Indian Metaphysics in Lawrence Durrell's Novels

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By

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Dedicated to my wife Prabha

I know that the bone structure of my work is metaphysically solid, so to speak, and that's what counts.
—Lawrence Durrell

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I sincerely thank Cambridge Scholars Publishing for deciding to publish the paperback edition of my book, *Indian Metaphysics in Lawrence Durrell's Novels*. The hardcover and eBook version of this book was first published in 2014.

Dr. James A. Brigham, the editor of *Lawrence Durrell: Collected Poems,* once expressed his desire to work with me on the Eastern mysticism in Lawrence Durrell's works at the Lawrence Durrell Research centre, S B College, Changanassery, Kerala, and the centre accepted the research project that he had submitted. Thus, he stayed in Kerala for over a month. He had interaction at Kochi with a professor who was known to be an authority on oriental philosophy, particularly in Buddhism, and he tried his best to give shape to his Eastern thoughts. The working title of his project was: "The Rays of the Sadhus: The Metaphysic of Lawrence Durrell". In the project he submitted to the centre he stated that the proposed project would study the growth of Durrell's metaphysics through his published work through sixty years and the independent work of both Ravi Nambiar and Brigham. After returning to Canada he planned to continue this project. During his stay in Kerala I could meet him only occasionally as I was working in Kochi, about three hours of driving from S. B. College. At the end of his stay in Kerala, he confessed to me that he could make no headway in his endeavour to grasp Indian philosophy. However, he promised to keep in touch with me when he got back to Canada. Before leaving, he left a copy of Aldous Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy* with me, telling me that it would become useful if I ever decided to work further on Durrell. Indeed, the book has been greatly useful to me and, I hope, the present work will stay as a perennial proof of his brief friendship with me.

I had agreed with Brigham before he left Kerala to continue our scholarly friendship and had suggested to him that we could still pursue our research together. My suggestion was that he could work on the Gnostic side of Durrell and I on his Indian side. He agreed. But fate decided the other way. I received only two letters from him after his return to Canada. To my utter shock, I came to know later that he had left this world. In fact, I had no idea about the extent of the studies he had done on

the subject and I also had no intention to pursue the project alone. But I owe him many thanks.

All my papers presented at different Lawrence Durrell conferences are either part of the thesis I had written for my PhD degree or are extensions of the research work I had carried out for my doctoral degree. The advice to consolidate my papers and develop them into a book came from my Durrellian friend, Prof. Dianne Vipond, during a dinner meeting at Goodenough College, London, in June 2012, when we had gathered there for Lawrence Durrell Centenary Conference. Of course, all my papers put together would only be less than fifty pages, but they contain the essence of the present book. I offer my warm thanks to Prof. Vipond.

However, the real scholarly inspiration I received is from my friend, Isabelle Keller-Privat, Toulouse University. I remain indebted to her for reading my manuscript with tremendous patience and giving me very valuable suggestions. Her insightful comments are inserted in the text at the appropriate places and my acknowledgement here should serve as the textual reference to her remarks. It was a great pleasure to work with Keller-Privat. She also helped me by sending material from Durrell Archive at Paris University, Nanterre. I extend my sincere thanks to her.

I thank Prof. Ian S. MacNiven and Prof. Corinne Alexandre-Garner for the "Introduction" and the "Foreword". My friendship with Prof. MacNiven goes back to 1992. I could not have attended the International Lawrence Durrell conferences without the support that kept coming from MacNiven. In fact, he is my Guru in many respects. He was quite busy writing a book; but he managed to snatch time for reading my manuscript and writing the introduction. I must also thank him for giving me permission to quote from his earlier letters written to me.

I met Alexandre-Garner first at the Avignon Durrell conference in 1992. I thank her for permitting me to use my own essays published by her at her university (*Lawrence Durrell at the Crossroads of Arts and Sciences* (2010) and *Lawrence Durrell: Borderlands & Borderlines* (2005), Presses Universitaires de Paris 10). She has been kind enough to read my manuscript minutely and I thank her for the valuable observations she made in the "Foreword".

I could always approach the great writer, Michael Haag, whenever I needed any help and within minutes he would respond. I thank him.

I must recall Dr. Mulk Raj Anand, who gave me a chance to interview him. I am sure that the valuable observations he made in the interview about Lawrence Durrell's metaphysical ideas enrich the arguments I have presented in my text. I also thank my brother, Radhakrishnan, who read out my questionnaire to Anand and recorded the interview.

I am grateful to Georges Hoffman for permitting CSP to use the image, Epfs' painting, on the book cover. I am also grateful to Roy Bhaskar, the renowned philosopher, whose books have been immensely helpful to me in developing the idea of metarealism. I must also thank Julien Yuseloff, Manager, Associated University Presses, for permitting me to quote from *Lawrence Durrell: Conversations.*

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Similarly, I thank all the living and departed writers whose works helped me in developing my ideas in this book.

It was Dr. James Gifford, who advised me to approach CSP for permission to publish this book. I thank him and the publisher who was kind enough to accept my proposal. This book would not have seen the light of the day without the interest shown by Cambridge Scholars Publishing. I must thank my friend Vinod Nayanar for the help and guidance he rendered to me. He has been inspiring me ever since I signed the contract with the publisher. I am grateful to Dr. Gigy Joseph of S. B. College, Changanassery, Kerala, for sending me material from the Lawrence Durrell Research Centre at S. B. College. My nephew, Santosh, too mailed me some material from Mysore University. I thank him.

Prof. K. C. Nambiar (Oxford 1954-56), former professor at Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (now EFLU), was kind enough to proofread the final draft of my manuscript. I sincerely thank him.

Last but not the least; I thank my mother, father, wife, children (Roopa and Surjith, Sandeep and Aparna), my sweet grandchildren (Adithya, Samhita, and Advaith), and all my dear friends.

