

BUDDHISM IN THE OEUVRE OF SEVERO SARDUY

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ABSTRACT

The exiled Cuban French novelist, essayist, poet Severo Sarduy (1937-1993) converted to Mahayana Buddhism in 1971 after his journeys to Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. Untrammelled by the rituals of his new faith, he remained unabashed in his critique of socio – political Buddhism (as in the novel Maitreya). Instead, Buddhism for him meant a creativity that surpassed the negativity of emptiness. As a post structuralist he leaned to Buddhism’s kindred theory of sunyata or “vacuidad germinadora”, with its premises of the dissolution of binaries and annulment of opposites. Sarduy had a Derridean approach to Buddhism – the wavering and sidestepping of boundaries them was his ken. He integrated the real and the unreal and his desire to shift skins led to a constant erasure in his writing and he used thus the ideas of sunyata or nothingness. In my essay, I trace the ideas of Buddhism in his oeuvre, its efflorescence and optimism in Cobra, its decline and transformation in Maitreya and the flecks of Buddhist thought lodged in essays such as “La simulacion” or “El estampido de la vacuidad”. I also show how by joining two distant spots in the world, Sarduy threw new light on the hybridity and mestizaje of his own land and became an important reference for the South South dialogue.

1. INTRODUCTION¹

We are not talking about a transcendental, metaphysical or profound India but on the contrary, about an exaltation of the surface and I would say costume jewelry India. I believe [and I would have liked it if Octavio Paz agreed – and I think he does] that the only decoding Westerners can do, that the only unneurotic reading that is possible from our logocentric point of view, is that which India’s surface offers. The rest is Christianizing translation, syncretism, real superficiality. (Sarduy, 1972,1995:p.ix)

Laden with ambiguity and deprecating of the West, the writer’s words echo the accusations made against the Orientalists of yore. But for Severo Sarduy who yearned to be a Buddhist, the idea of the “surface” played a special role in Buddhism. Though important critics like Gustavo Guerrero and his lifetime companion Francois Wahl have hesitated in calling Sarduy a real Buddhist as his learning and practice were different from those of a traditional Buddhist, yet as an assiduous reader of three key texts Nagarjuna’s *Madhyamaka*, Rahula Walpola’s *What the Buddha Taught* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* Sarduy had invested meaning to the word surface (*vikalp*) and the false split between the agent who perceived and the object of perception.

As Rahula Walpola says,

*“Who thinks now, if there is no Self? We have seen earlier that it is the thought that thinks, that there is no thinker behind the thought. In the same way, it is wisdom (paññā), realization, that realizes. There is no other self behind the realization”.*²

Together with *sunyata* or emptiness, based on the premise that the substance was insubstantial, (rather it was the surface i.e. the world as it is) on which action made its appearance is what Sarduy hinted at in the quote above. This apprehension of insubstantiality or nothingness transcended the polarizations of negation and affirmation and these ideas coincided for Sarduy with the dissolution of binaries a key element of the Western theory of poststructuralism. For this reason, Sarduy’s version of Buddhism with its emphasis on the surface nature of his texts, has been linked to Jacques Derrida’s “there is no outside the text”, language and context gave meaning to a text, not any outside authority of the past or future.

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¹Some parts of section 3 on the novels *Cobra* and *Maitreya* has appeared earlier in Choukroune, Leila et.al *Exploring Indian Modernities, Ideas and Practices*, Springer, 2018

²Chapter 4 The Third Noble Truth. Nirodha: The Cessation of Dukkha.

My endeavour in this essay is to explore Sarduy's brand of Buddhism, the knowledge of which he had acquired through his journeys in the countries where it had been disseminated like Indonesia and Sri Lanka. This Cuban exile in France began an intense study of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism after his journeys to Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim and declared himself a Buddhist after 1971. In 1978 he visited Tibet and spent time at the monasteries of Punakha in Bhutan, and Rumtech in Sikkim and met with the Rimpoche. His Buddhism was distanced from rituals and it helped him to escape the fear of life and the fear of dying. Thus Buddhist injunctions reverberate in his works like the words of the dying Lama in the novel *Maitreya* or his own foreseeable death in *Beach Birds*.

