

LITERATURE TO RELIGION AND RELIGION TO LITERATURE: CHANGING COLOURS OF THE BIBLE

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ABSTRACT

Every age crystallizes its own set of morals and the codified morals fermented into finery of religion. The basic source even for history is literature. One has to understand that the early literature has influenced the formation of religions. All religions greatly influenced subsequent literature and the holy Bible is no exception. In this paper we are trying to make an attempt to highlight how the earlier tragedies influenced the tragedy of Jesus or salvation of Jesus and how the later tragedies were influenced by the New Testament. The purpose of religion and literature is to assuage the inner turmoil and to soften the ruffled feathers of human emotions.

KEYWORDS: Knowledge, Literature, Religion, Tragedy, Tradition

INTRODUCTION

History is a vast reservoir of knowledge and human experience. All morals, ethics, religions filtered through this reservoir. Understanding the past appears to be a universal human need, and the telling of history has emerged independently in civilizations around the world. What constitutes history is a philosophical question. Every age crystallizes its own set of morals and the codified morals fermented into finery of religion. The basic source even for history is literature. Every individual, group, community and nation tries not only to protect their experiences and understanding of the world but also to carefully embed it in literature. World's two biggest religions – Hinduism and Buddhism - use literary texts as holy books of their respective religions. *Bhagavat Gita*, the holy text of Hindus, is part of the Indian literary epic, the *Mahabharata*. Almost all Buddhist morals are incorporated in *Jataka tales* which is also a literary art work.

One has to understand that the early literature has influenced the formation of religions. All religions greatly influenced subsequent literature and the holy Bible is no exception. In this paper we are trying to make an attempt how the earlier tragedies influenced the tragedy of Jesus or salvation of Jesus and how the later tragedies were influenced by the New Testament.

The very idea of God has become a necessary to discipline the free will of mankind. Unlike other mammals and animals human beings are endowed with larger brain than they really needed for their survival. They started living wildly in the wilderness of uncivilized world. To contain and control their over exuberance the community chieftains created a series of rituals that demand their patience and physical endurance. They started paying keen attention to rocks and trees that evolved into a kind of pagan practice. The warmongering physical exuberance of the strong started fighting in the name of their beliefs. They competed to explore the attributed magical powers of their favourite deities. Once the agrarian

societies established and gave relief to a minority from their work, they started laying foundation for the civilization. To quench their basic thirst for blood and violence, they started wars in the name of God. Pharaohs, Greeks and Roman kings used to destroy the temples and killed the priests whenever a new king ascended the throne. Every king imposed his own divine order to his people. Most of the priests in these temples developed the exquisite skills like writing history and sometimes even creative literature.

In the process the literary idea of tragedy generated from the fertility ritual, worshipping Greek God Dionysus to commemorate the harvest and the vintage. Though started as a religious ceremony it forged into an epic form in the hands of Homer. His *Iliad* and *Odyssey* which are based on ancient legends became a sinew to the later dramatists – Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides who were considered to be true explorers of the human spirit. Though it may not be authenticated that Aeschylus invented tragedies, it is beyond doubt that he set its tone and established a model and is still emulated. T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion* and Jean Paul Satre's *The Flies* reflect this fact. John H. Wheelock aptly stated that 'tragedy has been the underlying theme in the work of every poet from Homer to Eliot. It is implicit in any poet's vision of reality' (*A True Poem Is a Way of Knowing* 27).

With the passing of time power shifted into the hands of Romans. Among all the rulers of Rome, Julius Caesar stood tall having left an indelible impact on Rome. Born in Rome on 12 July 100 BC, he grew up in a period of unrest and civil war in Rome. However, the concept of appealing to the people for support, rather than seeking approval from the Roman Senate, worked well for Caesar in his later life. As a leader of common people, Caesar ascended to a position of absolute power and expanded the city Rome into an Empire. He redistributed land, increased grain rations to the poor and put in all efforts to make Rome a cultural and educational center of the Mediterranean world. His popularity made the Senate lost most of its power and this culminated in the assassination plot. And knowingly Caesar walked into the trap. It may sound incredulous to say that Caesar voluntarily walked into the death trap of the conspirators but Caesar has his own reasons. His failing health and his affair with Cleopatra belittled the man in him. Cleopatra's demand to shift Roman capital to Alexandria may not go well with Roman public. To remain a hero forever and allow his spirit to win over the senators and the conspirators, the military strategist Caesar opted to die with his shoes on.

