



EMERGENCE OF THE BUDDHIST GOSPEL IN MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL BY T.S. ELIOT

Dr. Arvind Kumar Srivastava

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Constituent Government College Bhadpura, Nawabganj, Bareilly,

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Rohilkhand University – Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh

Like his poetry, the plays of T.S. Eliot also contain overtones of Buddhism. They effectively reproduce "the different levels- sensuous, logical, psychological and spiritual- upon which life is lived."¹ His first attempt at a play consists of two rather unsuccessful fragments called "Sweeney Agonistes" and "The Rock", which suggests that the complete dramatic work would be forth coming. "Sweeney Agonistes" (1927) is Eliot's first dramatic version of "the theme of spiritual pilgrimage, the theme he has returned to again and again in his plays."² In this play, which consists of two fragments only, Sweeney's tale of murder and the awfulness of life-in-death for the murderers tend to illustrate the hollowness of sensuous pleasures and "a mystic process of killing desires."³ Thus, the murder and dissolution (in a loyal bath) of the girl in Sweeney's story represent "the violent murder of human desire and dissolution of the old life of birth and copulation and death in the sacramental purgatorial bath which will bring rebirth."⁴

"The Rock" (1934), a pageant play composed in collaboration with E.M.Browne (Eliot wrote only the choruses of the play), was presented on behalf of the Forty-Five Churches Fund of London for raising money for church building. While its scenes are intended to depict the efforts and difficulties of a group of London masons, the modern church builders, the series of pageants, coming in-between the scenes, exhibit the past history of the church. An analysis of this *Play* also brings to light "the first full dramatic expression of several of the important themes which Eliot was to use in succeeding plays." The figure of the Rock, representing the Church as eternal witness to suffering, and martyrdom, used in conjunction with the Chorus, representing the church in action, introduces the Buddhist theme of action and suffering and the idea of the perfection of the will. The chorus as acting sufferer is advised by the Rock thus:

I say to you: Make perfect your will. ⁶

The proper study of Eliot's plays, however, begins its *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), the first full length and high-pitched drama of serious nature. The tragic intensity of its action leaves an ennobling effect upon the reader. T.R.Henn calls it "a great tragic play."⁷ Grover Smith terms it "a comedy." According to A.Nicill, it is "an important milestone" in the long slow journey of the play towards the revival of the poetic drama. ⁸

This play, dealing with the martyrdom of Becket, is divided into two parts which are connected by the "interlude" of the Archbishop's sermon on Christmas morning. The play opens with the women of Canterbury expressing their desire in chorus to maintain the quiet sterility of their humble lives, undisturbed by any kind of greatness. "Living and partly living", ¹⁰ they are afraid that the return of Thomas after his seven years' absence is near and this return will bring a spiritual as well as a temporal disturbance in their

lives. They want peace and do not wish anything untoward to happen. However, they are intuitively aware of the greatness of the approaching event. The Chorus is followed by a similar reaction of the three priests to the news of Thomas' return. When Thomas enters he scolds the second priest for chiding the woman. Then follows the most powerful scene of the four Tempters who offer their temptations to Thomas, one after the other, in order to dislodge him from his determined course. Thomas remains firm and unmoved. He outrightly rejects the first three temptations. But the fourth one is hard to win over. It tempts him with the sin of 'becoming a martyr for his personal glory. In fact, the fourth Tempter repeats to Thomas his words to the woman. Thomas realizes his error, at last, that the pride of willing martyrdom is the greatest treason. The Chorus again speak at this point expressing its fears at the coming unhappy events. Then from Tempers, once again, speak together to Thomas condemning him as an enemy of himself and that of society too. Then speak the three priests jointly, urging Thomas not to be so obstinate. Next the chorus, the priests, and the Tempters, making a joint venture, warn him of the coming death. Then the chorus chants out its own tale of woes, the lot of common humanity, and also urges Thomas to save their lives.

The first part of the drama ends with the long speech of Thomas. The prose 'interlude' which separates the two parts of the play, is Thomas sermon on Christmas morning. He closes the sermon with his newly won insight into martyrdom, which with his newly won insight into martyrdom, which is a design of God Himself. So Thomas will no longer act of suffer. He places himself in God's hands and becomes His instrument willing.

