
Indian Appeal in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Dr Abhishek Tiwari

Associate Professor of English, Department of Humanities, Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri
National Sanskrit University (Central University), New Delhi, India
Email: abhishek_abhi.au@rediffmail.com

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Abstract: With a view to exploring a universal theme of offense and penalty, the great Romantic poet Coleridge attempted to put forward a broader visualization enshrined in the poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* through the medium of symbols and images. The research article titled "Indian Appeal in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*" envisions the Indian aspect embedded in the content of the poem that has the credential to make it more captivating and sensational among the scholarly circle at large.

Keywords: Free will, Sublime, *Karma* Theory, Maya, Catharsis

Samuel Taylor Coleridge collaborated with William Wordsworth in the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), which brought about a shift in the trends of both form and content in the arena of the Western creative canon formally known as the Romantic Movement in English literature. Undertaking environmental concerns to the hilt, Romantic poetry deals with the universal theme of the relationship between human beings and cosmic forces manifested in the eternal bond between Nature and Human nature. The instant reason behind such a phenomenal shift is apparently perceived in terms of a spiky response against the neoclassical affectations and a perfunctory way of contemplation. Sometimes, it is viewed as the reaction of the value system that triggered the French Revolution (1789-1799), that is, Equality, Liberty, and Fraternity, further elaborated in the form of individualistic free will. However, for reasons strange, one seldom approaches this great Romantic movement in the light of the efforts rendered by the great orientalists like Sir William Jones, Charles Wilkins, etc., who unreservedly measured the worth of the great Indian texts like Kalidasa's *Abhijnanshakuntalam* and the *Bhagavad Gita* and did the needful

to make it available to the West in English translation. The publication of the English rendering of the *Bhagavad Gita* by Charles Wilkins in the year 1785 proved very radical in spreading the sublime astuteness of this grand text among the literary luminaries of the West, including the great Romantics of the like of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Robert Southey, and John Keats. Of course, there is an Indian dimension to the organic evolution of the great Romanticism in world literature, and the brilliant poem of Coleridge titled *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which aimed to accomplish "Absolute oneness," was composed under the conscious influence of the thoughts, metaphors, and symbols very much Indian.

The governance of the universe demands a rationalization and moderate rehabilitation of the two life forces symbolized by Nature and Man, and of course, the malfunction to uphold the wholesome kinship between the two results in the existential crisis of grave Nature. A man's wishful endeavor to encroach upon the Great system of Providence without paying any heed to his limitations may result in serious consequences. Even a slight instinctive action is likely to bring about an equal reaction. By way of using Gothic paranormal elements, the poetic representation of the fortune of the Ancient Mariner is Coleridge's way of putting forward aesthetically a deeper humanistic message that our *Karma* has had a long-lasting bearing on human destiny and that the seeds that we sow today, in equal proportion the result will be reaped in future. There is no way to escape from the outcome of one's action, and even Indian *Shastras* convincingly assert that *Karma* finds its doer in a similar way as a calf recognizes its mother amidst lacs of cows. Truly, Coleridge's central approach in the poem is to bring about the moral significance of the theory of *Karma* in one's life and, through the unfortunate tribulation of the Mariner and other crew members, represent the uglier results of an ugly action. The Mariner's way of telling the narrative of guilt and redemption to the worthy listener is a way of relieving oneself of the pangs of the conscience (*Antaratma*). If we take the example of Shakespeare, we can conclude that his tragic characters also suffered the consequences of their actions. Lady Macbeth's aggravation in getting King Duncan murdered in cold blood resulted in her psychological trauma entrenched with culpability.

