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## EXPLORING THE REFLECTIONS OF EASTERN SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN POETS

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**Abstract:** There is a new, emerging trend in the world of literature, of spiritual poetry or poets from the west who have been deeply influenced by the mystical traditions from the east. Their writings vary in style and range but all have a common element of distinct spiritual elements in them. Their works carry reflections of the spiritual traditions like Sufism, Bhakti (devotional tradition), Zen etc.

This paper intends to study three such contemporary poets from the west, whose works reflect one or more stream of spiritual traditions of the East. These are three of the contemporary spiritual poets who have been selected on basis of the frequency of their works appearing on various spiritual websites. The paper studies some of their works along with the corresponding mystic/ spiritual concept that they reflect. There has not been much work/research done in this area so far. So it is difficult to find related literature from among the existing journals. But since this is an emerging phenomenon in world literature, it definitely deserves study.

**Keywords:** Poetry, Contemporary Western, Spiritual, Divine Feminine, Zen, Sufi.

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**Introduction:** From the turn of the century, an unprecedented phenomenon has dominated world literature; that is, the intermingling of Eastern and Western thought in contemporary literature. With the coming of the digital age, the concepts and thoughts that used to be the treasure troves of the East are now gaining increasing popularity among the world-wide audiences. As a result of this, there has been a new trend in the world of literature wherein the Western poets, drawing inspiration from the Eastern spiritual traditions have created a new form of poetry deeply imbued by the Eastern flavor. Their writings may vary in style and range but all have a common element of a deep spiritual yearning or experience in them.

This paper addresses three of the contemporary western poets, whose works reflect one or more stream of spiritual traditions of the East. The poets have been selected from names appearing most frequently on spiritual poetry websites. The paper studies some of their works correlating them with the mystic/ spiritual concept from the East that they reflect.

To start with,

**THE 'SHAKTAS':** In Hinduism, when God is conceived of as a male, He is perceived as 'Shiva', the inert and static 'male', the ultimate reality, the point of creation and annihilation of the universe. From this 'male' Shiva, emerges the female aspect that is 'Shakti' (which literally means: energy). Shakti is the creative aspect of the universe that manifests as the world itself. In other words, all that exists in creation is Shakti, the Divine Feminine or the Goddess. The worshippers of 'Shakti', are thus, called the 'Shaktas'. Goddess worship is also the source of the Tantra tradition wherein some yogis turned their devotions to the various emanations of the Divine Goddess-

Kali, Durga, Lakshmi, etc.

Coming to the first poet- Gabriel Rosenstock, the Irish poet (born 1949) who has translated of more than 160 books, including 13 volumes of poetry. Much acclaimed for his spiritual poetry and Haikus, he currently lives in Dublin. His poems in the books, '*Uttering Her Name*' and '*Year of the Goddess*' are distinctly marked by the devotional flavor of the Bhaktas (mystics following the path of devotion and love). Acknowledging this, Rosenstock himself calls his poetry "neo-bhakti". What is distinctive in his poems is his spontaneous utterances addressed to the Divine Goddess just like the Shaktas. He calls her 'Dar Oma' or 'Dar A'ma'.

*"Dar Óma  
slowly like Venice  
I am sinking  
into Your beauty  
Your grace  
lapping at my door  
when will I drown*

*in the spume-bright story of Your smile?"*(Rosenstock)  
The spume-bright story of Her smile, and Rosenstock melts into ecstatic, sublime delirium.

*"Dar Óma  
I was a beggar  
You threw me a smile  
I ran off  
delirious  
into the distance  
later, tired  
hungry  
I sat down  
now people toss me coins  
I throw them back at them  
all I ever wanted  
was Your smile."*(Rosenstock)

His intensity is often violent:  
*"Dar Óma*  
*snake unwinding*  
*from a lightning-blasted tree*  
*I've spotted You*  
*why should I flee?*  
*I am already deep in Your eyes*  
*come*  
*take all of me*  
*mercifully*  
*let me assist You*  
*here's my head firmly in Your jaws*  
*do not use Your fangs*  
*to stun me*  
*let me live*  
*this death in You now*  
*inch by slow inch"*(Rosenstock)

This violent intensity is reflected in many Shakti worshippers like Zamalakanta, Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the 18<sup>th</sup> century poet, Ramprasad Sen who says:

*"This time I shall devour Thee utterly, Mother Kali!...  
 Thou must devour me first, or I myself shall eat Thee  
 up;*

*One or the other it must be..."*(Budhananda)

There is a kind of naked intimacy with the Mother and the devotee swings from being a loving, dependent infant to a petulant, even shocking teenager.

A similar intensity of feeling is found in the Sufis of Punjab as well.

**The Sufis:** In seventeenth and eighteenth century Punjab (now mainly in Pakistan), there arose a school of Sufis who created a bridge between the devout piety of Arabic, Persian and Turkish religious traditions and the singing, dancing devotional fervor of the Indian Bhaktas. Sufi saints like **Bulleh Shah** (1680 - 1758), **Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai** (1689 - 1752) and **Sachal Sarmast** (1739 - 1829) combined the two diverse flavors of Islam and Hinduism creating a broad and welcoming tradition which made room for Muslims and Hindus alike. They espoused the direct experience of Divinity rather than conformation to traditional religion.

