

# THE LOTUS AND THE ROSE

## SOME INFLUENCES OF INDIAN ART ON EUROPE

CAMÖENS' famous poem describing the discovery of India by Europe, "The Lusiad," has been thus eulogised by an enthusiastic British commentator: "The grandest subject it is which the world has ever beheld. A voyage esteemed too great for man to dare: the adventures of this voyage through unknown oceans deemed unnavigable; the Eastern world happily discovered . . . . There cannot possibly be so important a voyage as that which gave the Eastern world to the Western."<sup>1</sup> In a less eloquent but more practical passage, the writer has described the climax of Vasco da Gama's great enterprise: "The Pilot now stood out to the East, through the Indian ocean; and after sailing about three weeks, he had the happiness to congratulate Gama on the view of the mountains of Calicut, who, transported with ecstasy, returned thanks to Heaven, and ordered all his prisoners to be set at liberty."<sup>2</sup> This is the prose of the matter; but the great occasion well deserved the glowing verse of the Portuguese poet:

"Now morn, serene, in dappled grey arose  
O'er the fair lawns where murmuring Ganges flows;  
Pale shone the wave beneath the golden beam,  
Blue, o'er the silver flood, Malabria's mountains gleam;  
The sailors on the main-top's airy round,  
"Land, Land!" aloud with waving hands resound;  
Aloud the pilot of Melinda cries,  
"Behold, O chief, the shores of India rise!"  
. . . . . The hero wakes, in raptures to behold  
The Indian shores before his prow unfold:  
Bounding he rises and with eyes on fire,  
Surveys the limits of his proud desire."<sup>3</sup>

Such was "the Discovery of India," extolled in Europe as signifying "the foundation of the grand Portuguese Empire in the East, and universal commerce as the consequence." As for the unfortunate poet-mariner who both lived and sang the Epic, *his* fate has been summarised by a fellow-poet of the nineteenth century:—"Yonder sits an African, snub-nosed,

<sup>1</sup> Mickle's Translation.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*.

blubber-lipped, and woolly-haired, on the marble steps of the palace in Portugal's capital, and begs ; that is the faithful slave of Camões. If it were not for him, and the coppers that are thrown him, his master, the singer of the "Lusiad," might have starved to death. Now there stands a costly monument on the grave of Camões."<sup>1</sup>

In spite of this tardy recognition, the divine afflatus of the Poet has hardly penetrated the "triple steel" of scepticism which enwraps the Western world to-day. Disillusioned critics of our own times are far less liable to be enthralled by the romance of the expedition. For in spite of the early foreign enthusiasts, a great change has come over the spirit of the commentators, who, if they concede that the Argonauts of the sixteenth century did indeed discover a new Garden of the Hesperides in India, and abstract therefrom another Golden Fleece, point out that they also imported into that earthly paradise the dragon known as "Western Influence"! And although, like its amiable prototype in the Hellenic Myth, this monster has figured as the guardian of the precincts, it has played, in reality, a very equivocal part, and devoured, voraciously, the art and culture of the country! The past and present influence of Europe on India is a subject that has been much ventilated, especially since the beginning of the present century; while the reverse of the medal has too often been unnoticed. It is needless here to discuss the delinquencies of "Western Influence." It is rather the purpose of this essay to examine something of the other side of the picture, some of the cultural, romantic, and artistic reactions of Europe to its Indian discoveries, from those Mediæval times when India was, for Western adventurers, as attractive as the magnetic island which drew all vessels to its rocks, and nearly proved the destruction of that voracious navigator, Es-Sindabad of the Sea! And assuredly, the tales of the Western adventurers who returned from the Indies in the sixteenth centuries, were little inferior in wonder to those of Scherezade, celebrated in the "Arabian Nights." This is the more understandable because a faint afterglow of the Mogul splendour which dazzled the old travellers, yet lingers here and there in India—in a thousand graphic touches, in types, monuments, and colours. The atmosphere of Mogul India is not yet irrecoverable; because the pageantry which has largely disappeared, still tinges the minds and lives of the people. Thus it is still easier to listen to tales of high romance in India than in Europe, in spite of the interval of time which divides the annals of Babur, the Conqueror of Hindustan, from our own less picturesque (if hardly less martial) times. There was an appropriateness, which is now hardly appreciable by us, between the homely villages of Queen Elizabeth's England, and the gorgeous if distant vistas opened to adventurous Youth by the India of the Moguls. Something of this lost spell may be recovered to-day by the Western student who has upon his table the *Memoirs of Babur*, *The History of Humayun*,<sup>2</sup> and *The Memoirs of Jehangir*. These

