



Unhappy People in Frost's Poems from 'The Code' to 'The Vanishing Red'

Dr. K. A. Thosar,
S.P.M.T.M. Arts & Commerce College, Chikhli

Robert Frost is a popular American poet with 'Humanism' as the most important characteristic. The great poet, four time prestigious Pulitzer Prize Awardee views man in relation to his environment, and his society. Robert Frost says in the beginning of *North of Boston* that it is 'a book of people;' and critics have often added – 'of Yankee or New England people.' Robert Frost underlines the challenging life of these people and their acceptance of the unhappy lot, in their life.

Some poems of Frost discussed here on man-society relationship present some peculiar New England situations, New England characters and code of the region. 'The Code', 'The Mountain', 'A Hundred Collars', 'The Witch of Coos' and 'The Vanishing Red' roughly fall under this category. 'The Code' begins in a farm, as a number of Frost's nature and social poems, to acquire in a short while, form of philosophy. The meaning of the word 'code' connotes in two ways: a system or way of communication as well as a system of ethical values and ideals, beliefs and principles. This dramatic narrative, 'The Code' opens at the time of hasty work of hay-making in a meadow, desperate to collect the hay before an approaching storm. All of a sudden, one of the Yankee workers throws down the pitch fork angrily and leaves the farm. The town-bred farmer can't understand why the worker has quit. So the other hired man explains the conduct of his companion. The farmer, half an hour before had said something about their taking pains. The Yankee took his remark as an implied reproach at his work:

He thought you meant to find fault with his work.
That's what the average farmer would have meant-
James would take time, of course to chew it over
Before he acted: he'd just got round to act.¹

He also tells the farmer to take lesson from it: "The hand that knows his business won't be told / to do work better or faster- those two things" (Lathemed; p. 70). Though the locale and the nature of action is purely Yankee, the philosophy propagated here is truly universal. The remaining farmhand tells his own action, years before of how he once took revenge on a farmer who challenged his honour by urging him to work harder. The farmer was nearly dumped by the load sent ten times in quick succession. The poet as usual uses a very apt



and picturesque simile for the action of the farmer- 'He squeaked like a squeezed rat.' Yet he didn't say a word to the working hand as he knew that the worker upheld Yankee values. Thompson rightly said that Frost's characters do not become caricatures. Yet they are painted up to the limit of explaining the code of their behaviour. Their other aspects are kept unexplained. It is applicable to 'The Code'. In addition, the tone of the poem is like a lucid story told through conversation and the reader with rapt attention, goes on reading only to stop at the last line of the poem.

'The Mountain' is one step ahead of 'The Code' in conversational tone. The poem is nothing but a conversation, presenting two different ways of looking at one and the same thing. The length of the lines is reduced or increased as per the need of the expression in conversation. The poem also exquisitely portrays barriers in human life - human communication. The dialogue takes place between a traveller who wants to know more and more about the mountain and an elderly farmer who has lived all his life at the foot of the mountain, without even going once up to the peak. As the poem progresses, the traveler becomes a symbol of adventure, inquiry and inquisitiveness, whereas the elderly farmer becomes a contrasting symbol. Frost reveals both the sides, shows limitations of both the attitudes. The old farmer, though spent all his life at the foot of the mountain is not impressed by its grandeur. It is a big wall, a big obstacle in the growth and development of the village, as the farmer views:-

"We were but sixty voters last elections.

We can't in nature grow to many more

That things takes all the room!"²

He has no emotional attachment for the mountain. He has heard about the brook at the top of the mountain, but has never climbed the slope and also thinks it to be a futile effort - to climb it for the sake of climbing. The traveler asks in amazement: "You've never climbed it?" (Lathemed; p.42). The question has another hidden question, 'Why hasn't the farmer (and the villagers) reclaimed and conquered it for man's use?' The traveler seems energetic, curious and eager to climb the mountain. Yet he does not intend to climb it the same day, the same time. He wishes to climb it 'some other day'. The traveller asks the old farmer-

"Is that the way to reach to top from here?

Not for this morning, but some other times:

I must be getting back to breakfast now"³



He may or may not be a nature lover. Is it an adventure undertaken for his love of nature or an expression of human desire to conquer nature? The answer is to be found by readers.

In 'A Hundred Collars' the contrast evolves between 'a learned and a rustic', which results in images of timid professor and a drunken yet generous bill collector. Both are compelled to share one room during night in a country hotel. The third person narrator opens the poem, with an ironical remark about the pompous personality of Dr. Magoon:-

Lacaster bore him – such a little town,
Such a great man. It doesn't see him often
Though a great scholar, he's a democrat,
If not at heart, at least on principle.⁴

We are told that Dr. Magoon is on his way to join his family for a few days. He has to wait four hours between trains, so he finds himself forced to share a room with a stranger. After introduction, Magoon and Lafe converse with each other; Magoon inadequately gets unveiled. The two characters represent two ways of living, two attitudes towards life. Dr. Magoon is a distinguished scholar, a college teacher, whereas Lafe is a vulgar, travelling bill-collector, who spends his days moving about the countryside for a local newspaper.

