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THE ROLE OF BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY IN ALDOUS HUXLEY'S *ISLAND*

Abstract: Aldous Huxley's last novel, *Island*, presents the utopian, peaceful society of Pala, a secluded island in the Pacific Ocean. Selected principles of Mahayana Buddhism constitute the cornerstone of Pala's political, educational and agricultural systems and serve as the main source of moral values for its inhabitants. By introducing characters who represent both Palanese and Western mentality, the author presents the clash of Western and Eastern cultures and, as a result, unmasks the destructiveness of Western greed, materialism and militarism. Moreover, the novel constitutes a reflection upon the spiritual and intellectual benefits of Buddhism, as it presents the peaceful coexistence of the inhabitants of Pala and their pursuit of self-improvement, knowledge and spiritual enlightenment. The following paper aims to confront the views and attitudes of characters who represent the East and the West as well as to trace Buddhist motifs in Huxley's novel in order to examine their role both in all aspects of Pala's culture and in the philosophical message of *Island*.

Key words: Aldous Huxley, *Island*, Mahayana Buddhism, the East and the West, utopian novel

Introduction

In an interview for *The Paris Review* Aldous Huxley revealed his plans for writing a novel about *a society in which real efforts are made to realize human potentialities with an intention to show how humanity can make the best of both Eastern and Western worlds* (Fraser and Wickes 1960). He realised this plan in 1962 in his last novel, *Island*.

In the novel, features of both a utopian novel and a philosophical essay can be clearly distinguished, which together reflect Huxley's ideas regarding spirituality and the roles of science and religion in society, which he presented in his earlier non-fiction works (Woodcock 2007:223). In an essay, *Science, Liberty and Peace*,

Huxley reflects on the role of science in the moral and spiritual development of a society, as well as for achieving peace and developing personal liberty instead of supporting government interests and centralized power (Huxley 1950:53). In *Themes and Variations* he criticises hierarchical organisations, such as State and Church, for abusing power, and offers an alternative in the form of *the decentralization of wealth and power and the creation of a federated system of self-governing cooperatives* (Huxley 1964:170). His interest in Buddhism can be traced back to his earlier collections of essays, *Do what you Will* and *Ends and Means*, in which he examines the Buddhist point of view in comparison with Western philosophy. The teachings of the Buddha are also present in his extensive study of religion and mysticism, *The Perennial Philosophy*.

All of these ideas were put into practice in the society of Pala. Consequently, read as a philosophical treatise, the novel contains criticism of Western society as well as a proposition to save it from self-destruction by merging technology and science with Buddhist ethics.

The novel follows the journey of Will Farnaby, an Englishman, who is shipwrecked on the shore of Pala with a hidden mission to negotiate an oil deal for his employer, Joe Aldehyde. Initially, Will expects the Palanese to be a very primitive society, but during his thoroughgoing tour of the island he realizes that he has found a well-developed culture which, in many instances, is superior to the Western states. As Sion (2010:172) puts it, *cast upon an island, Farnaby finds a superior civilization of wise people. [...] The inhabitants of Pala have realized the perfection of their species by seeking only what is beneficial to human culture.* However, because of both internal and external political tensions, the utopian society faces destruction. Consequently, a few days after Will's arrival, Pala is invaded by military forces from a neighbouring country.

Huxley conveys the most crucial philosophical messages of the novel in three ways, the first of them being a book-within-a-book, *Notes on What's What, and What It Might be Reasonable to do about What's What* written by the Old Raja, a late ruler of the island, which provides philosophical commentary to the plot. Moreover, extensive explanations of every aspect of Palanese lifestyle, including its legends and beliefs, are included in Will's discussions with the inhabitants of the island who serve as his guides. These conversations inspire Will to compare what he sees in Pala with his native culture. As Will's trip progresses, he learns and reads more about the Palanese, which leads him to his own conclusions and observations that he shares with the Palanese as well as with the reader.

Philosophical basis of the Palanese Society

Palanese Buddhism is not an institutional religion but rather a set of beliefs of individuals based on Mahayana, one of the mainstream branches of Buddhism, combined with elements of Tantric Buddhism. Will learns about the history of

Buddhism in Pala from one of his guides, Ranga, who presents a short historical background of Palanese religion: *Buddhism came to Pala about twelve hundred years ago [...] from Bengal, and through Bengal, later on, from Tibet. Result: we're Mahayanists, and our Buddhism is shot through and through with Tantra* (Huxley 1973:77). Ranga also explains the importance of Tantric influences, which gave the Palanese a down-to-earth attitude to life and religion:

You don't renounce the world or deny its value; you don't try to escape into Nirvana apart from life [...], you accept the world, and you make use of it; you make use of everything you do, of everything that happens to you, of all the things you see and hear and taste and touch, as so many means to your liberation from the prison of yourself (Huxley 1973:77-78).

