

REINSTATING THE TRUE NATURE OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS: ALDOUS HUXLEY AND THE UPANISHADS

PAWAN KUMAR SHARMA

Associate Professor of English, Markanda National College, Shahabad Markanda, Haryana, India

ABSTRACT

The Whole is all that,

The Whole is born out of the Whole

When the Whole is absorbed into the Whole

The Whole alone remains. (*Brihadaranyaka Upnishad*, 5.1)

There is only one story, a singular theme that runs through the entire modern literature. Broadly speaking it deals with the issue of what it considers as the crisis of consciousness. In an attempt to reinstate and enact the true nature of human consciousness, it often seeks to reach back to some original, more completed or coherent kind of thought unlike the modern epistemology. Searching for solution it digs deep into the most primitive and forgotten and brings something back in the process. "A completed thought" writes D H Lawrence, "was the plumbing of a depth, like a whirlpool, of emotional awareness, and at the depth of the whirlpool of emotion the resolve formed (44)". The modern thinkers lamented the fact that the man's arrogant mental consciousness getting the upper hand has set in motion a long process of misdirection which has culminated in the disaster of modern life. As a corrective measure, they felt the need to go back to the earliest civilizations where consciousness was an end in itself because "the old pagan process of rotary image thought" (Lawrence, 46) had the potential to create a way of being which fulfilled the individual and allowed him to exist at one with his fellows and his surroundings. There was no split between the subjective and the objective', an absence of which plagues the modern mankind.

KEYWORDS: True Nature, Human Consciousness

INTRODUCTION

Aldous Huxley too delves into this aspect of human consciousness in search of answers to the ultimate questions of human existence. As a writer and thinker, his writings seem to be searching for a sure and affirmative message to restore peace and fulfillment to the frustrating world. The search takes the form of a self quest, which distinguishes him from his other contemporaries. His divided and doubting self was struggling to come out of dualism or split, within and without both. His quest to reintegrate and reunify his inner self takes him to the *Vedantic* philosophy which offers a definite clue or guidance to this deeper quest at a time when he was going through a crisis of consciousness.

In 1937, Huxley was introduced to the *Vedanta* Society of Southern California by his scholar friend, Gerald Heard. At that time Huxley was trying to develop his perennial philosophy, the idea that religious traditions are historically and culturally relative but that they each validate, in their own way, that human beings are divine and that the purpose of

our lives is to come into a contact with the numinous behind the phenomenal world. This is, in fact, the core idea of the *Upanishads*. It is to these ancient *Hindu* texts that Huxley turned in search of a possible remedy and a method to get out of what he perceived as a Western crisis of consciousness. The most important message of the *Vedanta*, *The Upanishads*, is that *brahman*, the supreme reality of all things, and *atman*, the manifestation of the divine in the human soul, are one and the same, a pure and perfect whole. The purpose of our human life is to recognize the spark of divinity within all things. *Vedanta* also holds that all religions express the same principle, the same overarching truth that there is no separation between the soul and God.

Huxley's entire journey as a creative writer gives an explicit expression to the tremendous hold of the *Vedantic* philosophy on his mind. The very first volume of poems entitled *The Burning Wheel* seems to be an allusion to the *Vedantic* conception of an *alatchakra*. However his later works such as *Ends and Means*, *The Perennial Philosophy*, *Themes and Variations*, *Time Must Have A Stop*, *After Many A Summer*, *Vedanta for the Western World* and *Vedanta for the Modern Man* express more elaborately the *Vedantic* concepts of *Tat-Tvam-Asi* (Thou Art that) and *Atmanan-Viddhi* (Know thyself). While developing his perennial philosophy, Huxley went through an evolutionary process in discovering the highest principles of all the religions, before accepting *Vedantic* idea that "Knowledge is a function of being (*PP*, 1)". Huxley also contends that "since one is not oneself a sage or saint...the best thing one can do, in the field of metaphysics, is to study the works of those who were, and who, because they had modified their merely human mode of being, were capable of a more than merely human kind (*PP*, 5-6)". While underlining the influence of *Vedanta* on Huxley's personality, Hans Beerman went on to comment that "his style of walk reminded me somewhat of the way Indian *Rishis* with highly developed kinesthetic sense move around their ashrams (924)".

