

An Echo of Maya in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*

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ABSTRACT

Ursula K. Le Guin is a well-known science fiction writer in America. She often makes use of foreign cultures and philosophy in her fictions to convey her message about human civilization and values. In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin blends philosophical and scientific ideas in an inextricable way. She uses the Indian philosophic concept of 'Maya' and shows the two different planets – Urras and Anarres – having different principles. The inhabitants of the two planets are entangled in 'Maya' and refuse to realize the truth. They forgot the global harmony that prevails among the people. The protagonist Shevek yields to 'Maya' but finds the way to redeem himself from temporal pleasures. The paper makes an attempt to eulogize the concept of 'Maya' and brings out the common phenomenon that binds the eastern and western mind.

KEYWORDS

The Dispossessed; Maya; Urras and Anarres.

India is a land of rich cultural heritage and a mosaic of faith, religion and philosophical thoughts. In his Preface to his book *Indian Mysticism*, Swami Chidatman Jee Maharaj remarks, "India is a land of staggering of contrast with a mingling of the tradition and modernity that is a unique experience to be in India". It is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. It sheds its spectrum of light on various philosophical ideas. Among many philosophical schools, Indian philosophy's contribution to the world is unique. Indian philosophy is noted for its spiritual binding and its varied spiritual journey to the growth of the mankind. This paper makes an attempt to examine and illumine the concept of Maya in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* in which there is the fine blend of philosophy and science.

Maya is a fundamental concept in Hindu philosophy. The word Maya is derived from the Sanskrit roots ma ("not") and ya ("that") which literally means "that which

is not". Its meaning varies depending upon different schools of philosophy. It brings various notions of maya as magic, supernatural power, non-entity, and projection of worldly appearance and ultimately it explains the cosmic world in Rig Veda. The word Maya actually refers to supernatural power of Gods, especially Varuna, Mitra, and Indra.

In the Upanishadic philosophy, the concept of Maya refers to the sphere of metaphysics. In Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the word 'Maya' refers to unreality. It is noted as "Unreality is here compared to Not-being, to Darkness or to Death" (Pandey, 47). The Ishopanishad tells us that "truth is veiled in the universe" (Pandey, 48). In Kathopanishad, the people who lives in ignorance, thinking of themselves as wise is referred as a blind man following the blind in search of reality. The other Upanishads like Chhandogya Upanishad and Mundakopanishad also convey the same idea and in all these

Upanishads, 'Maya' refers to ignorance and it is indirectly conveyed by the usage of words like 'cover', 'veil' and so on. But only in Svetasvatara Upanishad, the word 'Maya' is used for the first time to denote the great Lord as Mayin

Theos Bernard notes that in Kashmir Saivism maya is considered not as a separate reality, but as the gross power of consciousness and is referred as Maya Sakti. The five evolutes of maya in Kashmir Saivism are called as Kañcukas. They are Kāla (Time), Niyati (Space), Rāga (Desire), Vidyā (Limited Knowledge) and Kalā (Limited Power).

In Advaita Vedanta Philosophy, maya is the 'limited, purely physical and mental reality in which our everyday consciousness has become entangled'. As Radhakrishnan pointed out in Indian Philosophy:

Maya is the power which enables him to produce mutable nature. It is Sakti, or the energy of Isvara, or atmavibhuti, the power of self-becoming. Isvara and maya in this sense are mutually dependent and are both beginningless. The power of the maya is called Maya in the Gita (Radhakrishnan, 539).

But sometimes it is considered as 'delusive power'. It refers to man's everlasting yearning for temporal or physical pleasures that does not lead them to the absolute truth or reality. This paper envisages and highlights this concept in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*.

Ursula K. Le Guin is one of the eminent science fiction writers. She is noted for her versatile writing. She has written novels, poetry, Children's books, essays and short stories, notably fantasy and science fiction. She was born and raised in California. She often makes use of alien cultures to convey a message about human culture. She gives importance to the individual moral responsibility through her characters. Her major works include *The Earthsea Trilogy*, *Rocannon's World*,

The City of Illusions, *Planet of Exile*, *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*.

In Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, scientific and philosophical ideas are yoked together in an inextricable way. The Protagonist Shevek is a young scientist and an anarchist from the planet Anarres. He wishes to exhibit his talents in his neighbouring planet Urras, which is considered to be the enemy to the Anarres inhabitants. The Anarres people call the Urras people as 'Propertarian'. The novelist shows the two different planets having different principles. The Anarres highlights the anarchist principles and showed itself as an idealist society while the Urras people are capitalist and had a proper government that abides by the rules and regulations. But both the planets disappoint Shevek and lead him to understand the ultimate truth. His life can well be compared to a sage's life. In Anarres, survival is the biggest problem. If one wants to survive, he/she has to go anywhere else for job. The job is not permanent and they have been allotted to a particular area by PDC. PDC (Public Distribution Coordination) controls and runs the job of the Anarres people as it does not have a government.

When Shevek was born, his mother Rulag has been promoted to work in the Central Institute of Engineering, Abbenay. His desolated life starts from his childhood. Though he lives only with his father, he is very much happy to be with him. He likes to be a good physicist. His interest in Mathematics and Physics raised him as a good scientist. He questions more to his friends and tries to find the answer from his childhood. The scientist's search will predominantly underlie the various innovative ideas regarding the material prosperity. But Shevek's search goes beyond this search. His search is not just a search for material prosperity but beyond that.

Under the influence of maya, the Urrastians mistakenly identify themselves

with the body. They accept such thoughts as “I am white and I am a man”, or “This is my house, my country, and my religion”. They give priority to their eternal joys in this temporal world forgetting their ultimate destination. They did not ponder upon the soul’s eternal elevation to the transcendental world. Their happiness born and decay within this temporal world due to their ignorance. Shevek invents the General Temporal Theory that will lead to the invention of a new device called ‘ansible’ against FTL (Faster than Light Travel). This device enables the people to communicate with the inhabitants of various planets within a brief time. He wishes that his visit to Urras will be fruitful to him by enabling him to share his idea with the Urrasti scientist and may help him to give his theory to the entire world. But he fails in his attempt. Being an idealist, Shevek does not give importance to the selfish attitude of the Urrastians. His priority is only towards the welfare of the society. When Chifoilisk, the representative of the government of Planet Thu threatens Shevek by referring to the selfish attitude of Urras scientist, he says:

You know what I want, Chifoilisk, I want my people to come out of exile. I came here because I don't think you want that, in Thu. You are afraid of us, there. You fear we might bring back the revolution, the old one, the real one, the revolution for justice in A-Io they fear me less because they have forgotten the revolution. They don't believe in it enough things they will be content to live in prison. But I will not believe that.

I want the walls down. I want solidarity, human solidarity. I want free exchange between Urras and Anarres. I worked for it as I could on Anarres, now I work for it as I can on Urras. There I acted. Here I bargain (The Dispossessed, 116).

Shevek symbolizes a saint or a philosopher in his notion towards life and his thought is

far-reaching and different from the ordinary scientists. His life devoid of maya or illusion is a typical model to the inhabitants in both the planets.

Shevek is dispossessed of what he has. He does not belong either to his native land Anarres or to his adopted land Urras. He is not having quest for identity yet he knows that his desire for the land is neutral. He is not injected by maya or Illusion as he sees all the human beings and nature as one. He does not discriminate anyone or anything through their material needs. When he was lured by the beauty of Urras, he realizes his mistake and says: “I’m thinking like an Urrasti...Like a damned propertarian. As if deserving meant anything. As if one could earn beauty, or life!” (*The Dispossessed*, 172).

Life is not chosen, it is given by God to us. It is recorded in Bhagavad Gita, ch.13, Verse 29 as “He sees, who sees that all actions are performed by nature alone, and that the Self is action less”. The self is the silent witness to all the events. Shevek realizes this in his life. Being a scientist, he can invent things for material prosperity but he realizes the relationship between the function of universe and self. One who goes after material needs can’t realize the Self and their craze for the material enjoyment will deny them to realize the heavenly wisdom. It keeps them ignorant of the bright life forever. Shevek understands this in his course of life. When he comes to Urras, he comes with a lot of hopes. But he was disappointed by the selfish attitude of the Urras people. From the beginning, he is desolated from the maddening crowd. Even though they tried hard and made him feel happy, he is unable to enjoy that temporal pleasure. There is some barrier within him that kept him away from the fellow beings.

