

T. S. Eliot: His Life and Age of Transition in Deviated Society

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Abstract: Thomas Stearns Eliot, the man of letters, had an unfathomable religious sensibility. His quest for belief holds together the diversified elements of the modern man's fragmented being and gives a sense of direction in his life. The paper aims to explore the life span of T. S. Eliot, his work and age which leads to the various stages of social and economic changes in mindset of modern society. His work which is known to be milestone of the literature implies the strong impact on the contemporary writer. His writing generated the interest in the society to blend and open up the thoughts of east and west. It gives the acute sense of divinity which indulges into the ocean of the positivity and peace of mind in the modern but deviated society.

Key Words: Diversity, Transition, Revolution, Spiritual Belief, eastern - western tradition

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on 26th September 1888 into a middle class family which was originally held from New England and later moved to St. Louis, Missouri. Originally he was an American. He came to Britain in 1914 and married an English woman in 1915. Thereafter he decided to live in England. He had established himself as a great modern poet, dramatist and a great critic.

Mr. Eliot was a bright student even at the early period of his education. Since childhood he had deep reverence for Christian religion. He loved writing and he had interest in business. His poems were published in the school magazine. From 1898 to 1905, Mr. Eliot attended *Smith Academy*, where he studied Latin, Ancient Greek, French and German. He began writing poetry in the age of fourteen being influenced with the work of *Edward Fitzgerald 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam'*, which was a translation of the poetry of *Omar Khayyam*. His first poem i.e. '*A Fable For Feasters*' was written as a school exercise and was recorded in the *Smith Academy Record* in February 1905. He also published three short stories in 1905, '*Birds of Prey*', '*A Tale of a Whale*', and '*The Man Who Was King*'.

Mr. Eliot rose as a great poet between 1918 and 1925. The publication of '*Prufrock and Other Observations*' (1917) brought him name and fame. In 1920 his next poetic volume '*Poems*' was published. It comprises of modern poems and its publication established him as a poet. His long Poem '*The Waste Land*' was published in 1922.

Later, he joined *Faber and Faber* and '*The Waste Land*' stands in the epic tradition. The poems reveal a considerable maturity of the poet's powers. The characteristic style and technique of Mr. Eliot are now effectively used. '*The Waste Land*', specially is fragmented in effect, lacking in cohesion, thus symbolizing the breakdown of beliefs and values in the cultural life of the west. '*The Waste Land*' raised a storm of criticism and

thus Mr. Eliot came to be well known to lovers of poetry in Britain and America.

T. S. became the Editor of '*The Criterion*', a literary magazine of high reputation. His '*The Hollow Men*' was published in 1925. It was known as a poem of despair and was widely appreciated. In the same year, Mr. Eliot left *Lloyds* and joined the publishing firm named *Faber and Gwyer*. Later he joined '*Faber and Faber*', London. He remained for the rest of his career and eventually was raised to the position of director in it. Most of his works were published by this firm.

Mr. Eliot converted from *Unitarianism* to *Anglicanism* on June 29, 1927 and in November he took *British citizenship*. After joining the Church of England in 1927 Mr. Eliot declared himself to be a religious poet. In the same year he composed '*Journey of the magi*', '*Ariel Poems*' and '*Ash Wednesday*' i.e. a group of six poems and these were published in 1930. He is specifically identified as *Anglo-Catholic*. He proclaimed himself as a Classicist in literature, Royalist in politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion.

'*Selected Essays*' of T. S. Eliot was published in 1932. '*The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism*' was published in 1933. He was mainly a critic of society. He composed a dramatic fragment, '*Sweeney Agonistes*', which he did not complete. He wrote a set of choruses entitled '*The Rock*' in 1934. His first play '*Murder in the Cathedral*' was published in 1935. Another play '*The Family Reunion*' was published in 1939. Mr. Eliot's book '*The Idea of Christian Society*' was published in 1939. His beliefs regarding God and the soul got a proper expression through this book. There after he wrote '*Four Quartets*', a long religious poem, which was divided into four sections and published in early 1940's.

Eliot anticipates a revitalized world that he fully conceives in the *Four Quartets*. In this later poem, Eliot once again includes the world of desire, fear,

and death that haunted *The Wasteland* and other earlier efforts. But in the *Quartets* the importance of this darker world has been diminished, relegated to the sphere of time to form a mere backdrop to Eliot's expanded vision of life as unblemished eternity.