Coleridge, the most notable meta-physician of his times, was considered to be highly learned and would appreciate reading works of noble merits. David Perkins truly observes, "In most of (Coleridge's) utterances on the subject of beauty, for example, he assumed that a beautiful work of art had this quality in itself and

universally. Beauty is not historically relative. Coleridge believed in the reality of genius, which by definition transcends its times" (Perkins 446). Coleridge was well aware of the virtue of the oriental scholars like Wilkins and Sir William Jones. The following extract from the unpublished writing of Coleridge that was published in John H Muirhead's magnum opus entitled *Coleridge as Philosopher* holds testimony to this thesis. In this work, there is a reference to "These Potentates of inmost Ind," *Himala, Ganges, Brahmin Theosophy, Avatars*, etc, that logically deliberates upon Coleridge's acquaintanceship to Indian thoughts available to him. Further, in one of his letters addressed to John Thelwall on October 14, 1797, Coleridge writes, "It is but seldom that I raise and spiritualize my intellect to this height --- and at other times I adopt the *Brahmin Creed*, and say --- It is better to sit than stand, it is better to lie than sit, it is better to sleep than wake, like the Indian Vishna, to float along an infinite ocean cradled in the flower of Lotus, and wake once in a million years for a few minutes just to know that I was going to sleep for a million years more..."(Coleridge Letters 350).

Self-explanatory in its importation, this extract illustrates the reference to Lord Vishnu, who, in spite of *Shesh Naag*, is sleeping on the Lotus flower, which is the feature of Lord Brahma, the Creator of the universe according to Indian mythology. Here, Coleridge probably does so in keeping with the henotheistic practice of Hinduism that treats multiple deities as if they are the definitive godly quintessence. He had read quite avidly whatsoever was available in the ethical Hindu text titled *Manusmriti* in the English rendering of Sir William Jones as "*The Ordinances of Menu* ."Equally, he had also quite sincerely gone through Thomas Maurice's *The History of Hindostan*, an encyclopedic text on Indian myth and religion, published in London in 1795.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is not merely a casual opus depicting the Romantic appreciation of the supernatural addition of strangeness to the aesthetics of human sensibility. The poem, however, unravels a more prophetic and magnificent aspect of human Nature that seeks to metaphorically sensitize people's perceptions in regard to his/her actions. C G Jung has said, "Creativity is rooted in the immensity of the unconscious" (Jung 87), and that is absolutely true in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Other than assimilating a theme of offense and penalty, there is a broader visualization enshrined in the poem through the medium of symbols and images that need to be highlighted with a view to delving deeper into the Indian aspect of Coleridge.

Fashioning a dream description, Coleridge begins his poem with the abrupt introduction to the antic Mariner with glittering and catchy eyes and his rendezvous with a wedding guest forcefully held to tell a chronicle of personal experiences elaborating the experiences of a human being with ups and downs, with grace and deception, with credit and discredit, sometimes without his/her accountability. Suffering and enjoying are the two components of life. While on their journey towards the southwards tropics, they met with a thundering storm blast that drove them finally to the land of mist and snow. The arrival of an unknown mysterious bird, the Albatross, turns the course of the spectacle positive, and the sailors feed the bird delightedly, hailing as a sign of a sanguine omen. However, as ill luck would have it, the Mariner, in a fit of Nihilistic impulse, killed the fine bird with his crossbow. Eminent literary critic G Wilson Knight observes, "The bird seems to suggest some redeeming Christ-like force in creation that guides humanity from primitive and fearful origins. Anyway, the central crime is the slaying of it, and by their wavering thoughts, the crew 'make themselves accomplices'; and the dead bird is finally hung around the Mariner's neck 'instead of the cross' as a sign of guilt. Indeed, the slaying of the Albatross in the Mariner's story may correspond to the death of Christ in racial history. It is, moreover, an act of unmotivated and wanton, semi-sadistic destruction, explicitly called 'hellish'" (Knight 85). Here, the sudden arrival of an albatross and the impetuous action of the Mariner in killing the bird looks very awry and untoward. Albatross here stands not merely as a living creature but a manifestation of *Daiva* or *Prarabdha* itself in the guise of the *Maya* to bring a shift in the course of the fate of the Mariner and other crew members. Jagatguru Shankaracharya, in his *Viveka Chudamani*, says,

*Avyaktanamnee paramesha shaktih
Anavidya trigunatmika paraa/
Karyanumeyaa sudhiyaiva Maya
Yaya jagatsarvamidam prasuyate //*

