

Moral Affirmations and Social Concerns in Elizabeth Bishop's Poems

Sulekha Sharma

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad, India.

Abstract: This paper is an attempt to unleash Elizabeth Bishop's affirmative ideology analysing few of her poems reflecting her concerns for issues of war, weaker sections of the society and concerns on the class divide in the society. Bishop's moral affirmations impart a ray of hope in the disappointing hopeless situations, arising due to political and economical unrest in twentieth century America, as an effect of various conflicts and wars in the period. Her moral affirmations or beliefs give a strong optimistic ideology to her poems. Though her moral affirmations and her social concerns are reflective of a very basic and simple way of thinking but was a required ideology for the war afflicted society on the verge of forgetting the simple and peaceful living. Reluctant to make grand moral claims in her writing, Bishop's poems remain consistently attuned to the crucial role in the ongoing social reformation for the development of self and polis.

Keywords: class divide; Elizabeth Bishop; moral affirmations; social concerns; war afflicted; weaker sections.

I. INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Bishop was a reticent writer of America in the twentieth-century. She has 110 poems to her credit, though a very modest number of literary outputs as compared to the stalwarts of literature, still her poems are worth exploring and unleashing the treasure of interpretations and meanings they offer. Though a less critically explored writer, Bishop's poetry offers a rich variety of interpretations and that is Bishop's achievement as a creator. Bishop is known to be a keen observer and writer of realistic details, which of course she is, but her poetry offers much more than just descriptions. Jonathan Ausubel, in his essay, assumes on Bishop's part a commitment to writing socially activist verse or, at the very least, verse that repeatedly and intentionally exposes what he calls the "cycle of domination" from "childhood to adulthood," from "personal to societal levels".¹ Bishop's poems showcase her social concerns for the issues related to war, concerns for weaker sections of the society and concerns on the class divide in the society. Bishop handles her apprehensions with positive moral affirmations or beliefs towards the afflicted and thus gives rise to an optimistic ideology in her poems. Her poems thus seem to have compassion for the afflicted and give a ray of hope in the most distressful moments. Richard Wilbur's insight in this regard is an accurate one: "her poems, for all their objectivity, are much involved in what they see: though she seldom protests, or specifies her emotions, her work is full of an implicit compassion."² Bishop's concerns are not restricted to the human beings, but are also extended to the immediate environment and the inhabitants of it that are affected by the oddities of inhuman acts. Bishop's involvement is simultaneously an emotional and an intellectual investment, an attempt to project her sympathies to the immediate surroundings of which she is a part. In other words, the poems insistently recognize the fact that "shared human interaction is a deeply satisfying experience" – a conviction which is important and amenable for the healthy society.³

II. MORAL AFFIRMATIONS AND SOCIAL CONCERNS

In America, the twentieth-century was marked by many losses, categorized by the Great Depression, two World Wars, as well as a rapidly changing society. No poet displays this sense of loss quite so empathetically or eloquently as Bishop did in her poems. In the poem, "A Miracle for Breakfast" Bishop puts forth her view regarding existences. In her 1966 interview with Ashley Brown, Bishop stated that: "Oh, that's my Depression poem. It was written shortly after the time

of souplines and men selling apples, around 1936 or so. It was my “social conscious” poem, a poem about hunger.”⁴ The poem comes as a remedy for the society which was struggling to evolve from the desolations of war. It can also be also taken as a parable, as a modern version of Christ feeding of the ten thousand; or of the variation of the ceremony of the Eucharist. The Christian implications to the poem itself imply the moral lesson in the poem:

“At six o’clock we were waiting for coffee,
waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb”⁵

Bishop talks about small happiness and charities which may look small, but ultimately gives the utmost satisfaction in life; and which were the necessary small steps needed to be taken to control the after effects of the war afflicted society. Bishop’s poems are not laden with spiritual theologies; on the contrary there may be moral affirmations imparting positivity to the poem. Although, she is less interested in philosophy than Stevens, she tends to be a better philosopher with her simple and uncomplicated ideologies⁶. Bishop might not establish philosophies through her poems, but she definitely records more accurately, perhaps, the effect of philosophical ideas upon the human emotions. In the midst of the contemporary social and political chaos, the simple ideology reflected through Bishop’s poems, invested in the power of resonance to different metaphorical images is commendable. The coffee and the crumb are the homely images making a parody of the “high thinking” behind the moral. The social scenario in the twentieth century was overshadowed by the repercussion of war where simplicity of thought was the only consolation for the soul, which is very much exhibited in poems like this.

