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A Clinical and Textual Analysis of Stephen Gill's Epic *The Flame*

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Abstract

Stephen Gill's *The Flame* is a highly thought provoking epic. It springs out of the philosophical and visionary farsightedness of the poet and has compelled world literary critics, researchers and politicians to contemplate upon this terror- stricken world and spread the message of peace and tolerance and do away with fanaticism to establish world peace.

The Flame evokes the readers and attempts to rouse him from his doused ethical values, to instill in him the epistle of hope and resurrection, wrapped up in the rising flames of fire,which destroys and also regenerates like the volcanic eruptions that pave the way for growth after the sinister destruction. It is this message, which Gill seeks to impart in *The Flame*.

As a cultivated work of art *The Flame* is a blueprint on the theme of Ahimsa(non-violence), a plea to unite and overcome the 'maniac messiahs' from in human activities in the name of religious fanaticism and enlighten the path of righteousness.

Gill justifies his title and states, "The eternal flame knows no occupation, faith nor complexion and cannot be imprisoned within human bonds…. The flame is known to engulf mortals even today, melting unknown metals into one."

Keywords: Flame, peace, tolerance, hope, resurrection, maniac messiahs, ahimsa, non-violence.

The birth of Gill's *The Flame* encompasses his alkaline wounds wrapped up with those of others he beheld during the partition of India and Pakistan, when reckless inhuman massacres of the innocent erased empathy. The wounds of yester years to date remain unhinged, and periodically emerge in the poet's poetic compositions because they are irreversibly rooted in his psyche. Gill is aware that the global world of today saturated with bomb blasts and terrorist attacks, has mutilated the altruistic conscience of man. The human wreckage, carcasses lying distorted in the most obnoxious manner:

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limbless bodies, trussed up in bags, (Part 2-6) is a ghastly blot on the wrinkled fabric of the dwindling structure of society. The churlish visage and impertinent veneering of national leaders, and their debasing and bristling accusations on flimsy political issues like border disputes and geographical boundaries and dissensions, set them on verbal warpaths so that they are unable to witness and mourn the combustion spreading around by "maniac messiahs" as Gill refers to them.

These "maniac messiahs" are none other than men dressed in human skins externally while internally they are viciously piqued. Their blood curdling activities are like those of the wild beasts who prey, sometimes converting them into man- eaters. The 'maniac messiahs' fall into the latter category feathered in the garb of religious fanaticism who creep and crawl stealthily into churches, mosques, busy market areas, temples and *gurudwaras* to fulfill their in sipid and unsavory activities in the name of Jihad.

However, why does Gill append the term "messiah" to "maniac?" The biblical meaning of the word 'messiah' means a 'redeemer' sent upon earth by God to absolve the sins of man. Gill uses the term in a controversial manner and addresses the terrorists as "maniac messiahs," although these men are not redeemers because they are obsessed with false religious fervor and grilled with the idea that they are direct messengers of God upon earth sent to annihilate disbelievers of their religion. By indulging in such gross and heinous terrorism, they will sail to paradise.

The title of Gill's epic is therefore significant. Out of the rubble and decaying humanity blazing grossly, he visualizes a peaceful world only if nations negotiate amicably, cross borders and pledge to serve humanity rather than bicker and bite. Hence, Gilldedicates this prestigious work to the "Eternal Flame" because along with its destructive power it has the property to regenerate as is observed after the fiery and flaming volcanic eruptions. Joseph Campbell defines it (fire), in this manner, "….Fire is luminous, like the sun and lightning…. Also, it is alive: in the warmth of the human body it is life itself, which departs when the body goes cold…." He further adds, "… it has been frequently identified with a demoness of volcanoes, who presides over an afterworld where the dead enjoy an everlasting dance in marvelously dancing volcanic flames" (35).

Consequently, if the fire is "luminous" it holds that the human body is illumined by its luster: the Soul. Nevertheless, the very same fire or flame (both are inseparable elements), converts into "volcanic flames" when identified with "demoness," which may be co-related with Satan, the lord of the devils residing in hell burning with sulphur all around. Inferentially, Gill's *The Flame* symbolizes that "eternal flame" which scintillates the human spirit/soul, unlike that of the terrorists who consume their spirit in "volcanic flames," that converts them into maniacs. According to Gill, these men are misguided individuals who "… generate the blizzards of fear and panic," and "commit horrendous crimes against humanity" (Preface 7). In this manner Gill concedes to the views expressed by Chevalier & Gheerbrant who state, "… unlike the flame which casts light, the fire which smokes and devours symbolizes an imagination inflamed… the subconscious... the hole in the ground… hell… fire an intellect in rebellion, in short, all sorts of psychic regression" (Fire 382).