Caesar was assassinated by the senators in the portico of the basilica of Pompey the Great on the Ides (15) March 44 BC and later deified in 42 BC. Interestingly his glory and tragic death sounds close to the life of Jesus Christ chronicled in the Gospels. Jesus, also referred to as 'Jesus of Nazareth,' is the central figure of Christianity, whom the teachings of most Christian denominations hold to be the Son of God. Jesus is God of the poor and the deprived who assured freedom in the form of liberation and salvation. Fighting against social injustices, slaves meted with brutal punishment for any crime or revolt by their masters or rulers. Beard, a classical historian at Cambridge University says, 'in 1st century BC, in Republican Rome crucifixion is a standard and degrading form of punishment' (Gee para 13). A Roman citizen is exempted from it. Thus, Alice Gee infers that in the martyrdom of Peter and Paul the difference is that Paul is a Roman citizen, therefore beheaded; Peter isn't hence crucified. Such ignoble crucifixion is bestowed upon Christ. The reason behind might be that since all Roman nobility are feudalists they naturally dislike Christ and his fighting for the good of the poor and commons. That gave way to tragedy.

Insightful observations into the ancient scriptures and historical documents might make one to speculate over the idea that Jesus' life is congruent to the life of Caesar. The Italian-German linguist and philosopher, Francesco Carotta, after investigating more than fifteen years came out with interesting similarities. According to his book, *Jesus was Caesar*, both

Julius Caesar and Jesus began their careers in northern countries: Caesar in Gaul, Jesus in Galilee; both cross a fatal river: the Rubicon and the Jordan; both then enter cities: Corfinium and Cafarnaum; both have affinity to ordinary people and both are accused of making themselves kings: King of Romans and King of Jews (47-50).

Also, Carotta found that even people and places have the same function in both stories. To mention a few, Pompey is the political godfather of Caesar and competes with him in the same way John the Baptist does with Jesus. Decimus Junius Brutus betrays Caesar as Judas betrays Jesus. Octavian is the young Caesar, his posthumously adopted son. John is adopted by Jesus as he is dying on the cross. Cleopatra had a special relationship with Caesar as did Mary Magdalene with Jesus.

The recently unearthed, *The Gospel of Judas*, an ancient text lost for 1700 years, disclosed the truth that Christ's betrayer was his truest disciple. Presumably Christ like Caesar engineered his own crucifixion. The New Testament says a treacherous Judas sold out Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. But *The Gospel of Judas* says that Jesus asked Judas to betray him, thereby freeing his soul from his body. Cockburn points out that as per the translation of Professor Rudolph Kasser, the opening line of the first page reads, "The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot...." Jesus tells Judas "You will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me." Despite Christ's warning 'You will be cursed,' Judas fulfilled his master's wish. In plain English or Coptic, Judas is going to kill Jesus – and thus do him a favor. Perhaps Coretta might be true when he said that Jesus is a true historical figure, he lived as Gaius Julius Caesar and resurrected as Divus Julius.

From Vigil in 70 BC to Ovid in 17 CE, Rome enjoyed the Golden Age of Roman Literature. In this period the Roman poets followed the examples of Greek Literature but their tragic drama emphasized more on sensation and rhetoric tending towards melodrama and bombast. Seneca became popular with his tragedies exploring ideas of revenge, the occult, the supernatural, suicide, blood and gore. Nine of Seneca's tragedies survive, all of which are *fabulae praetextae* and evidently his *Phaedra* was based on Euripides' *Hippolytus*.

