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**The Fire Sermon of Lord Buddha as a panacea to redeem the
Modern Wasteland**

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Abstract

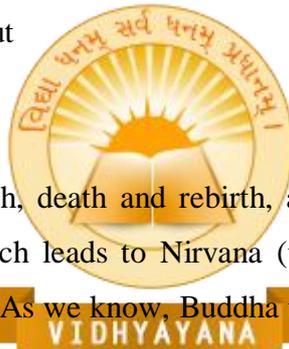
In The waste Land written at a time when, according to Spender, "Eliot was seriously toying with the idea of becoming a Buddhist", Eliot directly draws upon the Buddhas 'Fire sermon'. After presenting the state of living dead in terms of the individual life in Part I, in terms of the domestic life in Part II, Eliot presents the sterile life in terms of society and civilization in Part III. The root cause of all this downfall is desire and lust in which the modern world is 'burning' as the Buddha has shown in his Fire Sermon. The title of Part III of the poem, called "The Fire Sermon", is borrowed from the famous Sermon delivered by Lord Buddha to the assembled priests at Sarnath. Through the fire sermon, which shows the sordidness of urban pleasures, Eliot gives universality to the theme of passion. The poet, having always been a town dweller, confesses to ingrown "urban habits" and though he preferred London 'to any other metropolis in the world' that he knew he could not by-pass its malpractices. Hence he calls it 'Unreal city'. Eliot wanted these malpractices to go by all means, just as Lord Buddha held that passion is a cause of perpetual suffering. It is then that one is able to connect 'nothing with nothing'. Buddhism provided Eliot an effective instrument to highlight the modern moral ethos. The burning of the modern world could not be put out without cultivating the virtues of renunciation and spiritualism.



Introduction

Buddhism appealed to Eliot in particular for its asceticism and middle course of attaining salvation which he desperately wanted for redeeming the modern waste land of doubt and despair. The catholicity of Hinduism had perhaps an affinity with his own liberal outlook of religion. Many times Eliot talks of renunciation in his poetry, as though some Hindu sage were exhorting his disciples about his noble virtue in his forest abode. The concluding lines of Part III are of great value from the Indian point of view. Here Eliot collocates the "Two representatives of eastern and western asceticism" and tells us that the collocation is "not an accident". These valuable lines are :

"To carthage then I came
Burning burning burning burning
O Lord thou pluckest me out
O Lord thou pluckest
burning".



To be free from the wheel of birth, death and rebirth, according to the Buddha, one must follow the path of asceticism which leads to Nirvana (the root meaning of Nirvana being 'blowing out' of the fire of desire). As we know, Buddha thought that desire is the root cause of man's suffering. The moment he gets rid of it, he attains Nirvana. The fire of desire or lust is extinguished when there is no supply of fuel to feed its flames. Like Lord Buddha, St. Augustine too saw humanity as burning in the unholy empire of lust and concupiscence. He also again like Lord Buddha, suggested asceticism as the remedy. Eliot at this point specifically alludes to St. Augustine's experience recorded in third book of the Confessions : "To Carthage I came, where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves". And again in the tenth book the same saint says: "And I entangle my steps with these outward beauties; but thou pluckest me out, O Lord, Thou pluckest me out; because Thy loving-kindness is before my eyes".

Both the Buddha and St. Augustine reached the same point in regard to the 'burning' of the world in the fire of lust and its remedy, as has been nicely noted by Cleanth Brooks: "The wisdom of the East and the west comes to the same thing on this point". It is worth recording



here that Eliot fuses, in another context, the image of the fisher king of the Grail Legend and the figure of the Buddha as the fisherman which appears in Mahayana Scriptures. So it can be said that the collocation of Lord Buddha and St. Augustine in the present context is not haphazard, but calculated and conscious. In case of the Buddha, it is a highly relevant context. In this matter Eliot seems to share the view of Mr. Empson that "I think Buddhism much better than Christianity, because it managed to get away from the neolithic craving to gloat over human sacrifice, but even so I feel that it should be applied cautiously, like the new wonder-drugs". And Eliot, no doubt, proceeds very cautiously in the matter like a skilled physician who prescribes neither an "over dose" nor an "under dose". That is why he collocates the two representatives of the East and the West which implies that he is not inclined to extremes in either case. Here Buddha's famous Sermon at Benaras is worth recalling, where he taught the doctrine of the middle path avoiding extremes.