The Sufi Masters sing of the all-pervading love which inundates their being when they become one with their 'beloved' (God). The defining characteristics of all Sufi poets are 'ecstasy' and 'intensity'.

**Bulleh Shah** says *"Your love has made me dance like mad."* And then he chants, *"Repeating the name of the Beloved, I have become the Beloved myself..."*

Now compare this with the poetry of Ivan M. Granger, the creator and webmaster of the Poetry Chaikhana-an online resource of sacred poetry. For years this American poet has translated and explained spiritual poems from all traditions, having

authored several poems of his own. Some of the poems in his book, **'Real Thirst'** are marked by the spiritual intensity of the Sufis as well as by the ultimate discovery of the Beloved or the Self. Sample this:

*"The parched know --  
 real thirst  
 draws rainwater  
 from an empty sky."*(Granger)  
 And this,  
*"Beloved, they want to know:  
 Did I reach up to You,  
 or did You reach out to me?  
 And they want to know:  
 What is real  
 touch?  
 How can I explain  
 -- we pour  
 into each other."*(Granger)

The love and longing for the Beloved becomes so demanding that every desire, appetite, passion, emotion and thought has to be fed to this longing fire,

**Adi Atman 9: you you**

*"Adi Atman,  
 I am a fool  
 I place a picture  
 before me  
 and say  
 -- you you  
 hosanna hariharibol!  
 daybreak and I whisper  
 to the sun  
 -- you  
 full moon night  
 and I cry out  
 -- you  
 summer downpour  
 the thunder crash  
 shouts for me  
 -- YOU  
 drowning  
 drunk from too much  
 seawater  
 I sputter  
 -- you you you  
 shamboshankara!  
 I am a grasping fool  
 I say -- you --  
 and you are gone  
 when I remember to shut up  
 then you are here  
 and I am gone."*(Granger)

Within this longing or intoxicating madness for the 'other' (the Beloved), is found the eternally glistening 'Self'- the inner luminosity which knows neither birth

nor death. Here is Ivan's realization of the paradox then. He says,  
 "To say "you" is to push God away, to externalize God,  
 to alienate God...

Name It, try to grasp It... and It is gone. .. The only way to claim It is to be claimed by It. The only way to gain It is to lose ourselves within It amidst deep, deep silence."

*when I remember to shut up  
 then you are here  
 and I am gone*

Traversing the intense, intoxicating by-lanes of North Western desert heights, whirling with the dervishes, crossing the lush green deltas of Ganges and Brahmaputra, singing songs of the divine Mother, we finally reach the Far East, where Masters of yore found an inner satori or spontaneous awareness of the reality in the mundane itself.

**The Zen Masters:** The word *Zen* is derived from the Japanese pronunciation of the Middle Chinese word (dzjen/ *Chán*), which in turn is derived from the Sanskrit word *dhyāna*, meaning "absorption" or "meditative state".

Poetry writing often forms a part of the Zen practice, reflecting a complete, mindful awareness of the present moment. Experiencing this moment fully, the Zen Master reaches the final stage of enlightenment, which, he may see as the 'Source', 'Shunyata' (emptiness) or 'Oneness'. Zen/Chan practices and philosophy can also be compared to the Advaita non-dualist tradition within Yoga.

Reflections of this mindful living are found in the experiential poetry of Mary Oliver. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize (1984) and National Book Award (1994), Mary Oliver (born September 10, 1935) is an American poet who has been described by The New York Times as "the best-selling poet of this country". She is known for her clear and poignant observances of the natural world and reflects the Zen art of paying attention. She says,

*"Instructions for living a life.  
 Pay attention.  
 Be astonished.  
 Tell about it."* (Oliver)

In her collection of poems, 'Why I wake early', she says,  
*"Every day  
 I see or hear*

*something  
 that more or less  
 kills me  
 with delight,  
 that leaves me  
 like a needle  
 in the haystack  
 of light.*

*It was what I was born for --  
 to look, to listen,  
 to lose myself*

*inside this soft world ..."* (Oliver)

Her intimate absorption with and experience of natural world is vividly reflected in her poems. Hearing a bird sing in the branches, she says,

*"First, I stood still  
 and thought of nothing.  
 Then I began to listen.  
 Then I was filled with gladness—  
 and that's when it happened,  
 when I seemed to float,  
 to be, myself, a wing or a tree—  
 and I began to understand  
 what the bird was saying..."* (Oliver)

This, I feel, is her moment of satori which all of the Zen teaching seems to point at.

Her idea of prayer is, in a way, purely a Zen way of life:

*"I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
 I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
 into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
 how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the  
 fields,  
 which is what I have been doing all day..."* (Oliver)

And therein lies salvation- the true homecoming

*I climb, I backtrack.  
 I float.*

*I ramble my way home.* (Oliver)

This, I feel sums the purpose poetry - to guide one back 'Home'.

**Conclusion:** Thus, sacred poetry of the day, as of the yore serves as a guide, a companion and a sojourner, in our way back home. These poets, sharing their experiences and insights of their inner journey, have given us an entirely new genre of poetry which will be changing the shape of world literature for years to come.

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