Introduction

Reji Paikkattu “Octavio paz vis-a-vis India Octavio paz's objective assessment of Indian culture with special reference to A tale of two gardens and In light of India” Thesis. Department of English, University of Calicut, 2001
Introduction

In recognition of Octavio Paz’s "passionate writing of wide horizons... characterized by sensual intelligence and humanistic integrity" (qtd. in 'Octavio Paz: Otherness and the Search for the Present" Enrico Mario Santi, 265) the Swedish Academy awarded him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1990 thereby acknowledging the writer’s poetic and intellectual career as of unique and supreme importance throughout the world. In fact, it was strongly believed that the official recognition was long overdue as Paz’s stature was unique in that he was a poet, critic, historian and a formidable presence as a commentator of social realities making him the intellectual conscience of the 20th century.

Born in Mexico on 31 March 1914 to parents who sided with the peasant guerrilla leader Emiliano Zapata, Paz had an impoverished childhood redolent with memories of 'an old, dilapidated house, a jungle like garden and a great room, full of books' (265). The library became an enchanted cave for the young Paz; soon he began to have lessons in French which became a window to the world in the poet's life.

While in the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria San Ildefonso, the prestigious public school in Mexico, Paz wrote his first poem, 'Cabellera'
("Head of Hair") and his first essay ("The Artist's Ethics"). As a poet, Paz progressed through Luna Silvestre (Sylvan Moon, 1933), had his baptism as a writer with commitment in Spain during the civil war and came out with No Pasaran! (They shall Not Pass, 1936), founded a school for workers and farmers in Yucatan, attended the Second International Conference of Writers in Defense of Culture at the invitation of no less a writer than Pablo Neruda. There he came into contact with literary luminaries like Andre Malraux, Stephen Spender and Antonio Machado.

Back in Mexico, Paz founded a magazine Taller (Workshop) whose motto was 'to take the Revolution to its ultimate consequences' which lasted for three years. With A la orilla del mundo (At World's Edge, 1942), Paz established himself as the most important young poet of Mexico. In 1944, Guggenheim Fellowship enabled him to study in the United States of America. There he discovered its poets: Eliot, Pound, Williams, Stevens, Cummings. Later he became an official in the Mexican Foreign Service and served in a variety of countries - France, India, Japan, Geneva.

Paz's geographical as well as spiritual exile from Mexico enabled him to analyse the Mexican psyche and culture in a major book - The Labyrinth of Solitude. While in Paris, Paz had an intense exposure to the surrealist movement which left deep marks in his creative career.
In 1953 Paz came back to Mexico as a poet of wide acclaim. The year 1956 saw the publication of Paz's reflections on poetry *El arco Y la lira* (*The Bow and the Lyre*). During the next year Paz came out with a long and complex poem *Piedra de sol* ('Sunstone') which is written in a circular pattern. It has 584 lines, the same number as there were days in the Aztec calendar year. Using the circular structure of this ambitious poem, Paz fused together seemingly contradictory aspects of experience which are really one.

All of the faces a single face,
all of the centuries a single moment
and through all the centuries of centuries,
a pair of eyes blocks the way to the future.

(*The Collected Poems* 11).

In 1951, Paz came to India as a minor official in Mexican Foreign Service. Then he was sent to Japan. In 1962 Paz again came to India as Mexican ambassador and remained here for six years. This exposure to the Orient deeply influenced Paz and it radically altered his manner of writing. *East slope* and *Toward the Beginning* are collections of poems inspired by his Oriental experience.
In 1968 the Tlatelolco massacre of the student demonstrators in Mexico city prompted Paz to resign from the diplomatic service as a gesture of protest and indignation. During his tenure as ambassador in India, Paz brought out prose works like *Los siguos en rotacion* (Rotating signs, 1965) *Corriente alterna* (Alternating Current, 1967) and studies of Levi-strauss (1967) and Marcel Duchamp (1968).

After 1968, Paz held teaching posts in many universities, mainly in the United States, for the next three years. In 1971, Paz came back to Mexico and founded the literary journal *Plural* which continued till 1976. Then he started another review entitled *Vuelta*. With his creative intervention in the social life through the pages of these periodicals, Paz became a major voice in Latin America and eventually became the very conscience of a troubled century.

Paz got a number of prestigious awards - the Grand Prix International de Poesie (Belgium, 1963), the Jerusalem Prize (1977), the Olin Yoliztli Prize (Mexico, 1980), an honorary doctorate from Harvard University (1980), the Cervantes Prize (1981), the Neustadt Prize (1982) the Peace Prize (Frankfurt, 1984) and the T.S. Eliot Award (1987).