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FOREWORD

Professor Ravi Nambiar has long been known to the community of Durrell scholars. In 1992 in Avignon, France, he gave a paper on Indian thought and Lawrence Durrell's *Avignon Quintet*, which was published in *Deus Loci*, the Journal of the International Lawrence Durrell Society. It is also in France, at Paris Ouest University, that he developed this initial research when he compared Lawrence Durrell's Constance to D.H. Lawrence's Connie, and particularly their love-making in the light of Indian philosophy. This paper was published in a book, *Lawrence Durrell: A Writer at the Crossroads between Arts and Sciences.* Finally in London in 2012, for the writer's centenary conference, he talked about Krishnamurti in Durrell's work and this essay can be found in the book which is published today. What had driven Professor Nambiar's research as early as 1987 to Lawrence Durrell's two major sets of novels was the writer's approach to sex, the psyche and love and the artist's Indian metaphysical perspective which Ravi Nambiar then decided to explain to scholars from the West.

A story from Zen Buddhism that he told me during an interview at Changarnassery, Kerala, in July 2013 while the monsoon was raging, is a good introduction to Professor Nambiar's book. It can be seen in our mind's eye as a traditional scroll-like Chinese painting in ink with three characters standing on the banks of a river.

Two monks who were taking a stroll came to a river that had flooded. There was a lady there, stranded because of the heavy rains. She was standing on the bank of the river and could not walk across. The first monk offered to bring her to the other side. He lifted her and dropped her on the opposite bank. The two monks resumed their walk and the second monk told the rescuer: 'you are a monk, you are not supposed to hold a lady'. The first one replied: 'I have brought her to the other side but YOU are still carrying her in your mind, your psyche, whereas I have dropped her'.

This story might illustrate how, in his book, Ravi Nambiar attempts to open the door to Indian metaphysics for western readers and researchers and how he tries to carry us to that other side of the river. Some of us have glimpsed at this other side over the years and have written on the Indian intertext but few if any of us have been able to really enter this other country, to go beyond the main roads in this landscape and penetrate the

mindscape of this other culture. As academics from the West we have been neglecting the enduring significance of Indian metaphysics in Lawrence Durrell's work because as outsiders and onlookers, we are not impregnated with Indian culture so that something always eludes our understanding. The late James Brigham may have been a precursor in this field of research with his text 'An intruder from the East', published in 1998, in which he quoted many of the important annotated books on Buddhism and Asian philosophy that can be found in the Bibliothèque Lawrence Durrell in Paris Ouest University, which he had studied closely. He was the first researcher to have paid close attention to Durrell's Asian source texts. He was to have pursued his research with Ravi Nambiar, who in this book, in a way, carries on their common project and succeeds in enriching our knowledge even though sometimes we might feel somewhat puzzled by a methodology we are not accustomed to.

It takes an Indian academic, born and bred in the Indian world in which spirituality, philosophy and everyday life are entangled to make us aware not only of all the references we might have ignored until now but also to reveal the crucial impact of Indian metaphysics on the work and life of the artist. Dr Nambiar's book is about the relationship between Lawrence Durrell and India, particularly illustrated in the question of the vanishing of the stable ego in *the Quartet* and sexuality as inner liberation and the art of dying in *the Quintet*. But what Professor Nambiar thinks is most significant and original in his book is what he writes about illusion and reality and about 'Maya' in a chapter devoted to what he calls the existential dilemma.

'We have to remember that when Durrell, who could transcend all kinds of religious and ideological boundaries, uses the word 'India', he uses it as a metaphor, and not as a physical state with its own boundaries. India for him is the mythical India, the philosophical India, the spiritual India, and the perennial India' writes Professor Nambiar. He adds that he wants to understand why a writer like Durrell had to seek different metaphysics. To illustrate why Durrell rejected one world view to adopt another, R. Nambiar presents the opposition between the Victorian poet Tennyson's and the Japanese poet Basho's world views. Darley like Tennyson, says R. Nambiar, was for splitting reality, whereas a poet like Basho tries to see everything holistically. That is why when Professor Nambiar quotes Lord Tennyson's well known verses from 'Ulysses' which would exemplify the Western attitude 'to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield' he emphasizes how Durrell's transformed this verse into his very own 'to surrender, to yield, to abdicate, to receive', a very Eastern perspective.

Then Ravi Nambiar insists on the fact that what Durrell gained from India was 'the art of demolishing the ego' which comes from his reading the *Bhagavat Gita* while his ideas on sexuality and liberation came from Tantrism, and the art of dying/surrendering from yoga. Durrell, he says, also followed the principle of skandha to develop his idea of personality.

Other writers who might have inspired Durrell like Forster, Huxley and of course Henry Miller were attracted by the idea of 'the wisdom of the East', and we can say with Ravi Nambiar that Durrell has impressed his whole work with his oriental vision which he wanted to express or even 'realise' in what he called his 'Tibetan novel' *The Avignon Quintet* which was to change the way we look at ourselves and the world, at Man and the universe. As he told the French writer Cécile Wajsbrot, '*The Quintet* offers a solution: the East as a way out for the West'. This is also the opinion expressed by Mulk Raj Anand in his interview with Ravi Nambiar when he says that '(Durrell) certainly did not believe in Kipling's idea of 'the white man's burden'. (….). Kipling said that 'East is East and West is West. And never the twain shall meet'. (But) Durrell had a romantic idea of Indian civilization, as dominantly tender and replete with thought – having gone deeper into the human predicament.'

It is this interview which appears in the Appendix to the book while the other five, some of which have already been published in academic journals, revisit *the Alexandria Quarte*t and *the Avignon Quintet* from a new perspective and deal with Lawrence Durrell's main interrogations on the ego, tantric sex, death and illusion and reality in the light of an Indian theoretical corpus.