T. S. Eliot was an eminent writer and he got the 'Order of Merit' award in 1948. The very year is marked for his worth mentioning success by winning the Nobel Prize for literature, which instantly raised his personality from national to international level. He received this prize for his highly criticized poem '*The Waste Land*'. His 'Notes Towards a Definition of Culture' was also published in the same year.

The play '*The Cocktail Party*' was published in 1949. His prose works were also published in the 50s. His fourth play the '*Confidential Clerk*' was published in 1953 and the fifth play '*The Elder Statesman*' was published in 1958. As a writer T. S. Eliot reached his widest public with his '*Four Quartets*'. This book is largely written for the miscellaneous public and it is his masterpiece.

Mr. Eliot at the age of 68 remarried *Esmé Valerie Fletcher* on 10th of January, 1957. She was 30 years old at that time. Just opposite to his previous marital experience Mr. Eliot knew Fletcher well, as she had been his secretary at Faber and Faber since August, 1949.

T. S. Eliot is classicist. In sharp contrast to romantics, he lives in a world around him and shows his deep concern about contemporary society. The main impulse behind his poetry is to give a new and perfect expression to truths and commonplaces of man and his world. In his pursuits of giving a realistic representation of life around him, he sometimes becomes critical of the spiritual degeneration of mind and expresses his despair over the utter emptiness of the contemporary civilization. In '*The Waste Land*' and '*The Hollow man*' he describes the spiritual degeneration of modern man.

T. S. Eliot had earned a position as a writer. He tried to resolve the dilemma of human existence not only on the psychological or historical plane but also on the spiritual plane of being. In Mr. Eliot's poetry, the confrontation between time and consciousness is articulated mainly at three levels: psychic, historical and spiritual. With the developing scope of his poetry Mr. Eliot explores human experience of different cultures, including ancient Indian traditions. Regarding this aspect of Eliot's poetry J. K. Sharma in his '*Time and T. S. Eliot*' (1985) writes,

"The concern of Eliot is man – man in the act of self-making, either failing or succeeding. And the antinomy of Time and Consciousness is a major problem of his poetry. The problem is dealt with mainly at three levels: psychological, historical and spiritual. Eliot also uses time as a

technique. Through historical and contemporary juxtaposition of allusions, he achieves what may be called a 'Transparency' of time."

The allusions in '*The Waste Land*' are examples of '*simultaneous experience*'. The poet's mind grasps the significant moments of experience and juxtaposes with the civilization of our own time and region and achieves a kind of historical simultaneity. It shows that he is conscious of the co-existence of the 'Timeless' and the 'Temporal' together.

T. S. Eliot was a profound scholar and a great thinker. He was a product of diverse influences – literary, anthropological, and philosophical. The literary influences of Elizabethan dramatists, English metaphysical, French Symbolists and Imagists are great on his poetry. He learnt from Dante how to polish and refine his language, how to enlarge his emotional range and how to bring his own poetry in line with the European tradition.

Mr. Eliot was died in London on 4th of January, 1965 out of the disease named *emphysema*. He was a chain smoker and that very bad habit caused him suffer a lot for many years. Because of the same he had often been laid low with bronchitis or tachycardia. He was cremated at Golders Green Crematorium. According to Mr. Eliot's wish, his ashes were taken to St. Michael's Church in East Coker, the village from which his ancestors had migrated to America. Certainly one of the most important ways in which Eliot fulfilled his self-imposed duty to his own voice was by using the materials of the city for building his works.

T. S. Eliot: His Age and Transition Period

The last ten years of the Victorian Era gave birth to a fresh set of forces in literary field and witnessed a reaction against many of the old Victorian ideals. One of the chief characteristics of the twentieth century literary scene is a breakdown of values. The outlook of the rising generation was scientific rather than purely intellectual or romantic.

It was an era of confusion and uncertainty. The rise of the scientific spirit and rationalism led to challenging of accepted social beliefs, conventions and traditions. In matters of religion it gave rise to doubt and agnosticism. No doubt there was much questioning much criticism of traditional beliefs in the Victorian era also but the Victorian writer was not critical of the very fundamentals of the very basis of his social and moral order. On the whole his attitude was one of acceptance. By the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century we find a few writers criticizing the very basis of the existing social economic and moral system.

The last decade of the nineteenth century brought in an era of rapid social change and this change is to be noticed in every sphere of life. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, there was a

complete change in the way of life and economy. It was an age of industrial and mechanical development. Rapid industrialism, commercial and material expansion also resulted in many evils, such as the appalling social conditions of the new industrial cities, the squalid slums, and the exploitation of cheap labour.

