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Search for Immortality in Ilija Trojanow's *Along the Ganga*

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Abstract: In this paper, notion of immortality has been discussed with reference to literature and human culture. Immortality has been a core concern in human civilization. In the second part of the paper, immortality has been discussed as represented in Ilija Trojanow's *Along the Ganga*

Index Terms – Immortality, Culture, Civilization

There is something about life on this planet that one doesn't want to die in spite of the fact that life doesn't seem to carry any worth or fulfillment. In all ages, men have pondered on the question: "If a man die, shall he live again?" (The Holy Bible, Job 14:14). Somehow, even after being reduced to a mere spectator, one desires to extend one's stay on this planet till eternity. In the face of change all around, one wants to keep things in an unchanging state. Amidst the chaos all around, one wants to be the unchangeable core. It's noticed that people of old age do not approve any change in status quo in domestic affairs. They warn against even miniscule changes/renovation at home. This can be attributed only to a desire for absolute control when everything has already slipped out of control. This sentiment is something similar to the desire of the Hawk in Ted Hughes' poem *Hawk Roosting* not to permit any change:

The sun is behind me.

Nothing has changed since I began.

My eye has permitted no change.

I am going to keep things like this. (*Hawk Roosting* by Ted Hughes - *Famous Poems, Famous Poets. - All Poetry*)

The span of life seems so short, the zest for life so strong, that many have proposed that life in some form must continue beyond death. Indeed, the notion of life-after-death might indeed be a projection of human desire. From very early times men have believed in the existence of some undying part of man, something within that is immortal. Indeed, it may be said that all religions exist, partly at least, because of the attempt to find an answer to the problem of what happens when a man dies. Is death really the end of life?

In Western civilizations, the desire for immortality is expressed in the desire for power and domination. These civilizations have practiced materialism as a means for realizing immortality. Perhaps, materialism was the only means available to these cultures. The desire for material progress made the western man travel thousands of miles and colonize most of the length and breadth of this planet. The unlimited desires are best reflected in Tolstoy's story *How Much Land Does a Man Need* where we come across the character of Pakhom who is about to purchase some freehold land from a bankrupt peasant, when a passing merchant distracts him with stories of plentiful land in the far-away region of the Bashkirs. Over tea, the merchant says that after gifting the Bashkirs a few presents, he was able to secure thirteen thousand acres for a mere twenty copecks apiece.

Pakhom leaves his family behind and travels to the land of the Bashkirs. Upon his arrival, they prove to be friendly yet strange people and offer Pakhom kumiss to drink. Pakhom gives the Bashkirs several gifts, as instructed by the passing merchant, and they eagerly look to repay his kindness. Pakhom requests the opportunity to purchase some of their land. The Bashkir elder soon arrives and agrees to sell Pakhom as much land as he can circumnavigate in one day for the price of a thousand roubles, provided Pakhom returns to his starting point by sunset. Pakhom readily agrees.

That night Pakhom experiences a strange dream, in which the Bashkir elder, the passing merchant, and the traveling peasant each transform into the Devil, who then laughs at a dead and nearly-naked figure at his feet. Pakhom realizes that the dead figure is in fact himself. Upon waking, however, he brushes off the dream. He sets his eyes on the land waiting to be claimed, grabs his spade, and begins his walk.

Despite the growing heat of the sun, Pakhom easily covers approximately six miles of land, marking his way with the spade and shedding his clothing to keep cool. By midday, Pakhom has grown uncomfortable under the relentless sun, but he pushes on. After having walked ten miles, he realizes must hasten his pace to ensure that he returns by sundown. Pakhom rushes back and arrives at his starting point just as the setting sun crosses the horizon. He then promptly drops dead from exhaustion. His workman uses the spade to dig Pakhom's grave, answering the story's title question. In the end, a man needs only enough land to bury him.

The whole of Romantic Period in English Literature is nothing but an expression of man's unlimited desires of breaking all boundaries of human possibility, literary form and societal norms. On the one hand Keats tried to approach immortality through art. In a poem like Ode to a Grecian Urn, a work of art is seen to pass the test of time and be there even after civilizations are destroyed. The maxim 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' solves the existential dilemma for him.

Institutionalized religion has tapped our craving for immortality. Religion has been at the core of human existence. Rivers, on their part, have not only been at the core of human civilizations, but also at the core of religion. Sages have therefore indulged in myth-making; not only about the river as a whole, but also about each and every place and object located along the river. In this regard, Ganga and Narmada hold a very prominent position in Hinduism. In this chapter an attempt has been made to capture the anxiety about 'life-after-death' or 'eternal life' as represented in the travelogues under study. Being the first-hand account of the writers' engagement with the river, these texts are an appropriate site for the present investigation.

In India, there has always been a tradition for discounting the materialistic achievements of this world as 'maya'. Our actions in this world are but a precursor of an ongoing journey of the soul. One is advised not to become too engrossed in the matters of this world as it will make one lose sight of the ultimate aim of achieving 'Nirvana'.