In the first part of this paper I discuss Severo Sarduy's provenance and intellectual trajectory. In the second part I give a brief account of how Buddhism has been received in the West and Sarduy's place in this scenario. In the third section of this essay, I discuss the novels *Cobra*, *Maitreya* and the essays and poems that show direct Buddhist influences.

a. "India the most Extraordinary Gift"

"I owe to Octavio Paz the most extraordinary gift ever given: India. Without his words and texts I would probably never have gone there."

Paz en Oriente (1990)

Severo Sarduy maintained a lifelong conversation with the Mexican Nobel prize winner Octavio Paz both in person and through his work. They shared a common interest in Buddhism and in the writings of Nagarjuna the Madhyamaka philosopher. Sarduy admired the distance that Paz had kept from the discourses of intimidation, as he called them, the culture wars of a Europe disillusioned or defensive about Stalin's Soviet Union rife with *gulags*, concentration camps and dissidents. France had become Sarduy's adoptive land in 1960 and he soaked up the reigning *hippie* ambience, an atmosphere that ranged from being openly anti Western and Judeo Christian to a reflection on the possible role that the East could play during this crisis of values in the West. As a member of the influential Left leaning Tel Quel group of art and politics, he imbibed the reigning structuralist and post structuralist trends. Other members of the group included his close friend Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault as well as Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva. The obsession that France had for the East or the Orient culminated in the aforesaid intellectuals' intense interest in China and Maoism as an antidote for the disappointment they felt after what had happened in the Soviet Union.³ But for Severo Sarduy who had barely made it to France where he had come to study painting from his native Cuba, the idea of Mao was understandably too *deja vu*. Like his mentor Octavio Paz, he turned instead towards India. This reaching out had its precedents. Much before his journeys into South Asia, Sarduy had been a seeker of hybridization and *mestizaje* and had researched the Chinese presence in Cuba. His writings of different locales and experiences within his own country was a counter imagining of Latin America in which the Iberian and European population played center stage. As in Paz, the notion of "immigrant imaginary" in Latin Americanism, the recognition of Others within the continent, can be seen in his work and trajectory. (See Masiello, 2001:144-145) The Indian experience became a means to better understand his own culture. The critic Francois Wahl, his lifetime companion has remarked on how the asphyxiation Sarduy felt in the West was cured with the overwhelming vitality of India where no homogenization ever seemed possible. (Wahl, 2008: p.94). His eclectic interests ranged from masks and disguises (an indicator of his interest in proliferation), paintings in museums architecture and landscapes with an emphasis always on alterity. He had the extraordinary ability, as Wahl tells us, of not just being able to adapt to dissimilar surroundings but into becoming what he saw around him. In his discovery of the country, Sarduy fled from stereotypes. Instead he approached it in a ludic fashion with the sense of play that had characterized his earlier work. For him literature was always recreation, it had to be veiled not self evident, and distinct from realism. The places he visited ranged from Mysore during the first trip (1971), to Kulu in the Himalayas in the second (1978), as well as Varanasi and Kolkata. (He felt

³His interests were different from those of Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes or Julia Kristeva who looked to China and Maoism as an antidote for the disappointment they felt after what had happened in the Soviet Union. See Ruben Gallo (2008:99) "Notas sobre el Oriente de Severo Sarduy".

especially attracted to Mahayana Buddhism whose principal exponent was Nagarjuna and the Madhyamaka school dating from 2 A.D. or CE.) Since he had sought out India not for religion but for knowledge and art, the images in his works are all taken from the Mahayana school and this accounted for the multiplicity and proliferation of protagonists who were all illusory in the final analysis. Buddhism with its doctrine of acceptance as a way out of *dukkha* or suffering was therapeutic after the intellectual turmoil of Europe where he had been famous though not successful as few had read him. The present, the here and now was of import in Buddhism, and henceforth he began declaring that the fate of his body of work after death was unimportant.