Ravi Nambiar brings us back to the main references of Indian metaphysics, the *Bhagavad Gita*, *the Upanishad* and *the Vedas* which we know Lawrence Durrell had read. He also mentions Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha) and the heavily annotated book by Daisetz Teitaro Szuki's *Zen Buddhism*. Professor Nambiar draws from the work of philosophers like Shri Adi Shankaracharya (788-820) and pores over the texts of the more recent thinkers who have tried to build bridges between Indian metaphysics and Western philosophical systems like Sarvepalli Rahakrishnan and Jiddu Krisnamurti in his dialogue with David Bohm, just to mention a few.

During my interview with Professor Nambiar, the words *dropping* and *shedding* came back again and again. Just as the first monk in the Zen Buddhist story carries the lady across the flooding river but can drop her on the other side and shed her from his own mind, to become his own self or reach his cosmic SELF, Darley, in *the Quartet* has to drop and shed all his haunting memories from Alexandria, which anyway, says R. Nambiar,

were mere illusions and absolutely not the reality he thought he had to revisit. And it is this process of shedding that reveals simultaneously the world of illusion the narrator is living in and the problems of time, memory and thought the writer has to deal with, which are among the moot points of the fiction. In this perspective, Justine can be seen as one of the many embodiments or incarnations of love or the Goddess. Darley discovers his cosmic self at the end of *The Quartet* when he realises that just as in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*, the serpent he thought he had seen is nothing but a rope: his Alexandria was but a mental construction, a creation of his imagination, a total illusion.

Thus the first four chapters are preparations for the most original essay which Professor Nambiar himself thinks will change western academics' reading of Lawrence Durrell's work. Turning to the East could be taken as a metaphor, a metaphor for one's attempt to transcend one's personality from a life of "craving and self-interest, of ego-centric thinking, feeling, wishing and acting '', as Huxley states in his *Perennial Philosophy* (96). Like his mentor, D. H. Lawrence, Durrell found it difficult to accept the ideologies which moulded his society and to live in it as a writer was not only a difficult problem for him (…) because he knew that a true writer cannot make any compromise with the truth. This is precisely the reason why Durrell, like D. H. Lawrence, looked for other spiritual alternatives. Therefore, Durrell's oriental curiosity was not entirely born out of his sense of longing for the country of his birth. India was also 'a possible passage towards a spiritual shelter'. Like Miller he had made this philosophy from the East his own, and like him, he was looking for a kind of truth and a way to change his and our perception of the world through his writing.

In *the Quintet*, which R. Nambiar describes as an intellectual autobiography, when Durrell comes to the final stage of writing, he draws an ultimate figure, that of the lovers-philosophers which can be seen as one single unit both male and female who has reached a stage of bliss and 'intelligence'(knowledge, awareness and liberation), a kind of Buddhist happiness to be transmitted to others which could also be exemplified in the expression 'tat tvam asi' (Thou art that) from the *Shuka Rahasya Upanishad.*

In his fifth chapter also R. Nambiar develops the notions of Sat (body), Chit (awareness), Ananda (bliss). According to him, if we are to understand Lawrence Durrell's work in the light of Indian metaphysics, we have to remember how the writer must have been willing to illustrate the Sanskrit word Ananda when he presents the relationship between Affad and Constance, in which sex, knowledge and awareness cannot be

dissociated while the notion of' awareness' is passed on along a sort of chain, reminiscent of and yet different from *the Quartet's* iron chain of memory, from Affad to Constance and from Constance to Blandford. According to Professor Nambiar, using the expression 'Bliss side up' is a clue that Lawrence Durrell was well aware of the metaphysics he was weaving into his narrative. Thus it is through shedding, submitting and surrendering that the heroes reach a kind of liberation (Moksha) and empowered creation (Shakti). Having transmitted this power and awareness, Affad can prepare for death and Nirvana while Constance will pass this 'awareness and bliss' on through her own body to Blandford while the readers themselves will become the ultimate elements in this chain of growing awareness.

For Ravi Nambiar, Lawrence Durrell is searching for a new reality and fiction. *The Quintet* craves for a reality beyond the reality in which everything is dualistic. It is again Affad who exhibits a non-dual reality. Peace and happiness is his only motto. If every individual can attain that and pass it on to others, as Affad does, the whole society will become a paradise. This Utopian dream is possible if the focus shifts from group to individual, the essence of Indian metaphysics. So Durrell moves from metafiction to metarealism (*Livia* 9). 'He struggles for a metarealistic narration' says Ravi Nambiar and 'thus his *Quintet* can be classified as a Eudaemonistic novel'.

The three stages of Durrell's writing, formerly described by the writer himself, can be seen as Sat-Chit-Ananda: Being-Consciousness-Bliss : *the Quartet* at the conscious level, with Freud as a reference, *the Quintet*, the purely Indian novel, would be based on the notion of bliss and the five volumes of which would stand for the five skandhas which would fuse to make one.

In his interview with Ravi Nambiar, Mulk Raj Anand reminds us that Gandhi wrote: 'the truth about oneself should be the starting point of all writing. No use writing about others, when one has not written about one's own feelings, ideas, uncertainties, one's own agonies'. He then mentions a tale from the *Upanishad* in which a disciple asked his master, a sage: 'What shall I do with my life?' The sage answered: 'Ask yourself everyday who am I? Where have I come from? Where am I going?' (…). He adds that unless one asks the questions "Who am I, where have I come from, where am I going?" one cannot get over egoisms and achieve transcendence.

Professor Nambiar writes about how, through his two sets of fiction, Durrell, just like Affad, the perennial philosopher, keeps asking those questions, though sometimes in a more subtle way, and passes his spiritual

knowledge to his readers. This is precisely what Professor Nambiar himself is doing in his book.