(Avidya (Nescience) or Maya, also called the Undifferentiated, is the power of the Lord. She is without beginning, is made up of the three Gunas, and is superior to the effects (as their cause). She is to be inferred by one of clear intellect only from the effects She produces. It is She who brings forth this whole universe.) (Shankaracharya 108)

Shakespeare's remark in *King Lear*, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the

gods; They kill us for their sport" (Act 4 Scene 1), adheres to such divinely dictated human actions. After the Albatross gets killed, the climate becomes soothing, and the fog thins away. It gives the impression that the atrocious deed of the Mariner was justified. Eventually, the crew members hailed the Mariner for his deed. However, the ship met with a tedious fate when the sun burnt scorch-fully, and the sailors felt thirsty and had no water to drink until they met with a doom of worse Nature. Boarding on a skeleton ship, there arrive the two supernatural forces- Death and Life-in-Death- who are playing dice for the fate of the crew members. Death causes all the crew members to die, while Life-in-Death grants life to the Mariner so that he can undergo a sense of repentance by way of receiving pain and trauma as a result of the ache he inflicted upon the Albatross. Death on the part of the crew members becomes a cause of rebirth and salvation (*mukti*), while life on the part of the Mariner becomes a trap to suffer the agonies of his own conscience. He had a very tough time facing the dead bodies of the sailors and realizing himself to be the cause of that tragedy. Facing the distressing experience himself was his punishment for initiating the wrong action against the eternal order of Providence. Nobody can absolve one of his/ her crimes. The relevant text has been excerpted here for ready reference,

“Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide, wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul is in agony.

The many men are so beautiful!
And they all dead did lie:
And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on, and so did I."

Persecuted by the remorseful conscience and inner upheaval, the Mariner soon starts appreciating the divine blessings represented through the ways and attributes of Nature. The high load of suffering made the Mariner relate himself with the Great Design of the universe.

“O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware:

Sure, my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware.”

He showed his conviction in the theory of complete surrender (*sharing gati*), as pronounced in Chapter 18, verse 66 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is considered the essence of *Bhakti Yoga*,

“*Sarvadharmā parityajya mamekaṁ śaranam vraja/
Aham tva sarvapapebhyo mokṣayisyami ma śuḥah !*”

(*Abandoning all Dharmas (of the body, mind, and intellect), take refuge in Me alone; I will liberate thee from all sins; grieve not.*) (Bhagavad Gita 18/66)

It ought to be borne in mind that through the path of complete surrender to the authority of God, any living creature can attain liberation from *Daiḥik*, *Daivik*, and *Bhautik Taapas* (afflictions) and accomplish ultimate salvation. Coleridge writes, “The self-same moment I could pray;

And from my neck, so free
The Albatross fell off and sank
Like lead into the sea.”

The Mariner experiences supernatural trials until finally, his rendezvous with a pilot, the pilot's son, and a hermit in a boat as divine messengers. The guilt-smitten Mariner rejoices at the pretext of getting his soul purged of his sins by the holy Hermit. The demeanor of the Hermit described by Coleridge evokes a splendid aura of a spiritually elevated persona,

“This Hermit good lives in that wood
Which slopes down to the sea.
How loudly his sweet voice he rears!
He loves to talk with mariners.
That come from a far country.”

The saintly prospect of the Hermit is reflected through the fact that he ritualistically undertakes prayer and performs *sandhya* during the three phases of a day, is considered to be very pious,

“*He kneels at morn, and noon, and eve—
He hath a cushion plump:
It is the moss that wholly hides
The rotted old oak- stump. (Italics mine)*”

The spiritual significance of *Trikaal Sandhya Vandana* has been well asserted in *Prayaschitaadhyay* of *Yajnavalkya smṛiti*. With a view to purifying the *Dwijah* of

any undeserving *karma* committed during day or night, Lord Brahma created *Sandhya* for their spiritual upliftment,

“Yavantoasyaam prithivyam hi vikarmasthaastu vai Dwijah/

Teshaam vai paavnaarthay sandhya srista svayambhuva//

Nishayaam va diva vaapi yadjnankritam bhavet/

Traikaalya sandhyakarnaat tatsarvam vipranashyati// (*Yajurvedya smriti, Prayaschitaadhyay* 307, quoted in *Nityakarma Poojaprakash* 66)

The Hermit's tranquil bent of mind reflects his indifference to the duality of the materialistic world, thereby cultivating the spirit of Samantha Buddha in the fashion of a *shritaprajna*, according to the *Bhagavad Gita*. Coleridge further writes, “O shrieve me, shrieve me, holy man!”

