
Analysis of Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" Through *S'abda Vyāparās*

Ms. Priyamvada C^{1.}, Doctoral Research Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Andhra Pradesh

Dr. Maitali Khanna², Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Andhra Pradesh

**Paper Received on 09-09-2023, Accepted on 22-10-2023,
Published on 22-10-23; DOI: 10.36993/ RJOE.2023.8.4.75**

Abstract

Tennyson, a representative poet of the Victorian Age, is known for his profound poetic thought. Much of his poetry has been explored for many themes and stylistic interpretations. However, his poems are the epitome of 'suggestiveness', carrying in them universal appeal for all times and ages. And 'suggestive meanings' as explained and enumerated by our Sanskrit theoreticians would serve the best technique to delve deep into the meanings evoked by the words Tennyson deliberately picks. *Dhvani*, as expounded by Ānandavardhana opens various avenues to explore the meanings through suggestiveness. The article explores kinds of meanings, suggestiveness leads a reader to in Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" using *s'abda vyāparās* i.e. *abhidhā*, *lakṣanā* and *vyañjanā*. While the poem is on a sea voyage, *lakṣanā* and *vyañjanā* reveal more meanings of the poem. The poem is also about the journey from life to death, merging with the ultimate and also about "crossing the bar" at various levels in human life.

Keywords: Abhidhā, Lakṣanā, Vyañjanā, Tennyson, Crossing the Bar.

Introduction

"*Dhvani* is that ability of a signifier, a set of signifiers, a meaning, a sound, or a gesture to suggest (*pratīyamāna*) something other than what it explicitly presents" (Chandran & V. S., 2021). A word has three powers or *s'abda vyāparās/ s'abda sakthis* through which sense of poetry can be obtained. "The central thesis of the theory of *dhvani* is that words in their capacity of conveying sense, possess a threefold function, and consequently express a threefold sense. The three functions are known as *abhidhā* (denotation), *lakṣanā* (indication) and *vyañjanā* (suggestion), and correspondingly the three senses conveyed are *abhidheya* or *vācya* (denoted, primary), *lakṣya* (indicated) and *vyañgya* (suggested) respectively" (Vijayavardhana, 2010). *Abhidhā* is the conventional meaning or popular accepted meaning due to long usage. *Lakṣanā* is the figurative meaning. When *abhidhā* does not make complete sense and there is more to be

conveyed, *lakṣanā* gives the meaning. There are three conditions for *lakṣanā* to function: "In the first place, there should be total incongruity of the primary sense in the given context. Secondly, there should be some purpose (*prayojana*) or some usage (*rūḍhi*) to resort to a secondary sense. Thirdly the secondary sense thus obtained ought to have a connection with the primary sense of the word" (Vijayavardhana, 2010). *Vyañjanā* or the suggested sense can occur along with *abhidhā* and *lakṣanā* or without them. It leads us to a deeper meaning. "... *dhvani* arises only when in a composition, the suggested and not the expressed content is what contributes to its poetic worth" (Vijayavardhana, 2010). Only a *sahrdaya* or a receptive reader can delve deep and reap *dhvani*. The first two kinds of meanings i.e. *abhidhā* and *lakṣanā* were in use, and were used and passed on by Sanskrit theoreticians over centuries. *Vyañjanā* or suggestive meaning was given by Ānandavardhana in the ninth century, making Sanskrit poetics richer by giving a deeper and wider understanding.

Research on Tennyson

An article written by John Morton entitled, "Tennyson Studies: Current Scholarly Activity", published in 2017, reviews various approaches Tennyson scholars have taken to explore his poetic thought. Studies done comprises Celticist influences on Tennyson, Tennyson's poems through the lens of Christianity, Tennyson's

poetic voice, literal and spiritual echoes in Tennyson's poems, etc. (Morton, 2017). Another article on "Tennyson Studies" shows that studies are done on subjectivity and artistry, examining Derridean *différance* on Tennyson's works, post structuralist approaches etc. (Hughes, 2017). Linda K. Hughes who has closely read the studies done on Tennyson for over fifty years says, "... wherever new scholarly methods or theories go, Tennyson scholarship is sure to be represented" (Hughes, 2017). This puts in context the scope of reading Tennyson from close quarters using varieties of concepts and ideas. Tennyson's poems are, in a way, testimonial to his conscious and deliberate choice of diction, words and voice. As testified by Sanskrit scholars that words have such powers that lead to layers and varieties of meanings, Tennyson's poetry stands as an illustration to this endorsement. This article proposes to evoke deeper and suggestive meanings in Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" just by analysing the diverse meanings the words therein generate, employing the directives of *s'abda vyāparās* by Sanskrit theoreticians, which has not yet entered Tennyson scholarship. The denotative, indicative, representative, symbolic and figurative meanings that a word in context possesses conjure up various suggestions. These suggestions, especially in the composition like poetry, guides a reader to the various levels of understanding.

