

Indian Symbols in T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and "Four Quartets"

Dr. Parkash Verma

Head, Dept. of English, S.D.P. College for Women, Ludhiana (PB), India.

The modern literature especially the works of T.S. Eliot is a product of intellectual cross – i.e breeding of various forms and kinds and covers a vast arena of modern life. It mirrors dilemmatic state of two worlds -the old and the new; the pre-war and the post -war period and the breakdown of the First World War that created complete disillusionment and disintegration and introduced harsh materialism which annihilated moral and spiritual values. This chaos and degradation of values heavily influenced T.S. Eliot. Vikramaditya Rai comments: "Eliot with his high charged microscopic insight portrays the graphic picture of a despaired generation, the smell of war ridden soil, a state of psychological insurgency and the monotony and futility of modern civilization and they are the images of imperial catastrophe".

"The Waste Land" is Eliot's greatest achievement as it symbolises the modern civilization which is compared to the waste land. G. Bullough, commenting on this epic poem, writes: "The Waste Land goes beyond a mere diagnosis of the spiritual distempers of the age, it is a lament over man's fallen nature, a prophecy and a promise". It is an allegorical application of the Holy Grail originated in a fertility cult, to modern society and religion. Mr. Eliot, to enforce this, uses symbols drawn from myths and religions and presents an ironic picture of modern manners, superb mingling of satiric vulgarity and sensuous delicacy, prophetic earnestness and a variety of images and rhythm. Edmond Wilson views: "The Waste Land is a symbol borrowed from the Holy Grail, it is desolate and sterile country ruled by an impotent king, in which not only have the crops ceased to grow and animals to reproduce, but the very human inhabitants have become incapable of having children".

Eliot has used a number of symbols in "The Waste Land" and "Four Quartets". Majority of these symbols centre round the basic theme "birth - death - rebirth" and these are drawn from ancient myths and religions free the European literary tradition and from The Bible too. Eliot used these symbols not as ornaments but as means available for communication for certain levels of experience inaccessible through direct perceptions. It was in fact, the use of symbols that enabled Eliot to express the inexpressible, the obscure and the recondite. Eliot's symbolism is predominantly objective and impersonal and comparatively easy to comprehend.

Symbols suggest images with a host of associations. For instance, rose is generally a symbol of beauty; but Eliot makes it to represent Virgin Mary, Coriolanus stands for proud and selfish man but Eliot uses it to represent the lost leader and isolation and spiritual alienation. According to Edmond Wilson: Symbolism is the medley of images; the deliberately mixed metaphors, the combination of the grand and the prosaic manners; the bold amalgamation of the material with the spiritual".

French symbolists greatly influenced T.S. Eliot. Hence he used both traditional as well as complex symbols to express the inexpressible, the obscure and the recondite. Majority of the symbols found in "The Waste Land" do not express personal sensation; rather depict a complex and decadent civilization with all soul killing monotony and meaningless routine. These images and symbols also depict human-self which infact, is the battle ground for the forces of spiritual and sensual, the bestial and the Divine. Some of the images and symbols

used in "The Waste Land" are typically Indian in origin and application. The lotus, the light, the darkness, the wheel, the sunshine, the fire, the water, the sea, the river, the bird, the thunder etc. are frequently employed not only in "The Waste Land" but also in "The Four Quartets". Though the lotus, the wheel and the darkness are characteristically Indian symbols, yet others fall within the purview of universal application.

The Lotus symbolises purity, fertility and birth. The mud out of which it grows stands for the womb and the water around it for the maternal procreative vitality. But on the higher scale, we have cosmic lotus. Mr. Zimmer writes:

"While the Divine life substance is about to put forth the universe, the cosmic waters grow a thousand-pealed lotus of pure gold, radiant as the sun". According to Hindu conception, the waters are female, they are the maternal procreative aspect of the Absolute, and the cosmic lotus is their generative organ. The cosmic lotus is called "The highest form or aspect of Earth", also "The Goddess Moisture", "The Goddess Earth". It is personified as the Mother Goddess through whom the Absolute moves into creation. In limited and cosmic sense, lotus symbolises productivity. It is one of the Hindu images which have been naturalised in the Western imagination and language. The Gita tells us that lotus is an object of purity. In the first part of *Burnt Norton* of "The Four Quartets", Eliot writes: He who acts offering all actions to God and shaking off attachment remains unattended by sins, as the lotus leaf by water/mud. At some other place it pictures Brahma - the God of Creation as "parched on his lotus seat". Somewhere else, Arjuna desires to see Lord Krishna's four-armed shape "Bearing the conch, chakra, mace and lotus". Lord Vishnu is also pictured as a four-armed deity holding the same weapons as Lord Krishna.

