

## Orientalist Discourse, Buddhism, and Arnold's *The Light of Asia*

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### Abstract

The passing reference to Buddhism in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851) wherein the provincial town ladies misinterpret the caftaned, Peter Jenkyns on his return from India as “the great Lama of Thibet” followed by the more visible allusions to the Buddhist notions of reincarnation and karma in H. Rider Haggard's best-sellers, *She* (1887) and *Ayasha: The Return of “She”* (1905), draw attention towards the sudden astonishing interest in Buddha and Buddhism in the middle and the late Victorian England. This paper attempts to analyze the ideologies responsible for the Victorian revival of interest in Buddhism vis-à-vis Edwin Arnold's bestselling text *The Light of Asia* (1879), and to read the text as a participant in the Orientalist discourse of canonization or re-canonization of Buddhism for not just the British public sphere but also the Asian worlds.

**Keywords:** Orientalism, Victorian England, imperialist gaze, bestsellers

### I

The first direct encounter of the West with Buddhism took place in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the travel accounts of explorers and merchants such as Marco Polo (1254-1324) and Willem van Ruysbroeck (1215-95) to Sri Lanka, China and Central Asia aroused interest in Buddhist cultures; though the travelogues were based more on hearsay rather than on any sound knowledge of Buddhist scriptures, so to say. It was in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the translations of Indian scriptures on Buddhism from Sanskrit and Pali languages expanded the Buddhist practice and theory in the West. Scholars and translators as Léon Feer, Hermann Oldenberg, Thomas W. Rhys Davids and Max Müller to name a few were engaged in the task. Although, the eastern forms of knowledge and thought had dripped back to the West through the same route resorted for opium, tea and silk but sombre engagement with religion, wisdom and knowledge of East began only in the mid and the late 18<sup>th</sup> century with the first ever translations of the *Bhagavad-Gita* into German, English and French. Organised study of sacred texts from the East only began in Europe as late as 1820s when excavation, collection and translations of ancient Buddhist manuscripts commenced, attempts to textualize Buddhism, so to speak. One of the initial Western studies to focus solely on Buddhism was Edward Upham's *The*

*History and Doctrine of Buddhism* (1829). The Pali Text Society one of the major publishers for the translations of Pali texts in Europe and Britain was founded by Thomas W. Rhys Davids in 1881 following which the term ‘Buddha’ gained currency in day-to-day English usage. Buddhism “hit” across Europe (Franklin 1), particularly in England in both scholarly translations and popular literatures giving way to almost three book length poems on Buddha - Richard Phillips’s *The Story of Gautama Buddha and his Creed: An Epic* (1871), Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia: Being The Life and teaching of Gautama, Prince of India and Founder of Buddhism* (1879) and Sidney Arthur Alexander’s *Sakya-Muni: The Story of Buddha* (1887).

*The Light of Asia* enjoyed tremendous sales outselling even those of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. It was subsequently adapted as an opera *La Luce dell’ Asia* by the Jewish composer, Isidore de Lara and premiered in London in 1892; as a Broadway play – “two cantatas”; and the acclaimed feature film, *Die LeuchteAsiens/PremSanyas* by Himanshu Rai and Franz Osten in 1925. The text not only influenced authors such as T.S. Eliot, Leo Tolstoy and Herman Melville but by 1910 had been translated into several European languages. Arnold’s poem also influenced Indian intellectuals, authors and statesmen - Swami Vivekanand, Rabindranath Tagore, Nehru and Gandhi. Abanindranath Tagore,

nephew to Rabindranath and the founder of the Bengal School of Art after reading Book Six of *The Light of Asia* (where Buddha famously breaks fast by accepting a bowl of rice-milk from the village girl, Sujata) was inspired to recreate the scene, resulting in his renowned 1902 painting, *Buddha and Sujata*. The well-known Shakespearean, William Poel along with Kedar Nath Das Gupta and S.C. Bose produced a theatrical adaptation for the Royal Court Theatre, London entitled *Buddha* in 1912.