Orthodox Christianity failed to fascinate Huxley for its ritualistic character and rejection of the experiential knowledge and secular truth. Since "The man who invented Christianity - St Paul - said the highest possible ideals, and no methods for realizing them" (*Island*, 96), Huxley came to the conclusion that every seeker of truth must begin with a minimum working hypothesis as a starting point. He insists that man must have a firm belief in the ultimate Ground of Being, the idea firmly grounded in *Chhandogya Upanishad*. The Divine Ground, Huxley feels, is not merely transcendental, but also immanent. He also advocates that man must make efforts to establish affective relationship with the Godhead to be ultimately identified with it. Since the Semitic traditions are based on dualistic hypothesis, the *Vedantic* tradition opens up the possibility to be one with Godhead. *Chhandogya Upanishad* explains this concept of unity in diversity with illustrations. The other requirement pertains to the realization of the unified consciousness and the ultimate identity or merger of the individual with the Divine Ground - *Aham Brahm Asmi* (I am *Braman*), *Tat Tvam Asi* (That Art Thou) - through "law of mortification and self-transcending awareness (*TMHS*, 289)".

Completely disillusioned with the scientific and technological modernism of the West along with its materialistic interpretation of reality, Huxley finally realizes that "the ascent to the divine life is the human journey.... without which he would be only an insect crawling among other ephemeral insects (*Aurvindo*, 42-43)". Until a man is freed from the narrow bonds of the finite material world and enters into the realm of spiritual time and space he cannot know the answer. The cessation of sorrow can be achieved by the elimination of the feeling of 'I' ness and by achieving a realisation that ultimate reality is one, both within and without. Huxley finds the clue to resolve this dilemma in the *Upanishadic* thought which states each individual is a spark of a great flame, a ray of one light, undifferentiated within the body of cosmic spirit. Huxley insists that Self knowledge is the only way to truth, freedom, harmonious living and fulfillment "whose excellence does

not require to be proved by reference to anything beyond itself (*Literature*, 18-19)".

In *Those Barren Leaves*, Huxley asks the individual to constantly ask himself: "Why I am doing this? What is it all for? Did I come into the world supplied with a soul which may very likely be immortal for the sole purpose of sitting everyday at this desk (106)"? The inhabitants of Pala in *Island* also give much importance to self-knowledge: "So be aware – aware in every context, at all times . . . This is the only genuine yoga, the only spiritual exercise worth practicing (*Island*, 40)". *Upanishad* also says: "Of all these, the self alone is to be realized, for one knows all through it (*Chhandogya Upanishad*, 7. 24.1)". In his other works Huxley clearly upholds the superior philosophical wisdom of the *Upanishads* as a sure way to achieve an integrated state of being. He feels that "if the doors of perception were cleansed, everything will appear to man as it is, infinite (*DOP*, title page)". With the attainment of self knowledge, the individual thinks and feels cosmically.

Huxley insists on the primacy of immediate experience to gain real and absolute knowledge. Intellect and reason, by virtue of being discursive, analytic and abstract, cannot give the vision of a whole, a unified synoptic vision of reality. It is only through intuition that all dualities are dissolved. In the "Forword" to *Mystics and Society*, Huxley says that "Nobody was ever saved or enlightened by ascent to proposition, only by an immediate experience on the non-verbal level. The value of the metaphysical or theistic words is merely instrumental; that of the experienced states is absolute, self-evident and intrinsic (Ghose, ix). Huxley believed that it is only the intense heightening of perception at the intuitive level that can help comprehend the totality of reality. *Kena Upanishad* too advocates: "The eye does not go there, nor speech, nor mind; we do not know, how to instruct one about it. It is distinct from the known and above the unknown (1.3)". Huxley rejects the feeling of 'I AM', a sense of egotism which lies at the basis of all intellectual apprehensions. He writes: "'I AM', two tiny words, but what an enormity of untruth (*Island*, 175)".

