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India as Object of Mircea Eliade's Gaze

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Abstract

Exotism is one of the blue prints of European literature in the 20th century, says Jean-Marc Moura in *La littérature des lointains. Histoire de l'exotisme européen au XXe siècle*. (Moura 1). He defines this desire of the other as "the totality of Europe's debt to other cultures" (Halen: web). Thereby he acknowledges the permanent change of Europe's literary map through the integration of other cultures. Exotism equals a favourable or desirous perception of alterity. This paper sets exotism in polarity to access to India as to an imagined community, pointing to orientalist Mircea Eliade, historian of religions, as an example in point.

[**Key Words** : Mircea Eliade, colonial India, Memoirs, Erotic Mystic]

Introduction

Pierre Halen distinguishes three types of alterity in which the West is grounded: Roman, Greek, and Byzantine. To them Jean-Marc Moura adds a fourth, which was generated by colonial imperialism, taking the form of « ekphrastic exotism », whereby he understands the "description of an alien art work, real or imaginary, in a piece of fiction" (Halen: web).

The founding of European colonies in India, by Portugal, England, the Netherlands spawned a rich harvest of exotic literature, especially in English and French, which included : Edward Morgan Forster (*A Passage to India*), Rudyard Kipling (*Kim*), Paul Scott (*The Jewel in the Crown*, *The Day of the Scorpion*, *The Towers of Silence*, *A Division of the Spoils*), Pierre Loti (*L'Inde sans les anglais*), André Chevrillon (*Dans l'Inde, Sanctuaires et Paysages d'Asie*), Romain Rolland (*Gandhi*), André Malraux (*Antimémoires*), Marguerite Duras (*Le Vice-consul*, *India Song*), Catherine

Clément (*La Reine des cipayes*), Alexandra David-Néel (*L'Inde où j'ai vécu*). Famous are also American Louis Bromfield (*Night in Bombay, The Rains Came*), Italian Pier Paolo Pasolini (*L'odore dell'India*), Alberto Moravia (*Un'idea dell'India*), and German Hermann Hesse (*Carnets indiens, Siddharta*). Fascination with India took Romanian Mircea Eliade on a three-year journey to initiation in Orientalistics. It ascended from exterior initiation (the discovery of the unknown Oriental space), through affective initiation (revelation of love as the royal way to the absolute), to anagogic initiation (philosophy, theology, yoga).

Mircea Eliade and India

Mircea Eliade's presence in India is not related to the traveller's or the explorer's curiosity but by a desire to be initiated into Orientalism, not through bookish studies but through unmediated contact.

He was only fourteen when he took up the study of Sanskrit, Persian and Hebrew. In 1928 he received a scholarship from a Maharajah to study Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy with Professor Surendranath Dasgupta. He was also initiated into Hindu theology and Yoga practices. His Indian adventure came to an end three years later, in 1931, when he returned to Romania for military service.

Upon his return, Eliade published two books about his adventure in the East: *India* and *The Maharajah's Library*. He reports on his unusual experiences, inroads into the jungle or into the Indian metropolises, liminal experiences (moments of excitement, of anxiety, of disenchantment or shocking discoveries for the European coming from Eastern Europe, from a different culture, encounters with outstanding Indian personalities: his benefactor, Manindra Chandra Nandy, the Kazimbazar Maharajah, known in Bengali for his magnanimity, Ghandi, the leader of the movement for non-violent liberation from the British rule, poet Rabindranath Tagore, who spoke to him about the gap between the East and the West.

India is Eliade's notebooks of the 1928-1931 period, where he jotted down his impressions, experiences and reflections. In the preface to the book, published in 1934, the author specifies that this is no travelogue or book of memoirs but off-hand jottings about the visited places, giving back a fragmented image of the Oriental space he had discovered: "This book is made of fragments on India; some of them were written on the spot, others were recollections, and a third group were taken out of an intimate notebook. This is not a unitary book on India [...] I chose to replace adventure with reportage, and reportage with narrative. (Eliade a. 5). Here and there description makes room for reflection or for narratives of adventures in various Oriental places.

Ceylon was Eliade's gate of entry into India. The encounter with the jungle world is

overwhelming. He is taking in the exotic landscape through heightened visual and olfactive perceptions, being overwhelmed by the abundant vegetation, dizzy with its piercing flavours. He experiences at first hand a nightmare which, to a western man, is unimaginable.

