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Revisiting Masefield: A Dhvani Interpretation of *Sea Fever*

Dr. Sumathi Shivakumar

Assoc. Professor of English,
Agurchand Manmull Jain College,
Chennai -61

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Abstract:

A small insignificant matter of existence is sufficient to arouse mystical thinking in any true artist. Nature's inspiration on a bard is aplenty and is only natural. William Blake could see the 'Universe in a grain of sand'. Robert Frost could read the 'Design' in a spider's preying on a moth. But then, can man made matters also inspire poets? Can (wo)men of creative letters lend mysticism to Nature's bounty? How?

A Genius can!

A re-reading of Masefield's poem, 'Sea Fever' lends itself to newer interpretations enriched with mysticism. This interpretation seeks support from the Dhvani theory of 'Suggestiveness'.

Dhwani is powerful literary theory, promulgated by ancient Indian litterateur Ananda Vardhana and explicated a few centuries later by Abhinava Gupta. This theory advocates that the richness of any literary work lies not in the superficial meaning but in the implied signification of suggestiveness. This also implies that the reader must be well-lettered to extract implied signification with sufficient evidence from the literary piece. The more implied meaning is extracted, the merrier it is to read such works. Thus, by excavating such hidden meanings, a simple piece of art turns into a rich and rewarding experience for the reader.

This paper is an attempt to explore an interpretation of human nature, as reflected in different stages of life in John Masefield's *Sea Fever*.

Keywords: Dhvani, sea, poetry, human nature, life, suggestiveness, interpretation.

Introduction

There is a general perception that considers the Mystics and Poets to be interesting - but largely irrelevant in practical terms. However, the insights of the Mystics and Poets could be uniquely relevant and indispensable, if the work is well comprehended. This is all the more true with John Masfield, as his writings do not as a rule aim at mystification like a Blake or a Frost, but simply see what everyone has seen but think what nobody has thought.

The sea, by itself serves a metaphor for many things – infinity, ambition, aspiration, adventure and many more. It has also been among the most sought after theme for the writers. *The Tempest* is among the most popular comedies of Shakespeare, begins with a shipwreck on a tempestuous night, Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* with its spirit of adventure, Mathew Arnold's very poignant *Dover Beach*, William Wordsworth's eco spiritual *By the sea*, Tennyson's immortal *Ulysses* are to name a few. In all these poems, it is easily discernable that, the sea has always captured human imagination and attention and therefore can be dwelt deep for meanings. Much research have also gone into their hidden meanings. However, Masfield's *Sea Fever* is very elusive. On the face of it, it appears to be a straight from the heart, innocent sequence of rhyme and rhythm. But, while reading between the lines, the underlying mysticism emerges as smoothly as a fish swimming in the sea.

Published in 1902, his first collection of poems, *Salt-Water Ballads* is a compilation of such teasingly elusive mysticisms. The poem *Sea Fever*, taken up for the present study, appears in this collection. The text is reproduced here:

The Text

Sea Fever

*I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.*

*I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.*

*I must down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.*

- **John Masefield**

A Critical Outline of the poem

Considered as his most famous work, John Masefield's *Sea Fever* defines the poet's craving for the sea. The first-person poetic voice transcends to become a representative voice of wanderlust and therefore, can be identified with by those with a thirst for thrills. The effortless ease, with which he demonstrates his love for the sea and the affinity towards sailing, emerges from the sailor that he once was.

According to Babington Smith (1978), Masefield's prolific writing consists of "a great deal of memorable poetry". Muriel Spark believes that his poetic tendencies have spilled over to his fiction as well. She claims, "John Masefield's achievements in fiction are, essentially, a poet's. He uses words with the utmost sensitivity. He occupies himself and engages the reader in the minutiae of every phenomenon he undertakes to write about – the smallest details of any profession or craft of mankind belonging to any period in history or any place are not overlooked by him. In this way he gets at the essentials of a situation, perhaps paradoxically. That is Masefield's secret". (Spark, 1992) *Sea Fever* can therefore be said to be the catapulting of this secret.

'*Sea Fever*' is a concise and simple lyrical composition. The refrain and other poetic devices lend themselves well to both a loud reading and reflections in solitude. The poem has three quatrains; the first two lines form a couplet, and the third and fourth form a second couplet. Composed in heptameter with varied types of feet across the poem,

the stress on each syllable too varies in every line. Perhaps it is this variation that makes the poem flow like music, while the irregular rhythm reflects the varying rhythms of the sea.

Every stanza opens with the refrain “I must down to the seas again”, immediately connecting to the title. Craving for the sea is the obvious theme of the poem, yet, it also suggests the very human desire to connect with one of the most powerful natural forces of the earth. Masfield exhibits an apparent adulation for this wild and beautiful entity, personifies, by referring to it as “her” and describing her “face”.

