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
Chapter 2
Octavio Paz and India

* A *Tale of Two Gardens* (Viking, 1997) collects together the poems inspired by India and *In Light of India* (Harvill, 1997), the last major work by Paz answers the question: "How does a Mexican writer, at the end of the twentieth century, view the immense reality of India?" (*In Light* 32). It is all too clear that in the creative life of Paz, India was always a dominant influence and a constant presence. Eliot Weinberger, Paz's distinguished translator observes in his introduction to *A Tale of Two Gardens*: "No other Western poet has been as immersed in India as Paz" (*A Tale* 11). He continues: "More incredibly perhaps not since Victor Segalan in China at the turn of the century has a Western poet been so expert on, experienced in, and written so extensively about a cultural other" (*A Tale* 11).

For Indian readers, Octavio Paz is not just a Mexican writer who wrote in the Spanish language but one of the most acclaimed writers of twentieth century who is intimately connected to the culture, civilization, philosophy, art and ethos of our nation. Eliot Weinberger very clearly notes that undeniable fact: "For forty years India has been the twin of Mexico in Octavio Paz's life and work: the other to his self described otherness as a Mexican" (*A Tale* 9). India has been an overwhelming presence in his
creative life, but he never became a blind admirer or unthinking initiator of Indian ways and thought. He did not have even an iota of baseless aversion to India in her manifold aspects: nor did he fall into the trap of so called orientalism. Always a seeker deeply interested in Buddhism with its emphasis on middle path ('madhya marg'), Paz retained admirable balance and equilibrium in his approach to 'the immense reality of India' and avoided both extremes of aversion and admiration (In Light 32).

Paz's first contact with India was in 1951 when he was appointed under secretary to the newly established Mexican embassy in India. Paz had been living in Paris as a minor official in Mexican embassy when he was transferred to India as part of Mexican government's plan to open a mission in New Delhi. It was 'bewildering and painful' (In Light 4) for him to leave Paris.

Paz travelled to India on board the Polish ship 'Batory' and "arrived in Bombay on an early morning in November 1951" (In Light 7). In his trip to India, he had with him a little anthology of poems by Kabir, a print of the goddess Durga and a copy of the Bhagavad Gita which he described as his "spiritual guide to the world of India" (In Light 5). On board the ship, Paz had as fellow passengers, among others, Auden's brother, Santha Rama Rau, a well known writer and Faubian Bowers, her husband and a
group of Polish nuns. From the ship, Paz saw the Gateway of India and later, Taj Mahal Hotel which was constructed with its back turned to the sea as the builders failed to read the plan. Paz perceives the mistake as deliberate, "an unconscious negation of Europe and the desire to confine the building forever in India" (In Light 8).

Paz touched the land of India and was 'surrounded by crowds', entered the ramshackle customs building for a tedious interrogation by a customs official. Then a crazed drive in a taxi led him to the Taj Mahal Hotel. Paz put his things in the closet, had a quick bath, put on a white shirt and "ran down the stairs and plunged into the street". There an 'unimagined reality' confronted him: a reality comprising 'waves of heat', 'torrents of cars', 'skeletal cows with no owners', 'the apparition of a girl like a half-opened flower', 'women in red, blue, yellow, deliriously coloured saris', 'the violently blue sky' and 'crows, crows, crows . . . .' Paz was overwhelmed by the unforeseen intensity of the experience.

The poet in Paz was captivated by the Indian experience and so he hired a taxi and travelled through the city and neighbourhoods. He wandered toward Malabar Hill and reached the seashore and 'sat at the foot of a huge tree, a statue of the night' and tried to review the impression:
"dizziness, horror, stupor, astonishment, joy, enthusiasm, nausea, inescapable attraction" (In Light 12).

Overwhelmed by his first Indian experience, he tried to analyse the quality that charmed him. In retrospect, Paz views the influence of the first Indian experience on him:

"What had attracted me? It was difficult to say: Human kind cannot bear much reality. Yes, the excess of reality had become an unreality, but that unreality had turned suddenly into a balcony from which I peered into – what? Into that which is beyond and still has no name . . . ." (In Light 12)

At the suggestion of Santha and Faubian, Paz visited the island of Elephanta and was struck by "corporeal beauty, turned into living stone" (In Light, 13). Here Paz experiences a unique vision of life that fuses together phenomenal and transcendental realms of existence as is evident from the following words:

Shiva smiles from a beyond where time is a small drifting cloud, and that cloud soon turns into a stream of water, and the stream into a slender maiden who is spring itself: the goddess Parvati. The divine couple are the image of a
happiness that our mortal condition grants us only for a moment before it vanishes (In Light 13).