The grand finale of this series of accolade was the Nobel Prize for literature which was awarded in 1990.
Throughout his creative life, Paz sought to examine man in relation to time and space. In an age of fanaticism and block thinking, Paz's free, authentic and impartial interventions in his role as a social commentator had a salubrious effect. In founding *Plural* and *Vuelta*, Paz's one aim was a critique of Mexican situation and its one party system. Paz was a cosmopolitan and sought a critique of the world situation in general and pointed out the contradictions and injustice in order to make the world a bit more humane. Pluralism is an idea dear to Paz. In his acceptance speech 'Laureate's Words of Acceptance' at the Neustadt Prize presentation ceremony in 1982, Paz observed:

Plurality signifies tolerance of diversity, renunciation of dogmatism and recognition of the unique and singular value of each work and every personality. Plurality is Universality and Universality is the acknowledging of the admirable diversity of man and his works . . . . To acknowledge the variety of visions and sensibilities is to preserve the richness of life and thus to ensure its continuity. (*World Literature Today* (Autumn, 1982) 596).

Being the founder editor of the journals *Plural* (1971-1976) and *Vuelta* (1976–) Paz excercised a major influence as social commentator and
critic of the society whose intellectual integrity was widely acknowledged. His insightful awareness of the complexity of existence in the modern world and his creative responses to the challenges and crises in the civil society added one more dimension to his existence as an artist. As a critic of the society, Paz had an inclusive and harmonious conception of the tradition that sustained and nourished him as a writer. In his Nobel Lecture on 8 December 1990, 'In search of the Present,' Paz observed:

The temples and gods of pre-columbian Mexico are a pile of ruins, but the spirit that breathed life into that world has not disappeared; it speaks to us in the hermetic language of myth, legend, forms of social coexistence, popular art, customs. Being a Mexican writer means listening to the voice of that present, that presence. (The Georgia Review 1995, Spring, 257)

Paz was deeply anchored in Mexican tradition; at the same time he had wide exposure to the oriental and occidental traditions in literature. He saw each poet as 'a pulse in the rhythmic flow of generations' (Nobel Lecture, 261) who has 'sown a different plant in the miraculous forest of speaking trees.' Eventually, he was as familiar with the mystic poet Sor
Juana as he was with Su Shih, a Chinese poet who lived in the eleventh century and Nagarjuna, the poet-philosopher of the 2nd century India.

As a poet, Paz was in search of modernity and recognized that 'the search for modernity was a descent to the origins'. His quest for modernity led him to the source, his own antiquity. This apparently contradictory but authentic awareness made him realize that a poet is a pulse in the rhythmic flow of generations. Paz's awareness of time, which is cosmic in its proportions and all encompassing in its inclusion of the phenomenal and the transcendental aspects of existence, allows him to have this sublime vision of a poet in relation to his/her past and future.

Apart from his grand concept of literary tradition, Paz had immediate influences and personal preferences in his creative life. Jean Franco, Professor of Latin American literature at the University of Essex, refers to Paz's participation in the Writers' Congress in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War and observes the poet's dialectical relationship with large social movements in the following words:

his literary influences were far removed from any committed view of literature. First T.S. Eliot and then St. Jean Perse and later the surrealists and Indian religions
made deep impressions on him. *(An Introduction to Spanish American Literature 291).*

In the magazine *Taller* which he founded, Paz published translations of poems of Holderlin, Rimbaud and Blake. These different influences have a common preoccupation - they are expressions of a visionary disposition, 'deeply at war with modern society, and concerned with something that lies beyond the world of phenomena' (Jean Franco, 291). His conception of poetry is perfectly in tune with this quest for something beyond the apparent. Characteristically in *The Bow and the Lyre*, Paz describes the relation between poetry and society as a perpetual conflict of opposites.

Evidently in his major work *The Bow and the Lyre* Paz views poetry and society as contradictory but complementary terms. Paz observes:

A society without poetry would lack a language: everyone would say the same thing or no one would speak, transhuman society in which all would be one or each person would be a self-sufficient unit. A poetry without a society would be a poem without an author, without a reader and, in fact, without words. Condemned to a perpetual association that is resolved to instant discord, the two terms seek a mutual conversion: to poetize social life, to
socialize the poetic word. Transformation of society into creative community, into living poem; and of the poem into social life, image incarnate. (The Bow and the Lyre 234)

In the form of a question Paz pointed out his concept of a poem in the same chapter of the book.

The poem - is it not that vibrant space on which a few signs are projected like an ideogram that might be a purveyor of meanings? Space, projection, ideogram: these three words allude to an operation that consists in unfolding a place, a here, that will receive and support a writing: fragments that regroup and seek to form a figure, a nucleus of meanings.

