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A CRITICAL STUDY OF IGNORANCE IN J. M. SYNGE'S THE WELL OF THE SAINTS

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Abstract

Om Asto Maa Sadgamaya

Tamaso Maa Jyotir Gamya

Mrityor Maa Amrtam Gamaya

Om Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih

(Brihadaranyaka Upanishad-I.iii.28)

The above prayer is not meant for the material things of the world like health, wealth, success, glory, fame or so on. It is meant for God's support in our transcendence. It is meant to free us from our sundry misunderstandings regarding our self, the universe and God and bless us with 'true knowledge'. Tamaso Maa Jyotirgamaya means leading from darkness to light. When the Vedas refer to darkness and light, they mean 'ignorance' and 'knowledge'. This is so because ignorance, like darkness, obscures true understanding. As the only remedy for darkness is light, the only remedy for ignorance is knowledge. The knowledge spoken of here is again the knowledge of one's 'true self'.

Key Words: Jyotirgamay, Ignorance etc..

1. Introduction

J. M. Synge's The Well of the Saints(1905) is worthy of serious critical attention for more than one reason. One of the important reasons for it is the protagonist's journey from ignorance to knowledge- reflecting the Upanishadic injunction of the movement from untruth to truth- which is

artistically worked out in the life of blind protagonist couple Martin and Mary Doul. This kind of Upanishadic and philosophical base gives the play *The Well of the Saints* its peculiar significance. Synge has admirably worked out here the struggles of sensitive souls of blind Martin and Mary inching its way, against formidable odds, some present within themselves and much in the social situations around, towards self-realizations and attainment of knowledge.

The Well of the Saints is a serio-comedy based on a French farce *Moralite de l'Aveugle et du Boiteux* (Morality play of the Blind Man and the Cripple) by Andrien de la Vigne. Though, Synge is inspired by *Moralite de l'Aveugle et du Boiteux*, the plot, setting, tragic-comic elements, philosophical base of the theme of *The Well of the Saints* is his own invention. Synge took up a romantic dream of love for the sake of poesy in the play. The ridiculous beggar's impossible dream of romance plumbs the emotional and idealistic depths of Synge's protagonist and transforms what was farcical in *Moralite de l'Aveugle et du Boiteux* into a tragedy in *The Well of the Saints*.

The play opens at cross-roads nearby a Wick low village from where Martin and Mary Doul, a blind, old, ugly, battered beggar couple is passing to the fair. The couple is happy and living peacefully by the way-side, sustaining in the ignorance that they are a handsome couple. Their illusionary world is founded on the deceitful mockery of the villagers who instilled the illusion in this ignorant, miserable couple out of mixed feelings of pity and jest. Due to ignorance, Martin and Mary consider themselves as "so fine looking" (62) and "the finest man and the finest woman of the seven countries of the East" (62). Martin considers that he has "wedded with the beautiful dark woman of Ballinatone" who has "yellow hair" and "soft skin".

The other characters of the play like Timy, a middle aged vigorous smith, Molly Byrne, a fine looking girl, Bride, another girl and other villagers deceive Martin and Mary and make them believe that they are extremely beautiful, while in fact, they are unattractive beggars. Throughout the Act I, Martin and Mary Doul live in the world of false impression and ignorance in which they imagine themselves as "so fine looking" which gives them a feeling of false contentment, pleasure and exhilaration.

The blind couple becomes innocent victim of the village people's deceit, due to their ignorance. On this ground, the play evokes our pity for Martin and Mary. What they know about themselves is through others' languages. As Mary C. King pointed out, "language has mediating role for the blind couple since they are dependent on it to construct their vision of objective and subjective reality" (King.1985:106). It is clearly evident in couple's, especially in Mary's speech that what they in reality know or think about their bodily appearances is gathered from the villager's talk. "I've heard tell", "for I do look my best, I've heard them say when I'm dressed up with that thing on my head". It shows that "through the medium of language the blind couple shares in a social interaction with the community, in which the villagers serve as mirror to the couple". But Martin and Mary are not only deceived by others but also by themselves ignoring the reality. They are first deceived by their fellow villagers, but since what they hear fits their imagination of their desired beauty they accept the lie without making much effort to question it.

In Act I, Martin expresses his longing for the recovery of his sight in order to make sure that his imaginary picture of themselves is in fact true: "It'd be a grand thing if we could see ourselves for one hour, or a minute itself, the way we'd know surely we were the finest man and the finest woman of the seven countries of the East".