For him India meant the conjunction of the multiple and zero and the only remnant was nothingness or what has been called by critics as a “fertile vacuity”. Much of his writing has been considered autobiographical. Jacques Lacan has a close likeness to the doctor in the novel *Cobra*, the scenes and images of Asia are ones that he personally witnessed according to his partner Francois Wahl. The essay “La simulación” is greatly influenced by his readings of Deleuze and Guattari. According to Wahl

We can say that his position as concerns the exercise of writing is again ambivalent. On the one hand, he shifts things around, transforms different characters that he has known into something that becomes a simulation, but even if it is a simulation, it is the truth, because truth is simulation. And thus, he managed to unearth Buddhist thought. Truth is a field. Not truth but life is a field of illusory images that disappear and of which nothing remains. And he was very convinced of this: death is a full stop, nothing. And even the world is a giant theatre of appearances...”⁴ (Translation mine)

2. BUDDHISM AND THE WEST

Sarduy lauded the ruptures and discontinuities that Michel Foucault had written about when dealing with the evolution of ideas on topics such as madness, crime and sexuality. Foucault had abjured historical continuity, the belief that the past directly impinged on the present. He had highlighted that when madness came to be considered uncondusive for progress in the early modern era, the context was crucial as non conformists were deemed unfit for the propagation of capitalism. It was all context and Sarduy underlined relativity and the flux of time, nothing was static and unchanging. In his words:

“His work demonstrates that the way that notions of madness, punishment, desire and even Man are defined are not eternal and have not been always the same over the ages, they are a cultural phenomenon, even of other cultures: an effect of civilization. Thus historical continuity is an illusion”.⁵ (Translation mine)

These ideas would tie in with Buddhist notions of relativity. Reality was an illusion. Nothing had an independent self existence or *svbhava*. It was all *sunyata*. He made no distinction between the real and the unreal but integrated all as a Buddhist would. Sarduy sensed family resemblances between post structuralism and Buddhism. As a post structuralist he leaned to the Buddhist theory of sunyata or “*vacuidad germinadora*” (fertile emptiness), with its premises of the dissolution of binaries and annulment of opposites. This wavering between boundaries and sidestepping them meant a creativity that surpassed the negativity of emptiness. And yet it was far removed from nihilism because although one discourse might be the same as the other and nothing need mean anything outside of context, the moment of enunciation was all important.

⁴Wahl’s words in Spanish: Podemos decir que con respecto a su ejercicio de la escritura es una posición de nuevo ambivalente. Por un lado, él lo transpone todo, transforma diferentes personajes que eventualmente él ha conocido en algo que es una simulación, pero que aún como simulación es una verdad, porque la verdad es simulación. De modo que, quizás, una de las temáticas que podía recuperar era la temática budista. La verdad es un campo. No la verdad, sino la vida, es un campo de imágenes engañosas que se desvanece y del que nada queda. Y de eso él estaba muy convencido, ¿eh? Él estaba muy convencido de que la muerte es la nada: punto final. Y el mundo mismo es, en el fondo, un gigantesco teatro de apariencias. Él lo había dicho, hablando de Góngora: “la metáfora al cuadrado”. También hubiese podido decir: la simulación al cuadrado, pues la simulación es llevar al cuadrado la simulación que ya es la realidad. (Wahl) <https://rialta.org/francois-wahl-conversa-sobre-severo-sarduy-radicalmente-no-realista/>

⁵In Spanish: “Su obra demuestra que precisamente lo más neto -digamos la noción de locura, la de castigo, la de deseo y hasta la de Hombre- no es eterno ni ha estado presente en todos los tiempos, sino que es un fenómeno de cultura, incluso de otra cultura: un efecto de civilización. La continuidad histórica, por ende, es una ilusión. Lo que cuenta no es trazar un hilo desde el pasado, sino marcar rupturas, diferencias. Hay que buscar, pues, escarbar en nuestra cultura para saber de dónde surgen nuestras certitudes, qué otro saber las produjo, o qué grupo humano las inventó.”

