

Buddhism and Communism in Asif Currimbhoy's *Om Mane Padme Hum*: a Philosophical Interface

Gopakumar R.

Part-time Research Scholar,
Dept. of English & Comparative Literature
Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai.

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ABSTRACT

In the history of the post-independence Indian-English drama, Asif Currimbhoy assumes great significance as a playwright who produced drama for the stage. He is endowed with excellent craftsmanship and the variety of themes he dealt with in his plays made him stand apart. His plays were centred around serious social, political, economic and religious problems in the society. The distinctive feature of his plays is the remarkable philosophical underpinnings that are conveyed through their titles. The outstanding feature of *Om Mane Padme Hum* is the judicious juxtaposition of the two antithetical philosophical stances- Buddhism and Communism. Here he gives an expert documentation of the political developments that took place in Tibet in 1950s. 'Om Mane Padme Hum' is the most sacred of the Buddhist mantras which means 'hail to the jewel in the lotus.' Increasing conflict between the Buddhist philosophy epitomized by the Dalai Lama and the Communist ideological position embodied by the Chinese military is the central interest of the play.

Key words: Buddhism, communism, philosophical interface.

Currimbhoy's play *Om Mane Padme Hum* is an excellent example of the judicious juxtaposition of the two diametrically opposite philosophical perspectives- Buddhism and Communism. If Buddhism largely springs from the profound spiritual experience of Gautama the Buddha, Communism has its roots in the crass materialism advocated by Karl Marx. The plot of the play derives its theatrical energy from the complexity of the conflict between two antithetical schools of philosophical thought. Here the Communist perspective advocates violence whereas the Buddhist standpoint supports sufferance. The perpetual progression of the conflict between the two viewpoints remains unresolved at the end of the play. But a subtler analysis would bring out the fact that the pacifist philosophy of Buddhism has an edge over the Communist philosophy that manifests itself in the form of

a violent cult. In *The Plays of Asif Currimbhoy*, P. Bayapa Reddy observes:

An interesting feature of *Om Mane Padme Hum* is the masterly juxtaposition of opposites- Buddhism and Communism, the past and the present and violence and sufferance. The purpose of the Chinese invasion of Tibet is to transform Buddhism into Communism. The earlier attempt of the Chinese at the 'cultural reformation' in Tibet is juxtaposed with their present military threat. The Chinese soldiers take the gun and drag the monks to bend their knee and work in the field. They even threaten to kick them if they do not properly go about their work. The violent methods of the Chinese soldiers are borne patiently by the Tibetan monks who think that there are some who only pray and some who only cultivate. (100)

The element of the conflict between two antithetical philosophical perspectives forms

the lynchpin of the action of the play. The conflict operates in many levels. There is the on-going conflict between the Lama and the Double; between the two Generals; between Father and Son; between Lamaism and Communism; between Beauty and the Beast. But on closer analysis, one is compelled to conclude that the conflict intensifies on two parallel lines of philosophy- Buddhism and Communism.

The distinctiveness of *Om Mane Padme Hum* is that a contemporary historical event is elevated to the universal level. In fact it is more than a mere conflict between two different perspectives on life. There is a judicious admixture of the public and the private events. The dovetailing of such disparate experiences throw up many a moral question about humanity. The question raised by Dalai Lama who escapes from the Chinese threat encapsulates the philosophical perspective and the metaphysical meaning conveyed through the play. Dalai Lama says: "In any human conflict, the ultimate interests of the combatants are the same: the interests they fight for are only ephemeral" (80). The external conflict between Tibet and China is thus transmuted into a higher plane of metaphysical meaning.

Om Mane Padme Hum is undoubtedly a theatrical masterpiece that indicates the Indian predilection for mysticism and philosophy. Contemporary social and political events are carefully integrated with time-honoured philosophical perspectives. In *Om Mane Padme Hum* two philosophical stances that are poles apart- Buddhism and Communism - are pitted against each other. The play derives its steam from the head-on collision of the two mutually contradictory philosophical perspectives. In *Goa: A Consideration*, Daphne Pan quotes Currimbhoy:

... The essence of the theatre in my opinion is conflict. To have conflict you have different points of view which come head-on....This clash forms the most vibrant factor of the theatre itself. My approach to all my plays is that there is an essential conflict of attitudes. (3)

Thus in *Om Mane Padme Hum* there is a constant conflict and a balance of tension that helps the audience in maintaining interest in the unfolding of the various incidents in the play.