He had come to love Urras; but what good was his yearning love? He was not part of it. Nor was he part of the world of his birth...He was alone, here because he came from a self-

exiled society. He had always been alone on his own world because he had exiled himself from his society. The settlers had taken one step away. He had taken two. He stood by himself, because he had taken the metaphysical risk.

And he had been fool enough to think that he might serve to bring together two worlds to which he did not belong (The Dispossessed, 76).

Such kind of behaviour makes him to be elevated from the normal scientist to a saint with the metaphysical ideas. He comes to Urras empty handed and left to Anarres without carrying anything.

Ahamgara (ego-consciousness) and Karma are seen as part of the binding forces of maya. Sri Sankaracharya says of Maya

As the sun is hidden by clouds produced by the solar rays, but surely, the character of the day is not hidden by those modified dense collection of clouds, so the Self, though pure, (or undefiled) is veiled for a long time by ignorance. But its power of consciousness in living being which is established in this world is not veiled

Shevek is a typical model to his search for Self. He says:

There was something lacking – in him, he thought, not in the place. He was not up to it. He was not strong enough to take what was so generously offered. He felt himself dry and arid, like a desert plant, in this beautiful oasis. Life on Anarres had sealed him, closed off his soul, the waters of life welled all around him, and yet he could not drink (The Dispossessed, 108-109).

He did his duty as it is given to him. He does not react against any events; he is just a witness to all the incidents. His response is neutral to all kinds of qualities such as joy, sorrow, anger, and jealousy.

Whatever one did is just the karma or the duty of a person to fulfill in this material life. Despite of realizing this truth, people are lured by maya that exists in the world eternally and suffered by its effects. When Shevek sees the birds in the Urras, he feels that the birds are chirping in the sky as “This is my propertee –tee, this is my territoree-ree-ree, it belongs to mee, mee...” (The Dispossessed, 171). Yet he tries to accept the bitter reality. He remarks, “When in the Land of Property think like a propertarian. Dress like one, eat like one, act like one, be one” (Dispossessed, 174). His acceptance of life is not passive, he accepts his sufferings willingly. To him the word “happiness, sorrow, identity” seem to be a humbug. In his view, all these qualities do not seem to exist. Luxury, he enjoys in the planet Urras does not tempt him and at the same time the poverty in Anarres doesn’t gave him any sufferings.

Shevek views both the features equally. To him the experience he had in both the planets is neutral.

Fulfillment, Shevek thought is a function of time. The search for pleasure is circular, repetitive, atemporal. The variety-seeking of the spectator, the thrill-hunter, the sexually promiscuous, always ends in the same place. It has an end. It comes to the end and has to start over. It is not a journey and return but a closed cycle, a locked room, a cell.

Outside the locked room is the landscape of time, in which the spirit maya, with luck and courage, construct the fragile, makeshift, improbable roads and cities of fidelity: a landscape inhabitable by human beings (The Dispossessed, 275).

As one is disappointed by the mirage in the desert, man disappoints himself by luring in the temporal pleasures. But he is unaware of the fact that these pleasures are not eternal joy to man and it will not provide any fruitful things to him. It is just an elusive dream. The inhabitants in Urras

and Anarres are entangled in Maya and refuse to realize the truth or reality. They forgot the global harmony that prevails among the people. Shevek can't be merely said as a scientist as he invokes philosophical ideas to the entire world. He stands as an epitome of idealistic principles. Through him, the author wants to reveal the eternal truth to the mass audience. Le Guin brings out the oneness of humanity by blending the philosophical ideas in Science Fiction. She emphasizes the unison of people in this novel and this

paper tries to bring forth the resonance of Hinduism especially the concept of Maya in this novel. The protagonist Shevek is the person who yields to Maya but finds the way to redeem himself from temporal pleasures and thus becomes a model to everyone in this illusive world. This paper thus makes an attempt to eulogize the concept of Maya in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and brings out the common phenomenon that binds the eastern and western mind.

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