



Buddhism : Compassion as a transformative Panacea for Humanity in the poems of Walt Whitman and T.S. Eliot

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One of the all-time greatest contributions of India to the world is Buddhism. Historically, Buddhism arose in sharp reaction against the dogmatism and too much ritualism of Brahmanism, profoundly speaking, Buddhism was such a philosophical and mystically methodized religion as it has had far-reaching impact on art and philosophy of the whole world. The creative souls of the world literature have been equally influenced by the inspiring transforming vision embedded in Buddhism. Be it Indian, European and American literature, we come across tremendous influences of Buddhism on two of the all-time great writers of the west – Walt Whitman and T.S. Eliot. The present paper is a humble attempt to explore and explicate selected major poems of Whitman and Eliot to vindicate the transformative role of compassion as Buddhist doctrine in objective manner.

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When we glance at the Buddhist studies, we notice that most of the historians have appreciated the historical development of Buddhism as a religion in particular point of time. But then philosophers and artists have explored it variously and complexly. The historians like *Rhys Davids* focused on Buddhism, its history and literature methodically *E Conze* focused his searchlight on the essentials and universals underlying this rational ideology. Prof. *A.L. Basham* glorifies Buddhism as one of the universally acknowledged oriental contributions to the world philosophy. The literary critics, *Stephen Coote* based his studies on T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' and studies Eliot's allusion to the third section 'The Fire Sermon' as a collocation with St. Augustine's focused on 'Karma, - Desire – Bondage' nexus culminating into emancipation. In my paper, the searchlight has been focused on Buddhist principle of compassion (Karuna) as a universal value to be evaluated in the context of major poems of Whitman and Eliot to authenticate how incorporation of eternal value into the corpus of literary texts may enable literature to stand the test of time so that literature may prove a powerful vehicle of human transformation and social change

A patient perusal of the poems of Eliot and Whitman inspires us to notice the essential influences of Buddhism. Buddha's principle of Karuna (compassion), his doctrine of 'Shunyavada'/nothingness or the eternal consciousness of soul or Nirvana constitute the core of the poems of Whitman's masterpieces, 'SONG OF MYSELF', 'PASSAGE TO INDIA', 'OUT OF CRADLE ROCKING ENDLESSLY' and 'T.S. Eliot's poems 'The Waste Land' and 'FOUR QUARTETS' aptly and vividly show Buddhist philosophy designed to guide humanity to live a life in the light of truth, goodness, right conduct and detached consciousness.

It would seem that Buddhist doctrine of compassion and concept of suffering constitute the core of many a poem of Whitman and T.S. Eliot. Though both of these literary stalwarts belong to the West, yet their mystic apprehension of human life comes very close to those of Hinduism / Buddhism. They

themselves acknowledge the profound influences of Oriental wisdom in general and Buddhism, in particular on their creativity. As Walt Whitman in his best-known poem, ‘**Passage to India**’ declares:

Lo soul, the retrospect brought forward,
 The old, most populous, wealthiest of earth’s lands,
 The streams of the Indus and the Ganges and their affluents,
 (I my shores of America walking today, behold resuming all)
 The tale of Alexander on his warlike marches suddenly dying,
 On one side China and on the other side Persia and Arabia,
 To the south the great seas and the Bay of Bengal
 The flowing literatures, tremendous epics, religious castes,
 Old occult Brahma interminably far back the tender and junior **Buddha**

(PTI, 402)

As the tradition goes, the transformative journey of Siddharth began when he came across four facades of human life : an aged man, a sick man, a corpse and a wanderer. When he saw the serenity and inward joy of the wanderer, he took an oath to become that. He realized the Four Noble Truths – There is suffering, there is cause of suffering, there is cessation of suffering and the fourth Noble Truth is ‘NIRVANA’ – complete liberation from sorrow or bondage. The Buddhists observe :

As the ocean has only one flavor,
 The flavor of salt, so has our
 Doctrine has only one flavor –
 The flavor of emancipation from sorrow.

(Vinaya Pitaka, i, 239)

Like the Existentialists (Camus, Heidegger, Beckett etc.), Stream of Consciousness novelists (Proust, Joyce, Dostoevsky, Woolf etc.) and the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, the Buddhists believed in “no being”, but only in “becoming”. The universe is continuous flux and any idea of permanence is part of basic ignorance which causes suffering. In the poems of Walt Whitman, we come across a sort of going beyond the moment of sorrow into creative joy. For example, the poem, ‘Out of the Cradle. Endlessly Rocking’ (hereafter ‘OOTCER’), the creative spirit of the persona is exploded by the instance of pathetic killing of she-bird. The deeply-broken soul of the disappointed he-bird speaks out:

From under that yellow half-moon late-risen and swollen as if with tears
 From those beginning notes of yearning and love there in the mist,
 From the thousand responses of my heart never to cease,
 From the myriad thence – arous’d words,
 From the word stronger and more delicious than any.

