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Sacred Topoi of Mythical India in the Literary Work of Mihai Eminescu, the Romanian National Poet

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore some of the main important Indian *topoi* that were active in the creative imaginary of Mihai Eminescu, the Romanian National Poet (1850-1889). Not very many researchers from abroad know that Mihai Eminescu developed his own philosophical approach and, by far, Indian culture caught his attention through the richness of symbols, through the complexity of fundamental theories on world cosmogony and extinction, sacred topoi and through its fruitful mythology. Not at all by chance, one of the strongest voices who studied the literary work of Mihai Eminescu from this new perspective is the Indian author Amita Bhose, who lived for several years in Romania and who decided to learn Romanian language especially for being able to read Mihai Eminescu's poetry in the original language and to translate it for Indian people.

[**Keywords: C**reative Imaginary, Indian topoi, Romanian National Poet, Indian Researcher, Multiculturalism]

Indian culture, with its exotic mythology and consecrated archetypal structures was one of the privileged Eastern landmarks in the creative imaginary of the Romanian national poet, Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889). During his Philosophy studies in Vienna and Berlin, Mihai Eminescu, who is considered to be the "last great Romantic" of the world, thoroughly studied the ancient Oriental philosophies. By far, Indian culture caught his attention through the richness of symbols, through the complexity of fundamental theories on World cosmogony and extinction, the gods' migration between Earth and Heavens, the codes of human feelings and not least, the geographies of Paradise that were perfect for the Romantic Age escape temptations. Other sacred topoi are, for instance, Nirvana, a sky of stars seen in a mirror, the coral palace, the temple, but the most mysterious space of all is *the repose* or the *"ahistorical void"*, a place of refuge and protection, with re-balancing virtues in which the potential state, the untriggered *energeia*, the One and unrepeatable have not yet received a norm or a shape but are still potentialities.

Amita Bhose, a great lover of Romanian literature translated into Bengali a volume of Eminescu's poems and analysed the influence of mythological India on Eminescu's work by means of a direct and academic connection to the authentic values of Hindu culture. Born in 1933, in Calcutta, Amita Bhose followed her husband (Dipak Kumar Ray, Ph.D. in Oil

Geology) to Romania, in 1959. She loved Romanian people and culture so much that she decided to learn Romanian language perfectly. She started translating M. Eminescu's poems into Bengali and she published, in 1969, in Calcutta, *Eminescu: Kavita (Eminescu: Poems)*. Amita Bhose came back to Romania several times, and in 1971 she started a PhD programme in Philology, in Bucharest, with a thesis about **The Indian Influence on Eminescu's Philosophy**. After finishing her PhD training, she became a collaborator of the Oriental Languages Department of the University of Bucharest - Romania, where she taught an optional course in Bengali language and literature. In 1978 she published her most important book about *Eminescu and India*, a complex study about the close connection between M. Eminescu's literary work and the Indian philosophy and mythology.

At a careful look at Eminescu's research, literary historians (and Amita Bhose herself) have signalled a few aspects of Indian thought and mythology that Eminescu became aware of and studied thoroughly. Thus, it is well known that during his studies in Berlin, the poet attended the Sanskrit language course held by professor Ebel, and because of his interest in Sanskrit he later translated parts of Franz Bopp's *Critical Grammar of Sanskrit Language* and copied much of Bopp's *Comparative Glossary of Sanskrit Language*. Eminescu did more than copy the text. He also analysed and made connections between terms, which is a proof that he knew the deep semantics of the Sanskrit word *aksara* (which he explains by "quod non perit, immortale", "syllaba sanctissima") and of the sacred syllable *OUM* (meaning "seed", "essence"). He was very knowledgeable about Buddhism, as it may be inferred from his manuscripts, in which he mentions having read E. Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du Buddhisme Indien*. He also read *Bhāgavad-Gita* and analysed concepts of Brahmanism, which he later used in his poems; he studied the theses of