Analysis

“Crossing the Bar ” is written by the poet laureate of the Victorian age, Alfred, Lord Tennyson. This poem is an allegory, wherein there is a superficial meaning on top and a deeper meaning hidden within the poem.

Abhidheyārtha/ Denotative Meaning

At the surface level, this poem seems to be about a sea voyage. When the poem begins there is “Sunset and evening star” which marks the end of the day. A ship is about to start its voyage. Tennyson mentions the “final call” which is given for all the passengers to board just before a ship embarks on its journey. Tennyson is a traveller himself. When he starts his voyage he does not want any moaning. When he starts his journey, he does not want to hear the murmuring sound of the waves and also the sound created by the ship hitting against the sandbar. Both auditory and visual imagery can be experienced here. He also wishes for a tide, which is moving and not static, but which helps in movement without making any noise. “When that which drew from out the boundless deep/Turns again home,” then rings the “evening bell” announcing the close of the day. He wishes that nobody is sad when he bids farewell and departs on his journey. Though he may be carried beyond the limits of time and space as understood by humans, he retains the hope that he will be able to look upon the face of his “Pilot” when he has crossed the sand bar.

Lakṣanārtha/ Connotative Meaning

The poem is written from the point of view of the first person. There are many literary devices employed in the poem. Figures of speech purports to express something beyond the denotative meaning; it is a departure from the literal meaning of *abhidhā*. Tennyson has intentionally picked sea metaphor for this poem because it takes us beyond the indicative meaning and evokes the suggestion of crossing the *bhavasāgara*. It is not just leaping over something as in *abhidhā*, but the journey throughout. “Evening bell” is an implicit metaphor and is immediately compared to the final call. The extended metaphor of sea runs throughout the poem. The title “Crossing the Bar” is a metaphor of the journey from life to afterlife and the “bar” stands for death. The “clear call” is the announcement to alert that death is approaching. “Sunset and evening star” is a metaphor indicating that the poet is in the final years of his life. The “evening star” is like a guiding star for the “clear call” of journey through death to the nether world. “Evening star” indicates the wisdom that comes with “sunset”/old age. In the title, the word “bar” is also metonymic. Bar stands for the ocean itself. The word “Pilot” also metonymically represents somebody who leads an individual forward. Tennyson is expecting death. “Pilot” can be Christ who was himself crossed, who will help him cross the ocean. The poet uses the extended metaphor of crossing the sand bar to

sail forward to indicate man's journey from life to the other world. The wordplay of "crossing" is metaphorical as Jesus died on a cross. Jesus resurrected three days after; only after "cross"ing did he resurrect. The metaphor of sunset indicates that as with sunset the actions of a day come to an end, so too the actions of man come to an end with the closure of human life. Sunset is like the last stage of life. The "evening star" is old age. It is a warning of death's arrival. Tennyson says, "one clear call for me". He is certain of his death. Symbolism is present in the poem as well. The words "twilight" and "evening" symbolise old age. It takes a lot of struggle for a ship to cross over a sandbar. So, "moaning" is symbolic of the struggle during death. "Bar" is the barrier or death to be crossed in order to meet God who is symbolised in the word "Pilot". The "flood" which will take him far is symbolic of the faith of the poet. In Christianity God is believed to be the pilot of everyone's life. This leads to the understanding that the "Pilot" is God. "Moaning" is usually connected with the pain during death. Depth of the tide is symbolic of wisdom and faith in God. The waves rising from the sea, touching the land and merging in the sea is symbolic too. Man too comes to earth for a short span and "Turns again home". The term "boundless deep" is indicative of that real home. The time of the day mentioned is symbolic as well. "Sunset" is old age and "dark" is death.

