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What the Thunder said : The Benedictory close of The Waste Land

Dr. Swati Shrivastava, Lecturer (Selection Grade),

Govt. Women's Polytechnic College, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh,

Affiliated to Rajiv Gandhi Proudyogiki Vishwavidyalaya, Bhopal



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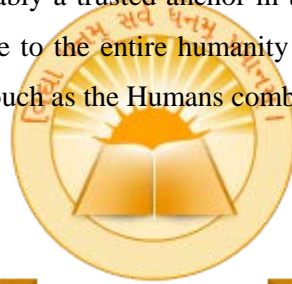
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Abstract

Richard Bartholomew has very persuasively argued in an essay entitled "The life theme and its treatment in Eliot's poetry", that, "the three words spoken by the Thunder lead straight to the core of Eliot's poetry". Together they represent "a compound idea, a philosophy really, that runs through all the poetry – poems as well as plays". These three words occur in the fifth and final part of *The Waste Land* which has been characterized as the most compelling and philosophical movement of the poem, for in this section Eliot shows to his readers the way of spiritual rebirth, and his teachings are based on the hoary wisdom of India. Thus the poem does not merely reflect, 'the disillusionment of a generation', it goes much deeper. It makes a promise and a prophecy which can redeem the modern Wasteland of doubt and despair. Self control is unquestionably a trusted anchor in the otherwise raging sea of life. The sagacious counsel of the great Aryan myth is applicable to the entire humanity for its range is universal. The message of the Thunder has been given an excellent human touch as the Humans combine all the three properties- angelic, human and demonic.



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What the Thunder said : The Benedictory close of The Waste Land

The picture of the contemporary Waste Land which The Waste Land presents might be bleak and gloomy, but it does not end on a note of despair – the hope lies in the return to fertility with the waters of the Ganga flowing down. Thus a promise is held out of the coming of the rain of divine grace, only if man will repent and do penance as the king fisher and the king Oedipus did. Eliot brings together the wisdoms of the East and the West and shows that spiritual regeneration can come, if only we heed the voice of the Thunder : Give, sympathize and control. These fragments the poet has shored to put his own land in order. The fifth and final part of the poem is a natural transition from the fourth part. The ambivalence of the water symbol connects the two parts. It depicts the quest of Tiresias, the Egyptian prophet representing the entire mankind in his person. Eliot tells us that "two sexes meet in Tiresias". In Indian mythology, the two sexes meet in Prajapati, who is the father of entire mankind. The reference that Eliot gives in Part V to his formal instruction to man (Purusha), God (deva) and demon (asura) also partly confirms it. Tiresias is like the Drasta (seer) in the Upanishads. According to Eliot, what Tiresias, sees in fact, is the substance of the poem, so also what Prajapati saw and expanded is the Upanishads. Like the Upanishads, Eliot's world picture is based on the concept of the Absolute.

Eliot informs us that three themes have been employed in the first part of Part V : the journey of Emmaus, the approach to the Chapel Perilous and the present decay of eastern Europe. The journey of the Quester to the Chapel Perilous constitutes what Miss Weston calls "a journey to the world's beyond". It is in effect a descent into the grave, into regions of the dead (where the quester, as in the romances, has to confront "apparitions and terrors", of which the collapse of the cities is one), so that the quester may achieve spiritual knowledge. Miss Weston attaches to the experience a mystical meaning. The quester fails at the Chapel Perilous, for he is not willing to penetrate to a deeper hell than the one he is already in; but for a spiritual regeneration he must come out of his own self centeredness and make a spiritual descent which shall be also a spiritual ascent according to the scheme which Eliot was to adopt much later in the Quartets, 'the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way backward'.

As the quests of the quester end in a fiasco, the spell of drought continues in the blighted land. There is a tension in The Waste Land due to want of rain. The state of rainlessness persists for long. The agricultural community as one finds in India, is greatly concerned about the rain. This is what he describes in a highly evocative opening passage :

"Here is not water but only rock

Rock and no water and the sandy road

The road winding above among the mountains



Which are mountains of rock without water

If there were water we should stop and drink

Amongst the rock one cannot stop and think

Sweet is dry and feet are in the sand

If there were only water amongst the rock

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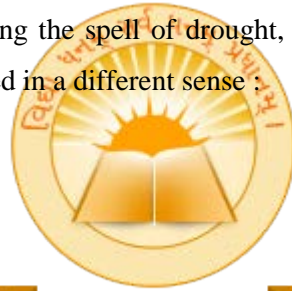
But dry sterile Thunder without rain”.