Yet we should not forget that, however impregnated by Indian metaphysics Durrell might have been, he tried to warn us about any too specific reading of his poetic prose when he wrote in the manuscript of his text of 1981 ‘From the Elephant’s Back’: ‘But all the symbols one uses, on the disquisition of words like ‘relativity’ or ‘Tao’, or ‘matter’ or ‘Maya’ are to be regarded as road signals which indicate the density and direction of the intellectual traffic. They are not absolutes. I imagine that the sage considers them to be simply paint rags upon which the artist wipes his brushes once the painting is complete.’ (Manuscript17).

However, I would agree with Isabelle Keller-Privat, who has proof-read the whole manuscript, when she says that : ‘Reading Professor Nambiar's analysis of the influence of Indian metaphysics on Lawrence Durrell's novels amounts to rereading Durrell's entire opus and questioning our previous interpretations not just of his prose but of his poetry as well. A new perspective is revealed that highlights, for instance, the quality of the poet's silence within the larger frame of what Professor Nambiar calls ‘cosmic passivity’ and enables readers to perceive the scope of Durrell's search for a universal awareness, an intimate knowledge of the self and of the world that ranges from Freud's theories to Indian metaphysics. The further one delves into Professor Nambiar's book, the better one grasps the maturing process from *the Quartet* to *the Quintet*, forcing narrator, writer and reader alike to wait and cultivate the Tantric art of patience which is a pre-requisite to full realization. Eventually, Professor Nambiar's book manages to question subtly all past and contemporary interpretations of Durrell through his insightful analyses. This book will become an essential milestone in the Durrellian landscape’.

Dr Corinne Alexandre-Garner, Associate Professor
Director of The Lawrence Durrell Research Library
Director of the Research Center ‘Espaces/Ecritures’ (CREA)
University Paris Ouest

INTRODUCTION

Like Lawrence Durrell, Dr. C. Ravindran Nambiar stands astride two of the world's most significant cultures, as well as at least two major languages. He is a bridging figure, and as such he occupies a distinguished place among scholars of modernist literature, one that is in fact unique in Durrell studies. Along with a deep immersion in the classics of Western Modernism, Professor Nambiar combines an intimate knowledge of the Indian culture that Durrell lived in until his "exile" to England for schooling. Nothing provides the same entry into the artistry and thought of another author like translation of his work into another language, and Nambiar has translated Durrell's *Justine* and *Balthazar* into Malayalam, one of the four great languages of south India. To my knowledge, Nambiar was introduced to Durrell's work in 1976, and has spent over a score of years studying, speaking, and writing on Durrell.

Ravi Nambiar is an old friend, and where Larry Durrell is concerned, he is a True Believer. I intend this in the most complimentary of senses: he takes his subject seriously. He has searched through Durrell's works for evidence of his debt to India, and his findings are impressive, his lists of the traces of Indian thought extensive, his conclusions hard to dispute. I tried long ago to warn Nambiar, telling him that Durrell was a shape-shifter, harder to pin down than the God Proteus. I told Nambiar, for instance, that when a critic tried to corner Durrell on the stage-worthiness of one of his plays, Durrell said blandly, "I don't know – when I wrote this I had seen only two plays, and one of them was, uh, *Charley's Aunt*." (In fact, Durrell had spent a considerable portion of his early life in London at the theatre: his lover and future wife Nancy Myers was an actress, and the actor Peter Bull was a good friend.) Durrell was a fabulist, a game-player, a *homo ludens*, I cautioned Nambiar. "You have to weigh and evaluate everything", he said. A dedicated scholar, Nambiar refused to be put off. He persevered, and the present book is the result of his many years on the Durrell trail.

The playful nature that Durrell pretended to, however, did not mean that he did not take his writing seriously. He *played* with ideas – as a bright child, an alpha child, might play with an Omega watch: he looks at it, listens to it – and takes it apart. As a boy, Henry Ford took watches apart, and then put them back together, becoming known in his

neighbourhood as a watch repairman, and eventually as a tycoon of the automotive industry. Durrell's metaphorical watches in contrast, would never keep Earth-time again. More an originator than Henry Ford, Durrell moved time into new dimensions, stretched and distorted time into new chronologies. As a word-scientist, Durrell set out to move literature into the twenty-first century. Famously, Durrell claimed that in *The Alexandria Quartet* he set out to apply Einsteinian physics to fiction, three parts of space and one of time, et cetera!

Durrell approached ideas, philosophies, and people as mysteries to be brought into his imaginative and affective world. He lacked the patience of the research scientist, of the scholar. Instead, he became an artist in language. As a teenager, he fled from his English public school to the reading room of the British Museum, where he embraced the Elizabethans and the Jacobeans. In his early twenties he became interested in the human body – he would become a doctor, he said! Then he decided that he could take on patients as a psychiatrist – imitating, perhaps, his friend Anaïs Nin who with no greater qualifications worked as an assistant to the pioneering psychoanalyst Otto Rank. On Corfu in the 1930s, Durrell set out to read all the science articles in his 1933 edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*. At some point he discovered Einstein and nuclear physics. And he kept up with India, through his friendships with Mulk Raj Anand and the Sinhalese J. Meary Tambimuttu in the 1930s.

Of great interest to readers of this book is the appearance in the appendix of Nambiar's 1993 interview with Anand, in which the two men discuss not only Durrell, but also Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin, and Anand's friends among the London Bloomsbury circle, individuals who knew D. H. Lawrence. This contact with one of the major figures of Indian writing, himself another culture-bridging figure, has lent additional authority to Nambiar's pronouncements.

Durrell may not have been sufficiently disciplined to master any particular branch of studies, but he trusted serendipity, those elements of chance or luck that landed in his lap what he needed *at the time*. He had a capacious memory, the ability to recall facts, whole histories, and the mannerisms and accents of everyone, seemingly, whom he encountered. A part of his genius was his uncanny ability to adapt to his uses such little-known figures as the psychoanalyst Georg Groddeck or the herbalist Ludo Chardenon (inspiration for the "honey man" in *The Avignon Quintet*). Again, here too Nambiar is a valuable guide, for instance in identifying Carlo Suarès as one of the inspirations for Balthazar, and, much more important, the extent to which Durrell assimilated Indian metaphysics.

