

The Unresolved Uncertainty and Unvoiced Dualism In The Poetry of Robert Frost

DR.N.SWAMINATHAN¹, S. VALARMATHI²

¹Asst. Professor of English, Rajah Serfoji Govt. College, Thanjavur-613005

²Research Scholar, Rajah Serfoji Govt. College, Thanjavur-613005

Abstract- Through poetry Robert Frost delineated the universal problem of making a choice between the demands of the practical and a desire to escape, the readers came to no final solution in his poetry. For example when we read the poem 'The Road Not Taken' we find only vagueness and uncertainty without precision in the rendering of the details and of the total attitude. Frost confuses whimsical impulse with moral choice. Frost himself is vaguely afraid that he may or may not be wrong or right. As Robert Frost tells us poetry should clarify life, he is criticized by some critics for not having clarified and never made any moral commitment towards the unpredictability and uncertainty of life in his poetry. In spite of the pastoral element predominant in Frost's poetry, he is still a modern poet because of his depiction of predicament, uncertainty and moral perplexity of modern man. Thus in Frost's poems contraries are constantly being set side by side especially the hiatus between what the individual aspires for and the hard reality of what he achieves-a conflict of which he is keenly aware. The idea of conflict or antithesis is inherited in all the elements of his poetry-in theme, metaphor, subject, matter, form and style. He portrays man's place in nature, his humour in grief, his pleasure in sadness, his transience in permanence, his isolation in communion etc. Frost acknowledges that humanity very much depends upon the conflict and paradox between stability and mobility, between vocation and avocation, between illusion and reality etc. This paper examines the cause behind his helplessness to be a committed poet and analysis the reason behind his inability in giving permanent solution to any things ordained to everlasting opposition. This study explores how his 'talking poems' dramatized his dualistic handling of uncertainty of post modernism and conflicting voices.

Index Terms: Dualistic, modernism, conflicting voices, poetry, Robert Frost

I. INTRODUCTION

A four-time Pulitzer Prize Winner in poetry and a special guest at President John F. Kennedy's inauguration, American, Robert Frost became a

poetic force and the unofficial 'Poet Laureate' of the United States of twentieth century. His popularity lies in depending realistic rural life of New England through American colloquial language and situations familiar to all the common men. Like Keats his greatness lies in his 'Negative Capability' by which he identifies himself with all sorts of people and things. Like Shakespeare, he has the talent to combine both subjective and objective approaches in his poetry.

According to Frost man is a choice-making animal who fulfils himself in the act of choosing with a sense of consequences. Men are born into society without their choice and the relationship with the social order in civil society is beyond voluntary choices. He is always aware of the continuous conflict between the individual and society and many of his poems such as 'The Vantage Point', 'Mending Wall' and 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' affirm the same theme in variety of ways. These poems reflect the paradoxical conflict between the necessary claims of society upon his society. But in such conflicts Frost maintains non-committal and skeptic attitude without taking any side and he leaves the final conclusion to the readers.

By steering something of a middle path, he makes a classical adjustment and he keeps this skeptic middle role in his political, religious and philosophical thoughts. For Frost the function of poetry is an exploration itself and he just want to explore the conflict without trying to resolve it. As Frost was considered as a poet of humanity, many critics are not satisfied with his non-committal attitude towards the perplexity and conflict of man.

But Frost lines as a poet and dedicates his entire life to the service of art. When Frost says vaguely of poetry as a 'way of life' he is consciously avoiding systematic theory for poetry or for life. By this statement, he is identifying his double role as human being and poet. For him the ultimate clarification of life comes through his practice of poetry. But critics find it difficult to separate the man from the poet. Critics take his thought as synthetic rather than

analytic. They find it hard to isolate his principles from his poetry since he talks of many things at mind. In his preface to his collected poems Frost writes as, “The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. It begins.....making poems encourages a man to see that there is shapeliness in the world. A poem is an arrest of disorder.”

In ‘Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost’ George W. Nitchie criticized Frost for not yet clarified life and momentary stays against confusion are not at all really stays. Nitchie accused Frost for not having any commitment. In his words, “Frost has not made that moral commitment, we can never really accept or reject his vision of reality.....cannot really be clarified, cannot subject to the order-engendering discipline, we are compelled to conclude that our momentary stays against confusion are not really stays.”

Frederic L. Carpenter tells that, Frost world is fragmentary and meaningless. It is his own words, “The vast chaos of all I have lived through within which a poem may exist but only as again in his own words a momentary stay against confusion.”

So, according to Nitchie, Frost is not at all serious about his conviction and he is unwilling to stand with a sustaining conclusion. So, for Nitchie, W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot are committed poets, but Frost suffers by comparison. He said that Frost gives us neither heroes nor villains. He gives neither saints nor sinners. To Nitchie, Frost world is fragmentary and meaningless and a non-committal poet.

