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CRITIQUE OF MODERN CIVILIZATION IN T.S. ELIOT'S "THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK"

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ABSTRACT :

T.S. Eliot, a famous poet, dramatist, and critic of twentieth century, is a realist who expresses modern man's problems in his writings. He is impressed by the classical poetry of Dante and John Donne. He calls himself a classicist in Literature. His poetic language is of classical standard which means of high level. He invents a new poetic style. He uses conversational rhythm and imagery drawn from modern life. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is remarkable for its diction and style. The language is clear and the poem does not follow any complicated structure. Its style is classical. He believes in objective and impersonal poetry; he says that the poet should not express his personal feelings in poem.

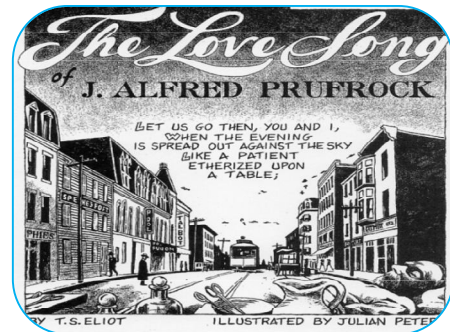
He uses various traditional and modern symbols and imagery in his poem and The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is no exception of it. He exposes the cowardness and inferiority of Prufrock through various symbols and imagery. There is imagery of evening, the image of cat and yellow fog are also remarkable in this poem. Prufrock is the central character in this poem. He is an aged man who is bald and this is the reason that he never expresses his love before his beloved. There are two selves of Prufrock- romantic and real self. His romantic self encourages him to propose his beloved but his real self does not allow him to do this because he is bald and aged man and his beloved is young and beautiful. He suffers from inferiority complex and does not want to go in the company of women because they will comment on his physical structure. The theme of the poem is impersonal.

KEYWORDS : modern, impersonal, reality, romance, cowardness, beloved, etc.

INTRODUCTION:

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) is regarded as one of the most outstanding poets in English poetry of the 20th century. Besides being a poet, he is a popular dramatist and critic. His importance as a critic is linked with his importance as a poet. He is a great realist always conscious about the problems of modern man and civilizations. His poetry is a revolt against the traditional poetry of his age. He has given a new shape, sensibility and meaning to poetry. He is a matchless creative artist and critical genius, that reflects the modern civilization in his poems. He has rendered an outstanding service to English poetry. He is awarded Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948.

Eliot is a great classical poet, who develops his own principles of classicism. He is highly impressed with the poetry of Dante and John Donne. His classical poetry is remarkable for order, precision and right reason. He has called himself classicist in literature. As a conscious artist, like the classical poets he achieves formal perfection. His classical poetry is marked by impersonal and



universal elements. He presents human tensions and problems in different forms. The first volume of his poetry *Prufrock and Other Observations* is published in 1917. It presents pessimism, depression, dejection of the modern age in ironical verse. He raises his poetic language to the classical standard. He is of the opinion that language should be raised to the higher level like the classicists. His poetry is the reflection of changing conditions of the modern age. With the help of intellectual energy and experimental technique, Eliot has been able to mirror social, cultural and moral conditions of his age. His poetry is remarkable for satire, irony, hypocrisy, vanity and pettiness of the 20th century society. There is no room for emotions and feelings in his poems. Eliot is specially a poet of mind and not that of heart. He rejects the approach of the poets like Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. Eliot's poems are remarkable for symbols and imagery. He transports his thoughts and ideas through symbols. They have touch of reality. He has made use of traditional and personal symbols but they are not beyond the reach of readers. With the help of these symbols, Eliot tries to transmit an objective view of modern society. His popular symbols are rope, the yew tree, fog, dance, sea, river, fire and so on. His symbols reveal his internal thought and reflect development of his personality. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is packed with symbols and imagery. The images of the cat, the fog and the patient are praiseworthy. *The Waste Land* is highly allusive and vague in the application of symbols and images. His poetic ideas and images are so nicely blended that they become one. He conveys not just moods but thought by means of symbols and imagery also.

