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A Study of T.S Eliot as a Spokesman of his Age

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Abstract

Thomas Streams Eliot (1888-1965) was an essayist, publisher, playwright, literary and social critic and one of the 20th century major poets. The present research work deals with the discussion of T. S. Eliot's as a Spokesman of his age. Eliot is a conscious writer and expresses the dominant anxieties and feelings of his age. In his creative works Eliot highlights how in today's scientific and materialistic world man is degenerating day by day. In blind materialistic pursuit, he is forgetting all his moral and spiritual values. In fact, the entire moral, spiritual, intellectual and physical traits, which are essential for a human to be humane, are vanishing day by day leaving him behind like a waste land where there is only barrenness that can never nourish the goodly tree of human being to survive or flourish in the poisonous environment of the modern social set up. The present study discusses how the poet discovers and presents a condition of modern world, where man lives a purposeless life. Through his works, Eliot highlights the need to belief in God, attain true self and be redeemed.

Keywords: Dominant Anxieties, Materialistic, Pursuit, Barrenness, Survive, Redeemed

The age in which T.S Eliot started writing poetry was the age of depression and disillusionment. The end of the nineteen-century came with the beginning of rapid industrialization of England, and with it, an increasing urbanization. Result of this was prosperity that gave birth to evils and affected the very basic aspects of life deeply. Materialistic outlook towards everything and the economic prosperity brought about a breakdown of values cherished so far. Money became more important than human affection and relationship. The greatness of man became more and more dependent upon his wealth and economic well being. The qualities of mind and heart, no longer, held much importance. It naturally led to a breakdown of spiritual and religious values and beliefs. Moreover, The First World War worsened the situation i.e., the feeling of loneliness, despair, confusion and cynicism increased. Barznji comments on the problems caused by First World War, "For example it made many people pessimistic, hopeless and worried" (48).

It was the age in which feeling of doubt and uncertainty, and the erosion of human relationship, was hastened and heightened by the new discoveries in the field of psychology. Freud emphasized that irrationality and the unconscious had a great power to affect human conduct. Irrationality, indeed, came to be regarded as fundamental to human nature. Forces lying deep in human beings could easily triumph over the so-called rationality.

This sort of background of instability, uncertainty, confusion and breakdown of values altogether awakened the sensitive heart in T.S.Eliot. It was against this background that he began to work. In the words of Bradshaw, the objective of modern poetry was to put “a stress on transformation, exteriorization, and shock.” (161)

His creative works exhibit that man was no longer seen as a rational being as far as his behaviour was concerned. His behaviour was read in ways that would not have been possible before the strides made in the science of psychology. Family relationships underwent a change. The assessment of the relative roles of man and woman changed. The younger generation and the older generation felt the gap between them widening, resulting in a change of relationship between parent and child. T.S. Eliot wanted to present this situation of modern world through his literature. He wanted to draw attention of his readers to these defects of modern civilization. He is of the view that a poet's aim should not be to entertain. It must have moral and social purpose.

Undoubtedly, Modern civilization is in the verge of decay. It is going very rapidly to drown. People are devoid of any guiding faith. They have no religious faith to hold them, they have no moral values to guide them, they have no cultural roots to sustain them. So it is quite natural that a society without any faith tends to drift and that is what Eliot has desired to express through his poetry. Not only Eliot, but there are a few others, who have also expressed the same views through their works. To name them, we can refer Irving Babbit John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, H.G. Wells, George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. They all echo the same despairing voice. As Irving Babbit says, “Unless there is a reaffirmation of the truth of inner life in some form, religious or humanistic, civilization is threatened at its base.” (qtd. in Sherwood Eddy, 1934:180)

Similarly the world portrayed in Eliot's poetry poses a threat to man's existence because it is a world which is insignificant; it is Eliot's firm conviction that without faith in God, no scheme for social improvement can work. Preoccupation with the doctrine of progress and worldly pursuits makes us blind to the true significance of time. We are destined to eternal suffering because we are forgetting our moral and spiritual values. As M.C. Bradbrook in his work “T.S. Eliot” says, “It is a world devoid of any generally accepted standards of belief.” (12)