Nāgārjuna's nihilist thought, the psycho-cosmogram with the ten circles of *Mandala*, he developed concepts like Nirvana, *samsâra* (cycle of birth and death, wheel of destiny), the world's gold seed or matrix (*Hiranjagarbha*), he knew all ancient Indian gods and used them in his own work, he read several of Kalidasa's works. Speaking about assuming Traditional Indian doctrines, Romanian ideologist Constantin Barbu notes that "the emptiness doctrine in Māhāyana Buddhism was darker and more tempestuous than Vedic hymns; for the most radical Māhāyana nihilist thinker, Nāgārjuna, also known to Eminescu, there is no: 1. cessation (*nirodha*); 2. origination (*utpāda*); 3. annihilation (*uccheda*); 4. eternity (*śāśvata*); 5. unity (*ekārtha*); 6. multiple meanings (*nānārtha*); 7. appearance (*āgama*); 8. disappearance (*nirgama*)" (Barbu 24).

Our intent is to analyse the Romantic perspective of **mysterium tremendum** shifted towards Oriental philosophical and imagological potentialities, which Mihai Eminescu appears to have used as an ontological support for the explanation of logos. We begin our analysis by accepting the idea that, for the Romantic man's archetype, assuming the sacred is a characteristic of what Phillipe Van Tieghem calls "the inner Romanticism", but also of the mystical experience of the creative self, mentioned with a fascinating relevance by Mircea Eliade, himself a great lover of Indian culture: "...the poet discovers the world as if he had been present at the birth of the world, as if he had lived the first day of creation. From one perspective we can say that any great poet recreates the world, as he strives to see as if Time and History did not exist" (Eliade.a: 72).

For Mihai Eminescu, loneliness and retreat to isolation in view of initiation are principles of dignity. M. Eminescu built a semantic and a deeply metaphorical bridge between what Hindu culture calls *Karma* ("fate") and "the blind will to live" (a concept borrowed from German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer),

thus giving birth to several extremely powerful lyrical motifs. As the human being was created equal to gods and subjected to his body's desires, he finds ways to rebel and come back to himself, to cross boundaries, to escape and protect himself against the petty exterior. Throughout Eminescu's work, we encounter a series of professions of non commitment and return to the inner depths of the self, while craving for the grand sites of knowledge and escaping to sacred places: silence and non-sight (stopping words in thought and refusal to look at the superficial outside world), solitude, melancholy, return to the past through remembrance, reaching privileged places and states (childhood and old age, climbing the magical mountain or the temple, return to origin).

We shall try to follow the manner in which several of these concepts are reflected in Eminescu's poetic imaginary, bringing to life the sacred topoi of Indian mythology during full European Romantic culture.

No-Place and No-Time, the Unborn, the Single Point

In 1877 M. Eminescu published an article after he had attended a lecture given by Romanian philosopher A. D. Xenopol on Indian Philosophy, being very much impressed by it. It is obvious that Eminescu already knew the major aspects of the *Hymn of Creation* in *Rig-Veda*, *Manu's Code* and the fundamentals of Buddhism: "The speaker', Eminescu writes, 'was of the opinion that pantheism was born out of the country's enriching nature and that the sun giving life to the thousands of organic forms was seen as the father of all living beings and that all living beings were different forms of the sun. On this occasion, he quotes a hymn from Rig Veda, dedicated to the sun, and another hymn dedicated to fire, as the most appropriate representative of the supreme god. The separation of people according to immovable castes had also sprung from the same manner of seeing the world, along with the belief in metempsychosis and the apathy of the Indian people. He goes on to present details of Hindu cosmogony and mythology and to talk about the great religious reform undertaken by Buddha. He remarks that Buddhism spread to other countries more than it did in India for the same reason that Christianity, born in Judea, spread more outside this country. This new religion was pessimistic, just like Christianity, and it opposed the optimistic Jewish belief. Without omitting details of Buddha's life, Eminescu focuses on the moral contents of his doctrines. Finally, he shows that, at this point, Buddhist morality is superior to biblical morality, and concluded that "the Brahman religious belief is closest to the results of modern science" (Eminescu a: 340*)*.