Stecchini, in his book *The Gospel according to Seneca: a Tragedy in Five Acts*, opines that Seneca's philosophical writings are still admired for their elegant exposition of the Stoic view of life. He presents an interesting argument stating that 'Was it Seneca who wrote the tragedy on the passion of Jesus that the evangelists used in constructing their narratives? A question such as this can never be answered with certitude. It can be, however, adopted as a working hypothesis, whose success can be judged by the extent to which it helps solve the innumerable enigmas of the passion narratives.'

Keeping this in view one might find that Seneca's choice of Jesus as a tragic hero is not surprising but in sequence to the so-called *fabulae praetextae*, of the whole genre of Roman tragedy. Moreover this is even supported by Robert Turcan's observation that Seneca had a lifelong interest in oriental religions and wrote several books on the subject. Considering Leon Herrmann's inference on Seneca's *De Ira*, Stecchini comes to a conclusion that 'Seneca had received some information about the founder of Christianity and it may be inferred from the allusion in one of his works to an unnamed individual who had aspired to royalty, but instead was condemned to suffer a cruel death upon the cross.'

No wonder for Seneca the trial of Jesus became a subject worthy of his aspirations as a philosopher and dramatist. His treatment of it was strictly within the conventions of the ancient theatre and in harmony with the original cultic tragedy of Dionysus which later tragedians emulated. Seneca's influence was particularly strong in humanist tragedy. His plays

with their ghosts, lyrical passages and rhetorical oratory, brought a concentration on rhetoric and language over dramatic action to many humanist tragedies.

The trial and execution of Jesus also is the crux of gospels' narration. However, the four evangelists who authored the gospels differed in their narrations. With Jesus' arrest these differences got faded giving rise to a highly dramatic story. This indicates that the gospels drew on some preexisting written account of the passion. As we read the story of Jesus' final hours and watch one carefully-constructed scene succeed another, we begin to distinguish the hand of a master. There must have been an individual of literary genius who wrote about the trial and execution of Jesus. The gospels of Mark and Luke originated in Rome in the late fifties or early sixties A.D., a period that coincided with the last great flourishing of Roman tragedy in the work of Lucius Annaeus Seneca (3 B.C.–65 A.D.). It is safe to presume that the anonymous writer might be Seneca himself. It proves to be so if one carefully goes through inter textual interpretations of the said portion.

Later Roman Empire mutated into The Eastern or Byzantine Empire when Constantine the Great moved the capital from Rome to Byzantium (now Istanbul) in about AD 330 and renamed the city Constantinople. The civilization of this empire was Greek in language and heritage, but it was Christian in religion. The chronicles of history infer that as there are many Gospels in circulation leaving confusion to many people, King Constantine commissioned a holy book that brought down Gospels to four and added the essential morals of mankind into its fold. In doing so the intention of Constantine was to create an entirely new god for his empire who would unite all religious factions under one deity. The conclave of Presbyters summoned by Constantine balloted down to a shortlist of five Gods namely Caesar, Krishna, Mithra, Horus and Zeus. The British born Constantine involved British factions and ruled that the name of the great Druid god, Hesus be joined with the Eastern Savior-god, Krishna and thus 'Hesus Krishna' is the new Roman god. Eventually both divinities became one God by democratic consent. The name 'Hesus Krishna' subsequently evolved into 'Jesus Christ.'

Merging the supernatural 'god' stories of Mithra and Krishna with British Culdean beliefs effectively joined the orations of Eastern and Western presbyters together 'to form a new universal belief.' The new writings emerged as the New Testament in the historical record. In religion the crowning literary achievement was considered to be the New Testament portion of the Christian Bible. This coupled with a reverence for the great literary traditions of the past combined to make Byzantine literature very conservative. In this period much of the writing was necessarily religious: sermons, hymns, theological works, and descriptions of the lives of the martyrs and saints. Later in the modern times, after years of dedicated New Testament research, Dr. Tischendorf expressed dismay at the differences between the oldest and newest Gospels, and that is why Pope Leo X (d. 1521) called *Christ* a "fable." According to Warren, Christian theology considered time as linear, progressing according to divine plan. As God's plan encompassed everyone, Christian histories in this period had a universal approach. For example, Christian writers often included summaries of important historical events prior to the period covered by the work.