The Hermit crossed his brow.

'Say quick,' quoth he, 'I bid thee say—

What manner of man art thou?’

Forthwith, this frame of mine was wrenched

With a woeful agony,

Which forced me to begin my tale;

And then it left me free.”

Since the very moment the Mariner had uttered his soul to the Hermit, he felt, at certain intervals, his agony reaching its zenith till he narrated his tale to someone who listened to him admiringly. The Mariner had developed a numinous power of narration, and he could easily trace from the outer appearance of the person whether he would be an empathetic listener or not, alluding to the *samudrik as* referred to in *Jyotish shastra* (Astrology).

The ultimate moral and gist of the poem is a saga of a humanitarian approach toward all the living creatures of the universe, irrespective of their forms and importance. The tormented soul of the Mariner evolves to the extent of showing great belief in the cosmic order of God. Through his personal sufferings and turn of events, he had been able to realize that service and love to the creatures of God is the real service to Him and that the highest form of prayer is to show love and affection to all, as Lord Krishna says to Arjuna in the *shlok* 4 of Chapter 14 of the *Bhagavad Gita*,

“*sarvayonisu kaunteya murtayah sambhavanti yah/*

taasaam brahma mahadyoniraham beejapradah pita//”

(Whatever forms are produced, O Kaunteya, in all the wombs whatsoever, the great

BRAHMA is their womb, and I the seed-giving Father.) (BG 14/04)

Coleridge affirms the ultimate wisdom enshrined in the history of humanism impregnated with an idea to spread love and affection with everyone because that is the only path of *Moksha*,

“Farewell, farewell! but this I tell
To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!
He prayeth well, who loveth well.
Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best, who loveth best.
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.”

Isha Upanishad also holds the same thought and treats every living being merely as an extension of one's Soul- self,

“*Yastu sarvaani bhutani aatmanyeva vaanu pashyati
sarvabhuteshu chatmanam tato na vijugupsate*”

(Who sees everything in his *Atman* and his *Atman* in everything, by that he feels no revulsion.) (*Isha Upanishad shloka 6*)

Chapter 6, verse 11 of *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* communicates further the same idea, “*eko deva sarva shooteth good hah sarva vape sarva bhootantaratma*” that means “God, who is one only, is hidden in all beings. He is all-pervading, and is the inner self of all creatures.” (Tyagisananda 123)

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is a psychological study that analyzes *Karma* theory. No salvation can be accomplished until the fruits of one's actions are realized. Goodness begets goodness, and so does its opposite. Literary, historical, and mythical examples prove this theory beyond any doubt whatsoever. King Dasarath of Ayodhya, Bheeshma, Karna, etc., had to bear the impact of the *karmic* design. Aswatthama, the son of Guru Dronacharya, was doomed to roam about, consequent upon his heinous act of killing the sons of Draupadi in sleep and attempting to brutally harm the womb of Uttara, the wife of Abhimanyu, who was in the family way. The boon of immortality on the part of him ultimately turned out to be a bane. The ancient Mariner suffers a similar fate. Life, being the *mrityulok*, serves result as a result of

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one's good or bad actions, and to my conviction, it takes place only in the present life. Death is the state of eternal catharsis; a person becomes totally free from the bondage of *Karma* and *Prayashchit* after he breathes his/her last. Highly didactic in its tenor and tone, Coleridge's *Rime* proves to be a poem highly influenced by Indian wisdom that holds a benevolent message for humanity ---

Ashtadash Puraneshu Vyasasya Vachana dvayam/

Paropkaarah punyay paapay parpeedanam//

(In all the 18 Puranas, two messages of Maharshi Vyas are very important. First – Doing favors to others is saintly, and second – giving trouble to others is a sin.)
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108-110/

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