Bishop’s poem presents with interpretations which are simplifications but they have life and meaning as perhaps the true world never has. In the poem, “Roosters” Bishop challenges the commotion of the roosters with the images of the Battle of Britain in 1940-41. Bishop sarcastically refers to the airplanes fight in the sky as cockfights. Bishop uses war imagery, but she also suggests a response, although not an easy one.

“his dreadful rooster come to mean forgiveness,”⁵

She advocates forgiveness as the essential savers of the human soul in the poem, reflecting her humanitarian concerns and wellbeing of mankind. Bishop dismisses the ideology of – tit for tat, war for war – and on the contrary advocates forgiveness for the betterment and progress of the society. According to Bishop, war cannot be the answer for war, but only forgiveness can be. Paradoxically Bishop presents the same bird, the “rooster,” as the symbol of both wars as well as of forgiveness. Even after forgiveness, the narrator cannot undo the senseless killing that had cost the rooster and the war victims their life. Other than forgiveness, what can save the society from destruction is repentance. By referring to the Greek culture in the second part of the poem, Bishop asserts an element of hope in the poem. Peter’s tears are symbolic of his repenting. Repentance and forgiveness are the high ideals Bishop sets for the war afflicted society which is on the breach of further breakdown due to ill practices and internal fights.

Bishop is deeply concerned with the issues of peaceful human co-existence, but reticent as she was her concerns are also implied at times allowing the readers to interpret them and unfold the hidden truth underneath. In her poem “Paris, 7 A.M.,” Bishop symbolically presents clock as an indicator of time past and time present. The time past is historical which has a contradiction or dilemma in itself giving rise to repetition of history. And the people who have witnessed the history of bloodsheds and wars still put an ignorant face, and this is the irony of the situation, Bishop refers to, in this poem. David Kalstone, Bishop’s best critic, saw how “the clock faces of the opening lines merges into the map of the Paris, the Etoile with dispersing circles.”⁷ Bishop through this poem questions the perpetrators of wars who make massive preparations in the form of piling up of “the ammunitions”:

“Where is the ammunition, the piled-up balls
with the star-splintered hearts of ice?”⁵

In the poem, Bishop refers to the triumphal arch, a memorable place in the heart of Paris at Place de l’Etoile. This arch celebrates the military victories from Napoleon’s time onward. Samuel Hynes, in his excellent book on literature and politics noted that if the decade is plotted as a tragedy, the peripatetic would be year 1936: “In that year, Hitler reoccupied the Rhineland and the Treaty of Versailles was finished, Abyssinia surrendered and the League of Nations had failed, the Rome-Berlin Axis was formed and the German-Japanese pact was signed. And, most emotional and

implicating of all the year's events, the Civil War in Spain began."⁸ Bishop in this poem evokes the memories of the soldiers whose lives are commemorated in the form of memorials in Paris.

“This sky is no carrier-warrior-pigeon
escaping endless intersecting circles.

