

Reading Religious Literature and the Legitimacy of Misunderstanding: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Dr. Sanjay Kumar Dutta

Asst. Prof of English

Sushilavati Govt. Women's College,

Rourkela

DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2020.4.6.03

Abstract

Reading religious literature according to one's own cultural and literary experience without accepting the meaning that is being offered yields no fruitful appreciation. The problem is not the individual rather social and historical. The alien readers imagine a question and look for an answer in the text from another culture, and come up with a misreading as a solution to their questions. These acts of misreading and misunderstanding are mechanisms with which literary productions and literary reception can be dialectically and dialogically mediated between different cultural and literary traditions. To misread the 'other' is for many a way of exposing a kind of ideological truth in one's own literary and cultural tradition. This paper tries to throw light on how misunderstanding is the natural result of a cultural dialogue between readers of different cultures who try to attempt to analyse in the light of their own specific place and time in history and at the same time this 'misunderstanding' becomes the only way to understanding particularly in a cross-cultural literary study.

Keywords: Religious Text, Misreading, Misunderstanding, Cultural Dialogue, History

When a Western reader confronts a tradition that is alien to him, he responds to its literature according to his/her beliefs and dispositions. There will be frequent failures in any attempt to respond properly. This is because a tradition that gives meaning to its cultural life will be unintelligible to him. Their socio-cultural system may contradict the very essence of the Eastern conceptions and beliefs. As a matter of fact many of the Westerners have failed to respond to Indian literature wholeheartedly and sensibly because they could never attain that degree of cultural openness which was necessary for them to understand the dynamics of a different culture. Had they understood that the attitude to life, religion, philosophy and moral values meaningfully differs from culture to culture they would have not only realized the necessity of

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelauncher.com

trying to understand the workings of a different culture on its own terms, but also would have taken the pains to understand with empathy before embarking upon a critique of any product of a civilization different from theirs. This would have enabled them to give a meaningful, sensible, and well-considered response. For the response of a people to a particular literature transcends the academic standards of literary criticism and aesthetics; it reflects their system of values, not only with regard to literature, but also with regard to religion as well as to their moral and social attitudes.

Literature is a socially distinct and integral thought-feeling complex, a free expression of differentiated humanity that foregrounds its dimension of depth. It is a product of the political, religious, historical, cultural and linguistic influences of its own milieu. It is a distinct product of a particular civilization, which may share certain characteristics with similarly distinct products of other civilizations but which embodies enough marks of cultural differences that would require an understanding of the various aspects of that distinct culture before one makes any attempt to understand or interpret any of its products. Because the salient features of the Indian episteme pose serious problems for any alien reader to have a sensible and sensitive appreciation and evaluation of it. So, just removing prejudices is not enough. One should be discerning enough and have the will and the ability to understand the sedimented layers of this more than five thousand years old civilization of complex diversity. Without exposure to them, it would indeed be very difficult for someone from other culture to even comprehend them intelligently.

The history of the Indo-European literary contact is fairly long. There were a few texts that had made some impact on the Western mind. Many Westerners have read and appreciated Indian literature as facilitated by their critical intelligence, differential cultural sensitivity and in depth with a broad outlook. The enthusiasm generated by those texts, however genuine and spontaneous, was short lived, keeping in view the magnitude of Indian literature. What dominated the Western mind with respect to Indian literature were certain stereotypes which defied the major norms of Western literature. The real difficulty in the communication between Indian Literature and western readers was possibly, the symbols, images, and metaphors that are conditioned by our own culture and thus are difficult to be understood by the readers of other cultures because of some fundamental cultural gap between cultures. Because it is not possible to overcome someone's own cultural conditioning. Alex Aronson has rightly said:

A poet handles his materials, the experiences which he communicates, in terms of symbols. Not all symbols, however, are of his own creation. He himself is a part of a tradition, which is not only 'literary,' but embraces the whole of his being. The language in which he clothes his experiences is reached with symbols of a part which is foreign to most

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

Westerners, with the exception of scholars, whose interpretation is liable to suffer from a painful lack of imagination. (85)

It is true that cultural influences are inevitable in any kind of work whether the author is conscious of them or not. As Susan Bassnett has rightly remarked: "Literature is a socially distinct and integral medium of thought; a common institutional expression of humanity; differentiated, to be sure, by the social conditions of the individual, by racial, historical, cultural and linguistic influences" (16). Hence, there are certain features of a culture which seem to be inevitably present in any kind of appreciation or evaluation. In certain sense, one can say that one cannot equally enter into the spirit of a literary work written in a language and culture other than that of one's own. Therefore question arises, is reading across cultures and traditions productive and fruitful? Does it help to understand both the traditions and give some new insights?