<https://diariodesvejk.blogspot.com/2015/09/un-algodon-de-las-meninas-para-michel.html?spref=pi>

Severo Sarduy belonged to the global modern Buddhism phenomenon that swept the world at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was uprooted from local contexts of South East Asia and the Indian subcontinent and reinvented by local New Age mystics and even Orientalists and anticolonialists. Sarduy's novels *Cobra* and *Maitreya* have protagonists who fit these descriptions. Separating it from local folk practices and rituals, the exponents of "detraditionalised" Buddhism also maintained that the religion was to be found only in its scriptures which were compared to Western theories and had the virtue of anteceding the latter by centuries. By doing this however they closed their eyes to the history of violence that had also at times been endemic in the local contexts in which Buddhism had been nurtured. Hence the surprise at the violence in Sri Lanka for example of Buddhist monks in the 1980's which is mentioned in Sarduy's novel *Maitreya*. The politics that finds its way into Sarduy's texts: the Chinese invasion of Tibet for example has been termed by Avram Alpert as the embeddedness of Buddhist texts in a context. Fiction with Buddhist themes did not disavow politics, total resolutions were avoided as they would be seen as artificial, instead they threw partial light on events as I will discuss below in the next section.

Sarduy's close associates stopped short of calling him a Buddhist, emphasizing only his love for the religion and also stated that they felt incapable of analysing the authenticity of Sarduy's faith in this religion in any detail.⁶ I have tried here to describe the attraction that the West has had for Buddhism in the last century and thus contextualise Sarduy's affinity for this faith. As David McMahan has shown, the "surface" that Sarduy mentions in the opening lines of this essay has a history in both the Modernist and Romantic literary movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the West. Buddhist creativity was premised on a reappropriation of the surface. Through case studies of Buddhist practitioners and writers like Sarduy, McMahan has formulated categories: detraditionalised Buddhists, demythologised Buddhists who abjure rituals and the Buddhists of psychoanalysis who treat the religion as a therapy which doesn't take away from their identities and original faiths.⁷

3. BUDDHISM IN THE WORKS OF SEVERO SARDUY

In the poem, "Palabras del Buda en Sarnath" (1991) ("Buddha's words at Sarnath") we can read these ideas,

No hay nada permanente ni veraz (There is nothing permanent nor true)

Ni ajeno al deterioro y la vejez (Nor aloof from deterioration and old age) (...)

El sujeto no es uno, sino un haz (The subject is not one but a mesh of dispersed fragments)

De fragmentos dispersos que a su vez (That divide into others without origin, texture or detail)

*Se disuelve lo que es en lo que no es, (What exists dissolves in what does not exist).
(Translation mine)*

The ephemeral and tenuous idea of the subject in this poem is in line with certain ideas that Sarduy had developed when writing on Latin American literature: "the obliteration of the signified" and the "disappearance of a single centre". Here we see a glimmer of his later evaluations of the Orient. The Baroque in Latin America in his view was destined from the beginning to be ambiguous and semantically dispersed with an uncontrollable economy of expression. The Latin American Neo Baroque was its progeny and referring to its "proliferation" he wrote:

Otro mecanismo de artificialización del barroco es el que consiste en obliterar el

⁶As Wahl says: Con todo no creo que pueda decirse que Sarduy haya sido realmente un budista y el mismo habria negado esta especie, pues siempre considero que lo que un occidental podía comprender de las enseñanzas del Buda era muy limitado. Este voto de modestia no le impidió sin embargo impregnarse de una cultura que llevo a sentir como suya propia Wahl...28