It is a dead one, or the sky from which a dead one fell.”⁵

The “pigeon” is a reference to the world wars where they were used as warriors. “Carrier-warrior-pigeon” is a descriptive language used in war. The “dead one fell” from the sky refers to the nightmare images of actual war, where fighter planes and warrior birds fell from the sky. Witnessing the wars and the after effects of it, Bishop has grown seeing the repercussions of war and thus her poems are occupied with these images of destructions. Bishop had a war nightmare “late in the thirties”:

“Tanks, lost in crowds of refugees, bombardments, etc. Last night I dreamed I heard cannon and that I was explaining to someone ... that it sounded exactly like the coo in of doves amplified 2 thousand times and ‘stretched out’ ... and that there was some connection with that and the Peace Dove.”⁹

This symbol of peace is dead in the poem, for the war inflicts immeasurable traumas and torment on the livings, whether human or bird, every possibility of life is cruelly curbed in the war time. Bishop's concerns are deeply displayed in this poem as she dismisses the idea of war, for war curbs all the possibility of peaceful coexistence.

“The Song for a Colored Singer” is one of Bishop's Key West poems addressing her various racial concerns and reflecting her love for the black community. Victoria Harrison notes that Bishop's four songs “suggest a mixture of voices, each slightly different and together voicing the alienation fostered by gendered and racial oppression.”⁴ The speaker in the first two songs, Harrison writes, “is strident and playful by turns, her unbashful rhymes reflecting how basic these problems are: life is unjust for the black women in the 1940s, shunted by both white and male supremacy”⁴ In the first song, Bishop presents the miserable condition of the black woman's life due to her man's alcoholism leading to poverty and pathetic social status. Despite of all disparity, this woman remains faithful neglecting the irresponsibility of her man. In the second song, Bishop presents a problematic personal relationship at the centre of the black woman's unhappy life. She represents all the oppressive women who are committed for a change in their life. She resolves to escape on a bus that “will take me anywhere.” Bishop addresses the black woman's problem in a very assertive way, recognising her need and capability for independence and better living. Bishop's singer, in the third song, reassesses the war impact. Harmonizing the singer's voice with history- the war is a major metaphor in the third song:

“Let nation rage,
let nations fall.
. . . Sleep on and on,
war's over soon.”⁵

Bishop, in this poem, reflects upon the repercussions of war and the ultimate animosity, hatred, disaster which are the natural outcome of the war. Wars give rise to a society which has lost its zest and zeal for happy and playful living. There is an irony in Bishop's use of war's weapon as a “silly, harmless toy,” which is warring against the playful approach to war by the countries drunk on power. The choice of moon over war, in the poem, encourages the child to ignore people who advocate war and, on the contrary, embracing the moon which is symbolic of love and compassion. There is a moral affirmation in the poem, as it advocates love over war and hatred. The fourth song of the poem expresses the feeling of a group of oppressed people coming to a realization of their identity. For years together, the black community was being oppressed and their plight Bishop identifies in this poem. Their “tears” are valuable for a sensitive heart like that of Bishop's.

“See it lying there like a seed,
like black seeds.”⁵

Bishop dramatises sorrow in this stanza by personifying tears. “Tears” representing sorrow establish their roots in the fabric of the black community giving rise to hatred and conspiracies against the dictators or captivators. “Song for a Colored Singer,” the catalyst to her success, was a daring poem in the 1940s in its insistence that white and black concerns find their common ground, that racial and gendered struggles cannot be isolated from each other, and that as a poet she cannot accept opacity as an excuse for neglecting further inquiry.

“Faustina” depicts the uncertainty of human relationships. The description doesn’t make clear who is the master- the white woman, shrivelled and dying or Faustina, the black servant. This poem, according to Brett Millier, is based on Bishop’s selection “among many facts and anecdotes about a black Cuban woman, a familiar figure in Key West in the 1940’s, and focuses on a single visit she made to Faustina at work, caring for an elderly white woman in her home.”¹⁰ In this poem, Bishop talks about the social divide between a master and servant, dramatising the tension and the intimacy in their relationship. Socially there are gulf seen in this relation but in the poem they share the same domestic space. There is a sympathetic and morally affirmative way of looking at the class divide in Bishop’s poetry creating a panorama of socially equal society, much accommodative of everyone.