It is certain that there are some concepts whose cognitive implications are different in different cultures; God means something different in the Judeo-Christian tradition and something quite different in the Indian tradition. In the Indian tradition, God has been visualized in a wide range of incarnations and manifestations and is not restricted to any particular theological formulation. As Radhakrishnan has said, "The fundamental concept of Indian religious life is that, the goal of life is the communication with the supreme. It is the life of realization, gnosis, an inner intuitive vision of God, when man achieves absolute freedom and escapes from blind servitude to ordinary experience" (*Indian Religious Thought* 9). There is no aspect of existence which is not presided over by God or a deity. Hinduism, as a religious tradition, draws its strength and inspiration from its mystical world view, poetically and philosophically articulated in the Vedas and the Upanishads. But the Christian God is completely transcendent. Creation is therefore an alienation from the creator. The Creator is present in his creation in the form of an imminent absence. There is God and there is that which is not-God. In Vedanta, on the other hand, God is both the giver and the given, the transcendent and the imminent, the one and the many and the non-dual absolute beyond and above the one/many binary. The crucial point of distinction between Christianity and Vedantism is to be found in the relation of God to the human beings. Christianity lays emphasis on human beings' sinfulness, guilt, suffering, penance and the need of salvation by the grace of God. It is to be noted that this salvation is only possible through the grace of God. This concept of salvation is not present in the Indian thought. Salvation in the Indian thought is almost entirely dependent on one's deeds during the different lives that the soul has to work out in this world.

The Western views on death also radically differ from those of Indian thought. In Indian thought and belief, life-and-death constitute a continuous cycle and death loses its finality. If death is not final, it is no more a terror and is very much part of the cycle- a recurring incident

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelauncher.com

that does not put an end to a single biological process, but furthers the progress of a larger one. As Radhakrishnan has said: "Life is a process of birth and death. Birth is death, and death is birth" (*The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* 55). This concept of death and rebirth is not acceptable to the West, for there exist a denial and fear in the face of the apparent hopelessness of mortality. Because its concept of time is linear: one life and one world, death is final, it is a brutal conclusion. As time passes, irreversible events advance, and the world changes, move steadily in its non-recurrent path. Christianity believes in this idea.

So, any intercultural communication requires a cultural sensitivity: the urge to understand the other. The problem here is to tease apart the specifically cultural from what we would like to call 'universal' in making an attempt to understand a tradition in which all poetry is a form of prayer or at least has some quality of prayer. God is not a 'concept' in Indian poetry. God is the magnetic horizon of transcendence, not an object but a direction. Devotion in Indian thought is one of the three paths (*margas*) which lead to spiritual fulfilment or eternal bliss irrespective of beliefs and creeds. Indian devotional poetry is the highest form of love poetry. Poetry, to Meerabai, was a prayer as it was to most poet-saints of India. Such a prayer was at the same time erotic and sublime. Meerabai occupies a sacred place in the history of Indian thought and culture for her passionate religious devotion. In the West, the case of Meerabai may be regarded as hysteria or a psychopathological problem or maybe a neurological malady. But for us, in the Indian context, it is not a breakdown but a breakthrough. If the separation were forever, then the pain would be unbearable. In the separation, lies the possibility of reunion. In the midst of darkness light persists, it is in the guise of suffering that the deity comes to the door of the devotee. So the pathos of the divine emotion is as intensely dramatic in the Indian tradition as the tragic pathos found in Sophocles or Shakespeare. So, the limit of the western readers is the limit of a culture not that of an individual. R. K. Dasgupta has rightly said: "If Western understanding of the Indian Literature is a problem, it is a problem for the Western man" (*East-West Literary Relations* 128).

Since we have entered the 21st century in a world which is fast becoming a global village so there is a growing sense of urgency to increase our understanding of people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Because of the rapid changes the world is becoming a smaller and more intersecting community where we find ourselves in increased contact with people who are culturally different in all spheres of life. From class- room to work- place diversity, different cultural beliefs, values, are here to stay. So, in order to achieve effective intercultural communication, we have to learn to manage the differences flexibly and mindfully and study those aspects which really 'make a difference'. Because reading a text according to one's own cultural and literary experiences without accepting the meaning that is being offered yields no

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelauncher.com

fruitful appreciation of the text. To quote Indra Nath Choudhury “Right from the days of Aristotle one knows that the particularity of situation of the writer determines his perception which creates its own universals” (49).

Works Cited

Aronson, Alex. *Rabindranath Through Western Eyes*. Calcutta: Rddhi India, 1978. Print.

Bassnett, Susan. *Comparative Literature: A critical introduction*. Oxford UK: Blackwell, 1993. Print

Chaudhury, I. N. *Comparative Indian Literature Some Perspective*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992. Print.

Dasgupta, R.K., ed. *Rabindranath Tagore and William Butler Yeats: The Story of a Literary Friendship*. Delhi: Deptt. of Modern Indian Languages, University of Delhi, 1965. Print.

Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy, Vol-II*. London: Longman's Green and co. 1923. Print.

---. *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*. Baroda: Good, 1961. Print.

---. *Indian Religious Thought*. New York: Orient Paperbacks, 2006. Print.