## II

Prior to the publication of *The Light of Asia*, Edwin Arnold (1832–1904) was known only as an editor of *Daily Telegraph* rather than for the dozen books he had published. The translation of Jayadeva’s 12th century, *Gitagovinda* only earned him minor fame amongst the Orientalists who never fully recognised him as one of their own. Like several elite Oxford-educated men of Victorian times, Arnold’s interests arose in Sanskrit while being in office in India as the Principal of the Poona Deccan College. Arnold after learning Marathi and Sanskrit by the acclaimed scholar, Krishna Shastri Chiplunkar (1824-78) attempted the Sanskrit translation of *Hitopadesa* as *The Book of Good Counsels: from the Sanskrit of the Hitopadesa*. However, one can encounter a typical Victorian Orientalist within the preface of the translated text. Arnold wrote,

The hope of Hindostan lies in the intelligent interest of England. Whatever avails to dissipate misconceptions between them, and to enlarge their intimacy, is a gain to both peoples; and to this end the present volume inspires in an humble degree, to contribute . . . A residence in India, and close intercourse with the Hindoos have given the author a lively desire to subserve their advancement. No one listens now to the precipitate ignorance which would set aside as ‘heathenish’ the high civilization of this great race; but justice is not yet done to their past development and present capacities. (qtd. in Ober 3,4)

The excerpt clearly indicates that Arnold’s scholarly writings and discourses share specks of some of the definitive qualities of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. It is not out of worth to mention

here that Arnold was a devoted imperialist well known for his support for the occupation of Ireland as that of India. His scholarly writings belong to that imperialist gaze that intended to disseminate “knowledge about India in terms that not only made explicit the alleged superiority of the West but also set the parameters by which India was to be understood, and therefore governed, both intellectually and physically” (Ober 4). One can witness the accomplishment of this imperialist gaze in the diverse ways that Judeo-Christian, European, and colonial worldviews orient the popular and the scholarly interpretations of not only India’s past but also its present and future. Said and several other scholars such as Thomas Trautmann, Richard King and Mihirini Sirisena have argued that Orientalism must not be necessarily taken as the transhistorical and uniform entity; rather the entire range of interests, motivations and multifaceted power networks that underlie the diverse Orientalist enterprises of late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Arnold like several other Orientalists shared the liberal Victorian stance that what lies at the core of all religions is the notion of truth and therefore all religions deserve respect. He argued further that this truth can be located in the original and the primitive forms of religions blurred by despots, priests and theologians. Christian peers accused Arnold as a ‘paganizer’ or ‘irreligious’ for his love for Sanskrit and classics of Indian literature. But he was hardly an anti-Christian as he embodied and endorsed “a growing liberal Protestant view that increasingly distanced itself from polemical debate and took a more conciliatory and dialogue-oriented tone of interreligious tolerance” (4). This is not to suggest that Arnold transcends racial hierarchies and cultural stereotypes. Arnold was very much a product of his times. The historical juncture when positivism, freethinking, scholarship on comparative religion and Darwinian science were on hype; the Orientalist findings of “India’s past and the packaging of its diverse cultures into discrete religions became of tremendous interest to those Europeans disillusioned by Christian orthodoxy” (4). There was not only a fascination for all things Indian – savage and exotic (as evident in much of Arnold’s narrative in poem, particularly its vivid descriptions of the Indian countryside, villages and “dancing girls” (nautch), that must have stemmed from Arnold’s travels in India), but the Victorians were also intrigued by the philosophies of a religion “with no personal creator” or “one that didn’t believe in an enduring self [Buddhism]” (4). Intending to overcome these differences and to aid to the better shared knowledge of West and East, Arnold dispelled what he felt as the misguided characterizations by the scholars and the Christian missionaries concerning India, especially the distortions of the “lofty character of this noble Prince” (Arnold xii) through his descriptions of Buddha in the opening part of *The Light of Asia*.