His body, the first receptacle of sensations, is almost crushed by their force which carries him from agony to exhilaration. The epithets convey this organic resonance, the ceaseless threshing of the senses: "a breeze pervaded by the fragrance of the sapful tree trunks", "an atmosphere saturated with strong and ravishing perfumes" (Eliade a. 13).

The jungle is working its power over the European soul with such force as to impose itself on the young man even when he has given it up as a form of possession: "The terrifying rush of saps makes you a prisoner, dragging you into the midst of their cruel slaughter, stirring and mocking you in your traveller modesty." (Eliade a. 17).

The jungle is the very image of creation, the endless show of the war between life and death and of their mix, the topos of a vitalist experience of sorts, and a permanent challenge to the senses: "This act of nature permanently spewing life, senselessly, for the mere joy of creation, for the joy of breathing in the sun and crying out its victory, makes one dizzy, makes one dumb" (Ibid.).

Eliade perceives the exotic miracle through sensations, the first step in the oriental space cognition being of a sensuous nature. His body is showered by sensations before his consciousness begins to reflect on the jungle experience: "You return to the world of men with the sense of having witnessed a miracle, something monstrous or something sacred, exceptional and irrational, which you can neither judge nor imitate" (Eliade a. 18).

By contrast with the jungle, as living show which suffuses the traveller with the joy of being in the world, the ocean's beach,

immense, desolate and impoverished, gives him a sense of waste and loneliness, similar to the one experienced in the vast low lands crossed by the Ganges.

The European unaccustomed with India's sultry weather, whose rains are hot and unexpected storms nightmarish, is plagued with sunstrokes. In the boiling sun of the low lands, his body loses its strength, his consciousness is over and again undone and recomposed, with temporary lapses into hallucinations.

Eliade enters a world that shocks a European through its unseemly mix of races, languages and religions, where civilizing efforts are frustrated by the resilience of aboriginal traditions still inviolate in the twentieth century. By that time, however, the liberation movement from the British rule instated in 1857 had started. In 1920 Mohandas K. Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi) had changed the Congress Party into a mass movement waging war against the British colonial rule. In the city of Amritsar, Eliade watches the effects of the civil war led by Gandhi: "I was in Northern India, the province that was most grievously affected, where no foreigner could move about without permission, where every stranger could be a revolutionary agent, and each Indian, a bomb maker (Eliade a. 71). He hears about the sacrifice of the 500 youngest answering Gandhi's call to non/violent resistance against the British rulers.

In 1930 he bears witness to the brutal repression of the students' and citizenry gathered together in the park of the Calcutta University:

Cordons of female Bengali students were broken by horsemen hitting left and right, whomever and wherever they could. Broken heads and ribs could be seen everywhere. There is however something that can only be seen in British India: children trampled under horses, children bleeding from hooves and cudgels" (Eliade a. 272). He goes on to say that

"nobody can intervene into someone else's destiny without committing a lawless act with consequences that would prove fatal eventually" (Eliade a. 276). He has in mind the belief in destiny, governed by the law of karma.

Eliade cannot get close to Gandhi excepta at his trial which he describes in *The Maharajah's Library*.

Eliade's view of the Indian space differs from the exotic cliches of other travellers crossing the continent and taking an outsider's view of India. The three years of unmediated experience forced Mircea Eliade to adapt himself to the daily life there, including cooking and transportation, but also in-depth studies in philosophy and theology. From the initial, external, perception of an alien struck by the novelty of a completely different culture, he progresses towards an inner vision as the fruit of erotic and spiritual experience. His Indian progress is one of initiation, of discovery and acquisition of knowledge at different levels: sensuous, affective, spiritual.

His infatuation with India does not exclude the objective grasp of the obvious gap among social classes as an effect of colonization, yet he does not allow himself to become a prisoner of cliches. Fascinated by Hindu spirituality, he seeks the company of poets and visits the Himalaya monasteries to watch religious customs and rites, even if his imperfect knowledge of Hindi forces him to communicate in a mixture of Urdu, Bengali and Sanskrit. (Dumitrache: web). He discovers the core of Hindu philosophy (in the *Upanishads*): outside the absolute reality of Brahman-atman, everything is merely appearance (*maya*). He reports on his journey through the jungle, his experience as hermit in a monastery, the Indian funeral rite (bodies are burnt on a pyre and entrusted to the Ganges), on the dark side of India with its horifying retinue of lepers, beggars, crippled, in sharp contrast to India's bright side; a

crocodile hunt is interspersed between journeys to Hindu temples and princely palaces, which occasion a display of what Jean-Marc Moura calls "ekphrastic exotism".