Man in this world fails to justify his existence when life does not appear to have any meaning except barrenness and hollowness. Eliot puts the same idea quite sarcastically, “Birth, and copulation, and death, That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks”

Critics have found a lucid and logical development of T.S Eliot's genius from beginning to the last stage of his career. He was a dynamic personality who was changing constantly and harmoniously. The poem “ The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock” depicts that man in his journey from a world of boredom to a world of release, has to encounter the great challenging questions pertaining to the problem of his existence. Religion has lost its spiritual appeal; society is lifeless without any direction; people meet one another wearing unusual makes due to which there is no communication among them; callous indifference of this moral decay and spiritual vacuum, yet the desire of emotional rapport is still blazing in their heart. For instance we have ‘ The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock.’ This poem is the confession of J.Alfred Prufrock, one of the denizens of this infernal world. Its epigraph is a brief commentary on man's existence on this earth. Nature or the outer world, symbolises his mental state of inertia. The

“Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” delves deep in the emotional and physical predicament of life. Prufrock belongs to the contemporary aristocratic world. His society shows the perfection of urban civilization with its sophisticated luxury, artificiality, hypocrisy, loneliness etc. it is a world disgusted with itself, bored to death and finding some relief in love and gaiety. The words of Prufrock come straight from the drawing room and fashionable clubs. This modern civilization preserved its formal manners and mechanical bits of conversation. Actually, this society is rotten and hollow at its core. It has no emotional or spiritual reservoir of strength. Eliot comments, in this modern world evening spreads, “Like a patient etherized upon a table; with smell of steaks in passageways” (Eliot, *The Waste Land and other Poems*, 1972, LL 8-9).

Eliot was quite aware of the degeneration, which was prevalent in his age and through his various poems, he has tried hard to raise a voice against this disintegration and degradation. In his poem “Hollow Men”, these hollowmen show spiritual emptiness and barrenness. It contains the poet’s reflection on the subject of human nature in the world and the relationship of this world to another, the world of death and eternity. Similarly, his poem “Gerontion” affirms the views of Eliot about modern life and civilization. The action of the poem is set not in any place, but in the mind of the old man himself. The old man is thinking of his past and present and also his physical surroundings. There is no movement towards any set purpose or goal. There is hardly any progress in the development of thought. The poem ends in the same as it begins. The words ‘dry season’ of the last line echo the words of the first line ‘dry month’. The ‘dry brain’ and ‘dry season’, however, achieve their grandest dimensions in his most famous poem as Elizabeth Drew comments, “Money orientation of values, spiritual sterility, death of intuition and the birth of empirical search for knowledge, all symptomatic of the post Renaissance Commercial civilization with no religious communion or human sense of community, a night mare world of isolation and instability, of restless nervous and intellectual activity, emotional stagnation and spiritual drought.”(48) “Gerontion” is an inner monologue. The thoughts of the protagonist recollected in tranquility reflect the essential barrenness of modern civilization. Eliot says that modern life is vain and futile like the days passed by the old man. He is quite disillusioned about himself and about the purpose of modern world. He regards himself ‘dull head’ ‘among windy spaces’. In this poem Eliot uses the technique of self-irony. Gerontion consoles himself by saying that it would have been useless to keep the passion alive for it must have been perverted by the nasty touch of empirical investigation. Not only this, Gerontion’s condition is more pitiable as he has lost his power of sense perception, “I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch.”(Eliot, *The Waste Land and other Poems*, 1972: L.66). Thus, the poet comments on spiritual and moral bankruptcy of man.

