



The Unalienated Being: Crisis And Quest

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Keywords

I, Thou, Post-modernism, *Maya*, *Nirguna*, Monism, Geeta, Upanishad, *Brahma*.

Abstract

In the preface to *The Root and The Flower* L.H. Myers states his purpose: to expose the deep-seated spiritual vulgarity that lies at the heart of our civilization, but which goes largely unnoticed. *The Near and The Far* is a study in personal relationships. In some ways it anticipates the post-modernist crises of breakdown at all levels, personal, familial and sociological. Myers is interested in exploring ethical problems which arise in the relationship between public and private life. The paper seeks to study the quest for an integrated self by Meyers' characters. The conduct of his characters is also explained in terms of "Conscious philosophical preconceptions than of subconscious psychological urges..." (41). The endeavor is to understand this quest in light of the diverse discourses of Christian existentialism, Upanishadic and Vedantic thought and the karma yoga philosophy of the Geeta.

Introduction

Myers was turning away from the contemporary life of material and moral decrepitude. As G.H. Bantock in his book *L.H. Myers: A Critical Study* points out, "Moral rather than aesthetic sensibility is what he cares about" (41). In the preface to *The Pool Of Vishnu* he refers to his use of the Indian setting as a distancing device. However, in addition the complex tradition of Indian thought also assists him in conveying his view of life. In 1929, in a letter to L.P. Hartley, Myers conceded that in choosing the Indian setting, "It was my object to create a world that I liked better than the existing one". This imaginary world acts as a convenient background for studying human mind as it grapples with the demands of public life and the quest for personal integrity. The modern world witnesses a reduction of the Individual to a fragmented decentered existence. Myers explores ideas beyond such a splintered existence which can help lend unity or wholeness to the individual's sense of self.

It is in these contexts that Myers found the influential Buberian idea of communication and relationality appropriate for his purposes. Martin Buber emphasizes the personal relation which should be the real relation between man and man. In his book *I and Thou*, he urged man to live in an I - thou relation with God and universe, a personal reverential relationship, rather than the more common I - It relation. He states "the primary

word I - thou can be spoken with the whole being. The primary word I it can never be spoken with the whole being” (Buber 3). He states, “I do not experience the man to whom I say thou, but I take my stand in relation to him” (9).

Buber holds that one doesn't experience but only encounters a 'thou' for then one takes ones stand in love. One who takes his stand in love for him:

Men are cut free from their entanglement in bustling activity. Good people and evil, wise and foolish, beautiful and ugly become successively real to him, that is set free they step forth in their singleness and confronts him as thou. (15)

He insists on a community of feeling and inclusiveness which can almost be equated to the Upanishadic Mahavakyas on non-duality. Buber says “Love is the responsibility of an I for a thou” (15). His view of human beings is an integrated one:

Thus human being is not he or she bounded from every other he and she, a specific point in space and time within the net of the world; nor is he a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. But with no neighbour and whole in himself, he is thou and fills the heaven. This does not mean that nothing exists except himself. But all else lives in his light (8).

He also states that “every thou in our world must become an it”. One has to come to terms with is this inherent contradiction. Man treats men and the universe as objects to be manipulated rather than as a holistic aggregate of reverential relationships. It is only the 'I—thou' relation that leads to humanitarianism and the existence of mutual respect and love between men and beyond this to all creatures.

It is in this context that the tetralogy portrays the attempts of various characters to communicate with the world and attain a sense of personal integrity in achieved relationships. However, as Bantock states their own philosophical considerations prove to be an insufficient guide to proper conduct. The most central quest in the tetralogy is that which prince Jali undertakes. 'There' cannot yet become 'Here' for Jali. His contemplative gaze is fixed on the distant desert that “was a glory for the eye” (Myres 18), must of necessity return to the other “that it was weariness to trudge”. His conviction, that “someday the near and the far would meet” and his wish to fling himself in a flash into the visionary scene before it could disappear, is yet premature. He still has to trudge the actual experience of life before 'there' becomes 'here'. There is a sense of isolation in him because of his awareness of his essential selfhood. He feels alienated from the people around as he feels “they were different” (216). His attempts to relate to the world and his quest for the essential unalienated being, meet with failure investing him with a sense of dread.