### III

Following the style of any long Victorian poem, *The Light of Asia* comprises eight cantos and is considered to be a rough translation of Mahayana Sanskrit text, *Lalitavistara* (roughly from 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> CE). However, Arnold devised *The Light of Asia* as a thoroughly humanist interpretation of several Buddhist works he was familiar with perhaps an attempt to philosophize Buddhism. His biographer Brooks Wright wrote that Arnold “toned down the more incredible miracles, rationalizing them, reducing them to manageable proportions or eliminating them completely” (Wright 87). Wright also suggests that Arnold’s characters “live in the same sort of world that we meet in the Christian Gospels: a natural world shot through with the supernatural, a real earth, but one over which the heavens hang so low that men and angels may pass from one to the other

without difficulty” (87). In pre-colonial narratives and biographies, Buddha was “constantly reinterpreted and reworked according to the vast social and cultural terrains in which the buddhadharma moved across Asia, but there had always remained a certain fidelity to the scriptures and structure of the narratives, whether depicted in palm-leaf manuscripts or temple walls” (Ober 5). But to challenge and set free from the customary ‘biographies’ of the Buddha, Arnold not only maintained a de-mythologizing approach rather endorsed the Orientalist paradigms, and etched Buddha as the founder of world religion that deeply paralleled the life of the ‘Historical Jesus’ (for instance; the narratives of Saint Asit, festivities related to birth, four Regents or angels from north/east/west/south building loose parallel to the three Magi in the Gospel of Matthew).

The poem follows a linear chronological narrative that traverses through Siddhartha’s birth, early life, renunciation, wandering ascetic, enlightenment and the Bodhi Tree, and ultimately the articulation of Buddhist tenets (four noble truths, eightfold path, Panchsheel etc.) as Buddha’s model for the ‘way to peace’. In the preface Arnold clarifies that not only Buddha of the poem “a real person”, but also most religions are “youthful” compared to Buddhism. Arnold had also envisaged the sorts of criticisms his poem would face, and as to what relevance, if any, does Buddha’s story holds for the West, when Buddhism was a form of nihilism in the popular European imaginary. Arnold wrote in Preface,

It is, [my] firm conviction .... that a third of mankind [Buddhists] would never have been brought to believe in blank abstractions, or in Nothingness as the issue and crown of Being. (qtd. in Ober 5)

Arnold also set a disclaimer for his Protestant Christian readers as not to judge Buddhism according to its present-day practices and rituals,

The extravagances which disfigure the record and practice of Buddhism [today] are to be referred to the inevitable degradation which priesthoods always inflict upon a great idea committed to their charge. The power and sublimity of Gautama’s original doctrines should be estimated by their influence, not by their interpreters; nor by that innocent but lazy and ceremonious church which has arisen on the foundations of the Buddhist Brotherhood or Sangha. (Arnold xi-xii)

Arnold further defended Buddha’s doctrines that possess, “eternity of a universal hope, the immortality of a boundless love, an indestructible element of faith in final good, and the proudest assertion ever made of human freedom” (xi). The very first edition of *The Light of Asia* turned out in 1879 under the banner of a London-based publisher for ‘Oriental books’, Trübner and Company. The early reviews were positive and by 1885 Trübner and Company issued over thirty editions. Though, there was fierce criticism by Baptists and Evangelicals for Arnold’s sympathetic portrayal of this “untraceable ignis fatuus” whose teachings might mislead world “into darkness tenfold deeper than that of nature” (qtd. in Ober 6), *The Light of Asia* appealed boisterously to the Euro-American world of Unitarians, Transcendentalists, Theosophists, spiritualists and the liberal Christians. *The Light of Asia* turned to be a Buddhist palimpsest, a channel that would bring the East and the West closer.

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