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Literature as the Route of Transmission of Buddhism into Britain

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Abstract

Literary transmission of a subject has been a perennial phenomenon through the mode of literature because literary works are not produced in vacuum. Authors transpire the spirit of an age by creative amalgamation of their external influences, which they absorb from their social consciousness, and their internal influences to create fictional literary images, style, themes and motifs for a work. In this manner, an author's influence from a preceding text or social consciousness exports to the successive literary works incessantly across the temporal and spatial dimensions. To determine literature as an intermediary or channel of transmission of Buddhism into Britain, the methodology of Influence Study is applied to delineate the spread of Buddhism through literary works. The investigation aims to identify the junctures of contact between an influence or an author and an influencer or the Buddhist source of information. Since multitude of impressions are involved in the ongoing process of literary production, the Influence Study utilizes Auguste Comte's philosophy of positivism and factual account of biographical details to verify the junctures of direct or indirect contact of the author with the Buddhist source of information via literary or extra-literary medium to map the route of interrelationships. For conclusive results, the tools of close reading and interpretive analysis are implemented by juxtaposing the texts imbibing the stylized Buddhist ideology with the teachings of Buddhism. In this connection, a few British texts such as Edwin Arnold's *the Light of Asia*, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, and Aldous Huxley's *Island* are scrutinized to investigate the literary transmission of Buddhism into Britain.

Keywords: Buddhism, Influence Study, Positivism, Literary Transmission

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Buddhism is an Eastern religion founded by the prince of Shakyan clan, Siddhartha Gautama in India around twenty-five hundred years ago. After being moved by *dukkha* (suffering), he renounced worldly pleasures and went into a forest in search of answers to the existing worldly sufferings. After six years of deep meditation, he experienced enlightenment under a Bodhi tree in Gaya at the age of thirty-five. Since then, he has been known as the “awakened one” or “the Buddha”.

The Buddha gave his first sermon in a deer park at Isipatana near Varanasito the five monks, who had earlier abandoned him for not observing severe penance, which to them for the only way to attain enlightenment. The Buddha went on to live for fifty years from that point, and the shedding of his mortal body at the age of eighty-five is understood by his followers as *parinirvana*. In this period, the Buddha kept on disseminating his teachings of the Four Noble Truths to acquire *nirvana* through the Eight-fold path of virtues.

The teachings and the methods of the Buddha were revolutionary even in those times. He transcended the barriers of class, creed and gender by treating every one alike in the dissemination of his teachings. The teachings focused on the evolution of mind by following the eight-fold noble path to acquire enlightenment. And above all, many a times the Buddha told his followers to believe in his teachings only by first experimenting on them before implementing in their lives. His famous dictum proclaims: “Be your own lamp.” It was this impartial methods and ways that even many centuries later, philosopher Richard Gombrich considered the Buddha to be “one of the most brilliant and original thinkers of all time, [whose] . . . ideas should form part of the education of every child, world over, and that this would help to make the world a more civilized place, both gentler and more intelligent” (1). Thus, the Buddha’s spiritual teachings have remained pertinent in invoking individuals to take an inward journey across the temporal and spatial dimensions.

Since the birth of Buddhism, the story of the charismatic founder and his teachings had become so much so popular that the Buddhist teachings spread from India to other parts in northern, central, eastern Asia and then from Asia to the West. However, in the country of its origin, India, the Brahmanical authority attempted to blur the boundaries between Buddhism and Hinduism by considering the Buddha as the ninth avatar of Lord Vishnu. Gradually, the patronage to Buddhist monks declined because of the emergence of Hindu traditions like *Vaishnavites* and *Shaivites* between fourth and seventh centuries. Moreover,

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after the invasions of Turks in the sixth century and the Islamic countries around the eleventh century, the religion faced a downfall and through these methods of erosion, Buddhism was effaced completely from the mainland of India to peripheral existence in the hilly regions by the twelfth century.