Thus Paz gets an insight into the essential nature of divinity and mortality. Paz hits the bulls eye when he describes the idols of gods on the Elephanta as "corporeal beauty turned into living stone" and also as "sexual incarnations of the most abstract thought, gods that were simultaneously intellectual and carnal, terrible and peaceful" (13).

Using Murray's Handbook of India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon, 1949 edition, as a guide, Paz boarded the train for Delhi. That interminable journey reminded him of a long train ride which he took as a child with his mother from Mexico city to San Antonio, Texas. His Indian experience parallels his experience in Mexico. The fact of being a Mexican helps him to understand India.

From the beginning, everything that I saw inadvertently evoked forgotten images of Mexico. The strangeness of India brought to mind that other strangeness: my own country (15).

In this context, Paz points out the importance of the treatise In Light of India in his oeuvre which will, in turn, point to its importance for an
Indian. Paz had written *The Labyrinth of Solitude* as an attempt to answer the question that his country asked him. Similarly, now India was asking another question, 'one that was far more vast and enigmatic'. Paz attempted to answer the question by writing *In Light of India*.

Paz reached New Delhi, which he regards as 'unreal', "an assemblage of images more than building" (*In Light* 15). According to him, New Delhi, a planned city that was constructed in a few years by the architect Sir Edwin Luytens, represents "a picturesque fusion of classical European and Indian architectures". As always, in his account of place and monuments also, Paz emerges as an astute observer. The Red Fort impresses Paz "as powerful as a fort and as graceful as a palace" (*In Light* 17). Quitab Minar is "a prodigious stone tree", "a tower that combines the height, solidity and slender elegance". The mausoleum of Emperor Humayun is 'serene' where "everything has been transformed into a construction made of cubes, hemispheres, and arcs: the universe reduced to its essential geometric elements" (*In Light* 17). Paz sounds lyrical when he says that "the mausoleum is like a poem made not of words but of trees, pools, avenues of sand and flowers". Later Paz wrote a poem in honour of the monument in which he viewed the mausoleum as
high flame of rose
formed out of stone and air and birds
time in repose above the water
silence's architecture

("The Mausoleum of Humayun" A Tale 30).

Observing the mausoleum as a construction made of cubes, hemispheres and arcs, Paz points out the difference between Islamic architecture and Hindu architecture: "In Islamic architecture nothing is sculptural – exactly the opposite of the Hindu" (In Light 18).

Paz experienced a moment of beatitude when he visited a tiny, empty mosque in Delhi: "A vision of the infinite in the blue rectangle of an unbroken sky". After many years, he had a similar experience in Heart when he was on the balcony of a ruined minaret. Paz preserved the experience in a poem of which the last section is as follows:

I saw the world resting on itself
I saw the appearances
And I named that half-hour:
The Perfection of the Finite (In Light 19).

Though Paz's first session in India lasted for less than a year, he made a few friends in India. According to him, Indians are hospitable and
'cultivate the forgotten religion of friendship' (In Light 19). Paz attended the concerts of music and dance which initiated him to the legends, myths and poetry of India. Also they gave him a profound understanding of the sculpture which is "the key to Hindu architecture" (In Light 20). In a memorable sentence, Paz reveals the connection between architecture and dance: "One could say that Hindu architecture is sculpted dance" (20). His Indian experience, which began as ambivalent and later transformed into inescapable attraction, came to an end when he was transferred to Tokyo.

In 1962, Paz returned to India as the Mexican ambassador and remained in that position till 1968. It was a rich and delightful experience: he could read; he wrote books of poetry and prose and cultivated friendship with a few friends who shared the aesthetic, ethical and intellectual affinities. Paz travelled through unfamiliar cities in the heart of Asia; also he met his future wife, Marie Jose Tramini. Simultaneously Paz was ambassador to Afghanistan and Ceylon. He visited many places including 'the venerable ruins of Taxila'. In Peshwar, Paz had his first experience of the Pathans and also met nomadic groups such as the Khoji and the Uzbeks. He says: "Peshawar was an important city in the history of Buddhism" (In Light 21). Paz observed many stupas and architectural remains in Peshawar and saw the art of the Kafirs, an Indo-European
people, in the museum. All these biographical details point in one unmistakable direction: His experience was not limited to India, but included the vast Indian subcontinent; his Indian experience was not confined to books and scholarship. On the contrary, Paz traversed the entire subcontinent and saw and experienced the vast reality of India with a poet's heart and a scientist's mind. Nothing escaped his attention. From the art of the Kafirs, an Indo European people who lived in Afghanistan in the past, Paz observed that they used chairs, "which were generally unknown in Asian cultures" (In Light 21).

