

The Impact of the East and India on the Genius of William Somerset Maugham

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ABSTRACT

East had charmed and influenced Maugham so much that he returned again and again to the East for the themes of his novels. The Midas touch of Indian philosophy laid its golden hands on Somerset Maugham and influenced him so much that he felt his search for the meaning of life culminates in India. He constantly turned to the East and India to study the “unique man with all his oddities”. He wanted to see ‘the life in the raw’. In India he found answers to all his questions about the existence of the human beings, transmigration of soul etc.

KEYWORDS

Variety; Contradictions; Hindu Philosophy; Religious Traditions; Immortal Soul.

British novelist, playwright, and short story writer William Somerset Maugham was born on January 25, 1874 in Paris as the sixth and youngest son of the solicitor to British embassy. French was his native town. He was orphaned at the age of 10 and was sent to England to live with his uncle, the Vicar of Whitstable. He was educated at King’s school, Canterbury and Heidelberg University. He studied medicine which gave him an opportunity “to see life in raw.” He started believing that a medical training is necessary for every writer as he could get an opportunity to see different emotions and feeling bare.

In order to get certificates, Maugham had to undergo some practical training. His experience in the state of Lambeth excited his creative instinct. He says,

In these three years I must have witnessed pretty well, every emotion of which man is capable.....It appeals to my

dramatic instinct. It excited the novelist in me I saw what hope looked like, fear and relief, I saw the dark lines that despairs drew on a face, I saw courage and stead fastness.

His medical training disclosed to him that man is the most wonderful creation of God and “We learn resignation not by our own suffering, but by the suffering of others.” He got deeply interested in man. He loved human beings for their oddity and believes that each man has been gifted with a harmonious blending of good and evil.

Maugham never felt at home in England. He always felt shy with English people. To him England has been a country where he had obligations to fulfill and responsibilities that irked him. For Maugham, the East had become more and more a liberation from all that had been a burden to him.

Thus, according to Maugham’s own statement, his first interest in the East had

come by the way of literature. In later years an additional reason was his search for material for his novels, as he says, he finds more variety of sentiments and emotions in the eastern people.

When asked by an American writer, Robert Van Gelder, "Why have you, after *Of Human Bondage*, so rarely returned to the English scene for your characters and background?" The author himself answered, "In England, you know, civilization goes fairly deep and it is an old civilization. This makes for an apparent sameness in the people. One must go through many layers to discover what it is that sets each man apart, to discover the unique and the natural man. Every man is unique, of course, but the strangeness that makes a man a story, the oddity within him, is not easy to find in a man who wears his civilization thickly. During the First World War I travelled and after it my travels become extensive. In those parts of the world where civilization is worn thinner, I found the unique man far easier to see. Material leaped at me-I handled it as well as I could.

Maugham's nostalgia for foreign countries finds its literary expression in his works. He repeatedly made several journeys to the East and he never returned the same as before. So he, as well as his philosophy of life transformed significantly as a result of his encounter with new people whom he met in the East. Now, he comes across new types of human beings, uncultured according to the European standards but Maugham realizes that they have learned life in a different school. He had a great admiration for the eastern culture and cannot help in proclaiming, ".....Then it seemed to me that in these countries of the East the most impressive, and more awe-inspiring monument of antiquity is neither temple, nor citadel, great wall, but man"

In Europe he has never found the contradictions in man so obvious in form as in the East, for civilization in the Europe

exercises such a powerful influence upon man that he is overpowered by it. Maugham says, "Culture is a mask that hides their faces. Here people show themselves bare,"

William Somerset Maugham arrived in India in 1938, to find inspiration for a novel, which he decided to write incorporating Hindu philosophy. After roaming in many cities in his quest to know the meaning of life he reached Chennai, where he got a rare chance to meet a sage, as he would later write, "a swami who was most celebrated and the most revered then in India. They called him the Maharishi." He planned to meet the Maharishi to quench his thirst for the knowledge of Hindu philosophy. Along with a customary fruit basket, he arrived in Tiruvannamalai at the ashram of Bhagvan Sri Ramana Maharishi who later became the fictional guru in his novel *The Razor's Edge*.

