

Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind': Its Influence on Tagore

Md Iqbal Hosain

Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature
International Islamic University Chittagong, Bangladesh

Abstract: This paper intends to explore an interesting similitude between Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' and some significant poems of Tagore on summer storm such as Varsases, Voisakh, Jhod etc. First of all, the paper discusses Shelley's idea of revolution as expressed in the ode and then finds its influence in those Tagore's poems which are written hailing summer storm. It is to be noted that the revolutionary poets of the world usually take the west wind or summer storm metaphorically to express their spirits of rebellion in their poems. Therefore, there might be symmetry between the poets of the world literature, as the theme is universal. These superb coincidences happened in a cluster of poems of the two poets are unearthed in this article.

Key Words: Boishakh(a month in Bengali Calendar), Jhod(Tempest), West Wind, Kalboishakhi(the nor-wester)

Date of Submission: 24-11-2017

Date of acceptance: 09-12-2017

I. INTRODUCTION

Although Shelley is quintessentially a romantic poet, his romantic view is distinct from the other romantics of English literature in that unlike other romantics, he was not immersed in the beauty of nature, rather he was imbued with the spirit of rebellion against all evils of the contemporary corrupt society in which men were enchained in the dungeon of royal despotism. He strongly voiced for reformation to free the society from feudal savageness. In the preface to *Queen Mab* he said, "The state in which we exist is a mixture of feudal savageness and imperfect civilization."(Shelley 1920)

Being greatly influenced by the philosophy of Plato, Godwin, and Rousseau, he urged the people of England to be united in a platform to uproot the tyranny from the society. This call for unity is echoed in his poem 'Song to Men of England':

"Sow seed but let no tyrant reap
Find wealth let no impostor heap
Weave robes let no idle wear
Forge arms in your defense to bear." (Pearson, 2006)

His romantic dream for a new world free from suppression and oppression surpassed the limit of England and spread over the globe. Tagore, the maestro of Bengali literature was greatly shaken by the wave of Shelley's romantic view. Many of his poems influenced Tagore to some extent but 'Ode to the West Wind' has a profound impact on him. He wrote a number of poems on the same theme and subject matter.

II. ODE TO THE WEST WIND

Shelley wrote this finest poem at Caseine Garden, an idyllic place near Florence. Later on this poem was published in 1820 with *Prometheus Unbound*. Ode is a kind of lyrical poem that admires or sings a person or thing with a rich tone of impulse. Here in this poem Shelley invokes to the west wind regarding it as destroyer and preserver of a society. The tempestuous west wind was blowing with strong gust while writing the poem. The poet was moved with and responded the west wind through this fantastic poem pregnant with appreciation and appeal to it for destroying the existing corrupt and shaky society with its devastating breath and at the same time urges it to preserve the society by its creative power. In a note to the ode Shelley says, "This poem was conceived and chiefly written in wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence...." (Shelley 1820)

The poem originates directly in that impassioned intuition which is the first condition of poetry; the wild autumn wind sweeping through the forest possesses his imagination and becomes a living symbol of the spiritual forces which regenerate the fading or decadent life of nation bringing succour and 'alliance' to forlorn heroic spirits, scatter their burning words, "like ashes from and unextinguished hearth", among mankind. Nowhere does Shelley's voice reach a more poignantly personal note or more perfect spontaneity.

The west wind is addressed as destroyer and preserver. Though on the surface it seems to be destructive, it basically creates and rejuvenates the dead woods and groves by spreading various seeds on the earth. In the very first line the poet hails west wind:

“O wild wind, thou breath of autumn’s being
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing”

In the succeeding lines he again labeled the west wind as destroyer and preserver:

“Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere
Destroyer and preserve, hear o hear!”

Here in the first stanza we see, personifying the west wind, Shelley describes its activities: it drives dead leaves away as if they were ghost fleeing a wizard. The leaves are yellow and black, pale and red, as if they died of infectious disease. The west wind carries seeds in its chariot and deposits them in the earth, where they lie until the spring wind awakens them by blowing on a trumpet. When they form buds, the spring wind spreads them over plains and on hills.

In the second stanza a magnificent imagery is drawn. The small pieces of cloud pour like dead leaves. The west wind drives cloud along just as it does dead leaves after it shakes the clouds free of the sky and the oceans. These clouds erupt with rain and lightning and the ocean leaps to leave itself.

