



Transmission of Humanitarian Ideals through Literary Works

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Abstract

Literature is a cultural artifact. It mirrors the societal and political conditions of an age. The authors are the harbingers who capture the spirit of their age and transport the human emotions, which are universal, in their literary writings. During the creative process of a work, they amalgamate external influences of their surroundings with their internal influences to produce a layered structure that reflects on the various aspects of human existence. To strike the chord with the masses, the authors utilize their creative sensibilities in inventing literary images, style, theme and motifs to convey a perspective to readers. By identifying the junctures of contact between the author and their surroundings whether direct or indirect, literary or extra literary, this paper attempts to study the absorption of humanitarian ideals of compassion, tolerance, and moderation in James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933) and in Leo Tolstoy's "Master and Man" (1835) to inspire the masses affected by spiritual and moral crisis. Being caught in the rat race of materialistic gains and sensorial pleasures, the masses have neglected in maintaining the balance between materialistic and spiritual gains. As a result, the degradation of human values becomes evident in the form of increasing crime, avarice, lust, terrorism, xenophobia and homicide over the centuries. Therefore, it becomes pertinent to revisit the sort of literary works that inspire building spiritual consciousness and letting go of human pride rooted to build a more tolerant and pluralistic culture.

Literary works bear the spirit of an age because they are not produced in a vacuum. The authors absorb, transform, and then transport influences in their literary works. By using their creative skills, the authors diffuse those influences in the form of literary theme,

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style, allusions and motifs to provide a perspective to readers. Being the carriers of universal human spirit, literary works even transcend their national and cultural borders. In this way, the literary relations are built across the borders despite inheriting a local flavour. Thus, the literary works have enhanced the porosity between cultural borders.

To find the assimilation of external or internal influences in a creative work, the French comparatists utilized the methodology of Influence Study that helped in tracing the route of literary influences. The study involves the investigation of an author's biographical accounts by utilizing Auguste Comte's Positivist philosophy. To map the route of literary influences from the real to imaginary, the factual details are gathered from memoirs, diaries, preface, and interviews that reveal about the ongoing influences on an author while producing a literary work. Thus, the study provides the intellectual pleasure of not only unearthing the interesting facts during the genesis of a work but also of an author's socio-political milieu. The transportation of influences also reflects that the masses of different climates and regions are interconnected by the common thread of human emotions and responses. Perhaps, for this reason, literary works have become perennial carriers of humanitarian values that inspire, aware, and motivate, the masses.

Keeping in view of the creative process, the comparatist Arturo Farinelli in *Melanges Baldensperger* (1930) argues, "*The destinies of poetry and art are fulfilled only in the intimate life and the secret accords of the soul*" (qtd. in Wellek 168). The comparatist points at the vagueness of appropriating the debt and credit in matters of poetry and in art. This sort of investigation requires erudition, to identify the penetration of influences from the multitudes of an author's experiences that get interwoven in a work. So, critics Jean-Marie Carre and M.F. Guyard suggests that scholars should collect all the data to provide reliable results to avoid the accusation of charlatanism. In this way, the factual data collected from biographical records will reveal the relationship between literary manifestations and external influences by providing "*meaningful conclusions to other disciplines, to the nation and to the world at large*" (qtd. in Stallknecht 5). Therefore, the critic Joseph Thomas Shaw states, "*The study of literary indebtedness has never given up its place as an important branch of*



literary research within particular literatures, and especially in comparative literature” (214). Perhaps, Shaw views the appearance of literary relationships as the spiritual affinities among human beings.

In the light of this fact, James Hilton’s, Buddhist lamasery, Shangri-La, tugged in Tibet in *Lost Horizon* seems to be conceived from the conditions of Britain. Due to the indelible impact of the World-War One, Britons became disillusioned for rooting their beliefs in materialistic pursuits. The masses were suffering from Western angst to such an extent that Gertrude Stein coined the term “Lost Generation” for this set of people in 1926. Being moved by the negative tide of emotions, Hilton invents a spiritual haven, Shangri-La in Tibet free from all sorts of worldly contaminations that is greed, lust, avarice and envy to provide respite to the masses torn between conflict of materialistic and spiritual values. To support this supposition, Hilton’s biographical record indicates that in a radio show on NBC (1950), he stated, “. . . during the winter of 1932 that was a hard winter for the world. The lowest point had we then known it of the depression. . . . It was in this mood that I wrote *Lost Horizon*” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7PV6gkks0>). Thus, it can be safely inferred that Hilton conceived the idea of inventing Shangri-La by witnessing Britons caught in the awry state of affairs because of the triple fire of greed, hatred, and delusion.

