

Disillusionment, Alienation and Frustration

(A study of various aspects of T S. Eliot's early poetry from Prufrock to The Waste Land)

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'My nerves are bad to -night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
I never know what you are thinking?

(T.S. Eliot: The Waste Land)

A great writer while writing, inevitably incorporates the trends, values, general beliefs and in fact the very essence of his age. T.S. Eliot is not an exception. His writings, more especially his poetic works remain unintelligible without reference to the age of which he was a part and factors and forces which prompted his literary works of everlasting value. Eliot himself said, "A great poet, in writing of himself, writes his age". His "The Waste Land" invariably presents the vast panorama of futility and anarchy and is hence known the epic of the modern age.

Eliot's main aim of writing poetry was to communicate through presentation the frustration, alienation and anxiety prevalent in the consciousness of the inhabitants of the lost generation. Eliot knew that the inner state of mind of man is very complex; it can only be presented either symbolically or in an indirect manner. To articulate the "agonies of the inarticulate", he had to make use of various kinds of allusions, symbols and images. His early poetry abounds with the imagery of sickness, disease and death. His concept of Objective Correlative helped him to transmit personal emotions into fused ideas and images which possess a quality of universality.

The period of 1920 is called "the decade of despair and disillusionment" therefore the poetry of post war era is neither cheerful nor inspiring. Scientific and technological advancements generated chaos, anarchy and disbelief in existing values. W. B. Yeats sums up this chaos and anarchy in his most popular poem "The Second Coming":

Things fall apart, the center cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere The ceremony of innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst, Are full of passionate intensity.

Eliot and Ezra Pound (who greatly influenced Eliot) found society and its standards crumbling and the world governed by big business and democratic ideas breaking into pieces a culture adapted to the older aristocratic system. Civilization was also degenerating into "a heap of broken images". Industrial enhancement and scientific advancement completely destroyed the ancient culture based on agrarian community. Scepticism in matters of belief, confusion and bewilderment in thought became the order of the day and directly affected art and life. Sense of anxiety, fear, aimlessness,

frustration, drabness, staleness and impotence and a corresponding search for a sustaining faith appeared and disappeared in Eliot's early poetry. Besides this it also displays chaotic, disillusioned, anxiety-ridden atmosphere which was hostile to moral, ethical and spiritual values. The European society undoubtedly was the enemy of moral and spiritual values but the American Society in which Eliot spent his early life, was also inimical to these values even in a higher degree and had left on his mind and heart an indelible impression of its drabness and staleness. V. de.S. Pinto in his book **Crisis in English Poetry** comments:

Eliot had the advantage of being brought up in the tradition of English literary culture and yet at the same time, of being able to see it, as a foreigner sees it, from the outside (as he was an American with a cosmopolitan education). On the other hand, his early life in America brought him in touch with a society which was probably even more corrupt and hostile to spiritual values than that of Europe.

Eliot started his poetic career as a sensitive observer in the city St. Louis. Hence his early poetry describes in greater intensity the loneliness and meaninglessness of man fostered on the assumptions of liberalism. It turns out men like Prufrock who have measured out their life in "coffee spoons" and Gerontion "dull head among windy spaces" and Mrs. Porter and her daughter "washing their feet in soda-water". The social ritual that liberalism imposes on man is the modern world of Western Europe and America turns human beings into social masks, hollow-men who spend their time "To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet". (Love Song)

Strong sense of futility and void in human affairs and relationships pervade in Eliot's early poems. The over-whelming questions of the protagonists of "Love Song" and "Gerontion" "Would it have been worth it after all?" and "who turned in the hall, one hand on the door/Vacant shuttles / Weave the wind, I have no ghosts" sum up the sense of ultimate futility of human relationships. Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady" also signifies the theme of individual's isolation, man's estrangement from other people and from the world. The woman protagonist of this poem grouping for some hold on life as it slips into middle age, trying amid concerts and conversation to procure romantic friendship, undoubtedly portrays somehow Eliot's own dissatisfaction with himself. The young man's twice mentioned "Self-possession" is not only his 'poise' but in Eliotic context, his isolation, frustration and inability to give himself or to possess others. The young man of "Portrait of a Lady" finds himself faced/encountered with the dilemma that confronts Gerontion (when over-come by the sense of utter disillusionment, turns to "a sleepy corner") and Prufrock unable to communicate feelings to women". Eliot writes:

I feel like one who smiles and turning shall remark
suddenly his expression in a glass,
my self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark.

Expressions of nervous tension and suppressed hysteria of the world of frustrated rudderless, cultured well-to-do people are visible in "The Waste Land". Even the note of emptiness appears in Eliot's last major work "Four Quartets", in which the whole panorama is perceived as "a place of disaffection" where one is distracted from distraction by distraction/Filled with fancies and empty of meaning (192-193)

Eliot's preoccupation throughout his poetic career is with the estrangement of man- the individual's alienation. The intimation of man's alienation and the fragmentariness of his existence are prevalent in almost all his works from the "patient etherized upon the table" to "The Cocktail Party" where Celia explains the psychiatrist Sir Henry Harcourt Reilly:

No it isn't that I want to be alone, But that everyone's alone or so it seems to me. They make noises, and think that they are talking to each other; They make faces and think they understand each other; And I'm sure that they don't. (133-134)