The second part of the play begins with the chant of the Chorus, which is followed by the flag march of the priests. Then the four knights enter, displaying their bestiality and demanding to see Thomas alone. They ridicule him for his ambition and pride and disloyalty to the king. The angry knights begin to attack him, but are restrained when the priests and the attendants quickly return. Condemning Thomas for doing injustice to the king, they announce the order of the king that Thomas be exiled immediately. But the Archbishop refuses to leave. The knights depart in fury, hurling accusations of treason and treachery for Thomas. They threaten to return soon, and Thomas gets ready for martyrdom. The chorus women express their reaction to the approaching murder in an impassioned and hysterical way. They accept their share of guilt. Thomas comforts the women with the message that they will afterward see the glory of the act. The priest urges Thomas to flee or hide, but he refuses to budge, insisting upon meeting death gladly if it is God's will. The Priests drag him off to vespers. They bar the doors of the Cathedral but Thomas demands that Church shall be open even to their enemies. The doors are opened and the knights enter maddened with drink, ready to kill Thomas. While the chorus demands a cleansing of the impure world, Thomas is slain by the knights, who circle around him with outstretched swords, visually forming a wheel with Thomas as 'the still point of it'.

In Murder In The Cathedral, the Buddhist gospel emerges quite clearly. *Though* the theme is pronouncedly Christian, there are many references, episodes, and symbols which bear close resemblance with *Buddhism*. The starting point of Buddhism is suffering which *disturbs* the peace of life and prevents people from enjoying life to the full. Suffering pervades the whole life of man. From birth to death, the activities of Human life are fraught with sorrow. Action and suffering seem to be the two shores of the river of man's life. In the very beginning of the play, the women of Canterbury in their chorus talk of their sorrow, decay, death and malady. They are haunted by some unknown fear. Some still greater calamity may befall them and they wish that their Archbishop should not come to Canterbury after his seven years' exile. They find themselves helpless and poor. They can do nothing to improve their lot because they are born only 'to wait and to witness' and not 'to act'. The poor women of Canterbury are to witness a martyrdom, in which they share in so far as they witness it, and suffer. They are the prototypes of all those who come as pilgrims to worship at the shrine of Canterbury and seek help and prosperity from the hero- saint. They are, in fact, the Christian equivalents of the ritual mourners who weep for the dead God or the saint. They have an intuition that they are living their lives without any meaning and without relation to some eternal purpose outside time. They are caught in the endless cycle of Time. The imagery from the seasons which keep on rotating, repeated towards the end of the first speech of the chorus, emphasizes this truth that they are 'a spiritless lot. *They* have an intuition that they are living their lives without *any* meaning and without relation to some eternal purpose outside time. They are caught in the endless cycle of time. The imagery from the seasons which keeps on rotating, repeated towards the end of the first speech of the chorus, emphasizes this truth that they are a spiritless lot and small folk' about whom nobody bothers in this world. It is the poverty of these women which prevents them from living much above their subsistence level. The following speech of Thomas is the most philosophical of all speeches. It

echoes clearly the Buddhist doctrine of suffering in human life. Scolding the priests for shushing the women of Canterbury, he says:

They know and do not know, what
 it is to act or suffer
 They know and do not know, that action
 is suffering.
 And suffering is action, Neither does agent suffer
 Nor the patient act. But both are fixed, In an
 eternal action,
 An eternal patience.

The chorus, representing the ordinary humanity are involved in the suffering, and martyrdom of Becket. They are aware from the very beginning that they are being drawn into events which will disturb the daily routine of their lives, and they cannot bear such a disturbance. Hence, they are apathetic to Becket return to *Canterbury* and wish him to go away. The effect of the Chorus to counsel and restrain Becket reminds one of the endeavors made by king Shuddhodan to prevent his only son Siddhartha from becoming a Buddha because it would affect the very face of his kingdom. Eliot might have kept in mind this fact of the Buddha's life *history* while mentioning these emotions of the chorus. Much against the wishes of the Chorus, the women of Canterbury soon become conscious of a spiritually charged situation of far reaching significance. They are conscious that the coming of the knights, the symbols of Evil, is a pollution of all life and nature. They realize their involvement in the imminent death of Thomas, and their greatest need is for an utter purging of themselves and the world. Finally, their minds are purged and they are spiritually reborn. Now, they realize the full significance of martyrdom both for themselves and for the humanity at large.

This process of spiritual progression for shaping the right attitude and right determination in the chorus - women is in accordance with the eightfold path of Buddhism, which prescribes the means for the cessation of suffering. The root cause of all suffering, according to Lord Buddha, is desire and the spiritual aspirant has to root out desire in order to reach the state of 'Nirvana'.