Somewhere Eliot has used physical symbols to give vent to spiritual ideas. The symbol of the Light or Sunshine is of this nature. A remarkable use of this symbol is found in the fourth movement of *"Burnt Norton"*:

Time and the bell have buried the day,
The black cloud carries the Sun away.

or

After the King Fisher 's wing
Has answered light to light.
And is silent, the light is still
At the still point of the turning world.
And again.....
Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
Even while the dust. moves
There rises the hidden laughter..
Of children in the foliage

The symbol of Light or Sunshine stands for spiritual consciousness in man. This consciousness leads man from ignorance to real knowledge, which is Brahma. This symbol is purely Indian and finds its application in the *Brihadarnyaka Upanishad* where the seer prays to Brahma to grant him.....

From darkness lead me to light

Another purely Indian symbol frequently used by Eliot is darkness. It stands for ignorance of the unlimited. This symbol recurs in the third movement in *"Burnt Norton"*:

Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude,

World not world, but that which is not world,
Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
.....

Again in "East Coker" movement third, Eliot writes:
On dark dark. They all go into the dark,
.....

I said to my soul, be in he, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God.

Water and Rain also find space in Eliot's poems. These two symbolise spiritual fertility which provides relief to the disillusioned, frustrated souls. Water, in the form of sea, appears a force of purgation, a cleaning power. Fire, as purgative, seems to symbolise the force of burning away of lust and corruption. The idea of 'burning' the forest of flesh and lust by the purifying fire of asceticism is inherent in the "The Fire Sermon". Lord Buddha, in his original Fire Sermon reads: "All things, O priest, are on fire". This symbol can be found in "Little Gidding" too:

The Dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incombustible terror.

Another Indian symbol frequently used by Eliot is the Wheel. It mirrors the eternal cycle of birth, death and rebirth. In Gita, Lord Krishna tells Arjuna :

Maya makes all things, what moves, what is unmoving
O, son of Kunti, that is why the world spins,
Turning its wheel through birth
And through destruction

This Indian symbol signifies the same in T.S. Eliot's writings as in "The Gita". Through this symbol, Eliot exhibits the externally decreed pattern of suffering. References to this symbol frequently appear in "The Waste Land", "Ash Wednesday" and "Burnt Norton" - one of the four quartets.

The River and the Sea form an integral part of the rich heritage of Indian symbolism. They signify transitoriness of human life on this earth and the eternal life of the Absolute. Both these symbols are correlative - the river flowing into the sea as the human soul flows into the oversoul and both become one and the same. When the soul (Atma) and the oversoul (Parramatta) become one, the soul starts singing and dancing in complete ecstasy. It forgets all about the transitory world. In "The Dry Salvages", Eliot writes :

I do not know much about God's: but I think that the river
Is a strong brown God
and after that :

The river is within us, the sea is all about us;
The sea is the land's edge also
And

The sea has many voices, and
Many Gods and many voices.

The river, personified as a 'strong brown God', connotes darkness of man's heart. The sea which is 'all about us', is the great unfathomed reservoir of the world's dateless evolution, encroaching on ordered society. Prof. Grover Smith remarks: the sea has 'the similitude of eternity, into which all rivers pour'. He further states that the sea and the river "allude to the

Hindu parable of life cycle the drop of water lifted as vapour from the sea, deposited as rain upon the Himalayas, and carried again seaward by the Ganges ".

'The Rose another symbol, stands for human love. In the broader sense, it signifies Divine Love or Bhakti - one of the means to attain God. This symbol is fused with the 'fire' of divine love which resolves all paradoxes of human life.

In fact, Indian symbols used by Eliot in "The Waste Land" and "Four Quartets" convey the cyclic repetitive patterns of beings and unity between the physical and spiritual dimensions of human existence. Complex symbolic technique with symbolism running from the beginning to the end of the poem "The Waste Land" is an attempt to bring out decay and desolation of contemporary civilization. Though this technique accounts to a great extent the complexity and intricacy of the poem yet provides suggestiveness, economy and unique comprehensiveness to it.

REFERENCES

1. Chadwick,C. (1971) : Symbolism .The Critical Idiom Series.(London: Methuen and Co. Ltd.)
2. Heinrich Zimmer, Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization (New York: Harper Torch book, 1962)
3. Helen Gardner, the Art of T.S Eliot. (London: the Cresset Press 1949).
4. Krishna Nandan Sinha, "Little Gidding: A Poem of Fire," Indian Response to Poetry in English, ed. M.K. Naik (Madras; Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1970).
5. Grover Smith, T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays, Phoenix Books ed. 6th impr. (Chicago and London: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965).
6. Louis L. Martz, T.S Eliot: A Selected Critique, ed. L. Unger (1948; New York: Russell & Russell, 1966).
7. S. Radhakrishna, tr. The Principal Upanishads (New York: Harper & Bros., 1953).
8. George Williamson, A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot's (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957).