Summing up, the Romanian poet was sufficiently knowledgeable about the traditional works, concepts and structures of Indian culture to engage in an exercise of cultural anthropology from an interdisciplinary perspective and to use them as filters of his own poetic visions.

Indian critic Amita Bhose is pointing to the poet's Indian sources in her study in ***Mihai Eminescu**'s **Cosmology***: "The source of Eminescu's cosmology has long been traced to Indian texts, more precisely to the *Hymn of Creation* in *Rig-Veda (Rig.* X. 129). There are documentary evidences to show that the poet knew this hymn. In his poem, *In Search of Sheherazada* (1874), Eminescu sends his hero out to India in search of wisdom. It is worth noting that Eminescu, who knew all the cosmogonic myths known in Europe in his days, selected the Vedic myth, which is the most scientific of all, according to eminent cosmophysicists of our times, Carl Sagan and Fritjof Capra for example" (Bhose. c: 76-86).[i]

Some of Eminescu's most important poems are drawing on Vedic cosmogony, such as *Scrisoarea I (the First Epistle), Rugăciunea unui dac (A Dacian's Prayer)* and *Luceafărul*

(Lucifer). Here is for instance Eminescu's view on creation in *Rugăciunea unui dac (A Dacian's Prayer)*: "When death did not exist, nor yet eternity, / Before the seed of life had first set living free, / When yesterday was nothing, and time had not begun, / And one included all things, and all was less than one, / When sun and moon and sky, the stars, the spinning earth / Were still part of the things that had not come to birth / And You quite lonely stood... I ask myself with awe, / Who is this mighty God we bow ourselves before"[*], or that from **Satires I**: "Into the time things began, when being and not being still / Did not exist to plague man's mind, and there was neither life nor will, / When there was nothing that was hid, yet all things darkly hidden were, / When self-contained was uncontained and all was slumber everywhere. / Was there a heavenly abyss? Or yet unfathomable sea? / There was no mind to contemplate an uncreated mystery. / Then was the darkness all so black as seas that roll deep in the earth, / As black as blinded mortal eye, and no man yet had come to birth, / The shadow of the still unmade did not its silver threads unfold, / And over an unending peace unbroken empty silence rolled!..." Certainly, our impression is that of similarity up to the point of being identical to the *Hymn of Creation* in *Rig-Veda*.

When analysing these Indian philosophical views that were used by Eminescu without any change, Amita Bhose notices in the same article that "Manu says that the self-created (i.e. unborn) One, spurred by the desire of creating, put His seed (*virya*) in water. The seed evolved into an egg, as bright as a thousand suns; Brahma, the ancestor of the whole world, was born out of it. He stayed a year in the egg, and then by meditation (mental power) split the egg in

two, out of which He made the sky, the earth, the atmosphere and the eternal abode of the waters. From his own self He created mind, ego (self-consciousness), conscience, the subtle elements and time. He created the gods and gave them life. He created the rituals, the word as well as the impulse and the act of procreation *(kama* and *rati)*. In order to create the living beings, He divided His body into two halves, out of which were born the masculine and the feminine principles, *purusa* and *viraj* (I.8-32). The golden embryo appears in hymn X. 121 of *Rigveda* and hymn IV. 2 of *Atharvaveda*. *Hymn X* of the former says that after *viraj* was born from *purusa*, he was re-born from her (Bhose.b. web). The process of creation described in *A Dacian's Prayer* is simpler than that in *The First Epistle*. We would only point out the conception of the creation of light from water, an idea present in Indian mythology. In *The First Epistle* (distichs 4 and 5), Eminescu imagines the process of creation in a way that comes very close to the one described in the *Rigveda Hymn of Creation*, the most explicit cosmogonic hymn in Vedic literature: "At the beginning *kama*, the seed of mind, appeared in One. There were receptors of seed. There was greatness or power. Happiness was below, will above" (Bhose: Ibid.).