The Palanese lifestyle underwent thorough reform when a Scottish doctor, Andrew MacPhail, arrived on the island to perform surgery on the Old Raja. The modern Pala is a result of their friendship and the merging of their ideas, as they managed to combine Western science with Eastern philosophy, or *make the best of both worlds* (Huxley 1973:133), in order to create a society which would allow all individuals to peacefully coexist and develop both intellectually and spiritually. Dr Robert, Andrew's grandson, describes the founders of the modern Pala as *a pair [...] of complementary temperaments and talents, with complementary philosophies and complementary stocks of knowledge, each man supplying the other's deficiencies, each stimulating and fortifying the other's native capacities* (Huxley 1973:133). Dr Andrew managed to gain the respect of the Palanese, as he invented a way to relieve physical pain using hypnosis during operations and labour, which contributed to the demographic growth of the society. Moreover, his idea of ending physical suffering corresponded to one of the most crucial elements of the Buddha's teachings, called The Four Noble Truths, which acknowledge the existence and source of suffering as well as show the possibility of its cessation (Buswell 2004:51). As explained by Dr Robert: *'I show you sorrow,' the Buddha had said, 'and I show you the ending of sorrow.'* Well, here was Dr Andrew with a special kind of mental detachment which would put an end at least to one kind of sorrow, namely, physical pain (Huxley 1973:134). Having gained the trust of the Palanese, Dr Andrew and the Old Raja, moved on to more extensive reforms of the Palanese lifestyle, including the agriculture and language. Pala became a bilingual country with the introduction of English as a "stepmother tongue". The knowledge of English enabled the Palanese to educate themselves, as well as to read Buddhist scriptures in English translations from Sanskrit. Their final reform concerned the education system and was meant to raise future generations in the spirit of their combined thought. What resulted from this lifestyle revolution was a society which was technologically developed and capable of very advanced medical procedures, but at the same time spiritually advanced and persistent in their struggle towards enlightenment.

The Old Raja described in his book the philosophical core for a society based on two crucial virtues of Mahayana Buddhism, *karuna* (compassion) and *prajna* (wisdom). Compassion constitutes one of two universal virtues in most mainstream Buddhist schools and can be defined as *the wish that others be free of suffering* (Buswell 2004: 419). *Karuna* is also related to prohibitions against harming others and causing unnecessary suffering (Buswell 2004:420). The Palanese trained mynah birds to repeat *karuna, attention, here and now boys*, to remind the inhabitants of the island about compassion as well as about living in the present. Following their words constitutes one of the pieces of advice given to Will by Dr Robert, when he asks about the easiest way of self-actualization: *here and now, all you have to do is to follow the mynah bird's advice: Attention! Pay attention and you'll find yourselves, gradually or suddenly* (Huxley 1973:176). Moreover, the mynah birds cry for attention and the awareness of here and now, which may be identified with the notion of *sati*, mindfulness, that is attention to the present as well as to one's own body, feelings and state of mind (Buswell 2004:754). According to Bowering (2014:204), for the Palanese, attention is *a momentary escape from the memories and anticipations, from all the symptoms of the conscious 'I'*, and thus constitutes one of the central elements of what they call *the art of living*. They use the same technique in their *art of dying*. As explained by Susila, *being conscious of the universal and impersonal life that lives itself through each of us—that's the art of living, and that's what one can help the dying to go on practicing* (Huxley 1973:248).

Together, compassion and awareness are believed to lead to a better understanding of oneself, which in turn results in what the Old Raja presented in his book as *Good Being*:

Knowing who in fact we are results in Good Being, and Good Being results in the most appropriate kind of good doing. But good doing does not of itself result in Good Being. [...] There has never been a society in which most good doing was the product of Good Being and therefore constantly appropriate. This does not mean that there will never be such a society or that we in Pala are fools for trying to call it into existence (Huxley 1973:38-39).