Changing times brought in the new interpretations of holy texts. During the Age of Enlightenment, the gospels were studied rationally as literary works within their ancient context and parallels had been drawn between the passion of Jesus and the rituals and mysteries of the dying and resurrecting gods such as Dionysus and Osiris. Probing into the fact that Greek tragedy evolved from sacred plays in honor of Dionysus, made the scholars of the modern times speculate on the idea that primitive Christianity might also began as ritual drama. Thus, Alfred Loisy, one of the most perceptive New Testament scholars, wrote that 'the economy of the Gospel narratives is related to the ritual commemoration of the Passion;

taking them literally we run the risk of transposing into history what are really the successive incidents of a religious drama' (*The Birth of the Christian Religion*). Brandon is impressed by the superb theatrical montage of the trial of Jesus; Raymond Brown finds that John's gospel contains touches worthy of great drama in many of its scenes and suggests that our text may be the product of a dramatic rewriting on such a scale that little historical material remains (*The Trial of Jesus* 136).

Stecchini points out that these scholars, however, missed to identify the fact that it is not primitive ritual performance but the element of tragedy that constituted the kernel of the Passion story. The gospels themselves authenticated the fact that the creator of this tragedy was someone imbued with the cultural values of the early Roman Empire, a playwright of unusual abilities, who used drama as a vehicle for expressing specific philosophical concepts.

In the modern times even the similarities in the names of 'Christ' and 'Krishna' have enough fuel for the curious mind to prod into the proposition that they were indeed one and the same person. The father of the Krishna Consciousness Movement A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada once remarked: "When an Indian person calls on Krishna, he often says, Krsta. Krsta is a Sanskrit word meaning attraction. So when we address God as Christ, Krsta, or Krishna we indicate the same all-attractive Supreme Personality of Godhead. When Jesus said, 'Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be Thy name', the name of God was Krsta or Krishna" (qtd. in "Christ-Krishna Connection").

In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna said about His oneness with God: "I am the way, come to Me...Neither the multitude of gods, nor great sages know my origin, for I am the source of all the gods and great sages." In the Holy Bible, Jesus also utters the same in his Gospels: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well...." (qtd. in "Christ-Krishna Connection").

In the words of Guiseppi, 'to suggest that all Western literature is no more than a footnote to the writings of classical Greece is an exaggeration, but it is nevertheless true that the Greek world of thought was so far-ranging that there is scarcely an idea discussed today that was not debated by the ancient writers. The only body of literature of comparable influence is the Bible.' Writing on 'The Influence of the King James Bible on English Literature,' Hedges stated that:

The allusions to biblical incidents, characters, and language color much of British and American literature
From the 17th century to the present, including biblical stories recast in innumerable "versions" of poetry,
Fiction, and drama, in apocalyptic narratives as well as pastoral idylls. From Bunyan to Beckett, from Milton
To Morrison, the influence of the King James Version broods over the corpus of literature in English, infusing
Its richness of texture, familiarity of phrasing, fund of imagery, force of simplicity into the very texture of our
Cultural heritage and the products of our permeated imaginations.'

The tradition that produced Milton was the European Christian humanistic one; he has been called "the last Renaissance Man." Milton had an encyclopedic vision. He believed that the Bible was a precursor to the classical forms relied on by the Greeks and Romans, and that the Bible accomplished what the Greeks and Romans wished in a more suitable manner. Milton further says, "Of the style and uniformity, and that commonly called the plot, whether intricate or explicit... they only will best judge who are not unacquainted with Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the three tragic poets unequalled yet by any, and the best rule to all who endeavor to write tragedy" (Milton 2007). As with his

Christian epics, Milton fused classical and Scriptural ideas in order to create better English literature.