The title of the play *Om Mane Padme Hum* is a clear indication that the playwright has clear-cut leaning towards the philosophy of Buddhism. The title means 'The jewel in the Buddha' in which the jewel stands for the noble qualities of the Buddha. At the very outset of the play, while talking to his mother, Dalai Lama says, "My life is celibate, but that which was complete lay as a child in your comforting arms" (15).

This is an indication that the Dalai Lama is devoted to a life of morality or *Sila* which is the first of the triple gems, the other two being *Samadhi* and *Pannya*. The idea is echoed in the sixteenth chapter of *The Dhammapada* in which it is said: "If you long to know what is hard to know and can resist the temptations of the world, you will cross the river of life" (*The Dhammapada*, 182). Thus the stage is set for the enactment of the conflict between the ideals of Buddhism and Communism. Buddhism is a religion that is wedded to pure pacifism whereas communism advocates violence and bloodshed.

At the beginning of the play, the Dalai Lama expresses his dissatisfaction over the indifference shown to the miseries experienced by the people in Tibet by India and the United Nations. In *Om Mane Padme*

Hum, the Dalai Lama observes: “Moderation is never a virtue in politics... but it is in religion with Buddha’s eightfold path, to which I... we... are committed” (16). Here the communist philosophical perspective of the Chinese Communist party is held in sharp contrast to the Buddhist spiritual perspective advocated and followed by the Tibetan Buddhists led by the Dalai Lama.

The hawkish General Tan Kuan San takes exception to the apathy shown by the Chinese military in putting the Tibetan rebels down with an iron hand. To him, a stitch in time would have saved nine. Chin Hao Jan is of the view that the stringent measures taken by the military to overpower the Tibetans through a cultural conquest failed to deliver the goods. He says: “No, no, you have it wrong. We did confront them earlier... with cultural reformation. We lost. Now we’re confronting them militarily... we’ll win” (18). He is fully confident that military might would succeed where cultural invasion fails. The Generals do not have any doubt in the result of the planned crackdown on the followers of the Dalai Lama. But in sharp contrast to this communist, materialist, pragmatic, political stance, the noble, spiritual ideas and ideals of Buddhism advocates pacifism. The Buddha’s words in *The Dhammapada*, translated by Eknath Easwaran emphasize the significance of self-conquest, “One who conquers himself is greater than another who conquers a thousand times a thousand men on the battlefield. Be victorious over yourself and not over others. When you attain victory over yourself, not even the Gods can turn it into defeat” (135).

Though belatedly, the Generals realize the strong spiritual bonding that makes the Tibetans a cohesive force that fight a relentless spiritual battle against the unflinching military men in the Chinese army who contemplate military action. The

exposition scene provides obvious indications to the upswing in the action of the play. Here the conflict between two equally powerful forces becomes more complex and reaches its acme in the ensuing scene.

In fact, the army has serious apprehensions regarding the conquest of Tibet. They know that external conquest is quite easy for them, given the massive military might. But a comprehensive conquest is damn difficult, for, physical conquest is only half the conquest. The General remarks: ‘The Tibetans have a curious ambivalence. They’re quite feudal, but the essence of a class conflict is missing. This is because of their strong religious ties, and their absolute belief in the Dalai Lama (*Om Mane Padme Hum*, 38). The General gives orders to Chin to break the chain of Tibetan unity and bring disunity to prevail on them. Panchan Lama should be pitted against the Dalai Lama. Revolution becomes possible only if there is an intense class conflict. It cannot thrive in an atmosphere of calm, peace and tranquillity. The judicious observation made by Terry Eagleton in *Marxism and Literary Criticism* is thought-provoking. He observes:

Ideology is not in the first place a set of doctrines; it signifies the way men live out their roles in class-society, the values, ideas and images which tie them to their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole... All art springs from an ideological conception of the world; there is no such thing, Plekhanov comments, as a work of art entirely devoid of ideological content. (15)

The words of General Chang Chin-wu translated by the interpreter make the political and ideological stance of the Chinese administration clear. He says, “Tibet has always been part of China and that the new

China was formed with the Great Proletariat Revolution of 1948” (*Om Mane Padme Hum*, 30).

