

**MASEFIELD'S SALT-WATER BALLADS: A BOHEMIAN SURVEY***Somnath Barui, Asst. Teacher, Bakulia Rajendra Nath Institution, Bakuliagram, Hooghly***Abstract:**

*Closely linked with Romanticism in literary discourses, 'Bohemianism' is an interesting and enticing leitmotif to be easily discerned in the poetry of the poet laureate John Masefield (1878-1967), esp. in "Salt-Water Ballads" (1902). Really speaking, there is hardly one soul in the magnificent realm of literature, whose instincts have not turned towards the vagabond-like pursuits of nature. A bohemian is a happy, socially indifferent person whose mind never intoxicates at the prospect of power, pelf or position. He is happy with and lost in his own world of joy, loveliness and wonder, savouring each and every bit of nature's revelation achieved through the senses. This romance with nature, to put in Wordsworth's words, is all about goodness and ever a blissful one since nature "never betrays the heart" who loves her. Young Masefield in his immortal "Salt-Water Ballads" pours out his heart by reflecting upon the various moments of charm he enjoyed with the sea in particular and nature in general. But how he has achieved the fabrication of a single harmonious thread in his depiction of sea-imagery is a matter of wonder. But he has tremendously blended his passion with the knowledge he has of the sea.*

**Keywords:** *Nature, Bohemianism, Romantic, Magnanimity, Spiritualism*

Starting from the 'A Consecration', where the broad-minded poet discloses his poetic credo that he desires to portray 'not the ruler' but the underprivileged, the unsung itinerants, 'the tramp of the road', to the 'A song at Parting' in which the ripened poet wishes to get ready for a serene afterlife through a calm death, the volume "Salt-Water Ballads" has a long catalogue of poems filled up with the bohemian ingredients. The poems, as the critics W H Hamilton and Muriel Spark have already observed, are full of colloquial idioms used by Masefield and his fellow-mariners. The ballads tell tales of those wretched sea-men who, despite living from hand to mouth, don't forget to listen eagerly to the wind's mysteriously beautiful music and see the romantic sky and the sea's surface. Poems like 'Trade Winds', 'A Ballad of Cape St. Vincent', 'The Tarry Buccaneer', 'The West Wind', 'The Gallery-Rowers', 'Vagabond', 'Personal' are documentation of uncontrollable thirst and fascination the sea-poet feels for his dear sea. But this paper seeks to examine the bohemian nature of the Masefield poems by analyzing the prime two representative poems in the volume, namely 'Sea-Fever', a talisman for Masefield and 'A Wanderer's Song'. At the same time, the other most characteristic bohemian poems from the volume will also be examined.

'Sea-Fever' is the prime Masefield poem through which he is known worldwide. It is the poem that introduces us with the quintessential Masefield. The poem has twelve lines, divided into three separate quatrains. In the first four lines, the poet makes his desires known by asserting that he must near the lonely seas and the sky for the umpteenth time and take an adventurous voyage on a tall ship with the pole star as his faithful guide. He also reveals his wish for heeding the wheel's kick, the wind's eternal song, and for viewing the shaking of the white sail

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.

The phrase 'grey dawn' may intensify a negative and destructive aspect of the sea, but that does not

disinterest the poet. Thus, through a plethora of sea-images the poet has created a mood that is at once hopeful and hopeless as the sea is associated with both blissful and baneful outcomes. In the next four lines, the bohemian poet explains the cause of his marine madness; he likes to desert his hearth and home as the wild calls of the running tide, the wind, the flung spray and the blown froth of sea-waves and the sea-gulls continuously unbalance him. This personification of all the natural elements on the part of the poet is nothing but a symbol of his own piercing wanderlust. The poet firmly confirms that he can't deny the wild calls, and so is well-disposed to take up his journey.

The last four lines are a continuation of the second quatrain in which the poet wishes to rove the curious routes of the sea-gulls and that of the whales, where the wind lashes him pungently like a sharp knife. But despite this angst, his bohemian interest to the sea never diminishes; rather within the perils of the voyage, he seeks the enjoyment of a "merry yarn" from one of his happy shipmates. Thus, the jovial mood of the poet is a certification or indication of his profound magnetic attraction towards the vagrant life of a voyager. However as a true Christian he has other desires also. He wishes that after the journey is over, he must have the boon of some happy remembrance by people on earth whom he loves very much: 'And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over'. However, it is in the first line of the third quatrain that the poet declares himself as a bohemian: 'I must down to the seas again to the vagrant gypsy life'. The sea is a living entity. Finally the title 'Sea-Fever' itself hints at the way the poet suffers from a feverish obsession with the sea.

