MIRCEA ELIADE AND MAITREYI – AN INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTER

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Abstract*: The present papeer focuses on the two books written in forty years distance one after the other, Mircea Eliade's Maitreyi and Maitreyi's It Does Not Die. Opposite to the common opinion that these volumes represent in a way, an erotic dialogue, the paper considers a very strong characteristic of both books- a very specific cultural background.*
Key words: *Maitreyi, interculturality, dialogue.*

Preliminaries

The modern period lives unconsciously in a kind of intercultural pond. This phenomenon is not perceivable when the values are commonly accepted, in their entirety or with very small differences. But it becomes more visible when people face sudden or strong cultural changes happening inside of the traditional framework.

The intercultural field supposes however, not only encounter and information, but also incorporation of values. The intercultural value of information is realized only by its experienced expression; a direct or an indirect one, as for example, through culture

This issue is precisely expressed in the pair of writings that are going to be approached. In a way, the two ones appear as symbols of a cultural encounter, simultaneously developing on multiple planes: corporal, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual

The comparison of two works, written in geographical spaces very far one from the other; written in different periods -different as objective as well as the subjective time –and with different intensity of the emotional experience, this comparison therefore, requests a slightly different approach from the one that is usual in the science of literature. On the other side, the study goal is not the analysis of the literary vehicle or the narrative content as such, though they are obviously, the necessary determiners in any similar endeavour. The present study concentrates its interest upon the text meanings, therefore, the socio-historical context of the authors' lives as well as the linguistic analysis are considered only when is strictly necessary.

The writings

The main pillars of the two narrations can be expressed in two words: an affirmation and a response. The affirmation is presented by Mircea Eliade's novella *Bengal Nights* (*Maitreyi* in the Romanian original), and the answer is considered to be Maitreyi Devi's novel *It does not die*.

Bengal Nights (Maitreyi) is a youth writing of Mircea Eliade, based of real events he experienced while he lived in India. It is not his first fiction work related to that time but it is, without doubt, the most known. On short**,** the engineer Sen has offered his hospitality to Allan, a young European engineer of whom he was the boss. Allan fell in love with his *host's daughter. The entire novel is dedicated to the development of this love, from the beginning to the closest intimacy. The younger sister telling to her father what was happening, Allan was literally thrown out the house and Maitreyi brutally punished.Though Maitreyi had many attempts to contact and see him again, Allan constantly rejected her.*

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The novel was always considered a love story or an erotic writing. At the time it was published, Eliade was blamed as an author of „pornography".

It does not die is the response coming 42 years later. It is a narration of maturity, written by an accomplished woman. An apprentice of Mircea Eliade, visiting India and meeting Maitreyi, has awaked memories that she considered to be forgotten. Finding out from this visitor about the content of Eliade's book, Maitreyi felt herself overwhelmed by sadness and disappointment. That is why she wrote her own version of the events. Her book however, was not only a retelling of the story (actually, it was not a retelling at all) but a conversion of her remembrances in poetry, philosophical and social concepts. Her book unveiled not that much the truth about the facts, but about the true character of Amrita (the name used for Maitreyi by the family members)

The common points of the two writings according to the position adopted here are:

Both seem to be autobiographic narrations

Both refer to the same event, placed in the same period of time

The common event is experienced by characters appearing in the both works.

Mircea Eliade

Mircea Eliade's writing no doubt, belongs to the fiction literature even if usually it is considered a creative non-fiction one. As a story, it is an extremely convincing tale, conveying a total sincerity. The author's belief in his own version penetrates every word. The reader *knows* that the event happened in India was real and that it was transformed into literature on the basis of a diary. The feminine phantasms turn around the intelligible – a love story in *European* version. So, let's look firstly over Mircea Eliade's writing. As a structure, it contains three main sections, grouping the events as follows:

1. Before entering Bengali house
2. In Maitreyi's home
3. Chased from the Bengali house

All these three large sections of the novella are actually stages of a unique process of spiritual aspiration: Allan (the young Eliade) arrived in India searching something, something still confused, indefinable. At this level one can also delimit three sequences:

a. This something is a spiritual phantasm

b. The phantasm gains a name and a body (Maitreyi's)

c. The phantasm, in its concrete manifestation is abandoned together with that "something" itself.