(OOTCER, 375)

The touching realization of he-bird has a ring of universality and it touches the chord of every sensible soul. It is this compassionate heart, the natural ability to emphathize and sympathize with the suffering humanity that enables a living soul Wordsworth’s persona to hear “the still, sad music of humanity” (Tintern Abbey, 85), let alone a poet or a philosopher. Wordsworth naturally felt the ever-fresh feeling of a noble heart towns experiencing tears and sorrow of even a small object or ordinary man when he writes in one of his great poems :

Thanks to the human heart, by which we live,
 Thanks to its tenderness, its joy, and fear
 To me the meanest flower that blows can give

Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

(Intimations of Immortality, 149-150)

Whitman's persona (he-bird) speaks out marvelous poetic words out of touching separation from his mate :

And everyday the he-bird to and fro near at hand,
And every day the she-bird crouched on her nest, silent with bright eyes,
And everyday I, a curious boy, never too close, never disturbing them
Consciously peering, absorbing, translating.

(OOTCER, 376)

Sage Valmiki, the arch-epic writer of world's earliest epic poem, *The Ramayana* was equally touched and his touched heart outburst the first ever poetic words to observe the estrangement of the he-bird from she-bird killed suddenly by a hunter :

Maa Nishad! Prattstham Tvamagamsamah!
Yatkraunch mithunadekmawadhi Kammohitam!

(The Ramayana, 01)

Sumitranandan Pant, the Hindi Nature-poet rightly says :

“Viyogi hoga pahla kavi – Aah se upja hoga gaan,
Umadkar Aankho se chupchap bahi hogi kavita anjaan.

It is conjectured, and not for nothing, by critics that Valmiki could not help identifying his troubled and torn soul during separation with Rama's bewailing at Sita's being kidnapped by demon, Ravana.

Similarly, the persona of Whitman's poem expresses his essential grief-struck heart :

He called on his mate,
He poured forth the meanings which I of all men know.

(OOTCER, 376)

The elegiac vein of the poem reaches its acme when the persona feels bereaved and isolated in the absence of his beloved :

O past! O happy life ! O songs of Joy!
In the air, in the woods, over fields,
Loved! Loved! Loved! Loved! Loved!
But my mate no more, no more with me!
We two together no more.

(OOTCER, 378)

The suffering of the he-bird is undying and he embarks on the earth and the heaven to be the eye-witness of this great tragedy and his sensitive heart bursts forth:

A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die
O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me,
O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease perpetuating you,
Never more shall I escape, never more the reverberations,
Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me,
Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before
What there in the night.

(OOTCER, 379)

Even Lord Buddha's divine compassion could turn the hardened man-killer Angoolimal into a saintly figure who became Buddha's ardent disciple. Such is the universal power of love as transformative panacea.

Hence 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' records the growth of poet's mind, the person's progress "from the mute watcher into the creative soul" as Geoffrey Dutton would appreciate it. (Whitman, writers and critics series, Oliver and Boyd). And the poem ends with persona's newly awakened wisdom as if the whole world of Nature responded to his humblest urge for sympathy and compassion. This spiritual progress and transcendental wisdom of the persona recalls the very creative evolution of the persona in Wordsworth's **The Prelude** and Coleridge's '**The Rime of the Ancient Mariner**' (Coleridge, 250). The persona of the poem 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' closes on the note of profoundly meditative wisdom having universal responses to every sensitive soul:

My own songs awaked from that hour,
And with them the key, the word up from the waves
The word of the sweetest song and all songs,
That strong and delicious word which, creeping to my feet.
(Or like some old crone rocking the cradle swathed in sweet garments, bending side. The sea
whisper'd me.

(OOTCER, 380).

When we go through on the poems of T.S. Eliot, we notice unmistakably deep influences of Buddhism on his poems. As the great historian **Prof. A.L. Basham** puts it, "Buddhism knows no being, but only becoming. Everything is resolved into momentary configurations of events. The universe is in continuous flux, and all idea of permanence is part of the basic ignorance out of which sorrow springs" (Basham, 270),

In fact, Buddhism lays stress on the basic truth that craving or desire to become is the root cause of all suffering. The craving may include personal ambition, desire, longing lust and selfishness of various types. As T.S. Eliot aptly and vividly observes in one of his best-known poems, choruses from 'The Rock':

Waste and Void. Waste and void
And darkness on the face of the deep.
Has the church failed mankind, or
Has mankind failed the church!
When the church is no longer regarded,
Not even opposed, and men have forgotten
All gods except Usury, Lust and Power.

(Eliot, 113)

The Mammon – worship of the contemporary society at the cost of fast declining moral and spiritual values has reduced mankind into what T.S. Eliot would call The Waste Land. As in the third section of Eliot's magnum opus, 'The Waste Land' The Fire Sermons, The persona of the poem (Tiresias) vividly describes the spiritual crisis and chaos of the modern suffering humanity and invokes the Almighty to help him overcome the present predicament :

'On Margate Sands
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty

My people humble people hand
 Who expect nothing
 la la
 To carthage then I came
 Burning, burning burning burning
 O Lord Thou pluckest me out
 O Lord Thou pluckest
 burning.