1. *The Thorny Path of Honor*. Hans Andersen

2. Written by Babur's daughter, Gul-Badan Begum

books form an incomparable Indian *pot-pourri*. We can hardly open their pages without feeling their sweet and powerful attraction ; it is as though a thousand perfumes are distilled to mingle with the open-air scents of the Mogul gardens. One hears the echoes of sword-strokes on mailed heads ; the snorting of chargers, and the trumpeting of the war-elephants ; while every now and then the faint far tumult of " battles long ago " is broken by calm interludes of courtly pageantry, kingly gifts, sparkling jewels, rich pavilions ; and above all, by the lovely ladies who were the heirs of these luxuries. We see them bending over their silk brocades, or albums of gold studded with gems enclosing the poet's exquisite Persian script embellished by the artist's brush ; or perhaps listening to the instruments of the musicians and the voices of the singing girls, while fountains of rose-water play their fragrant accompaniment in the Moonlight Garden. With these books beside him, even the most immobile arm-chair reader of the West may rival the energetic traveller ; they are as sure and rapid a means of transport as the Flying Trunk in Andersen's story !

This is the India which Shakespeare saw ; not indeed in the flesh, but with the prescient eye of genius. There is no doubt of that, in spite of a few disputed passages in which the Bard is supposed by some to have animadverted upon India by way of contrast. Shakespeare, in common with many other soaring spirits in the Age of the Tudors, looked on India as an Eldorado.

" From the East to Western Ind  
No jewel is like Rosalind,"

sings the enamoured swain in " As You Like It " Troilus, the most effusive lover in Shakespeare, raving over the charms of the frail Cressida, enshrines her in the most lustrous figure of speech that his mind can compass when he cries .—

" Her bed is India ; there she lies a pearl."

Shakespeare summed up the lavish pageantry which distinguished the meeting of Henry of England and Francis of France,— " The Field of the Cloth of Gold,"—in the vivid statement that the splendour of Henry's entourage " made Britain India " ; while limitless flattery of Henry's inamorata, Anne Boleyn, could only be conveyed in lines gilded by a light more brilliant than that of Europe :

" The King has all the Indies in his arms,  
And more and richer."

India forms the strange beautiful background which looms darkling behind the ethereal pageantry of " A Midsummer Night's Dream " ; and it is remarkable that the far-reaching significance of the question which the Fairy Queen, Titania, puts to her Consort, Oberon,

" Why art thou here  
Come from the farthest steep of India ?"

has escaped the notice of most, if not all, commentators. Indeed the main theme of this play is the quarrel of the King and Queen of Fairyland over

“ A lovely boy, stolen from an Indian King.”

Titania describes this child's mother as “ a votaress of my order ”; tells how they two often sat together

“ In the spiced Indian air, by night,  
Watching the embarked traders in the flood.”

In this lovely comedy Shakespeare unerringly traced the Fairy Tribe back to India ; back to its “ furthest Steep ” (the Himalayas), which is the mythology of the Hindus. Compared to this striking instance of what Coleridge would have called Shakespeare's “ wisdom and intuition,” Dryden's *Indian Drama*, “ *Aurangzabe*,” is no phenomenon, although it well illustrates the strong influence that Mogul India maintained on the literature of Europe of the seventeenth century. His play, which delighted Charles II, and his Court, was closely based on François Bernier's account of his travels, indicating that the book of the shrewd French physician was not so practical or critical in tone as to be devoid of the power of inspiring Western poets, as indeed every one who reads Bernier's enthusiasm for the Taj Mahal, or his impressions of Kashmir, will acknowledge. The art-inspiring glow of India, percolated, indeed, through all the hide-bound prejudices and doubts of the earlier Western travellers, and tinged their souls with wonder. Even so practical an observer as the British envoy, Sir Thomas Roe, who visited India about the time of Shakespeare's death, felt that he had learnt something new in artistic values when, having presented the Grand Mogul, Jehangir, with a picture, he witnessed the enthusiasm of that imperial patron of an art that was still but little valued in England.<sup>1</sup> If Sir Thomas, as we cannot doubt from his own account, learnt about art from Jehangir, his experience symbolised the influence of the India of the period upon Europe. Even the proud Tudor Rose had something to acquire from the Indian Lotus ; and East and West have met and mingled their fragrance ever since in the fields of art and poetry.

