



The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot as a modern epic

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Abstract— ‘The Waste Land’, of course by T. S. Eliot has been treated as the magnum opus of T. S. Eliot on account of its big canvas, wide range of themes, saga of suffering, with epic grandeur. It concludes with an optimistic note- “ Shantih, Shantih, Shantih” as well as “Da, Datta, Dayadhvam” The mental journey from ‘The Burial of the Dead’ to ‘What the Thunder Said’ via ‘A Game of Chess’, ‘The Fire Sermon’ and ‘Death by Water’ undertaken by Tiresias symbolizes the journey of the Christiana in John Bunyan’s ‘Pilgrim’s Progress. In Spite of this, the complexity of theme prompted a sensitive Hindi poet Nirala to remark- “ Kahan ka ianta kahan ka roda, T. S. Eliot ne kunwa joda” The elegiac note of the opening part visualizes ‘a ray of hope’ when the poet refers to ‘the Holy river’ Ganga and the Himavant i.e. the snowbound mountains in Himalayan Ranges. Suddenly, the attention is shifted towards the famous fable of the ‘Brihadaranyaka Upanishad’ The three-fold offspring of the Creator, Prajapati, Gods, men and demons; these three approached Prajapati for instruction after completing their formal education. To each group, He uttered the single syllable ‘Da’. The message was sent to all three in the form of encoding but they interpreted or decoded in their own ways. The Gods decode it as ‘Damyata’ (Control Yourselves). The Gods decoded it as ‘Datta’ (give). The demons interpreted it as ‘Dayadhvam’ (be compassionate). When these three meet Prajapati, aware of their interpretations, He responds with ‘OM’ signifying that they have fully understood. This concludes with the thrice repetition of thunder - Da. Da. Da. viz., control yourselves, give, be compassionate. This episode reminds us of T.S. Eliot’s focus on Charles Lanman, his Sanskrit teacher at Harvard University who gave Eliot a copy of ‘Vasudev Lakshman Shastri Phansikar’s Sanskrit edition of ‘The Twenty Eight Upanishads’. While interpreting ‘Dayadhvam’, Eliot refers to Dante’s ‘Inferno’ Book 33, line 46 - “And below I heard the outlet of / The horrible tower locked up”. These words are uttered by Ugonio della Gherardesca, a 13th century Italian novelist as he recalls his imprisonment in a Tower with his two sons and two grandsons where they starved to death. This allusion communicates a sense of finality and suggests the terrifying consequences of imprisoning oneself within one’s own ego or consciousness. Eliot feels that only by confining to one’s own faith one is ought to transcend the boundaries of tradition. According to the European tradition or Christianity ‘Shantih’ has been interpreted as ‘Peace Which passeth understanding’. Indeed, It is a feeble translation of the inherent meaning of the world. Eliot anticipates something absolute and sublime as has been suggested by the Upanishadic Connotation. To conclude it can be said that this poem begins with pessimistic suffering but concludes with robust optimism.

Keywords—Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Epic, Magnum opus, Sermon, Sublime, Tiresias, Ugolino della Gherardesca.

I. INTRODUCTION

Whenever Tradition and Civilization fall, that leads to the composition of an epic. To quote some verses from the Hindu epic, 'Mahabharata' that serve the same notion:

“Yada yada hi dharmasya glanirbhavati bhārata
Abhythanamadharmasya tadatmanam srijamyaham
Paritrānaya sadhunāṅ vināshaya cha dushkritam
Dharmasāṅsthapanarthāy sambhābami yuge yuge”

Signifying thereby, Whenever virtue subsides and wickedness prevails, I (God) manifest Myself. To establish virtue, to destroy evil, to save the good I come from Yuga (age) to Yuga and the heroic deeds of God are recorded in an epic. Actually, the period in which 'The Waste Land' took its shape was very much disturbing. It was the time when the entire England was passing through many crises- Spiritual crisis, political crisis, social crisis, financial crisis and physical crisis. And the reasons behind these crises were- publication of Darwin's 'The Origin of Species', 'Communist Manifesto' by Marks and Engels, William James 'Principles of Psychology', Freud's 'The Interpretation of Dreams' and to a large extent World War I. In fact, the cry of humanity caused by these aberrations unnerved T.S. Eliot to such an extent that he composed this epic in a mood of disillusionment. On account of his leanings towards so many religions and his visits to so many countries he is regarded as 'Cultured and Vultured'.

