

MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL T. S. ELIOT
VEDANTIC TRANSCENDENTAL INTROSPECTION IN THE SPIRITUAL EVOLUTION
OF THOMAS BECKET

SANJIT SARKAR

Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Mirik College,
Darjeeling, West Bengal, India

ABSTRACT

Any transcendental literature, whose aim is to understand the ultimate reality i.e. the Vedantic *Brahman* and *Atman*, is Veda. Anyone who is looking for the supreme soul or Lord is actually following Vedic philosophy. Vedic transcendental consciousness is the way of life seeking the soul and self, the real essence of life. I think that in Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral' Thomas Becket's spiritual odyssey is to seek his real soul and Self passing through different temptations in life. The article captures Becket's changing meditative consciousness in understanding the highest Reality, where he seeks liberation from body-bondage by acquiring vidya (knowledge) of the identity of Atman and Brahman.

KEYWORDS: Vedanta, Yogi, Brahman, Atman, Transcendental, Martyrdom

INTRODUCTION

Vedanta helps us to discover our inherent being, make us understand our self and thus meaning of life. Naturally Vedantic knowledge is basically transcendental and mystic. When transcendental realization comes in, one feels that the Brahman is only real and all other things are manifestations of it. The realization of the Brahman [the highest Reality] or Atman [the true Self] brings the idea of unreality of the materialistic world and gives him the idea of the reality of the Brahman, which is the cause of everything. The Atman is real as it is not subject to death and birth. It is eternal, all-pervasive, changeless. As there is no other one than the Atman, then how will it be killed or destroyed by another? It is subordinate to none. It is alone and independent. Everything depends upon the Atman. So Becket's realization is:

"It is the just man who

Like a bold lion, should be without fear."

He realized:

"No life here is sought for but mine,

And I am not in danger; only near to death."

The Upanishads said that the realized and enlightened soul remains unattached to both good and bad, pleasure and pain, because he knows and feels that the Atman is above all kinds of duality. Continual self-surrender is his motto. The enlightened Self of Becket finds the real nature of his soul and Self, the very feeling of Brahman and Atman, oneness in everything with his very feeling of continual self-surrender, the communion with God in "still point", whereas the chorus is

the “wheel” of human active life.

A Vedantic Yogi is a person who is not attached to anything that reaps fruits or results. A Yogi is one who has controlled the senses and restrained desires and passions. So he is impartial and pure in heart. In the Gita it has been said, *“he who is equipped with Yoga, whose mind is quite pure, by whom the self or mind has been conquered, whose senses have been subdued, whose Self has become the Self of all beings, - though, he is not tainted.*” Thus when the mind is purified, the inner consciousness blooms into flower and makes a man restrained and balanced. Thomas Becket is equipped with this well balanced and well restrained mind. So he could overcome all the allurements and he like a Yogi is never chained by any action. Rather he performs everything in the spirit to surrender himself to the Supreme Being. He lives in phenomenal world, but the allurements and temptations of the sense-objects cannot chain him. So the Supreme Lord discussed in the Karma Yoga in the Gita- *“not by abstaining from actions does a man win inaction nor by mere renunciation does he attain perfections.”* but he attains perfection through the medium of selfless action. The Gita says (4/18) *“He who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction is intelligent among men, he is a Yogi and a doer of all action.”*

In *‘Murder in the Cathedral’* Eliot dwells on the simple Vedantic theme- *“Make perfect your will”* in all its manifestations. The theme here occurs in three forms- firstly, the need for the purgation of the will; secondly the need for the soul to divest itself of the love of created beings; thirdly, the aim to arrive at the experience of highest spiritual essence. This way is adopted by Vedantic mystics and this is the way of Eliot’s spiritual divinity.

Eliot uses the term Martyrdom in the meaning in which it was originally used and that is *‘witness’*. I would also like to use the term as the meaning of *“Vairagya”* that is nonattachment, that is necessary for the perfection of will, which the very essence of Vedanta to attain the level of the Brahman. God is impartial and just. He is like a witness. He is never attached to any desire or action. In the play Becket like a Vedantic *Yogi* nicely though very obtrusively attains the position which is that he neither longs for martyrdom nor any other religious dignity, he knows that every human is dictated by God-

“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 the agent suffer

Nor the patient act. Both are fixed

In an eternal action, an eternal patience

To which all must consent that it may be willed

And which all must suffer that they may will it,

That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is the action

And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still

Be forever still”