The Chinese military is wedded to the political ideology of the Communist regime. The military men, as stated in *Om Mane Padme Hum*, enter Tibet solely to consolidate the new nation and to protect their borders. But they are intelligent enough to give leeway to the Dalai Lama. The political and ideological stance taken by the military is a reflection of the pragmatism of the Communist government. The political position assumed by the military smacks of the sociological formulation of Lenin. In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams observes:

The position is clearly that ideology is theory and that theory is at once secondary and necessary; ‘practical consciousness’ as there of the proletariat, will not itself produce it. This is radically different from Marx’s thinking, where all ‘separate’ theory is ideology, and where genuine theory- ‘real, positive knowledge’ - is, by contrast, the articulation of ‘practical consciousness.’ But Lenin’s model corresponds to one orthodox sociological formulation, in which there is ‘social situation’ and there is also ‘ideology,’ their relations variable but certainly neither dependent nor ‘determined,’ thus allowing both their separate and their comparative history and analysis. (69)

The Chinese troops enter Lhasa to establish their control and to keep the influence of the Dalai Lama at bay. The Tibetans look sullenly at this display of military force. It is evident that it is an occupation army. As the stage direction/description of the background indicates, there is something awesome and almost intimidating about the sight of thousands of disciplined soldiers descending upon the sleepy, peaceful town. In the large

main tent, General Chang Chin-wu gives orders to bring the Tent-maker and put up a new tent made exactly like the Dalai Lama’s room. A short while after, Rimpoche comes in and others leave. The innocence of Rimpoche is in sharp contrast to the intrigues of the General. The description of the Potala by the Rimpoche draws the attention of the audience to its mysteries Rimpoche sees:

... Hidden chambers... And underground tunnels that go to the depth of mysterious lakes, where time stands still, and dimensions of existence can be leaped into... Out there are the embalmed bodies of the thirteen Dalai Lamas, covered with fine gold sheets, amidst incense and buttered lamps that flicker and bring them back to life.... (*Om Mane Padme Hum*, 40)

In Buddhist philosophy, the dimensions of existence such as ‘morality,’ ‘concentration’ and ‘wisdom’ can be transcended through awareness meditation. In fact, ‘Sila,’ ‘Samadhi’ and ‘Pannya’ are the corner stones of the Buddhist philosophy. If one moves along the path accordingly, one is bound to attain ultimate liberation. In order to accomplish this ultimate objective, a secluded life is imperative. After the attainment of full liberation, the Buddha blessed Mucalinda (the Naga King) saying:

Sukho viveko tutthassa,
Sutadhammassa passato,
Auyâpajjam sukham loke,
Pânabhutesu samyamo.

‘In this world, seclusion is blissful for one who with penetrative wisdom, sees the true nature of Dhamma he has learnt. Universal love is blissful for one who is self-restrained towards all living creatures’ (*Basics of Buddhism*, 48).

Rimpoche goes on describing the peculiarities of Potala, a palace city within a city built to house granary and gold, ancient tank and manuscripts. Rimpoche waxes eloquent, "... and there is the meditation cave, where monks who reach the highest stage of learning and experience go through three years of living death without seeing anyone, anything, shut-out and buried under tons of rock..." (*Om Mane Padme Hum*, 40).

The play ends with the indication that the Buddhist, philosophical and spiritual stance gains an upper hand over the Marxist, communist, philosophical positions. In *Philosophy and Revolution*, Rayal Dunayevskaya postulates, "Marxist philosophy holds that the law of the unity of opposites is a fundamental law of the universe. This law operates everywhere, in the natural world, in human society and in man's thinking. Opposites in contradiction unite as well as struggle with each other" (167). Thus the perpetual conflict between the two ideological positions of Buddhism

and Communism crystallizes into a synergy, thereby developing the unity of opposites leading ultimately to the resolution of the protracted conflict.

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Sacrifice is giving up something good for something better.

~ Anonymous