

TRADITIONAL VALUES AND MOTIFS IN SOUTH EAST ASIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract: *I have chosen the concepts of self, family, history and law as the guiding theoretical frame for exploring the content of postcolonial South East Asian literature written in English. The question which has guided my reading is how much of the old, pre-colonial traditions are still reflected in the works of contemporary - mainly Indian authors writing in English, and to what extent they conceptualize their work within the framework of eastern literary concepts and traditions. Therefore the article will have a first part introducing the theoretical concepts and the background of Indian and near-Eastern history and traditions, and an applicative part, an analysis of several novels.*

Keywords: *topoi, postcolonial literature, cultural area, Midnight's Children, Shalimar the Clown*

The literature written in English by contemporary authors of Indian origin, living mostly abroad, but also in India, was sometimes styled post-colonial, especially during the 1990-ies (as in the case of Salman Rushdie, for example), but I think that we may now speak of a new generation of writers, in a world that is trying to redefine itself after the post-colonial era, reincorporating traditions in flexible, or shifting identities. Anita Rau Badami, an Indian writer living in Canada and writing in English, captured the essence of the situation: "I think Indian writers have been writing marvellous fiction for many years, but it hasn't been in English, so the West hasn't always heard of it. But a new generation of Indian writers born here or in India, writing confidently in English, has opened new doors to fiction about being Indian anywhere in the world."¹

This so-called Indian English Literature was not free of controversy, as the one created by Salman Rushdie a few years ago, with his affirmation that "India's best writing since independence may have been done in the language of the departed imperialists"².

¹ *Rediff India Abroad*, January 7, 2003, Review of *The Tamarind Mom*, by Sonia Chopra, accessed on April 14 2015, at <http://www.rediff.com/news/2003/jan/06spec.htm>

² in the essay "Damme, this is the Oriental Scene for You!", introducing the 1997 *New Yorker* Special Issue (June 23 and 30) dedicated to Indian fiction in anticipation of the country's 50 year anniversary of independence

And equally controversial was the “colonial” literature related to India, which preceded it. I would only mention two cases, E.M. Forster’s famous *A Passage to India* (1924), and Mircea Eliade’s equally famous, in its own place and time, *Maitreyi* (1933)³ which echo a special relationship of misunderstanding arising between Indians and foreigners – in this case the colonial. Forster’s novel shows not only the prejudices of the British towards the Indians (Ronnie Heaslop, Adela Quested and even Mrs. Moore) but also the Indians’ mistrust that there can be any understanding (and friendship) between people of so different backgrounds (despite Cyril Fielding’s openness to friendship with Aziz, this cannot last because of the latter’s attitude).

On the other hand, Mircea Eliade’s novel shows yet another side of the impossible relationship between East and West. The young student of Indian philosophy, Mircea Eliade (Allan in the novel), falls in love with his Professor’s daughter, Maitreyi, but is thrown out of the house when the famous professor of Indian philosophy, S. Dasgupta finds out.

He will spend the next months in the Himalayas, trying to become a Hindu and to convince Dasgupta that his feelings for Maitreyi go beyond religious boundaries. Professor Dasgupta remains inflexible and the young scholar returns to Romania and converts his impossible love story into a best seller in 1932, upon hearing that the National Culture Publishing House opened a contest for the best debut novel, with a prize of 20,000 lei and free of cost publishing.

However, as scholars like Mircea Eliade, who loved Indian tradition, tried to explain it for the Western world, and as a wave of interest in Buddhism, especially Zen, and Oriental philosophies, swept over Europe and America ever since the Beat generation, I tried to see to what extent this tradition is reflected in the works of contemporary authors and to what extent they conceptualize it in their work.

In this attempt I considered that **area studies** concepts could be relevant for me as I followed the transcendence of geographical boundaries by cultural and religious concepts, in a transdisciplinary attempt.

³:immensely popular in Romania in the 1930-ies, *Maitreyi* was translated into Italian in 1945, German in 1948, French in 1950 as *La nuit Bengali*, and Spanish in 1952. An English version, however, was not commissioned until 1993, when Carcanet Press in England assigned a translation from the French, as *Bengal Nights*.

