

The Effect of Theosophy on Select Literary Works

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Abstract: The term 'Theosophy' is derived from Greek words "Theos" and "Sophia" that refer to the meaning "Divine Wisdom". The concept of Theosophy originated in the US during the later years of 19th century. Its teachings are basically derived from the writings of Helena Blavatsky. She emphasised that it was not particularly a religion. Though, it analyses and adopts the teachings of various religions. The effect of this very idea is frequently observed over the literary creations of all languages, as many a literary works encompass the ideas of God, wisdom, divinity and their synergism in varying shades. This paper attempts to enlighten the influence of theosophical concept on literary works of some eminent writers of English, Hindi and Urdu literatures.

Key Words: Theosophy, English literature, Hindi literature, Urdu literature, Occult, Divine, Religious, Spiritual.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The word 'literature' conveys a clear suggestion of de-limitation. The study of literature is far removed both from the academic preciseness and from the dilettante trifling. A great piece of literature grows forthrightly out of life; in reading it, we are brought into large, close, and invigorating relations with life, and in that fact lies the ultimate explanation of its faculty. The book is born of the brain and heart of its author; he has put himself into its pages; they partake of his life, and are ingrained with his individuality. Literature is an integral record of what men and women have seen in their lives, what they have known of it, what they have contemplated, observed and discerned. There are some facets of life that have the most immediate and abiding interest for all of us that are restored in books. It is thus, fundamentally an expression of life through the medium of language.

Theosophy depicts and explores a search of ties that amalgamate in the universe, the relationships as the foundation of all things. The modern introduction of theosophy to the West was begun by Helena Blavatsky, a Russian woman who claimed herself to be a psychic and shepherded a new method of understanding the deep complexities of the world. Theosophy lay emphasis on the mystical experience. Theosophical writers believed there was divinity within every individual. Helena Blavatsky, one of the greatest believers in theosophy said, "Theosophy is, then, the archaic Wisdom-Religion, the esoteric doctrine once known in every ancient country having claims to civilization." (The Theosophist, October 1879). The strength of theosophy lies in the fact that it is not to be defined.

2. EFFECT OF THEOSOPHY ON ENGLISH LITERATURE:

In literature, theosophical influence has been quite pronounced. Most significant is the Anglo-Irish poet William Butler Yeats, one of the major literary figures of the twentieth century. Yeats described his meeting with Blavatsky in his autobiography and he became one of her private pupils. Yeats became interested in Theosophy in 1884, after reading 'Esoteric Buddhism' by Alfred Percy Sinnett. A copy of the book was sent to him by his aunt, Isabella Varley. Together with his friends, George Russell and Charles Johnston, he established the Dublin Hermetic Society, which would later become the Irish section of the Theosophical Society. According to Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology (EOP), Yeats's tendency towards mysticism was "stimulated" by the religious philosophy of the Theosophical Society. In 1887, Yeats's family moved to London, where he was introduced to Blavatsky by his friend Johnston. In her external appearance, she reminded him of an old Irish peasant woman. He recalled her massive figure, constant cigarette smoking, and unceasing work at her writing table which, he claimed, "she did for twelve hours a day". He respected her "sense of humour, her dislike for formalism, her abstract idealism, and her intense, passionate nature". At the end of 1887, she officially founded the Blavatsky Lodge of the Theosophical Society in London. Yeats entered the Esoteric Section of the Lodge in December 1889. In August 1890, to his great regret, he was expelled from the society for undertaking occult experiments forbidden by the Theosophists. But Yeats's writings are imbued with theosophical and other esoteric themes. Many of his poems can be understood only within the context of the theosophical, kabbalistic and hermetic traditions. In one of his most popular poems, 'The Second Coming', he writes,

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.....
The blood-timed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.....
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.....”

Like Yeats, a member of the Irish Literary Renaissance and an active Theosophist, George William Russell expressed the idea of theosophy in his poetry and prose, especially in ‘The Candle of Vision’. Russell was an Irish writer, editor, critic, poet, and painter. He was a writer on mysticism, and a central figure in the group of devotees of theosophy which met in Dublin for many years. ‘The Candle of Vision’ is a set of transcendent essays on Celtic mysticism, describing Russell’s luminous excursions into the other world, including clairvoyant and prophetic visions, precognition of Gnostic concepts, past-life and astral journeys, and always heightened awareness of the beauty that pervades mundane reality.

James Joyce one of the famous novelists in English Literature used theosophy in his literary works. The dominant themes in his novel were shaped in large measure by theosophy. Joyce’s personal library was well populated with books by occult writers, notably Henry Olcott and Helena Blavatsky, founders of the Theosophical Society in New York in the 1870s. Though Joyce dabbled in occult philosophy in his youth, he eventually became disillusioned with it. As a result, references to theosophy and hermeticism found in Ulysses, are paradoxical. Theosophy encompasses a wide range of views, and, Joyce was particularly intrigued by theosophical beliefs in reincarnation and the cyclical nature of the universe.

