

John Steinbeck and Oriental Thought:

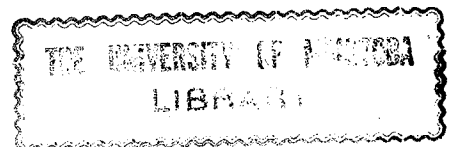
Some Parallels

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Abstract

A careful reading of the novels of John Steinbeck reveals the fact--unnoticed by most of his critics--that many of his important conceptions have a greater correspondence with Hindu and Eastern thought than with the Christian and Western, though he is indelibly an Occidental in the main covert assumptions on which he operates. An examination of his writings, especially those written before 1945, shows how pervasive this correspondence is. In this respect he is one of the small number of writers and intellectuals who have shown interest in the East and is thus in the direct though diffuse line which stretches from Emerson and Thoreau to the Hippies.

The non-teleological or "is" thinking is useful as a key to the understanding of Steinbeck's writings. Non-teleology is his alternative to the teleological thinking of the West which he considers narrow and misleading. The



picture of the deep ultimate Reality of the universe is, according to Steinbeck, portrayed by "is." Non-teleology is concerned, says he again, with what actually "is" and with acceptance of things and men as they are. However, Steinbeck is not able to develop this theory advanced by him and his biologist friend Edward Ricketts into a fully articulate philosophical concept. Basing his conclusions on a study of marine biology, Steinbeck argues that the whole universe is an ecological unit. His concepts of the divine and the mystical unity of the universe are similar to the non-dualistic concepts of the Upanishads. He postulates further that Reality consists of something more than mere empirical reality and he sees this Reality as underlying the plurality of constantly changing natural phenomena. In To a God Unknown and The Grapes of Wrath Steinbeck makes an enquiry into the nature of the divine, and in some of his other novels he considers the practical implications of the concept of non-dualism. Reality and illusion is the central theme of Tortilla Flat and The Pearl, and non-attachment of Cannery Row. He sees nature as an aspect of the divine.

Steinbeck does not, however, give us a unified system of philosophy. He is not always consistent and

often lapses into sentimentality. Most of his characters tend to be abstractions. In spite of these weaknesses, however, we can recognize a philosophical and religious point of view. A close scrutiny of the novels of Steinbeck reveals a vein of thought which is strikingly parallel to the Hinduistic and a recognition of the correspondence between Steinbeck's and Oriental thought provides a new illumination of his work.

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PREFACE

There have been a few full-length studies of John Steinbeck, but none from the Oriental point of view. A study of Steinbeck's thought in the context of the correspondence it has with Hindu thought should make this an illuminating study.

In citing references, I have used English editions of Steinbeck's novels wherever American editions were not available. The English editions have Anglicized spellings, with the result that some of the quotations in the thesis have American spellings and the rest English.

I am highly obliged to Dr. Robin Hoople, Associate Professor, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, without whose guidance, kindness and encouragement this thesis could not have been written. My thanks are due to Dr. Joseph Fontenrose, Department of Classics, University of California, Berkeley, and Dr. Warren French, Department of English, University of Missouri, Kansas City, whom I had occasion to consult. Dr. Joseph Fontenrose has kindly permitted me to quote from his letter.

I should also express my thanks here to the University of Manitoba without whose award of a Graduate Fellowship it would not have been possible for me to undertake this study of Steinbeck.

S. T. Kallapur

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INTRODUCTION

The Case for the Defence

It is no longer critically fashionable to praise John Steinbeck as a writer. He has remained popular with the reading public, but that popularity itself makes him suspect with the critics. A wide variety of charges have been levelled against him. It is said that he lapses into sentimentality, that his philosophy is naïve, and that he depicts characters on the instinctual level only. Admitting all this, The Grapes of Wrath is not only artistically successful but philosophically profound, and In Dubious Battle is a model of objective writing. These, with The Pastures of Heaven, To a God Unknown, Tortilla Flat, Of Mice and Men, and Cannery Row, fill a permanent niche in the history of American literature.

Why Steinbeck's Work Deserves a Close Study: Correspondence between Steinbeck's and Hindu Thought

Such high praise of Steinbeck's novels is not undeserved. They demand critical attention, for though the setting of most of Steinbeck's writing is modern American society and the problems he concerns himself with are those of the American nation as a whole--its

ideals or lack of them, its dreams and disillusionment, and its past and present--Steinbeck transcends the local and the particular to give us his Weltanschauung. The theme of The Pastures of Heaven and East of Eden is the American dream of finding a new Garden of Eden for the one lost by Adam and Eve; The Winter of Our Discontent has for its theme the decline of moral values in modern American society; and The Grapes of Wrath, Of Mice and Men and In Dubious Battle centre round the great and continuing divisions in American society, but there is a serious vein of thought underlying the topical nature of the subject-matter and its local background. Woodburn O. Ross suggests that Steinbeck's thought has been affected by the ideas of Hume, Rousseau and Auguste Comte.¹ Frederic I. Carpenter states that in the ideas of John Steinbeck, "the mystical transcendentalism of Emerson reappears, and the earthy democracy of Whitman, and the pragmatic instrumentalism of William James and John Dewey."²

¹Vide "John Steinbeck: Earth and Stars," in Steinbeck and His Critics: A Record of Twenty-five Years, ed. E. W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker, third printing (Albuquerque, 1965), p. 178; cited hereafter as Tedlock.