His seminal work “The Waste Land” also describes the hollowness of modern society. The lack of spirituality in modern world is reinforced by the reflection of the mythical waste land devoid of water, the source of life. This is a difficult and complex poem and requires repeated readings to understand its meaning and implications. Cooper’s advice “The key to the poem may lie, paradoxically, in the fact that there is no single key to its meaning. Indeed, the poem needs to be read in a way that was unfamiliar to many contemporary readers of poetry in 1992 and still challenges readers today” (64). The poem is divided into five sections which illustrate various aspects of

degenerated modern world. The first part “The Burial of Dead” makes us aware of the spiritual barrenness in modern man’s life. Eliot conveys a sense of apprehension and incomprehension in various characters presented in different situations. The lack of understanding is not helped by Madame Sosostris, a fortuneteller, whose enigmatic pronouncements only make sense later in the poem. The city, in particular London, is a grim place of people unable to live fully or see a way out of their deadness. The lines from poem express it clearly, “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow, Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, You can not say or guess, for you know only, A heap of broken images.....”(LL19-22)

The part two “A Game of Chess” offers two scenes showing the essential emptiness in a lavishly decorated room, a rich lady whose constant questions express her anxiety and lack of control. The second scene is set in a London pub where two women discuss the predicament in which Lil finds herself. The modern man is mentally impotent. He can’t think anything positive. The theme of sexual dissatisfaction is presented in Part III, “The Fire Sermon”, where Eliot, ranging about in time from Buddha and St. Augustine to the present day, has tried to show how man’s aspirations to a higher i.e. more spiritually mode of living are constantly thwarted by his subservience to his bodily appetites and his self-awareness. Fredrick J. Hoffman rightly summarizes the situation, “Religious incentive is lacking, belief fails of a divine purpose, love has no real opportunity for issuing either in a meaningful sexual relationship or in life itself. The full terror of this situation is presented in terms of a dramatic analogy of faith and love given a concrete, social, human meaning”.(336)

Next, the part IV “Death by Water” highlights materialistic degeneration. In this section, a drowned merchant’s body decomposes in the sea. He seems to have achieved nothing. Further, the last section “What The Thunder Said” begins with a description of the death of Jesus and goes on to relate a difficult journey through the desert to an empty chapel. However, the poem ends with a hope of salvation. The poem gives an advice to regenerate themselves and wishes that everywhere in the world should be “Shantih shantih shantih”(L. 433). Prof. Radhika Subhankar Mukherjee in her paper, “A Study of Ecology As A Metaphor in T.S.Eliot's The Waste Land” summarizes the theme of “The Waste Land” in the words, “Eliot suggests by his poem the people of Twentieth Century Europe, who are really sightless, blind to their own fate and lack of faith. The structure of the poem itself is an indication of this unfaithful society which is assorted and broken.”(4)

The meaninglessness of regulated life without any higher purpose in other poems also. As in “Ash Wednesday” (1930) there is an innerdrama of the clash between flesh and spirit. In the beginning, it might have been a purely intellectual emotional affair, but when the protagonist makes effort to act in accordance with his belief, he fluctuates between the world and the word. T.S. Eliot in his *Selected Essays* comments, “One of the unhappy necessities of human existence

is that we have to find things out for ourselves” (428). The protagonist in “Ash Wednesday” is in the Purgatorio of his soul; behind him in the vast inferno of the world and before him is the Paradiso. He has rejected the delusory world of the false dreams of happiness, yet it tempts him. He is too weak to erase from his mind the memories of his past sensual life and to overcome the temptations of the illusory attractions of pleasures at present. Yet he has a will to transcend the material world and get at the spiritual world. Therefore, it becomes a matter for exploration and self

questioning a search with in. The theme of T.S. Eliot works may be summed up in the words of Ackroyd, “It was Eliot’s belief that if Christianity disappeared our civilization would disappear with it” (249).

Thus, from the above discussion it emerges that T.S. Eliot is the true representation of all the trials and tribulations of his age. He has given a true account of the characteristic features of his age. His creative works centred on the fact that no doubt, the discoveries in science brought a better understanding and a widening of horizons, but the astonishing ultimate result of it was the break up of old traditional values and relationships and the ever-increasing feeling of rootlessness in the hearts of individuals.

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Quoted by Sherwood Eddy in “Russia Today” London:George Allen and Unwin Ltd;1934.