It must be borne in mind that the Fire Sermon is as central to Buddhist thought as the Sermon on the Mount of Christianity. But since Eliot chooses the title of Part III from the Buddha's Fire Sermon and since he uses almost the same word and in the same context, there is every reason to believe that he held Buddhism in a position not lower than Christianity. The Fire Sermon itself, as Mr. Empson points out, "Leaves Christianity far behind." The theory that Eliot turned to Buddhism, or for that matter to Hinduism, to "extend the Christian awareness" is to read and assess his poetry from a hind sight. It is true that Eliot was a Christian, but a poet's sensibility is not crippled by petty considerations of caste, creed, religion and nationality. Hence the Christian Eliot is "a later discovery", first and foremost, he is a poet of international status. So to approach the poetry of Eliot from the pre-conceived notion of an orthodox Christian is to approach him wrongly. The point is that Eliot's poetry is not the poetry of a particular religion. Moreover, Eliot declared himself to be "Classicist in Literature, royalist in Politics, and anglo-Catholic in religion" in 1928, just six years after the appearance of *The Waste Land*, in which a Buddhist or Hindu is as pronounced as a Christian.

To the great scholar E.L. Mayo, the passage ... "To Carthage then I came ... burning" is genuine fusion among three religious traditions, the Christian, the Hebrew and the Buddhist". The first line in the passage is a literal translation of the opening words of a passage in St.



Augustine's Confessions, wherein he bewails the vanity and license of his pagan youth in Carthage, and in the next the words of the Buddha extend the vision of human waste and self-deception to the whole created universe, finally, in the line 'O Lord Thou pluckest' we have a reminiscence of a proverbial expression drawn from the Hebrew prophets (both Amos and Zachariah employ it) who used it in every instance with reference to Jehovah's interventions on behalf of sinful Israel in the past. By altering the tense to the present idea of God's intervention is given a new and frightening kind of immediacy. The passage ends with a second allusion to the Buddha's Fire Sermon. The effect of the passage on the reader sensitive to such allusions is that of "three great world religions speaking as with one voice". Even the long debate between Eastern Sage and western Mystic as to whether the soul is saved by heroic self-discipline or 'by Faith alone' is momentarily resolved within the passage because, when seen within the larger context of the poem, it is the very revulsion of soul before the self-destroying fires of the world's lusts which becomes as it were the hand of providence plucking the soul out of the holocaust. The soul's very disgust becomes its saviour. After giving this analysis of the passage under review, Mr. Mayo hastens to say with confidence: "What I am trying to point out, I suppose, is that the mood projected in the poem is equally Buddhist and Augustinian. For the second time in American literature (Whitman was the first who conjoined the themes of spiritual autonomy and liberation found in the Upanishads with the sturdy political and social individualism of the Deist tradition) Eastern and western insights were fused together without inner tension or strain".

Now a relevant question is : Why does Eliot collocate the two representatives of Eastern and Western asceticism particularly when Augustine by himself can be an adequate symbol of the burning of lust with reference to his coming of Carthage? Or why does Eliot pull in Lord Buddha in the passage? He has cited the 'two representatives' of the East and the West because he wants to bring the entire globe together in pursuance of spiritualism and asceticism. No doubt, the world is a single unit in such matters. This is affirmed by what he has said in his Notes on The Waste Land. "The collocation of these two representatives of eastern and western asceticism, as the culmination of this part of the poem, is not an accident" or we can say that he does so in order to emphasize the great asceticism of the Buddha, who was a born prince with all luxuries at his command; but who in the prime of his



youth renounced the throne, his young beautiful wife and his newly born son and walked out to a place from which there is no returning.

The Waste Land signifies that man's worldly life is spiritual death and there must be a renewal of asceticism before they can be remedied. He has collocated Lord Buddha and saint Augustine in order to suggest that regeneration is possible, but only through penance, suffering and self discipline. The mythical Waste Land of the fisher king symbolizes contemporary decay and spiritual sterility. The poem presents "a vision of dissolution and spiritual draught". This spiritual and emotional sterility of the denizens of the Waste Land arises from the degeneration, vulgarization, and commercialization of sex. Eliot's study of the fertility myths of different people has convinced him that sex act is the source of life and vitality, when it is exercised for the sake of procreation and when it is an expression of love. But when it is severed from its primary function, and is exercised for the sake of momentary pleasure or monetary benefit, it becomes a source of degeneration and corruption. It then represents the primacy of the flesh over the spirit and this results in spiritual decay and death. The section is a Sermon but it is a sermon by examples only. The sterile burning of lust is brought out by different sex experiences in the contemporary Waste Land.