Anthropologists like Robert Fritz Graebner⁴, or Leo Frobenius defined a concept of cultural area, while American anthropologists like Wissler and Kroeber applied the concept to North America and subdivided it according to ecological zones matching cultural and social traits⁵. Similar zones were delineated in Asia⁶ and today most scholars accept a subdivision into East, South-East, South and Central Asia, without referring to any *kulturkreise* (cultural area) concept.

The division of Asia into East and South Asia has been made, and accepted as such, on the basis of the Chinese state and of the Hindu religion, which give a particular unity to each of the respective areas. Just as with the division of Indian history made by its first Western researchers during the latter half of the 19th century, into a Hindu, Moslem and British period, which is still influential today, it has become accepted to use religion and administration as criteria for defining an area and an age. However, when speaking about South-East Asia things become more controversial, in terms of both spatial and temporal divisions. If we are to apply an “area studies” approach to the traditional cultures of China, India or Japan, we will notice certain similarities between India and Japan in fields like the transmission of knowledge and crafts: *shastra* and *yoga*, *michi* and *za* are similar ways of handing down secret knowledge, within specialized families of artists, astrologers, alchemists and other trades. The concept of class, or caste – the people already living in the Indus Valley, like the Aryans, believed that people were born into a particular social class, or caste - is also an interesting concept to study across cultures.

⁴ Friedrich Graebner (1877-1934), a German ethnologist, was the creator of the term *kulturkreis*, “culture circle”, or cultural complex, developing in successive epochs from a center of origin and becoming diffused over large areas of the world, as for example “the horse-raising peoples” in the primary herding, primitive culture. Together with Wilhelm Schmidt, he was a proponent of a diffusionist theory of culture in the period when anthropologists were seeking an underlying, universal human nature (the psychic unity of mankind sustained by evolutionsits). Graebner and Schmidt, as well as other german diffusionists like Frobenius, believed that a limited number of Kulturkreise developed at different times and in different places and that all cultures, ancient and modern, resulted from the diffusion of cultural complexes—functionally related groups of culture traits— from these cultural centres. Proponents of this school believed that the history of any culture could be reconstructed through the analysis of its culture complexes and the tracing of their origins to one or more of the Kulturkreise. cf. <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Fritz-Graebner>

⁵ Kroeber, A. L. (1947), ‘Culture Groupings in Asia’, in *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 3 (4), p. 322-330

⁶ Karl L. Hutterer, A. Terry Rambo, George Lovelace (eds.), *Cultural Values and Human Ecology in South East Asia*, Michigan Papers on South and South East Asia 27, Ann Arbor: Michigan, University of Michigan, 1985

as well as Cynthia Chou, Vincent Houben. *Southeast Asian Studies: Debates and New Directions*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto, 2006

Divisions of class appear to be equally important in the earliest descriptions of Japan by the Wei historians in 2nd century C.E., as in Vedic literature. And last, but maybe most importantly, the idea of *dharma*, as correct moral conduct, so pervasive in all the stages of Hinduism and developing to a maximum in the Buddhist thought, is strikingly similar to the ethical aspects of Confucianism. As the Buddhist Emperor Ashoka (304-232 BCE) spread the Buddhist faith across his empire, actually across Asia, he explained his faith and moral concepts such as dharma in edicts inscribed on pillars or rocks all over his empire. These edicts were translated into the local languages – like Greek and Aramaic, for example, in a trilingual inscription found in Afghanistan at the middle of the 20-th century. This inscription is very important as it shows that the word *dharma* was translated with a concept of Greek philosophy, *eusebeia*. This word is interpreted by Hellenists to mean “veneration of gods ... a generally reverential attitude toward the orders of life”, and it was even “used for conduct towards relatives, between husband and wife, and even for the conduct of slaves toward their master.” “It is this concept that the Greek speaking officials of [Ashoka] rediscovered in the Indic *dharma*”.⁷