⁷In the words of McMahan "There is a dimension of Buddhism as it emerges in the West that picks up on these themes. The development of modern ideas on Buddhist creativity arose to some extent in the intersection of Modernist and Romantic discourses—between Romantic ideas of persons having "inner depths" from which creativity and art spontaneously emerge and the Modernist artists' attempt to reappropriate the "surfaces" of things in a way that reveals but also takes one beyond the mechanized drudgery of the modern world.

significante de un significado dado pero no remplazándolo por otro, por distante que éste se encuentre del primero, sino por una cadena de significantes que progresa metonímicamente y que termina circunscribiendo al significante ausente, trazando una órbita alrededor de él (...) ((Sarduy, 1972: p.170)

Another mechanism of the Baroque consists in obliterating the signifier of a given signified but not by replacing it with another, however distant it might be from the first, but through a chain of signifiers that progresses metonymically and ends up circumscribing the absent signifier, tracing an orbit around it. (...) (Translation mine)

(...) lenguaje que, por demasiado abundante, no designa ya cosas, sino otros designantes de cosas, significantes que envuelven otros significantes en un mecanismo de significación que termina designándose a sí mismo, mostrando su propia gramática, los modelos de esa gramática y su generación en el universo de las palabras. (Sarduy, 1972: p.176)

(...) language that howsoever abundant, does not designate things but other indicators of things, signifiers that envelop other signifiers in a mechanism of signification that ends up designating itself, showing its own grammar, the models of this grammar and its generation in the universe of words. (Translation mine)

The excess and overflow of signification and the dissolution of oppositions was what Sarduy had admitted Paz had opened his eyes to. This was conjoined with a critique of the subject and the idea of impermanence. Transposing these ideas on to Buddhism he would write:

En Occidente escribe todo el que tiene – o cree tener – algo que comunicar y que de cierto modo esgrime esa experiencia y la considera como un modelo; en el Tíbet, junto al techo azul y nevado del mundo, el sujeto que escribe, escrutador de la tinta y del vacío, sólo pretende borrarse, desaparecer en la noche de las enormes letras, llegar a través de la paciente escritura a esa disolución del yo que es uno de los posibles rostros del budismo. (Sarduy, 1989:236)

In the West, he who writes has – or feels he has- something to communicate and in a certain way he uses this experience and considers it a model; in Tibet, under the blue snowy roof of the world, the subject who writes, searcher of ink and emptiness, only tries to erase himself, disappear in the night of the enormous letters, arrive through patient writing to the dissolution of the I which is one of the possible faces of Buddhism. (Translation mine)

The short essay or chronicle *Tibet sur la Seine* (Tibet on the Seine) begins with the images of tigers in the Vincennes zoo during a snowy night in Paris and the monastery towards which the writer is headed.

*“The snow creates a particular kind of silence, like a texture of the emptiness, we hear the nocturnal roars of tigers who for probably the first time are experiencing a winter”.*⁸ (Translation mine)

Thoughts of the Buddha crowd his brain:

“If Maitreya has really arrived and is already there amongst us, who would be able to identify or recognise him? A Pakistani living in London or a hidden Tibetan Lama. (...) Because Paris can be Madras on the Seine, Tibet on the Seine, Jerusalem on the Seine or Mecca on the Seine, it is of no importance. Everything passes and soon. Only the Seine remains. (46) (Translation mine)

Accustomed to contemporary politics that gives us a flood of processed information on societies and religions, we read with incredulity his words on the Pakistani Buddha or the Mecca on the Seine. There is an explanation of his version of Buddhism in the essay “Simulation” where he says “Reality

⁸Original Spanish: “La nieve crea un silencio particular, una calidad única de silencio, como una textura del vacío se escuchan desde muy lejos los rugidos nocturnos de los tigres que, quizás por primera vez, sienten el invierno. Si Maitreya de verdad ha llegado y está ya entre nosotros ¿quién será capaz de detectarlo de reconocerlo? Será un paquistanés de Londres o un lama tibetano oculto (...) Porque Paris puede ser Madras sur Seine, Tibet sur Seine Jerusalem sur Seine o La Meca sur Seine, poco importa. Todo pasa y pronto. Solo queda el Sena” (46)”.

is an emphatic bluff of nothingness just as Buddhism suggests to us.⁹ Sarduy describes his writing that defies credulity as a “trompe l’oeil (visual illusion) before its time when everything becomes undone and whirls around ...a pure circus simulation of reality, a false but credible doubling of the visible.¹⁰ Through these visual illusions, a fawn becomes the Buddha.