And he seeks no "moaning" when he dies. "Moaning" is usually associated with pain and anguish. He wants to have a painless and peaceful death. He wants to have complete contentment, when death approaches him. When the purpose of life is fulfilled, one can embrace death in absolute peace. When life is lived gloriously one can calmly end the journey of life and go back to where he came from. As there is "twilight" for a short span before darkness, so too in human life after old age certainly comes "dark"/ death. He does not want others to grieve when he dies. He is not sad himself as he has embraced the reality. Through death, he will be transported to a space which is beyond the time of this world. But once the "bar"/ death is crossed he hopes to see "my Pilot"/ God.

The word "bar" is relevantly placed in the title itself. The pun in "bar" indicate different kinds of bars. From a log of wood (crossing the daily obstacles) or a boundary (crossing a lifetime) to the ocean (crossing life itself), there are multiple meanings for "bar", suggesting various stages of human birth. There are alliterations in the phrases, "clear call" and "full for sound and foam". The "sandbar" is personified in the first stanza as it is said to be "moaning". In the second stanza, the "tide is personified as it "seems asleep". Assonance is seen in the line, "And may there be no moaning of the bar". The lines "*I hope to see my Pilot face to face/ When I have crost the bar*" are enjambed.

Euphemism is evident in the poem. Death is usually taken gravely and much sadness and fear are associated with it, but Tennyson presents it as a simple phenomenon. The poet has used different metres in different lines and gives us the auditory imagery of the sound of waves. Tennyson uses the word “when” at many places. This denotes that he is certain of future events. At the same time, he also uses the word “may” at various places. This shows his uncertainty on what might happen. “Twilight and evening bell” foreshadows death. The words in the poem are replete with imagery. “Sunset and evening star”, “But such a tide as moving seems asleep” and “bar” evoke visual imagery. There is auditory imagery in “evening bell”. Nautical imagery pervades the poem as an extended metaphor.

As congruous with the conditions of *Lakṣanārtha*, the connotative understanding of the poem comes with *prayojana* and *rūḍhi*. It takes us to explore the profound themes of the poem. Though the *Abhidheyārtha* presents death as the theme of the poem, the tone is not melancholic, instead it is courageous. The pun in the title word “crossing” is indicative of a reflective tone, a voice that suggests Christ-like vision, taking the readers to explore the themes of courage and acceptance in the poem. The poem is also about living honourably; only then can one accept death bravely. Another very significant theme that *lakṣanārtha* in “Pilot”,

“call”, “evening star” evokes is home. The poem is about the journey to the real home from the temporary one. The metaphorical/ metonymical suggestions in these words expand the sense of ‘death’ – not just a soul’s temporary change of a body, but a permanent release from the cycles of many births and deaths. “Pilot” as God, “call” as inner realization, “evening star” as the ultimate phase of our sojourn on earth and “bar” as piles of many lives are suggestive of the most profound theme of time. When the time comes, all will have to leave this world. It is the time that prepares man for the journey too.

***Dhvani*/ Suggestive Meaning**

Lakṣanārtha in the words as explained above led to various themes, and interpretations. However, beyond the figurative, indicative and symbolic meaning, the words invoke *dhvani* of suggestions that meander the readers through various lanes of understanding. The use of “I”, “me” in suggestivity is more deictic. When referred to the poet himself, the readers get to know him better and deeper through his choice of words and suggestions therein. The *Lakṣanārtha* that readers explore persuade him to know the poet well, suggest a biographical reading of the poem. Tennyson was eighty years old when he penned this poem and he was well aware of the next phase of the journey which awaited him. The poem was written by Tennyson in 1889 three years before his death. His second son

died in the year 1886. This could also have contributed to his realisation of the vulnerability of life and the truth of death.

“Mind you put *Crossing the Bar* at the end of all editions of my poems’, he said to his son some days before he died” (Steane, 1969). He did cross the bar between life and death very smoothly. His doctor, Andrew Clark had described Tennyson’s death as “the most glorious (death) he had ever seen”. “It is ‘the national belief’, said *The Times*, ‘that the late Lord Tennyson is distinctly and emphatically one of the immortals” (Steane, 1969). “Even *Punch* gave up its large illustration page to an engraving of the poet standing up firmly in a boat yet still looking spirit-like, crowned with laurels and inevitably ‘Crossing the Bar” (Steane, 1969). “... ‘Crossing the Bar’ (1889) perfectly epitomises his final attitude to death, a mixture of fatalism, stoicism and doubtful optimism, through the image of starting a voyage into the unknown at evening” (Turner, 1976).

