

The Love of Radha and Krishna: A Comparative Study of Love in Eastern and Western Literature

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Abstract – Love, then, whether for God or human being, is a desire to merge with, be one with the beloved. This contributes to an ambivalence of expression that has been fully exploited by the poet Jayadeva in his Gitagovinda to portray the love of Radha and Krishna. Viewed at one level the love is earthly, sensual and profane, while at another level it expresses the deepest Bhakti (devotion) of the human soul for the divine.

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I

We are one life and flesh ... You and

I, Tristan and Isolde, shall forever remain one and undivided: ...

I am yours . . . you are mine . . .

one Tristan and Isolde:[1]

Thou art in me and I in thee, glued together as one and the selfsame thing which henceforth and forever cannot be divided.[2]

An examination of secular and religious literature allows to be seen that in both the utterance of the rooted love is essentially the same, and in fact, removed from the context one could scarcely distinguish between the two. This similarity of expression is explained by Augustine in his insistence on the peculiar quality of all love whether secular or divine:

What about every kind of love? Does it not wish to become one with what it is loving? And if it reaches its object, does it not become one with it:[3]

The poet's aim is implicit in the opening of the Gitagovinda:

If remembering Hari enriches your heart,

If his arts of seduction arouse you,

Listen to Jayadeva's speech

In these sweet soft lyrical songs. (I.4).

Remembrance of Hari is sacred and is a devotional activity, while the reference to "his arts of seduction" imply the profane. Jayadeva thus makes it clear that the Gitagovinda is about both.

Keeping this ambivalence in view, there is interestingly, a great deal of affinity between Indian and Western literature. In the course of this paper I propose to examine the portrayal of the love of Radha and Krishna with relation to the portrayal of both secular and divine love in Western literature particularly as exemplified in the Roman Tradition and the divine poems of St. John of the Cross and The Song of Solomon in the Bible.

II

The love of Radha and Krishna begins in spring – the conventional mating season in both Western and Indian literature. It is in spring that Daphnis and Chloe⁶ first experience the stirrings of love, as do the young cowherdresses of Brindavana. It is in this season that nature comes into full bloom and love lurls in every spring sound – in the "soft sandal mountain winds" (1.27), in the "enticing sounds of honey bees" (XI.4) and the crying of the cuckoos "sing(ing) love's commands like bards" (IX.4). All nature sings in joy as myriad sweet odours fill the air with fragrance and,

Gleaming saffron flower pistils are golden septers of love,

Trumpet flowers like wenton bees are arrows in Love's quiver

When spring's mood is rich, Hari roams here

To dance with young women, friend

A cruel time for deserted lovers. (I. 30).

It is in these Arcadian surroundings that Radha and Krishna undergo the despair and joy of love in their separation and reunion.

If the idyllic surroundings stir young hearts, it is the beauty of Krishna which impels the cowherdesses to flirt with Krishna, for like all heroes of romance Krishna too is eminently handsome. When Radha thinks of him, she first recalls his beauty – his “restless eyes”, his cheeks, his swaying head, his tremulous ear ornaments, his hair, his dark body and his throbbing arms all conjoined in the “love-dance./playing seductively. .” (II.2-8). After the enraptured catalogue of his charms, Jayadeva adds that his song “evokes the image of Mathu’s beautiful foe/fit for worthy men who keep the memory of Hari’s feet” (II.9). The sensual recollection of the beloved’s beauty of sanctified with the devotional recollection of the beauty of God which is the basis of his appeal for the devotees.

Krishna is also the embodiment of love. He loves and is loved by the “beautiful cowherd girls [who] wildly / wind him in their bodies: (I. 46). He enchants all the cowherd girls, then falls in love with Radha and “abandons the beautiful cowherd girls” (III. 1).

Like all heroes of romance, Radha too is the paragon of beauty and is pictured in sensual detail with her “Luscious red berry lips” (III. 13) teeth like white jasmine” (X. 13)., “liquid movements of her eyes” (III. 14), “Lotus mouth” (III. 14), “arched brow” (III. 15) and in her graceful gait she “bear(s) the young beauty of heavenly nymphs” (X. 14).

Krishna’s friendship with Radha is brief at first for Radha catches him being unfaithful to her and spurns him, so that the god is completely humanised as he turns into the love – lorn lover of romantic tales. He has on him all the marks of the desolate lover that launce catalogue in The two Gentlemen of Verona:[7]

To relish a love song . . . to walk alone . . .