But with the rise of imperialistic western nations around the eighteenth century, Buddhism was discovered being practiced as the most followed religion of the East. Having estimated a huge population of Buddhist devotees in the East, Westerners became curious. However, initially, westerners were unable to identify the common thread of religion among the followers of the Asiatic nations because the central figure of the buddha was known by different names such as *Godamain* Ceylon present day Sri Lanka, in China as “*Fo*,” in Tibet as “*Boud*,” in Japan as “*Xaca*” (*Sakya*). But to deepen their imperial roots for economic growth in the East, the imperial nations’ interest heightened in the socio-political conditions of the colonized and so the western scholars were encouraged to gain information about the culture of the colonized. This led to what the historian Raymond Schwab has referred to as “the Oriental renaissance” (161) initiated in the West. In fact, the exploration of Buddhist scriptures became the heart of the matter for Oriental scholars and thinkers. The translations of the ancient Buddhist texts began for compilation whether available in the language of Pali or Sanskrit. The critic Philip C. Almond informs, the Victorians worked towards “the creation of Buddhism” (4) in Britain from 1820s onwards. Hence the restructuring of Buddhism began in the Oriental libraries from its textual past.

Also, the archaeological expeditions even added information to the bulk of Buddhist knowledge. The eleven stone bas reliefs depicting the life of the story of the Buddha were excavated by colonel, Colin Mackenzie of East India Company at the ancient Buddhist site of Amaravati in 1797. Hence, the Buddhist information that laid in diffused form in the sub conscious state of the masses started being fed by textual and non-textual Buddhist resources.

By the nineteenth century, the Victorian society was steeped in Buddhism because the Buddhist information was pouring in Britain through several channels. It included not only the scholars but also travelers, soldiers and traders that were bringing back the information about the widely practiced religion of the East. In the light of such events, several ambivalent types of Buddhist texts were produced that included even by the missionaries that undermined Buddhist philosophy in favor of Christianity. However, the first sympathetic text

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that came into existence was Edward Upham's *The History and Doctrine of Buddhism* (1829). Several European scholars and pioneers of textual compilation and translation took to the production of Buddhist texts such as— Brian Houghton Hodgson, Alexander Csoma de Körös, Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat, Henry and James Princep, and Philippe Edouard Foucaux. Among them, Eugène Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien* (1844) work was considered as the most influential then. Burnouf draws his understanding from the Sanskrit manuscript of Hodgson. And with the publication of Burnouf's work, 'Buddhology' emerged in Britain as a primary occupation of a new field of study of Comparative Religion that until then was ignored in Britain.

Moreover, the development in the field of science and knowledge was at its peak due to inter-cultural exchange of information. During this period, the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1857) shook the Victorians from their deep-rooted belief in Christian doctrines. To seek religious clarity, the Britons started looking for an alternative spiritual method. In the meanwhile, the scholars were drawing parallel understanding between the Buddha's concept of *Dhamma* and the survival of the fittest theory. By comparing the two fundamentals, the scholars rationalized the Buddha's *dhamma* as the karmic evolution of a being through the cycle of birth and rebirth in order to achieve salvation than the natural selection of a being through nature. The Buddhist concepts provided a logical understanding and methods to tackle the mundane and troubles of mankind through spiritual means. However, the concept of empty mindedness received a mixed response and was challenged for possessing nihilistic properties by some scholars. The subject remained a debatable Victorian issue for quite a sometime. But soon afterwards, the concept was realized as the liberation of inner self to acquire mental state of compassion, love and tolerance than delving into self-ego and self-pride. Plus, the production of religious texts and critical works under the lens of Comparative Religion didn't destabilize the status quo of other religions in favor of Christianity. Thus, the steady flow of Buddhist philosophy was maintained and it became deeply rooted with the establishment of Pali text society in 1881. Subsequently, the watershed moment that marked the inexorable inter faith dialogue between Buddhism and British Consciousness was with the establishment of the Buddhist Society in Great Britain and Ireland in 1907. Later, in 1961, the 14th Dalai Lama became the patron of the Society, the first organization in the West to be so honoured.