The *Upanishadic* system conceives reality on the pattern of the core or *atman*, the permanent substance which remains immutable and identical amidst the changing panorama of the outer world. The *atman* or soul is the internal *atman* of all created things, and as such the only unifying principle in the world. This idea of unity as an immutable essence, the original unity at the base of shifting material appears to be deeply embedded in Huxley's philosophical thought. His interpretation of reality comes very near to Sankara's. In *Time Must Have A Stop*, he approvingly quotes Sankara's interpretation of reality as supra-intellectual, a supreme unity and coherent whole. In *Eyeless in Gaza*, regenerate Anthony Beavis advocates the principle of "unity of mankind, unity of all life, all being even (*EIG*, 612)". Dr. Miller, in the same novel, propounds the thesis of essential unity underlying all multiplicities. In *Time Must Have A Stop*, Huxley advocates that "There was the ultimate all embracing field—the Brahma of Sankara, the One of Plotinus, the Ground of Eckhart and Boehme (*TMHS*, 92)". This is a typical *Vedantic* way of conceiving human existence. He writes:

Life bringing order out of chaos and ugliness, life performing its miracles of birth and growth . . . beauty, . . . 'and horror . . . a reconciliation. And not merely a reconciliation. A fusion, an identity. Beauty made one with horror . . . Life reconciled with the perpetual immanence of death . . . Emptiness identified with selfhood . . . 'the One in plurality, the Emptiness that is all'. (*Island*, 166)

Huxley also underlines the fact that only the transcendent, the completely other, can be immanent without being modified by the becoming of that in which it dwells. The Perennial Philosophy teaches that it is desirable and indeed necessary to know the spiritual Ground of things, not only within the soul, but also outside in the world and, beyond world

and soul, in its transcendent otherness. The Divine Ground of all existence is a spiritual absolute which is described by Huxley as 'God without form.' In his essay on "Man and Reality" he remarks that the realization of divine immanence and transcendence is possible only to one who is enlightened.

Imbued with an intense desire for seeking a solution to this dilemma, Sankara puts forth the concept of *maya*. Huxley calls it, 'cosmic illusion' with the same end in view. Influenced by Sankara, Huxley also says in "Shakespeare and Religion" that "The world is an illusion, but it is an illusion which we must take seriously, because it is real as far as it goes,... We must not attempt to live outside the world, which is given us, but we must somehow learn how to transform it and transfigure it (174)". In *Those Barren Leaves*, Calamy marks the distinction between appearance and reality, permanence and transitoriness, and mutability and immutability. He says : "you see that everything that seems real is in fact entirely illusory—may in fact, the cosmic illusion—behind it you catch a glimpse of reality (368)". In *Eyeless in Gaza*, Anthony Beavis advocates that this empirical world should not be denied but viewed in terms of a new light. Like the Vedantic thinkers, he does not want to negate it but endeavours to transform and transfigure it. In *Island*, Will Farnaby, who undergoes the essential horrors of empirical life, which he calls murder, war, starvation and ignorance, craves for perfection and sets out on a visit to Pala, a forbidden Island, in search of something new and significant. There the 'mynah bird' articulates 'Attention—Attention,' but since he is confronted with duality, he fails to grasp the real significance of these utterances. After being exposed to various institutions of the Palanese, he gets a glimpse of the ultimate reality, leading to the resolution of duality in him.