The process is slow, distilled, loaded with details, especially erotic, that can divert the reader's attention from the true events that are pure *interior* facts. Living between two worlds, Allan finds his equilibrium in the new world, with rarefied air; as a result, the old impulses start to attack, trying to re-conquer their territory. It is the period of the erotic play, of the absurd jealousies, of the carnal madness. *The pleasure to possess a goddess* gives him the sentiment/delusion of the power. But this equilibrium does not last for long. Soon, the failure is announced by some of negative effects as:

The religious confusion. The failure of the young aspirant does not come from flesh but from spirit; from the wrong spiritual interpretation of the events experienced in a too young body. Allan wants to become a Hindu. His attempt to change the religion/belief is made starting from a body-related-love and this kind of love is considered criterion of the truth of the new religion.

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The blame of his own civilization. The world Allan comes from is a lifeless world. In change, he affirms, India offers „*a living world, with living people and their maidens are holly, not spiteful women. It is a dead world, our world, our white continents. I cannot find anything there, any more"* (ELIADE, 1969: 92-93) It is worthy to notice that the young Allan will never be able to detach himself from this world of vice.

The spiritual confusion; *the denial of his innate archetype.* Exposing his wish for change to a party friend, this one, with common sense, asks him: "- But your religion?, to which Allan answers:" *To me, the Christianity was not yet born. There were only Christian churches, dogmas and rituals. The Christianity is coming to birth here, in India, on the land the most concealed with God, where people are thirsting for love, freedom and understanding. I do not conceive Christianity without freedom and without the primacy of the spirituality*..." (ibid.).

The sick love. The confusion, illness, the mental insanity of Maitreyi's younger sister, Chabu, is in a way, a symbol of the fall. Touched, in full progress of adolescence by the burning wave of the eroticism, Chabu reacts disorganized, trying (unconsciously) to take her sister's place in the relation with the European man. The quarrels and the accusations that Allan brings to Maitreyi, his incautious attitude, jealous rage, his egotistical self asking for revenge [„*I was crazy thinking that I denied myself for a virgin who cheats me with the first comer. "* (ELIADE, 1969: 107) all these are signs that the gods' world is disturbed by the urges of flesh.

The chase from Heaven. The young Allan is taken out of the house. The master, Mr. Sen, utters memorable words: „*You are a foreigner. I do not know you*." A very strong expression that annihilates, erases, annuls the entire existence of the young man in that place. He is categorically defined as a *stranger who does not know the language*.

Allan's revenge against the Hindu world is contained in one single word by which Allan defined Maitreyi: „*Literature*" (ELIADE, 1969: 157)

Visibly, the whole experience is literature. .Once arrived at home, burnt by passion, shame and the feeling of defeating, the young man who still dreams to change entirely his spiritual condition and who coquets with the ascetics, writes in only two months (January-February 1933), the novel of his failure and revenge. He places in it the characters with their real names (except his one) but with exaggerate traits or even fictive, attributing them crushed destinies; perhaps this activity had a therapeutic effect upon the author. Eliade let himself lead by a strong compensatory imaginary that determines him to write his book with a passion unique in its kind. And that is precisely what fascinates the Western readers who are not preoccupied by the aspects of truth, but the erotic ones. Unfortunately, this message is too much taken into consideration by the Eastern readers too, even if their reactions are different.

Despite the majority of the commentaries, literary or not attributing a pure erotic character to Mircea Eliade's novella, the stake seems to be an entirely different one, namely the *diverse aspects of the encounter between two cultures, represented by two special and strong personalities*

We saw already a prime aspect of this topic: the spiritual quest, the attempt of an inner change by the help of another culture values. Here also, as it was already mentioned, the genuine dilemma of the cultural understanding/misunderstanding is

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eclipsed by the picture of the erotic understanding/misunderstanding. There are indeed, here, some doubts concerning the "honesty" of the love story as it is described by Eliade: the young Allan's interest is really directed *to Maitreyi as a person or to Maitreyi as a representative of some cultural values* toward which he feels attracted? Both variants seem equally true. Stimulated by his love for Maitreyi, the young Allan absorbs, incorporates not only the girl's appearance, but everything related to her in a way or another: *"I had arrived to like only she liked; music, poetry, Bengali literature, nothing that was of interest for me once, could not retain my attention, now."* (ELIADE, 1969: 82)