Murder in the Cathedral presents the spiritual progression of its hero, Thomas-a-Becket. Right attitude and right determination to wards martyrdom achieved by Thomas is more important than the historical and political aspects of this story. The religious and *philosophical* echoes are so abundantly marked in the character of *Thomas* that he is less of a man, and more of an embodied *attitude*. *He* exists only for confronting a spiritual crisis, and he *succeeds in* elevating himself to the conclave of martyrs. From the very beginning, the dramatist has created a proper atmosphere for the martyrdom to take place. Thomas has returned, but there has been no reconciliation with the king, so, he knows that there will be little rest and peace in Canterbury. The speeches of the chorus and the priests focus upon this fact. Then comes the most crucial scene in which Thomas struggles with the temptations within him. The four Tempters reminds of the four sights witnessed by Buddha in his early life while making a tour to his capital city, Kapilvastu. His father, king Shuddhodana, had tried his best to bind the young prince's heart to the allurements of the world and to the kingdom of the Sakyas. All sorrowful sights, all miseries and all knowledge of miseries were kept away from the prince Siddhartha. But one day, anxious to see the world, the prince rode with Channa, his charioteer, through the streets of the city where he met an old man, a sick man, and a dead man. And these sad sights made deep impressions on the prince. All the pleasures of the world appeared stale to him and he loathed the joys of life. While the prince was pondering over the problems of evil, he beheld with his mind's eye a lofty figure endowed with majesty, calm and dignified. He was an ascetic who had left home to seek the path of salvation. He *was* leading a mendicant's life to find the path of deliverance. He told the *prince* the emptiness of worldly pleasures and the endless *suffering* of human life. At long last, the thoughtful prince left home *and* went out in search of permanent peace and real knowledge. The words of the mendicant flashed upon the prince, and he became quite hopeful about the solution of the miseries of life. The fourth sight gave him a clue to obtain his purpose the Enlightenment. His heart was filled with an unspeakable peace, and he muttered to himself thus:

I have awakened to the truth and I
 am resolved to accomplish my purpose.
 I will sever all the ties that bind
 me to the world, and I will go
 out from my home to seek the way
 of salvation."²

These words of the prince Siddhartha bear a striking resemblance with the speech of Thomas made after the proposal of the fourth Tempter was refused by him. The fourth tempted him with his own desires and dreams, and it was quite difficult for the Archbishop to turn them down. Thomas, however, defeated him by his firm and final decision to give up the desire and pride of self glorification by becoming a martyr. Thus, he merges his will into the will of God and finds peace of mind, all passion spent. Thomas says:

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain;
 Temptation shall not come in this kind again.
 The last temptation is the greatest reason:
 To do the right deed for the wrong reason.
 The natural vigour in the venial sin.
 Is the way in which our lives begin.¹³

Now, the meaning of the last temptation is plain to Thomas and he *finds* his way clear. By refusing the last temptation which urges *him* to accept martyrdom for glory, he overcomes the sense of *spiritual* pride. He gives up his desire for self glorification and submits to the will of God. Thus, he arrives at 'the still point' of God and liberates himself from the rounds of life and death. Making it amply clear, he says in his sermon:

A martyrdom is always the design of God,
 For this love of men, to warn them, and
 to lead them, to bring them back to his
 ways, it is never the design of man;
 for the true martyr is he who has become
 the instrument of God, who has lost his
 will in the will of God, who no longer
 desires anything for himself, not even
 the glory of being a martyr."¹⁴

When the Tempters, the priests, and the chorus - women leave Thomas alone, he recalls the course of his own life and wonders how he was once absorbed in the pleasures of life, how he explored all the ways and means of leading a life of prosperity power and pleasure. He recalls his brilliant success as the Chancellor when he beat the Barons at their own game and punished those who plotted against him. But now he determines not to be trapped into temptations. The greatest temptation, he states, is "to do the right deed *for* the wrong reason". He realizes that the way he has chosen will appear to most of them as mere madness - "senseless self- slaughter of lunatic". But every crime and wrong brings with it its own punishment. He will no longer 'act' or 'suffer'. He places himself beyond the rotation of life and death, action and suffering. And in this way, he attains, what Buddhism calls `Nirvana' a state of salvation or deliverance.