He also explains to us in this essay that “the code of language is one of the many in the uselessness of communication. As in all Buddhist messages, there was more of a sense of humor, flagrant paradox than logic and accumulation of knowledge.”¹¹

a. Cobra

Sarduy’s novel *Cobra* analysed from a plethora of perspectives has been described as postmodern, a term used probably to account for its decenteredness, the numerous scattered allusions to India in the fabric and life of the “double” transvestite principal protagonist and the playfulness associated with the lack of a central idea and fixed agenda. The bricolage, the bits and pieces of lives, texts, dispersed objects, as well as the transvestism is another attempt to break binaries. Cobra is originally a doll in a house of pleasure girls or courtesans who have suggestive names like Sontag, Cadillac and Dior. She becomes human with the administrations of an Indian discovered by the Madam of the house in the steam of a Turkish bath in a Marseille suburb.

She was so amazed when, despite the prevailing vapor, she distinguished the proportions with which Vishnu had graced him – all those hieroglyphs inscribed there, used by destiny to astonish us without revealing their nature – that, without knowing why, she thought of Ganesa, the elephant god. (Sarduy 1972, 1995: p.9)

This “geographical – historical” fantasy devised by Sarduy culminates in Cobra changing her sex in the middle of the novel and joining a teddy boy gang in Amsterdam. A realist reading of this kind of literature seems impossible so perhaps it is more reasonable to follow Sarduy’s own injunctions at the beginning of each paragraph that introduce us to these characters and their origins.

Writing is the art of digression. Let us speak then of a smell of hashish and of curry of a stumbling basic English and of a tingling trinket music. (Sarduy 1972, 1995: p.6)

And a paragraph later, “Writing is the art of recreating reality” “No. Writing is the art of restoring History”.

I realize how a novel like this could lend itself to charges of being a purveyor of Orientalist images *a la* Edward Said. *Cobra* has been described by James McCourt who introduces the text as the narrative of the Latin American subconscious. (James McCourt, “Introduction”: xiv) In the latter there existed no negative or opposites and according to him writing is “shriveled when drenched in politics”. The differential power equation theory of Orientalism, of writing from the West inevitably relying on stereotypical images to bolster the Western sense of self is inapplicable to Sarduy and Paz. Instead all landscapes are prone to change. The “pleasure dome of the Orient” can exist in Marseille in a Turkish bath as well as in Amsterdam where Cobra transforms into a man.

Throughout the novel however there is a parody of the New Age spiritualism of the credulous West as well as its consumerism and narcissism. Cobra’s guru travels in a jet and after seducing a lover who is the most blonde amongst all his followers, he pronounces “Barbarism your name is the Western World”. (Sarduy, 1995:p.101) The Madam of the house of dolls returns after a trip to India laden with the usual trinkets and goodies. Her trip is thus described by the narrator:

There wasn’t an inflatable Buddha, nor a life-sized celluloid elephant with two archers on its back, no silk, sari, satin, wash and wear Indian silk that the Madam, (...) did not haggle, pillage and carry off at auctions, (...) For the *Féerie Orientale*, the dream of every doll in the

⁹In Spanish: L’ a realidad es un bluff enfático de la nada tal y como la insinúa el budismo” (1292)

¹⁰In the original Spanish: “Trompe l’oeil avant la lettre moment cuando todo se desune y rueda; los cristales de un armario...pura simulacion circense de la realidad como doblaje falaz pero verosimil de lo visible”. (1286)