At the time of writing the poem, the poet was acutely romantic and enthusiastic; swelling up with dreams and so he wanted to be:

“If I were a dead leaf thou mightiest bear
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee” (L 43-44)

The ode speaks for an immense reformative zeal which Shelley has been cherishing for a long time. In the fifth stanza, the poet request the west wind to make him his lyre as the west wind’s powerful currents turn the woods into a lyre. The poet further implores the west wind to drive out his dead thoughts to quicken a new birth:

“Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth” (L 63-63)

These lines are very significant as they carry the symbolic tone of rebellion against the aged-old thoughts that prevails in the society. Shelley through these lines strongly revolts against the contemporary society full of injustice, corruption, persecution, savageness etc. Actually in these lines, he urges the people down-trodden to stand erect and unite to destroy the base of despotism.

Finally he concludes the poem with self-contentment that Winter is followed by Spring:

“If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (L 70)

III. INFLUENCE ON BENGALI POETS

Shelley directly or indirectly influences Bengali poets, especially Tagore, Nazrul, and Farrukh trio who stand in the zenith of Bengali literature. Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’ is one of the most celebrated poems in English literature, which more or less impresses the poets of the world and especially carries a revolutionary appeal to the poets of Bangladesh. This poem is so celebrating that Tagore, Nazrul and Farrukh and many more were imbued with its appeal and they all wrote poems on the same theme and subject matter.

IV. WEST WIND, BOISHAKH AND JHOD(THE TEMPEST)

A west wind is a wind that blows from the west in an eastward direction. In Western tradition, it has usually been considered the mildest and most propitious of the directional winds. (Wikipedia) The wind blows with strong gust and destroys the fading plants and at the same time it spreads seeds and causes the river overflow and carries silts on to the fields and thus helps crops grow better. This west wind is so taken by Shelley as an emblem of optimism and so is hailed to destroy the old order of the existing society and thus to accelerate a new birth.

Boishakh is the first month of Bangla year when the tempestuous wind blows from the west to the east direction and causes havoc in the society. The month is used by the Bengali poets as metonymy for the tempestuous wind because Boishakh is merely a month; it neither can destroy anything nor can create anything. Though they have written poems on the title, they basically point to the wind that blows from the west. Here lies the relation between west wind and Boishakh.

And the term ‘Jhod’ refers to the summer storm which is also known as ‘Kalboishakhi’. This ‘Jhod’ also comes from the west and causes a huge damage to the nature but soon after the storm over; a new life is seen in the woods laden with buds and flowers. Therefore, though the three terms are apparently anomalous, they are basically birds of a same feather.

V. INFLUENCE ON TAGORE

Tagore, the great doyen of Bengali literature, has been happily called 'The Shelley of Bengal'. (Sen1992) Though Tagore is induced with many English poets, his writings are superb and sometimes excel those who influenced him. A good deal of similitudes is found between some of the poems of Tagore and those of English poets. The best instance of similitude is present in between Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' and Tagore's poems *Voisakh*, *Jhod*, *Varsases* etc:

Shelley's works both in the original and translation have influenced Bengali poets such as Robindranath Tagore and Jibonananda Das. (New World Encyclopedia)

Tagore's 'Varsases' is one of the best poems which is very strikingly identical with Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind'. To some critics, it is the Xerox copy of the first stanza of 'Ode to the West Wind':

"His storm poem, 'Varsases', may superficially recall the first stanza of the 'Ode to the West Wind.'" (Sen. 1992, p259)

Shri Pramathanath Bisi states in his Bengali book on *Tagore and Santiniketan* that he heard the poet say, while explaining the poem, that he had the 'Ode to the West Wind' in mind while composing it. Dr. Thomson is positive that it shows the influence of Shelley's ode. He also discovers the same influence in 'Voisakh', too, for are there not wind-driven dry leaves in Shelley's poem, and are there not 'also moreover' wind-driven leaves in Tagore's? (Foot note, Tagore: A Centenary, Volume 1861- 1961)

To place an evidence of similarity, a stanza from 'Varsases' is extracted below:

দাও গান, প্রাণ-ভরা ঝড়ের মতন উষ্ণেগে
অনন্ত আকাশে।

উড়ে যাক, দূরে যাক বিবর্ণ বিশীর্ণ জীর্ণ পাতা
বিপুল নিঃশ্বাসে। (L20-24)

Give song like the animated storm speedy in the eternal sky
Fly and far off the fading leaves by the strong breath.

"Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth." (Ode To the West Wind, L 5)

Tagore hails *Voisakh* as Shelley does the west wind to ravage the sick world with its tempestuous breath. Many songs, Tagore composed addressing *Voisakh* and *Jhod* (Tempest) which are thematically similar to 'Ode to the West Wind'. Some examples are placed to show the similarity:

"এসো হে বৈশাখ, এসো এসো

ভাপস নিঃশাস বায়ে মুমূর্ষুরে দাও উড়িয়ে।

বৎসরের আবজনা দূর হয়ে যাক যাক এসো, এসো।" (Gitabitan: An Anthology of Tagore's songs)

Hail thee *Voisakh*, Hail!

Blow away the moribund with thy ascetic breath

And may the dusts of the year disappear.

"অস্ত গিরির অই শিখর চূড়ে

ঝড়ের মেঘের আজ ধাজা উড়ে

কালবৈশাখীর হবে যে নাচন

সাথে নাচুক তোর মরণ ও বাঁচন।" (Gitabitan: An Anthology of Tagore's songs)

In the peak of the setting mountain

The flag of the cloud of tempest flies

Kalboisakhio will dance

Let your life and death dance with.

In the fourth stanza of 'Ode to the West Wind' Shelley urges west wind:

'Make me thy lyre'. The literal translation of this is Tagore's:

'আমারে করো তোমার বীণা' belongs to a renowned song.

Tagore's another poem "'Voisakh' is immensely identical with 'Ode to the West Wind'. One extract from the poem is quoted below:

"সুখ-দুঃখ, আশা ও নৈরাশ্য

তোমার ফুঁৎকারঝুঁকু ধূলাসম উড়ুক গগনে।

.....

ছাড়ো ডাক হে রুদ্ধ বৈশাখ।” (L36-7,46)

Let thou breath-raged, dust-like, weal-woe, hope and despair
fly in the heaven

.....

Grown O angry Voisakh.

VI. CONCLUSION

Shelley and Tagore are the two poles, though stand apart: one in the west pole and the latter in the east pole, cherish the same dreams for a heavenly world free from all sorts of corruption, persecution, human bondage in their poetry. In this regard we can say that it is quite usual to have found the similarity between two poems of individual poets, though imitation is not expected in creative art and literature. Tagore might have been induced by the appeal of the English romantics, but surely he did not attempt to imitate their works. It is evident from his works that he has surpassed sometimes the English romantics in literary excellence. A Bangladeshi critic very simply illustrates the fact:

“While it is true that Tagore’s finest poetry is written under an impelling urge for the divine, the manner of it is strikingly proximate to and sometimes even identical with that of the leading poets of the romantic movement like Wordsworth, Blake, Shelley and Keats.” (Gopala Rao 2009)

REFERENCES

Notes: All verses of Tagore’s poems are taken from Sanchayita (meaning collection), an anthology of his selected poems and then translated into English. It was especially published by Visva-Bharati to mark the Tagore Septuagenary Celebrations in 1931. Some lines are also taken from Tagore’s Gitabitan, a collection of his songs. The extracts of “Ode to the West Wind” are taken from Shelley’s Poetry and Prose, edited by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers. Published by Norton.

- [1]. Shelley, P. B, Queen Mab, London, 1920. Print.
- [2]. McMahan, Lynne, and Averill Curdy. *The Longman Anthology of Poetry*. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006. Print.
- [3]. [3] Sen. T, “Western Influence on the Poetry of Tagore”, Rabindranath: A Centenary, Vol. 1861-1961, p.259, New Delhi, Shahitya Akademi, 1992.
- [4]. http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Percy_Bysshe_Shelley
- [5]. Shelley, P. B, ,*Prometheus Unbound With Other Poems*, London, 1920, Print.
- [6]. _____, *Poetical Works*, First Edition, Published by Mrs Shelley, London, 1939. Print.
- [7]. Tagore, R , *Shanchoyita*, Dhaka, Onannaya, 1996. Print
- [8]. [8] Gopala Rao, M.O, “Tagore and English Romanticism”, 2009, Print

Md Iqbal Hosain "Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind': Its Influence on Tagore." IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 22 no. 12, 2017, pp. 01-04.