If we are to compare the concept of *dharma* with the Confucian ethical values, it is significant to consider a great Indian epic contemporary with the cristallization of Confucianism in China – the *Ramayana* (attributed to Valmiki, ca. 500 B.C., but probably recorded in writing as late as up to 100 BC). Indian scholars consider that it describes the duties of **relationships**, i.e., the ideal **father**, ideal **servant**, ideal **brother**, **wife** and **king**, and that it explores the **human values** and the concept of **dharma**⁸. It is interesting to note that in China – around the same time *Ramayana* was composed and circulated, Confucius (551-479 BC) synthetized and crystalized previous wisdom into an ethical, moral and political theory that was to influence the whole of S-E Asia for the next 2000 years. His purpose was to define **humanity** (the concept of *ren*, 仁, ‘the quality of being human’), and he discovered that it is acquired through education, but truly refined and created only in relationships – in the relationships that a person develops with **parents**, **brothers**, **wife**, **friends** and last but not least, one’s **sovereign**, the ruler. The importance of Confucius’ doctrine lies in his articulation of the similarity or even *identity* between the **father-child** relationship and the **ruler-ruled** one. The relationship of an individual to his collectivity, or to the world, is like the one between child and parent, and filial piety, the feeling

⁷Hacker, Paul. “Dharma in Hinduism”, in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, (2006) Vol. 34, Issue 5, pp 479–496, p. 480

⁸Dodiya, K. Jaydipsinh, *Critical Perspectives on the Ramayana*, New Delhi, Sarup and Sons, 2001, p. 2, pp. 28-29

of duty and love that any child has for his parent, is essence of humanity. Filial piety is based on **reciprocity**, the child answers the love his parents give him by helping them in his turn when he becomes mature and his parents become dependent on him. The same relationship naturally obtains in society, between the ruler and subject, when the ruler's **benevolence** is answered in turn by his subjects' **loyalty**⁹.

The same relation is valid in Japan: social relations mirror the family ones, observable in contemporary Japan in the big companies, where the boss acts as a father (*oyabun*) to his employees (*kobun*, children). The typically Japanese system of life-time employment and providing familial facilities for the employee was at the basis of Japan's economic boom. While the concept of an autochthonous moral, ethical way existed in Japan, from the oldest times, albeit in a vaguer form, as the *furu michi* of native *kami*, the „old path of virtue”, from before the continental influence. So all these are similarities even between cultures of the different cultural areas of Asia, pointing to an even broader circulation of *topoi* and of ethical/philosophical concepts like *dharma*.

If we study contemporary Indian literature in English looking for traditional Indian elements and symbolism, we find interesting elements in an author like Salman Rushdie. In one of his latest novels, *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), besides a very ambitious political program of commentary on matters like terrorism and the “issue” of the Middle East, which are not in the scope of my research now, Salman Rushdie uses famous *topoi* of the Eastern area and much symbolism from both the Islamic and Hindu tradition, that unfortunately escape the candid Western reader¹⁰. The *topos* that I want to identify here is the story of Anarkali, which the *bhand-pather*¹¹ troupe from the fictitious Pachigam village in the novel perform for the American Ambassador in India, Max Ophuls. The star dancer who performs Anarkali's role crosses her eyes with the Ambassador in the final moment of the play, and in that moment a tragic love story, which will bring the ruin to both the Kashmir village, and all the families involved, is sparked. The story of a Kashmiri Hindu girl, married to a Muslim *bhand-pather* performer, who lets herself seduced and abducted (she sees the event as her unique chance for a better life) by the American Ambassador

⁹ Cheng, Anne, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1997, pp. 51-52

¹⁰ reviews in the major American literary magazines at the time when the novel appeared, which were sometimes quite critical, reveal a total misunderstanding of the novel's depth. Cf. John Updike, “Paradises Lost – Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*”, in *The New Yorker*, September 5, 2005

¹¹ a form of entertainment from North India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan, comprising dance, acting and other musical and physical skills, mostly of a farcical character, transmitted within endogamous Muslim families of folk performers. They traditionally entertained the Mogul rulers or the Nawab dynasty that followed them in the North of India.