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy provides a possible decryption of the creation symbols from the perspective of the *Upanishads*, also known to M. Eminescu: "God is an essence without duality (*adwaida*) or, as some maintain, without duality but not without relations (*vishishtâdwaita*). He is only to be apprehended as Essence (*asti*), but this Essence subsists in a two-fold nature (*dwaitibhâva*), as being and as becoming. Thus, what is called the Entirety (kritsnam, pûrnam bhûman) is both explicit and inexplicit (*niruktānirukta*), sonant and silent (*shabdâshabda*), characterized and uncharacterized (*saguna, nirguna*), temporal and eternal (*kâlâkâla*), partite and impartite

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[*] All quotations of Mihai Eminescu's poems are Corneliu M. Popescu's translations unless stated otherwise:
www.estcomp.ro/eminescu/popescu.html

(*sakalâkalu*), in a likeness and not in any likeness (*mûrtâmurta*), shewn and unshewn (*vyaktâvyakta*), mortal and immortal (*martyâmartya*) ... and so forth. Whoever knows him [God] in his proximate aspect (*apara*), immanent, knows him also in his ultimate aspect (*para*), transcendent" (Coomaraswami 275).

Nirvana, Retreat and Quietude

In Eminescu's work, we can identify symbols of identity between man and God as well as symbols of the search for the profound self up to the moment when Karma is fulfilled and the fundamental ontological Quietude is found, all of which hold different poetic functions. Tantric Nirvana is for Eminescu a place of compensation, not of extinction, a place of withdrawal from the world's anguishes. Here we would like to mention that Mircea Eliade, the most knowledgeable Romanian author about Indian culture and philosophy, wrote that "The experience of Light signifies by excellence the meeting with the ultimate reality: that is why man discovers inner Light when he becomes aware of his Self (*ātman*), or when he perceives the essence of life and of cosmic elements or when he dies. In all these circumstances, the veil of illusion and ignorance is torn apart. Suddenly, man is blinded by Pure Light and falls into being. From a certain point of view, we can say that he transcends the profane world, the conditioned world and that the spirit reaches an absolute level, the level of Being and of the sacred. Brahman, like Buddha, is at the same time the sign of the sacred and of Being, of absolute reality. Indian thought identifies being with sacred and mystical knowledge, and it is through them that the mind wakes up to an awareness of reality. That is why you can find Light either through meditation on being – as it happens in the Upanishads and in Buddhism -, or through the attempt to reveal the sacred, as in some yoga teachings and in mystical schools. (...) According to Indian Philosophical thought, freedom and knowledge are related: he who knows, who has come to know the profane structures of being, is freed from his earthly life and no longer conditioned by cosmic laws; from now on, he enjoys divine spontaneity, no longer moving like human automata according to the laws of cause and effect, but 'dances' like gods or like flames." (Eliade b: 36-37). Much in advance of Mircea Eliade, M. Eminescu had already noticed these similarities and created some of his poems and prosej on the idea of reaching inner Nirvana as he had understood it from his studies in Indian culture. Amita Bhose, in her study ***A fundamental motif in Eminescu's poetry***, notices that "`Seated at the "cool balance of thought", Eminescu attains control of passions. Now he is equally indifferent to the pleasant and the unpleasant. Buddha's disciple has come near Nirvana. The spirit of *The Gloss* is also in conformity with that of the *Bhagavad-gita*, which maintains that one who is not moved by either happiness or sorrow, gain or loss, who remains the same in victory and defeat, and who is free from fear, anger and bitterness can verily be called wise" (*Bhagavad-gita*, II, 38, 56). *The Gloss* is immediately succeeded by *Ode in Sapphic Metre* (1883), permeated with an acute longing for death. To Eminescu's mind, death no longer signifies exit from sufferings. Buddha's teachings guide him not to look for salvation through death. He calls on "sad indifference" to help him pass over the humdrums of daily life. The poet believes that at last he has learnt to die" (Bhose b: 131-140). Here is an excerpt from Eminescu's poem *Ode in Sapphic Metre* which endorses Bhose's assertion: "I little thought that I would learn to die; / Forever young, enveloped in my cloak, / My dreaming eyes I lifted to the star / Of solitude. // When of a sudden you stood in my way, / On, anguish you, of nameless suffering sweet... / And to the dregs I dank the draught of death / Unpardoning. (...) By my own dreams consumed, I endless wail; / At my own pile I am consumed in flame, / Shall I then luminous one day return / As does the