An opportunist in the plot lines and characters on which he structured

his novels, Durrell nonetheless had a master plan that he developed early in his career. To T. S. Eliot he mapped out three major works, at a time when he had written only the first of these, *The Black Book*, which he termed his *agon*, the conflict and suffering of the artist. Next would come the *pathos* (not yet named, *The Alexandria Quartet*, in which the artist, Darley, learns pity and compassion), and finally Durrell would write the *anagnorisis*, the resolution, the knotting up (the future *Avignon Quintet*).

Well, it sounds convincing, does it not? That Durrell had a master plan for the *Quartet*, based on Einstein's relativity theory, from the moment he started writing the first volume, *Justine*? In fact he wrote a stand-alone volume, *Justine*, and sent off the manuscript to Faber and Faber in London, to Dutton in the United States. *Justine* rose to the top of the best-seller lists, and to capitalize on its success, Durrell resolved on a sequel, *Balthazar*, which he initially called "Justine II." Soon he decided upon writing a quartet, and published *Balthazar* with a preface in which he announced, "I have turned to science and am trying to complete a four-decker novel whose form is based on the relativity proposition."

That artist of distorted watches, Salvador Dali, caught on to Durrell's time scheme intuitively. When he read the *Quartet*, Dali sent Durrell a telegram of congratulation, "DARLEY MON FRERE . . . LOVE DALI," thus claiming Durrell/Darley as his brother in future time. It is the simultaneity of time past, time present, and time future of Indian philosophy that Nambiar tracks throughout Durrell's writing.

One of Durrell's main complaints about Christianity – and about English society – is the lack of humor in both. He had enjoyed thoroughly the main comic character in the *Quartet*, the transvestite Joshua Scobie, so, taking an artistic holiday from his master plan, Durrell set out to write a pair of comic novels, the diptych *The Revolt of Aphrodite*, under the working title, "An Attic Comedy." Set partly in Istanbul, it showed Durrell again turning toward the East; but at the center of *Revolt* is matter, as represented by the international mega-corporation, the hyper-materialistic Merlin's. And the central conflict is the one between Iolanthe/Aphrodite, standing at once for love and spirit, and Julian, the emasculated Director of Merlin's. If this sounds like an attempt to consummate the union of spirit and matter, in the manner symbolized by the Goddess Kundalini/Shakti, that is surely no accident. Durrell is laying the groundwork for the attempt to achieve just this union that Nambiar sees in the *Quintet.*

Then Durrell wrote *Monsieur*, the first volume of *The Avignon Quintet*, and just before it appeared in print he went to Pasadena in California to teach for a few months at CalTech, that legendary American haven of advanced scientists. Fatefully, he was lodged in the suite at the CalTech

faculty club that had been Einstein's apartment. Durrell fled the faculty club after two weeks because he was told to wear a jacket and tie to dinner, and he did not want to repeat the Einsteinian space-and-time formula either, but reached back to his Indian memories and his readings in Indian philosophy and religion for a core of ideas on which to hang the thought-and-theme structure of *The Avignon Quintet*. This is where Nambiar comes into his own, with his recognition that it is here, in the five linked novels, that Durrell has returned to the India of his early remembrance, the India that he described in his late memoir, "From the Elephant's Back," and to the philosophic India of his reading and discussions.

Equally important to Nambiar's contributions to the understanding of Durrell in times past are the implications of Durrell for the twenty-first century – and also for India, already becoming again one of the great economic and political powers of the world. Durrell has started with his memories of the Old Raj in "From the Elephant's Back," and then moved on to the timeless run of Indian philosophy in *Constance*, has taken human sexuality beyond Freud, beyond D. H. Lawrence. In verse Durrell wrote, poking fun at Lawrence, "like Chatterleys of high romance/ Get carried off in Sex, the ambulance."

Going beyond Durrell's jibe at Lawrence, Nambiar brings into sharp focus the importance of sex, of a fully achieved *maithuna*, a sexual union in a sacred Tantric context. He is quite right to bring this focus to our attention. Sure, Durrell liked to call his *Quartet* "an investigation of modern love," because the importance of sex per se in both the *Quartet* and the *Quintet* is easy to miss, I believe. Although there is considerable talk *about* love in both novel groupings, there is precious little sex. Take a look at Durrell's pal Henry Miller if you want to see a writer who could be called truly sex-obsessed.

Durrell had learned a lot since he wrote *The Black Book*, a rather mild book by today's standards, but with enough four-letter-words to prevent Faber and Faber from publishing it in 1938. It is not the *tender* portrayal of love and sex that Nambiar has so perceptively seen in *Constance*. Nambiar turns the powerful lens of his *Indian* perspective especially on Durrell's description of the crucial sex act in *Constance*, in which Affad enters Constance, lying on a table, bathed in her menstrual flow. (As Nambiar notes, sex at a time of menstruation while tabu in some cultures in the West is sanctioned by Indian religious thought.) The red blood flow on her thighs is shocking to the Western-oriented mind, especially because Durrell has been so sparing in his descriptions of the sex act. Also, it is a tender *love*act – "Thank you, Constance," says a moved and grateful

Affad. (Affad, by the way, is soon to be murdered by the madman Mnemidis, a death that becomes a symbolic *Liebestod*, a love-death consummation, seen in the perspective of Constance's blood flow.