Being is just seeming he suggests in his story, *Nights at Serampore*, a belief he had acquired from his guru, Swami Shivananda, a former Indian physician, whom he met at the monastery of Rishikesh, where he found shelter after being driven out of Dasgupta's home for having an affair with his daughter.

In Hindu philosophy, what western thinkers take for reality is only a veil of appearances. The idea is illustrated in the story by an adventure in which are involved the narrator and his companion and explained away by Swami Shivananda, the physician who had "studied all philosophies in a quest for the peace of his soul" (Eliade d. :87) undertaken in the retreat of his cottage on the banks of the Ganges at Rishikesh. The narrator tells him his strange experience, with no rational explanation, of having got out of his time into another temporal interval, with which he interferes and modifies, while witnessing an event occurring 150 years back.

Swami Shivananda explains the difference between western and eastern philosophy, giving him a persuasive proof of the possibility to reenter a past moment and relive the experienced formerly triggered by Professor Suren Bose during a secret Tantric ritual: "Everything that goes on in our cosmos is illusionary. In a world of appearances, in which no thing and no event is consistent, in which nothing possesses a reality of its own, anybody can control certain forces which you choose to call occult, and do what do whatever he wishes. It is obvious that he too creates nothing real, but only a play of appearances" (Eliade d. 91).

The idea of annihilating time through yoga exercises is also present in *The Maharajah's Library*, but in a different sense: life can be prolonged after death according to one's own will, as yoga exercises can wake up in man the

"kundalini", i.e., "the cosmic potency planted in man which can bring about experiences unknown to ordinary psychic life" (Eliade d. 51).

In *India*, Eliade surveys the sundry races sharing the same territory, the religious differences between the Hindus and the Mahomedans, their conflicts, the effects of Hindu mentality (indifference to death, the squandering of one's wealth, passivity), the multicultural society, the characteristics of the Hindu soul (sincerity, thirst for love, respect for tradition, religious fervour), and several aspects of the Hindu religion: belief in the migration of the souls, imprisoned by Karma in the chain of reincarnations until the soul disengages itself from its social conditioning, breaking loose and recovering its cosmic dimension. The liberation can be achieved either in one's lifetime through techniques of spiritual elevation or through biological death.

Experimenting with mystic Hindu

In Hindu philosophy, woman embodies nature (Eliade h. 8), her nakedness revealing divine beauty, which means that she should be eyed admiringly but dispassionately, as a mystery of cosmic creation rather than as the object of a lay man's gaze [...] In India, every woman is a Devi, a goddess [...] India sees in woman neither a virgin nor a mistress, but only the goddess, the self-sacrificing mother" (Eliade a. 257).

The body participates in a cosmic ritual, and erotic experience is mystic.

The union of man and woman according to Hindu mentality is not a profane act but the union of two deities, a ceremonial ritual following a divine model: "The sexual union is a ritual that changes the human couple into a divine one" (Eliade h. 9-10)

Young Eliade experiences in Calcutta this kind of love for Maitreyi, the very image of female Indian exoticism, but also of mystic Hindu spirituality.

His erotic experience is narrated in the novel *Maitreyi*. The heroine is a sixteen-year-old Bengali, who initiates him into Hindu erotic mystic. She combines innocence and maturity, intelligence and naivety, prudery and audacity, play and provocation. Her virginal body bespeaks sensuality, exerting an irresistible charm. It is a deity's body progressively revealed in an ambiguous play of sensuousness and innocence which her male partner cannot quite comprehend: "I know she is excessively sensual, even if as pure as a saint" (Eliade b. 61). On seeing her next to him, as a guest, he experiences the mystic of her body: "one could say she lived in virtue of a miracle, not biologically" (Eliade b. 12).

The growing intimacy of the couple, through a blend of sensuality, friendship, attraction, and love, in the home of the engineer who intends to adopt him and settle with his family in Europe, goes through Tantric rituals, as the sexual act presupposes initiation into the moment of ecstasy, otherwise it remains a purely carnal union. Initiation includes spiritual exercises. With the Indians, everyday life is suffused with mythology, gestures and conduct being dictated by the Vedas. Every Indian goes through an initiation within his own caste, he observes religious rites and the tradition he learns since childhood. *Maitreyi* makes no exception, it is only that her sentimental choice does not confirm to the very strict principles of her caste. Those who do not observe them are punished, being driven away from home for fear they might draw the divine curse on the whole family.