Surely, if there is something authentic and durable in this novella, is the author's fascination for India which has remained to him equally far away and not understood all his life. The scene of the „beloved tree" elaborated by the author with astonishment, envy and ignorance, offers the *exact measure of the differences in interpretations* (cultural as well as individual). Maitreyi tells Allan about her first love – a tree which she loved as a living being, telling to it her daily events and writing poems to it. But while Maitreyi speaks about purity, Allan imagines nothing else but erotic, almost perverse images.

Much before this episode, in the novella appears an "announcement" of the tree scene. The two sisters ask Allan to tell them a story about a tree. He begins to narrate, but deviates because he thinks that the topic is stupid. Chabu interrupts him with strange questions: *„But the tree? Chabu interrupted, What the tree said? – That one was not a magic tree and didn't have the gift of speaking, he said – But why it has to be magic for being able to speak? – she asked."* Maitreyi tells Allan that her sister gives every day to her tree a bit from everything she eats and Allan observes:" - *Well Chabu, but the tree does not eat bread. – But I do! she answered, very surprised...*" (ELIADE, 1969: 83-84; 31-32)

It is difficult for the reader to differentiate the content of the novella from the real events. In dependence on his relation to one or the other of the two main personages, he tends to take sides for one of them. Apart from the historic events, Mircea Eliade's writing is literature in the best sense of the word. Extremely well written in his native language, the text is pure and simple an explosion of youth and erotic tension. Perhaps, not actually the content as such, but especially the atmosphere of exasperated desire that remains unfulfilled, has determined the name "pornography" for the writing. But the novella has a real literary value and it is impossible for a Western reader, young and ignorant in Indian realities, not to be overwhelmed by the colossal energetic discharge and not to be enthusiastic about Eliade's text.

Maitreyi

We must come out the fiction and touch again the real thing. From this point of view, Eliade's novella has gained for ever the label of "version". Version of a real story. It is right therefore, that the other version to be studied too, since it exists. Maitreyi's book, *It does not die*, (Na hanyate) is much more difficult to approach. Firstly, as a translation. Secondly, because it is an open "book" – without shades, without reproaches. A spirit reaching her maturity and a certain equilibrium, which puts order in her life and clarifies for her as well as for the others, an experience that one could call it as being karmic.

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Here intervenes a third difficulty: Eliade was young and very marked by the Indian events; he reacted passionately, as any young man and burnt himself (almost) to the end. In change, Amrita's book is one of maturity, a response coming after forty years. What was future in Maitreyi's life and personality (in his version) turned into the past for Amrita (in her version). She had the advantage of the whole landmark. It is very likely that, if she had known Eliade's novella at the same age of youth, her response would have been a very different one. The prove? - The trance in which she falls; the memory that dominates her and creates a parallel world, both simultaneous and historic. The whole past becomes present. It would be wrong to affirm that she lives again the events. In reality, she lives them *now*, with the same intensity as *then.*