To sigh . . . to weak . . . to fast . . . (II. 1. 17)

Krishna broods sleeplessly, weeps, falls ill, longs for her and “sighing incessantly to pours out his grief” (V. 16). Spenser’s plaint in the Amoretti might well have been uttered by Krishna:

Yet cannot I, with many a dropping teare,

And long intreaty, soften her hard Lart:

That she will once vouchsafe my plaint to heare,

Or looke with pity on my payneful smart (XVIII)

Krishna’s suffering makes even “cool moon rays scorch him / threatening death. (V. 3). Like Orland in As You like It he haunts the wilderness crying out,

I have little use for wealth or people

Or my life or my home. (III. 3)

Krishna, the destroyer and preserver of the world, acknowledges the supremacy of the love – god, the supremacy that Virgil had declared in his “Omnia Vincit Amar” and that echoed through the lyrics of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance Krishna asserts that “Love’s . . . arms conquer worlds” (X. 13) and “Our games prove your triumph love” (III. 12).

If Krishna suffers the pangs of separation so too does Radha. Like Julia in The Two Gentlemen of Verona who cannot tear herself away from Proteas in spite of his unfaithfulness, Radha too loves Krishna in spite of his infidelity. She expresses her helplessness:

My perverse heart

Only wants Krishna back

What can I do? (II. 10)

She is “dejected” (IV. 2) by his desertion, clings to him in “fantasy” (IV. 2). Her face is “clouded and streaked with tears” (IV. 5). She is almost mad in her agony and “laughs, collapses, cries, trembles, utters her pain” (IV. 8). She becomes corpse-like in her sorrow:

Hari: Hari: she chants passionately

As if destined to die through harsh neglect. (IV. 17). She evokes him “in deep meditation to reach[his] distant form” (IV. 8) and “feels secretly revived” when she “meditate(s)” on him (IV. 21). However, she prefers death to living without him. (VII. 39, 41).

Both Radha and Krishna are shown to be targets of the arrows of the love god. The mythology of the love god is common to both Eastern and Western literature. Shakespeare in A Midsummer Night’s Dream gives us a picture of Cupid taking with his arrows. “As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts” (II. ii. 103) and we see him playing havoc with the love-life of the couples Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius. So too does Chancer in Troilus and Criseyde show us Troilus as the victim of Cupid’s love – shaft (I.30). Radha says “He pierced my heart with arrows of Love.” (VII. 4). Her heart is impaled by “love’s arrows”. (IV.66, VII.4,8) and she is “wasted by the arrows of love.” (VIII. 7) Krishna begs the god of love not to pierce him with any more arrows:

Don't lift your mango-blossom now:

Don't aim your bow: (III.12).

At the same time he also prays the love god not to mistake the signs of the lover's longing for the signs of asceticism:

Lotus stalk garland my heart,

Not a necklace of snakes:

Blue lily petals circle my beck,

Not a streak of poison.

Sandalwood power, not ash,

Is smeared on my lovelorn body:

Love God, don't attack me, mistaking me for Siva:

Why do you rush at me in rage? (III. 11)

Siva exemplifies an ascetic devotion that totally negates all worldly concerns in his meditation on the divine. Radha and Krishna exemplify a passionate love, which also makes them forget all worldly concerns. Their passionate love is as powerful in its intensity as Siva's ascetic devotion and the spiritual end is the same – a union with the divine. While Radha's meditation on Krishna is religious, Krishna's meditation of Radha is the god's response to the call of the devotee. The poet thus cleverly uses the ambivalence of expression to express both the sacred and profane levels in the yearning love and the pain of separation of Radha and Krishna.

Love in separation was idealized as the necessary condition of the intense yearning which characterises both the lover and the devotee in both Indian and Western Literature. Denise de Bougemont shows that the separation of lovers and the consequent suffering has been the central motif in the history of the literature of love in the Western world:

Tristan and Iseult[s] . . . need of one

Another is in order to be a

flame, and they

Do not need another as they are. What they

Need is not one another's presence, but one

Another's absence. Thus the partings of the lovers

Are dictated by their passion itself . . . [10]

Rougemont shows that what they relish is the pain and suffering of separation. At the same time the

symptoms of yearning and pain have typified Western descriptions of love in separation from god. Radha's predicament as she wanders in vain in search of her beloved – "I followed him at night to depths of the forest" (VII. 4) is similar to the predicament sketched in The Song of Solomon in the Bible, "By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not" (3:1) and again, "I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone. . I sought him, but I could not find him" (5:6) the shulamite's request is that "if ye find my beloved . . . tell him, that I am sick of love" (2:5) so too in the Christian system of redemption, "Love is strong as death." (8:6)