Buber states, “At times the man, shuddering at the alienation between the I and the world, comes to reflect something is to be done” (70). Prince Jali is determined to change. For him it is a dread, “To return to the solitary island of self, after having failed to effect a landing on the busy continent of mankind?” (Myres 219). His experience in the court makes him realize the hollowness and vanity of an existence where appearances alone form bridges between people. His comment on the women of the court is revealing of his disillusionment with

their mode of life, “Were they for a moment to realize their own hollowness and vanity, what would happen? Why they could collapse...” (225).

His association with Gunevati makes him feel “It had brought him out of isolation into communion with the kindly race of man” (237). But his perception is still that of a fragmented and separated world where each entity; be it a tiger, cobra, a plant, his father or mother; living in separate worlds. It is only his own particular personality which allows him to see these segregated worlds together. After his brief foray into the experience of the world inhabited by the court inmates and the aesthetes of the Daniyal camp, he comes to the realization that he must pursue his own sense of reality alone, “He, Jali was an isolated consciousness and as such must fight his spiritual battles himself” (246).

Jali’s vacillations continue and are resolved in the last novel, *The Pool of Vishnu* which is the most mature statement of Myers’ views.

Hari’s efforts to relate meaningfully to the world are fraught with difficulties. He is an egotist who values the lived, present moment. reprimanding Amar for his wish to renunciation he says, “Life, taking it in the large gives us one hint only - I should say only one single command: live!” (121). A rebel against institutions, Hari exhorts the value of feelings and emotions. Buber’s views coincide here with Hari’s: “Feelings are ‘within’ where life is lived and man recovers from the institutions” (43)

However, Buber adds that feelings alone are insufficient as they yield no ‘personal life’. World weary, disillusioned in his affair with Lalita, and frustrated in his love for Sita, Hari has an experience near Ravi which is uncharacteristic to his assertive individualistic self:

What could be better than to feel the knot of selfhood loosen and one’s spirit flowing over those luminous spaces between the tranquil level of the earth and the brightening stars? Ah! then would one learn what it was to breathe, not with the quick hot breath of humanity, but with the long slow rhythm of the earth herself (172-173).

Nevertheless, this is merely a transitory wish for self-effacing. Hari is not able to engage himself with any satisfactory personal or social relationship. His understanding of the world and himself still remains a fragmented one, perhaps because of his very emphasis on the immediate moment in the world. Sita’s confirmation the values of love in lived social and familial relationships, is juxtaposed to Rajah Amar’s ascetic tendencies. Gokal who plays the role of mentor in the first three novels’ comments:

The Upanishads says: In darkness are they who worship only the world, but in greater darkness they who worship the infinite alone. He who accepts both saves himself from death by the knowledge of the former and attains immortality by the knowledge of latter (90).

Gokal himself has only a partial understanding and is also struggling towards some golden mean which will offer a sense of unity and integration to him. He tells Sita, “It may be intended that after ascent into communion with the one there should be descent once more to the many - but with the knowledge of oneness retained” (178). The phrase ‘may be’ expresses the extent of Gokal’s understanding which is partial.

The struggles of all these characters are played against the panoramic background of a society whose inhabitants are the likes of Daniyal, Mobarek, Salim, Akbar and other court intriguers. There is a complete breakdown of consolidation of any kind, personal or social. It is a strife torn state where there is no communication between the rulers and the ruled. The brotherhood of aesthetes established by Daniyal proves to be a fraud, and statesmen like Mobarek merely uphold conventions and oppressive institutions. The only response they can give to a fragmented world is to ‘systemize’ and coerce it into some kind of order for their own convenience. Buber’s views regarding institutions that they ‘know only specimen’ not the ‘person or mutual life’, applies to the order enforced by narcissistic rulers. Within this dilapidated world, the sensitive individuals move towards a deeper understanding of their true nature, “A growing realisation of the need to come to terms with the true, underlying nature of life (of which the social world is only a distortion and in the last resort a delusion - though one to be reckoned with) ...” (Bantock 50).

