



Being 'Thou': (Re)Thinking the Poet as Ecoshaman

Meenakshy B. Sujanan

A shaman is believed to be the one who is capable of performing spiritual journey to the other worlds, staying in trance state and attaining altered state of consciousness. He/she is a healer, protector or prognosticator. A shaman is also a mediator or a connecting figure between the members of a village/tribe and the world of spirits, always advocating on behalf of the community against all ills. The task of an ecoshaman thus becomes an endeavour to help us develop both a psychic and physical relationship of reciprocity with the land and the beings that provide us with life. Romantic poets' works have enormously been studied in terms of the trajectories of various theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Written in 1819, Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* has been the subject of elaborate literary and academic deliberations. Industrial Revolution with all its concomitant ills on nature is oft quoted as the major impetus for Shelley's poetic imagination of 'the Wind' as a trope for defending nature. The paper attempts at re-imagining the poet as an ecoshaman, who in his most spiritual sense envisions the innate source of energy or the ultimate reality within him. In contrast to the earlier literature that situates the poet as an activist, the paper proposes the poet to be a spiritual healer, a shaman who strives to make the readers realise the inter-connectedness and web of relations immanent within the whole universe.

Keywords: ecoshamanism, animism, interconnectedness, altered state of consciousness, energy

The Romantic Age in English literature can appropriately be called as an age of poetry. The Age provided the writers with utmost freedom to give voice to their individuality and to choose the subject matter and the form of poetry to effectively express their true feelings, intuitions and imagination. By rejecting the conventions of the Neoclassical period which prescribed set rules to be followed in the form, content and language of poem, the writers of the Romantic period pictured individual experience of everyday life in a language closer to the one of ordinary man.

Readers worldwide would never ever fail to acknowledge that Percy Bysshe Shelley was one of the greatest Romantics who crafted finest poetry of the Age. Though a revolutionary idealist and political radical, Shelley is described by American literary critic Harold Bloom in *The Best poems of the English Language, From Chaucer through Frost* as “a superb craftsman, a lyric poet without rival, and surely one of the most advanced sceptical intellects ever to write a poem” (2004, p. 410). Shelley declared himself to be an atheist who rejected organised religion. His atheism is often reflected in many of his works and it further augmented his political standpoint as a radical. Being a political radical, Shelley envisioned a radical transformation of the society through his works. The poem *Ode to the West Wind* is hailed as one among the prime poems that spread his message of reform and revolution across the world.

Ode to the West Wind has enormously been studied in terms of the trajectories of various theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Written in 1819, the *West Wind* has been the subject of elaborate literary and academic deliberations. The paper attempts at re-imagining the poet as an ecoshaman who in his most spiritual sense envisions the innate source of energy or the ultimate reality within all earthlings. In contrast to the earlier literature that situates the poet as an activist or a radical, the paper proposes the poet to be a spiritual healer, a shaman who strives to make the readers realise the interconnectedness and web of relations immanent within the whole universe. A critical

re-reading of the poem is attempted by consulting the conceptual work of ecoshamanism as conceived by a practising shaman James Endredy in his work, *Ecoshamanism: Sacred Practices of Unity, Power and Earth Healing*.

As the term evinces, ecoshamanism emphasizes the ecological connotation of a shaman. Endredy says, “connecting and communing with the ancient wisdom of Earth’s natural systems and sacred spiritual elements are at the core of ecoshamanism, and as such offer us a way to heal our separation from our environment, our physical bodies, others of our kind, and our connection with Earth” (2007, p. 2). Healing the wounds inflicted on Earth by human ignorance becomes the need of the hour. This state of urgency demands the rise of a healer, a modern shaman capable of invoking in us the spirit of unity and awe-inspiring power of nature which was long lost from human cerebration. The project of ecoshamanism should never be confused as an exhortation to start leading a life in the woods rather it makes us realise our inseparability with the nature and to follow a sustainable way of life within the realities of our times.

Industrial Revolution with all its concomitant ills on nature is oft-quoted as the major impetus for Shelley’s poetic imagination of the Wind as a trope for defending nature. In fact, it is supposed to be the stimulus for major part of Romantic literature. James C. McKusick in “Introduction: Romanticism and Ecology” observes, “much Romantic writing emerges from a desperate sense of alienation from the natural world and expresses an anxious endeavour to re-establish a vital, sustainable relationship between mankind and the fragile planet on which we dwell” (1997, p. 123). The obvious reason which propelled the sense of a fragile planet was the ravages caused by Industrial Revolution on Earth. The idea of new social and ecological changes associated with the major industrial change evoked both awe and dread among the men of literature of the period. Southey, Owen, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth and many others’ expressions of their apprehension were implicit in their writings. Like other Romantics, a spurring interest in the nature, intense despisal of the new industrial change and profound reverence for nature are noticeable in Shelley’s poems. But he never stops there. In addition to explicitly expressing a

deep veneration and respect for nature, he calls for action from the part of the readers. This suggests a radical call for societal reformation as well as environmental and individual healing. The poet asks the Wind to listen to him and when it does, he urges the Wind to drift him away so much so that he can spread his message all over the world.