In the quotation the word 'act' means "to do one's own will" and "to suffer" means 'to bear' the will of another. The mystery of the working of the individual will of Becket within is expressed here and at one with the will of God. Man is free to will his life, yet that freedom is the freedom to act in oneness with purpose of God. Becket first thought himself to be the agent, the source of the will of chorus women. But later he understood that the action and the suffering emanate from the First Agent- God at the center of the wheel. So Becket must passively accept his role as willed by God. Action and suffering are distinct on the circumference of the wheel but they coincide at the still point of center and are reconciled in the design of God. Becket has to submerge his will in the will of God and suffer and through his suffering he will become an involuntary agent for suffering in the chorus. So here lies Becket's Vairagya or nonattachment. So in the Gita (v-14) the Supreme Lord said-

"Neither agency, nor objects, does the Lord create for the World, nor union with the fruits of actions. But it is the nature that acts."

So the Supreme Lord again said in the Gita (4/13)-

"Renouncing all actions by thought and self-control, the embodied one rests happily in the nine-gated city, neither all acting nor causing others to act."

The self-controlled Becket subdues the senses and renounces all actions in speech, thought and deed; by renunciation and inaction in action, he rests happily. His realized soul renounces all actions of the physical body and of the senses attributed to the Atman through false knowledge. The power of acting or causing to act, is not inherent in the Atman, because the Atman transcends all desires.

Roughly speaking, God is at the scheme of the life. He also acts and suffers just any other human. On the other hand all human beings wait and wait for direction to act and suffer, for both the duties are not at his control; they come from God. Any deliberate act and therefore suffering is a matter of perdition so there is eternal patience. Man waits for direction to act and suffer. The two words, "act" and "suffer" are always together for there can be no action without suffering. In a word God sits in the middle of things directing them what they should do. Acting and suffering are needed for spiritual elevation as the Vedanta confirmed.

So when the mind is calmed, it is reduced to its real nature or consciousness, then absolute peace comes. In 'Murder in the Cathedral' the yogi Thomas Becket with intellect, firmness and with purification in his mind is blessed with tranquil mind and thus he achieves absolute peace. The mind of Becket is restrained by detachment or vairagya. Patanjali said, detachment or vairagya is the consciousness of supremacy in him who is free from any worldly enjoyment. Nonattachment is not mere absence of desire, rather it is the consciousness of indifference to enjoyment. So Becket as a martyr is not one who suffers for a cause or who gives up his life for some religious beliefs, instead, he is a witness to the reality of God's power, God's will. So the dramatic climax lies in Becket's attaining the nonattached condition, to lose his will in the will of God through the continual self- surrender.

Conflict is the soul of tragedy in the drama. In 'Murder in the Cathedral' the strife or conflict is with "shadows" which are nothing but abstract temptations lying within Becket himself. Eliot leads us to a strifeless condition through the life and deed of Thomas Becket. He makes thorough study of the significance of martyrdom by showing us in the life of an ideal Vedantic mystic like Becket how a man can reach the level of divinity winning over all the temptations of life. This

conflict is for Becket's self-purification and transcendental introspection and evolution.

The Martyr becomes a martyr neither by an accident nor as the effect of a man's will to become a saint rather, he has to divest himself of all wills, even the will to become a Martyr. This has been shown in Becket's life when he has to pass through different temptations. The first temptation is that of the life of senses which was known in his days of prosperity. The second temptation is that of temporal power which he had wielded in the past as a Chancellor. Third temptation is the offer of alliance with the English Barons to defeat the king at his own political game. It is easy to overcome these temptations with which Thomas has been familiar. But the fourth one is the most formidable of all; for in it lurks the danger spiritual pride. Thomas knows that it is also the way perdition. He realizes that Martyrdom lies in complete self-surrender and so he desires that he shall no longer act or suffer to the "*Sword's end*". This determination, this selflessness leads Thomas to the level of Martyr. Thomas himself gives the sermon-

"True Martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God and who no longer desire anything for himself, not even the glory of being a Martyr.". The Gita says (6/4), "When there is non-attachment, either to sense-objects, or to actions having renounced all Sankalpas, then is one said to have attained concentration." So with the feeling of Vedantic non-attachment Thomas now has reached that level of divinity and that is the climax of the drama.

Becket must give himself to the suffering to be a witness to the will of God, not for the glory of becoming a saint but for the sake of uniting his will with the will of God Who moves the stars. Thus determined he has only waits for murderers to appear- "*All my life they have been coming, these feet, all my life I have waited*".

When he stands on the steps on the church the knights rush upon the Archbishop. Their anger collides against the calm of Thomas and the brutal murder takes place. Four swords of the murderers are the four spokes of the Wheel of which Becket is the centre- they at the circumference, acting, he at the still centre, patient, suffering, witnessing, willing, as Nevill Coghill said. When the bloody deed on the holy floor of the House of God is over, we see the saintly hallow reflecting in the appearance of Becket and Becket now prepares his march to heaven, the prize for continual self-sacrifice only for the cause.