(249)

Paz views a poem as a purveyor of meanings and a pattern in space which implies that for him, a poem need not be a simple 'song', an unalloyed expression of emotion. As a poet, Paz is in search of a language that will have the universality of philosophical language. Consequently, it becomes highly abstract. Ultimately the poet's aim is to arrive at a mode of expression that will integrate the variety and flux of the world using words. In the concluding part of The Bow and the Lyre, Paz observed:
All poetic creation is historical; every poem is a longing to deny succession and to establish an enduring realm. If man is transcendence, a going beyond himself, the poem is the purest sign of that continuous transcending himself, of that permanent imagining himself. Man is an image because he transcends himself. (262)

Evidently, Paz views poetry as a way of transcending the being of the poet with a view to effecting a form of communion. Thus, in the world of Paz, poems regain the quality of a ritual of communion.

In the last chapter of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* entitled 'The Dialectic of Solitude,' Paz propounds the concept that communion and love are almost impossible in modern society. Still, man must try to break out of his solitude and to effect communion. According to Paz, myth is the agent through which man can transcend his solitude. The awareness of time, not as succession and transition but as 'the perpetual source of a fixed present' is part of mythological time. Paz conceives of a unique condition where 'life and time coalesce to form a single whole, an indivisible unity' (209). The effect of any fiesta is also similar. A fiesta reproduces an event. Then chronometric time disappears and the eternal present is reinstated. In addition to myth and fiesta, 'love and poetry also
offer us a brief revelation of this original time' (210). Paz muses on 'the eternity of the poetic instant' the hallmark of which is 'the conception of time as a fixed present and as pure actuality.' Thus, according to Paz, the poem partakes of the nature of myth and fiesta and allows human beings to escape from the prison of time. Paz succinctly says:

In the poem, being and desire for being come to terms for an instant, like the fruit and the lips. Poetry, momentary reconciliation: yesterday, today, tomorrow; here and there; you, I, he, we. All is present: will be presence. (The Bow and the Lyre 262)

In an incisive article entitled 'Octavio Paz: Otherness and the Search for the Present,' (The Georgia Review, 1995 Spring) Enrico Mario Santi, a professor of Spanish and Latin American literature at Georgetown University observed that Paz's attempt to formulate"universalist poetics" and his concept of poetry as "otherness" account for Paz's stature and influence. As the critic says, "such an ecumenical definition of poetry, the origin of which is found in being itself, has won him followers the world over, across nations and languages, generations and ideologies." Enrico Mario Santi continues: "Poetry, Love and the Sacred - the poem, the lover and God - mean, for Paz, the three ways to a radical absolute, what he calls
otherness, which in the end turns out to be the experience of an encounter with ourselves" (270).

According to Mario Santi, the second factor for the eminence of Paz is his many-sided achievement. As he says, "it would be difficult to find in the world today another writer who has treated so many subjects: poetry and anthropology, history and politics, visual arts and philosophy, medicine and mythology etc." (271). Moreover, using his journals - Taller, Plural and Vuelta - Paz monitored the literary, artistic, intellectual and political currents of the 20th century thereby exercising overwhelming influence throughout the Latin America. During the fifties of the 20th century, Paz dealt with the uniqueness of Mexican culture and the nature of poetry and poetic process in the light of psychoanalysis and existentialism. In 1960's, Paz analysed Hindu philosophy and Buddhist logic in such works as Alternating Current and Conjunctions and Disjunctions. His analysis of contemporary world situation in One Earth Four or Five Worlds is searching, incisive and brilliant. In every decade Paz conducted his "search for the present" in order to find his authentic voice. Whether he is writing poetry or analysing Mexican culture or dealing with international situation, the most striking quality of Paz is his utter honesty and sincerity to the truth of being. As Charles Simic observes in the article "Poetry is the Present" in Western Humanities

Throughout his life Octavio Paz has remained free, tempted by neither the ideological utopias nor the nostalgias which have proliferated and emprisoned so many of his contemporaries... it takes a heroic constitution to endure our modern age. Paz is one of our true heroes (16).

The present study is divided into six chapters including the conclusion. Chapter First focuses on the importance and impact of Octavio Paz in the 20th century world literature. Chapter Two is a specific exploration of the connection between India and Paz and looks at the way in which the poet was distinctly influenced by India. Paz's incisive and startlingly original analysis of the evolution of Modern India is the subject of the Chapter Three. The area of enquiry in the chapter Four is the extent of influence of Indian ethos in the poems of Paz. Chapter Five analyses how Paz envisions a complete life as the sensual interaction of the masculine and the feminine. The final chapter puts forth the argument that the literary evolution of Paz bears ample testimony to the abiding influence of India in his creative life which proves that the socalled East and West can be contradictory yet mutually fulfilling factors in the growth of a truly master-artist.