¹¹In Sarduy’s words: “el codigo del lenguaje no es más que uno de los tantos por los que pasa la inutilidad de la comunicación. Como en todo mensaje budista había más de sentido del humor, de paradoja flagrante y de evidencia garrafal que de logica y acumulacion de saber”

Theater, she returned to the West bent under a mound of Indian junk where each piece of tripe claimed fantastical adjective which the diligent metteur en scène pronounced with ornamental phonetic relish, spattering it with sickening Brahmanic references. (Sarduy 1972, 1995: p. 31)

Buddhist lamas poke fun at naive Westerners in search of salvation. A protagonist called Tundra asks the Great Lama what he has to do in order to convert to Buddhism and he gets the answer:

TUNDRA: What should I do in order to convert to Buddhism?

THE GRAND LAMA: Shave your head. Ah, and please, if you really want to get into the “mainstream,” stop all violence right now. The French ambassador came to see me this morning; in the afternoon his son killed a tiger in Rajasthan. From here they went to the Ashoka Club and drank rice beer. Veerily I say unto you, kids of Holland, that it is Thirst that prevents you from seeing the uncomposed, the un-created, that which is neither permanent nor ephemeral. What do you think of this ancient painting, a gift from an incarnate lama in Bhutan? (146)

Through the above examples from *Cobra*, we can see how Sarduy deconstructs the melodramatic and false consciousness and the almost caricaturesque mode in which the West understood India in the Paris of the 1970s.

In *Cobra*, the Buddhist religion in which all the oppositions dissolved, is privileged. Here sin and grace coexisted, the *yin* reception and negativity lived with the *yang* or negative energy.

b. Maitreya

The raucous symphony of *Cobra* continues in *Maitreya* published in 1978, and deals with the Chinese invasion of Tibet and then the Cuban and Iranian revolutions. It opens with the last Lama on his death bed describing the impending Chinese invasion:

“Why are you so contrite? I have seen clearly my new birth. Each day the Bardo is shorter. (...) The moment of the great move draws near. Burnt flags, red mortar over the ancient frescoes. They will make others believe that we raised our monasteries over those skulls of children...we emerge from noncreation and we return to it in the twinkling of an eye.” (158)

In the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* that Sarduy mulled over, the Bardo is the assistant to those dying. The last words of the Lama spell *sunyata*, “The void is the form. The form is the void.” (159) A Chinese official referring to India remarks (164) “Everything was going very well here until the men with hair on their body arrived.” With details like these we decipher the novel’s progression. Meanwhile the legacy of the *Maitreya* will be taken up by a Chinese cook in Ceylon, Luis Leng who lives with two sisters, one whom called Illuminated hums Billie Holiday songs. All protagonists have humongous lineages as we can see. We are treated to incongruous and outlandish descriptions of Parsi converts recruited by the Lengs who shift to Cuba and begin to start cooking *duck a la orange!* We are also made aware that those whom the Lamas once venerated are consigned to the void that the dying lama had predicted. All the erstwhile Tibetan treasures are auctioned off in Kandy Ceylon.

“Three generations later when the teachings were distorted to total oblivion, and neither faith nor bidders remained, the heirs of the last authenticated bones ended up chucking them into a charnel heap”. (195)

These passages reveal his mocking critique of Buddhist regimes in power. The descendants of the lama “authorized incestuous marriages, commerce in leather goods, menstruating women in kitchens and even the eating of animals slaughtered with more than one blow..”. With the habitual ‘proliferation’ that characterises his texts, Sarduy writes of the new “sects” emerging and in the embers of the dying race of the original Buddhists, he refers to the Sikhs:

“Then they had the right to add to their names the suffix Singh – lion and were obliged to wear the five ritual b’s tied in a knot on top of the head – bracelets, steel and brush.” (197)

At another place, the narrator writing about the Tibetans (Leng sisters) fleeing Tibet writes:

“Dragging the cripple with doleful faces they got on without tickets and changed cars three times, in a train that had crossed the monsoon with Pakistani refugees in white dhotis, perched on the roof and sticking out of the windows.” (169)

These images recall Partition and the western border and yet the incredible idea of “Pakistani refugees in white dhotis” makes us blink. Reality and unreality is indistinguishable here. In Colombo the Leng sisters find Tamil pilgrims and also “Parsis converts”. The latter is also an improbable occurrence.