Bishop in her most liked Brazilian poem “The Armadillo” with “Samambaia” as its natural setting shows the environment of the place and her home there under a literal and metaphorical threat. The seeds of the poem can be traced in the specificity and timing of the Brazilian holiday during the “Festa de São João” (or “Junina”) which falls on June 24 in the honour of St. John. The celebration demands the background of the cultural icon of the fire balloons, which leads to the disruption of both the environment and the domestic life of Lota (Bishop’s Brazilian love) and Bishop who lived in Samambaia when the festivity was on. Bishop shows the cruel repercussions of this event, the chaos these fire balloons generate. The falling of the fire balloon in “The Armadillo,” give the animals physical marks, injuring them and forcing them to leave their abodes and the environment it invades. The animals in the poem, driven from their nests by a fallen balloon, emerge frightened and mystified, all, from the ancient owls to the baby rabbits, vulnerable in the face of this disaster. The owls’ “whirling black-and-white” is “stained bright pink underneath,” the armadillo becomes “rose-flecked” with either sparks of fire or blood, and the baby rabbit jumps out “short-eared,” appearing as “a handful of intangible ash / with fixed, ignited eyes,” either reflecting the fire, filling with metaphorical fire, or literally catching on fire. All these creatures become transformed in the eyes of the viewers. Even the well-protected armadillo is defenceless before the incomprehensible and terrifying shower of fire. In “The Armadillo”, Bishop seems to present her first-hand experience of witnessing World War II while in Key West. The poem presents a paradox by presenting the terror of the animals, at the same time presenting the beauty of the fire balloons which are in a way responsible for the destruction of the natural beauty itself. Bishop dislikes each and every expression of aggression, be it war or an aggressive festive celebration disrupting the normal living. Bishop dedicated this poem to Robert Lowell, who becomes a conscientious objector when the Allied command began firing and bombing German cities in World War II. Bishop’s poem points directly to these fire bombings, which wreak the same kind of horrifying destruction on a part of our universe that the fire balloons wreak on the animals. Bishop seldom protests or specifies her emotions, her work is full of an implicit compassion, and her friend Robert Lowell justly ascribed her tone “of large, grave tenderness and sorrowing amusement.”¹¹

Though, Bishop holds back her emotions, by not showing her authorial control intending not to give moral resonance to the poem, still the moral dimension is undoubtedly present. In this poem, Bishop advocates a peaceful coexistence of man and nature, a subject which is very much of Bishop’s immediate concern. Many of Bishop’s poems reflect the urban disturbance in natural living, thus reflecting her environmental concerns in the poem.

In the poem “Brazil, January 1, 1502” Bishop explores the atrocities inflicted upon the natives by the colonisers from a historical perspective. The poem’s title refers to the day that the Portuguese anchored at Guanabara Bay, Brazil, and claimed the country as part of their empire. (In 1494, Spain and Portugal had signed the Treaty of Tordesillas, dividing the non-Christian world between them.) Toward the end of the poem, Bishop signals that the colonizers came with the motive to exploit Brazil:

“to an old dream of wealth and luxury
already out of style when they left home-
wealth, plus a brand new pleasure.”⁵

Bishop shows native resistance to colonization because the native wealth, the landscape and its women are exploited at the hands of the intruders. Bishop focuses on the human tragedy in the form of the native women being raped at the hands of colonisers and thus addresses the essential social concerns of colonisations.

Bishop in "12 O'Clock News" portrays a U.S. military venture during the Cold War as a neo-colonial enterprise. Camille Roman pointed out that the poem was originally titled "Desk at Night," and began in year 1950 in response to the Korean War and was then developed "into the Vietnam era published poem." Thus, this poem took fourteen years to take its final form. Bishop constructs a parody of newscast – one broadcasting from a particular dark midnight of the writer's soul. Reporting its imaginary war story in the style of network news or documentary, "12 O'Clock News" brings to light an eerie confluence of military, corporate, anthropological, travel, and neo-colonial discourses. In this poem, Bishop transforms her room and things on her study table into a war field. Bishop looks at our ability to feel alienated from the world around us, even when that world is occupied with the issues of immediate concerns. It is all the more humorous that in the ashtray she sees;

