

Contextualising Mysticism in Aldous Huxley's "Those Barren Leaves"

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Abstract:

This paper aims at Aldous Huxley's relation to the Indian philosophical systems, both the Vedantic and the Buddhistic with the reference to his novel, *Those Barren Leaves*. Huxley shifts from the tedium of modern life to mysticism in this novel. *Those Barren Leaves* was his first attempt at portraying a realistic vision of a man who, in spite of his physical limitations, rises above all other species and seeks to understand the nature of existence itself. Huxley's philosophical principles and worldview increasingly investigated the many issues that face people today. He was raised in a society where the three main forms of fear - nuclear, biological, and psychological - were still prevalent. This journey leads one through Huxley's novel experiences, modes of thought, and livelihood options. Huxley emerges as a thoughtful author who guides his readers from intuition to self-transcendence. He has made an effort to capture the complexity and contradictions that characterise the human mind and nature as the source of all paradoxes. Huxley seems to be on the lookout for the ideal living environment for humans throughout his literary works and personal life. This search of Huxley, from material to spiritual is the purport of this paper.

Keywords: Philosophy, Mysticism, Life, Spiritual, Idealism, Religious

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Aldous Huxley is a notable modern novelist because of his sharp wit, mocking logic, and remarkably prescient vision. He is both a serious thinker and a brilliant creative genius. The philosophy of Huxley is intricate and riddled with inconsistencies and paradoxes. His philosophical concepts develop gradually as he examines the various issues in life and its fluctuating forms rather than emerging suddenly. His examination of human issues and existence is psychological and empirically based. Because of his extensive knowledge of the universe, his understanding of human issues, and his understanding of nature, Huxley is excessively contradictory and pessimistic in his outlook on life. He also lived in a period when moral and spiritual turmoil was rampant in society and individuals were always in flux and doubt. Thus, each of these components has a specific position in his writings.

Huxley has organised his thoughts on mysticism in a methodical manner. For him, the development of a higher level of spiritual awareness is what aids in character restoration and personality transformation. He views mysticism as a methodical ascent to truth that entails an unending union of the ego with the Infinite. He believes that human beings can only be freed from cravings, pains, and servitude in the mystic world. In the universe of mystery, all paradoxes can be reconciled, and man can recognise the reality of eternal existence. He supports mysticism as the only strategy that can truly reform society, and he rejects idealism for a variety of reasons.

Huxley's third novel, *Those Barren Leaves*, was started in March 1924 and ended in August of the same year. Despite having bad eyes, he wrote it at an amazing pace. The novel was released in January 1925. He asserts that the central topic of *Those Barren Leaves* is the undermining of all things by a kind of dejected scepticism, followed by the undermining of that mysticism. The palace of Mrs. Aldwinkle in Vezza, where the tale is situated, is obviously inspired by Carrara. Although the source of Mrs. Aldwinkle's riches is never made known, it is obvious that she is wealthy. No Mr. Aldwinkle, alive or dead, is mentioned. She appears to be rather irresponsible toward her family because she is caring for her niece, whose parents are also left out of the conversation.

Despite being of a certain age, Mrs. Aldwinkle is not opposed to falling in love if the mood strikes. She also enjoys gathering intelligent people, which she has done in her palace. Most of the visits are easily recognisable individuals. Mary Thriplow, a Lady Novelist whom Huxley mocks, is the first person we encounter. He is unapologetically sexist. Although she is a proto-feminist, she is undoubtedly in love. At the start of the novel, she is the only visitor to the palace; however, Mr. Calamy, an intellectual who left school to travel for a while and who eventually finds himself here and develops a relationship with Mary Thriplow, soon joins her. Mr. Cardan, the grizzled old intellectual who is also broke, is a recognisable type. The young Lord Hovenden and Mr. Falx, a working-class socialist who is instructing Lord Hovenden, are our final two characters. Unfortunately for Mr. Falx, Lord Hovenden prefers socialism to Irene, the previously mentioned niece of Mrs. Aldwinkle.

In the shape of Francis Chelifer, a mediocre poet and editor of the *Rabbit Fancier*, we have Huxley himself. With Chelifer, Huxley switches between the first and third person. He is first described to us in the form of a narrative that details his past, a broken relationship, and his general cynicism in the Huxleyian vein. He travels on vacation to Italy, almost drowns, and is rescued by Mrs. Aldwinkle. She had been trying to get a hold of him for a while and is happy to finally have him in her care, despite the fact that he makes an effort to avoid her and even brings his mother along.

One significant narrative point is Mr. Cardan's endeavour to obtain some cash. The butcher's son tells him that the grocer has an ancient statue that he can sell for a lot of money and that he thinks might be a Giotto or Michelangelo creation. He encounters an English brother and sister while looking for it. The brother thinks his innocent sister is far inferior to him, but she is the one who has the money, which is encumbered and cannot be accessed. She was brought to Italy by her brother in the hopes that she would have malaria. Even more cynical than

before, Cardan almost kidnaps her, but tragically for him, his plan backfires. At the conclusion, sad Mrs. Aldwinkle is not able to have an affair with Chelifer as she had hoped, and everyone departs for their own parts of the globe with Mrs. Aldwinkle and Cardan following behind them on their way to Monte Carlo.