Shelley's desire to be carried away by the Wind to the other side and spread the words urging for change is analogous to a shamanic journey into the other worlds in an altered state of consciousness, conversing with spirits and endeavours to heal the injured. A shaman is believed to be the one who is capable of performing spiritual journey to the other worlds, staying in trance state and attaining altered state of consciousness. He/she is a healer, protector or prognosticator. A shaman is also a mediator or a connecting figure between the members of a village/tribe and the world of spirits, always advocating on behalf of the community against all ills. Thus, the task of an ecoshaman as Endredy opines becomes an endeavour to help us develop both a psychic and physical relationship of reciprocity with the land and the beings that provide us with life (2007, p. xiv).

The task of the poet in *Ode to the West Wind* therefore alludes to the task of ecoshaman in "making peace with the spiritual manifestations of our biosphere as well as with the animal and plant communities within our local bioregion and throughout the world" (Endredy, 2007, p. 45). This view can be substantiated with the help of the basic tenets of ecoshamanic experience as expounded by Endredy in his treatise on ecoshamanism. First of all, the set and setting of the ecoshamanic experience hold chief importance. The purpose of the experience and the place where the experience happens are both relevant because the 'experience' has to eventuate in a pacific mind facilitated by the serenity of the surrounding environment, in order to aim at collective peace and wellness. Cascine woods near Florence, Italy offers the setting for our shaman poet and his aspirations for societal reformation becomes the sacred purpose.

Secondly, ecoshamanic experience is associated with a perception of reality from a source of knowledge which can be anything like visions, dreams, emotional connection with plant and animal life

or any living or non-living entities. Animist beliefs are the core of shamanism. Each and every entity in the universe is attributed a soul or conscious centre and is regarded as equal to human self, placed neither above nor below. Every single element thus becomes a source of knowledge rendering boundless grasp about the reality of existence. An ecoshaman gains insights while entering into an ecoshamanic state of consciousness, an alternate consciousness stimulated by the participation of the natural world. In the poem, *Ode to the West Wind*, the poet urges the wind to lift him like a wave, a leaf or a cloud. His urge to get lifted up could be perceived to an aspiration for entering into an altered state of consciousness and journeying into other worlds where he can seek the primal learning experience to realise the powers of nature and get carried to disseminate the message all over the world. Kate Rigby in *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* feels that Romantics may not have the answers to the ecological problems of our times but an ecocritical return to Romanticism can lead us forward into “an alternative, greener modernity” (2004, p. 2). An ecocritical return to Shelley’s text does the same purpose. Additionally, if we attempt a re-reading of the text from an ecoshamanic perspective, we are led to an alternate reality where the reader undergoes a shamanic experience, gets mesmerised by the beauty of its imagery entering into the world of the West Wind and grasping the supreme knowledge of the web of relations in the nature.

The third is the experience of death and rebirth. Shamanic initiation is a highly strenuous affair in which the subject has to go through several processes encountering severe hardships and suffering. Often, the initial calling for shamanic task happens through an illness or any serious form of physical ailment. This dis-ease during initiation eventually turns into a productive outcome for the subject as he/she gets initiated with shamanic capabilities. Endredy feels the whole process dichotomous as he says, “this is one of the paradoxes of shamanism-knowledge through distress, health through sickness, wholeness through fragmentation, dying of this life in order to joyfully live another” (2007, p. 17). Apparently, the destruction-rebirth dichotomy is the central theme of *Ode to the West Wind*. The poet

calls the Wind both as ‘destroyer’ and ‘preserver’. It scatters the seeds, makes each of them lie on the Earth’s surface like a corpse, only to enliven and make them sprout sooner or later. The superimposition of the image of ruined palaces and towers submerged deep under the Mediterranean and the image of overgrown sea plants on them in consecutive lines in the third Canto offers intriguing illustrations where the poet emphasizes the inevitability of change manifested through destruction and renewal or rebirth in our life. Throughout the poem Shelley attempts at voicing a call for change. Critics have often read this as a call for political or radical social change. But it could also be considered as a call for a spiritual change, an attempt to invoke in human minds eco-consciousness and indispensability of ecological awareness in times of the proliferation of industrial activities. Shelley desires to become a lyre for his musings charged with his visions to be heard aloud across the globe. He becomes an advocate for change in the same way as an ecoshaman who is an advocate for balance and harmony to restore peaceful co-existence with nature. The fact that a picture of peaceful coexistence becomes discernible only when it is preceded by events of destruction is exemplified in the line, “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (Shelley, 1819, line 70)

Singing, chanting, dancing or drumming can heighten the flow of ecoshamanic experience. It connotes the fourth characteristic feature. A thorough perusal of the poem inspires us to think that the poetic content and form are designed specifically as a chant or a prayer so as to heighten his poetic imagination and render expressions to his musings.