A dramatic presentation of Vedanta should be a presentation of the progress in which experience and the progress will be through the conflict to the victory of the right forces or auspicious forces. Here Becket's soul becomes a battlefield for Good and Evil to gain supremacy. This heroic contest is held between material and ecclesiastical gain. The conflict in Becket is between his religious convictions and the Tempters, the killers. He remained unmoved, as it what he calls at "*still centre*" while the inimical forces surrounded him and tried to deflect him from his stand. Becket as Vedantic Yogi neither suffered nor acted. So here Becket's spiritual evolution is the result of his purified will.

The drama, '*Murder in the Cathedral*' is the dramatization of Becket's purification of will. According to the Vedanta purification means reduction of desires and even making it nil. We can easily transform the mind into pure crystal consciousness through purification. Thus perfect calmness and balance comes in mind. When the mind is silenced and calmed, common consciousness of mind is transformed into pure consciousness. Now one feels the Self and the Brahman, the ultimate reality. When a man can appreciate the Brahman in the universe, he needs nothing- name, fame or wealth. Becket felt the Brahman in the heart of the universe and through his self-purification he elevated himself to the height of being worthy with perfect will to surrender. In such stage of total self-surrender death is a welcome for his salvation from

the earthly bond. So Becket says-

“All my life

I have waited. Death will come only when I am worthy

And if I am worthy there is no danger

I have therefore only to make perfect my will.”

The Atman is the real form of the individual self. Consciousness which shines behind the mind is the real nature of Atman. So the mind should be directed towards the Atman as the Atman is the director and illuminator of mind. To a devoted spiritual aspirant the divine flash of revelation comes. The divine revelation or relation means awakening of the sleeping energy. Then it communicates with Supreme consciousness. It comes through self-revealing transcendental consciousness. When the individual Self is communion with the divine Self, a man realizes his real nature which is above nescience. Then spiritual aspirant can transcend the cycle of birth and death and can merge himself in the eternal and absolute reality, the ‘Param Brahman’. Attaining this height of supreme self-realization Becket surrenders himself.

“I give my life

To the Law of God above the Law of Man.”

Vedanta says that nothing of this universe is permanent, as everything is changing. But amidst the changes there is something unchangeable that is Atman. The Atman has only real existence. All other things are under the rule of time, space and causation. These things are born, die and therefore impermanent. The Atman is only beyond time space and causation. So Atman has no birth and no death and therefore it is permanent. The Gita (II/ 20) says-

“The Atman is not born, not does it ever die; after having been, it again ceases not to be; nor the reverse. Unborn, eternal, unchangeable and primeval, it is not slain when the body is slain.”

So immortal Atman transcends all transformation, decline and destruction, for Atman or Brahman is absolutely detached from Maya, which can be said desire. This desire limits the unlimited and undivided Atman. With Thomas Becket’s introspection of unlimited and undivided Atman he could give up all his desires. The Upanishads say that there remains no will or desire in the absolute Being. Becket loses himself in the will of the Absolute being with his death, the death is the means of salvation from this earthly bond. He has now no desire or will left.

Generally the mind runs mad after objects of senses for enjoyment as Becket’s mind does to some extent. So it will be one’s duty to forcibly withdraw it back to the Centre, to the Self, the Atman. Becket does so and uplifts his mind through the Temptations. The process of withdrawing the mind to the Centre is known Pratyahare or repeatedly drawing back. It is taken as means to concentration and meditation. The Gita says *“little by little let him withdraw by reason or intellect held in firmness; keeping the mind, in the self, let him no think of anything as supreme bliss verily comes to this yogi, whose mind is quite tranquil.”* The Gita again says-

“Thus always keeping the mind balanced, the yogi with mind controlled, attains to the peace abiding in me, which culminates in nirvana or moksha.” Becket as a yogi with controlled mind attains the peace of mind abiding in the lap of God.

Vedanta enables one to get the peace or bliss one longs for because each and every word of Vedanta helps one to elevate a step in spiritual life. After experiencing Samadhi, peace comes in him in an easy ecstatic manner-*“this earth is blissful to all beings and all beings are so sweet to this earth, they all help each other. And all the sweetness is that Effulgent, Immortal, One who is inside this earth.”* Becket could appreciate this very Vedantic feeling and so he could advise the Chorus-

“Peace, and be at peace with your thoughts and visions.