Keats—that master of word-painting, yielding, with exquisite perception, to the secret breath wafted from the palm-bordered Ganges, has interwoven India with the classical Greek Myth which he poetised in “ *Endymion*.” His Moon Goddess appears in her dual role in that lovely poem ; in both her Hellenic, and her Indian guise, blonde, and dark. It is as though the poet intended her thus to symbolise the light, and the averted aspects of the moon ; both views are of overwhelming loveliness ; in both, she conquers. Keats, who thus sang the achievement, through the union of East and West, of perfect beauty, has been called the most Shakespearean of British poets. He too had inherited, by virtue of the relationship of all poets, which transcends national frontiers, the Indian secret ; neither he nor his great precursor could lay aside that unique adornment to the rich treasury of their verse. Their attitude to India is

1. He tells in his memoirs how Jehangir had the picture copied by his own artists so well that he could hardly distinguish the original picture from the duplicates



reflected in the breathless wonder, with which the eponymous hero in "Endymion" asks the dark-eyed nymph who haunted his steps, in the depths of Greek forests,

"Didst thou not after other climates call,  
And murmur about Indian streams?"

If truth is indeed stranger than fiction, it is equally true that poetry can come nearer truth than prose; and this is a consoling thought now-a-days, when we, in Europe, are as familiar with books "debunking" India, as with those demolishing other household gods of our youth. This age of speed has brought India well within the danger zone of modern criticism in Europe, which is all for relegating old standards and established reputations to the scrap-heap.

This cult of mysticism which surrounds Indian Art in Europe and attracts readers to commentaries whose marvellous obscurity is their sole recommendation to notoriety, is a pitiful decline from that definite concrete appeal which Mogul India exercised on the imagination and admiration of the West. Mogul art, the true interpreter for us to-day of Mogul manners, is as free from obscurity as Dutch or Flemish art. There is of course an insoluble mystery inherent in the ideas of Beauty and of Genius, but that mystery is common to all lands, and to all peoples. If many people in modern Europe (misled by modern books) can only form a vague notion of Indian art as a bizarre hierarchy of polycephalous deities surrounded by profoundly obscure Western "Interpreters," that is not due to the fault of the Past, but to a European phase of the Present. The older European travellers in India, if they were naturally slow to understand the deeper intricacies of Hindu Philosophical thought, responded sympathetically to the objective triumphs of Oriental Art which astonished them in Mogul India. They sought to explain to their avid friends in the West, these triumphs in Building or in Painting; but they did not attempt, as we do now-a-days, *to explain them away*. In fact mediæval Europe was impressed far more by the reports of practical achievements than of subconscious emanations. Thus François Bernier wrote: "I have often admired the beauty, softness, and delicacy of their (Indian) paintings, and was particularly struck with the exploits of Akbar, painted on a shield by a celebrated artist. . . . I thought it a wonderful performance." But he did not proceed to tell us that the artist had achieved his results by subconscious emanations, or by Yoga; to attribute the Oriental's skill to inspiration alone, in opposition to the "materialistic" art of Europe which depends upon principles! Bernier was not disposed to make his tale of wonder yet more wonderful by exaggerations which could only mar the effect, (which have marred India's case in our own times); on the contrary he tells us frankly: "The arts in the Indies would long ago have lost their beauty and delicacy, if the Monarch and principal Omrahs did not keep in their pay a number of artists who work in their houses, teach the children, and are stimulated to exertion by the hope of reward and the fear of the *korrah*. . . . Large halls are seen in many