It was an age, which was called the Age of Interrogation and Anxiety because the scientific revolution and changing social, moral, political and economic conditions have shaken man's faith in the authority of Religion and Church and the established order. Man did not want to accept anything unless it was tested by reason. The persistent mood of skepticism and interrogation has increased disproportionately in want of a new set of values. Moreover, the modern industrial and technical progress had given birth to the spirit of competition. Everyone wanted to be successful in the rat race but only a few could succeed. This failure coupled with the complexities of modern life had resulted in frustration, anxiety and cynicism.

The year 1900 marked the beginning of the end of the supremacy of the middle classes, their thought and writing. The sorry state of the poor, living along with the affluent sections of society, aroused the desire to improve living conditions in the poor working class. The poor had grown conscious of their sad predicament. They posed a great challenge to the social conscience. The early twentieth century writers put in every effort to reform and reconstruct the society. They tried to make their readers accept the new age as new and attempted to mould it by consciously purposeful efforts.

The literature of the twentieth century had been greatly influenced by the economic and social changes. The landed aristocracy and agricultural labour class were in trouble. Young villagers began to migrate to industrial towns and there was complete break up of rural way of life. The writers expressed the disintegration of the village community and its profound implications. In the new century emphasis was put on urbanization, which completely changed the pattern of social relationships. Materialism and competitive spirit began to encroach upon the placid tenor of village life. Money became the key factor in all-human relationships.

New psychological researches also influenced the literature of the twentieth century. Freud put great emphasis on the power of the unconscious to affect human conduct. Intellectual convictions appeared to be rationalizations of emotional needs. The ordered emphasis on sex behavior was completely changed and a rational view of sex relationships was evolved. The modern age may be termed as the age of rationalization in sexual behavior. The rightness of sexual union outside marriage was accepted. The two world wars virtually brushed

aside all familiar notions of conduct and morality. Sex was considered to be amoral. The new inventions of contraceptives encouraged extramarital relations among the young.

The post war period was an era of depressions. By the end of Second World War in September 1945, England had suffered the loss of hundreds of thousands of young men along with the devastation of wide area in London. It had badly affected the country's economic system and its financial resources. The development of radio, cinema and television had an enormous impact on the writings of that period. The growth and development of literature greatly influenced the mental and moral climate of the period. The invention of locomotive and telegraph, rapid and cheap intercommunication resulted in intellectual revolution.

Printing was multiplied and economical. It was an era of journalism, which resulted in the deterioration of literary standards. The journalists search for the vulgar, trivial and sensational items in order to attract a large number of readers. As a result of better printing facilities cheap editions of modern books were published and as a result all types of literature were accessible to the common public.

As the modern youth were interested in reading vulgar literature there was a rapid growth in pornographic literature, especially sex novels. This lowering of taste had an adverse effect on art and literature. Individualism reached new heights with men of finance and industry who created prominence in the area of industrialism. Mr. V.K. Roy explains T.S. Eliot's circumstances [*T.S. Eliot: Quest for Belief in 1979*]. He says, "It was under these material conditions and in such an intellectual climate that Eliot listened, at Harvard, to the lectures of Irving Babbit an anti-romantic humanist. He shared with the great thinker his dislike for romanticism, liberalism, democracy, scientism and above all materialism."

These are the characteristic features of the age in which Mr. Eliot produced his writing works. He accepted the challenge of the new age and seems to make an attempt to reconstruct the society with the traditions to the past. He was realistic in his writings and intensely critical of the evils in society and critical values of the individual soul.

To express the boredom, horror and the agony of existence in a concentrated poetic diction Mr. Eliot used new poetic technique of the Imagists. Imagism insists on the use of bare, dry and precise visual images and the use of the exact word from the language of the common speech. Mr. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' is the first major example of this type of new poetry. Mr. Eliot found the new technique highly suitable to present the dry life of the people of the 'Waste Land'.

Conclusion:

T. S. Eliot, the masterpiece of diversity explore the boundaries of the human society on the different scale. More or less all his works depict his religious beliefs, his observation of the people around him,

his criticism about the society, lack of faith, and materialistic attitude of the people of that period. This study pertains to the relevance of one of Mr. Eliot's works in the present context. Therefore, it is pertinent to take a closer look at this particular work and the depiction of his age there in.

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