The greatest master of tragedy was Shakespeare, and in tragedy he reached his greatest height. 'Wisdom in selection and power in reproduction determine the quality of genius' writes Eaton describing Shakespeare. In his book *Shakespeare and the Bible*, he writes that Shakespeare perpetually reminds us of *the Bible*, not by direct quotation, indirect allusion, borrowed idioms or palpable imitations of phrases and style but by an elevation of thought and simplicity of diction which are not to be found elsewhere. In Shakespeare's plays religion is a vital and active principle, sustaining the good, tormenting the wicked and influencing hearts and lives of all. Almost all his plays are rich treasure of biblical imagery. For instance in Act II, Scene iii, in *Macbeth*, Porter speaks:

"Porter: Here's a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell-gate, he should have old turning the Key. Knock, knock, and knock! Who's there, i' the name of Belzebub?"

Shakespeare is indebted for the words 'knock' and 'Beelzebub' to the New Testament. They are from the 11th chapter of St. Luke:

"Knock and it shall be opened unto you,
To him that knocketh, it shall be opened."
"He casteth out devils through Beelzebub."

v. 9, 10, 15.

In the very opening scene of *the play Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Horatio says, 'A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye.' This idea is evidently taken from the words, "Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye?" found in the 7th chapter of St. Mathew. Mabillard in the article entitled 'Biblical Imagery in *Macbeth*,' aptly states that it would take volumes to examine comprehensively Shakespeare's use of biblical imagery. Shakespeare's debt to Scripture is profound; biblical imagery is woven into every play. No writer has integrated the expressions and themes found in the Bible into his own work more magnificently than Shakespeare.

From Seneca, early Renaissance tragedy borrowed the "violent and bloody plots, resounding rhetorical speeches, the frequent use of ghosts . . . and sometimes the five-act structure" (*Norton Anthology of English Literature* 410). In his greatest tragedies Shakespeare transcends the conventions of Renaissance tragedy, imbuing his plays with a timeless universality.

T. S. Eliot was one of the twentieth century's major poets. With his masterpiece poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915), he attracted widespread attention. Writing about the impact of Eliot's Christianity on his poetry, Spurr stated that Eliot in the poem *The Hollow Men* presented a post-Christian world, despairing of human and divine love or redemption from its despair. Indeed, Eliot's first "Christian" poem is called "Journey of the Magi" (1927). It is undeniably focused on the Lord's birth, the doctrine of the Incarnation - which is central to Anglo-Catholic theological, liturgical and spiritual life. In "Journey of the Magi," there is the symbol of a "water-mill beating the darkness." It speaks of rejuvenation, conquering the darkness of sin and, sacramentals, of baptism. It has the potential to revive the desert landscape of *The Waste Land* where there 'is no water.'"

Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land*, widely regarded as "one of the most important poems of the 20th century," loosely

follows the legend of the Holy Grail and the Fisher King combined with vignettes of the contemporary social condition in British society. Eliot employs many literary and cultural allusions from the Western canon and from Buddhism and the Hindu Upanishads. Besides drawing allusions to and quoting from ancient writers down the lane, Eliot also makes extensive use of Scriptural writings including the *Bible*, the *Book of Common Prayer*, the Hindu *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, and the Buddha's *Fire Sermon*, and of cultural and anthropological studies such as Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Miss Jessie L Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. Eliot wrote in the original head note that "Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie Weston." The symbols Eliot employs, in addition to the Waste Land, include the Fisher King, the Tarot Deck, the Chapel perilous, and the Grail Quest. Thus, Eliot reiterates the fact that Literature is a rich reservoir not just of creative writings but also of chronicles of history intertwined with various religious beliefs.

The purpose of religion and literature is to assuage the inner turmoil and to soften the ruffled feathers of human emotions. The ancient narratives mostly depend on their contemporary incidents. One has to create a hero to set example and standard for human behavior. So it is inevitable either for religion or literature to project better human beings like Rama, Krishna and Jesus as their heroes. They become immensely popular with the majority. So some of these characters adopted into the religion. To make them super beings and supernatural beings, they are bestowed not only with omniscience and omnipotence but also with magical powers that give hope of heel and provide for the needy.

Unlike the tragic heroes, the makeup of Christ doesn't have any tragic flaw. Imposition of such savage punishment on innocent cannot go down well with the public who are in known of it. As if it were an afterthought they introduced the idea of resurrection and make the sinners to await his second coming to redeem them. The characters that saw the resurrection added much more drama and wider appeal for the public.

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