And while connecting the dots to find a link between Hilton and his transport of Buddhist ideals in *Lost Horizon*, Brian M Stableford informs that, “In various directories Hilton listed his recreations as music and mountain climbing, and it is noticeable that music and mountains play crucially significant roles in both books [*Lost Horizon*, *Good Bye Mr. Chips*]” (51). Stableford informs that his personal inclination brought him in contact with the secondary literature produced by mountaineers and explorers of that age. It is known that during the expeditions in Tibet, the explorers encountered Buddhist abbots and monasteries of those regions. The anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner highlights “*The sahibs were fascinated by their visits to the monasteries*” (qtd. in Ortner 150). By coming in contact with the locals or Buddhist followers inhabiting those regions, explorers alongside their feats and achievements



mentioned about Buddhism in their works. In this way, the Buddhist knowledge transpired in secondary texts and to Hilton indirectly.

In this connection, whether or not Hilton was influenced by secondary texts, the investigation of Emily Mitchell Wallace provides valuable information. Wallace had taken an enquiry to find Ezra Pound's source of inspiration in depicting Na Khii tribe and the paradisiacal atmosphere of Lijiang in final cantos, *Drafts and Fragments* (1970). And she identified that Joseph Rock's essays, an Austrian-American botanist and ethnologist, who explored the southwestern Chinese provinces and Tibetan borderlands, published in *National Geographic* were the source for Pound. To confirm whether or not, the portrayal of the fictional work and the real correlate, she herself visited Lijiang and found that Rock provided the information as it is. Also, the editor, Zhaoming Qian, of the anthology of essays, *Ezra Pound and China*, in which Wallace's essay, "Why not Spirits?"—"The Universe Is Alive": Ezra Pound, Joseph Rock, the Na Khi, and Plotinus", is published, reiterates, in the introduction, that "*Pound did not exaggerate, which means that his source, Joseph Rock, did not misrepresent the place and the people*" (9). Thus, Qian too affirms the authenticity of content in Rock's essays.

While investigating, Wallace came across billboard at the entrance of new town of Lijiang that stated, "*Lijiang is the model for Shangri-La, the utopia in James Hilton's Lost Horizon, named after a street, Shangra, in the Old Town*" (9). And Wallace could interrelate the advertisement with a lot of allusions to Rock's essays in *Lost Horizon*. To prove, Wallace cites that when Conway said, "*Strolling about Tibet isn't a one-man job; it needs an expedition properly fitted out and run by someone*" And '*He had been travelling then for some American geographical Society,*' (qtd. in Qian 232). Through this allusion, Wallace confirms Hilton's awareness about Rock and his contribution in providing information about Tibet and borderlands. And therefore, Wallace is compelled to state, "*. . . as far as I know, is that Hilton's fictional world of Shangri-La was heavily influenced by Joseph Rock's National Geographic Essays*" (qtd. in Qian 232). Thus, it is needless to say that Hilton owes debt to Rock's essays in its depiction of Shangri-La. And, it can be safely



inferred that Hilton's encounter and assimilation of Buddhism, Tibetan landscape and lamaist culture was through secondary literature.

Moreover, one of the scenes in the novel indicates literary texts were Hilton's source of information. When Conway names a list of books in the monastery's library, that book list pertains to Tibetan history and culture. Also, Hilton stated in the same NBC radio show that "*I remember hours in libraries reading tales and legends of the great missionary travellers who explored all central Asia countries ago*" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7PV6gkkbS0>). Thus, Hilton confirms that his source of Tibetan knowledge and Buddhism were literary texts.

Besides, in Britain, the cultural processing of Tibet as the highest plateau of spiritual centre, wisdom, and secrecy had begun since Madame Blavatsky exoticized Tibet as the land of Mahatmas. And subsequently, Hilton's predecessors such as Rudyard Kipling and H. Rider Haggard depicted in their literary works *Kim* (1901) and *Ayesha, the Return of She* (1905) that, "*if anywhere upon this earth wisdom is to be found*" is Tibet (qtd. in Normand iii). Thus, by being a part of this social consciousness and tradition, it can be safely inferred that Hilton was inspired by this ideological cluster to select Tibet as the land of wisdom to inspire Britons who were looking for answers to their existential crisis.

And to stir the Britons, Hilton urges the masses to awaken their spiritual consciousness by taking an inward journey to overcome chaos and angst. In one of the scenes, Buddhist lama, Chang informs Conway and his mates that the factor behind true happiness of Shangri-la and its inhabitants is moderation. Lama Chang states, "*our prevalent belief is in moderation*" (66). As Hilton was witnessing that excessive desires led to the degradation of human nature, he takes refuge in the middle path suggested by the Buddha. To convey the masses to maintain balance between cravings and contentment. Hilton suggests inventing a true mental space or Shangri-La in their minds free from all sorts of negative emotions to experience eternal joy and happiness.