Paul Brunton, a London Journalist, wrote a book 'A Search in Secret India' in 1934 to record his experiences with the holy Maharishi. Maharishi got renown in the West through this book. Life magazine devoted a feature to Maharishi in the May 30, 1994 issue titled, "Holy man Sri Ramana Maharishi has India's answer to most of men's problems." Renowned journalist for Life magazine, Winthrop Sargent Wrote: "Sri Ramana's views are extremely orthodox. His life of austerity, his renunciation of all worldly desires, his contemplative serenity, his unshakable peace of mind are all part of the traditional equipment of the Hindu sage." But Maugham happened to be ignorant of all this. He only came to know about him when he visited India. He could not tolerate the scorching heat of India and fainted outside the ashram of Sri Raman Maharishi. He tells the incident in 1958 in an essay, "The saint:" "I was carried into a hut and laid on a pallet bed. I did not know how long I remained unconscious, but presently I recovered. I felt, however, too ill to move. The Maharishi was told what had

happened, and that I was not well enough to come into the hall in which he ordinarily sat, so, after some time, followed by two or three disciples, he came into the hut into which I had been taken.”

Sri Ramana Maharishi sat near his bed. “After the first few minutes,” Maugham continuous, “during which his eyes, with a gentle benignity, rested on my face, he ceased to look at me, but, with a side long stare of peculiar fixity, gazed, as it were. He remained thus, motionless, for perhaps a quarter of an hour; and they told me later that he was concentrating in meditation upon me. Then he came to, if I may so put it, and again looked at me. He asked me if I wished to say anything to him, or to ask any question. I was feeling weak and ill and said so; where upon he smiled and said, “Silence is also conversation.”

Maugham had a deep interest in the religious traditions of the East. His motive to visit India was to collect information on Hinduism. So his experience at the ashram was exhilarating for him. In his novel, later, he described Maharishi as “neither thin nor fat, polish brown in colour and clean-shaven, with close cropped white hair. He never wore anything but a loincloth, and yet he managed to look as trim and neat and well dressed as a young man in one of Brooks brothers’ advertisements.”

During the Second World War time, Maugham wrote *‘The Razor’s Edge’* to express his own disillusionment from the game of power, money, greed and lust. He coined the title of his novel from a passage in Kathopnishad: “Like the sharp edge of a razor, the sages say, is the path. Narrow it is, and difficult to tread.”

Maugham’s hero, Larry Darrell, a young American starts seeking for the meaning of life after the tragic death of his friend. He rejects the material life and wanted “to know whether God is or God is not.” He wanted to “find out why evil exists. I want to know whether I have an immortal soul or whether when I die, its end.” His quest culminated in a South

Indian ashram where he meets Shri Ganesha. Larry describes his meeting with Shri Ganesha: “When I got down to Travancore I found I needn’t have asked for information about Shri Ganesha, Everybody knows him.” I found a young man at the entrance of the compound and asked if I could see the Yogi. I’d brought with me the basket of fruit, which is the customary gift to offer. In a few minutes the young man came back and led me into a long hall with windows all around it. In one corner Shri Ganesha sat in the attitude of meditation on a raised dais covered with a tiger skin. ‘I’ve been expecting you, he said..... Before he’d said another word I knew this was the man I’d been seeking ‘What have you come here for?’ he asked. I began to tell him how I’d come to India and how I’d passed my time for three years; how, on report of their wisdom and sanctity, I’d gone to one holy man after another and had found no one to give me what I looked for. He interrupted me: All that I know. There is no need to tell me. What have you came for? ‘So that you may be my Guru, he said.” Larry stayed in the ashram and quenched his thirst for real knowledge, their Vedanta in the end, when Larry leaves India to the United States, he was firm to lead a life of “Calmness, forbearance, and compassion, selflessness and continence.” And he felt “never been happier or felt more independent,” in his life.