As Harding says Myers presents, ‘Experiments in living’, to produce better lives. *The Pool of Vishnu* is a culmination of the author’s most mature views. It presents Jali’s quest for the essential un-alienated being as the most central concern. His journey and quest resonate Svetaketu’s Ontological question articulated in the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, and concludes in the answer ‘*Tat tvam asi*’. The upanishadic philosophy of non-duality emphasizes unity of the Atman with Brahma and eventually with all of existence. There are correspondences in the *Advaita Vedanta*, as well as Buberian ideas of communication and personal relations.

Both monism and dualism start with a drawing near to God with an intense feeling of his presence within one’s own being. The *Prasna Upanishad* gives an effective image to convey this idea; as long as there is water in a lake, a reflected image of the real sun remains. But if the water drains away only the real sun remains. Likewise, when the world fills the consciousness, duality lingers. But when the obsession with the world is shed, the Atman is revealed as the Brahman. The *Chhandogya Upanishad* provides a subtler image for similar contestation; the existence of a pot outlines a definite area of space within it, but this space is simultaneously part of the external space. When the pot is shattered no distinction lingers and only continuous space remains. Svetaketu’s ontological question about the true nature of Brahma or absolute self is answered by his father king Aruni Uddalaka as follows:

In the beginning, my dear, this world was just being (*Sat*), one only, without a second. To be sure, as some people say: “In the beginning this world was just Non-being (*a-Sat*), one only, without a second; from that Non-being Being was produced” (Hume 1921 241).

He further elaborates, “That which is the finest essence-this whole world has that as its soul. That is reality. That is Atman (soul). That art thou, Svetaketu” (247). The *Mandukya* Upanishad echoes this thought, “Brahma, indeed, is this immortal. Brahma before, Brahma behind, to right and to left. Stretched forth below and above, Brahma, indeed, is this whole world, this widest extent” (373).

The Upanishads present a fearless quest of truth by uninhibited minds to investigate ultimate reality, the mystery of Atman. The Upanishadic thinker attempts an analysis of external world and identifies the deeper level of subjective person - essential self (Atman), with ultimate basis of objective universe - cosmic reality (Brahman). Upanishads explain man as a social being with family, caste, religion and other social relationships. Ethical life in social groups is supported by two pillars. Firstly, the order that emerges from a focal center of power that rewards and punishes and secondly, at a higher plane, the strengthening of the social impulses of the individual that enable him to realize that other men are his brethren. Both aspects are organically, integrated into structure of Upanishadic thought. Brahman is both transcendent and immanent. The conviction that there is a moral order operating in the affairs of men seems to be one towards which Myers seems to be striving. As the socialization of individual progresses, a positive attitude of kinship emerges when the grand unity of being is realized. Whoever beholds all living creatures as in him and Him ... the universal spirit ... as in all, henceforth regards no creature with contempt, says the *Isa* Upanishad. M. Hiriyanna says that the prime object of Upanishadic discipline is the removal of ahamkara, which is the basis of all evil and vairagya is the name given to that attitude towards the world which results from successful eradication of narrow selfish impulses for which it stands.

The particular type of monism taught by Sankara is very old. The most distinguishing feature on the theoretical side is its conception of *Nirguna* Brahma as ultimate reality with the implied belief in the *Maya* doctrine. Unity of the identity of Jiva and Brahman and the conception of Moksha, is seen as the merging of former in latter. The teaching of destruction of ego is meant to prove the concurrence of the identity of the perceiver's individual self with the unconditioned supreme self. The world can now be imagined as *Maya*, signifying not illusion but phenomena. The transcendental reality Brahma appears as the lower empirical reality, the world. The supreme soul also exists as the individual soul and the final liberation comes with realisation of this singularity. On the practical side, it is advocacy of Karma Sanyas or complete renunciation. Resonances of all these are to be seen in the figure of the Guru Bhupendra whose role is that of a spiritual guide. The precept of abnegation however is not accepted by the Guru who believes in renunciation 'in action' and not 'of action'.