Apart from spiritual progression in the characters of Thomas and the chorus - women on the Buddhist pattern of the cessation of suffering, there are other clearly recognizable Buddhist touches in the remarks of the priests and Thomas himself. The concept of 'wheel', which was used by the Buddha as a synonym for 'the religion' propagated by him, occurs in this play many times. In his very first sermon preached to the five Bhikkhus in the Deer park at Benares, Lord Buddha said, "Let the wheel of this most excellent law roll".¹⁵ He further explained the metaphor of 'wheel' by mentioning the various components of the wheel. He has remarked:

The spokes of the wheel are the rules of
pure conduct: justice is the uniformity of
their length: wisdom is the tire; modesty
honesty and thoughtfulness are the hub in which
the immovable axle of truth is fixed."¹⁶

Through this metaphor of wheel; Eliot has tried to express metaphysical ideas about the relations of man and God, Time, and *Eternity*. This image dominates the play and constantly recurs to illuminate its central meanings. Even the murder of Becket is ritually performed through this metaphor of wheel. When Thomas stands on the steps of the Cathedral to meet his murderer, the four swords of the murderers are the four spokes of a wheel of which Becket is the centre. Thomas remains in the centre, suffering patiently, witnessing, enduring and willing. The knights are at the circumference, acting and suffering. On the circumference of the wheel, action and suffering are distinct, but at the 'still point' of the turning wheel, they coincide. However, for the fulfillment of the 'eternal design', it is necessary, for those on the circumference of the wheel to turn towards the centre. The play teaches that the aim of life is to gain freedom from the wheel of birth and death. It revolves round the idea that the purpose of life is to attain to the stillness of 'the still point' of the wheel through suffering and action. This 'still point' is identified in *Murder in the Cathedral* with the mystery of the Incarnation or Salvation which gathers into itself the Atonement, too. There is a belief that the entire history of Man is represented by the wheel of process. The image of 'the wheel' first appears in line 137, where it implies no more than the turn of temporal events worried about the *consequences* of the arrival of Thomas in Canterbury, the third priest says:

For good *or ill*, let the wheel turn.

The Wheel has been still, these seven years,
and no good.

For ill or good, let the wheel turn."¹⁷

Here, the first line clearly echoes the words of Buddha as found in his first sermon.

The image of 'the wheel' reappears more forcefully in lines 216 and 290, and there it has important bearings on the conclusion of the sermon preached by Thomas in the interlude. Thomas talks about the circular rotation of time and seasons and also of human life. He says that all we know of the future in this world is that it will be much like the past, the same seasons will return, year after year, and the same human situations too. We are caught up in these returning processes and problems inescapably, and to no ultimate purpose, it would seem. Yet if we surrender our will to the will of God, cutting ourselves off from "the love of created beings",¹⁸ and if we renew our will, as a snake renews itself by sloughing off its old skin, we will evade the meaningless repetitions of the cycles of Time. Apart from this recurrent use of the symbol of 'the wheel' there are stray references to Buddhist principles of "shunyata" or 'Nihilism', and the theory of 'relativity' or 'the law of cause and effect'. When Thomas is about to be killed, the priests, make a desperate attempt to save their leader and drag him off. The chorus then speaks thus:

.... Only is here

The white flat face of Death,
 God's silent servant
 And behind the face of Death, the Judgment,
 And behind the Judgment the Void,
 more honied
 than active shapes of hell;
 Emptiness, absence, separation from God;
 The horror of the effortless journey,
 to the empty land,
 which is no land, only emptiness, absence,
 the void.'¹⁹

These are the fears of the chorus who are shaken by the imminence of the death of their leader. They are thinking of the last four things - death, judgment, Hell and Heaven and they are specially, in terror, of the first three of these things. The void is Hell itself, here conceived as emptiness, absence, and separation from God. Eliot's 'void' is imagined as a state of being in which the soul can take no comfort of any kind being perpetually confronted by the knowledge of its own nothingness, and its solitude in nothingness. This concept of 'void' has a close resemblance with the concept of 'Nihilism' in Buddhism. Further, references to cause and effect are found in the statement of Thomas in which he commands the priests to under the doors. According to him:

...For every life and every act consequence
 of good and evil can be shown.
 And as in-time results of many deeds are blended.
 so good and evil in the end become
 confounded.²⁰

Thus, Eliot has very clearly referred to the Buddhistic concept of 'void' or 'Nihilism' in Murder in the Cathedral.

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13. T. S. Eliot, op. cit, p.52.
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18. This bears reference to the famous epigraph from St. Joan of the Cross: "Hence the soul can not be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings". Quoted from The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p.74.
19. T. S. Eliot, op. cit, p.77.
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