Considering the circumstance in which Tennyson wrote this poem, a suggestive meaning is evident. The *Vyāṅgyārtha* of life after death evidently runs through the poem. On a deeper note under the pretense of sea voyage the journey of man from life to death is portrayed. Death is not the end of all. Knowing the biographical purport of the poem, *dhvani* in the deixis “I”, “me”, thus evoked, shifts

the *origo*, the reference point, to the readers, taking the narrative from person to persona. And this leads to the schematic exploration of the reader’s schema, where the suggestions in the poems follow the prior knowledge of readers. Here the words, lines and the poem itself evoke *Vyāṅgyārtha*, a relatable suggestion, which comes along with or without *abhidā* or/and *lakṣanā*.

An Indian reader, cannot help but get detracted into Indian philosophy here. Life beyond death is a new lease of life in another world, is hidden in the lines of the poem. And according to Indian ideology, death is not the end as the soul goes on to take another birth which befits his actions of the previous birth. The ones who have done away with all the karmas or baggage attain liberation. There is the concept of *Bhavasāgara* or the ocean of worldly life in *Sanāthana Dharma*. According to this, in order to cross the *bhavasāgara*, one needs a master alongside to help row through this sea; a master who has crossed the sea himself, and can guide his disciple in the right direction. Once the *bhavasāgara* is crossed, the body perishes and the soul travels from this world, ‘*iha*’ which is temporary to the next, ‘*para*’ which is permanent. It is a kind of homecoming. We are here in this world only for a short span of time. We belong elsewhere and we return there after death. The four *mahavākyas* given in the *Upanishads* also confirm the same. The four

mahavākyas are: “*tat tvam asi*” meaning you are that, “*aham brahmāsmi*” meaning I am Brahman or divine, “*prajnanam brahma*” meaning consciousness is divine and “*ayam atma brahma*” meaning the self or soul is divine. We all are part of the divine or the ultimate consciousness. Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba says, “I separated myself from myself so that I can love myself”. We are here only for a while after which we return to our real home. In that case, “moaning” is unnecessary. Nobody cries as much while returning home. An “evening star” is symbolic of calmness. It also indicates the final call from the other world to come and join the journey towards it, after crossing the bar of death. Once the bar is crossed what awaits him is the Pilot/ ultimate reality. Experiencing God is a solace.

In another sense, awareness of life and always being prepared for it is in itself crossing the bar. In daily life too man needs to cross that “bar” for a better life, a better career or for better relationships. Till the bar is crossed one stays wherever he is, stuck without any progress. Getting out of the comfort zone or crossing the bar is very important in life. Leaving behind ‘*iha*’ or temporary to attain ‘*para*’ or something higher will lead man to success in all frontiers. That one step towards freedom, towards betterment of life should be taken crossing all the mental barriers. Once it is crossed a new world filled with possibilities welcomes warmly. There is no loud

“final call” in this stage of human life. There are no loud hints but subtle ones directing man to take the right turn. Men who ‘moan(s)’ over everything, achieve less. People who do not loudly show what they do in their life, or where they are headed, reach their goals. There is no noise made, but they will not be static either. There is silent movement forward. Like “twilight” is a hint for the next phase that is night, so too life offers subtle but visible hints to help man journey forward. Man is put in the same kind of circumstances, similar situations and people with affinities, to make him aware of what went wrong previously and how to handle those situations well. Life offers many chances to grow, chances to overcome, till man learns and moves forward. In daily life too man can heed to the “evening bell” and bow down to God or the higher power, seeking help to cross the various bars of human life. That would surely lead man to face the problems and see the end of dreaded situations, even if it is death.

A well-read reader will recall an anecdote of Sage Narada being sent to the earth by Lord Narayana, asking him to report the incident that evoked the most amount of wonder. Sage Narada tours the earth and reports back to Lord Narayana that the incident which evoked the most amount of wonderment in Narada was the moaning of peoples relatives after their beloved ones death. He said that he found that all over the earth. Why did this common phenomenon induce

wonder in Narada? Death is not the end. Once a man is born it is certain that he will die someday. Death is just the beginning of another journey. In fact, death is constant. It keeps happening. Even the people who moan over their beloved's death will die someday. What should be done for one not to die? Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba says that if one does not want to die, he should not take birth in the first place. How profound! In order to be not born ever again man should do away with his karma or baggage.