Similarly, around four decades ago, the Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy to appeal to the Russian bourgeois sentiments, who were affected by the repercussions of several



wars, Avant Garde movements, and oppression of aristocratic nobility, relies on the subject matter of folktales and religious traditions. By writing inspirational tales interspersed with egalitarian beliefs, his one of the short stories among others “Master and Man” appeals not only to the human heart but also to the eye.

Interestingly, Tolstoy too encountered Buddhism at the age of sixty-five. His diary entry of September 1884 informs about his sympathetic views on Buddhism wherein he mentioned, “*Read about Buddhism and its teachings. It is wonderful*” (qtd. in Bunin xxiv). Seemingly, he was so much so fascinated by Buddhism that by early July of 1886, in a letter to Cherkov, his friend, Tolstoy expressed, “*to present [Buddhism] in the simplest, most accessible form*” in a creative project” (qtd. in Bunin xxiv).

To assist Tolstoy, the critic Nikolai Strakhov and Cherkov provided him with several Buddhist texts as informed by the editors Thomas Gaiton Marullo and Vladimir T. Khmelkov in the introduction of *The Liberation of Tolstoy: A Tale of Two Writers* (1937). Then after exploring several Buddhist texts, Tolstoy opines on Buddhism, “*The Teachings of Buddhism and Stoicism, like those of the Jewish Prophets, . . . , all equally recognize the essence of man to be his spiritual nature, and this is their greatest service.*” (qtd. in Mc Keogh 78) . Thus, Tolstoy realises that Buddhism and other World religions and philosophies have similar essence and profess compassion, love, altruism, and tolerance towards human beings.

And, the impact of Buddhist influence on Tolstoy culminates in the production of short story “Master and Man”. According to, scholar Dragan Milivojević, “*There are, in addition, statements about Buddhism made by characters in his novels and a Buddhist view of the world appears in his later work, particularly Master and Man and The Death of Ivan Ilich*”(4). Thus, Milivojević highlights that the influence of Buddhist doctrines became visible on Tolstoy while creating the character, Vasili Andreyevich Brekhunov in *Master and Man* to aware the Russian masses about the cause of their plight. And, critic Martin Greene finds, “*Tolstoy’s religious beliefs were very much intertwined with his efforts to reform Russia. In effect, he created the religion he had been seeking in the Sermon on the Mount*(and



in Buddhist doctrine)” (173). Thus, Greene suggests that Tolstoy’s internal objective was to bring reformation by disseminating humanitarian ideals through his works whether they alluded towards Buddhist or Christian ascetic principles.

To stimulate the readers, Tolstoy portrays the transformation of Vasili’s state of consciousness from selfish to an altruistic being to reignite the human spirit of love and kindness. To disseminate the observance of humanitarian ideals as the most virtuous practice, Tolstoy depicts Vasili’s change of heart from self-centeredness to a compassionate soul. Initially, Vasili is depicted as an ardent worship of mammon. But after facing tribulations, he humbles and lays his life for his slave, Nikita. Vasili’s liberation from ego and pride reflects in remark, “Nikita is alive, so I too am alive!”. By acquiring a spiritually blissful stage at the end of his life, undoubtedly, Vasili’s end alludes to attaining *nirvana* or salvation. According to, Damien Keown the literal meaning of *nirvana* is “quenching” or “blowing out”(56), however, Keown interprets *nirvana* as blowing out from “the triple fire of greed, hatred, and delusion” (57). Truly, Vasili reflects the same and acquires *nirvana* or enlightenment. Through Vasili’s sacrifice, Tolstoy suggests that true happiness lies in performing selfless acts. And also, critic Edward A Thurber agrees with the same that, “the *Death of Ivan Ilyitch* and *Master and Man* are greatly superior to any of his parables’”(338). This signifies that the story succeeds in motivating the readers to be kind and generous. In fact, both the authors have met the objective of literature in their own ways to not only inspire but also to appeal human heart and eye.

From the above discussion it can be concluded that literary works bear the spirit of an age because an author transports their influences in their work creatively. To inspire the masses incessantly across the time and age, the authors transform their influences into literary images. Whether it is Hilton’s Shangri-La or Tolstoy’s Vasili both the literary images inspire to practice humanitarian ideals to experience joy and happiness. Therefore, literature has always been and will remain the perennial carriers of humanitarian ideals.

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