". . . a sort of dugout, possibly a shell crater, a "nest"
of soldiers. They lie heaped together, wearing the
camouflage "battle dress" intended for "winter war-
fare." They are in hideously contorted positions, all
dead."⁵

The "ashtray" stanza shows several "soldiers" in a heap, "all dead". They are ineffective and there is little in the way of sorrow at their deaths. We've been set up not to empathize with the people in this foreign place, but just to witness and report passively. In a conversation with George Starbuck, Bishop seems to be reluctant to accept the poem's reference to war and says, "It had nothing to do with Vietnam or any particular war when I first wrote it, it was just fantasy."¹² The soldier's uniforms were designed for "guerrilla warfare" and the fact that they are wearing them gives further proof of:

". . . the childishness
and hopeless impracticality of this inscrutable
people, our opponents, or of the sad corruption of
their leaders."⁵

Bishop describes a lost war where soldiers are dead. But somebody probably from the opponent's party calls them childish, hopeless, inscrutable, impractical, and "their leaders" in a sad state of "corruption." Employing ethnocentric terminology, Bishop ascribes "childishness" and "corruption" to these "inscrutable people" and thereby exposes the political biases concealed within the electronic media's seemingly objective, authoritative voice. The poem uses Third-World landscapes and people as figures for the poet's writing, a gesture contiguous with the news media's own self-involvement. Bishop satirises the televisual imperialism and the political policy imposing wars in the poem, questioning our faith in our political stalwarts and the news reporters who were not worth the trust we put on them.

Bishop in her poem "The Imaginary Icebergs" celebrates the sublime supremacy of mind over the senses, over the material world. In this poem, Bishop imparts the ordinary with morally laden meaning, making it an element of search for the soul. Her moral affirmations are at times indicators of the search for one's existence:

"Icebergs behoove the soul
(both being self-made from elements least visible)"⁵

These witty "white peaks" of the iceberg after achieving their pre-eminence merely stand and star without violation or consciousness. The iceberg has the magnanimity to "behoove the soul" because it is like the soul not dependent on the outer realities, but engaged in inner realities. Robert Pinsky rightly sees the use of Bishop's language as the "geographical situations of the soul."¹³ In the last stanza of the poem, Bishop reminds the readers about the threats of ending travels without discovering the iceberg. The image of the iceberg may imply the innermost self after struggling in air, on earth,

and in oceanic immensities. The iceberg is the symbol of the eternal within the temporal. Bishop in this poem expresses the self-reflective destination because an object in nature begins to correspond to the soul.

Bishop's conversation with George Starbuck, published as "The Work!" quoted her friend saying "But you have no philosophy whatever", further explaining Bishop said, "people who are really city people are sometimes bothered by all the "nature" in my poems." She may not neatly be categorised under a specific school of philosophy, but it will be literal poverty on the part of reader to fail to appreciate the simple but instinctive awareness in Bishop's poems.

In "Cape Breton," the theme of the disruption and destruction of nature due to the encroachment of urbanization is strongly evident. This poem reflects Bishop's environmental concerns:

"and somewhere the mist incorporates the pulse,
rapid but unurgent, of a motorboat." ⁵

Bishop mixes nature with urbanity and her profound emotions with wit. Civilization, as represented by the motorboat, affects the nature and encroaches upon it, yet the two manage to coexist. Man and civilization represent a threat, in these landscape poems, to the calmness and stability of nature. The progressive groups are isolated from nature and become dispassionate towards the natural world around them. The looming threat to stability, due to development serves as a means to understand a stable sense of place, its beauty and serenity so as to fathom the loss thereafter. Upon the road in the poem is a set of "small yellow bulldozers," whose sole purpose is to destroy natural or existing things in order to replace them with civilization:

"The road appears to have been abandoned.

Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been
abandoned," ⁵

Both these lines end with the word "abandoned" suggesting a sense of misuse in regards to the land. The land has been robbed off several things like, its purpose and identity by these bulldozers. First, the abandoned land has lost its meaning and becomes a blank canvas left to be inscribed upon. Second, the natural beauty of the land has been robbed of its meaning. And finally, without meaning or beauty, the landscape serves no purpose. It remains inactive and unused and is characterized by what it is not supposed to be. In addition, the road described in the poem is "disused" and associated with "song-sparrows" which sing "dispassionately" reflecting the inaction and abandonment of the road and its imposition upon nature. This impersonal characterization of the landscape maintains a distance between civilization and nature throughout the poem. Although the two affect each other, they are distant and disconnected despite their coexistence. By evoking these emotions, Bishop expresses her deep disconnect with urban displacement in search of a home and amplifies it to make it a universal concern.

Bishop's social concerns are apparent from the bridge she tries to establish between the social divides of the society. The confrontations between people in Bishop's work are sometimes ambivalent and tricky; high and low, master and servant, victor and victim, are likely to change places. In the poem, "Manuelzinho" the relation between the patron and the tenant-farmer is based on the inequality between them, but there is also reversal of roles, when "superior" and "inferior" lose all meaning. Bishop's subject in this poem encompasses places like property, house, and territory, and to the dynamic forces shaping the relationship of employer and employee. Manuelzinho, the tenant is seen as improvident, touching, exasperating, picturesque—qualities traditionally attributed to the colonized; the landowner is essentially benign, ruefully resigned to the balance of power in which Manuelzinho must cajole and beg for handouts. The servant class representing the big social divide is given the attributes of the coloniser and a new ultramodern social ideology is being laid in Bishop's poetry.

The poem "Manners" by Elizabeth Bishop is a profound and insightful depiction of the system of etiquette followed in the era of history, more specifically the twentieth-century American history. The title of the poem refers to what is socially correct, polite and decent behaviour. World War I had ended in the year 1918 denoting a shift in value and manners that are often followed by rapid changes brought about by the war. The subheading "for a child of 1918" shows that the child of year 1918 was different in a sense that the social scenario were inconsistent. While on the surface the poem seems merely a description of manners of the day, it is, in actuality, a satirical depiction of the obsolete and old fashioned codes

of civility, traditionally accepted by all people as proper and necessary reflecting the relatively instantaneous transition from the old to new. Bishop in this poem tries to touch the social fabric of the twentieth-century and challenge it. Bishop uses the relation between grandfather and granddaughter, in order to bridge the gap between their respective eras and also to put them in contrast:

“My grandfather said to me
as we sat on the wagon seat,
“Be sure to remember to always
speak to everyone you meet.”⁵

The system of etiquette from the grandfather's time is based largely on always being humble and ingratiating oneself for others. His values are the only hope which would take her through the audacities of modern times. In this way, perhaps, his life and identity resembles human beings who are preoccupied in the trivialities of life, so much so, that they are not aware of their surroundings. In the last stanza, the bird is seen moving quickly exhibiting a kind of tunnel vision, and is the object of the speaker's pity (“Poor bird”) because of his obsession of a petty “grain” so as to sustain himself. The repetition of 'something,' emphasizes the point that the sandpiper does not know what he is looking for. The bird is so engrossed in looking for “something” that he pays no attention to the beauty that is literally beneath his feet “the millions of grains” which are in vibrant colours like, “black, white, tan, and gray mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.” Instead, he merely hurries along, searching, focused, and hoping to find the next tiny scrap of food that will sustain his existence. Finally, it is the ambiguity behind the sandpiper's actions that strikes us most forcefully; the sense of mystery that we can all relate to is ‘looking for something, something, something.’ Through a controlled tightening of focus, like the turn of the lens on a telescope, Bishop draws our attention ever closer to the minutiae of existence, of which the bird is solely conscious: from the water glazing over its feet, to its toes, to the spaces between its toes, to the grains of sand, and finally to the very nature of each grain, their precise colours and the stones and minerals that constitute them. Bishop narrows her vision to focus at the minutest of the details which are laden with important messages for us.