Amrita did not want to write a novel, a fiction story; that is why she kept the real names of the main characters with only small modifications: Mircea Eliade becomes Mircea Euclid, Sergiu Al-George, the guest coming from Eliade's country is Sergui. But out of decency, she changes her sister's name and also, the name of the student for which his father will abandon his wife, ten years later. The name of Romania never appears, however, it is mentioned several times in an emotional vibration as being *his country*. She had the courage to let herself prey to the memories because now, the things seemed to be extinguished and she felt herself in a situation of emotional comfort. In fact nothing referring to their old relationship it is touched by the passing of time. The emotion is lived in present. There is a husband, there are children and grandchildren – but this fact is known by the reader, not by the narrator. The same rebellion against the human perception of the time passing can be seen also in the moment of the "terrestrial" encounter, 42 years later, when she enter professor Eliade's office: „*I enter the room. At the same moment the old man exclaimed: ,Oh!' and hopped on the same spot... I followed him with my eyes...he had not a single hair on the top of his head, only at his temples and at the back of his head a little bit of white hair*". Nevertheless, she has no doubt: „ *Yes, he is the same Mircea, the same indeed, that little old man of twenty three years old is very visible in this old man of sixty six years old...I can recognize him so easy, with my whole being. This is him, this one and not another being. What about myself? Who am I? I am also myself. My mind of sixteen years old proves to be indestructible. One can rediscover it even now."* (MAITREYI, 1999: 231-232). At that time, Maitreyi/Amrita lived everything any adolescent lives: her body and soul struggle to get out from the shell; they do not know what they find outside and in fact, they do not know what they want. There is a state of search, of aspiration towards something, perhaps something globally called 'liberty'; in this case is the confused aspiration of an Indian teenager girl, touched by the wing of the poetry and philosophy. Her own body, in full blossoming, is still a big mystery. The house was full of relatives of all categories, students, poets, philosophers but from the point of view of man-woman relationships was still a traditional one (as in fact was the European family at that time): „ *Nobody talk about things like that and even books about sex we did not have in our house. No allusion about sex, embracing, kissing was possible. I never saw men and women holding their hands*." (MAITREYI, 1999: 22).In this context of feminine blossoming and absolute ignorance about the subsequent transformations, the young Amrita is excited by the unknown, by the undecipherable; far from a woman's way of thinking, the adolescent sees in the European guest rather a symbol of her own desire for searching and changing, even a possible source of answers:"*I've been always longing to go somewhere, to leave my veranda behind, to fly throughout the sky*."

The young man's inclination toward study is another link between the two people: „*My father brought Mircea.. to the library...Mircea had a special passion for*

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knowledge. My father was extremely happy with his student. In my father's museum, we were the best pieces". Thus, there is no surprise that the two young people came near each other and their youth searched in a way, the most pleasant form of their relationship.

There are also more "terrestrial" motives determining Maitreyi to look at the European man with a more emotional openness; she, like all the women in the family, was seduced by his behaviour: helping the women to carry the heavy things, standing up in a woman's presence, eating with elegant manners, etc., etc. By comparison, woman's condition in the Indian family was close to the one of the slaves: "*The master of the house is a god. When he is sick, we cannot have another thought, especially my mother. She has to stay next to him night by night, without being tired – and of course, my father accepts this service. This attitude is of all Indian men and their wives perhaps recover by the labour itself they do, by serving their husbands and accumulated virtue, but for these, their husbands are not obliged to be at least grateful to them. This lack of gratitude cannot be considered a mistake from the part of the men .Even the ones considered as very civilized behave in the same way. They did not suffer from remorse and the others did not expect another kind of behaviour. The master of the house was the one earning the daily bread so, he had the right to disregard any other opinions...He considered himself as a little God, lawgiver in his house.*" (MAITREYI, 1999: 37; 39; 91)

Another confirmation: Yes, Allan/Eliade's wish was to become a Hindu. In *Maitreyi*, she is delighted with this idea and her father is the one bringing objections to too enthusiastic European. In her own account, Amrita confesses how aware she was at that time of the impossibility of his conversion: „*I have heard that he wants to become a Hindu...I do not know why he wants to become a Hindu...He does not know our world at all. Our social customs are almost beyond his understanding...* The text contains in this context, detailed explanations about the Indian conceptions. Personally however, she is not very happy or very interested: „*I don't care about these things. I will never enter the cage of a prejudice. Even if I do not marry him, I shall prove with my life that I did not care about these stupid prejudices.*" (MAITREYI, 1999: 77-78) And so it was. Obviously, we deal with an unusual rebellious Indian adolescent. Her education – very special for those times, is not sufficient to explain her personality, her independent way to think. But all of these can explain the seal that this very young person put in Mircea Eliade's life.

The "Tantric" scene of the love trough eyes is real only as an idea. Chabu/Sabi's idea, her younger sister who, suffering that she is not older (because "*everybody loves Didi, no one loves me*.") asks Maitreyi: "*What do you discuss each other with your eyes*?" Maitreyi tells this to Eliade: „*When I told this to Mircea, he considered it as a practical problem: ,Speak with the eyes! A beautiful expression! Let's try!' "* A very good example of misunderstanding. Amrita's appreciation for the white skin was also real but not as a sign of her adoration towards him: „*He wears a skirt unbuttoned at the top two buttons, which allows me to see a bit of his so white chest*." (MAITREYI, 1999: 86; 43) To be white is not related to a sexual adoration; for Maitreyi, it means actually, the possibility to come out from her world full of limitations and interdictions; now she finally understands why many women of her family are so full of resentments and anger.