According to Huxley, the capacity for perception known as “intuitive vision” permits a person to have a direct encounter with ultimate truth while also learning how to distinguish between their true selves and egos. But since a man is a thinking being, intelligence on the other side, poses complications for a man. To illustrate his concept of intellectual servitude, Huxley has introduced several intelligent individuals to the audience. Three categories can be used to group all the characters. Like Cardan of *Those Barren Leaves*, the first set of characters seeks to live on an intellectual level. They examine every element of life logically. They make an intellectual effort to unravel the mystery of life.

In *Those Barren Leaves*, Calamy rejects the materialistic world and embarks on a contemplative journey up a lonely mountain to unravel the mysteries of human existence and death. He affirms, “The mind must be open, unperturbed, empty of irrelevant things, quiet. There’s no room for thoughts in a half-shut, cultured mind” (347). Calamy suggests contemplation as the only way to unlock the secrets of human existence and the only way to comprehend the true essence of reality. His mystical insight is that the self is unaffected by external factors.

Through his intuitive vision, Calamy sees into his spiritual core and recognises the immutable character of his inner self. He believes that one’s inner self is autonomous. He argues that meditation can help one realise their true selves, which are entirely distinct from their egos (Ahm) (Dhyanam). The mystical consciousness that arises from meditation. Huxley believed that the only way to reach mystical consciousness is via spiritual practise. So, he, through Calamy, speaks in *Those Barren Leaves*, “No, it’s not fools who turn mystics. It takes a certain amount of intelligence and imagination to realise the extraordinary queerness and mysteriousness of the world in which we live” (370). In *Those Barren Leaves*, after discovering the pointlessness of ordinary life, Mary Thirplow confesses her firm faith in God. She affirms,

God is a spirit, she said to herself, a spirit ... A spirit, an all-pervading spirit. God is a spirit ... All the universes are one in spirit. Mind and matter in all their manifestations - all one in the spirit ... God is a spirit ... All things are one, all yes, yes.

All, all, all she repeated. But to arrive at the realization of their oneness one must climb up into the spirit. The body separates, the spirit unit. One must give up the body, the self; one must lose one’s life to gain it. Lose one’s life, empty oneself of the separating Me (359-60).

Huxley is greatly influenced by Zen Buddhism and Vedantic Mysticism because they place a strong emphasis on the methodical development of spiritual consciousness through practises like dharana, dhyana, and samadhi (yogic trance, contemplation, and meditation) for changing the nature of consciousness. Most of these people serve as examples of his idealistic ideas. In this regard, Chelifer, Calamy, and Mary Thirplow carry his thoughts in *Those*

Barren Leaves. Even Mrs. Aldwinkle, who was enjoying life's superficial pleasures, yearned to understand its idealistic principles. Chelifer characterises Huxley's concern for humanity as: "I thought of my passion for universal justice, of my desire that all men should be free, leisured, educated of my imagination of a future earth peopled by human beings who should live according to reason" (149).

Calamy, the central character of this novel, who is in search of a spiritual solution to his problems, displays a typical idealistic thought. He wants to explore the cosmos through knowledge. He claims that I have an entire universe inside of me that is unexplored and just waiting to be discovered. This universe can only be reached via introspection and patient, unhurried thought. When describing the mysteries of existence through the intellectual process, Mary Thirplow claims that thinking steadily and intensely about one thing is wonderful mental exercise because it helps to reveal the mysteries that lie beneath the everyday surface of existence. If one kept thinking about it for a long enough period, one might even be able to solve the mystery and discover its solution.

In *Those Barren Leaves*, when discussing the "Hata Yoga" of Vedanta to Mary Thirplow, Calamy is possibly seen describing the philosophical significance of the extended hands. He states:

And so, these; he said, are some of the ways - and there are plenty more, of course, besides and these are some of the ways in which my hand exists and

is real. This shape which interrupts the light - it's enough to think of it for five minutes to perceive that it exists simultaneously in a dozen parallel worlds. It exists as electrical charges: as chemical molecules: as living cells as part of a moral being, the instrument of good and evil, in the physical world and in mind. And from this one goes on to ask, inevitably what relationship exists between these different modes of being - what's therein common between life and chemistry, between a collection of cells and the consciousness of a caress? It's here that the gulf begins to open, for there is not any connection-that one can see, at any rate. Universe lies on the fop of universe, layer after layer, distinct and separate... (346-347).

In *Those Barren Leaves*, Mary Thirplow is told by Calamy the significance of the hand and how it can be examined from various angles, including physical, biological, chemical, and metaphysical. Calamy affirms,

all, the different ways in which those five fingers ... have reality and exist. All the different ways ... if you think of that, even for five minutes, you find yourself plunged up to the eyes in the most portentous mysteries (340).