The desire to connect with the sea is shown through the pursuit of a sailor’s life as he asks for a ship to sail. To him the sea is “grey” and “lonely”, adding mysterious and melancholic implications, while enchanting at the same time.

No one can miss the alliterations in “a tall ship and a star to steer her by” and “the wheel’s kick and the wind’s song and the white sail’s shaking”. The visual images of the sea form a perfect foil to the auditory effects of the alliterations. One can hear the typical chanting that sailors render while sailing.

The second stanza is vibrant and action packed, stimulating all the five senses. Masfield’s depiction of the sea makes us wonder if we are reading his poem or strolling on the shore. We could listen to the “sea-gulls crying”, watch the “white clouds flying”, feel the chill of the “windy day”, and taste the saltiness of the “flung spray and the blown spume”. He emphasizes the irresistible pull of the sea as he reiterates the “call”. The second refrain “And all I ask”, contrasts the simplicity of the sea to the complications of everyday life; both the verse and the sea here present something comfortable, consistent and familiar.

The third stanza of ‘*Sea Fever*’ foregrounds the theme of wanderlust. The poet’s love for “gypsy life” with a deep desire for a “laughing fellow-rover”, illustrate the ‘wanderlust’ theme. This quatrain is scattered with positive images of “merry yarn” and “sweet dream” and contrasted with a sharp and powerful image of “the wind’s like a whetted knife”. Besides, the presence of wind in all the three stanzas, serves to pit man only way.

So to sum up, the core message of the poem is the inherent contradictions of life at sea where the cruel winds and wild waves are harmonious with the sweet and endless freedom that one can enjoy.

The concluding line of the poem expands the scope of the theme. He uses the word “trick”. In sailing terms trick refers to a watch at sea: four hours watching followed by eight hours rest. At face value, it could mean a simple way of dealing with a balanced work and rest formula. However, there could be more than what meets the eye. The reference to the draw of the sea and the desire to travel perhaps eclipses the “long trick” as an implicit reference to life in general. Phrases like “quiet sleep” indicates a peaceful death that allows a “sweet dream”, of perhaps, life after death or after having worked well and lived truly. In that sense, and more the whole poem presents itself as a metaphor for life.

The poet persona seeks a “tall ship and a star to steer her by” in the first stanza. In the second stanza he asks for “the running tide”, “wild call” and “a windy day”. And in the third, he desires “a laughing fellow-rover” and “a quiet sleep”. Looking deeply, we can see the child in the first stanza, in need of someone ‘taller than himself, guiding and steering his life. The poet suggests he is an adventurous youth in the second stanza ready to face challenges courageously. He desires the wild call of the sea and windy day. In the third stanza, the poet portrays himself to be an old man, seeking a companion and a peaceful end to his life. The highly mystical ‘sleep’ or ‘rest’ is inevitable to all irrespective of their moral fibre.

Thus the poem lends itself to this interpretation throwing light on the fact that human beings irrespective of life on land or in the sea follow the three fundamental stages of life.

Now how do we account for this interpretation? Has the poet intended the poem to be interpreted on these lines? Why not?

Though the poet describes life at sea, he has never really claimed that his focus is only on sea. He is being subtly suggestive of the idea of similarity of human life whether in the sea or in land. This suggestiveness is what makes poetry reading a very rewarding experience. The theory of suggestiveness or implicit meaning is professed by the Dhvani theory promulgated first by Anandavardana in *Dhvanyaloka* and explicated by

Abhinavagupta in *Locana*. Suggestiveness is just one miniscule aspect of Dhvani, an unfathomable ocean and this is taken up for explication of John Masfield's *Sea Fever*.

The meaning which is the admiration of refined critics is generally considered to be the soul of poetry. The explicit and the implicit are regarded as its two aspects. The explicit is that which is obvious and works at a more superficial level. But the implicit is quite different from this. It shines supreme above the striking external constituents. Here the conventional meaning renders itself secondary and suggests the implied meaning. And this suggestion usually appears as flash upon the mind when we look beyond the literal meaning. Suggestion does not bear identity with indication because indication is grounded on the primary denotative force of the words. Thus suggestiveness works at a level which is far removed from the primary superficial denotative meaning of the text.

It may sound rather shallow at the moment that such an obvious interpretation - as that of suggestiveness which we can carry out even without the help of Dhvani is deemed great. But one has to consider the fact that this theory was proposed at a time when English literature was not yet born, while Greek and Latin had already reached stagnation point, and much less to speak of English Literary Theory. But Sanskrit was at its pinnacle of glory with scholar after scholar enlivening the literary scene with suggestiveness as the core of their compositions.