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Maitreyi's Indian love is different from the sensual love of the Occidental Allan which was effacing in time. It is of the same kind as her love for Poet. It seems that Maitreyi possessed only this kind of love: „*Is love a property or an adornment? A light, Mircea, a light similar with the one of wisdom or knowledge, this is the light of love. The light of intelligence has limits, it acts only in one single sphere, but the light of love is much brighter, it shows all the things in their real nature. As soon as this light is on, the entire world fills with love. Even the disgraceful things become pleasant, Believe me, Mircea, my husband became much dearer to me from the moment I remembered you. I've never loved him so much before, as I love him now.*" Reading the text, a Western reader cannot help to open the Scriptures, at the page Saint Paul describes the Christian love. Facing that rigid body, the universal concept of the radiant love receives in her eyes the symbolic body of the Phoenix bird that gives her, hope; she will succeed to bringing again the light in his eyes; and their old bodies waiting to die, will bring closer that luminous moment of the last eternal encounter on the Milky Way. (Maitreyi's Indian love is different from the sensual love of the Occidental Allan which was effacing in time. It is of the same kind as her love for Poet. It seems that Maitreyi possessed only this kind of love: „*Is love a property or an adornment? A light, Mircea, a light similar with the one of wisdom or knowledge, this is the light of love. The light of intelligence has limits, it acts only in one single sphere, but the light of love is much brighter, it shows all the things in their real nature. As soon as this light is on, the entire world fills with love. Even the disgraceful things become pleasant, Believe me, Mircea, my husband became much dearer to me from the moment I remembered you. I've never loved him so much before, as I love him now.*" Reading the text, a Western reader cannot help to open the Scriptures, at the page Saint Paul describes the Christian love. Facing that rigid body, the universal concept of the radiant love receives in her eyes the symbolic body of the Phoenix bird that gives her, hope; she will succeed to bringing again the light in his eyes; and their old bodies waiting to die, will bring closer that luminous moment of the last eternal encounter on the Milky Way. (MAITREYI, 1999: 232; 237; 234)

The final conclusion of Maitreyi/Amrita's novel is not however, emotional but a philosophical one: the human love, limited, experienced "in part", can resist only by transcending the human limitation, transforming it into superior qualitative "partiality", into a part of cosmic love. But not even this is the ultimate reality. Beyond all the concrete forms of manifestation of love on the earth and in the sky, still there are other criteria: „*Love is worthlessness when it lacks beauty....Happiness cannot be found in events or objects outside of our minds. It can be influenced by the external elements only if we are prepared for happiness, in our inner Self."* (MAITREYI, 1999: 153). But beyond love, beauty and good, surrounding and embedding them, there is the supreme concept, the criterion and support in infinity - Truth. Love does not die so far it remains in truth. Truth is the one conferring immortality and infinity. (MAITREYI, 1999: 200) In this way, Eliade's erotic narration is lifted on the other level, and the dialogue is developing now as a discussion between human eroticism and human philosophical spirituality.

Closure

The comparison between the closings of the two novellas is painful and strange due to their inequalities. One is finite, evoking the idea of death, the other epilogue, paradoxically, is infinite. That is why the two writings are complementary, none of

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them reaching its fullness without the other. Orient and Occident, two mundane halves are able to recognize and rediscover each other in a common action of transcending and spiritual ascension. A young girl in her sixteenth has opened a way. Both writings contain several levels of perception and comprehension. There are common levels, different only by the stresses placed on one topic or another. Undoubtedly, the difference in time changes the point of view. Also, the sex difference introduces some other discrepancies. Even more, they come from cultures perceived rather by the differences between them.

Maitreyi's lesson is simple and perhaps that is why so difficult to understand. However, there is a chance for everybody to realize the fact that, the two words "culture" and "difference" are not synonyms and the obstacles of communication are just intellectual illusions.

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