His experience spilled over to Southern India also as is evident from his numerous allusions to Madras, Mahabalipuram, Madurai, Tanjore, Chidambaram in his works. Paz celebrated many of these places in the poems included in East Slope. Paz points out why he mentions these names. He has been using these names as though they were talismans, but "they are like certificates: a testimony that my education in India lasted for many years and was not confined to books" (23). About his education in India, Paz says, 'it has marked me deeply'. Commenting on the nature of that education and its impact in his personal and creative life, Paz wrote: "It has been a sentimental, artistic, and spiritual education.
Its influence can be seen in my poems, my prose writings and my life itself" *(In Light, 23).*

Unique that it undoubtedly is, Indian ways and philosophy helped Paz to face the dilemma in life. In 1963, Paz had been awarded the Knokke le Zoute International Prize for poetry. Consequently Paz was in a dilemma, whether to receive the prize or not. For Paz poetry had been a secret religion, 'celebrated outside the public eye'. "Prizes were public, poems private" (24). Paz told his problem to his friend Raja Rao, the well known novelist who took him to an ashram where he met Mother Ananda Mai. She looked at Paz and smiled and threw an orange at him which he caught. It was a symbolic gesture intended as an answer to Paz's problem which she had learned from Raja Rao. After stating that 'the puppet whom you call Ananda the Mother is your fabrication', she advised Paz to be humble and accept the prize. She continued: "To not accept it is to over value it, to give it an importance that it does not have . . . . True disinterest is accepting it with a smile, as you received the orange I threw you . . . . What matters is not prizes but the way they are received. Disinterest is the only thing that matters" . . . (26).
The session ended. Paz told Raja Rao that he was happy, not because of the Prize, but for what he had heard. That spiritual session persuaded Paz to accept the prize.

It was decisive in his personal life also as is evident from the following encounter and its development. While Paz was on the way to Belgium to receive the prize, he stopped in Paris for a few days and one morning he met Marie Jose. It was chance, or fate or elective affinities; they decided to return to India together. In this context Paz brings out his philosophy of life and love:

"To live is to be condemned, but it is also to make choices; a determinism and a freedom. In love's encounter, the two poles entwine into an enigmatic knot; embracing as couples, we embrace our destiny" (In Light 27).

Paz, as Mexican ambassador, saw Nehru whom he found to be always immaculately dressed with a rose in his lapel. According to Paz, the two ruling passions in Nehru's life were politics and women. In Nehru there was not even the slightest trace of any sympathy for the Hindu or Muslim religious tradition of India. Paz is emphatic in his assessment of Nehru: "Nehru was a man of Western culture" (28) in whom the English education had become a 'second nature'. He was interested in young
artists. Paz mentions how Nehru unexpectedly turned up at the opening of the exhibition of a group of young iconoclasts headed by the painter J. Swaminathan.

In his capacity as the Mexican ambassador, Paz came into contact with many national leaders and statesmen including V.K. Krishna Menon and Indira Gandhi. Paz regards Krishna Menon as the evil spirit of Nehru. Indira Gandhi, who often consulted Paz about Latin American political and cultural affairs strikes Paz as "a reserved and affable woman' whose questions and observations were succinct. Commenting on the grooming of Indira Gandhi by Nehru, Paz observes: "For many years she was his (Nehru's) confidante, his right hand, and councilor" (In Light 28). In the light of what Paz regards as her attempts to promote her sons, Sanjay and Rajiv, Paz makes this penetrating comment: "Indira belonged to modern democratic culture, but her deepest sentiment was traditional: the family" (29). According to Paz, Indira Gandhi believed that she "belonged to a predestined lineage" – the Brahmans of Kashmir – which 'clouded her realism and her sharp political understanding' (29). His familiarity with Indira or his admiration for her doesn't make him blind to the truth. In the context of Punjab problem and her assassination, Paz is impartial and comments how she had 'lit the fire that consumed her' (30). He doesn't
mince words; Paz's independence of judgment is striking in this context.

When the Mexican government suppressed the student rebellion resulting in the death of many in October 2nd, 1968, Paz resigned his post as a sign of protest. Thus his official relationship with India came to an end. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, invited Paz and his wife to a dinner at her house as parting ceremony, in which Rajiv and his wife Sonia attended along with a few mutual friends. This shows Paz's personal contact with national figures in politics which helped him to understand and evaluate contemporary Indian reality with an insider's awareness and information.