may have multiple meanings¹², but what I am concerned to discuss here is the similarity with the legend of Anarkali. A dancer coming from Persia with a caravan, called Anarkali - “the Peach Blossom”, on account of her great beauty, she was supposed to have become the concubine of the great Mogul Emperor Akbar (1542-1605), but to have also attracted the love of his son Selim¹³. The Oedipal conflict suggested by this legend (there are no contemporary citations of the story, neither in *Akbarnama*, nor in *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, Selim’s diary after he became Emperor Jahangir), as historian Abraham Eraly puts it, could be confirmed by Akbar’s involvement with and thwarting of another of his son’s relationships, with Nur Jahan.

Although the story is not documented by any contemporary Mughal sources, it appears in the diary of British trader William Finch, who came to Lahore during 1608 to 1611, working for the East India Company. According to Finch, “Anarkali was one of the wives of Emperor Akbar and the mother of his son Danial Shah. Akbar suspected that Anarkali had incestuous relations with Prince Selim and, on this ground had her buried alive in the wall of Lahore Fort. Having become Emperor Jahangir, Selim had a splendid tomb constructed in memory of his beloved, on the place where she was killed”¹⁴. Later writers such as Noor Ahmed Chishti, in his book *Tehqiqaat-i-Chishtia* (1860), give further details “Anarkali was a beautiful and favourite concubine of Akbar the Great and her real name was Nadira Begum or Sharf-un-Nissa. Akbar’s **inordinate love for her made his other two ladies jealous and hostile**¹⁵ towards Anarkali. Now, some say that Akbar was on a visit to Deccan when Anarkali fell ill and died and the other two concubines committed suicide to avoid the emperor’s wrath. When the emperor came back he ordered to create this grand tomb.”¹⁶

I have underlined the above “inordinate love for her” in order to suggest the similarity with a famous topos of Chinese culture, the unduly love story between Emperor Xuanzong and his concubine Yang Kueifei (719-756). Her story has become a subject for many literary works in China, and is even setting the scene for the most famous Japanese classical

¹² cf. the review by Jason Cowley, “From Here to Kashmir”, in *The Observer, The Guardian*, September 11-th 2005: “Rushdie’s critique is double-edged: the story of Max and Boonyi’s doomed relationship can be read as a study in human vanity, selfishness and aggressive mutual need, but also as a parable of the carelessness of American intervention on the subcontinent. Beware the return of the repressed, he seems to be saying, in often unexpected and violent forms.”

¹³ Abraham Eraly, *Emperors of the Peacock Throne – The saga of the Great Mughals*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 1997, p. 237

¹⁴ (<http://www.dawn.com/news/694833/legend-anarkali-myth-mystery-and-history>)

¹⁵ my underline

¹⁶ (<http://www.dawn.com/news/694833/legend-anarkali-myth-mystery-and-history>)

novel, *Genji Monogatari* (“The Tale of Prince Genji”, c. 1008). The idea of how dangerous is such intense love appears from the very beginning of *Genji Monogatari*: “In a certain reign there was a lady not of the first rank whom the emperor loved more than any of the others. ... His court looked with very great misgiving upon what seemed a reckless infatuation. In China just such an unreasoning passion had been the undoing of an emperor and had spread turmoil through the land.”¹⁷ The son issued from this too great love was Genji, the Shining Prince, and the topos of the incestuous rivalry between father and son will be formulated in Genji’s love for Fujitsubo, the emperor’s new wife who is said to remind him of Genji’s departed mother. The figure of the mother whom Genji never quite knew will be what he will look for in his subsequent marriages and affairs.