Apart from certain rules of conduct and meditation, the Palanese use psychedelic mushrooms (called *moksha medicine*) as a short-cut to spiritual enlightenment, or an aid to achieving it. They believe the mushrooms to be a quick way of reaching self-actualisation, a source of self-knowledge and a liberating visionary experience, especially for those who cannot achieve similar states through meditation. Dr Robert describes the effects of *moksha medicine* as *liberation, the ending of sorrow, ceasing to be what you ignorantly think you are, and becoming what you are in fact* (Huxley 1973:171).

The second of the Buddhist values cultivated in Pala, *prajna*, can be defined as spiritual wisdom, or *the power of intuition [...] which is naturally much more than*

merely intellectual (Suzuki 1964:99). The Palanese understand wisdom not only as spiritual self-knowing, but also as a merging of it with elements of science, ecology and psychology. They call their attitude towards Western science *the new conscious wisdom* (Huxley 1973:201), as they believe that complementing it with compassion and spiritual insight brings it to the next level of advancement and applicability.

Analysis of the Characters

The characters of the novel can be divided into four groups, taking into account their attitudes and background, two of them being positive and two negative. The first of them includes characters of Palanese origin, for instance Dr Robert, his daughter-in-law Susila and other inhabitants of the island who serve as Will's guides. They represent a peaceful and sober attitude derived from the values of compassion and wisdom, combined with the respect for science that was typical of Pala. What is more, they are characterised by such features as striving for self-improvement and respect for nature and other people.

The second group, consisting of Will Farnaby and Dr Andrew, are outsiders who adapt to the Palanese lifestyle. Huxley presents a thorough study of Will's accommodation to the island's way of life. When he arrives on Pala, Will is bitter and disillusioned. Moreover, he is haunted by recurring memories of his dead wife and blames himself for her death. However, even though his life *has been a typical product of a materialistic, power-driven culture* (Sion 2010:171), he gradually acknowledges that the Palanese way of life offers a fresh insight into spirituality and antidotes for the Western vices. What changes Will are not only the revolutionary ideas he learns from the Palanese, but also a lesson in how to cope with his traumatizing childhood and feelings of guilt. In hypnotherapy sessions, Susila shows him how to concentrate on the present instead of regretting his past. As Sion (2010:171) puts it, *through his spiritual training, Farnaby learns not to dwell on the past or the future but to concentrate on enjoying the present*. Another event that changes Will is triggered by *moksha* medicine. Under the influence of this drug he experiences the loss of self and oneness with the universe, which consolidates his decision to adopt the Palanese lifestyle and abandon his work for Joe Aldehyde.

The third group includes the Rani and the Young Raja, the Palanese who aspire to the Western lifestyle. Together, they are the source of the main internal tensions leading to the fall of Pala. The Queen Mother, the Rani, despises the Palanese way of life and dreams of *the crusade of spirit*, by which she understands spreading her own ideology worldwide and becoming a famous spiritual leader. Her son, Murugan, the Young Raja, considers the Palanese way of life backward and primitive and craves the Western lifestyle, especially consumer goods. Inspired by the dictator of a nearby country, Colonel Dipa, he wishes to turn Pala into

a military state. Because of his attitude, he is not respected by the Palanese, who see him as interested in only *jazz records and sports cars and Hitlerian ideas about being a Great Leader and turning Pala into what he calls a Modern State* (Huxley 1973:77). Both Murugan and the Rani disdain the country which they rule and intend to change it by conspiring with Colonel Dipa. Their aspirations turn out to be destructive when the utopian state falls as it is overtaken by the military forces of Dipa, who, together with Joe Aldehyde, constitute the fourth group of characters, namely outside threats to the Palanese lifestyle. Both of them are powerful and wealthy, yet still seek more power and riches. Moreover, they show no consideration for people and nature, as they perceive Pala as merely a source of natural resources and its inhabitants as a cheap workforce.

The Differences between the Palanese and the Westerners

The combination of Western science and Eastern morality enabled the Palanese to establish political, agricultural and economic systems which also prevented the state from turning into a dictatorship. Huxley (1973:152) describes it as *a federation of self-governing units, geographical units, professional units, economic units*. Consequently, the citizens of Pala do not fear the rise of any financially and politically privileged caste: *there's plenty of scope for small-scale initiative and democratic leaders, but no place for any kind of dictator at the head of a centralized government* (Huxley 1973:152).