In a figurative sense, a desire of breaking free of the boundaries of temporality imposed upon us is implicit in the search for immortality. Desire for power. Seeking through materialism/spiritualism. This triggers the search for immortality. This, however, is only one of the ways of understanding our desire for being immortal. Search for immortality begins the moment we become aware of death/limited nature of our existence. Can we say that it is this awareness, itself constituted in language, which makes available the probability of immortality? The awareness of the inevitability of death might be the cause of the search for the possibility of immortality. Whether such immortality is desirable or not is another matter. It has often been argued that it is the limited nature of existence that makes life attractive. But at the same time, none wants to die!

Gautam Buddha has said that *Zara*(Ageing), *Vyadhi*(illness) and Death are eternal truths but human beings keep striving, through ritual, religion, modern science to achieve some kind of immortality. These are nothing but attempts to re-invent, resuscitate, the ghost of immortality; though the world is replete with narratives about great beings who strived to lord over this planet forever; have patronized people who promised immortality at any cost. Such narratives re-iterate and underline that immortality is a mirage. In Hindu mythology, this world is itself named '*mrityulok*'. But whatever be the form of government, a colossal industry still flourishes which promises some sort of immortality by coining new phrases to monetize this treacherous human desire. The pursuit of immortality is an imaginary enterprise yet it is catered to in the real market place.

Travel literature is a site which gives expression to human desire for eternal life. This desire informs and motivates people to undertake travels to unravel the mysteries of the universe and to somehow find the holy grail which would unlock eternal life. The desire to prolong life forever gets translated into search for the keys to such immortality at the places which are considered to be the repositories of spirituality. In a wider sense, spirituality is also an expression of human's yearning for immortality. Western travelers undertook journeys to all the nook and corners of the world in search of material progress. As India was seen to be the land of spirituality; most of the foreign writers have dabbled into Indian scriptures in their search for immortality. Rivers, especially Ganga, being the vantage point of Indian spirituality, has attracted travelers from all over the world in their quest for immortality. *Along the Ganga* is one of these accounts of the river. This travelogue was originally written in German by Ilija Trojanow.

The travel itself must have been occasioned by a fascination for the river. This fascination is visible throughout the text as it is interspersed with fictionalized mythical accounts of the spiritual origins of the river. Such details have a high degree of dramatization and intensity reflecting the writer's own 'spontaneous overflow of emotions'

Trojanow's anxiety for salvation/immortality is visible at many places. His take on salvation has been expressed in many ways. The declarative statement below can not be taken at face value. 'Winding Road' connotes a sense of circularity: a road leading back to the starting point. The emphasis on 'down' is in sync with the motion of the river as it moves from the mountains to the planes but, at the same time, the word 'drive' would suggest a kind of mechanical movement. It's not clear how would the path of salvation be cleared by 'acknowledging the multitude of forms and names' (24) ?

There is no shortcut to salvation. One has to walk down, or more appropriately drive down, the whole long and winding road, acknowledging the multitude of forms and names. (24)

At some places, the search for immortality takes the form of comments on India's customs and rituals, for example, the ritual of bodily purification. This custom is seen as a preparation for the journey to the next world:

Strict customs and stipulations about bodily purification are as old as civilization in India. The gods perceived bathing as a source of well-being; the myths are drenched with the cleansing power of water. Even five thousand years ago, in Mohenjo-Daro, the houses of wealthy persons were equipped with bathrooms and toilets; a drainage system led the water from wells and directed the waste water into the canal system. (26)

At other places, the author's ambivalence towards Indian spiritualism is expressed through his criticism of the hollow rituals which generate nothing but noise pollution. It seems that the author

Every morning we take up to the screech of 108 godly names; our alarm clock is suffocating mist of song and sound, our dawn full of clanking crickets. Incantations, each prayer besieged by a multitude of competing prayers. No holiness, no solidarity, no inwardness, no mercy. Only noise. And the loudest of all mantras, the ultimate destroyer of sleep-*Shanti om!* (79)

The use of loudspeakers in Temples and other places attracts sarcasm and mockery bordering on derision:

The most important instrument of contemporary spirituality is the loudspeaker; its volume set high as if the world were deaf. The ghat was dominated by an amplifier turned to the pitch of ecstasy. Eardrums were stretched to the point of rapture (25)

The writer subjects the *maths* to scientific scrutiny. The writer is critical of the rituals being followed at these places. He has his doubts about the efficacy of these methods in achieving salvation:

“They want to achieve quick results in anything they do. Look at their daily schedule: two hours of yoga, breakfast, four hours yagna, lunch, two hours of satsang, tea break, one hour of aarti, an hour of leisure, supper, then meditation or a lecture. A day fit for a competitive athlete. They seem to be training for the Olympics of Salvation I'm sure you know the story of the shishya who asks his guru: “How long will it take for me to achieve liberation?”

“A whole life,” the guru answers.

“And if I try very hard?”

“Several lives!”

“But what if I give it all I have?”

“Then you will never attain it!” (82)

But at the same time he keeps mentioning the spiritual potential of the river Ganga:

Those who bathe in the confluence of the white and dark rivers will ascend to heaven.
(86)

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