Again, Calamy tells the story of the "atoms" from several perspectives, which amply illustrates Huxley's theory of multiplicity. In *Those Barren Leaves*, Calamy the Salvationist makes a point of distinguishing between illusion and reality, as well as between the tangible and the spiritual. Everything, from social institutions to what we have previously regarded as the most holy scientific truths, according to him, is completely contingent and temporary, and nothing - from the Treaty of Versailles to the universe's ability to be rationally explained - is actually safe.

Two distinct visions - spiritual and material - are expressed in *The Elements of Reality* by Calamy and Cardan. Cardan, who is surrounded by the atmosphere of the empirical world, is unable to assess the nature of reality; in contrast, Calamy has spiritual understanding. Since he is under the influence of time and space, he is unable to investigate the true essence of reality. Contrarily, Calamy, a true monist, is able to grasp the nature of existence and does not distinguish between appearance and reality. He claims that a protracted process of body discipline and mental education can lead to the realisation of the ultimate reality. After being overtaken by the carnal pleasure, Huxleyan characters reject the notion that “love is lust” and instead express their spiritual yearning via self-transcendence.

In *Those Barren Leaves*, Calamy describes his desire for escape from the bonds of love and the realisation of the ultimate reality through solitary reflection in the mountain. After being depicted as a philanderer for much of his life, Calamy comes to understand the pointlessness of sensual pleasure. Therefore, he claims, “I don’t like racing after women, I don’t like squandering my time in pointless social encounters, or in the quest of what is officially recognised as pleasure ... it is an esoteric form of lunacy” (71-72). He believes that the sexual need would not interrupt his metaphysical exploration of the cosmos. He therefore rejects Cardan’s suggestion to simultaneously search the physical and metaphysical parts of the world.

On the other hand, Chelifer in *Those Barren Leaves* is pessimistic about life and thinks that there are no problems that the present life can fix. They both agree that the universe is chaotic and that it is their moral duty as artists to bring order to it and close the gap between the real and the ideal. But because they examine everything on an intellectual level, they fail. They are unsuccessful, in the word of Sisir Kumar Ghosh, because “the bridge must be one of living experience, of total living experience. It cannot be built by dogmas or mere intellectual criticism of life” (*Mystics and Society: A Point of View*, 12).

Although Calamy, the future Huxley, is the first character in the novel we see in action, he is not introduced in the same way as other characters have been. He is not a cartoon character; toward the novel’s conclusion, he develops a mystic belief system and takes the spiritual practises of the Indian saints very seriously. Miss Thriplow is impressed by his body and relaxed demeanour. She knew from the moment she saw him that she had done the right thing by donning all her jewellery and acting in such a sassy manner. For the young man depicted on the covers of illustrated magazines pressing his crimson lips to those of the young woman of his choice was undoubtedly the young man the butler ushered into the room. That was not really fair, though. He was not quite as unbearably attractive and foolish as that. He was simply one of those incredibly pleasant, upstanding, ignorant young people who, occasionally, are such a relief after too much exposure to highbrow culture. Brown, tall, with blue eyes like a soldier. frightfully upper class, possessing all the glory and self-assurance that come with being born wealthy, in a position of security, and privilege; probably a touch insolent in his awareness of his fine looks and in his recall of romantic victories. However, he was rudely lazy, and the roasted quails just fell into his mouth without any effort on his part. In sleepy arrogance, his eyes drooped. Oh, she knew everything about him at first glance.

Huxley is influenced by the idealists of Europe. He also has different fundamental philosophical beliefs from them, which puts him closer to Vedantic idealism or mysticism. He conveys his extreme worry about a material entity becoming an unattached being. He views mysticism as the advanced stage of spiritual consciousness to explain this. Mysticism is viewed by Huxley as an experimental science. He views mysticism as a knowledge that unifies and harmonises human existence, and this idea appears frequently in his literary works.

Huxley uses *Those Barren Leaves* as his launching pad to explore the depths of philosophy and mysticism. *Those Barren Leaves* makes it clear that Huxley disapproves of intellectual pursuits and intellectual output. Modern science and technology, which are the mental creations of man, are occupied with bringing ease and pleasure and so pulling him toward the realm of things. The many ideologies, such as “nationalism,” “fascism,” and “totalitarianism,” unite individuals under their banners and instil in them a sense of racial superiority, selfishness, tension, and hostility. The various sociocultural, socio-political, and religious institutions 0 all of which were established with the intention of creating a society in which people could realise their potential and humanity - have shaped people’s perspectives in such a way that they are now primarily focused on creating those institutions.

Huxley claims that numerous religious organisations teach individuals restricted ideologies, dogmas, and superstitions rather than sermons and the Divine Law. He denounces the high intellectual ministers and religious authorities for the stark discrepancy between their teachings and actions as well as for their refusal to acknowledge their fellowship with the devil. He recognises that religion is no longer practised in its idealised, pure, and private form, but rather as an institution. Thus, intelligence expands multiplicity rather than piercing the essence of reality.

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