(Eliot, 54)

Both Buddha and St. Augustine reached the same observations that the entire world is on the wheel of fire. Due to this preoccupation with attachment and bondage, human beings are being isolated from the basic spring of morality and spirituality. So Eliot pleads for some kind of spiritual progress from change to changelessness :

End of the endless
 Journey to no end
 Conclusion of all that
 Is inconclusible
 Speech without word and
 Word of no speech
 Grace to the mother
 For the Garden
 When all love ends.

(Eliot, 78)

Buddhism categorically suggests that all sorts of suffering can be removed through Eightfold Paths and the golden mean or the middle way. This is a state of complete rest, a sort of bliss, the complete annihilation. As the Buddhism defines Nirvana as “a glorious city, stainless and undefiled, pure and white, unaging, deathless, secure and calm and happy”. (Milinda Panha, V, 6). This is a kind of inner illumination and activation of divinity lying dormant within every individual. It recalls the Vedic wisdom : “Tat, Tvam, Asi”. T.S. Eliot wonderfully suggests in his poem choruses from ‘The Rock’:

The world turns and the world changes,
 But one thing does not change.
 In all of my years, one thing does not change.
 However you disguise it, this thing does not change:
 The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil
 Forgetful, you neglect your shrines and churches;
 The men you are in these times deride
 What has been done of good.
 You find explanations to satisfy the rational and enlightened mind.

(T.S. Eliot, 101)

As Buddhist doctrine postulates :

What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday,
 And our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life
 is the creation of our mind. If a man speaks or acts with

An impure mind, suffering follows him as the wheel of
the cart follows the beast that draws the cart.

[Dhammapada (trans. Juan Mascaro)]

Referring to the title of one of the Buddha's sermons for the title of third section 'The Fire Sermon' of 'The Waste Land', Eliot hints at the fusion of Buddhism with the reminiscences of St. Augustine's *Confessions* and comments :

The collocation of these two representatives of eastern and western asceticism, as the culmination of this part of the poem is not an accident. The English Buddhist Christmas Humphries equally appreciates the causal effect of Karma, birth-bondage flux of human life which binds man to suffering. He aptly remarks:

..... Even as the causes generated by one man react upon that man, so the mass causation of a group, be it family, society, or nation, reacts upon that group as such; and upon all whose Karma places them at the time they are in. Each man has, therefore, several 'Karmas', racial, national, family, and personal, yet all quite properly his, else he would not have found himself subject to their sway.

(Stephen Coote, 119)

In his well-known mystic anthology 'FOUR QUARTETS', Eliot explores the spiritual voyage of human soul across birth-death syndrome towards stillness, rest and a new beginning of unending bliss. Even the worldly patterns of society, garden, stream, weather and climate are basically perpetual "agony of death and birth" (Eliot, 201). But the persona realizes that one has to work out one's life of liberation and transformation from oneself. It is something like the Buddhist doctrine of 'Middle Path', 'Nirvana' 'all-encompassing love' and 'compassion'. And the persona vividly and beautifully sums up in the end of second quartet 'East Coker' of this volume:

Love is most nearly itself when here and now cease to matter
Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter.
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise.
In my end is my beginning.

(Eliot, 204)

T.S. Eliot finds the clue to all spiritual and moral crisis of humanity to the Oriental Wisdom – the Upanishads and Buddhism. As the ending part of The Waste Land – 'What the thunder said' suggests :

Datta, Dayahvam, Damyata
Shantih Shantih Shantih

(Eliot, 59)

Buddhism presupposes four cardinal virtues - love, pity, joy and serenity and so does T.S. Eliot, the catholic categorically observes that Datta (Give), Dayadharm (Sympathy/compassion), Damyata (control)

alone can help suffering humanity to liberate itself from bondage and sorrow. As Eliot himself writes in his sources of *The Waste Land*.

In final analysis, Buddhism unmistakably constitutes the core of complex mystical structure of the major poems of both Whitman and Eliot. Eliot emerges as more compact, more brief and more methodized in the treatment of Buddhist theory of 'Becoming' and 'Compassion' than those of Whitman. But then one undeniably experiences the felicity and facility of poetics in embodying the Buddhist philosophy in the poetic realm of both Walt Whitman and T.S. Eliot.

But then undeniably, Buddhism, its advocacy of universal panacea of compassion and Middle Path may work as guiding principle to today's policy-makers, diplomats and politicians towards helping them to tackle the menace of terrorism and communalism so that this world may be transformed into a better place of living.

“Budham Sharnam Gachhami
Dhammam Sharnam Gachhami
Sangham Sharnam Gachhami”

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