Eliot's poems are replete with innumerable shades of man's loneliness. Locked up with in the suffocating and choking atmosphere of ugliness and squalor of 'yellow fog' and 'stale smells of steak in passage ways', of 'stale-beers' and 'the burnt-out ends of smoky days' of the rates' alley, the male and female protagonists of his poetry give the readers the impressions of faceless creatures, sordid and pathetic characters who are homeless. These are all 'lonely men in shirt sleeves leaning out of windows, damp souls of housemaids, sprouting, despondently at area gates', 'women who come and go talking of Michelangelo', the typist girl, daughters of Thames and a crowd of Stetsons flowing over Landon Bridge. "The Waste Land" also presents a long procession of characters prisoned in their own cells: We think of the key, each in his prison, / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison (79). Infect the protagonists of Eliot's early poetry are the representatives of highly sophisticated, cultured but degenerate Boston Society. Prufrock, The lady, Aunt Helen Mr. Apollimax etc. are more interesting as representatives than as individuals. To be with them, is either in the city streets or in some haunt like saloon or the degenerate but fashionable upper class people. The malady that afflicts Prufrock, is not frustration or anger; but hesitancy and indecisiveness. Through this poem Eliot portrays reluctance and indecisiveness of modern man - always confused and stressed and brings forth the triviality, hypocrisy and emptiness of contemporary urban life.

Even the world of "Prufrock", "Prelude" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" has reduced human beings to mere phantoms who dare not even to communicate with their fellow sufferers. The protagonists of "Portrait of a Lady", "Conversation Gallante" and "La Figlia Che Piange" by chance ladies, are disappointed, frustrated alienated figures. They are awfully aware of their predicament yet their belief in life sustaining values of emotional relationship is not dead. The poor lady in "Portrait of a Lady" the female counter-part of Prufrock is a pitiable soul hankering after "touch of relationship and love which she never gets". The ennui of life has sapped her vitality and the indifferent attitude of her lover has thwarted her dreams. Even the romantic aroma of her drawing room does not produce any positive effect in the heart of the lover for whom it all appears to be historic. His mechanical smiles and tea-drinks also exhibit his detachment from the lady. His heart has not anchored itself in her world so he can easily dissociate himself from her drab cloister. Lack of faith in human relationships and other such values of everlasting importance and pride are the root cause behind this alienation. In the ancient times man's inner-self was governed by faith but today life is totally devoid of it. Consequently isolation overpowers. Eliot depicts isolated pitiable condition of modern man in his "The Waste Land": Each in his prison/ Thinking of key. F.O. Matthiessen endorses this view:.... pride alienated him from his people and brought him to destruction, pride which is the worst of sins in Dante's Theology Since, being at the opposite pole from humility, it cuts the individual of both from man and from God.

Eliot's "The Waste Land" reflects the contemporary spirit in its totality. Its anxiety, despair, neurosis, boredom and mental vacuity have all been brought out. In the contemporary waste land corruption and sexual degeneration prevail at all levels. Sex has become a matter of intrigue, a subject of moves and countermoves, and a mere source of momentary pleasures, a sordid game of seduction and exploitation of the innocent. In the words of D.E.S. Maxwell: "This union of the two sexes is not in any degree actuated by a desire for children" "Contrary to marriage, sex revolution does not go beyond a short lived copulation union in which each partner remains a sex apparatus "largely unknown to each other, their egos are not merged into one, nor is their selfishness tempered by mutual devotion and love. Consequently its momentary pleasure leads to lasting anguish, anxiety, fear, remorse, hate and pain", states Pitirim A. Sorokin. The fashionable society woman in "The Waste Land" despite all her pomp and show, feels bored and fed up with meaningless routine of life and is therefore neurotic and hysterical as a consequence. Her love too suffers from mental vacuity and is unable to keep up even small conversation "What are you thinking of? / What thinking? / What ? / I never know what you are thinking. Think (The Waste Land) and man's replies. "I think we are in rat's alley / where the dead men lost their bones" put forth utter anarchy, futility and chaos of values in the modern world. Life has become a meaningless mechanical routine: "hot water at ten/ and if rains, a closed car at four".

The characters of "A Game of Chess" are all victims of ennui, frustration, disillusionment and hopelessness. Violation of chastity and predominance of lust have degraded them and they even acknowledge the staleness of their relationships: "My nerves are bad to night/yes bad, stay with me. / speak to me .Why do you never speak? Speak". Crowds flowing over London Bridge' listless and apathetic" with their eyes cast down are the spiritually dead citizens of modern waste land. They remind us of similar crowds in Dante's Inferno and Eliot amazingly writes: "I had not thought death had undone so many". These wretched creatures, spiritually tormented, walking over the bridge in the unreal city London, are clerk's, cashiers and business dignitaries etc. who begin their job at nine, hour of Christ's crucifixion, there by signifies 'Life-in-death'. Here people do not live they merely exist, as do inanimate things.

To conclude Eliot's poetry up to "The Waste Land" presents "the torturing impact of the great modern city upon the lonely individual. Eliot himself had experienced the intolerable burden of "the unreal direction and its futility, its lack of faith "heap of broken images" and hence presents it with convincing realism that tragedy is at the heart of life. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and other poems of the Volume Prufrock and Other Observation-1917 not merely express 'the disillusionment of his own generation' but also the fact that such disillusionment and suffering is the common lot of all humanity in all ages and countries.. F.O Matthiessen endorses Eliot's view: "this tragedy is not of 20th century alone, but of all ages. "

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