²"The Philosophical Joads," in Tedlock, p. 242.

similarity between Hindu thought and Steinbeck's than even these critics recognize.

Difficulties in the Way of a Critical Study of this Correspondence

However, there is much to discourage careful critical treatment of the parallelism between Oriental thought and Steinbeck's. First, a critic has to be conversant with the root concepts rather than the superficial and the more commonly known aspects of Hinduism such as the custom of sati (the wife's burning herself on her husband's funeral pyre), idol worship and the caste system. Second, terms like "Brahman" and "maya" may sound strange to American ears; and ideas like the divinity of man and the non-existence of evil may appear unfamiliar to persons brought up in certain Christian traditions. Another discouragement to critical treatment of this aspect of Steinbeck's thought is the extensive use of Western myths made by Steinbeck in his novels. By "Western" is here meant Biblical and Graeco-Roman myths, pagan fertility myths and Arthurian legends. The use of myths gives depth and significance to what is usually a realistic experience on the surface. It is a technique used to great advantage by artists like T. S. Eliot and William Faulkner. A wide use of well-known myths, however, is not without a certain disadvantage--it

may act as a "blinder" and possibly prevent the reader from perceiving the author's use of less well-known myths. For example, as I shall point out later, there are certain incidents in The Grapes of Wrath which are similar to some episodes in the life of Buddha, but the more obvious presence in the novel of myths from the Old and New Testaments would reduce the probability of an unwary Western critic's recognizing the Oriental parallelism. Similarly the figure of the old Chinaman in Cannery Row is a striking counterpart of Vishnu in the Gita,⁵ but no critic appears to have noticed the possible correspondence in Steinbeck's work to this Hindu myth.

The extensive use of myths may also prevent the reader from recognizing ideas which may be implied by the writer but which may happen to be contradictory to those which are usually associated with the myths used. The Grapes of Wrath provides a good illustration. There can be little doubt that Jim Casy is meant to be a Christ figure, the equivalent and symbol in modern times

⁵Gita is the popular name of the Bhagavad-Gita, one of the important books of the great Sanskrit epic, Mahabharatha. Krishna elaborates the doctrines of the Upanishads to Arjuna, the Pandava hero, on the field of battle. Krishna is one of the incarnations of Vishnu. Quotations from the Gita are from Bhagavad-Gita, tr. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, 11th printing (New York, 1964).

Because Casy is a Christ figure, Shockley assumes that whatever Steinbeck is saying must be in accordance with Christian doctrines and rules out all other possibilities. But we shall see that there is more to Jim Casy and the way he is presented than we can find by restricting analysis to Christian symbolism.

Still another reason why the similarity of thought between Steinbeck and Hinduism may have been overlooked is Steinbeck's reticence. He shies away from giving information about himself and his writing. When the California State librarian sent him a questionnaire, he wrote:

Name: John Ernst Alcibiades Socrates Steinbeck.
 Born: Lesbos, Magna Graece, 1902.
 Father: Heredotus Xenophon Steinbeck.
 Mother: Chloe Mathilde Lopez.
 Married to: Jo Alfreda Jones, in Tia Juana.
 Writings: The Unstrung Harpie. Donahoe, 1906.
 Taxgiversating Tehabedrous. MacDougall, 1927.
 Barnacles. (Ballinadae.) Monograph. 2 vols.
 Stanford University Press.
 Bugs, a Critical Study. Morbide Press.⁷

Steinbeck has not been more helpful regarding information about his reading either. There is little external evidence of Steinbeck's reading of Oriental books. It is frustrating

⁷ Harry Thornton Moore, The Novels of John Steinbeck: A First Critical Study (Chicago, 1939), p. 91.

for a critic not to find some external evidence in support of conclusions based on a reading of a writer's works. This kind of frustration may be seen in Joseph Fontenrose's statement: "Steinbeck has surely read the Bhagavad-Gita, but I cannot prove it."⁸ The only valuable piece of information available is contained in Peter Lisca's statement:

[Steinbeck's] interest in oriental [sic] and early Christian literature goes back as far as To a God Unknown, whose theme and title refer to both the Vedic Hymns and the Acts of the Apostles, and whose kindly priest reads La Vida del San Bartolomeo. Sea of Cortez demonstrates an intimate knowledge of the works of several Spanish Jesuits who wrote about Baja California, and The Wayward Bus shows a familiarity with St. John of the Cross. While he was working on The Pearl, he wrote to Pascal Covici about the Arabian Nights, "strange how you can find the roots of practically all western stories there." (JS - PC, 1/15/45) In his letters and fiction there are occasional references to the Bhagavad-Gita, Buddhism, and Oriental concepts of Being. Doc of Cannery Row quotes from "Black Marigolds" and reads Li Po. Ricketts once referred to The Golden Bough as "Steinbeck's Vade mecum." ⁹

As to whether Steinbeck has read the Upanishads, with the philosophy of which his thought has serious affinity,

⁸In his personal letter to the present writer, dated September 28, 1966.

⁹The Wide World of John Steinbeck, 4th printing (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1965), p. 223; cited hereafter as Lisca.

there is no information.

Internal Evidence

But though there is little external evidence of Steinbeck's readings of books on Hinduism and Buddhism, a study of his novels provides the reader with some evidence of Steinbeck's knowledge of Indian books. The Vedic hymn which he quotes as epigraph to his novel To a God Unknown and Bilhana's "Chaurapanchasika" (translated as "Black Marigolds" by Powys Mathers) quoted in Cannery Row are direct evidence of Steinbeck's knowledge of Oriental literature. He refers to Buddha in The Pastures of Heaven, Cannery Row, Sweet Thursday and The Winter of Our Discontent, and to the Gita in Sweet Thursday. Though the references are casual and not followed by any philosophical discussion, they are not without significance; even if they do not prove a first-hand knowledge, on Steinbeck's part, of the philosophies of the East, they do indicate a certain bias towards its spiritual and moral values. The correspondence between Steinbeck's and Oriental thought should not, therefore, come as a surprise. I have explained in the Appendix those of the Hindu root concepts which have a relevance to Steinbeck's thought.

Oriental Thought and Transcendentalism

It should be even less of a surprise if we remember the important role Oriental thought has played in the shaping of Transcendentalism. Transcendentalism is the cultural heritage of all Americans, except very recent immigrants, whether it is recognized as Transcendentalism or is called by some other name. It has ever remained a force in American culture and it is so pervasive that it is natural for Steinbeck to have imbibed it as a part of his heritage. To any one who has studied the Transcendentalists, Hinduistic ideas and concepts will be familiar ground. Emerson combined within himself Western and Eastern thought, though he could not always reconcile the two. A brief glance at those ideas of Emerson which are similar to Hindu thought will serve to show that Hindu thought is neither strange nor foreign to American thought. Emerson sees in the universe an all-pervading spiritual power which he calls the Over-Soul. This Over-Soul is his God, but he denies to it any personality. Nature and Spirit or Over-Soul are closely related to each other; in fact, nature is the symbol of the Spirit. All things in the universe emanate from the Over-Soul. The subject of his poem, "Brahma," is the absolute unity of the world which underlies the multiplicity of things. This fundamental unity is the Over-Soul

and is to be found everywhere: "What is there of the divine in a load of bricks? What is there of the divine in a barber's shop?....Much. All."¹⁰ Emerson also posits that the soul in the individual is the same as the Over-Soul: "Within man is the soul of the whole."¹¹ ("The Over-Soul") Men usually do not see the unity underlying the multiplicity of objects because they suffer from illusions:

Illusion works impenetrable,
Weaving webs innumerable. ("Maia")¹²

In moments of illumination, however, man can see through illusions and be one with God: "He will weave no longer a spotted life of shreds and patches, but he will live with a divine unity."¹³ ("The Over-Soul")

The illumination that Emerson refers to is the result of mystical experience, and in his essay, "The Over-Soul,"

¹⁰ Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston and New York, 1909-14), III, 321; cited hereafter as Journals.

¹¹ The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston and New York, 1903-04), II, 269; cited hereafter as Works.

¹² Works, IX, 348.

¹³ Works, II, 297.

he describes one of his experiences: "There is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences."¹⁴ This mystical experience should be applied, says Emerson, to the philosophy of history and to the daily conduct of life. An important corollary to the idea of unity which one experiences through mystic illumination is that both evil and good are illusory. First, good and evil are only relative terms. Second, the law of "Compensation" redresses any temporary imbalance, and he associates this law with the Hindu idea of karma. Third, good and evil exist on the level of phenomena only. "Mysticism denies the reality of 'evil' in the conventional sense, and Emerson's interpretation was fundamentally that of the mystic,"¹⁵ explains Frederic Ives Carpenter. The man who has experienced the unity with the Over-Soul is beyond good and evil. Again, because the Over-Soul is by definition good, everything emanating from it is good. It follows that man, too, is good. When Emerson suggests that Jesus Christ was human, he is implying that every human being is divine. And when he talks of "self-reliance," he is not speaking of "self" in the sense of the empirical ego but of the higher self:

¹⁴Works, II, 267.