places called *Kar-Kanays* or workshops for the artisans. In one hall embroideresses are busily employed, superintended by a master. In another you see the goldsmiths ; in a third, painters ; in a fourth, varnishers in lacquer-work ; in a fifth, joiners, turners, tailors, and shoemakers ; in a sixth, manufacturers of silk, brocade, and those fine muslins of which are made turbans, girdles with golden flowers, and drawers worn by females, so delicately fine as frequently to wear out in one night. This article of dress, which lasts only a few hours, may cost ten or twelve crowns, and even more, when beautifully embroidered with needlework. The artisans repair every morning to their respective *Kar-Kanays*, where they remain employed the whole day ; and in the evening return to their homes. In this quiet and regular manner their time glides away ; no one aspiring after any improvement in the condition of life wherein he happens to be born." The foregoing blunt description of practical conditions in the arts of Mogul India, does not in the least detract from the skill of the craftsmen. On the contrary it makes their achievements all the more impressive to us, as it obviously did to the contemporary French observer whom I have quoted. Rembrandt was greatly impressed by the Mogul miniatures, on account of their craftsmanship ; and Sir Joshua Reynolds is also credited with having expressed admiration for Mogul painting. It was for these artists, as for the poets, the objective beauty of India which intrigued them ; just as interest in externals, at a much later period, induced Major Robert Gill to spend some thirty years " in feverish jungles," copying the paintings in the Ajanta Caves.

It is India, the Objective Spectacle, not India the Subjective Theme, which made and has maintained its hold upon the interest of the Western World. Tavernier, contemplating with stupefaction the Peacock Throne of Shah Jahan, and assessing its almost fabulous value,<sup>1</sup> may not be a very inspiring object lesson, but his attitude is symbolical of Europe's dazzled reactions to Indian influences. For these natural reactions have been practical, and commercial, as well as æsthetic ; the Western Hemisphere can express its admiration more universally, because more truly, through these inherent attributes, than through an acquired veneer of Eastern occultism and mysticism. Mogul Painting was an art as practical as it was exquisite. It owed a debt to Persia from which it drew much of its romance, and to Europe from which it acquired proportion, verisimilitude, and chiaroscuro of a kind. But this international alloy, fused in the alembic of the painters' national genius, emerged as the pure Indian product, of an originality that delighted Western observers.

Western taste has been immeasurably indebted to India since Tudor times ; whether in the Indian painted silks which Louis XV encouraged so lavishly at the Court of France, or in the satirical pages of Voltaire, or the glowing periods of Macaulay, or the gorgeous canvases of Besnard. After all is said, one's personal experience is the only touchstone of truth. My meeting in early youth, with India (through Moore's poetical story

1. Tavernier estimated the value of " this grand and magnificent throne " at twelve million pounds.

of Aurange-Zebe's daughter, and the Happy Valley of Kashmir, in "Lallah Rookh,") fell far short of the reality which I was only to encounter very much later in life. Sir Walter Scott's "Surgeon's Daughter," which extols the glory and justice of Hyder Ali, and seemed at the period to breathe life into the dry bones of the East India Company, conjured before my boyish mind a romantic vision of India which twenty years of personal experience of that wonderful land has enhanced rather than tarnished. Indeed the real India, which I saw at last, turned out to be more splendid in truth than was its simulacrum in fiction. For India's essence may reach to distant lands, as sweetly potent as attar of roses, even though thrice-distilled through the pages of foreigners who have admired an India which they never saw! So it was that on my first journey to Delhi, at the time of the year when the opulent earth seems to chant its pæan of fecundity after the rains, when even the peacocks which strut through the vernal paradise appear to be dancing to mysterious music, the brilliant landscape and its rhythmic suggestions formed an appropriate threshold, to my view, to the sanctuary of the Moguls, which my train was fast approaching. Not that Agra fares much better than the other towns—from the railway. The distant views of shrines and tombs, including that stateliest of domes, the Taj Mahal itself, are mere provocative glimpses that tantalise but cannot satisfy. Beautiful mediæval things peep shyly and partially at us from behind the changeful screen of flitting trees or obstructing buildings, like the ravishing glances of some haughty lady of old Castile, from behind her fan. We get hints of incomparable architectural loveliness—the sweet lilt of that new song in stone and alabaster which India heard from Persia; then we are whirled away from it all! Even Sikandra, the tomb of Akbar, although comparatively close to the railway, only gives momentarily to our eyes its noble gateway with soaring minarets, and a further flash of domes and finials peeping over the top of the sylvan barrier between us, all rose-coloured in the mellowing light.

However, it is useless to regret the multiform wonders which we reach and abandon in the same instant; there is no time to notice the half of them. As the evening draws on many a less celebrated shrine, and once-sacred enclosure nods shyly to us and is gone; and many a graceful ruin beckons us in passing, to its broken arcades and cupolas, as though testifying with its last breath to the long reality of the Mogul's lavish bequest of art and beauty, not only to India, but to the World!

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