'A Wanderer's Song' is the immediate next poem to 'Sea-Fever' in the volume. In it too, the poet at the very outset makes his condition and intention clear that he is not going to remain quarantined within homely boundaries. Like Tennyson's Ulysses, who loathes the artificial home, he says

A wind's in the heart of me, a fire's in my heels,  
I'm tired of brick and stone and rumbling wagon-wheels  
I hunger for the sea's edge...

The symbolic 'wind' and 'fire' hint at the energy and enthusiasm he feels for gaining proximity to sea, his soul's sole guide. Like a romantic poet, Masfield can't stay at home because his real heart mate is the face of the earth, the beauty of the sky and the mesmerizing, unending sea. One noticeable cause about this urgency is that, as he asserts, he is 'tired of brick and stone and rumbling wagon-wheels'; like Gerald Louis Gould who, in a similar vein, announces in his poem 'Wander-Thirst': 'Beyond the East the Sunrise, beyond the West the Sea/ And East and West the Wander-Thirst that will not let me be', the marine poet is also seized with a strong wander-lust or sea-lust. His bohemian self is so hasty that he dies to see the 'lifting foresail-foot', 'yawls and ketches', 'the sea-wind', 'the tide', 'the rusty hulls' and 'the gulls' and to hear the 'clucking, sucking of the sea'. Such an insanely deep yearn is rarely seen in a human, and in this regard Masfield, the pelagophile remains unparalleled. Time and again his mention of the varied neritic allurements indicates the density of love he possesses for the sea, and he is never monotonous in his affirmation. Rather he has the conspicuous marvelousness of expression

Oh I am tired of brick and stone, the heart of me is sick  
For windy green, unquiet sea, the realm of Moby Dick.

Such lines appear in plenty in "Salt-Water Ballads". The poet's fondness for the topsy-turvy pelagian ambience is again a proof of his romantic zeal. The poet, it is to be contextually mentioned, is much similar, in his attitude to the sea, to James Reeves, his contemporary.

The two quoted lines are also important for their intertextual reference to Herman Melville whom the poet favoured reading. The poem 'A Wanderer's Song', therefore, truly represents all the bohemian poems in the volume where Masfield's preoccupation with the sea is visible from all corners. The title of the poem itself gives us ample notification of the nature that both the poem and its poet have. It is about the

aimless, directionless life Masfield once pursued both on HMS Conway and Gilcruix, and the inexpressible amount of charm and amazement he used to gather in his maritime oceanic life. His is a heart totally dedicated to the sea, and therefore unspoiled, unsoiled by any narrownesses. To understand the bohemian nature of "Salt-Water Ballads" and to get hold of the poet's fragrant mood, we should better look at the other few poems of the volume. In 'A Valediction', the poet enthusiastically bids all adieus before venturing into his journey over the sea

We're bound for the blue water where the great winds blow,  
It's time to get the tacks aboard, time for us to go.

The joy associated with the lines is like that of a child who is, as it were, going to undertake a train journey for the first time. While sailing, the poet is fascinated by listening to sealoers and simultaneously invites us to 'hear the yarn of a sailor/ An old yarn learned at sea' ('The Yarn of the Loch Achray'). In 'Sing a Song O' Shipwreck' and 'Burial Party', the poet pays tearful tribute to those souls lost amidst the wondrous sea, much like Maugham's Wilson in 'The Lotus Eater'. The poet's mention of his friends (e.g. Jim, Tom, Harry, Bill, Jakey) on board the ship, with whom he shared his weal and woe of marine experiences, is interesting and exciting in that the cabin boy, the young Masfield vividly makes his presence in our imagination with all the characteristic sordid attire and duty on the ship. Muriel Spark in her biography "John Masfield" mentions this broad-mindedness of the poet: 'In this age, the serious creative writer who is at the same time capable of self-identification with the activities (as apart from the impulses, desires, motives) of his fellow-men is phenomenal'. (p.26)

Now, with all these shipmates, the poet readies himself for the feast which a sea-voyage sometimes nauseatingly offers. The poet, though is never demoralized and disorientated with such marine treatment, says rather jubilantly, in 'A Pier-Head Chorus'

Oh I'll be chewing salted horse and biting flinty bread,  
And dancing with the stars to watch upon the fo'c's'le head.

Such defiant zeal is characteristic of all the romantics, say, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Blake who liked to toy with adversity. Now, after all the toiling and soling sea experiences, the poet reaches the harbour and is pacified to see new nature, new marine coastline forms as he is elated in 'Trade Winds'

In the harbour, in the island, in the Spanish seas,  
Are the tiny white houses and the orange-trees  
.....  
There is the red wine, the nutty Spanish ale,  
The shuffle of the dancers, the old salt's tale.'