According to Peter Stanly, if we want to study Frost as a poet, as a man and philosopher, it requires taking into full account of his dualism of mind or spirit and matter. This study of his dualism only provides the whole basis of his psychology, his conception of god, Man and Nature. So, without knowing his dualistic handling, it is difficult to analyze his thought, his emotional bias and choices regarding ideas and events in conflict. So, the poetry of Frost should be approached with a conscious awareness of his dualism without the expectations of finding final solutions to the major problem because such approach to Frost is long overdue.

Dualism is a vital place in his poetry, prose and conversation. Before criticizing Frost for not having any commitment and being an impartial judge by not taking any side it is important to view his poems with perception of dualism. So, this paper reviews at

Frost belief in the constant conflict of complex ideas and precarious conditions in the daily life of man and the reasons behind his being an impartial judge by not taking neither side in such conflicts, objectively having Dualism philosophy as its background.

II. THE BASIS OF DUALISM

Before analyzing dualism in Frost’s writings, it is beneficial to define what is meant by monism logical and analytical methods of spirit of reasoning.

A. Monism:

According to this metaphysical view reality consists of only one element without division. While dualism distinguishes between spirit and matter, monism denies such a division or merges both of matter and spirit in a higher unity.

‘Materialistic Monists’ states that only the physical (matter) is real and that the mind (spirit) can be reduced to the physical. This doctrine holds that from the matter only the world evolved. Bertrand Russel and Thomas Hobbes are the members of this camp. ‘Idealistic Monists’ argues that external world is an illusion created by the spirit and so, there is only one reality, eternal and spiritual which is termed as spiritual monism. G.W.C. Hegel is a spiritual monist.

B. Dualism:

According to this belief the reality consists of two things: material (physical) and immaterial (spiritual). It argues that the mind is an independently existing substance-and the material cannot think. This philosophy states that mind and body separate from each other and they are not identical. Plato and Aristotle are dualists.

III. SCHISM BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

When Yoe Winters asked Frost whether he whether he were a monist or a dualist, he replied that his poetry ought to answer that. In a letter to Lawrence Thomson (July 11, 1959), he stated “I am a dualist” and rejected Emerson’s Monism. (Peter P.4)

Frost’s dualism is explicitly evident in such major works ‘Masque of reason’ combined with ‘A Masque of Mercy’, ‘Two Trams in Mud Time’. ‘The Death of a Hired Man’, ‘The Monologues as Snow’, ‘The

Hill Wife' and 'The Generation of Man'. He is keenly aware of the 'two endless things in pairs ordained in everlasting opposition'. We get our effects on a tension between opposite meanings and that paradox went deep in Frost both in his temper of art and in the character of man. We can analyze some poems of Frost in the perspective of dualism in order to justify his not committal attitude towards uncertainty and dilemma. In his paradoxes are Omni present.

"The fact is the sweet dream that labour knows
(Mowing)

Men work together; I told him from the heart,
Whether they work together or aspect"

(The Taft of Flowers)

(Robert Frost's 'A Living Voice by Reginald Cook'
P. 273)

So, we can see a short list of dualistic opposites in Frost's poetry like matter-spirit, God-Devil, heaven-hell; justice-mercy, heart-mind, love-thought, body-soul, fact-fiction, fire-ice. This list of paradox, contraries, and ambiguities could go on.

But one of the recurrent themes in Frost's poetry is perennial conflict between justice and mercy in 'The Death of Hired Man'. This poem has been universally praised. The drama of man's justice and women's mercy is described without much ado. In this drama, Warren does not want to take back Silas into service, (The Hired Man) because he had irritated Warren and left him in hope of higher wages. Now Silas returned back but became very old and he is on the periphery of death. But he need job from Warren in order to maintain his-respect.

The conflict arises when Warren's wife Mary's efforts to persuade Warren to have pity on Silas, forgetting past and Warren's Stern, harsh and unforgiving attitude towards Silas. But the pull between the two values of justice and mercy lead to finally the death of a hired man Silas, a man with a heavy dosage of self-respect.

The same conflict between justice and mercy would be seen in the poem 'love and question' where he came to no final solutions. The dilemma is posed whether a bridal couple should practice charity and there by allow a unknown passing stranger to man love of two by harbouring woo in the bridal house. But in such a complex situation there is no answer from Frost.

Another unresolved question is in between the claims of love and thought. 'West Running Brook' the paradox is in between romantic idealism and militaristic monism. The poem compares the behaviour of the book with the behaviour of the husband wife. The poem tells us that human life is full of contraries. When wife asks questions about the book,

"What does it think, it is running West
When all other country brooks flow east
To reach the ocean?"

