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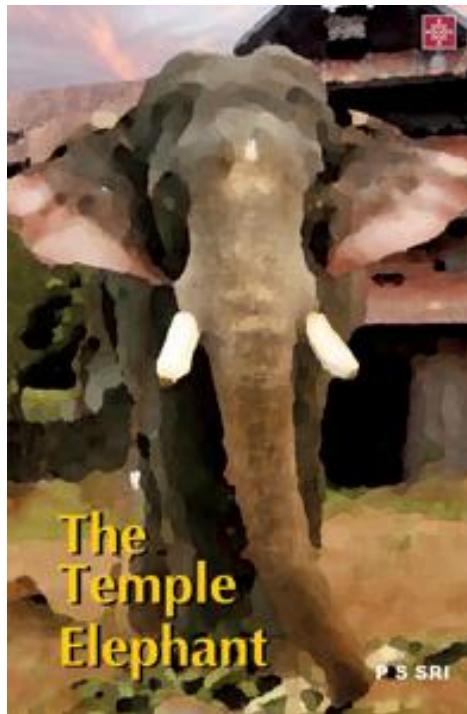
**P.S. Sri's The Temple Elephant: A Bestiary with  
Socio-Political and Spiritual Message**

**Varun Gulati M.A., M. Phil., Ph.D. (Candidate)**

## **P.S. Sri's *The Temple Elephant*: A Bestiary with Socio-Political and Spiritual Message**

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### **Introduction**

P.S. Sri, a scholar and researcher, is an Indian author, based in Canada, with a fresh-found voice in the realm of Indian English Literature. Sri lived in Chennai and obtained his M.A. English there. Later he moved outside India and received a degree of Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. Sri has wide-ranging experience of teaching and research on a variety of themes, and at present he is serving as a professor of Comparative Literature in the department of English at Royal Military College, Kingston, Ontario.

Sri has authored a book *T.S. Eliot, Vedanta and Buddhism* and also a collection of his short stories and poems appeared in *The Blue Heron Press Anthology: New Voices from Kingston and Scapes*.

Sri is a recipient of many prestigious awards including the Canadian Federation of Humanities Grant.

### ***The Temple Elephant***

‘The Temple Elephant’, a novelette, is a median work of Sri expressing his close association to India including its religious, social and political milieu. One can sense that his agonies and exaltation are revealed in the form of metaphors and touching symbols used in the novel.

The story takes us back to the time of the British Raj, and is an odyssey from the ancient temple Guruvayoor, located at Trichur (Kerala), to South Indian forests including a visit to an ashram.

### **Kesava: An Emblem of Animal Intelligence and Wisdom**



The story opens with a temple elephant named Kesava, who performs the greatest honour of carrying the stone image of bewitching child god Krishna as a ritual of daily procession in Guruvayoor temple. Kesava, the narrator of the story and a namesake of god Krishna himself,

receives great love and tenderness from his mahout Madhavan, who decorates him with a tilaka, sandal paste, gem-encrusted gold plate and silver cups edged with the blue tassels.



**Sri Krishna idol in Guruvayoor**

Kesava is presented as a symbol of wisdom, astuteness and docility. (There was actually a temple elephant named **Kesavan** in Guruvayoor temple. Kesavan is legendary, and is remembered every year through various festivities and rituals in Sri Krishna Temple, in Guruvayoor. For some recent notices on this legendary figure, see <http://www.hinduonnet.com/2008/12/09/stories/2008120951070300.htm> <http://www.hinduonnet.com/2000/12/07/stories/0407211u.htm> and other search results for *Kesavan*.)

The novelist reminds through the intelligence of Kesava how the Indian spiritual traditions are still preserved and revered despite long intervening centuries of rulers from outside India, including the English reign. Facing the *garbha-griha* (a sanctum sanctorum for the main idol) during *shringaa*, a ritual, of lord Krishna, Kesava says:

“The Brahmins begin chanting in Sanskrit, the ancient Vedic language whose origins, my Guru told me, are lost in the abyssm of time and whose sounds have been passed down orally from generation to generation for almost five thousand years to form one long unbroken spiritual tradition.” (20)

Madhavan usually reminds him that even animals are like humans with an unfathomable wisdom and ethics at their core. Kesava frequently observed his mahouts clairvoyance when he said that even animals have same soul in their bodies fulfilling the unfinished karma from their past lives before attaining salvation.