The great insight into life is gained by him by withdrawing from the eddying currents of life for obtaining a better perspective of it. At the same time, he initiates a constant interaction between the hermitage and the civic center. His views are closely aligned to the doctrines of Gita. Throughout Gita, the close relationship between God and the individual is expounded with an emphasis on right action:

Therefore always perform without attachment such work as he to
be performed; for it is by the performance of such work

that the man who is without attachment, attains into

the supreme (Lecture XIV, sloka 19).

According to Gita, God realisation means realisation of the congruity of all beings. An ethical imperative emerges directly from this realisation. For right conduct is whatever expresses our real unity with God, man and nature (Lecture XII, sloka 4). Liberated from ego centered distinctions, man sees the self in others too and the stability of the world becomes his ideal. Gita advocates Karma yoga, “devotion to discharge of social obligations”. All sojourners, on the journey to self-discovery, should return to the responsibilities of group life. The objective which the man of action should keep before him is stability, solidarity and progress of society. This delineates the increasing progress of Myers from communion to communism.

Jali in his voyage through the novel encounters through various individuals, different modes of living. The novel *The Pool of Vishnu* begins with the picture of a strife-torn state where multitudes are struggling to escape pestilence and famine. Rani Sites desire, “we ought somehow to share” (Myres 571), brings to focus the very nexus of the novel’s concerns. There is a breakdown between personal relations and sympathies of men. Myres articulates here his growing disillusionment with a materialist, selfish society. People exist in the usurious ‘I-it’ relation with each other and with the world. Why is man self-engrossed and selfish? Myers’ query is voiced by Jali:

It now seems to me like this: if one sees a man struggling at the bottom of a well one is moved to do all one can to pull him out. If a man is starving, one's natural impulse is to share one’s food with him. Surely it is only on second thoughts that people do not do these things? Society seems to me to; be like an organised system of rather mean second thoughts. In theory, no doubt society helps men to help one another, but actually it provides every man, with arguments for helping himself and not helping others (720).

In the face of such cogent questioning which reveals the hollowness inherent in a fragmented society, Damyanti is still able to focus on a positive vision. The wisdom acquired by her under Guru's guidance enables her to act as an agent of change in society, even though her attempt is doomed to failure. She and Mohan are able to practice their religion of friendship with the peasants, relating to them as a ‘thou’ and endlessly working for their upliftment. Damyanti states, “People must go on making attempts. Otherwise there will never be any change at all” (720).

There is in the novel, as Belliappa points out, a constant opposition between those who interpret experience through moral discrimination and those who vulgarize it as a means to an aesthetic experience. In Rajah Bhoj and Rani Laxmi there is a preoccupation with keeping up appearances. Laxmi’s feigned friendship with the common people is a facade and she only derives a sense of her own importance from the association. Unable to address them as ‘thou’, she is unable to practice an inclusive relationship with her subjects. In the manipulative and self-serving world of Bhoj's palace, there is little scope for human integrity or candid personal relations. Rajah Bhoj thinks “to rule ... is more than a calling, it is a gift” (678). The very premise of this supposition sets

him up as superior to others. It negates even a peripheral possibility of relationships being practiced with any equality or integrity. Jali realizes that people at Daulatpur are slaves of their own conventions and standards. Damyanti points out that all the culture and graces in Bhoj and Laxmi become worthless in absence of one grace: “sometimes it looks like a lack of magnanimity, of generous feeling” (735). As the Guru says, they lack candor. They do not relate through the center. To Jali's question: Must one reach the centre? the Guru replies, “All communion is through the centre. When the relation of man is not through the centre it corrupts and destroys itself” (942).