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The journey of Buddhism into Britain was sped up through literature too because a literary work is a creative expression of an author that reflects the socio-cultural milieu of an era. A work bears the spirit of that particular age because it isn't produced in vacuum. And while creating a work an author transpires the impressions of its surroundings into their literary work. He/she recalls on the stored mental images to create fictional characters and situations. By amalgamating those impressions with their creative skills, a literary work is produced carrying the impressions of the time. In this way, a literary work also provides the understanding of human emotions and feelings that can neither be perceived from historical nor from political accounts of an event.

To map the route of transmission of an influence through the mode of literature, the methodology and principles of the Influence Study were initially established by Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett in his work *Comparative Literature* in 1886 by identifying the modes of transmission of literary works on a wider geographical scale, thereby generating the “relativity of literature” from its synthesis to its consumption (51). Later, another school of comparison developed by the French critics emphasized upon, what the Slovenian scholar Janko Kos delineated as the “sources of literary works, reactions and mediators, the fate of the works and the success of the authors, their influence” (qtd. in Steven Totosky 112). Plus, the method that they employed states Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek was, “comparing” (112). Thus, the method employed by French Scholars helped in identifying the influencer or the source of information, the influence or the receiver of the influence and the intermediaries that transmit the flow of influence. Since multitudes of impressions are involved in the ongoing process of literary production, the French critics employed Auguste Comte's philosophy of positivism and factual account of biographical details that aid in verifying the intersecting points of contact between the author and influencers, which can either be literary or extra literary sources. The French School of Comparison foregrounded influence as opposed to the inherent literariness of any work; as the Critic A. Owen. Aldridge concedes that the study helps in, “Understanding a source shows the process of composition and illuminates the mind of author” (144). Thus, the work of a comparatist infuses multiplicity of layers and textures in any work, whereby the reading experience is enriched and enhanced. Today, myriad genres have emerged and writers are more than often seen against the socio-political backdrop, especially because with the evolution of fantasy literature, the motifs have

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become very individualized. Nevertheless, as the critic Joseph Thomas Shaw states, “The study of literary indebtedness has never given up its place as an important branch of literary research within particular literatures, and especially in comparative literature” (214). This is due to the already mentioned fact that writers influence and are influenced by each other. Thus, the investigation under taken the lens of Influence study will aid in mapping the factors for the percolation of the Buddhist information by the British authors.

In relation to the appearance of Buddhist literary texts in Britain, the publication of Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* marked the historic literary success by retelling the life story of the Buddha and its teachings. In fact, the poem seems to be the culmination of the social cultural conditions of that age. However, scholar and critic, T. W. Rhys Davids opines that the theme was, “too familiar to the reading public for it to become popular” (qtd. in Franklin 945), yet the record sale of the book was in millions on both the sides of the Atlantic. Within six year of its publication, the work was published in thirty editions in England and over eighty editions in America. Despite of the fact that Arnold’s book length poem was a repetition to the prior work of Richard Phillips’ *The Story of Gautama Buddha and its Creed: An Epic* (1871) and to the following work of Sydney Arthur Alexander’s, *Sakya-Muni: The Story of Buddha* (1887), its popularity was unmatched. Seemingly, Arnold in comparison to the contemporary authors was able to transplant the story of the Buddha in British soil successfully.

For Arnold to absorb Buddhism sympathetically, the ground was paved long before. And it is a combination of both external and internal influences on Arnold. As his biographer, Brooks Wright, opines that, “Arnold was looking for a religion more universal and embracing than Christian orthodoxy” (15). Thus, he was in search of egalitarian principles than conservative religious doctrines. Moreover, the turn of events in 1857 took him to India, Poona, to work as Principal of Deccan college where he came in contact with the Eastern themes. And subsequently, he engaged in the literary production of quantum of works embedding Eastern religious ethics and beliefs such as *Hitopadesha* (1861) among others. Therefore, his *magnum opus* on the life of the Buddha seems to be the culmination of his external and internal influences.