Even Hindus would get surprised to see Maugham’s depth of knowledge on Hindu philosophy. Larry says:

Advaita doesn’t ask you to take anything on trust; it asks only that you should have a passionate craving to know Reality; it states that you can experience joy or pain. And there are men in India—hundreds of them for all I know—who have the certitude that they have done so. I found something wonderfully satisfying in the notion that you can attain Reality by

knowledge. In later ages the sages of India, in recognition of human infirmity, admitted that salvation may be won by way of love and the way of works, but they never denied that the noblest way, though the hardest, is the way of knowledge, for its instruments is the most precious faculty of man, his reason.

On reincarnation Larry, the hero of *The Razor's Edge* says,

"Can there be anything more stupendous than the conception that universe has no beginning and no end, but passes everlastingly from growth, the equilibrium to decline, from decline to dissolution, from dissolution to growth, and so on to all eternity?"

(Maugham to Larry) "And what do the Hindus think is the object of this endless recurrence?"

(Larry) "I think they'd say that such is the nature of the Absolute. You see, they believe that the purpose of creation is to serve as a stage for the punishment or reward of the deeds of the soul's earlier existences."

(Maugham to Larry) "Which pre supposes belief in the transmigration of souls?"

(Larry) "It's a belief held by two thirds of the human race

Maugham assimilated the Hindu theory of karma and makes his hero proclaim this fact that one should do good deeds in order to lead a better and happier life in the next birth. He says,

If the evils we suffer are the result of sins committed in our past lives, we can bear them with resignation and hope that if in this one, we strive

towards virtue, our future lives will be less afflicted. But it's easy enough to bear our own evils; all we need for, that is a little manliness; what is intolerable is the evil, often so unmerited in appearance, which befalls other. If you can persuade yourself that it is the instable result of the past, you may pity, you may do what can to alleviate-and you should- but you have no cause to be indignant.

Larry further expresses his views about the absolute, typical Hindu in essence - "according to Vedantists, the self, which they call the Atman and we call the soul, is distinct from the body and its senses, distinct from the mind and its intelligence; it is not part of the Absolute, for the Absolute, being infinite, can have no parts but the Absolute itself. It is uncreated; it has existed from eternity and when at last it has cast off seven veils of ignorance, will return to the infinitude from which it came. It is like a drop of water that has arisen from the sea and in a shower has fallen into a puddle, then drifts into a brook, finds it's way into a stream, after that into a river, passing through mountain gorges and wide plains, winding this way and that, obstructed by rocks and fallen trees, till at last it reaches the boundless sea from which it rose.

Larry was also astonished and accepts the fact with an open and clear heart that "Indians look up on the word as an illusion (Maya)." He raises a question "Why Brahman should create the world." He could not digest that God, who has created this world, could create evil also. He says,

Well, if you ask that question, the answer you're generally given is that the Absolute created the world in sport without reference to any purpose. But when you think of flood and famine or earth quake and hurricane and all the ills that flesh is

heir to, your moral sense is outraged at the idea that so much that is shocking can have been created in play. Shri Ganesha had too much kindness of heart to believe that; he looked upon the world an expression of the Absolute and as the overflow of its perfection. He taught that God cannot help creating, and the world is the manifestation of his nature. When I asked how, if the world was a manifestation of the nature of a perfect being, it should be so hateful that the only reasonable aim man can set before him is to liberate himself from its bondage. Shri Ganesha answered that the satisfaction of the world are transitory and that only the Infinite gives enduring happiness. But endless duration makes good no better; nor whites any whiter. If the rose at noon has lost the beauty it had at dawn, the beauty it had then was real. Nothing is the world is permanent, and we're foolish when we ask anything to last, but surely

we're still foolish not to delight in it while we have it. If change is the essence of existence one would have thought it only sensible to make it the premise of our philosophy. We can, none of us, step into the same river twice, but the river flows on and the other river we step into, is cool and refreshing too.

So, we can conclude that the East had charmed and influenced Maugham so much that he returned again and again to the East for the themes of his novels. The Midas touch of Indian philosophy laid its golden hands on Somerset Maugham and influenced him so much that he felt his search for the meaning of life culminates in India. He constantly turned to the East and India to study the "unique man with all his oddities". He wanted to see 'the life in the raw'. In India he found answers to all his questions about the existence of the human beings, transmigration of soul etc. For Maugham, the East had become more and more a liberation from all that had been a burden to him.

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