A farewell tribute was organized by writers and artists at the International House. In connection with Paz's resignation and departure from India, "there were articles and interviews in the press" (In Light 203). This shows Paz's stature as a writer and the reputation he enjoyed in India even in those days. After a train journey from Delhi to Bombay during which, at various stations, groups of students boarded the train to offer the traditional garlands of flowers as a sign of affection, Paz and Marie Jose stayed at the Taj Mahal Hotel and visited some friends. Both of them spent the last Sunday on the island of Elephanta and relived what they
had felt years ago. Parting from India was quite poignant for Paz as is evident from his thoughts at the moment of departure. "We thought that we were seeing all this for the last time. It was as though we were leaving ourselves" (*In Light* 204).

During the night before the day of departure, Paz wrote a poem, partly as an invocation and partly as a way of saying good-bye. Addressing the divine couple Shiva and Parvathi, Paz ponders over the phenomenal life of the mortals and the transcendental existence of the immortals. Paz views the divine couple as 'images/of the divinity of man'. Towards the end of the poem, the poet celebrates the life of the mortals which is phenomenal and so finite.

Shiva and Parvati

the women who is my wife

and I

ask you for nothing, nothing

that comes from the other world:

Only

the light on the sea,

the barefoot light on the sleeping land and sea. (204-205)
In 1984, Paz got an opportunity to visit India when, at Indira Gandhi's request, he had been invited to Delhi to give the annual lecture in honour of Jawaharlal Nehru. Before the day fixed for it, Indira had been assassinated. Consequently the lecture was suspended but the officials insisted that they come for two weeks visit. In 1985, Rajiv Gandhi renewed the invitation and Paz came to India which was his last visit.

After eight years, Paz read the text of 1985 lecture and decided to recast it entirely: Thus originated *In Light of India*. According to Paz, it attempts to answer the question: "How does a Mexican writer, at the end of the twentieth century, view the immense reality of India?" (*In Light* 32).

*East Slope*, a collection of poems, embodies what Paz 'lived and felt' during his 1962-1968 period in India. In those poems, Paz tried to 'preserve certain exceptional moments' in his life. According to Paz, *In Light of India* can be regarded as "a long footnote to the poems of *East Slope*. *In Light of India* deals with the intellectual context of *East Slope*.

From the foregoing survey of Paz's life in relation to India, it is evident that he had sufficient exposure to India – its geography, climate, politics, public figures, artists, music etc. His first hand experience of India coupled with close study of Indian intellectual heritage enabled him to write his mature, mellow work – *In Light of India*. His sympathetic
heart enabled him to understand the vast reality of India and his empathy enabled him to live and feel in India as only a few foreigners could. He loved India for what it is – with its uniqueness, variety and also imperfections. Consequently his reminiscences of India's years and his revaluation of Indian heritage stand out as a masterpiece of rare calibre.

India exercised an overwhelming influence in his evolution as a poet. Eliot Weinberger points to this fact in the following comment: "Again and again, Paz's poems return to two gardens: the one from his childhood in Mixcoac and the one he shared with Marie-Jose in India" (A Tale 11). It is evident from 'Mutra', the first poem (1952) which he wrote to defend himself 'against the metaphysical temptation of India' to 'A Tale of Two Gardens', the last poem in East Slope.

It is significant to note that the last book by Paz is about India. In Light of India, which bears ample testimony to his love for and knowledge of India, embodies the mature, mellow wisdom of Paz on life, culture, various issues in society, art, music, philosophy, purpose of existence, nature of time and meaning of life. Quite effortlessly and with positive ease and naturalness, Paz delves into the depths of any aspect of Indian reality and analyses Indian ethos with a clarity and mastery that stemmed from his close familiarity with India that lasted for over six years.
While in India, Paz met and married Marie Jose — "after being born, the most important thing that has happened to me" (A Tale 9). He remained in India for well over six years and had travelled through the length and breadth of the vast subcontinent; also he studied Indian art, philosophy, music and history. He assimilated the poetry of Dharmakirti and studied the philosophy of Nagarjuna; once he even thought of becoming a Buddhist. It is all too clear that what Paz had for India was not the attitude of a tourist. On the contrary, toward India he had the deep love of a pilgrim in search of truth and clarity.

The foregoing examination of the relationship between the poet and India clearly points to the abiding influence of India in the personal and creative evolution of Paz. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that on this Mexican writer, India exercised an influence that was equal to, if not greater than, that of his motherland.

In world literature, a foreign country influencing the evolution of a master artist as profound as was in the case of Paz is quite uncommon.