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"Export of a Mystic": Representations of Yoga in Western Literature from Colonial Encounter to New Age Adoption

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Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of the literary representation of yoga and the figure of the "yogi" in Western literature from the 19th century to the late 20th century. It argues that Western authors consistently refashioned yoga to serve their own cultural and philosophical needs, a process that facilitated its global popularity but simultaneously divorced it from its foundational contexts. Beginning with the Transcendentalists, who saw in yoga a confirmation of their own universalist spirituality, the depiction shifted towards a more complex Orientalist fantasy in the high colonial period. Modernist writers like T.S. Eliot and Aldous Huxley then appropriated yogic concepts as an antidote to Western spiritual decay, while the mid-century counterculture, epitomized by Hermann Hesse, embraced it as a path of rebellion and self-discovery. Finally, the paper examines how these cumulative literary representations, by privileging experiential and psychological aspects, paved the way for yoga's contemporary incarnation as a mainstream wellness activity. Through close textual analysis, this study demonstrates how literature was not merely a reflector but an active agent in the "export of the mystic," shaping a globalized image of yoga that is often deeply intertwined with Western consumer culture and divorced from its philosophical and soteriological roots in South Asia.

Keywords

Yoga, Orientalism, Western Esotericism, Transcendentalism, Modernism, Counterculture, New Age, Spiritualism, Literary Representation, Cultural Appropriation

The "Export of a Mystic": Representations of Yoga in Western Literature from Colonial Encounter to New Age Adoption

The journey of yoga from the banks of the Ganges to the studios of Manhattan and London is one of the most remarkable cultural translations of the modern era. This journey was not merely physical but profoundly ideological, mediated and shaped significantly by Western literature. From its initial encounter in colonial texts to its adoption by the New Age movement, yoga has been persistently reimagined, repackaged, and represented to suit the spiritual longings and philosophical crises of the West. The literary sphere served as a crucial laboratory for this transformation, where the figure of the yogi and the philosophy of yoga were extracted from their dharmic context and recast as a universalist, psychological, and often commodifiable solution to Western disenchantment. By tracing this literary evolution—from the Transcendentalists to T.S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, Hermann Hesse, and beyond—this paper

argues that Western literature systematically exported a "mystic" ideal, a process that enabled yoga's global ascent but simultaneously obscured its intricate philosophical foundations, reducing a complex soteriological system to a tool for spiritual longing, counter-cultural rebellion, and ultimately, personalized wellness.

The first significant Western literary engagement with yoga emerged in the 19th century, not from direct contact, but through filtered translations and a Romantic yearning for primordial wisdom. The Transcendentalists, particularly Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, were pioneers in this regard. Accessing Indian philosophy through English translations of texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*, they discovered a vocabulary for their own rebellion against Unitarian rationalism. For them, yoga was not a distinct practice of postures (*asanas*) or breath control (*pranayama*); it was a metaphysical confirmation of their belief in an oversoul—a universal spirit immanent in nature and the self. In Emerson's essay "The Over-Soul," the influence is palpable, though the term "yoga" is rarely used. He speaks of a unity where "the heart in thee is the heart of all; not a valve, not a wall, not an intersection is there anywhere in nature, but one blood rolls uninterruptedly an endless circulation through all men" (Emerson 385). This is a clear, albeit generalized, reflection of the yogic concept of *advaita* (non-duality). The yogi, in this early imagination, was not a physical culturist but a sage, a forest-dwelling contemplative like Thoreau at Walden Pond, seeking to unite his individual soul with the divine All. This representation was positive but profoundly syncretic; it absorbed yoga into a pre-existing Western esoteric and Romantic tradition, valuing it as an ancient, exotic validation of a universal truth that Emerson believed was also latent in Platonism and European mysticism. This initial framing set a crucial precedent: yoga was seen not as a culturally specific path, but as a perennial philosophy, a move that began the process of decontextualization that would intensify in the centuries to come.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries, the zenith of the British Raj, saw a shift in the literary representation of yoga, colored by the power dynamics of colonialism. If the Transcendentalists approached Indian thought with a degree of reverence, many high colonial writers depicted the yogi through a lens of Orientalist fantasy and grotesquerie. The yogi became a trope—a symbol of the irrational, the magical, and the decadent East, often serving as a foil to European rationality and vigor. This is starkly evident in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901). The novel features a Tibetan lama, a figure often conflated with the yogi in the Western imagination, who is portrayed as spiritually profound but childishly dependent on the practical, street-smart Kim, a symbol of British imperial competence. The lama's quest for the River of the Arrow is treated with a patronizing affection; his spirituality is admirable but ultimately impractical. Elsewhere, in the pulp literature of the time, the yogi was frequently depicted as a sinister fakir, a performer of dark miracles or an ascetic engaged in terrifying, self-mortifying practices. These representations, as scholar David Gordon White argues, fed a "colonial narrative that simultaneously marveled at and denigrated Indian asceticism, seeing it as a sign of both profound spirituality and civilizational decline" (White 5). The yogi was an object of curiosity and fear, an emblem of an Orient that was spiritually deep but politically inert, thereby justifying the colonial "civilizing mission." This bifurcated image—the sage versus the sinister magician—created a potent, if contradictory, archetype that would be mined by later writers.