T.S.Eliot one of the dominant names in Modern English Literature is greatly influenced by the philosophy of theosophy. His most influential poem, ‘The Wasteland’, is one of the best examples in English literature to show us that poets used esoteric motifs and is symptomatic of the extent to which theosophy permeated literary culture after the turn of the century. Eliot was interested in the occult from the very beginning. The character of Madame Sosostri- who is a famous occultist, the “famous clairvoyante” in the poem, The Wasteland, is mockingly described as “ the wisest woman in Europe/ with a wicked pack of cards.” We further find in Eliot’s Four Quartets, disdainful occultists who “Describe the horoscope, haruspicate or scry,/ Observe disease in signatures, evoke/ Biography from the wrinkles of the palm” (CPP,189). The reading of The WasteLand is enhanced by an empathy towards theosophy, as this mystical psychic movement based in Eastern religion and philosophy swept Western sensibilities in the decades leading up to 1922.

The Belgian symbolist and Nobel Prize winner Maurice Maeterlinck was well known in the field of literature and art in the early part of the twentieth century. His voluminous writings became a genre to be followed by an entire generation of artists in the decade before the World War I. Although his symbolism is of the misty and languorous kind, and at that time popular and talked about, it has clear theosophical affinities.

Henry Miller in his works, ‘The Book in My Life’ discusses several well-known theosophical works . L. Frank Baum was a member of Theosophical society and theosophical ideas are central to his well-known and most widely loved story ‘The Wizard of Oz’.

More recently, the Harry Potter novels of J. K. Rowling are filled with theosophically relevant themes, and at least one clear reference to H. P. Blavatsky as “Cassandra Vablatsky”, the author of a book “The Secret Doctrine” on divination. Many of the themes of these novels, although not identified as from Theosophy are unmistakably in its tradition.

3. EFFECT OF THEOSOPHY ON HINDI LITERATURE:

The use of Theosophy is even more vivid in Hindi literature. Renowned Hindi poet, Sumitra Nandan Pant is his works, ‘स्वर्ण किरण’ uses many a theosophical doctrine to explain the various stages of human life- which culminate in death.

“खो गई स्वर्ण की स्वर्ण-किरण
छू जग-जीवन का अन्धकार
मानस के सूने से तम को
दिशि-पल के स्वप्नों में सँवार!
गुँथ गए अजान तिमिर-प्रकाश

दे-दे जग-जीवन को विकास,
बहु रूप-रंग-रेखाओं में
भर विरह-मिलान का अश्रु-हास!
धुन जग का दुर्गम अन्धकार,
चुन नाम-रूप का अमृत सार,
मैं खोज रहा खोया प्रकाश
सुलझा जीवन के तार-तार!
खो गई स्वर्ग की अमर-किरण
कुसुमित कर जग का अन्धकार,
जाने कब भूल पड़ा निज को
मैं उसको फिर इसको निहार!”

Great poet Kabirdas unfolds the complex elemental thoughts through simple embodiment of poetry;
“तुम्हें जिन जानों गीत है यह निज ब्रह्म विचार
केवल कहि समझाता, आत्म साधन सार रे।।”

Kabir was a saint-poet of mystic devotional stream. As a poet, he was exceptionally magnificent, filled with emotional and human values and guard of dignity. He tried to show the rightful path to misled mankind through his poetic works.

Hrivansh Rai Bachchan's legendary work 'मधुशाला' is treasure of theosophical thoughts over all. He uses 'हाला, प्याला, मधुशाला' as metaphors in his signature work to describe the theosophical influence in every facet of our lives. He describes the beauty of nature and significance of life in rubaii;

“साकी बन आती है प्रातः जब अरुणा ऊषा बाला,
तारक-मणि-मंडित चादर दे मोल धरा लेती हाला,
अगणित कर-किरणों से जिसको पी, खग पागल हो गाते,
प्रति प्रभात में पूर्ण प्रकृति में मुखिरत होती मधुशाला।”

In 'मधुशाला', Bachchan beautifully depicts various stages of human life using the same metaphors. In each case, the relevance of these metaphors changes, and poem goes on with ceaseless eloquence. He describes the childhood in rubaii;

“नहीं जानता कौन, मनुज आया बनकर पीनेवाला,
कौन अपिरिचत उस साकी से, जिसने दूध पिला पाला,
जीवन पाकर मानव पीकर मस्त रहे, इस कारण ही,
जग में आकर सबसे पहले पाई उसने मधुशाला।”

Further, He illustrate the love and joyfulness of youth as;
“सुमुखी तुम्हारा, सुन्दर मुख ही, मुझको कन्चन का प्याला
छलक रही है जिसमें माणिक रूप मधुर मादक हाला,
मैं ही साकी बनता, मैं ही पीने वाला बनता हूँ,
जहाँ कहीं मिल बैठे हम तुम वहीं गयी हो मधुशाला।”

Expressing the final stages of life, Bachchan writes about the reality and inevitability of death in the same poem. He used 'मधुशाला' as a metaphor for death. He writes;

“क्षीण, क्षुद्र, क्षणभंगुर, दुर्बल मानव मिट्टी का प्याला,
भरी हुई है जिसके अंदर कटु-मधु जीवन की हाला,

मृत्यु बनी है निर्दय साकी अपने शत-शत कर फैला,
काल प्रबल है पीनेवाला, संसृति है यह मधुशाला।”

Bachchan do not stop at death, he elucidate that business of world are endless. After one's death, others replace and world keeps on going.

