrespective of the region, creed or faith. This kind of a common wealth is the greatest outcome of cross cultural fertilization of ideas and spreading this message is an effective cure for many ills of exclusivism that we suffer from today. A correlative reading of history and literature from this standpoint could be one of the prime components of future syllabi, for "A knowledge of history may teach us that civilization is a cooperative product, that nearly all peoples have contributed to it; it is our common heritage and debt; and the civilized soul will reveal itself in treating every man or woman, however lowly as a representative of one of these creative and contributory groups." (Will & Ariel Durant 2010, p.31)

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