And though the subject matter was shared, Arnold’s success lies in appropriating the subject according to the taste of Britons due to his influences. He had portrayed the Buddha

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as a reformer on the protestant model who professed adopting the egalitarian principles of religion rather than getting burdened by the religious orthodoxy bound with religious rites and rituals through the lines in the poem, “Pity and need/ Make all flesh kin. There is no cast in the blood” (Arnold *TLOA* refer to Book 6, 131). In this manner, Arnold answers Victorians to follow humanitarian ideals rather than being caught in the claws of avarice, desires and popish authority. He writes, “. . . but who is wise Tears from his soul this *Trishna*, feeds his sense/ No longer on false shows, files his firm mind/ To seek not, strive not, wrong not” (Arnold *TLOA* refer to Book 7, 154). Hence, in this way Arnold guides the readers to become active in performing virtuous actions and building of a “Self” free from all desires. He also clarifies the vexing concept of empty mindedness by not being passive, but by performing virtuous actions so as to accumulate for oneself good *karma*. He writes: “The Karma— all that total of a soul/ Which is the things it did, the thoughts it had/ The “Self” it wove—with woof of viewless time” (Arnold *TLOA* refer to Book 7, 154). Undoubtedly through a literary text, Arnold transmits a spiritual therapeutic program to the West that would aid in restoring the fallen spirits of the Westerners. The idea was to encourage the people to pull out from the crisis of faith and take refuge in the Buddha to train and to discipline themselves by following the eight-fold path.

Having received positive reception, the poem succeeded in fascinating the masses so much so that in subsequent years Buddhist practices and ethics got integrated with the social consciousness of the Britons. After reading the poem in 1890, Charles Bennet was so deeply influenced that he became a Buddhist monk, Ananda Metteyya. Simultaneously, the positive impact of the poem inspired the young creative minds too such as Rudyard Kipling. Having influenced by Arnold’s poem in his school days at United Services College, Kipling, in his later work *Kim* (1901), transmits the similar tone of Arnold’s message captured in poetic lines, “Pity and need/ Make all flesh kin. There is no cast in the blood” (Arnold *TLOA* refer to Book 6, 131), by reverberating an incident in *Kim* through the mouth of the Buddhist monk, the Lama, “Low Caste I did not say, for how can that be which is not” (Kipling *Kim* 43). Hence, the Buddhist information was being carried from a preceding work into succeeding work and it becomes needless to say that literature became one of the earliest vehicles for transmission of Buddhism in Britain.

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Keeping in view Kipling's *Kim*, the realistic description of the Buddhist monk, *Teshoo Lama*, in accordance to his costume, his monastery's geographical location and his observance of Buddhist ethics reflect Kipling's contact with Buddhism: the description of the lama corresponded with that of the Red Hat Tibetan Buddhist monks. For this realistic portrayal, Kipling owes to his father John Lockwood Kipling. Peter Hopkirk in his book, *Quest for Kim* (2012), informs that in 1906, Lockwood wrote a letter to the great Central Asian explorer Sir Aurel Stein enquiring of him whether or not Stein recognized the Lama that appeared in his son's *Kim*. This simple query becomes pertinent because both Lockwood and Stein had encountered a Red Hat Tibetan monk at school and at the museum where Kipling's father worked. It is evident that the creation of *Kim* includes recalling his external impressions during the creative process, and transforming those subconscious images into fictional form. Thus, the percolation of Buddhist ethics in Kipling's *Kim* was due to the external influences of Buddhism on Kipling (41-42). Moreover, the visibility of Buddhist imagery and motifs in *Kim* reiterates the fact that Buddhism had integrated well with the social consciousness of Britain and therefore it had penetrated into literary works. Further, Kipling's influences led to the creation of a Buddhist monk in *Kim*. Thus, it can be asserted, literary works have become the perennial carriers of Buddhist imagery, motifs and themes by transcending the temporal and spatial dimensions.