Thus Radha's condition and the universal condition of the devotee are the same in her separation from and union with Krishna the Lover and Krishna the Lord. Through separation the lover becomes absorbed in the beloved and absorption in God was the goal of the devotee. Jayadeva further sanctifies her love by juxtaposing his own devotion with her erotic language by declaring that he takes "refuge at Hari's feet" (VII.10). Separation is valued because it makes the love – devotee realise the need for refuge in and union with Krishna.

The confidence of the beloved in regaining her lover is seen in Radha's change of stance once she has him back in her fold and he stands "bowed before her, pleading forgiveness." (VIII.1). She now acts like the proud unattainable mistress of the European courtly Love Tradition who spurns the lover's advances while the latter implores a soft glance.

Firm in her belief of her power over him, she mocks him with withering scorn:

Damn you, Madhava: go: Kesava, leave me:

Don't plead your lies with me:

Go after her, Krishna :

She will ease your despair. (VIII. 66)

Krishna begs forgiveness of Radha:

Forgive me now :

I won't do this to you again. (IV. 9)

After the initial denial Radha gives in and moves in secrecy under cover of night to consummate her love:

The night's dark cherished cloak

Embraces limbs of beautiful adulteresses

Whose hearts rush to meet their lovers (II.11)

The adulterous trust was as conventional in Indian as in European literature. The heroine moves in darkness and secrecy. The literary motif of the heroines surreptitious journey through the darkness to meet her Lover – here Krishna – also becomes a religious one. It becomes symbolical of the devotee seeking the Lord in the figurative darkness of the “Kaliyug”, the present degenerate age. So too, in the European tradition, St. John of the Cross identified his soul with the lady who seeks a tryst with her “Lord” at night:

Upon a gloomy night,

With all my cares to loving ardours flushed,

(O venture of delight :)

With nobody in sight.

I went abroad when my entire house was hushed.

In safety, in disguise,

In darkness up the secret stair I crept,

(O happy enterprise :)

When my entire house at length in silence slept.”

Their union too is the conventional “secret” enjoyment of love, the concretization of Radha’s earlier fantasy:

I reach the lonely forest hut where the secretly lies at night

My trembling eyes search for him as he laughs in a mood of passion. (II.11)

Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu, submits totally to his beloved and makes obeisance at Radha’s feet. He is the knight of courtly love who enters into a slave like devotion of his mistress. Where Spenser had expressed the desire in the Amoretti to “fall lowly at her feet” to entreat his mistress grace Krishna translated it into action. He massages her feet, paints them with lac (X.7,8) puts his head on them (X.1,2) and “worships [Radha’s] Lotus feet [like a] slave” (XI.2).

The sexual union is shown as the natural consumption of love as Krishna supplicates: “Offer your lips nectar to revive a dying slave Radha.” (XII. 6) The imagery of the sweet taste of the beloved occurs even in sacred literature. “Thy lips”, Solomon sings to the Shulsmite “drop as the honey comb: honey and milk are under thy tongue . . .” (4.11). The lover draws sustenance and life from the sweetness of the beloved’s mouth.

Their ecstatic love is shown as a death and resurrection. Krishna is told that Radha is dying of love and can be saved only by the heavenly elixir” from his body (IV. 20). The intensity of her passion is vividly pictured:

Radha sinks in a sea of erotic mood,

Clinging to you in her meditation.(III.10)

Jayadeva sanctifies the sensual passion by juxtaposing it with “meditation” and the sacred and the profane merge in the sea of love in which the self is dissolved as expressed in the musical composition of Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde:

In the swelling flood

In the echoing sound

In the infinite torment of the world’s breath, be engulfed

Sink deep Unknowing.[12]

So too does Fr. Poulain express the intimate communion between God and the soul:

“He will not be content until he is merged into, almost identified with the beloved soul that has given herself to Him. He desires an intimate and mutual penetration.”[13]