“बड़े बड़े परिवार मिटें यों, एक न हो रोनेवाला,
हो जाएँ सुनसान महल वे, जहाँ थिरकतीं सुरबाला,
राज्य उलट जाएँ, भूपों की भाग्य सुलक्ष्मी सो जाए,
जमे रहेंगे पीनेवाले, जगा करेगी मधुशाला।”

4. EFFECT OF THEOSOPHY ON URDU LITERATURE:

In Urdu 'Adab', the modernist movement started near 1960s. The two most eminent names in this movement are Shamsur Rehman Farooqui and Gopichand Narang. This movement laid more stress on symbolic and other indirect expressions. But theosophical inclinations were already present in works of great urdu poets like Mirza Ghalib and Allama Iqbal.

Ghalib's immortal lines question the presence and relevance of God in human life.

“ना था कुछ तो खुदा था, कुछ ना होता तो खुदा होता,
डुबोया मुझ को होने ने, ना होता मैं तो क्या होता।”

Ghalib further points out in his lines that our love for materialistic things often leads us to make compromises with our values and morals. These compromises with our principles may provide with temporary relief but finally lead us to sorrows and pain. He says;

“हुआ जब गम से यूँ बेहिस तो गम क्या सर के कटने का,
ना होता गर जुदा तन से तो ज़ानों पे धरा होता।”

In another couplet, Ghalib underlines the fact that whole mankind has a sole supreme power, which can be realised after rising above all petty sects and beliefs, and leaving hypocrisy.

“हम मुवह्हिद हैं हमारा केश है तर्क-ए-रूसूम,
मिल्लतें जब मिट गई अजज़ा-ए-ईमाँ हो गई।”

Another venerable urdu poet, Allama Iqbal, in his legendary works 'Shikwa' and 'Jawab-e-Shikwa' introduces a new dimension of poetry through dialogue between God and devotee. He uses many a theosophical doctrine to express his ideas. In 'Shikwa' devotee complains to God about his pathetic condition in the world.

“क्यूँ ज़याँ-कार बनूँ सूद-फ़रामोश रहूँ,
फ़िक्र-ए-फ़र्दा न करूँ महव-ए-गम-ए-दोश रहूँ,
नाले बुलबुल के सुनूँ और हमा-तन गोश रहूँ,
हम-नवा मैं भी कोई गुल हूँ कि खामोश रहूँ,
जुरअत-आमोज़ मिरी ताब-ए-सुखन है मुझ को,
शिकवा अल्लाह से खाकम-ब-दहन है मुझ को।”

Khuswant Singh translated these lines in English.

“Why must I forever lose, forever forgo profit that is my due,
Sunk in the gloom of evening past, no plans for the morrow pursue.
Why must I all attentive be to the nightingale's lament,
Friend, am I as dumb as flower? Must I remain silent?
My theme makes me bold, makes my tongue more eloquent.
Dust be in my mouth, against Allah I make complaint.”

In 'Jawab-e-Shikwa', God replies His devotee explaining that he, himself, is responsible for his poignant state on account of his indolence and dormancy.

“जिन को आता नहीं दुनिया में कोई फ़न, तुम हो
नहीं जिस क़ौम को परवा-ए-नशेमन, तुम हो
बिजलियाँ जिस में हों आसूदा वो ख़िर्मन, तुम हो
बेच खाते हैं जो अस्लाफ़ के मदफ़न, तुम हो।”

He further writes;
“थे तो आबा वो तुम्हारे ही मगर तुम क्या हो
हाथ पर हाथ धरे मुंत्ज़िर-ए-फ़र्दा हो।”

Khushwant Singh translates these lines as;
“The only people in the world of every skill bereft are you.
The only race which cares not how it fouls its nest are you.
Haystacks that within them conceal the lightning’s fire are you.
Who live by selling tombs of their sires are you.”
“Your forefathers indeed they were: tell us who are you we pray?
With idle hands you sit awaiting the dawn of a better day.”

5. CONCLUSIONS:

In the above mentioned examples, the works of some great English, Hindi and Urdu writers are cited. These are some examples of theosophical influences on literature. In fact, theosophical ideas were embedded deeply in literature long back before formal emergence of this concept, such as- poetry of Kabirdas and Mirza Ghalib. Literature, naturally, is a cosmic encyclopaedia of human psyche to transmit the storage of knowledge and experience from generation to generation. It is with theosophy, the strongest tool to inculcate moral and ethical values which are exigent for man’s sound social character. Theosophy and literature heal the aching hearts, soothe the sores of soul and freshen our weary minds. It is the responsibility of the creative writers to create such literature as may regenerate the spiritual values and laws in the erratic, irrational, illogical and slightly aimless society. The creative writers bring about man’s re-awakening to the higher consciousness by their fruitful writings. Thus, they produce such writings so as to combat dogmatism and illogicality present in the society. Through the literary work embedded with theosophy, creative writers create revolutions in the society.

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