It is not easy to appreciate this passage highlighting the importance of rain unless one does know the numerous hymns sung by the primitive Aryan communities to the God of rain in the Rigveda.

It is interesting to note that the bone image precedes the message of the Thunder – 'Dry bones can harm no one'. Of course, the bones are rather helpful in breaking the spell of drought, as seen in the case of Dadhichi. The image is recurrent in the poem. In Part II we have it used in a different sense :

"I think we are in rat's alley

Where the dead men lost their bones”



In Part III it is used to issue a warning to mankind enmeshed in lustful activities :

"But at my back in a cold blast I hear

The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear."

In part IV the image brings to mind the necessity of asceticism which the Phoenician failed to practice in his life :

"A current under sea

picked his bones in whispers".

These lines make it clear that the Phoenician did not possess the water-yielding bones of Dadhichi, who has become proverbial for compassion and charity (Dana) in Hindu mythology. In Part V it is worthwhile to note that the image of 'dry bones' is accompanied by the welcome signs of rain cock, flash of lightening and damp gust :

"Only a cock stood on the roof true

Co co rico co co rico

In a flash of lightning .Then a damp gust

Bringing rain."

This signal of rain is given after the quest of Tiresias through the Christian strongholds ends without any promise of



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spiritual regeneration (that is what rain or water stands for).

It is significant to mark the way Eliot has Juxtaposed the bones of the Christian and Indian traditions in the context of the actual bones that were lying scattered on the battle-fields of Europe 'where the dead men lost their bones' – because war is a waste. As Christianity believes, these bones may come back to life by the 'grace' of God. One gets inclined to believe, as Prof. Narasimhaiah certainly does, that the allusion to the Dadhichi story can make the poem more meaningful than the reference to bones in the Bible in the light of the question put by the poet towards the end of Part V of The Waste Land :

"Datta : what have we given?"

Eliot sometimes juxtaposes the two great traditions – Christian and Hindu – for purposes of comparison and contrast, and the bone image illustrates the fact. He has done the same in the image of 'burning' in the third part where he collocates the Buddha and St. Augustine.

At this juncture, references are made to the sunken Ganga, to the limp leaves, to the black clouds gathered far distant, and to the jungle crouched and humped in silence. A pressing need of rain is being felt at the time :

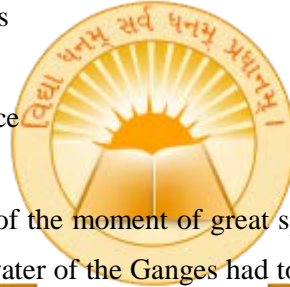
"Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves

Waited for rain, while the blank clouds

Gathered far distant, over Himavant.

The jungle crouched, humped in silence

Then spoke the Thunder".



The existing state of rainlessness reminds us of the moment of great spiritual crisis that once betook the holy land of the Hindu : there was a severe drought ; the water of the Ganges had touched the lowest mark; the crops did not grow and the animals could not reproduce; the leaves of trees were totally withered, the branches of trees were bending low, and the whole jungle had assumed a 'Stooping Posture', as it were, to sustain the force of the Thunder shower that was so anxiously awaited and that was so imminent in view of the dark clouds hanging over the Himalayas. This is the picture of a great spiritual crisis in Indian culture of which "the Ganges is the very bloodstream and the sinking of its water is naturally symptomatic of the low vitality of the spirit in the Indian community". In the blighted land, the rain, which is the vitalizing substance, is held back, and the 'freeing of the waters' the pristine object of the fertility ritual in the Rigveda as well as in Miss Weston's From Ritual to Romance, must wait. As referred to earlier, only a Dadhichi and his Vajrayudha can open the black clouds and make the rain possible for the benefit of all.

Apart from this, another Indian myth is so relevant in connection with the two key-words 'Ganga' and 'Sunken' (in 'Ganga was Sunken'). The Sunken Ganga has its immemorial associations with the Indians. Take the word 'Ganga' first. The preference of the name 'Ganga' to the readily available 'Ganges' (as well as of the 'Himavant' to the current 'Himalaya' or 'Everest') shows the profound insight of the poet into the culture of distant land. There are still many highly educated Indians to whom 'Ganga' and 'Ganges' mean all the same. The word 'Ganga' was lying locked up in the Sanskrit Pundit's old manuscripts and in the vocabulary of illiterate masses, while the educated Indian was



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trafficking with the corrupt, prosaic 'Ganges' credit goes to T.S Eliot for having brought 'Ganga' to currency.