II. THE CONCEPT OF EPIC

Indeed, Epic is the highest type of poetry, a long narrative poem in verse in which the characters and the actions are of heroic stature. Its hero is a figure of national or International importance; other characters are also expected to come from the highest class in a society raised above the common man by birth, possession, manners and appearance. The setting of an epic is ample in scale and the action involves heroic deeds complete in itself. There must be a beginning, a middle and an end. The most notable epics of the World Literature are The Iiad, The Aeneid, The Ramayana, The Mahabharata, The Divine Comedy, The Odyssey, Paradise Lost, Javednama and many others.

III. 'THE WASTE LAND' AT PAR WITH OTHER EPICS OF THE WORLD.

On judging 'The Waste Land' as epic at par with other great epics of World Literature like 'The Iliad' and 'Odyssey' by Homer, 'The Aeneid' of Virgil, Dante's 'Divine Comedy', 'Mahabharata' by Vyasa, 'Ramayana' by Valmiki, 'Paradise Lost' by Milton or 'Javednama' by Iqbal, one is often disappointed because almost all these

epics start with an Invocation to Muse. For example, Milton invokes in *Paradise Lost* in words like these:

“ Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme:
And chiefly thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer,
Before all temples the upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for thou know'st; thou from the first.”

But Eliot, instead of invoking to Muse, starts this poem with the description of decadent elements of Modern Age in general and Modern poetry in particular:

“ April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.”

Moreover, the hero of this epic is not a figure of National or International importance as one finds in the above cited great epics of World Literature. Herein, the hero of this epic is Tiresias who is half man and half woman. He is introduced in the third part of the epic subtitled, 'The Fire Sermon':

“ I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see”

No doubt, he lacks National or International importance and ability to but he can see to such an extent that a man with sight can not see. So, He is having some sort of prophetic vision. As he sees a young 'Carbuncular' man hop into bed with a lonely female typist only to make love to her aggressively and leave without hesitation. Herein one finds modern relationships that embody more of profession and less of emotion. This is the social crisis that the epic poet Eliot wants to expose by referring to this episode of a typist and a young man.

Highlighting the characteristics of an epic it is said that an epic must be serious in theme. Here the essence of the poem is 'Modern Life as a waste land'. No doubt, the themes of this poem are Death, Lack of Faith, Fear of Death and life, Corruptio of Sex which are serious in nature. Two sections of the poem - 'The Burial of the Dead' and 'Death by Water' refer to the theme of Death. What complicated matter is that death can mean life: in other words, a being can pave the way for new lives after dying. Eliot asks his friend Stetson:

“ That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
“Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?”

Similarly, Christ by ‘Dying’ redeemed humanity and thereby gave new life. Surprisingly, the last part of the poem subtitled ‘What the Thunder Said’ serves the best purpose of the epic i.e. ‘to justify the ways of God to men’. After referring to mythological concepts, Eliot finally justifies the ways of God to humanity by providing a clear concept of Upanishad:

“Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata.”

In order to bring ‘Shantih’ into the world we will have to follow these three ways. In fact, these are the three ways to attain salvation and eternity;

‘Datta’ to give (Self- surrender), ‘Dayadhvam’ , sympathize, ‘Damyata.’ to control (Self- control).

IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, ‘The Waste Land’ is a modern epic. It contains epic elements. It deals with the cry of humanity of the whole generation. It was published in 1922. It is divided into five parts - The Bunal of the Dead, A Game of Chess, The Fire Sermon, Death by Water and What the Thunder Said. Although much shorter than previous cited great epics, ‘The Waste Land’ does contain history both contemporary history and the history of the world understood in mythological terms. As his mentor, Ezra Pound defines an epic as ‘ a poem including history’. Moreover, very aptly I.A. Richards has found in it an articulation of ‘ the plight of the whole generation’. The poem begins with ‘April’ and concludes with ‘Shantih’ Covering 433 lines in verse.

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