Scholastically, Gill's dedication of his epic to "the eternal flame" is a very speculative and clairvoyant periscope that illustrates the destruction of that spark of life that glitters the human world. Thematically Gill eulogizes it in this manner, "The eternal flameknows no occupation, faith nor complexion and cannot be imprisoned within human bonds…." (Preface 28), i.e. the flame or fire cannot be subjugated or confined to any creed. Its blessings and destruction is common to all humanity.

Gill states that the first part of *The Flame* is devotional. In this section, the poet witnesses the regenerative forces of nature and applauds the goodness bestowed upon earth by its sparkling azure. Gill as a true Christian, expresses his humble gratitude for the bounty, which all human beings commonly enjoy irrespective of caste, creed or religion. Ellen G. White expresses a similar view when she writes, "The sunshine and the rain, that gladden and refresh the earth, the hills and seas and plains, all speak to us of the Creator's love….God…supplies the daily needs of all His creatures" (8). Albeit, the Hindu Rig Veda also celebrates nature in its hundreds of Vedic hymns.(MacDonnel. Preface V). Gill therefore extols the flame as a harbinger and writes, "You bind the earth and the sky/ and rule to relieve/ the rusting monotony" (Canto 1, Stz 6, L. 6-8). In the second canto of Part 1 stanza 4, Gill emphasizes the flourishing and restorative effects of the flame and writes, "You are the spectacular light / of the first appearance of light / that dissolves discomforts / of the pilgrims of peace…." (L. 1-3. 35)

Strikingly, in these lines Gill delineates a verbal picturesque image of the sun in all its glory. The idea conveyed is how the sun dispels darkness by its flaming rays that glow and outspread the message of peace, kindle the spirit and renew the essence of life. However, the deceased mind of the "maniac messiahs" remains overshadowed with darkness. On the other hand, Gill refers to the peace loving people as "pilgrims," which superimpose the idea that human beings are mere travelers, traversing a holy place. This imbibes the biblical idea that "… earth is linked with heaven" through Christ who was sent upon earth as God's messenger (messiah), to bridge the gulf between earth and heaven (White 14). This also conveys the pantheistic concept that God created Nature, and Nature created Man, so God, Nature and Man are co related, which is also what the great Romantic poet Wordsworth stated and which is also expressed in the Hindu Vedas.

Parts 2, 3, 4, & 5 of the epic condemn these maniacs. In Canto 10, Gill refers to them as "avatars of savagery [who] mow down defenseless innocents" (Part 2, Stz. L. 2-3). Writing in the same frame of mind he says they are, "Spiders of sinister news/ [who]/ crawl in and out of the cracks" (Stz 2, L. 2-3). Metaphorically, these deranged men blasting innocent human lives are like lethal reptiles and insects who reside in the "cracks of walls" and 'crawl' out in search of victims to prey upon them. In the 3rd stanza Gill alludes to them as "…locusts of threat." The degrading word (locusts), appended to these deceptive men also has a biblical allusion. In the Old Testament locusts are presented as an "image of destructive scourge (Exodus 10:14). Albeit in the New Testament Revelation 9:1-6, "a swarm of locusts becomes spiritual and moral torment" (Chevalier 615).

In the 12th Canto of Part 2, Gill dresses up the environment in dismal shades of woe and the idea of the locusts destruction is carried forward because the 'structure" of "tranquility is rocked," with the sound of an explosion. The dreary environmental gloom is so irksome that it intimidates even the 'birds,' "sparrows, roses and dawns/ forgot their songs… (i.e. nature stands still)… (Stz 3, L. 5-8, 50), while "Brutes flickered tongues / over the lips of normalcy," and "Time" stopped amidst the thick black smoke of "explosion" (Stz. 4, L.1, 51). Gill's conception of the dead lying bereft of eyes, ears, heads, limbs, fingers legs torn apart , twisted eyes jutting out among the debris shocks the readers' sensibilities even as he visualizes the depraved massacre of human life by the "locusts of hell." (Canto 15, Stz 5, L. 1, 60)

Parts 3, 4, & 5 recount chilling and grisly episodes of the dead where the cops, volunteers and firefighters, ransack the human wreck only to discover a decaying arm or leg of a victim. They make a vain attempt to match it to the dead before disposing the body by trussing it up in gunny bags, wrapping them up "in white sheets" to be cremated. (Part 4, Stz 2, L. 3, 76). Gill further relates how the nurses are soaked in blood and plead over the "radio stations" for people to "donate blood to save a life" (Part 5, Canto 23, Stz 2, L.1-2, 81-82).