Even though Kipling intermingles the eastern spiritual ideals with the materialistic goals of *Kim*, *Kim* became a literary success. The positive reception in Britain shows that the Britons were aware and fascinated with the Buddhist ethics. And by creating a Tibetan monk, Kipling also indicates that the information regarding Tibet as the highest plateau of spiritual centre was also present in Britain.

This recurring motif of the legacy of Tibet as a remote place where peace and harmony prevail soon appears in H. Rider Haggard's *Ayesha: The Return of She* (1905) through the mouth of a Tibetan monk. For creating the image of Tibet as the land inhabited by mahatmas in Britain's social consciousness, Madam Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophical society, owes credit, for she through her work *Secret Doctrines* (1888) mediated a lot of information of Tibetan Buddhism. Alongside, from many centuries earlier, the ancient texts of Jesuits missionaries and the translations of primary texts on Tibetan Buddhism had been transmitting information into the West such as Jesuit Antonio de

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Andrade's *the Novo Descubrimto de Grao Catayooou Dos Regos de Tibet* (1626). However, Jesuits missionaries had taken the precarious task of exploring the hinterlands of Tibet with an aim to spread their religion. But none of the European countries had been successful in exercising their control on Tibet. As a result, Tibet was exoticized as a spiritual land of wisdom far in the East. And the Tibetan information was exoticized and mystery enveloped the accounts.

Besides, the early twentieth century was known as the age of exploration. The secondary literature produced by mountaineers and explorers aided in reiterating the image of Tibet as the paradisiacal land of Mahatmas. During expeditions, they came in contact with Tibetan Lamas living in those regions. Having influenced by their hospitable and kind behaviour, these explorers also included the amicable conversations with the Buddhist lamas along with their feats in their texts. Often, the subject of Tibet was handled by several intermediaries in terms of, "remoteness, secrecy and wisdom" (qtd. in Normand 46). And simultaneously, Britain was flooded with a lot of information on Tibetan Buddhism and lamaist culture through the essays of Joseph Rock's "Seeking the Mountains of Mystery: An Expedition on the China-Tibet Frontier to the Unexplored Amnyi Machen range, One of Whole Peaks Rivals Everest" (1930), Dottore Giuseppe Tucci's *Indo-Tibetica* (1932), J. B. L. Noel's *Through Tibet to Everest* (1927) among many others.

Simultaneously, the developments in scientific and technological field were at their peak. But the advent of the twentieth century, with its two World Wars and economic depression overturned the social conditions of Britain. Western angst and ennui ran rife among Britons, but in parallel the existence of Tibet as a spiritual land was recognized too. In the backdrop of this ideological cluster, Hilton wrote *Lost Horizon* (1933). He provided this information in a radio show of NBC in 1950. He states, "The lowest point had we then known it of the depression. And already dark with the threat of war come about that time.... It was in this mood that I wrote *Lost Horizon*". (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7PV6gkkbS0>). However, being distinct from contemporary writers of his age whether H.G. Wells or Jules Verne whose works awe at the scientific marvels, Hilton invented a spiritual sanctuary, Shangri-La, hidden in Tibet where peace and harmony prevailed in the lapse of nature, which was free from modern world's secular issues and cries.

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Having viewed agony and misery all around, Hilton was aware of the western psychological fantasy to get respite from existential crisis. To devise a solution for the then prevailing social turmoil, he devised a remedial formula immersed in Buddhist principles, together with a tinge of other eastern philosophies of Confucianism and Taoism. Through a fictional incident, Hilton informs the readers when High lama informs Hugh Conway that cessation of desires, “is the doctrine of Shangri-La” (60). Shangri-La’s doctrine alludes to the teachings of the Buddha’s the Four Noble Truths. Likewise, many fictional motifs evoke the understanding of Buddhist meditation practices to train the mind in order to evolve from cravings, desires, and excessive efforts for materialistic gains, which were the gravest concerns of the age. Because of which, the masses were devoid of spiritual enlightenment and were suffering from anxiety and fear of looming catastrophe.