III

In this concept of love, Jayadeva thus presents the love of Radha and Krishna at two levels that are distinct and yet mutually complementary. At the secular level the love is intensely human, and the narrative has all the elements of a typical romantic tale – the idyllic arcadian setting with spring stirring young hearts with thoughts of love, the arrows of the love god impaling both the protagonists, the initial joyful friendship marred by the young lover’s misdemeanour, the pain of separation and the final ecstatic union. While the narrative, the setting and the demeanour of the lovers recall Shakespeare’s romances, the sensual details of the lovers’ passionate love of Tristan and Isolde. The same impassioned language typifies Western Hymns of divine love as seen in the poems of St. John of the Cross and The Song of Solomon in the Bible. But the two – secular literature and sacred literature and sacred literature are distinct. One refers distinctly to the earthly and the profane, while the other refers distinctly to the divine and the sacred. Jayadeva’s Gitagovinda however, is both – secular and divine. One does not exclude the other. Jayadeva presents them as complementary to each other. Jayadeva achieves this by constantly stressing, along with the narrative of the human lovers, that Krishna the human incarnation of Vishnu who in his earlier ten forms had liberated

the world of its evil (I.5-16), has once again descended on earth as the cowherd Krishna to relieve the world of its evil. By presenting him as a human lover filled with human emotions Jayadeva sanctifies these emotions and presents them as complementary to the love of God. In this reconciliation of the religious and the secular, the anti-asectical trend and the idealization of delight Jayadeva presents love not as a metaphor for any process of liberation or awakening but human love as an ultimate reality in itself, celebrated in the body, in the heart, and in the soul.

NOTES

1. The Tristan of Gottfried Von Strassburg, Trans. A. T. Natto (Harmondsworth: Penguin Edn. 1960), P. 282.
2. Quoted by Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New Yorks Dutton Paperback, 1961), P. 427.
3. The Writing of St. Augustine, Vol. I Trans. Robert P. Russel (New York : 1948), P. 325.
4. Jayadeva, *Gitagovinda : Love Song of the Dark Lord* Trans. Barbara Stoler Miller (New Delhi : O.U.P. Rpt. 1978) All references to the text of Gitagovinda have been taken from the edition cited above.
5. Krishna is referred to by various names in the *Gitagovinda* besides Hari such as Madhava, Kesava, Mura's foe etc.
6. Longus' *Daphne and Chloe*, Trans. Paul Turner. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Edn. 1968), P. 48.
7. William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Ed. Donald Wolfit, (London: Spring Brooks, 1958)
8. Spenser, *Poetical Works*, Ed. J. C. Smith & E. De. Selincourt, (London: O.U.P. 1970).
9. The Complete Wprks of William Shakespeare.
10. Geoffrey Chaticer, *Troibus And Criseyde*, Trans. Nevill Coghill. (Hermondsworth: Penguin Edn. 1971), P. 10.
11. Denis De Rougemont, *Love Delcared*, Trans. Richard Howard, (Boston: Beacon Pagerback Edn. 1964). P. 41.
12. St. John of the Cross *Poems* Ed. With translations by Roy Compbell (Baltimore: Penguin Edn. 1968) P. 27

13. Cited by Denis De Rougemont, *Love Delcared*, P. 159
14. *The Song of Divine Love*, Tr. Duncan Greenlees (Madras: Kalakeshetra Publications Rpt. 1962), P. 29.

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2. Chaucer, Geoffrey, *Troibus and Criseyde* (1971). Trans. Nevill Coghill, Harmondsworth: Penguin Edn.
3. Do Rougemont, Denis, *Love Declared*, Trans. Richard Howard, Beacon Paperback Edn. Boston: 1964.
4. Gottfried Von Streassburg, *Tristan*, Trans. A Hatto Penguin Edn. Harmondsworth: 1960.
5. Jayadeva (1962). *The Song of Divine Love*, Trans. Duncan Greenless, Madras: Kalakeshetra Publications: Rpt.
6. Jayadeva, *Gitagovinda: Love Song of the Dark Lord*. Trans. Barbara Stoler Miller, New Delhi: O.U.P. Rpt. 1978.
7. Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe* (1968). Trans. Paul Turner, Penguin Edn. Harmonds worth: 1968.
8. *Saint John of the Cross, Poems*, Ed. With translations by Roy Campbell, Penguin Edn. Baltimore: 1968.
9. Shakespeare, William (1958). *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Ed. Sir Donald Wolfit, London: Spring Books, 1958.
10. Spenser, Edmund, *Poetical Works*, Ed. J. C. Smith & E. De. Selincourt, London: O.U.P., 1970.
11. Underhill, Evelyn, *Mysticism Dutton, Paperback Edn.* New York: 1961.

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