Returning to Yang Gueifei’s story and its significance for the Anarkali episode in Salman Rushdie’s novel, we need to stress some details of her legend: she is said to have been “one of the few obese women in Chinese history to have been considered beautiful. She became a concubine to Xuanzong’s son, but the 60-year-old emperor found the girl so desirable that he forced his son to relinquish her.”¹⁸ The sexual tension between father and son exists here just as in the case of Emperor Akbar and his son Selim, but the Oedipal complex is reversed, with the father stealing his son’s mistress. The fact that Yang Gueifei was obese, just as the twentieth century “Anarkali” mistress of the American Ambassador will become during her several years of seclusion as a “secret affair” in New Delhi, or the fact that Akbar’s love for Anarkali was also considered excessive and dangerous, just like the one of the Chinese emperor, allows one to conclude that Salman Rushdie may have been aware of the similarities, establishing such a common *topos* of the dangerous Oedipal love triangle, and of the perils of too much love in Asian culture.

If we are to focus on the use of traditional Indian symbolism in contemporary novels, I would like to point out the use of the ***Ravana*** figure in *Midnight’s Children* (1981), the sweeping chronicle of Indian history that brought its author unanimous literary appreciation, winning Booker Prize in same year in which it was published. The novel traces the story of a Moslem family from the Kashmir valley, who move to Agra, then, to New Delhi and finally Bombay, in tune with the movements of Indian history. In New Delhi, before 1947, the Sinai family lives in a Muslim neighborhood, and has some profitable enterprises. But the anti-Muslim gang calling themselves the *Ravana firebugs* sets fire to Muslim-owned factories, shops, or asks for protection money in order to spare them. In

¹⁷ *The Tale of Genji*, tr. Edward G. Seidensticker, vol. 1, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1983, p. 3

¹⁸ *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, accessed at <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Yang-Guifei>, May 20 2015

New Delhi Muslims are called “the Jews of Asia”, and the slogan is “No Partition, or else Perdition!” meaning the opposition against the partition between India and Pakistan that was to accompany India’s independence in 1947. After the family’s factory is set on fire due to the accidental loss of protection money in the deserted Delhi fort, at the hands of monkeys the decision to move on to Bombay is taken. So, the book’s sixth chapter, *Many-headed Monsters*, is set under the sign of **Ravana**, the evil king of Lanka who abducts Rama’s wife in the *Ramayana*, a demon with ten heads, a ruler of the land of *rakshasas*, demons that share Vedic origins and the territories of Sri Lanka with other creatures like *nagas*, *yakkhas* and *devas*¹⁹. As an embodiment of evil, the *ravana* are a fitting symbol for the period of the Partition of British India in August 1947, which resulted, beside the good outcome of creating two independent nations, India and Pakistan, in one of the greatest forced migrations in history. Some 12.5 million people were displaced from their ancestral homes and fled across the newly delineated borders depending upon their faiths. “Hindus and Sikhs exited from lands demarcated as “Muslim” Pakistan into the “new” India, while Muslims departed Hindu-dominated India into the new state called Pakistan (West and East). ... up to 1 million people (perhaps many more) died; while untold numbers of women suffered a fate worse than death -- they were raped, sometimes tortured, gang-raped and murdered. Indeed, the Partition of India and Pakistan, a decision made by lawmakers far from the front-lines, unleashed an episode of brutal depravity that might be unmatched in recent history. These atrocities primarily occurred in Punjab and Bengal and involved venal criminality on the part of all parties concerned: Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.”²⁰

Both Rushdie novels – *Midnight’s Children* and *Shalimar the Clown* - are extremely rich in cultural references, weaving a baroque network of symbols, from which I have only chosen two, which impressed me due to their associations to classical Sanskrit, Chinese and even Japanese literature. Salman Rushdie is an author who has impressed audiences with his involvement in current world issues such as terrorism, or with human and cultural aspects of postcolonialism that tend to be overlooked (especially religious ones), but his works have a wealth of erudition and symbolism that still need to be explored, and this paper is only a modest contribution in this direction.

¹⁹ according to the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. *Nagas* were serpent like deities, *yakkhas* were a kind of fairies or genii of the land and *devas* were godlike creatures.

²⁰ Palash Gosh, “Partition of India and Pakistan, the Rape of Women on an Epic, Historic Scale”, in *International Business Time*, August 16-th 2013

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