The Palanese, as a rice-growing nation, need cooperation between farmers in the processes of terracing and irrigation. Thus, agriculture is based on mutual cooperation agreements, or, as Dr Robert explains, *streamlined cooperative techniques for buying and selling and profit-sharing and financing* (Huxley 1973:150). The Palanese take pride in the fact that their society stands in clear opposition to Western capitalism and its fierce market competition. What surprises Will is also the fair, cooperative banking system. The Palanese produce their own money and mine gold, thus their gold-backed currency is very stable. Being self-sufficient when it comes to the production of food, Pala can afford modern farming and medical equipment which serve the good of all the citizens (Huxley 1973:151). In order for this model to work, Pala adapted ways to control its demographic growth, such as free and encouraged contraception. Another threat to this stable system, over-consumption, was solved by basing every aspect of life on Buddhist philosophy and the Four Noble Truths, which teach that desire for material things is one of the sources of suffering. Such an economic system also supports political stability, as it does not allow anybody to become significantly richer than others; as a result, nobody can gain influence or power due to their wealth. For Will, such a model opposes the Western world of economic disparity. Due to pacifism and a system which averts internal conflicts, Pala has no military forces or hierarchy

and does not engage in any wars. When the Palanese realise that they might be invaded, they decide to resort to non-violent resistance. As an opposition to this approach, Huxley presents the neighbouring country of Rendang, ruled by a power-hungry and violent dictator, Colonel Dipa.

Contrary to what is common in the West, Pala's religion is not institutional and relies solely on the personal experiences of an individual. Thus, the Palanese are focused on applying religious principles in practice rather than on rituals of organized worship. As Dr Robert explains: *we have no established church, and our religion stresses immediate experience and deplores belief in unverifiable dogmas [...]. So we're preserved from the plagues of popery, on the one hand, and fundamentalist revivalism, on the other* (Huxley 1973:152). Dr Robert also stresses the importance of scepticism, especially in the education of children, and the importance of a critical approach to everything they read or hear. The Palanese, who do not worship any personal god, teach their children to understand that all deities and gods are the creation of the human imagination. The Palanese scarecrows are sizable puppets of the Buddha, King Solomon and God the Father. Vijaya explains this idea: *It was the Old Raja's idea. [...] He wanted to make the children understand that all gods are homemade, and that it's we who pull their strings and so give them the power to pull ours* (Huxley 1973:207). The use of puppets teaches the children, and reminds the adults, not to worship an idol but to apply religious principles in every aspect of life. Frequently, the Palanese express their negative attitude towards Christians, who behave morally only because they expect a reward in heaven and fear condemnation in hell, which the Palanese see as an absolute opposite to living *here and now* and unconditional compassion. As Dr Robert comments, the Palanese are *just men and women and their children trying to make the best of the here and now, instead of living somewhere else, as you people mostly do, in some other time, some other home made imaginary universe* (Huxley 1973:99).

The Palanese education system is based on the rule of applying theory into practice. Mr Menon, the Under-Secretary of Education, explains this principle to Will: *never give children a chance of imagining that anything exists in isolation. Make it plain from the very beginning that all living is relationship. Show them relationships in the woods, in the fields, [...] in the village and in the country around it* (Huxley 1973:219). Both surprised and impressed, Will Farnaby compares the purely theoretical English education he received with the comprehensive, practical education in Pala. He admits: *in the school I went to, [...] we never got to know things, we only got to know words* (Huxley 1973:249). In a conversation with Mr Menon, Will comes to the conclusion that children in most Western countries are raised to be future mass-consumers, whereas, in Russia and China as "cannon fodder" and for strengthening the national state (Huxley 1973:208). Mr Menon claims the Palanese children, on the other hand, are educated to become *full-blown human beings* (Huxley 1973:209). From the earliest years, the children are introduced to the notion of *karuna* and its application in their relationships with

peers and families. The diversity of human characters is explained to them with animal metaphors, according to which humans can be divided into four groups (cats, sheep, martens and guinea pigs) each having different attitudes, preferences, but all deserving compassion and respect. As explained by one of the teachers, *talk about it in animal parables, and even very small children can understand the fact of human diversity and the need for mutual forbearance, mutual forgiveness* (Huxley 1973:214). The teaching of ethics, however, does not rely on prohibitions, like the Christian Decalogue, but on positive instructions of proper behaviour: *the old repressive "Thou shalt not" has been translated into a new expressive "Thou shalt"* (Huxley 1973:215). The Palanese children also begin a very early education in ecology, which is perceived as practical acts of compassion towards the environment. The lessons in respect for nature are also accompanied with images of man-made environmental destruction, as warnings of the potential tragic consequences of one's actions.