The inspiring analysis of aesthetic experience was set forth in the *Locana* of Abhinavagupta. India's founding literary critic for well over a thousand years, this critique has dominated traditional Indian theory on poetics and aesthetics. The *Locana* is essentially a commentary on the ninth-century *Dhvanyaloka* of Anandavardhana, which is the pivotal work in the history of Indian poetics.

The *Dhvanyaloka* revolutionized Sanskrit literary theory by proposing that the main goal of good poetry is to evoke a mood or "flavour" (*rasa*) and that this process can be explained only by recognizing a semantic power that transcends denotation and metaphor, namely, the power of suggestion. On this basis the *Locana* develops a theory of the psychology of aesthetic response.

Though rooted in the more familiar cultural traditions, the philosophical validity and practical efficacy of their theory is quite imminent. The dhvani theorists do not aim at harmonized notions of the particular. In the introduction to *Rasadhvani*, Abhinava

explicates only the most common principles of the nine emotions and art emotions on which the dhvani aesthetic rests. He assumes invariance at the most basic level; yet his system allows for cultural and other forms of difference. Furthermore, the dhvani theorists claim that the situations (determinant and consequents) under which a particular aesthetic experience occurs are infinitely varied and context bound. Cultural variance allows simply another context in which dhvani-related patterns can be recognized and elucidated.

A culture bound view of the dhvani schema is apparently based on specific language theories, ideas of order and metaphysics derived essentially from Hinduism, also permits substitution of each particular item by other indigenous, hybrid terms and matching concepts. 'From a Sanskritised Indic point of view, an abstract of the dhvani aesthetic would look something like this:

- (a) four levels of language awareness, *para* (undifferentiated transcendental signified), *Pasyanti* (the "beholding" awareness, or object awareness) *madhyama* (speech of thinking, understanding, fancying), and *vaikhari* (the audible, material language);
- (b) four aims of life, *dharma* (duty), *artha* (money or fortune), *kama* (desire), *moksa* (salvation);
- (c) three components of character and/or constituent elements of consciousness (*sattva* reason, *rajas* passion, *tamas* ignorance);
- (d) three types of mobilities (or dilatations) derived from various combinations of the constituent elements, *vikasa* (blossoming), *druti* (speed), *vistara* (expansion);
- (e) nine basic emotions and art emotions

srngara– love

karuna - pity

hasya - laughter

bibhatsa - disgust

raudra - terror

bhaya - fear

adbhutha - marvel

vira - valor

santa - peace

(f) the attendant permanent and transitory states of mind (sthayi and vyabhicaribhavas), consequents and determinants (anubhavas and vyabhicari)'. .

Added to these are seventy five figures of speech, numerous subtypes of each, all adding up to a final count of roughly 7,420 types of dhvani (Dhvanyaloka 646), or an "endless variety," as Abhinava states.

It is essentially at this point that one is able to decode the more sublime interpretation of human life in Masefield's *Sea Fever*. A very subtle combination of the different aspects of dhvani enables the reader to interpret the poem as a reflection of human life. Aspects language awareness, *pasyanthi* where the physical appearance of the sea, to which one can apply reason (sattva), and arrive at a metaphor (alamkara dhvani) to suggests that the desire to go to the sea varies with the different stages in life – handholding and guidance as a a child, courage and challenge ready as a youth and seeking companionship to avoid loneliness and a peaceful end to life in the old age. One can't help marvelling (*adbutha rasa*) at the remarkable accuracy of the connections.

Abhinava's dhvani aesthetic is undeniably one of the most significant non-Western literary / poetic theories that developed in India several centuries before the beginning of Mid-Eastern and European colonialisms. Its influence on modern criticism and critical theories are stupendous. Lacan's use of this theory as evidence easily ascertains a world-historical framework of continuity (and gratitude) particularly at a time when academic multi-culturalism today persists to be reticent about non-western literary theories. It parades a kind of view that literary theory, like the infinite matters of modern technoscience, was first conceived and/or created in the West and therefore any talk of pre-western literary criticism stirs up a response which is more of a kind of cynicism rather than a 'willing suspension of disbelief'. Hence, a post-colonial realignment of non Western theories outside the centers, along the margins of nation, culture, language, time, and history seems indispensable. It may be pertinent to note that much of western Literature can reveal new interpretations and understanding of the cultures they present, if they are studied and analysed from a Dhvani point of view. The poets might have employed the theory of suggestiveness rather unconsciously in their works. Hence modern research can focus on a Dhvani interpretation for a rich and rewarding literary experience.

'*Sea Fever*' is undeniably a revelation of the poet's love for the sea and the life of a sailor. Hidden inside is the fact that the poem is an extended metaphor of life itself- the desire to go to the sea varying with each stage in life. It is the poem's unpretentious simplicity and the relevance of the Dhvani theory that allow us to draw certain conclusions with respect to our individual lives, a fact that marks the poem a true work of art.

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