¹⁵Emerson Handbook (New York, 1953), p. 143.

"Self-reliance, the height and perfection of man, is reliance on God."¹⁶ ("The Fugitive Slave Law")

Where Emerson got these ideas--whether from Plato, neo-Platonism, or Hinduism, or whether he arrived at them himself--is of no importance here. What is really to the purpose is that these ideas tend to bridge the wide gulf between ancient mystical Hindu thought and modern American pragmatism.

Historical Association between Hindu Thought and American Culture

The numerous references to Transcendental ideas in the foregoing are not without reason, for Steinbeck is in the direct though diffuse line which stretches from Emerson and Thoreau to the Hippies. From the early decades of the nineteenth century there has always been in America a small number of philosophers, writers and intellectuals who have shown an interest in the East, especially India, China and Japan. The Oriental philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism came to America in the company of neo-Platonism, German Transcendentalism, and English Romanticism. Emerson was characteristically American in that he borrowed ideas from wherever he could.

¹⁶Emerson, Works, XI, 236.

He transcended Puritan intolerance and welcomed the spiritual values of the East. He and his disciple Thoreau had a first-hand knowledge of Hindu religious books like the Gita, the Laws of Manu, and the Vedas.¹⁷ The mysticism of the Upanishads with its intuitive way of attaining knowledge appealed to Emerson more than the dry rationalism of the eighteenth century, and Upanishadic non-dualism more than Christian dualism. After Emerson and Thoreau, Transcendental thought became a pervasive influence in America, and the interest in Hinduism and Buddhism did not disappear altogether. Appropriately, it was in New England that most of the interest in Hinduism appears to have been centered. James Freeman Clarke published his Ten Great Religions (1871) "which went through at least twenty-two editions, and brought a knowledge of the high aspirations of other religious leaders to Christian people."¹⁸ At Concord, the rumour ran, "in every household, they read the Rig-Veda at the breakfast-table."¹⁹ As late as the

¹⁷Vide Arthur Christy, The Orient in American Transcendentalism, reprinted (New York, 1963), Appendix, pp. 278-323.

¹⁸Ambrose White Vernon, "Later Theology," in The Cambridge History of American Literature, ed. William Peterfield Trent et al (New York, 1921), III, 211.

¹⁹Van Wyck Brooks, New England: Indian Summer, 1865-1915 (New York, 1940), p. 23; cited hereafter as Brooks.

middle seventies, there was a class of young girls studying Sanskrit in the town of New Britain.²⁰ Francis Marion Crawford, the novelist, had studied Sanskrit and had been editor of the Indian Herald at Allahabad (India) for two years, and, back in America, he wrote for the press on every subject, including Buddhism. A longing "for the East was a symptom of the moment, especially marked in New England."²¹

The interest in Sanskrit studies was kept alive by the Harvard University Press with its publications of the Harvard Oriental Series, the first of which was The Jātaka-mālā: or Bodhisattva-avadāna-mālā [Buddhist Stories] (1891) and the third was Buddhism in Translations (1896). The American Oriental Society, New Haven, had started publishing its Journal half a century earlier, in 1843.

The meeting of the Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 drew the attention of the general public towards India. The Indian representative was Swami Vivekananda whose brilliant presentation of Hinduism made such a profound impression that The New York Herald wrote:

²⁰Vide Brooks, p. 83.

²¹Ibid., p. 358.

"Vivekananda is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions. After hearing him we feel how foolish it is to send missionaries to this learned nation."²² He gave lectures at various places and founded Vedanta societies. "Vivekananda's influence still lives in America. There are societies that teach Hinduism in various ways in New York, Boston, Washington, Pittsburg and San Francisco. His influence seems to be far stronger in San Francisco than anywhere else."²³

The love of Buddhism led the New Englanders to Japan, too. Percival Lowell's The Soul of the Far East, a study of Japanese life and religion, was very popular, and it was at least partly responsible in sending Lafcadio Hearn to Japan. Ernest Fenollosa lived in Japan for a number of years and helped in saving traditional Japanese Art which the Japanese were discarding. John La Farge and Henry Adams were among others who were attracted to Japan. They visited Ceylon, too, and Adams "sat for half an hour under the shoot of Buddha's bo-tree. Where else could he ever hope to find Nirvana?"²⁴

²² Quoted in J. N. Farquhar, Modern Religious Movements in India (New York, 1919), p. 202.

²³ Ibid., p. 207.

²⁴ Brooks, p. 372.