After a long struggle in the sea, the poet thus gets rewarded with healthy drinks and meals and the attractions of a new world. The boy in the poet is so overwhelmed with all this that he even goes to the extent of imagining that he will be a buccaneer with all the ghastly appearances and fun

I'm going to be a pirate with a bright brass pivot gun,  
... And a silver flagon full of red wine to drink when work is done

- *The Tarry Buccaneer*

The poet is made by the sea: he is a sea-product. Whatever is associated with the sea the water, the greenery, the mariners, the sky, the birds and even an arduous work is dear to him, however sad, bad or odd it may be. This is madness, this is romance personified. But the romantic poet is patriotic also, for he has a deep-rooted Englishness in him. When he makes his advent in his native English soil, he intuitively realizes it with the coming of warm west wind, bird cries, daffodils, songful thrushes, April's airy agents. He is definitive, after a long maritime wandering, in 'The West Wind'

It's a warm wind, the west wind, full of birds' cries;

I never hear the west wind but tears are in my eyes.

.....

It's a fine land, the west land, for hearts as tired as mine,  
Apple orchards blossom there, and the air's like wine.

The sight of his country's borderline with the warm affectionate touch of the warm west wind makes him homesick and nostalgic and he is therefore in tears. The phrases like 'fine land', 'air's like wine' symbolise his possessiveness, and the poet 'tired' with long peregrination is illimitably elated, for the heart who has rambled a lot at foreign lands knows best the value and meaning of a homecoming. The final line of the ballad, 'In the fine land, the west land, the land where I belong' seals his patriotism far more forcibly.

It is interesting to note that John Masefield is more a romanticist than a realist. According to W H Hamilton, 'The sea has never been more lovingly, more intimately sung' ("John Masefield: A Critical Study", p. 146). The poet's idol, the aforesaid "Moby Dick" author, wrote about the sea, of course, but in an objective and in a more dispassionate way, and in all his descriptive long passages of enviable integrity Melville has rather realistically perfected his art of story-telling. Melville's diametric opposite is his aficionado, Masefield who is avidly sensitive and passionate in divulging the mysteries of the scenic marine imagistic beauties. The poet is surely realist if his longer poems like 'Reynard the Fox' (1920), 'The Widow in the Bye Street' (1912) can be taken into consideration. But the curious poems of "Salt-Water Ballads" have a dazzling glow of romantic imagination and high bohemian ideal. His madness towards the sea is similar to a commitment: whatever may befall to him, his voyaging on the sea is a definite truth 'I must down to the seas again'. This 'mustness' or affirmative tone is a rare positive commitment quite rare in all literary history of all time. The lines like 'Oh, I'll be going, going until I meet the tide' warrant the assurance that in case of his not fulfilling the intended romantic desire he may be in some sort of neurasthenia, for the sea has totally wrought his inside out. Such frenzied bohemian committed attitude is not without its sweetest of fruits, for such a soul knows no complications, no indecencies or double-dealing. The line from 'Sea-Fever': 'And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by' easily proves his heartfelt simplicity. Thus, his austere liberality stretches far away from the clutches of familial conflict or narrownesses. Masefield, therefore, through the ballads establishes himself as a superior human being devoid of malice and thus opens up an immense possibility for posterity to follow in his footsteps. This is no less a gain in a world getting increasingly machine-oriented, intrinsic and difficult to sustain.

The vagabond-life, spent on the sea from the moment he joined the HMS Conway in 1889 till 1901, is much like the vagrant life of W.H. Davies who describes his aimless ramblings in his perennial "The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp" and also in the poetry collections like "The Soul's Destroyer and Other Poems" (1905), "Nature Poems" (1908), "Songs of Joy and Others" (1911).

'Society is all but rude', wrote Andrew Marvell in his 17<sup>th</sup> century poem 'The Garden', connoting the fact that society is a complex imbroglio of chaos, complexity and disorder. Marvell, therefore, advises us to take a broader outlook and relish the romantic beauty of the garden and its fruity and flowery resources. Masefield, likewise, savours the itinerant touch of nature, ignoring and often disavowing the urban hustle and bustle, and is able to find things in the light of a liberal attitude achieved from that healthy exposure to nature. Nature, esp. the vast surface of the sea, nurtures him and sustains his soul and pushes him towards becoming a broad-minded individual full of natural, rustic goodness. The vast sea and the unending sky lend him a bountiful disposition that shapes his mental world and spirituality. He develops fundamentally as a human by shirking the demeaning aspects of a human soul. Thus, nature's beautiful world helps a bohemian to know the simple rules of life and spiritually enlivens him in progressing forward by inculcating fraternity, magnanimity and empathy in him. In a world of literature and critical studies where subtlety and novelty are sought for always, Masefield's simple attitude to life for living it better, as reflected in the volume "Salt-Water Ballads", bears no less significance as literature is all about making a

human humane, magnanimous and so spiritual. Thus, Masfield's "Salt - Water Ballads", if felt deeply, can inspire us in developing a feud-free healthy social ambience, awaken a strong mental order and make us more and more sensitive and careful to nature and her serene propitiousness.

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