The Alexandria Quartet was a huge popular success for Durrell, and many critics still treat it as his most important work. However, a few major Durrell scholars, notably among them Paul Lorenz, Richard Pine, and Donald Kaczvinsky, have come to see *The Avignon Quintet* as central to any consideration of Durrell. With *Indian Metaphysics in Lawrence Durrell's Novels*, Nambiar has added his voice, bringing a vital new perspective to Durrell studies.

Ian S. MacNiven
Athens, New York, September 2013

List of Abbreviations

AQ	*The Alexandria Quartet*
BB	*The Black Book*
Key	*A Key to Modern British Poetry*
CVG	*Caesar's Vast Ghost*
LCL	*The Lady Chatterley's Lover*

CHAPTER ONE

DURRELL AND INDIA

> I have memories of India involving silence, grandeur, and space.
> —Lawrence Durrell

Ian S. MacNiven in the "Preface" to his book, *Lawrence Durrell: A Biography,* points out that India "remains the fiery shade behind Durrell's thought and work". He immediately adds a conditional clause:

> If he succeeded… his life's work will come to be seen as a keystone, a *clou*, a bridge linking the human physical and spiritual centres of East and West, a passage from India to the British homeland of his ancestors and back east again.[1]

The purpose of this book is to bring out the "fiery shade" of India behind "Durrell's thought and work" to which a serious scholarly study has so far not been devoted. His artistic role as a spiritual bridge-builder between the East and West needs critical scrutiny. While his love of India can be attributed to the fact that he was born in that country, his Oriental insight may have nothing to do with the place he was born in. On the contrary, his friendship with Henry Miller and his ardent respect for D. H. Lawrence and his works must have drawn Durrell deep into the study of Eastern wisdom. Many literary writers, like Aldous Huxley and E. M. Forster, were equally attracted towards the wisdom of the East. Though Durrell's keen interest in India can be traced back to his earlier works, it is in *The Avignon Quintet* that he finally succeeded in expressing his oriental vision. In fact, the *Quintet* can be approached by remembering the words of Will Durant, the great American writer and philosopher:

> "As our energies tire in the daily struggle against imperial nature and hostile time, we look with more tolerance upon Oriental philosophies of surrender and peace".[2]

These words have the echo of the insightful utterances of Akkad and Affad in the *Quintet*.

Lawrence George Durrell, one of the greatest writers who lived in the twentieth century, was born in India. The biographies that are available, particularly the one written by MacNiven, give us elaborate details about Durrell's personal life and his development as a literary writer. Therefore, his relationship with Indian thought and how far it helped him in his literary pursuit are the only subjects coming up here for analysis in this book. Durrell found in Indian metaphysics a possible solution to the problem of the cultural anarchy infecting this world. This is what one can gather from his writings. When we look at his entire work in the light of this fact, we can notice the steady attempt he made in his literary career at achieving an oriental or Indian insight, an ultimate insight. "But one feels that real bliss, the smiling silence of pure transcendence is Asiatic", writes Durrell in *Caesar's Vast Ghost* (*CVG* 13), in his last work. In other words, most of the insightful qualities with which he created his serious characters or the way he moulded his vision in his works can be traced to the wisdom he gathered from oriental philosophy and mysticism. As he reached his final novels, his Indian insight gains more and more depth. Durrell's ardent desire to build a rich and complete view of life in his artistic creations is, therefore, backed by the insightful knowledge he gathered from the East.

The main creative emphasis Durrell gives in his novels is in illustrating the inner crises of his characters, and subjecting them to an objective scientific enquiry. The habit of carrying out an inner scrutiny, an insightful scrutiny in life, no doubt, is a Buddhist or a Hindu feature. Durrell's readers know that he even went to the extent of calling his *Quintet* a Tibetan novel. In an interview with Cecile Wajsbrot, which is published in Earl G. Ingersoll's *Conversations*, Durrell states, "The *Quintet* accordingly offers a solution: the East as a way out for the West".[3] Therefore, it is essential here to examine to what extent Indian metaphysics helped him in his literary ventures. The main focus of this chapter is to trace the development of Durrell's interest in Indian thought and to scan how far his knowledge of the East helped him in his literary pursuits, particularly as a novelist. As Durrell was not the only writer in the West to seek Eastern wisdom, an effort to probe the reasons that led to such a metaphysical starvation in the West also becomes part of this chapter. This obviously demands the inclusion of some valuable observations made by a few thinkers and writers in the West. Such observations easily substantiate the arguments presented in this chapter, the arguments which explain why Durrell sought Oriental wisdom. Therefore, a small deviation into the

subject of the socio-political scenario in the West, created by hollow religious faith, automatically gets space in this chapter. In fact, it was the frustrating socio-political situation that pushed writers like Durrell towards the East to seek better insight.

One of the best sources to study the difference between Western and Eastern metaphysics is D. T. Suzuki, who was a great exponent of Zen Buddhism in the West. The publication of his work, *Essays in Zen Buddhism,* in 1927 marked a turning point in the study of philosophy; he was recognized as "the foremost interpreter of Eastern thought for Western minds."[4] Therefore, a purposeful peep at Suzuki's essay, "East and West", will be of immense help to readers in understanding the reasons why the writers in the West took keen interest in Oriental wisdom. Durrell's personal copy of the book, *Essays in Zen Buddhism,* is now in the Durrell Archive in Paris.[5] All the important passages in the book are not only thickly marked by Durrell, but are also underscored and given different codes, indicating that they would in future be pulled out for pasting them in suitable places in his creative writing. The markings in the book also highlight to what extent Durrell had assimilated the great Buddhist principles.