There is no rain as yet, for instead of practicing certain noble virtues and austerities as Bhagirath did. Men have fallen on evil days living without love, sympathy, and control. It is to enjoin on them the necessity of these virtues that the Thunder Peals thrice Da Da Da. He makes an allusion to a significant episode in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, which describes how Gods, men and demons (deva, purusha, and asura) approached Prajapati, who was their father-preceptor, for instructions after completing their formal education.

"Three classes of Prajapati's sons live a life of continence with their father, Prajapati (viraj) the Gods, Men and Asuras. The Gods, on the completion of their term, said 'please instruct us'. He told them the syllable 'Da' (and asked) 'Have you understood'? (They) said 'we have. You tell us : control yourselves for you are naturally unruly (He) said, 'yes, you have understood'.

Then the men said to him, 'please instruct us'. He told them the same syllable 'Da' (and asked), 'Have you understood?' (They) said, 'we have you tell us : Give' – Distribute your wealth to the best of your might, for you are naturally avaricious. (He) said, 'yes, you have understood'?

Then the Asuras said to him, 'please instruct us'. He told them the same syllable 'Da' (and asked). 'Have you understood'? (They) said, 'we have. You tell us : Have compassion' (He) said, 'yes, you have understood'. That very thing is repeated by the heavenly voice, the cloud, as 'Da', 'Da', 'Da' : 'control yourselves', 'Give', and 'Have compassion'. Therefore one should learn these three – Self control, Charity and Compassion.

From what the Thunder said, the protagonist realizes the true ideal of life and sets about putting his lands in order. This realization is significant enough, for the true curse of these who inhabit the The Waste Land is inaction (akarmanyata). Those inhabitants are living incompletely without having any concern for such virtues as 'Give', 'Sympathize' and 'Control' : they are, therefore, dead in life. The 'action' image, in the sense as the Gita would have it, is noticeable in the line."Shall I at least set my lands in order?" After the realization of the urgent need for 'action', the protagonist assumes the role of the fisher king at a time when 'London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down'. It is to be remarked here that, according to Miss J.L. Weston, the Buddha is sometimes pictured in the attitude of a fisherman; he is called in the Mahayana scriptures "the fisherman who draws fish from the ocean of Samsara to the light of salvation." The fish needs to be set free, and for this the fishermen – the Buddha – is required.

The fragmentary quotations with which the poem ends are drawn from four languages at least some scholars have taken the closing passage as 'a farrago of meaningless fragments', while some others (like George Williamson and D.C. Fowler) approve of its "artistic propriety." Mr. Fowler even suggests to read it as "a charm, the purpose of which is to break the spell of The Waste Land". He goes on to suggest that 'the emotional impact of the poem is enhanced by such an interpretation". The fragments that the protagonist has shored against his 'ruins' represent 'the broken culture of the west'; they also contain "the germs of the poet's own philosophy which he later elaborates in Four Quartets". All these fragments tend to highlight the value of soul over flesh, of metaphysics over materialism, as a measure to set the disorderly lands in order.



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Scholars have been at variance in their interpretations of Shantih Shantih Shantih. They have failed to respond to the full poetic implications of the word Shantih. According to some, the tripe 'Amen' of the Christian world may be compared to the triple Shantih, while the poet himself tells us in the notes on the poem that it is 'a formal ending to an Upanishad'. Elizabeth Drew thinks that "it is impossible to feel peace in the concluding passage. It is a formal ending only". In addition to its being an 'ending' to the Upanishads, it is also an integral part of the Vedas. It occurs in the Yajurveda in its entirety, where the full text runs as under :

"May sky be peaceful

May atmosphere be peaceful

May Earth be peaceful

May waters be peaceful

May Medicinal herbs be peaceful

May Plants be peaceful"

May all the learned persons be peaceful. May God and the Vedas be peaceful. May all the objects be peaceful; May peace itself be peaceful. May that peace come unto me."

And the worst ever interpretation of the use of the triple Shantih was given by Eliot's mentor, Ezra Pound, to whom the poem is dedicated and to whose critical insight it owes a good deal for its greatness as the facsimile edition has demonstrated. Pound wrote to Eliot in December 1921 commenting on the word Shantih : "One test is whether anything would be lacking if the last three words were omitted", and adds : "I don't think it would". To which Eliot replied in January 1922 : "criticism accepted, so far as understood, with thanks". It is obvious that Eliot did not carry out the suggestion of Pound and the poem continued to retain the Upanishadic words as before.

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