In his essay “La simulación” (Simulation) Severo Sarduy tells us that writing is the art of taking apart an order and composing a disorder.¹² The overwhelming unnecessary quantity of detail in his work, the kitsch was an attempt upset the hierarchy of values, the rough and tumble of reality did not make an order possible and discourses had another side to them. If the Latin American Baroque had given Sarduy the literary techniques of proliferation and exaggeration, poststructuralism had taught him the dilution and dissolution of binaries, something that he recognised in Buddhism. If not taking a stand amounted to negativity, he made up for that by his “transcreativity” from nothingness. Simulation also offered him an outlet for his non alignments. He contrasted the reasonings and assertions of the West with an Orient or East where

“it could be said knowledge in itself is a state of being, i.e. a constituted being, a simulation of a being – a being of that knowledge – that only remembers the character of simulation of all being – of manifesting itself as that being. In order to know what is simulated one would have to go to that space where knowledge is not in a binary function (...). In the Orient (East) we do not find a full presence, the man god logos but a fertile (germinating) emptiness at the centre of the great theogonies of Buddhism, Taoism whose metaphor and simulation is the visible reality whose true life and understanding are liberatory.”¹³

4. CONCLUSION

I will try to weave the ideas above on Buddhism and his politics in the manner of an epilogue. In both *Cobra* and *Maitreya* distant memories somersault with recent realities. As concerns the politics he espoused, Sarduy preferred to lament the Chinese invasion and Tibetan exile with conversations and events bordering on the absurd. He shifts around places, events and substitutes one name for another. Incongruity and arbitrary images abound. Indeed *Cobra* is rife with transexual and tranvestite protagonists. The message seems to be that one sex cannot define us. Orientalist fantasies and stereotypes are dashed and a flexible approach that admits Otherness is suggested. In *Maitreya* the legacy of the Buddha continues through the Chinese cook Luis Leng and his sisters who relocate to Cuba. This signifies the end of a culture but also the expansion of Buddhism. *Maitreya* is a novel embedded in the politics of its time. Like modern Buddhists, he did not resist change and the collapse of a particular identity but instead he negotiated identity pragmatically. This held true for his own life as well as for his Tibetan protagonists. Through his new found faith, Severo Sarduy branched out looking for different forms of universal logic. As the Lama in the radio theatre play *Tanka* says:

“Your own consciousness, shining and empty and inseparable from the Great Body of Splendour has no birth nor death and is the immutable light Amitabha Buddha. This knowledge is enough. Recognising the emptiness of your own intelligence as the condition of the Buddha and considering it your own consciousness is preserving yourself in the divine spirit of the Buddha (1101)”¹⁴

¹²“La escritura es el arte de descomponer un orden y componer un desorden”, (1819)

¹³In Spanish “se diría que el saber en sí mismo es un estado del cuerpo, es decir, un ser compuesto, una simulación de ser – de ser ese saber – que no hace más que recordar el carácter de simulación de todo ser- al manifestarse como ese ser. Para saber qué simula habrá que ir pues hasta ese espacio en que el saber no está en función binaria,(...) En Oriente encontramos en el centro de las grandes teogonías – budismo, taoísmo no una presencia plena: dios hombre logos sino una vacuidad germinadora cuya metáfora y simulación es la realidad visible y cuya vivencia y comprensión verdaderas son la liberación”.

¹⁴In the original Spanish: El lama en el radioteatro *Tanka* dice. “Tu propia consciencia brillante vacía e inseparable del Gran Cuerpo de Esplendor no

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