## **Brutal Captivity of Kesava**

Kesava engulfed his buoyant life in jungle with all his herd feeling great pleasure in their leafy abode along the Tamiladu-Karnataka-Kerala border popularly known as Blue Mountains. Kesava grew under the care of his mother and soon became accustomed to the worldly manners. His dreams were shattered by the so called human beings as they captured and forced him to slavery. He wonders how a man, who loves his own freedom above all, would have deprived animals from their liberty.



The novelist expresses his anguish against those human beings who actually lost their sense of compassion and sensitivity. Kesava realizes later in his life that human beings will never stop their exploitation of animals and even their own surroundings. Kasava observes Indian's stupidity and becomes a voice of the novelist who reminds us how a small number of British enslaved us and how we had forsaken even our spiritual freedom, like a dump cattle, leading towards the bloodshed of partition.

The novelist reminds Indians of a callous man who murdered ahimsa and represented the contemporary psyche of the natives. Kesava says;

“Hadn’t the Hindus and Muslims forgotten their brotherhood and turned in insane fury against each other during the bloodbath of the infamous Partition? How blind they had all been to the gentle old man’s vision of a true swarajya! Not content with crucifying his loftiest principle of ahimsa, they had finally murdered the man himself!” (45)



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### A Twist in Kesava’s Life

Kesava’s life took a change when he was selected for a tiger hunting organized by the Maharajah of Mysore. The novelist went into the time of the British Raj and points Indian out how Indian rulers conducted ceremonial *shikar* to please the British Collectors as also. Once during a tiger hunt, Kesava used his elastic trunk to pick up the fallen crown-turban of His Highness and offered it to him. As a result the royal king rewarded him with the orders that the clever elephant be kept in the royal custody only for the services of his master.

In the palace, for the first time in his life, Kesava received a sincere kinship with a human being who was his mahout named Madhavan, one of the thousand names of lord Krishna himself. With the passage of time, Madhavan, his mahout fell in love with a young, beautiful girl named Radha, and their parents happily approved this relation and fixed their wedding. Meanwhile, Kesava also found himself in the same sense of divine love with one of his mates, a kind and graceful cow named, Rukmani.

The author adds a mythological incident to the story by which he shows a resemblance of Kesava with Lord Krishna, who saved Panachali’s honour by decimating the strength of Dushshasana. Kesava, the elephant, saves the honour of his mahout’s spouse Radha by gate-crashing in the process of rescuing the victim. In his outrageous act of breaking the Prince’s neck, we discern the sense of justice in the elephant. Kesava was almost near to crush the Prince’s head beneath his legs, when Madhavan cries out not to kill the Prince. Later the Prince was banished by the gentle king and Kesava received a huge round of applause for saving the chastity of a girl. The author cannot resist applauding:

“Oh, Kesava! You are indeed blessed. You saved the honour of that innocent girl Radha just as Krishna saved the honour of Panchali in *The Mahabharata*.” (62)

### **Kesava: A Victim the Prince's Vendetta**

After the death of the King, the Prince takes the help of the Britishers and claims the entire empire in his possession. The Prince is filled with the sense of reprisal against Kesava and Madhavan. In the meantime, Madhavan gets success in escaping and joins Mahatma Gandhi in his Quit India Movement and leaves his wife Radha in Madras where she is out of the reach of the cruel hands of Prince. However, Kesava and Rukmani do not manage to run away and face severe actions of the Prince. Both were kept hungry for many days and suffered horrible beatings by some brutish men. Rukmani cannot bear that torture and died pathetically. Consequently Kesava, in a mad disgust, forcibly breaks the steel chains and finally smashes the evil face of the Prince.

The novelist here proves that tyranny hath its fall. However, the event left again a deep wound of Kesava's soul. He crushes everything in madness that comes in his way.

The novelist takes another legend from *The Ramayana*, a great Hindu epic. Kesava was told later;

"This was your Lanka Dahana. Did not Hanuman in *The Ramayana* set fire to Lanka, unable to bear the demon Ravana's cruelty to Sita, the chaste and gentle wife of his beloved master Rama?" (68)

### **Maharishi: A Saviour of Kesava**

Rukmani's death left a deep wound on Kesava's soul and in this mad frenzy he would kill whosoever comes in his path. In an extreme anxiety the villagers informed the English Forest Officer of Mysore to rescue them. Kesava found the Englishman lifting his rifle and he was about to shoot when a Maharishi came to his rescue and assured that the elephant will not bother anyone from then onwards.