The section opens with Tiresias surveying the Thames scene in the autumn. The leaves have fallen down and the wind moves without any rustle. The Thames is deserted. In the summer, it had been the haunt of nameless ladies in search of momentary pleasure and the rich sons of business directors equally in need of pleasure. After having their round of pleasure, they have all left. The river is strewn all over with empty bottles, cigarette cases, papers, handkerchiefs, etc., the remainder of the orgy of pleasure on its banks. The water is a source of purification and regeneration but the degenerate modern man does not realize this, and so does not hesitate to defile the purity of the river which, "sweats oil and tar". The pollution of the river symbolizes spiritual degeneration. The river scene puts us in mind of a similar scene in Spenser's Prothalamion. But in Spenser's scene the nymphs and their lovers prepare for wedding, but in the contemporary scene they assemble there merely for an orgy of pleasure. The contrast is jarring, and it is a measure of the spiritual degeneration in the 20th century.

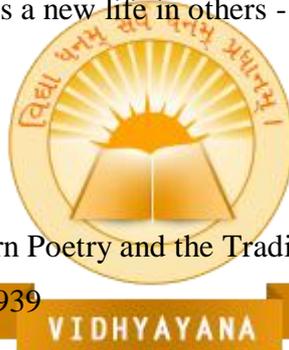


The protagonist mourns the pollution of the river water. As he sits on its banks fishing in the dull canal near the gas-house, a cold wind blows. It brings to him the sound of the senseless laughter of London Crowds who move about rattling like dried bones. Memories crowd in upon him, and he is reminded of Bonivard in the prison of Chillon in Byron's famous poem, lamenting his loss of freedom on the banks of lake Lemman; or the captive Jews in The Bible weeping by the river Babylon. Since he is the spokesman of humanity, one who has fore suffered all, one whose memories go to the remote past, the scene also reminds him of the brother of the fisher king, fishing for the regeneration of his brother, and of Ferdinand, mourning the death of his father, the king. Water and fishing were symbols of transformation and regeneration in the past, but now they have lost their spiritual significance. The surroundings of the river are dirty, slimy rats creep by, naked dead bodies float on the river, bones are scattered all over, and are rattled as the rats move about. Such is the spiritual degeneracy in the modern Waste Land. The degeneracy is further symbolized by the fact that Mrs. Porter and her daughter wash their feet in soda water, not for their spiritual purification, but to make their flesh fairer to attract more males. Reference to "sound of horns and hunting" in Marvell's Coy Mistress puts us in mind of Actaeon being brought face to face with Diana, the goddess of Chastity. However, in this passage the 'horns' are the horns of motor cars, and they carry the beastly and coarse Sweeney to Mrs. Porter, a brothel keeper. The lust and sexual perversion of the modern man is further symbolized by the French song, "O these children voices, singing in the choir" from Verlaine's Parsifal, in which Sir Parsifal reaches the Chapel perilous in the quest of the Holy Grail, but there is no purity in his heart, and his sex instincts are aroused by the children voices singing. Similarly, the song of the nightingale does not suggest a story of suffering and purification, but one which sanctions man's sexual brutality. Thus there is complete vulgarization of values.

To conclude : sexual perversion and lust are the causes of spiritual death and degeneracy in the modern world. This degeneration is to be seen in all sections of society, the rich, the middle class, and the poor. Regeneration can come about only if the modern humanity heeds the teaching of the great moral and religious teachers, both of the East and the West. This is emphasized by references, both to the teachings of St. Augustine in his Confessions and of Buddha in the Fire Sermon. In a way we can say that here T.S. Eliot is exhorting the modern



civilization to burn all desires. Just as Lord Buddha had done at Sarnath. The full significance of fire or 'burning' in the Fire Sermon is not to be realized without an appreciation of the ritual still current in Hindu society. All ceremonies in a Hindu family - birth, marriage, occupation of a new house etc. are performed with the ritual of burning of twigs of the fig tree, the tree under which Buddha lost his selfhood and experienced the illumination, Fire, thus, has a negative function at a simple level and a positive one at a higher level. Etymologically speaking, the Sanskrit word for fire is agni from which the verb 'ignite', which means to produce light, spark, knowledge. Agni, then is like the sun, the prime source of all light and the sun in Indian symbolism stands for knowledge, the highest end of man's endeavor on earth. Hence all Yoga begins with salutations to the sun and with homa or sacrifice to fire. Agni or fire occupies the place of great importance as a divinity in Hindu community and as an essential element in Buddhism. The word 'Buddha' also means one who is awake and who awakens a new life in others - a life of light and knowledge.



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