The two characters project contrast in their physical appearance and their reaction to every situation that arises. Lafe even generously offers to give his earlier size fourteen collars to Magoon. Action projects Lafe as tough in mind whereas Magoon is weak: "You'd better tuck your money under you / And sleep on it the way I always do / when I'm with people that I don't trust at night" (Lathemed; p.47, 48). Then Lafe offers him drink from his flask, rambles on various topics and leaves the Doctor to rest-himself going out of the room. Lafe represents the solid Yankee virtues-the common sense, the shrewd perceptiveness and subtle tact- whereas Dr. Magoon, the urban sophisticate, lives in the narrow world of his own scholarly speciality. Though uneducated, Lafe emerges to be a better person than highly educated Dr. Magoon.

The poem is believed to be Frost's comment on formal education system and specially university education system. Frost draws no conclusion directly and opens the issue for the readers and critics to decide. Whatever may be Frost's inclination, the rustic, rough drunken newspaperman seems to be a man of understanding and has brotherly feeling for others. As the village hotel is a transit place in 'A Hundred Collars', 'The Witch of Coos' has a village farm. The poem begins with the narrator's simple statement:-



"I stayed the night for shelter at a farm
Behind the mountain, with a mother and son?
Two old believers. They did all the talking"⁵

The story in the form of dramatic dialogue, begins on the line of ghost story to end in a ghastly murder story, because of the faithlessness of the witch in her young age. The story displays a rotten part of New England life. The light tone in which the terrific story is narrated, sustains the interest. For some lines the poem moves on smoothly and suddenly, the narrator confronts a bloody secret. The old woman on this stormy night suddenly questions her own worth as a witch and for the first time – she relates a tale – the tale of her own faithlessness and her own guilty conscience pinching her all these years. She no longer cares to conceal the fatal secret by the lie, so well prepared and 'ready for the strangers'. The mother reveals herself:-

Son: "We never could find out whose bones they were."

Mother: "Yes, we could too soon, the truth for once

They were a man's his father killed for me.

I mean a man he killed instead of me.

But tonight I don't care enough to lie-

I don't remember why I ever cared."⁶

The undertone throughout the poem proves very stunning. The horror becomes all the more poignant because of conciseness, precision, graceful suggestion and dark humour skilfully used by the poet. This, too, exhibits the exquisite skill and dramatic technique of Frost. The focus of the story and major action is kept on the ghost story, whereas the dramatic declaration of faithlessness by the witch is the real pivot of the poem. It also shows Frost's acceptance and presentation of dark facts of life.

In 'The Vanishing Red' Frost faces the darker side not only of New England, but American life. The poem is a pertinent comment on finishing the Red Indians from America. Frost, in his 'Gift Outright' sings a great hymn of the motherland, and here, in contrast accepts the blame of finishing Red Indians till the last, by the Americans. So the poem is a bold acceptance of fact. 'The Vanishing Red' may be culled a social poem of violence and death. It tells about a death which results from the brutality and hatred of a white man, towards a Red Indian. The technique of undertone proves very effective. The brutal action is not directly described and no one witnessed the murder. As it is never



witnessed but only imagined, its terror is unlimited. As if to purge his guilty conscience by association, the narrator recounts the incident and simultaneously interprets the story.

Along with the narrator, there are two characters: John, the Indian, "said to have been the last Red Man / In Action", and a Miller, whose laugh seems to have some ominous quality in it, but who would not allow anyone to laugh. Two savages are kept side by side: John, a Red Indian – is traditionally looked upon as savage and the Miller, who emerges a real savage for cold-blooded murder of John, revealing the racial animosity. The Miller has apparently felt his duty to destroy the Red Indian as he says – "...It's just that I hold with getting a thing done with" (Lathemed; p. 142). Grinding grain is equated with grinding the person – and that too, accomplished efficiently.

John, the last Red Indian curious about machinery, is invited by the white Miller with a sense of disgust – the Red Indian "One who had no right to be heard from." (Lathemed; p.142). The miller opens a manhole cover showing John the violently churning water "in desperate straits like frantic fish." Ironically John, about to be murdered is identical with it. At this point the scene is shifted outside the machine room. Here is no mention of a murder, merely mention of the loud noise of the trap door closing "That jangled even above the general noise", his coming upstairs alone and saying something to another person which that man doesn't understand at the moment. As no one talked or discussed the murder, people accepted it. No mention of it is more horrifying. The final line of the speaker – "Oh, yes, he showed John the wheel pit all right" (Lathemed; p. 142) seems to be delivered with a tone of dark humour as is seen in its understatement. The two simple words "all right" ironically convey the opposite – the malignant design of Miller. This poem highlights brutal animosity implicit in the racial prejudice in America. While expanding America, thousands of native Red Indians have been brutally killed and brushed aside casually by the white Americans. Frost doesn't become overtly sentimental about the inhuman injustice inflicted by the white Americans on the native Red Indians, but the dark humorous undertone implicit in the intentional casual handling of the brutal incident deepens the tragedy and hence the title – 'The Vanishing Red.'

Frost's social poems mainly highlight darker side of human world. Though, every human being is a part of society, he is alienated and isolated and remains so. Generally, an individual suffers, faces problems, remains alienated from society and his kith and kins and Frost as a poet accepts their human lot with great maturity. Though these alienated characters in society acquire universality, they don't lose their individuality. John – the last Red Indian is remembered as an individual, though his murder represents massacre of



millions of native Red Indians in America. In Frostian society men are not faceless, but the Yankee faces discussed in this paper are quite unhappy.

References-

1. The Poetry of Robert Frost, ed. E. C. Lathem (New York : Henry Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969) p. 70.
2. IBID; p. 41.
3. IBID; p.41.
4. IBID; p.44.
5. IBID; p.202.
6. IBID; p. 206-207.