Durrell's claim that his *The Alexandria Quartet* is a Western novel and *The Avignon Quintet* is an Eastern one[6] can be examined under the light of Suzuki's essay, "East and West". In his essay, Suzuki compares two short poems written by two famous poets: one by a seventeenth century Japanese poet, named Basho, and the other by the great Victorian poet, Lord Tennyson. The subject of both poems is a flower. Basho observes a flower from a distance, appreciates its beauty, and loves it as a wonderful object in nature. He admires the flower, realizes that its existence is rooted in nature and finally leaves an exclamation mark in the poem. Tennyson, on the other hand, "plucks the flower from where it grows. He separates it from where it belongs. Quite differently from the Oriental poet, he does not leave the flower alone".[7] Suzuki observes that Tennyson "does not care for its destiny, his curiosity must be satisfied."[8] This comparison speaks volumes. If we can put on Suzuki's spectacles and read Durrell's *Quartet,* we may find that either Darley, the protagonist in the novel, cannot leave any object in Alexandria alone, in his "beloved" Alexandria, or he does not have the patience to stand at a distance and appreciate or admire anything there. He must pluck each and every "flower" he came into contact with in his life and analyse it. Finally, he makes his own life a muddle, because he is not able to arrive at any satisfying inferences about Alexandria or her people, in spite of the subjective and relative analyses he makes as a writer. In the *Quintet,* on the other hand, it is silence with

which the heroic role of Affad, one of the key characters in the novel, is qualified. Suzuki says, "The East is silent while the West is eloquent.… Silence in many cases is as eloquent as being wordy".[9] Durrell probably expects his readers to understand the significance of the "eloquent silence" in the *Quintet*. It is only obvious that readers prefer the *Quartet*, a "wordy" novel, instead of the embedded silence in the *Quintet*. The *Quartet* displays the Tennysonian attitude to life and nature, whereas it is the silent and serene attitude of Basho that we can find in the *Quintet*. To be more precise, to appreciate the exclamations and silence in the *Quintet*, one needs to have a better metaphysical base.

Presuming that we have understood the key to the difference between the West and the East, we can now have a look at Suzuki's deeper analysis of the actual differences between them. He writes:

> According to this, the Western mind is: analytical, discriminative, differential, inductive, individualistic, intellectual, objective, generalizing, conceptual, schematic, legalistic, organizing, power-wielding, self-assertive, disposed to impose its will upon others, etc. Against these Western traits those of the East can be characterized as follows: synthetic, totalyzing, integrative, nondiscriminative, deductive, nonsystematic, dogmatic, intuitive (rather, affective), nondiscursive, subjective, spiritually individualistic and socially group-minded, etc.[10]

The reason for quoting Suzuki at length here is that it can help us in understanding the writer, Lawrence Durrell, and his great novels, the *Quartet* and the *Quintet.* There might be some difficulty in applying all the given differences to Durrell's novels, but they will surely help us in studying his novels in the light of the contrast enunciated by Suzuki. For example, Durrell's works reveal that he does not accept the view that the East is dogmatic. Therefore, the differences given by Suzuki may be taken as a guide for understanding the growth of Darley's consciousness in the *Quartet*, or to see how it responds to the reality in which he lives. In other words, Suzuki's analysis tells us that it is difficult for a character like Darley who is shaped by Western culture to act differently in his life. At the same time, the qualities with which Suzuki identifies the East are almost the same qualities with which Durrell tried to cast his central characters in the *Quintet*. In short, a proper understanding of the metaphysical differences between the East and the West can be of enormous help to those who would like to enter into the labyrinths of Durrell's novels.

To begin with, it is advisable to know what Indian Metaphysics really means, what its broad features are, and how it differs from Western

metaphysics. However, a full discussion is not required in this chapter, as a clear idea of it will emerge from the total discourse presented in this book. "Traditionally", E. Jonathan Lowe, a Professor of Philosophy at Durham University, writes in his book, *The Possibility of Metaphysics*: "metaphysics has been thought of as the systematic study of the most fundamental structure of reality".[11] In Dr. Sarvapally Radhakrishnan's words:

> The very name *metaphysics* characterises the type of inquiry which goes beyond what is given to us. Whereas science deals with existent objects, philosophy tries to envisage the guiding concepts of ontological reality.[12]

There are a number of books available today on Indian metaphysics, written by both western and eastern writers. We have great sages in India, like Swami Vivekananda, Sri. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Sri. Aurobindo Ghosh, Swami Chinmayananda, and similar thinkers of the modern period, apart from the great philosophers of the ancient past, like Sri. Adi Sankaracharya[13], who have done well in interpreting Indian philosophy to the common man. However, the greatest of all Indian philosophers, who is superb in analysing the Indian insight and who is equally great in discussing all the existing philosophies in the world, is certainly Dr. Radhakrishnan. P. T. Raju, an eminent Indian philosopher, says that Radhakrishnan is "the liaison officer between East and West."[14] Among the modern philosophers, Radhakrishnan is sure to be more helpful to the students of Durrell. To understand Durrell's gnostic and Indian ideas it is imperative to understand how ancient Indian thought reached the West via Greece. One can get a clear idea of this historical development from Radhakrishnan's philosophical work. Durrell told the two French interviewers, Jean Pierre Graf and Bernard-Claude Gauthier, who met him in 1984 that Greece was the right place to make up the philosophical loss he felt in his life.[15] He felt that he must use his stay in Greece to facilitate his return to India and he achieved it perfectly well.

Therefore, for tracing how Indian philosophy made its journey from India to West via Greece, Radhakrishnan, the great philosopher, is the most suitable and reliable guide. Durrell not only rediscovered India when he was in Greece, but also realized that all the beliefs of the Greeks are greatly influenced by Hinduism. He told Jean Montalbetti that it was in Greece that he discovered the Indian root of the great Greek philosophers.[16] Richard Pine observes that "the Mediterranean in general, and Greece in particular, offered Durrell a spiritual accommodation as well as a comfortable place to settle…. He also made strenuous claims for linking some aspects of Greek civilization to those of India.[17] Greece was

his metaphysical collection centre. The underlying fact is that the study of Durrell's fiction can generate in readers an enthusiasm for almost all the philosophies and psychological ideas in the world. But, the discourse in this book is confined to search and discover the depth of Indian metaphysics in Durrell's novels.