Huxley feels that, in the advanced technological societies, the freedom and subjective self of man is being threatened by social coercions. Man is disunited within himself; and the world has become fragmented. The root evil according to Huxley is the metaphysical evil, which is ignorance, *avidya*. Because of his ignorance, man fails to view the true nature of reality and its existence. It is only through self-awareness that man can conquer dualism and achieve unity in nature and consciousness. Spiritual knowledge starts with self-awareness which enables man to discriminate between the finite and the infinite, the apparent and the real. Huxley borrows a quotation from Shakespeare to explain it further:

"But man proud man,
Drest in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he is most assured
His glassy essence like an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As make the angels weep. (*Ape and Essence*, 25)

In *After Many A Summer*, Propter shows his complete disgust with Jo's activities of prolonging his life on the mundane level. In *Eyeless in Gaza*, Dr. Miller tells Anthony Beavis that we perpetuate evil in the world because most of the time we are swayed by stupidity. In *Time Must Have A Stop*, Bruno Rontini suggests Sebastian that it is by leading a life of awareness that we can break the shackles of bondage and emancipate ourselves. In *Island*, Huxley has concretized this idea by the ever-present 'mynah birds' which have been trained to sing two words and a phrase—'Attention:' *Karuna* (compassion) and "Here and now boys (12)".

Like the Vedantic thought, Huxley insists on the individual's efforts for the realization of his true consciousness, with divine grace occupying only a secondary role in the process. In his exposition of the means of transformation of consciousness, Huxley mainly depends upon the *Vedantic* and *yogic* methodology. In *The Perennial Philosophy*, he writes: "As to the means to salvation, these are simultaneously ethical, intellectual and spiritual and have been summed up with admirable clarity and economy in Buddha's Eight-fold path (232)". Speaking explicitly, these three stages may be distinguished as purification, concentration, and identification. These practices are adopted for disciplining one's nature and strengthening the will by super-rational concentration. In *Ends and Means*, he writes that meditation is the only technique of mysticism. It is the control of will which can help the individual to detach himself from the mundane world and seek an attachment with the Divine Ground.

The Hindu method of meditation (*Dhyana Yoga*) holds a great fascination for him. *Yoga*, he believes, is not an esoteric practice but meditative discipline, a focussing on consciousness. He has a preference for *Dhyana Yoga* as against the *Raja Yoga* of Patanjali. Through meditation on the Whole, as 'I am all, I am the infinite Brahman,' all particular consciousness is dissolved and the individual loses his particularity and becomes universal. Since the object of meditation is expansion and identification, the *Chhandogya Upanishad* advocates: "one should meditate upon *Akasa* (space) as *Brahman*(3.18.1). Huxley's mind is not limited to particular objects, but embraces in its expansive vision the totality of the universe. In *The Perennial Philosophy*, Huxley shows his marked preference for the *yogic* 'aphorism' 'om' as an object of contemplation. He writes that "the end of human life is contemplation or the direct intuitive awareness of God (337). Huxley has been so much fascinated by *yogic* contemplations that almost all his metaphysical characters give great importance to meditation and contemplation for the attainment of unitive knowledge: "As a lump of salt thrown in water becomes dissolved in water and there would not be any of it to seize forth as it were, but wherever one may take it salty indeed, so, verily, this great being, infinite, limitless, consists of nothing but knowledge (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 2.4.12.)".

Thus from the preceding examination, it can be conclusively established that Huxley's thought reveal a striking kinship with the *Vedantic* systems in regard to all metaphysical questions. His works can be studied and appreciated appropriately only in the light of his beliefs that the essential nature of the human being is not the one, far removed from all social connections, but is that of one who is an integral part of social and natural organization, one who lives his life from the cradle to the grave in and through the social and natural whole. The enlightened individual of Huxley is not a solitary individual but an individual who is a member of a perfect society: a society where there is an absolute reign of love. It is not only free from evils, but it is full of virtues, intellectual and ethical as well as spiritual. The enlightened individual leads a life of complete identity, identity with his own self, identity with his body and other physiological adjuncts, identity with nature and with all other fellow beings. Huxley believes that our society can be transformed only by enlightened individuals, 'theocentric saints'.

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