Phoenix? / Tormenting eyes but vanish from my way, / Come to my breast again sad unconcern; / That I may die in peace at last, myself / Give back to me" (*ODE <in antique metre>*). This is, in Eminescu's vision, the moment when the three Vedic energies - **cit** (the absolute truth), **jiva** (individual soul) and **māyā** (material illusion) – allow for a transgression of time, space and causality, enabling enlightenment. Otherwise it would be impossible for the self to accept the sacred **Tat twam asi**, that Eminescu knew about and which gave the one of his poems.

Within this context, we can mention Amita Bhose's analysis of the poem *Rugăciunea unui dac (A Dacian's Prayer)* which "begins with a Vedic hymn dedicated to the God of creation, then moves to the steps of suffering towards death, towards the return of *atman* to *Brahman*. By mentioning the cosmogonic concept from *Rig-Veda*, the Upanishads philosophy of the link between individual soul and universal soul ('your breath will mine efface'), and the Buddhist doctrine and exit from samsara, the circle of birth ('into endless nothing I go, and leave no trace') (*A Dacian's Prayer*) the poem shows Eminescu's knowledge of Indian philosophies and represents a noble attempt to synthesize them" (Bhose b: 91). In addition, M. Eminescu also cultivates the **samsara** archetype, an obvious symbol in *Luceafărul (Lucifer)*, the most important poem of his entire literary work: "Hyperion, o child divine,/ Don't thus your state disclaim, / Nor ask for miracle, nor sign / That has nor sense nor name. // You wish to be a man of son, / To be a star you scorn; / But men quick perish every one, / And men each day are born. // Yet stars burn on with even glow, / And it is fate's intending / That they nor time, nor place shall know, / Unfettered and unending. // Out of eternal yesterday / Into tomorrow's grave, / Even the sun will pass way / That other sun's shall lave; // The sun that every morn does rise / At last its spirit gives, / For each thing lives because it dies, / And dies because it lives" (*Lucifer*).

Certainly, there are influences from *Atharva-Veda* regarding identity unaltered by the laws of time and causality.

Eminescu is also inspired in his meditations by one of *Bhagavad-Gita's* parables on the relativity of the material world, as if directly from Shankara's wisdom "For someone to metaphorically imagine the world, they should take a piece of clay – eternally the same -, which is therefore timeless – and shape it into different things, one at a time, this or that. The clay remains the same" (Eminescu b: Ms. 2285, f. 126). Not few are also the gods of ancient India mentioned by Eminescu either as self-standing mythological structures or as symbolic entities. Eminescu's favourite seems to be Kama, to whom he dedicated an entire poem: "In pain for love/ and wanting to heal my soul, / I called Kama in my sleep - / Kamadeva, the Indian god" *Kamadeva* (1887).

In conclusion, we can say that the entire work of Mihai Eminescu, the Romanian national poet has absorbed concepts, myths, archetypes and symbols of deep resonance in traditional Indian culture. His fiction too is shot through with topoi borrowed from the theory of avatars, the cycles of life and death, places-refuge of the Nirvana type, karmic structures, symbols of female and male as a sacred duality, the Manichaeist structure of the world, the complex processes of cosmogony or of world extinction. This and Eminescu's entire poetical work was thoroughly analysed by the Indian researcher Amita Bhose, who is the most pertinent analyst of these aspects of the creative imaginary in his case. The intention of this study has been to highlight, once again, the borderless movement of world's cultural values and the migration of sacred topoi between apparently completely different cultures.

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