Martin Buber expounded, “The community is built up out of living mutual relation, but the builder is the living effective centre” (45). The centre would be the very core and reality of the individual soul, which of necessity will see itself reflected in others and vice versa. Renunciation of the ego is practiced by the Guru in order to establish a more authentic relationship with the divine, that is imminent in all fellow beings. His life is like ‘peeling an onion’, stripping off the pretense and deception to reach the innermost kernel of his being. While creating the character of Guru, Myers declared that his intention was to portray a good man. Because of deficiencies in humans and the resultant ignorance they move in a divided world, failing to see oneness of things. In a moment of intense feeling Jali, acutely aware of the world around him, has a mystical communion with natural objects:

With an intensity unknown to him he was aware of the world around him. Branch entangled gleanings lift by the sun, a cool uphill from the low hung moon ... scents now cold now warm breathed up from the water and the stone. All this he felt, all this he was Tat Tvam Asi (705).

The awareness that the eternal is in one-self. The real which is intrinsic to all things is essence of one's own soul. The Upanishadic *Mahavakya*, ‘That thou art’, summarizes Jali's experience of affinity and unity with all things. He achieves a mystical state where all is one. He is able to achieve ‘I-thou’ relationality with the ‘other’. The moment of revelation is not a culmination, but only a stage in Jali's expanding consciousness. The ‘Thou’ will of necessity lapse into world of ‘it’. The moment of revelation is transitory. The challenge is to sustain it in everyday human existence. It is the task entrusted to the Guru, as a guide and teacher, to show how the spiritual lesson in relationality will find translated into meaningful action. Guru resounds the activism propounded by Gita. He exhorts man to return from solitude and self-communion back to society and then work towards its upliftment.

Guru himself practices this path to ameliorate the conditions of the peasants, emphasizing the necessity of work as a corollary to faith. For him “every action is personal at its root” as “personal alone is universal” (900). Jali's query “How in the world of separation to hold past?” (841) is answered by the Guru reiterating the necessity to interpret faith through action :

One must cling to memory. One must remember and one must act. The knowledge gained in communion and ripened in solitude must pour its life into the world through action. Thus only will you and the world about you live (941).

He is expounding the two ideals of Gita: action and contemplation. It requires men to continue work even in the perfected state, there being nothing incompatible with inner peace. But “from communion - man must always return” (941). What Jali has learnt in his communion and solitude, he now must put to practice by uplifting society which is also his moral duty as a ruler. Echoing the mystical state of absolute identification and non-dualism Jali had achieved, Guru says, “My son ... this is the heart of the mystery. we go forth we meet and in that meeting we are as one. At one also with all life”. The Guru takes the Vedantic position when he says : “Although we know that we are spirit and that all spirit is one, yet by unalterable system of our being we swing out from the world of communion into the world of separated things” (940, 941). The message of ‘Tat Tvam Asi’ provides the basis for universal love. The spirit that has experienced this unity with the world and God will know that “spirit is the world’s master” (943) also that there is "divine meaning " in the life of men. The Upanishads say he is slave to none who realizes the truth: “*Aham Brahmasmi*” that is, I am Brahma. With this understanding behind him Jail is ready to take his part in the world as the ruler of Vidyapur. “He had a sense of security” and “saw the complications of the world as artificialities painted over true forms a life” (947). Having gained insight into the nature of reality with the help of a Guru, Jali comes to terms with the human condition where there are no absolutes. He is not even sure whether he would return to Hawaghar. But the ‘Rta’ or the permanent reality is the kernel around which he can rally his faith, “Vishnu would certainly be there for him” (949).

Man's relation to God can only be correct if man's relation to man is right. Bantock comments “That public life is demoralizing is Myers most constant theme” (97). But in his Indian novels the quest for an integrated self concludes in a positive statement of an exhortation to a mystical ‘amoral love’ which is to be the basis of equal relationships within society. Drawing parallels between Myers and Forster, Leavis calls them ‘custodians of something essential’. While Forster’s concern is for individual liberation, Myers personal relations are to eventually change the shape of things and to bring about a social revolution. Myers was more than a humanist. He was a philosophical thinker who in this tetralogy places man in the universe and advocates a deep spiritual connection, his communionism evolving to an ideal communism.

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