These things had to come to you and you accept them,

This is your share of the eternal burden,

The perpetual glory. This is one moment,

But know that another

Shall pierce you with a sudden painful joy

When the figure of God’s purpose is made complete.”

The Gita says “That man who lives devoid of longing, abandoning all desires, without the sense of ‘I’ and ‘mine’, he attains to peace.”

Becket experiences the Samadhi in the calmness and embraces death being blessed, merging in the sweetness of the Immortal. So Thomas could express-

“I have had a tremor of bliss, a wink of heaven, a whisper,

And I would no longer be denied; all things

Proceed to a joyful consummation.”

Becket enjoys here tranquility and ecstasy as “one who has controlled his mind, who is free from attachment and envy, enjoying things by his controlled senses, enjoys eternal bliss” (The Bhagavad Gita)

Freedom or salvation or ‘*mukti*’ is the synonym of peace, bliss and Absolute. Until and unless one is free from all sorts of mental bondages, one cannot have the test of Bliss. With the dawning of the Absolute that reveals itself in Samadhi one becomes free from all bondages. Actually human body is the only medium through which the self can be realized. It is the only vehicle to achieve salvation as Vedanta says. So through Samadhi Becket becomes free from all bondages and thus he finds his right path in right way. As one becomes free, he enjoys Absolute bliss. He is content as he,

“Shall no longer act or suffer, to the sword’s end”, now God makes Becket His agent.

The Vedantic mind aims at the ultimate unification of the individual self with the Absolute Self and thereby reaches Absolute unity. This is the goal which Becket sets at the outset of the voyage of his like a bold lion, should be without fear.”

Inner world. After overcoming the temptation, when he reaches the goal he revels that in him was the absolute from the very beginning. The Perfect which he sought was within him. The peace which he was craving was lying within him. He tries to express *“I am without attribute or activity. I am ever free, eternal and ever imperishable.”* Realizing the

true nature of the Self, Becket comes to know that it is not the external but internal which really matters. Hence, he discards apparent worldly temptations and gives emphasis to the world within him.

The Upanishads boldly declare that the world is without a second. But with the sufferings of body and mind, the Vedanta observes that his individual feelings could not merge with the universal feelings, for to undergo suffering, there must be a sufferer, the suffering and a cause of suffering, which implies the existence of two or more. Becket unveils that ignorance is the barricade in the way to the absolute unification. Having found the cause of all wrongs, he puts all his efforts in annihilating ignorance and getting a permanent solution. Here begins the duels between the internal and external worlds. The mind, with all its impressions of the external world tries to manifest in the language of matter while new mind efforts to cease looking outside and by means of cause and effect, goes on analyzing to unveil its real nature. He discards the external world. He advances rejecting his body for the body is perishable and hence cannot be true. Now the mind remains. He proceeds on. He plunges into the depth on his mind, explores its kingdom. His real nature is discovered. He discovers his Self which is unchangeable, imperishable and free from all bondage. Hence he discovers his real nature is beyond body and mind. He tries to give up all his imagination and thoughts. His mind ceases. He enters Samadhi or the state of spiritual ecstasy. Thus Becket understands his real nature in him. He realizes the Supreme Self. All mysteries are solved within no time. All speculations about the Supreme find realism. The individualistic view is converted to the universal view. The existence of God, the Almighty, he finds is nowhere but in him as he is one with his existence. The diversified version is converted to a vision of oneness that is the feeling of unified and undivided Brahman, the underlying substratum of this universe.

REFERENCES

1. Coghill, Nevill, *Murder in the Cathedral by T. S. Eliot*; with an introduction and notes. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.
2. Vivekananda, Swami, *Advaita Vedanta*. Kolkata-14: Advaita Asrama, 2009.
3. Prajnanananda, Swami, *Thoughts on Yoga, Upanishad and Gita*. 19-B R.R. Street, Kolkata, India: Ramkrishna Vedanta Math, 1991.
4. Swarupananda, Swami, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita (English)*. 5 D.E. Road Kolkata: 5 D.E. Road Kolkata, 2004.
5. Sri Arabinda, *The Upanishads*. Sri Arabinda Ashram, Pondichery, 1972.
6. Gardner, Helen, *The Art of T. S. Eliot*. London: Cresset Press, 1949.
7. Sarkar, Subhas, *T. S. Eliot the Dramatist*. Calcutta: Minerva, 1972.
8. Nikhilananda, Swami, *The Upanishads*, Kolkata-14: Advaita Asrama, 2008.
9. Smith, Grover: *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays; A Study in Sources and Meaning*. Doaba Publications with the University of Chicago Press. First Indian Reprint: 2000.