Maitreyi aspires to an all-consuming love, in which the individual being is absorbed into the Divine. It is the archetype of *Shakti* (the female principle, the energia), while Allan, a Shiva figure, the masculine, passive, principle, is woken up, initiated by *Shakti*. Extremely sensuous, *Maitreyi* experiences a sense of totality, of cosmic absorption through a merely visual contact or a touch. The male body is not carnal temptation to her, but an

instrument of access to a higher world. The mental make-up making the difference between Europe and India is also manifest at this level of the erotic relationship. *Maitreyi* tells more than once to the European Allan, with whom she falls in love, that he does not understand love, while Allan keeps repeating to himself that he is not in love, but merely attracted by her charm, by the virgin's irresistible sensuality. For all that, before the physical possession of her body, Allan will experience, despite himself and astonished at himself, the Indian erotic mystic in the scene of the look which releases a state of inexpressible magic and total communion, as some kind of absolute possession. It is through the gaze, not through the body that he reaches mystic ecstasy: "We were staring at each other bewitched, flooded by the same unnaturally sweet current, incapable to resist, to shed off so much charm [...], experiencing a calm and at the same time violent sense of contentment, to which the soul will give in – the beatitude of the sense which surpasses sensuality, as if we had shared in a heavenly bliss, in a state of grace." (Eliade b.75). For *Maitreyi*, the union of two people is the fusion of two principles, male and female, the erotic act being the fulfilment of the existential meaning ordained by the Divinity (Eliade b. 110).

Indian mentality does not however allow of the mesalliance with a stranger. This is the source of the dramatic fate of forbidden love among people belonging to different castes. Mircea Eliade fell so deeply in love with *Maitreyi*, his mentor's son, that he decided to convert to Hinduism in order to marry the sixteen-year-old Bengali. Their love and marriage were deemed impossible by Indian mentalities that prohibited marriage to an impure stranger, despite the sacrifice the westerner was ready to commit accepting a new religion and a new culture.

The lovers are separated and punished. Driven out of the house, Mircea Eliade will live a hermit's life in a monastery close to the

Himalaya mountains, where monks practised Yoga techniques. It was there that he began his initiation into Yoga which would be the subject of several of his books: *Techniques du Yoga* (1948), *Le Yoga. Immortalité et liberté* (1954), *Patañjali et le Yoga* (1962).

Eliade and Hindu spirituality

In the Ashram Swarga monastery, where he spent several months, Eliade was taken to a higher level of initiation by his guru, Swami Shivananda. He discovered the yoga practices and lives of the monks living there in meditation and prayer: "Prayer is not always devotional, religious, in the Christian sense of the word, but rather a spiritual exercise in inner purification and metaphysical athletics." (Eliade a. 195).

The purpose of the Yoga practice is the liberation of the individual from temporality and the accession to absolute freedom, as, in Hindu philosophy, being is only a veil of appearances, illusion (*maya*). Nothing exists except for the Creator's absolute reality. Monks in monasteries and ascetics in caves break loose from life's turmoil through spiritual exercise in view of "acceding to" the only reality, Brahman-atman, the soul which is identical in man and in the universe (Eliade a. 186) - an upanishadic motif. He discovers his self in order to pass the cosmic one: "Brahman is the only God, immanent in the whole of creation, and yet transcendent" (Eliade a. 95)

Mircea Eliade enters into the core of Hindu philosophy through study. In *Yoga. Immortality and Freedom*, he identifies and defines the fundamental notions at the basis of Hindu spirituality: *Karman*, *maya*, *nirvana* and *yoga*. *Karman* is the "law of universal causality" which conditions human existence. *Maya* is the "cosmic illusion", while *nirvana* is the "absolute reality", existing beyond illusion and human experience. The "pure Being (the Absolute), called the Self (atman) or Brahman,

is the "undetermined, transcendent, immortal, indestructible, or Nirvana".

Yoga consists of the "means of reaching being, the techniques which are appropriate to go through in order to reach final liberation (*moskṣa, mukti*)" (Eliade g. 15).

The Hindu sage discovers universal suffering, in which Hindu philosophy is rooted. Human existence generates suffering, but this belongs to an individual's personal drama, not to the spirit (the soul, the Self), named *paruṣa, atman*, which is "eternal and cannot be mixed up with psycho-mental life". The purpose of Hindu philosophy is liberation: "To rid oneself from suffering, this is the purpose of all Hindu philosophies and mystics. Liberation is achieved directly through knowledge [...] or through techniques [...], but no science is any worth, if it does not aim at man's redemption" (Eliade g. 15).