At the end of the Act I, the Saint's holy water cures their sight. We see Martin Doul crying out in joy that he sees the walls of the church and the great width of the sky:

Oh, glory be to God, I see now surely... is the walls of the
Church, and the green bits of ferns in them, and yourself, holy
father, and the great width of the sky.(73)

He runs in half-foolish joy and sees Molly Byrne, with her grand hair and soft skin and eyes, sitting in Mary Doul's seat. When Molly makes game of him, he goes from one young girl to another identifying Mary and people are cruelly mocking "Try again, Martin, try again, and you'll be finding her yet" (74). After restoring their sight, Martin and Mary have to face a bitter reality of life. Their recognition of their real ugly physical appearances and the deceit they were living in results in immediate disappointment and the rejection of each other which is worsened by the villagers' ridiculing.

In Act II, we see Martin and Mary facing harsh realities of life. Martin is seen working for Timy at his forge. He was working hard and getting less than when he was sitting blinded at the cross-road: "It's more I got a while since, and I sitting blinded in Grianan than I get in this place, working hard and destroying myself the length of the day". Besides the tyranny of his master, Martin also has to face contemptuous humiliations by Molly Byrne. Martin and Mary both are seen frustrated, humiliated. They are seen not at ease as they were in their blindness. The grand day of restoring their sights proved but a bad day. When Act III opens, Martin and Mary Doul lost their sight and are seen blind again, sitting back at the cross-road realizing an early spring day. The Saint comes once again and is ready to cure sight of Martin and Mary at second time and permanently. But Martin and Mary are not ready to get it restored because now they attained the knowledge of 'real self' and real world. Martin says to the Saint;

MARTIN DOUL:[more troubled] We are not asking our sight,
holy father, and let you walk on your own way, and be fasting,
or praying, or doing anything that you will, but leave us here in
our peace, at the crossing of the roads, for its best we are this
way, and we're not asking to see (98).

Although the saint was ready to cure their sight permanently to integrate them into the society of the seeing people, they willingly reject it and decide to return to the state of their blindness. In Raymond William's words, "when their sight fade again, they achieve a new illusion of their dignity of old age and fly in terror from a renewed offer to restore their sight of real world". The source of their disappointment is obviously the society around them into which they are not able

and not willing to integrate. Mary's scornful remark on the society, "they're bad lot those that have their sight" is quite evident in this connection.

Martin and Mary reject the holy water to restore their sight once again at the end of the play because they attained the knowledge of 'true self' and life. They want to keep themselves away from the harsh realities of the life. As has already mentioned, the source of the couple's disappointment is not only their ugliness but also ugliness of the society around them. The couple turns their back to the superficial, hollow world and finds reconciliation in the fantasy of their imagined world. They also want to keep themselves aloof from any sort of worldly pleasure. Martin and Mary want to live far away from the din and bustle of the society. They long for absolute freedom from cares and anxieties which constitutes the very essence of happiness in life.

Synge's protagonists in the present play, Martin and Mary aspire to an impossible noble life, cherishing their personal distinction, even in the teeth of life's bitter realities. Synge's other protagonists are aristocrats of the soul. Blind Martin and Mary Doulo of the present play also take their place in this company. What is most fascinating about the play is not the story but the questions it raises. Martin and Mary were ignorant about the real meaning of beauty, self and life but at last they attained a perfect knowledge of the self. At last, we can recognize their cry for assistance in their transcendence. They prefer blindness instead of sight because they come to know the finite nature of all the objects of the world and want themselves to lead *asat* to *sat*, ignorance to knowledge.

Martin and Mary prefer blindness instead of a permanent cure of their sight at the hand of the Saint. This leading or transformation of Martin and Mary is not a physical one. But it is a journey of souls of Martin and Mary from what they misunderstand to be theirs to what truly is of their own. They got knowledge of the things that the things of the world and material pleasures are impermanent and cannot bring them lasting happiness. The human goal according to Vedanta is self realization, attainment of knowledge of self from ignorance. The *atma* is the ultimate reality, when one realizes his true nature, he attains spiritual fulfillment in this life itself. Then, upon death, he does not go to any heavenly abode but simply merges into the supreme reality. This is what Martin and Mary might have understood; hence they prefer blindness instead of sight in Synge's *The Well of the Saints*.

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