Tennyson has the attitude of complete acceptance towards this inexperienced journey and is in a state of contentment. Since death is a reality, he does not want his farewell to be sad. He also hopes to meet his "Pilot". Thus, there is no "moaning". He wishes for tides "Too full for sound and foam" to sail him beyond the waters of death smoothly. In the *Maha Mrityunjaya Mantra*, we pray to the "Pilot" who knows the past, present and future to let us detach ourselves easily from the worldly bondage as easily as the *urvaruka*/ the gourd detaches itself from the stem. He believes that he will be taken to another level of "Time and Place", different from human understanding. The "Pilot" could also be Hallem, Tennyson's friend who was his soul companion for years. Tennyson's views on life and death had changed much after Hallem's death. According to Christianity, the "crossing" of Jesus gave man the blessing to reach another

"Time and Place" heaven and reunite with God.

The suggestive understanding behind the metonymic "bar" leads the reader to intertextuality here. Intertextual suggestion can be another stroke to suggestive meaning. Bar is the cycle of birth and death. The concept of the cycle of birth and death or crossing the *bhavasāgara* is something which everyone should go through to finally cross the bar. In order to achieve this a pilot is required. Taking the ninety first verse of Tagore from *Gitanjali* and placing it in this context, we find intertextuality. In the last couple of poems of *Gitanjali*, Tagore has spoken about death. Bar can be equated to death. Death is not the end but only a stage to be crossed. Tagore sees death as an important link between God and the seeker. This is close to Tennyson seeking link with his Pilot. Thus it evokes intertextual allusion here.

O thou the last fulfilment of life,
Death, my death, come and whisper to me!

Day after day I have kept watch for thee;

for thee have I borne the joys and pangs of life.

All that I am, that I have, that I hope and all my love

have ever flowed towards thee in depth of secrecy.

One final glance from thine eyes and my life will be ever thine own.

The flowers have been woven

and the garland is ready for the bridegroom.

After the wedding the bride shall leave her home

and meet her lord alone in the solitude of night (Tagore, 1920).

When both poems are compared, the title suggests the reversal of subject. After analysing Tagore's poem, we find that death becomes the subject, who is crossing the bar to come and take the bride to meet his master. In the Bible it is said that, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then 'face to face'...".

Conclusion

"Crossing the Bar" is a short but meaningful poem enlightening readers on how one should be ready to leave when the "final call" is heard. Christopher Ricks says, "Six times it ("Crossing the Bar") speaks of "I" or "me." And yet no poem was ever less self-absorbed. Its self-possession is a possession of, not by, self, and it is the single occurrence of the word "our" which gently but inexorably claims the poem and which vindicates Tennyson's unclamorous claim to the central humanity of a great poet" (Ricks, 1974). The application of *shabda vyāparās* has helped fathom various levels of meanings present in the poem and make the poem universal

meant for people at all times and places preparing everyone to leave this "Time and Place".

References:

- Chandran, M., & V. S., S. (2021). *An Introduction to Indian Aesthetics: History, Theory and Theoreticians* (1st ed.). Bloomsbury Academic India.
- Hughes, L. K. (2017). TENNYSON STUDIES, 1967-2017. *Tennyson Research Bulletin*, 11(1), 9–14. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48596478>
- Morton, J. (2017). TENNYSON STUDIES. *Tennyson Research Bulletin*, 11(1), 21–24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48596481>
- Ricks, C. (1974). *Tennyson*. The Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Steane, J. B. (1969). *Tennyson*. ARCO Publishing Company.
- Tagore, R. (1920). *Gitanjali – Song Offerings Spiritual Poems of Rabindranath Tagore*. The Macmillan Company.
- Turner, P. (1976). *Tennyson*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Vijayavardhana, G. (2010). *Outlines of Sanskrit Poetics*. Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office.

How to cite this article?

Ms. Priyamvada C & Dr. Maitali Khanna, "Analysis of Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" Through S'abda Vyāparās" *Research Journal Of English (RJOE)*8(4), PP:67-75,2023, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.4.75