Hindu thought aspires to ultimate truth by virtue of its soteriologic function: "The utmost purpose of a Hindu sage [...] is liberation, the conquest of absolute freedom" (Ibid.). The liberation from social-historical determinism is realised through different methods: gnosis or yoga exercises, which presuppose asceticism and meditation. It is through knowledge that man will "wake up" from ignorance, realising that his spirit's dependence on matter is only illusion. Hence he will try to shed the illusions of the phenomenal world through yoga practices, which impose self-control on the body and help the spirit concentrate on its transcending of the human condition and access to a higher, absolute reality.

"Knowledge is merely an <awakening> that reveals the essence of the Self, of the spirit" (Eliade g. 35), and which cannot be acquired through intellectual toil but through revelation. During the "awakening" or the "illumination", the object and the subject become one (the "Self" is self-<contemplating>)" (Ibid.). This is not thought, Eliade explains, which is a mental activity as

an attribute of nature (*prakṛti*), i.e. of matter as primordial matter.

Man believes that the spirit (soul) is matter's *ancilla* (servant), and that it can break loose from it, but that is only an illusion of psychomental life, for the spirit is eternal and free.

"Liberation" means the *anagnorisis* (recognition) of this eternal freedom and of the fact that life is a succession of painful moments which do not involve the spirit, because the spirit is only a detached observer. The one that breaks loose is annihilating his personality understood as a "synthesis of psycho/mental experiences" (Ibid.). Hence suffering is external to the spirit, it belongs the personality side. The one "set free" disengages himself from psychomental life and attains absolute freedom through the return of the individual self to the primordial oneness of the universal Self. He escapes karma, the consequences of his deeds.

Conclusions

In his search of oriental wisdom, Mircea Eliade comes to an understanding of the Hindu soul, generous, sincere, joyous, thirsting for freedom in the spirit of his religion, in which all Indians are brought up, coming to think that their destiny is decided by the law of karma, that nobody has the right of the power to intervene into the three decisive events of an Indian's life: birth, marriage and death. Hence the passive acceptance of life, the devotion to one's family and traditions, the serene acceptance of death as a way to the liberation of the soul from matter, which is the purpose of a Hindu life's.

Young Eliade, bearing witness to everyday life in India for three years, accedes gradually to the essence of Hindu philosophy, discovering the fundamental difference between Occident and Orient. The western man aspires to individual freedom, to the attainment of materialist targets, to the

exercise of power, the family being a fragile institution in Europe. He is traditionally an atheist or a Catholic, but not a devotee. By contrast, the Hindu acts out of conviction and religious devotion, and out of respect for tradition which governs his existence. To him, family is a sacred institution, woman is the creative mother-goddess, respected by all for her devotion to the family, which is an existential purpose accepted throughout in India.

The perspectives on oriental existence are contributed by multiple voices in *India*. On the one hand, there is the narrator observing and discovering from the outside; on the other, there are the insider perspectives of indigenous male and female Hindus. A third vantage point is the erotic and spiritual initiation in *Maitreyi*.

An Indian woman's mentality and status are defined in relation to the European ones by a female voice: "We're not interested in freedom. That's an illusion which sooner or later you will discard. Our lives are governed by Fate, by Karma, and any attempted escape will only *tighten* its hook *around your neck*. To us, happiness is not a whim, it is not something fleeting and irresponsible, passionate and sentimental infatuation. [...]. To an Indian woman, happiness never lies in individual initiative, but in the institution which teaches the time-honoured ideal of family, of the rearing of children. Bliss and final liberation only become possible if we give up on our passionate whims, our shallow and ephemeral ideals, and aspire to the mothers' perfection. [...] In all religious rituals we commune with our imagined greatgrandmothers (Eliade a. 258-259).

To the Indians, everything is mystic - religion, philosophy, eros, even politics - says a representative of the non-violent liberation movement: "Our struggle is not an abstraction, a matter of principles, nor confined to claims. Our struggle is a crusade for the liberation of the mother ("India is

Mother to Us”) That is why it is not politics but mystics: we accede to freedom, as Mahatma says, through purification, by renouncing selfhood, through non/violent agony, Our politics is ascetic apprenticeship.” (Eliade a. 277).

Indian philosophy has a soteriologic purpose, the Indian sage seeks the supreme truth, the absolute reality. It is through knowledge in the sense of "awakening" or "illumination" that the Hindu will get off the hook of suffering caused by psycho-mental activity, finally realizing that the spirit is actually free and immortal, that it does not go down to either psyche or thinking, which are steeped in the primordial substance of life, in matter.

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