In Part 6 of the epic Gill questions these maniacs as to how they could commit such barbarous crimes against humanity. The poet is convinced that the souls of these maniacs are engulfed in darkness so that bombs, machine guns and other armaments have become the "toys of these robots… to free their unfed tigers / from the cages of depravity" (Canto 31, Stz 31, L. 4-5). Since they are "robots," they kill mechanically as soon as they receive orders from their heads. They are "unfed tigers" because they are man- eaters.

Parts 7 & 8 mourn the loss of the dead and ends on the note of hope that these rising flames of bloodshed, fanaticism, hatred and communal violence will perish because of the innate goodness of man. (Canto 35).The poet pleads that someone will light the "fire glowing in the hearth / of emptiness" to protect humanity from the "vultures of the bloodshed" (Canto 34, Stz 3, L.6, 108). The animal imagery that recurrently appears in these cantos exposes the inflamed and pensive cogitation of the poet who deplores the rueful annihilation of human life. Gill denounces such men and so alludes to these deserters as fiends (animals), who retreat and evade justice once their evil spirit has committed crimes. The foregoing lines "…cages of depravity…," significantly asserts the poet's view. The noun "cages" discloses their animalism.

Even as the poet's ruminations present a desultory picture of society gripped in the hands of these maniacs, his emotional outbursts seek respite in the hope that someone will light the "… fire glowing in the hearth/ of emptiness…" (Canto 34, Stz 4, L.7-8, 109). Gill's wounded heart, swaddled in his own insipid childhood memories seeks for the comfort of the flame and pleads that the flame's light will 'weed' out darkness (Canto 35, Stz 1, L.1, 110), to restore faith in humanity. Yet, the poet's own harrowing trials spur him on to ponder over his racial segregation in India, and

the grueling tortures he and his family underwent. He perceives the same in the global dislocation of the world so he writes "…Snakes of personal migraines/ raise their strained necks… while irresistible memories flow by" (Canto 39, Stz. 1, L. 1-7, 114). Despite these reverting thoughts of yesteryears, Gill's tranquil suppositions do not permit him to lose hope for peace or in the initial goodness of man. He writes "When hope sails/on drooping wings/ and a thick fog settles/ over the slender shoot of thought/ you navigate to anchor my boat /to a bay for security…." (Canto 47, Stz 1, L. 1-6, 125).

In the 52nd Canto of part 7, Gill introspectively summons his Christian beliefs and embarks upon the idea that he is an "unclaimed lamb" who needs a "good shepherd" (Canto 52, Stz 6, L. 2-3, 129). Thus Gill craves to break away from the 'tethered,'' disintegrated' 'wilderness' (Canto 51, Stz. 2, L. 3-6, 128) of Time and begin a new life "floating in the waters of your presence" (Stz 3, L.3). "Floating" signifies the beneficial effect of the flame's presence and God's benevolence.

In the final section, Part 8 of *The Flame*, Gill seeks solace from the mundane and disintegrated life. He pleads for a peaceful world where he can live and breathe freely, gaze at the beauty of nature, listen to the whispering wind and discard "the arrows of despair" and "kiss/the lips of the sunrays" (Canto 53, Stz 7, L. 1-2, 133). Gill is convinced "… where there is no light/ there is darkness of the grave/where vermin grow/ on the bodies of speculative creeds" (Canto 55, Stz 1, L. 8-11, 135), therefore "life disintegrates/where the rays of flame/ do not reach" (Stz 2, L. 6-8).

Aesthetically, the flame's regenerative power is visualized and Gill's epic, *The Flame* becomes a written symbol of values that need to be cultivated. The flame burns in the life of human beings until he departs to the next world, till then it lives in the veins and "in the flame of your temple" (Canto 58, Stz.10, L.6, 141). It is the flame, which dispels darkness because everyone drinks "…contentment of the warmth/in the company of the flame" (Canto 61, Stz 13, L. 4-6, 151).

This paper humbly presents some critical views about the global world in the grip of terrorism. Most of the discords center round religious fanaticism. Gill is firmly convinced that violence can only be controlled with patience, restraint and mutual understanding.. Crimes committed by 'maniac messiahs' in the name of religion against humanity need drastic political reforms among all the nations of the world. In this global multicultural scenario, a sense of goodwill amongst all communities, can build bridges of peace. Gill does not moralize he expresses his profound views on racism and religious frenzy. No religion teaches man to draw daggers against men of different beliefs. In fact, religion inculcates a sense of good-fellowship. Ross & Hills rightly state, "…to persecute in the name of religion is the very denial of man's humanity as well as proof of how stunted one's own faith is…" diversity of religion should not be seen as a battle unto death. "*The Flame* asserts 'humanity's true oneness" lies in acceptance of the good in every religion because, "Divinity is around us – never gone" (188-89).

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