The love for the East, for some of the western writers, originates from their revulsion to what was going on in the West, both politically and culturally, and it also comes from the fact that life in the twentieth century was getting more and more difficult to be lived. We know that Durrell's utter loathing of Western culture lies sprinkled in the pages of his works, from *The Black Book* to his last work, *Caesar's Vast Ghost.* To the question why some people have this dislike of Western culture Fritjof Capra seems to offer a convincing answer in his *Tao of Physics*:

> We have favoured self-assertion over integration, analysis over synthesis, rational knowledge over intuitive wisdom, science over religion, competition over cooperation, expansion over conservation, and so on.[18]

Capra echoes what Suzuki has said about East and West. In short, the opposite of what Capra says about the West form the bricks on which the Eastern metaphysics is built. In his lecture, "India: What Can It Teach Us?" F. Max Muller, the renowned German-born philologist and orientalist, states:

> If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most fully developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered on the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions of some of them which well deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant--I should point to India.[19]

Sanskrit language and Indian religions were Muller's special area of interest. As a true literary artist who always yearns to create a world in which man could be seen living in peace, Durrell too, like Muller, Will Durant, Suzuki, Heinrich Zimmer, T. S. Eliot, Henry Miller, Aldous Huxley, Fritjof Capra, Joseph Campbell and Ken Wilber, like so many such thinkers and writers, turns to India, seeking a metaphysical shelter. In *A Key to Modern British Poetry* Durrell writes, "In the literature of the last decade there has been a distinct growth of interest in mysticism, and more noticeably in Eastern religion" (*Key* 33). In fact, *Key* is the key to the way Durrell as an artist was getting shaped, and it also reflects the subject matter with which he was going to write his novels in three stages. If anyone has a question, why some of his contemporary writers were so

deeply engaged in the study of Eastern philosophies, Durrell's words in *A Key* serve as the right answer:

> Herein I believe lies the key to the new influences creeping into art – influences which may be recognized in the Eastern philosophies which are being studied by writers as diverse as Huxley, Heard, Isherwood, Maugham (*Key* 64).

Altogether, there developed a situation in the twentieth century, which demanded a change in writing, because the creative artists found that each swelling individual ego was trying to give shape to separate or isolated realities, resulting in the formation of difficult and dangerous boundaries, and the net result was the growth of hatred and violence in society. According to Aldous Huxley:

> For four hundred years, from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, most of the Christian nations of Europe have spent a good part of their time and energy in attacking, conquering and exploiting their non-Christian neighbours in other continents.[20]

This kind of situation made the human life difficult and there arose a great longing for peace, love, and harmony in life and also for a need to rectify the prevailing angle of vision. There is a way of life in the East, Durrell realized, that is ready to offer peace and Harmony, if only man understands the spiritual significance of the East and accepts it. He told Stephen Gray in an interview in 1965:

> Think of the bloodstained record of our Christian civilization and then of the sort of things that were going on in people's nuts compared to, say, a system like Buddhism, which is so simple, which hasn't an organized dogmatic system, has never caused a war, that has no party system, and which you can do at home, as you wish.[21]

How greatly Durrell is convinced of the Eastern metaphysical approach to human life is evident from these words. It is something "you can do at home", Durrell reminds his readers.

What troubled Durrell most, right from his early days, was that the ideas he gathered from his western life and from his studies about human nature were found insufficient to help him in his quest for truth. The perception of truth and reality, he realizes, is directly proportional to one's outlook and wisdom, to the culture in which one is brought up. The Western attitude is generally for a fragmented reality which does not help man to reach anywhere near the truth he is seeking, and he is fated mostly to

grope in darkness, as he is not able to find a way out of the maze in which he finds himself trapped**.** This is very much the case of almost all the central characters in Durrell's novels. The novelist's aim is like that of Radhakrishnan, who said:

> I take it by a desire to lift Eastern thought from its shattered remoteness and indicate its enduring values as a living force in shaping the soul of the modern man.[22]

The *Quintet* is to be seen as a novel that is packed with the "enduring values" which Radhakrishnan indicates here. It contains the "living force" of Indian wisdom though it is served in the form of fiction. These enduring values are given prominent place in Durrell's novels mostly in the form of aphorisms; they appear in condensed form from characters that are steeped in wisdom. His main concern as a writer is for the future of this planet. One of his remarks that appeared in "The Kneller Tape" and published in *The World of Lawrence Durrell* is worth quoting here:

> You are literally educating and shaping the physical responses of the younglings who are going to take over from you and walk on your face; this is the continuity of literature which I was trying to hint at in my writers from Arnauti onwards.[23]

The words quoted here highlight Durrell's sense of responsibility as a writer. Not only he reminds his readers about the precariousness of the present human situation in the world, but also tries to educate and shape the consciousness of the "younglings". At the same time, he is also conscious of the need of maintaining the "continuity of literature".

Alan Wallace**,** a great Buddhist practitioner, points out in *Buddhism and Science* that "modern science has left us humanity in the dark as to the nature and potentials of consciousness, subjective experience and its relation to the objective world."[24] In the last century there was a leap in scientific knowledge, a greater progress in industrial life, and along with it the technology in warfare underwent a rapid change. Killing became rampant. The only thing difficult to be fulfilled, which was beyond the reach of man, was peace and happiness. The serious nature of this human situation was realized by most of the twentieth century novelists, and it compelled them to turn elsewhere to seek a way out. The result was that studies in Oriental wisdom became an interesting and attractive preoccupation for most of the Western thinkers. The richness of Indian insight quite baffled many of them. Heinrich Zimmer, the great Indologist and historian of South Asian art, observes, "We of the Occident are about to arrive at a crossroads that was reached by the thinkers of India some