Bishop's optimism is seen in the poem “In the Waiting Room” where she displays her strength in a stressful conflicting situation. The poem narrates the crises of identity loss from Bishop's childhood memories which she resolves with much of positive affirmations of her personality giving rise to an epiphanic moment in the poem when the speaker is aware that nothing stranger can ever happen to her:

“I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen.”⁵

These lines indicate that her disorientation is complete: the menace of identity-dissolution is incomprehensible. The poem also exhibits the adamant and robust soul of the child to challenge the unseen and withstand life on her own terms.

Bishop, a passionate traveller focuses in the poem “Night City” on the degeneration of an urban city, which she has witnessed over her years of displacement from one place to other. In 1970 people began to realize the importance of recycling because there was no more room for garbage dumps and burn sites. It was now or never. Bishop in this poem seems to catch the reality of the world surrounding the years 1970. She notices and reflects upon the environment and how tormented it is, at the cost of development and urbanisation:

“Broken glass, broken bottles,
heaps of them burn.”⁵

Bishop opens the poem with utter distress and uneasiness for she views the city as a burning furnace, all that resides in it is seen burning or melting. The images of the heap of “broken glass” burning appear to be a double threat to anyone who would walk there. The image of, “the flaring acids” and “variegated bloods” equates the diverse racial elements or blood of the city to acid, symbolizing the racial or cultural tensions in the poem. These violent images are a threat to the mankind which would lead to the dissolution and mental chaos. Bishop personifies the city and presents it tormented and

emotionless. It had become so barren that there are no tears left to shed over her destruction and abolishment. Due to such ill treatment to the city, it is losing its beauty and charm- its lakes aren't flowing, but they are merely "gathered" as if conspiring to desert the place altogether. The lake is supposed to be the lifeline of the city laden with exotic "aquamarine" but it "begins to smoke," or darken with hopelessness as if trying to rebel against the city. "The city burns guilt," thus rejecting morality which causes guilt and without guilt there isn't any hope for change. Guilt is the precondition for revival and change but the city, unfortunately, lacks it. The image of "tycoon," in the poem, who is weeping by himself, for he is responsible for creating "A pool of bitumen ," and "a blackened moon." He is crying along because in the wake of progress and materialistic development he has lost his loved ones. Whether in a skyscraper or an ordinary man, everyone seems to contemplate their decision of progress at the cost of beauty which is now a "blackened moon" "dark environs." "A skyscraper up" is symbolic of the hollowness of the progress of urban society. But with so much of hopelessness, Bishop's poetry end on a note of positive moral affirmations. The final stanza of the poem comes as a ray of hope. With so much of the change happening in the living places, still the "creatures are "careful ones" adjusting to the new terms and condition of the so-called progressive cities. In a very humorous vein, at the end Bishop equates all beings into the word "creatures" walking cautiously, following the decorum and rules of living in urban society, "green, red; green, red."

"Pink Dog" is one of Bishop's best social consciousness poems. Many American readers are horrified to read the punishment inflicted upon the beggars in the fifth stanza of the poem, but they don't know the identity of the perpetrators:

"Didn't you know? It's been in all the papers,
to solve this problem, how they deal with beggars?
They take and throw them in the tidal rivers."⁵

Regina Przybycien, in his 1993 dissertation entitled "Black Beans and Diamonds: Brasil in the work of Elizabeth Bishop" gives a particularly revealing historical background for this poem illuminating Bishop's understanding of the Brazilian events of the early 1960s. Przybycien explains the source of the poem:

"One of the scandals of Governor Lacerda (in 1962) was the discovery that the Beggar Recovery Service was "recovering" in a style that was not orthodox: drowning them in the Rio da Guarda—one of the many episodes of summary execution common until today in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. Except in this case there appeared to be an official sanction to this practice of "sanitation" in the problem of begging. The international repercussion of the scandal motivated investigations on the part of the government and the punishment of some of the guilty. The event, however, gave ammunition to Lacerda's enemies who began to refer to him as the "governor [who] kills beggars."¹⁴