Kesava found a great relief in the intimacy of the Maharishi and stayed in his holy ashram. Kesava heard the Maharishi's cherished voice in the depths of his mind many times:

"You have come home my child. I know all that you have suffered. But tell me everything if that will ease your mind...I knew I had been blessed beyond my wildest dreams. I had found my guru." (75)



### **Maharishi: A Superhuman**

*Maharishi* means the great seer. He was born in a Brahmin family in a very small town in the Southern part of India. At the age of seventeen the Maharishi found a grand change in his life and he abandoned home, in search of the Truth. Soon he discovers power of the ‘self’ by practicing some yogic techniques. He overcomes the death and realizes that it is the body that dies, not the soul which is immortal. The man lost all his interest in worldly pleasures and plunges himself into the ‘Bliss’ of ‘Self’ and, thus, he lives in his ashram in the way of the Shiva temple under a hill.

Kesava felt elevated in the company of his guru and his life was totally transformed. Kesava found around him calm and tranquil atmosphere in the ashram. He felt elated: “...repeated like a song of love, my Master, my friend, philosopher and guide...the Formless being and my heart.” (81)

### **Reunion with Madhavan: A Lesson of Ultimate Pleasure in Life**

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Kesava was taught that “God is the one and only truth of this universe” (84) in ashram where dogs and cows lived in perfect harmony. The life of Maharishi transmitted a lesson of submission to Kesava and he found this having telling effect not only on restless minds of scholars but also bringing comfort and peace to the gloomy hearts of common man.

One day, Kesava found a man rushing towards and prostrating before his master’s feet. The aggrieved man’s wife and children had died recently due to a cholera epidemic. Everybody was moved by his pathetic tale of woes and Kasava found that he is none but his old mahout Madhavan. The Maharishi wiped out his tears and Madhavan submitted himself whole-heartedly to the true services of humanity.

Madhavan was given a duty to look after Kesava with a message of their guru; “You have both lost those whom you loved. Now you have found each other. Be at peace.” (90) Once Madhavan, Kesava and other devotees of the ashram discovered that the Maharishi was preparing to leave his body, like throwing away a worn out cloth. The Maharishi suffered with physical ailments and people believed that he took the sufferings of people on him whosoever came to seek in his refuge. Even the doctors whispered that pain must be piercing, but Maharishi gave no sign of suffering on his part.

One day he called up Madhavan and said:

“Madhava, after this body is dead, take Kesavan to the Krishna temple at Guruvayur...you will both find peace at Guruvayur.” (95)

A Frenchman proclaimed that he had seen an illuminated and enormous star rushing towards heaven coinciding with the bodily death of the Maharishi. Later, Madhavan and Kesava followed the words of their masters and surrendered their whole to the child-god Krishna in the temple of Guruvayur. “As we travelled, we carried the revered footprints of our Master in our hearts.” (97)

## Conclusion

It would be appropriate to state that the novelist uses some events from the Indian struggle for independence. The struggle of the animal coincides with the human struggle. The author has a deep and intimate knowledge of Indian myth and he has brought these out to bear upon the life of the animal.

The author’s approach to life is clearly based on the Vedic Hindu understanding of life. While consequences of karma are not highlighted, *samsara* and possibility of rebirths are certainly emphasized. Oneness of souls of all living beings is again another assumption highly emphasized throughout the story.

Wisdom obtained and obtainable through the agency of human gurus is another aspect of the novel. Although no caste is downplayed as to their karmic positions, the priestly duties of the Brahmin community have a pre-eminent place. The Maharishi is also portrayed as a person from the Brahmin caste. While metaphorically Kesava is shown in one episode as performing a duty similar to that of Krishna, it is not clear how the author would place him in terms of hierarchy. In any case the emphasis is more on the equality of souls across species, in some sense.

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<sup>1</sup> Sri, P.S., *The Temple Elephant*: New Horizon Media Pvt. Ltd: Chennai 2007 (All the subsequent quotations are taken from this text.)

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