The Modernist period of the early 20th century witnessed a profound crisis of faith in Western civilization, catalyzed by the trauma of the First World War. In response, writers like T.S. Eliot and Aldous Huxley turned to Eastern thought not for universalist confirmation, as the

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Transcendentalists had, but as a radical alternative to a perceived spiritual and cultural wasteland. Their engagement was more explicit, yet it remained a highly selective appropriation. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is the quintessential literary document of this despair, and its famous closing section, "What the Thunder Said," draws directly from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. The Sanskrit words "Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata" (Give, Sympathize, Control) and the culminating "Shantih shantih shantih" are presented as a fragmented, almost desperate incantation for peace in a broken world. For Eliot, yoga and Upanishadic wisdom were not integrated systems but shattered fragments to be juxtaposed against the ruins of European culture. They signify a longed-for, almost unattainable, spiritual order. The practice itself is absent; the philosophy is used as a literary device to highlight the depth of the West's desolation.

Aldous Huxley's engagement was more systematic but equally instrumental. In his seminal work *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945), Huxley argues that a common, universal truth lies at the heart of all major world religions, and he uses Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, including yogic texts, as primary evidence. For Huxley, the techniques of yoga—particularly meditation and the stilling of the mind—were technologies for achieving the "direct apprehension of the divine" that constituted this perennial truth (Huxley 72). This was a significant step in the psychologization of yoga. Huxley, influenced by his interest in mysticism and his later experiments with psychedelics, framed yogic practice as a means to achieve higher states of consciousness. This representation was immensely influential, moving yoga away from its goal of liberation (*moksha*) from the cycle of rebirth and towards a Western therapeutic model of expanded awareness and self-actualization. It presented yoga as a science of the mind, a formulation that would make it highly palatable to the burgeoning human potential movement of the 1960s.

It was in the mid-20th century, with the rise of the counterculture, that the literary representation of yoga fully embraced it as a path of rebellion and self-discovery. No author was more central to this than Hermann Hesse. His novel *Siddhartha* (1922), though set in the time of the Buddha, is a quintessentially Western story of individualistic quest. The protagonist's journey, which includes periods of asceticism, worldly pleasure, and finally transcendent wisdom by the river, resonated deeply with a generation disillusioned with post-war materialism and conformist society. Hesse's narrative brilliantly repackaged Indian spiritual concepts for a European audience, presenting them not as a rigid dogma but as a personal, experiential voyage. The novel's immense popularity in the 1960s made it a gateway text for thousands of young Westerners seeking alternatives to their own culture. Siddhartha was the ideal yogi for the new age: not a renunciate in a cave, but a romantic seeker who sampled various life paths in his pursuit of authentic selfhood. This representation dovetailed perfectly with the countercultural ethos of "dropping out" and seeking enlightenment, often through a combination of Eastern spirituality, psychedelic drugs, and a rejection of established institutions. Yoga, in this literary and cultural milieu, became a symbol of anti-establishment rebellion and a tool for exploring the inner frontiers of consciousness.

The cumulative effect of these literary representations—from Emerson's universalism to Hesse's individualism—created a fertile ground for the final stage of yoga's Western adoption: its mainstreaming as a wellness and fitness discipline. By the late 20th century, the figure of the mystic sage or the rebellious seeker began to recede from high literature, replaced by a normalized image of the yoga practitioner in popular fiction and memoirs. The profound philosophical and soteriological aims of classical yoga, as outlined in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*—

specifically *chitta vritti nirodha* (the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind)—were largely sidelined. In their place emerged a focus on the physical and psychological benefits: stress reduction, flexibility, and a sense of personal peace.

This shift is emblematic of what sociologists call the "subjective turn" in modern spirituality, where external authority is replaced by internal experience and feeling. The literary groundwork for this had been laid for over a century. Huxley had psychologized it; Hesse had personalized it. The final step was its commodification. In contemporary Western culture, the "yogi" is less likely to be a literary character and more likely to be a consumer, purchasing Lululemon apparel, attending boutique studio classes, and following influencers on Instagram. This modern incarnation is the direct descendant of the literary export, a mystic stripped of its most challenging philosophical demands and repurposed for self-optimization in a capitalist society. The practice has been largely divorced from its ethical foundations (the *yamas* and *niyamas*) and its ultimate goal of *kaivalya* (isolation), becoming instead a support for navigating, rather than transcending, worldly life.

In conclusion, the representation of yoga in Western literature from the 19th century to the late 20th century reveals a consistent pattern of appropriation and adaptation. Each literary movement projected its own anxieties and aspirations onto the malleable figure of the yogi and the concept of yoga. The Transcendentalists saw a universal mystic, the colonial writers an exotic other, the Modernists a fragmented antidote, and the counterculture a rebellious path to selfhood. This long and layered process of literary reimagination was instrumental in creating the global brand of yoga we recognize today. It successfully "exported a mystic," making ancient Indian wisdom accessible and appealing to the Western mind. However, this very success came at a cost. The literary lens, while powerful in disseminating these ideas, consistently filtered out the cultural, ethical, and philosophical specificity of yoga, transforming a comprehensive soteriological system into a versatile signifier for spiritual longing. The journey of yoga in the Western literary imagination is thus a potent case study in the dynamics of cross-cultural exchange, demonstrating how the embrace of the "other" is often, in reality, a reflection of the self.

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