Since Palanese children are raised on Buddhist tales and legends, the teachers use the morals of these stories as illustrations of complicated notions. For instance, intuitive understanding is taught by the example of the legend about the Flower Sermon given by the Buddha, during which *he held up a flower to a gathering of students, without uttering a word* (Suzuki 1964:9). The sermon was meant to be, according to Harmless (2008:192), *wordless passing of teaching, from master to the disciple* and, for the Palanese children, a lesson that some spiritual lessons should be understood intuitively, as opposed to the intellectual understanding of science. The students are also instructed to make use of both kinds of understanding and to combine them. In order to develop the intellectual skills of their students and teach logic, Palanese schools make extensive use of educational games. Moreover, the children are not taught only science and arts, but also methods of self-control and the possibilities of achieving self-fulfilment called *Destiny Control*, which can be described as a method of meditation which is supposed to lead to greater understanding and awareness.

In order to illustrate the differences between the Western and Eastern relationship between people and nature, Huxley used the legend of Muchalinda. During a visit to a Palanese home, Will notices a curious statue of the Buddha who is sheltered by a snake's hood. *What he had taken for an oddly ornamented [...] pedestal has suddenly revealed itself as a huge coiled snake. And that downward tapering canopy under which the Buddha was sitting, was the expanded hood [...] of a giant cobra* (Huxley 1973:199). His hostess tells him the legend which explains the meaning of this depiction of the Buddha. When, during the time of his enlightenment, the Buddha was meditating under a tree, Muchalinda, the king of snakes, came out to pay his respects. As Huxley (1973:200) puts it, *the Snake King crawled out of his hole, yards and yards of him, to pay Nature's homage to Wisdom*. When a sudden storm began, the cobra wrapped itself around the Buddha and spread his hood over his head in order to protect him from the wind and torrential

rain. Will notices that such a portrayal of snakes differs significantly from how they are represented in Western culture, as his closest association with the statue is a quote from the book of Genesis: *I will put enmity between thee and the woman and between her seed and thy seed* (Huxley 1973:200), which establishes snakes as eternal enemies of humans. The difference in how a snake is depicted in Christian and Buddhist scriptures leads to changed perceptions of nature in general. The Palanese consider themselves to be an integral part of nature and represent a perfect communion between people and their environment. What the Palanese teach their children is respect and compassion towards nature, which the animals can return, as snakes do not hurt people who treat them with respect. The Westerners, as represented by Will, consider themselves the rulers of nature, which they see as a dangerous wild power which has to be controlled, leading them to have a cautious or even hostile attitude towards some animals. Will's host perceives such a mindset as a source of *pointless cockfights between Man and Nature, between Nature and God, between the Flesh and the Spirit* (Huxley 1973:200).

Furthermore, in the discussions with Ranga, one of the Palanese, Will starts to notice and understand the differences between Western and Eastern philosophy. Ranga claims that even though the Western philosophers make elaborate statements on crucial issues such as the nature of man and the universe, they do not offer any ways of testing the validity of their ideas nor their practical application. As Ranga comments: *Western philosophers, even the best of them – they're nothing more than good talkers. Eastern philosophers are often rather bad talkers, but that doesn't matter. Talk isn't the point. Their philosophy is pragmatic and operational* (Huxley 1973:78).

Conclusions

Pala's society was built around a core of strong Buddhist morals harmoniously combined with the necessary scientific advances. What led to the fall of the island was a change of balance in this equation. Even though Huxley considered his novel *a Topian rather than a Utopian phantasy, a phantasy dealing with a place, a real place and time* (as quoted in Claeys 2010:116), he intended to show that a peaceful society stands no chance of survival if it is surrounded by greed and corruption. In the interview for *The Paris Review* he stated: *I'm afraid it must end with paradise lost—if one is to be realistic* (Fraser and Wickes 1960). As Sion comments on the fall of Pala: *the theme supports Huxley's view that a materially obsessed Western civilization based on power and wealth thwarts any chance of human fulfillment, which can only come through meditative self-understanding* (Sion 2010:172). Consequently, the message gained by Will and passed on to the readers is that a society benefits its citizens only if it aims at intellectual and moral development, not strengthening military or economic power.

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