She identifies herself as married to the brook as well as to her husband. She wondered about the brook running west instead of east. Philosophically she is essentially idealistic. On contrary her husband, as a monist of matter perceives the flow of the brook in objective and scientific terms. He compared the backward movement of brook with the origin of all human beings! So, the backward motion of brook to West instead of east metaphorically undertones the union of paradox in the human existence.

In 'Human Burial' the conflict develops between husband and wife over the women's way and the man's way of facing the painful tragedy caused of the death of their first born. Her romantic idealism could digest the mysterious and hostility of nature. She could not digest her husband's act of burying their child with his own hands. But her husband's practical and realistic approach metaphorically refers to the monism of matter. But in this content we could understand Frost's agreement with Darwin's principle that earth is a hard place in which to save the soul. So, man's life is like a dualistic drama and it is a trial by existence for each person to the find tragedy of death. In this context he completely rejected Emerson's Unitarian Optimism and Wordsworth's pantheism. So, the final conflict between idealistic illusion of wife and the realistic and practical attitude of husband lead to total lack of love. Metaphorically 'Home Burial' refers to the burial of love and mutual harmony.

The same conflict between man's illusion and realistic and hostility nature of earthy life exposed in 'In Most it'. An isolated individual in a lonely forest could not find any human reciprocal voice but he could have only the echo of his reply from nature. At last he saw a buck which came out of the lake. The poem 'The Road not Taken' depicts the dilemma of modern man. Behind the poem 'Birches Frost's need is to choose between heaven's truth and earth's truth,

between deductive and inductive knowledge of the universe. Here is a clash between man's aspiration towards heaven and again withdrawal into earthly wilderness.

IV. SYNTHESIS OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

According to Redcliff though Frost was cautiously dividing his bets and comes to the threshold of a final vision wilfully draws back. His assumption is that Frost strives for a harmony and synthesis between an inmate and remote nature and between a transient and permanent nature.

For Frost the schism between earth and heaven is portrayed in a pair of confrontation and transcend schism and these confrontations are central to the appreciation of the poetry. Frost translated science and religion in two terms as 'spirit' and 'matter' and then frost can make no choice between spirit and matter and he tried towards the syntheses of both.

"It is the height of poetry,
The height of all thinking
The height of all poetic thinking
That attempt to say matter in of spirit
And spirit in terms of matter."

Frost's strong conviction is life contains the tragic paradox of two thoroughly opposed halves, reason (mind) and desire (heart) and he made it clear that human nature consists of this dualistic opposites and it is impossible to resolve this into a monistic unity. Frost rejected Descartes' dualism because Descartes is a monist of matter in his methodology and a monist of spirit in his theology. To Frost two monisms could not add up his dualistic philosophy. Frost perceived the whole life and the universe in its parts through the fusion of spirit and matter. In particular 'Kitty Hawk' dealt with metaphysical conclusion that spirit penetrates matter and makes both into 'essentially one'.

Frost skeptic attitude permits his to reconcile the paradox and this scepticism act as a balance wheel control the acceleration of faith and the deceleration of denial. So Frost wants to hold a middle-ground position (in poetic sense)

Frost made a principle of non-conformity and declared that is sacred to be integrity to his own heart and mind. For Frost no final questions were resolved by perceiving the world from the position of

materialist or idealist because life still escaped with monist and idealist when they tried to think and tried to define it. So, Frost dallies with heavenly wisdom and returns to earth and this teeter-totter of thought and feeling is a desire to bring divine understanding to earth. So, there is no contradictory jumble in these poems because he was cautiously divides his bets.

Finally Frost made it clear that great mysteries of life have no permanent answers because of its dualistic nature. He recommends that these conflicts could be adjusted without trying to triumph of one side over its opposite. To Frost a poem is only a momentary stay against confusion not a final clarification to everlasting opposition.

V. CONCLUSION

Life on earth is full of struggle with conflicting emotions especially the problems before modern man is so complex. The hiatus between what the individual aspires and the hard reality of what he achieves has break down his life and so he plunged in so much uncertainty, so much perplexity and so much unsettlement. The modern man has no substitute for faith and religion except science and information. Aldus Huxley aptly points out that "ours is a world in which knowledge accumulated and wisdom decays". But any responsible person is aware that there is no single solution to this dilemma as the problems before modern man are so complex that neither any single solution nor all solutions would give a perfect world. It is only a Utopia. Finally we must conclude that the poetry of Robert Frost do not rise and resolve questions. They explored problems and examine alternatives rather taking sides between conflicts.

To Frost clarification of life means clarification of reality. For critics like Ritchie, Sidney Cox etc who demanded final clarification including Yoe Winters who condemns Frost as a 'spiritual drifter' the epitaph of Frost "I had a lover's quarrel with the world' is an appropriate climax answer.

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