In the backdrop of these conditions, Hilton’s *Lost Horizon* became the best-seller of its time. The concept of Shangri-La caught popularity like a wildfire in both the eastern and the Western World. Even President of the U.S.A. Franklin, D. Roosevelt named his mountain retreat in Maryland as Shangri-La. The positive reception of the novel reflects the desire for people to live in place such as Shangri-La, which had its root in the Buddhist ethics, to feel the bliss and joy of life. In this way, Hilton’s Shangri-La is symbolic of mental peace and harmony that can be created by efforts of every individual in their mind. For that he suggests that the people create Buddha fields in their mind by following the Buddhist ethics of cessation of desires. Consequently, the masses will create their own heaven psychologically and experience eternal bliss all the time. He portrayed this by depicting the mental stage of Conway while staying in Shangri-La and after the loss of Shangri-La. Hence it becomes needless to say that the literary images such as Shangri-La have immortalised Buddhist doctrines by providing an alternative therapy for existing issues.

By 1960s, despite the glamorous and comfortable life provided by scientific inventions, the Britons had become disillusioned by the glory of the development made by mankind. Because a huge population was struck by psychological problems and health concerns due to issues such as pollution, overpopulation and power struggle among nations. The masses were again caught in the web of the life because the materialistic pursuits bereft of spiritual strength were demeaning the existence of human as a living being. The Westerners were repeatedly getting caught in the rat race for materialistic gains. In the

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backdrop of these conditions, Aldous Huxley brought in the relevance of Buddhism through his work, *Island* (1962) in which he creates a utopian island Pala, “an imaginary island between Ceylon and Sumatra, at a meeting place of Indian and Chinese influence” (qtd in Watt 149). Having realised the impossible existence of the twentieth-generation people without the comforts of scientific and technological objects, Huxley syncretizes a solution by combining the scientific ideals and the spiritual ideals, which were rooted in Buddhism. He aligns with the Buddhist ethics in founding the governing principles of Pala because of the influence of Buddhism on him. In the beginning of the novel, he says that of all the gods he like the, “Compassionate one” (Huxley *Island*18). His inclination for Buddhism was a result of his search for higher meaning in life. Before inventing Pala, which is embedded with Buddhist ethics, Hilton had surveyed several mystical and spiritual philosophies and his work *Perennial Philosophy* (1945) is an interpretation of diverse inter-religious faith and beliefs. However, when his internal search coincided with the Buddhist ethics, he surrenders to its belief and interweaves the plot of *Island* with the Buddhist images and teachings stored in his subconscious. In *Island* repeatedly, he reinstated the Buddhist principles of “*Karuna*” and “*Here and Now*” (Huxley *Island* 11, 20) explicitly. Again, in this manner the work became a powerful medium in spreading the Buddhist message among the masses torn between the conflict of materialistic and scientific growth. Huxley in order to provide a remedy to the masses from the modern secular issues of the age, he urges to build society on the model of Pala that is a combination of Eastern and Western ideals. Till date it is observed that the teachings of Buddhism have been enlightening and penetrating the different cultural borders through literary texts.

At the same time, the Buddhist ethics still hold relevance in this time and era. When the World is not only jolted by its divisive policies due to power struggle but also by unprecedented changes made in the environment because of imbalance created by the excessive exploitation of nature and its natural resources. The Buddhist ethics focus on observing compassion, love and tolerance for sentient beings. To help the sentient beings, the methods guide to train mind to evolve from worldly desires by following the eight-fold path of virtues, the understanding urges to help each other by observing the underlying interconnectedness among humans with humility and love. Again, it is seen that precepts of Buddhism guide to watch our actions by shedding human hubris and by embracing

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humanitarian principles to lead simple life by renouncing excess. Probably, this middle path is a way to sustain for the millions of us existing now. And therefore, these practical Buddhist doctrines are viable and pertinent which have been transcending the cultural borders not only to penetrate the literary texts globally but also to become a world religion. Moreover, this paper does not defy the principles of other religious beliefs rather reveals the pertinence of the Buddhist precepts to observe fulfilment of human ideals by being an embodiment of kindness, compassion and love for all.

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