Fifth is the perception of spirit. Communing with the spirits of nature is central to shamanic experience. David Abram in “The Ecology of Magic” wonderfully situates shaman as an “intermediary between society and earth” (1997, p. 7). As a mediator, the shaman sets out a metaphorical journey beyond the confines of human world to unbounded vastness of the spirit worlds to bring back immense treasures of alternative knowledge and wisdom. Each Canto of *Ode to the West Wind* is devoted as an invocation to the five basic elements of the universe. Shelley’s attribution of spiritual power to the Wind is

easily discernible with the use of upper-case letter ‘W’ wherever the term wind is used. Furthermore, it is saluted as ‘Wild Spirit’, ‘destroyer’, ‘preserver’, ‘My Spirit’ and ‘Impetus one’. For him the Wind is at once the supreme spiritual power with the capacities of a destroyer, preserver and a source of knowledge. In Greek mythology, Maenad is a spiritual being that roamed around Dionysus, performing frenzied, ecstatic dances and were believed to be possessed by the God. The poet’s wild comparison of the Wind to a ‘fierce Maenad’ and his own urge to become one with the Wind implicitly equate himself to be a shaman. Further, the lines “Be through my lips to unawakene’d earth/ The trumpet of a prophecy!” (Shelley, 1819, lines 68-69) is revelatory of shamanic trance state where the spirits communicate through a shaman to ordinary people. Randy Allen in the article, “Ecoshamanism: Awakening Humanity to the Dream of the Earth” says, “the ecoshaman has the capacity to hear the voice of the Earth, as well as the innate voice within humanity that is held captive by the domesticated industrialised traumatising cultural dream” (2014, p.7). Through the poem, Shelley, the eco shsman wishes to become a lyre for the Wind Spirit to speak through the message of the vitality of knowing the universal oneness and leading a balanced way of life with deep veneration and respect for nature.

S. Harper in “The Way of Wilderness” says, “nature is not a relationship that we have, it is who we are” (1995, p. 186). The awareness of universal oneness is the core of ecoshamanism. In fact, the focal idea of the poem or the message that the ecoshaman poet conveys through his wisdom endowed by the spirits is the idea of immanent unity within all elements of the universe. He prays that the Wind may become his soul and his whole being. Moreover, the Wind is hailed as the ‘impetus one’. The word impetus means the force or energy with a body moves or something happens. While chanting “be thou, Spirit fierce, My Spirit! / Be thou, my impetus one!” (Shelley, 1819, lines 61-62), Shelley equates the Wind with his self. Further, the Wind is the ‘impetus one’ for the poet. This equation indicates the poet’s identification of himself with the energy. The poem therefore, becomes the manifesto of Shelley’s realisation of his oneness with the life force or the supreme energy, the ultimate reality.

References

Abram, David. (1997). The Ecology of Magic. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (pp. 3-29). Vintage.

Allen, Randy. (2014, September 18). *EcoShamanism - Awakening Humanity to the Dream of the Earth*. Academia.edu. https://www.academia.edu/8381912/EcoShamanism_Awakening_Humanity_to_the_Dream_of_the_Earth

Bloom, Harold. (2004). *The Best poems of the English Language, From Chaucer through Frost*. Harper Collins.

Endredy, James. (2007). *EcoShamanism: Sacred Practices of Unity, Power and Earth Healing*. Llewellyn Publications.

Harper, S. (1995). The Way of the Wilderness. In Roszak, T., Gomes, M. E., & Kanner, A. D (Eds.), *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (pp. 183-200). Sierra Club Books.

McKusick, J. C. (1997). Introduction: Romanticism and Ecology. *The Wordsworth Circle*, 28(3), 123-24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24043936>

Rigby, Kate. (2004). *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism*. University of Virginia Press.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. (1819). Ode to the West Wind. *Poetry Foundation*. Ode to the West Wind | The Poetry Foundation

Meenakshy B. Sujanan

Research Scholar, Institute of English

Senate House Campus

University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram

India

Pin: 695034

Ph: +91 8281866172

Email: meenakshybsujanan@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0000-4969-0100