Sarcastically in the poem, in order to save the bitch from drowning, Bishop advises her to disguise herself so that she avoids being the object of scorn or ridicule and punishment. In the poem, Bishop's angry disenchantment, even her much-lover Carnival becomes complicit in monstrous civic heartlessness toward the poor and helpless. In order to camouflage the bitch so that she would not be the subject of scorn and ridicule, the "dilapidated dog would not look well," Bishop insists that it needs to "dress up" for the "Carnival." The only way to merge in the present and save oneself is through disguise. It is the poem that gathers the eroticism into the political interests of her later Brazilian poetry displaying her social concerns for the poor and the weaker sections of the society.

III. CONCLUSION

Elizabeth Bishop's poetry essentially presents her lingering uncertainty over the dilemma of how to voice her essential social concerns. Her social concerns and moral affirmations overlapped her aesthetic descriptive accounts making her works a complex study and imparting multifaceted dimensions to it. In a politically and social fragile situations, Bishop's poetry advocates moral affirmations and thus lends a ray of hope to the society on the verge of breakdown. Bishop express sympathy in its most basic form in her poems, feeling with others (and not so much feeling for them) as a means of identifying the deep-rooted sources of pain and isolation in post-war culture. Though Bishop does not propose philosophical theories but, never the less, advocates simple and better living. In poems like "Manuelzinho," and "Faustina, or Rock Rose," Bishop is seen desiring for a more socially equal society. In "The Song of Coloured

Singer” Bishop blurs the racial divide showing concerns for the oppressive section of the society. She very well touches upon the issues of war and colonization in her poems and upholds the simple, peaceful and provincial living in her poems. As Cheryl Walker astutely puts it, Bishop’s poetry is “compelling because it makes compassion not simply a matter of feeling but also of thought”¹⁵ giving her poetry a socialising effect.

REFERENCES

- [1] Jonathan Ausubel, "Subjected People: Towards a Grammar for the Underclass in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry," *Connotations* 4.1-2 (1994/95): pp 83.
- [2] Wilbur, Richard. “Elizabeth Bishop.” *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*. Ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess. Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 1983, pp. 265.
- [3] Tomkins, Silvan. *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*. Ed. E. Virginia Demos. New York: Cambridge UP, 1995, pp.169.
- [4] Harrison, Victoria. *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy*. University of Cambridge Press, 1993, pp.82.
- [5] Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Complete Poems: 1927-1979*, 1st ed., The Hogarth Press: London, 1984, pp.3-52.
- [6] Stevenson, Anne. *Elizabeth Bishop (Twayne's United States authors series,105)*, 1966, pp.53.
- [7] Cook, Eleanor. *Against Coercion: Games Poets*. Stanford University Press, 1998, pp.45.
- [8] Hynes, Samuel. *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to a Modern War*. Penguin publications, 1997, VII.
- [9] Aránzazu Usandizaga, Andrew Monnickendam. *Dressing Up for War: Transformations of Gender and Genre in the Discourse*, Amsterdam and New York, 2001, pp.220.
- [10] Millier, Brett C. *Elizabeth Bishop. Life and the Memory of It*. Berkeley, California: University of California P, 1993. pp.188.
- [11] Bloom, Harold. *Modern Critical Views Elizabeth Bishop*. Chelsea House Publishers. New York, 1985.
- [12] Monteiro, George. *Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi,1996.
- [13] Schwartz Lloyd, Estess P. Sybil. *Elizabeth Bishop and her Art (Under Discussion)*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1983.
- [14] Neely, Elizabeth. *Findings from the Brazilian Basement*. Fall, Vol 19(1), 2013.
- [15] Walker, Cheryl. *God and Elizabeth Bishop: Meditations on Religion and Poetry*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp.101-2.