T.S. Eliot expresses hollowness of modern civilization of the modern man. He is an earnest and bitter critic of urban life style and exposes the hypocrisy of the modern society. He also highlights ironic inferiority of so-called dignified people. In the poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the poet exposes the cowardness and inferiority of J. Alfred Prufrock. He is bald-headed and aging man, who suffers much from his inferiority complex and has much courage to express his love before his beloved. He is afraid of his beloved lest she should comment and reject his proposal. Here the most revealing lines in the poem are when Prufrock asserts: "Is it perfume from a dress / That makes me so digress?" (Williamson 68)

T.S. Eliot stands high as a modern and classical poet for his invention of a new poetic style. He enriches English language and transformed it into proper expression. He develops a new effective technique of communication both in style and versification. He uses conversational rhythm and imagery drawn from urban life. Eliot's diction is unique, original and intellectual. W.B. Yeats is of the opinion that he is an Alexander Pope working without apparent imagination producing his effect by a rejection of all rhymes.

T.S. Eliot believes in objective and impersonal poetry. He is of the view that a poet should not express his personal feelings and emotions. He suggests that poetry is not expression of the poet's personality. He does not appreciate the subjective poetry of William Wordsworth, John Keats and P.B. Shelly, and other romantic poets. Eliot gets name and fame as a poet with the publication of the poem *The Waste Land*.

As a matter of fact, T.S. Eliot gives a new channel and direction to English poetry. He raises his pen for poetry, drama and criticism. *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party* got tremendous success in the field of drama. No other English writer has so much originality and versatility as Eliot. Appreciating his poetry, E. Albert asserts

With the possible exception of Yeats, no twentieth-century poet has been held in such esteem by his fellow poets as Eliot. During 1930's his influence was enormous, and, if his pre-eminence is no longer so stridently proclaimed, he seems assured of his place among the great English poets who directed poetic impulses into channels. (533)

The poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is one of the most celebrated poems in English literature by T.S. Eliot. It is a powerful dramatic monologue that published in his first volume entitled *Prufrock and Other Observations*. The central speaker of the poem is Prufrock who is a modern Romeo, a bald and aging man. He does not have so much caliber to reach at a decision, loves a lady who is young and beautiful. He wishes to marry her. But he cannot express his love before his beloved. He suffers from the prevailing temper of cynicism and skepticism.

There are two selves of J. Alfred Prufrock one is romantic and other is real self. In the very beginning of the poem his romantic self suggests him to go to his beloved so that he may propose to her. But his real self holds him not to go there since he is bald and age aged man. His hands and legs are thin. Still, he visits there and just then listens the voices of some women in the adjoining room. The speaker states: "In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo" (Williamson 67).

The stream of his thought is broken and highly disturbed by noise of the women in the adjoining room. He does not want to go in the company of the women, for they may comment him regarding his physical structure. Prufrock is in deep sorrow and realizes that he is getting old and bald. His romantic self suggests him to wear the fashionable garments so he will wear white flannel white trousers like the cricket players and walk along the beach. He will enjoy sea- girls bathing and singing in the sea, where both selves of Prufrock will get relief and satisfaction to see the beautiful sights.

The poem is remarkable for certain qualities. Its theme is impersonal. The poet has not introduced his personal feelings and emotions in the poem like the romantic poets. The poetry of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats expresses their overflow of powerful feelings provoked by some external objects. On the contrary, Eliot's poetry is impersonal and objective. The style of the poem is mixed with metaphysical and French symbols and that's why the poem is ambiguous. It is written in free verse that was a new thing in 1917. The poem presents a complete break with the 19th century tradition.

The imagery of the poem is highly striking. In the very opening lines, the evening has been likened to a patient etherized upon a table. The image of cat and yellow fog is praiseworthy. The poem is full of images which prepare the background of the poem. Eliot also makes use of animal, literary and historical imagery. But the opening lines of the poem have been written in colloquial language. Regarding his imagery E. Albert remarks:

A close study of Eliot's imagery is essential to any comprehension to his work. Like the Imagists, he is always concrete, and his pictures are clearly realized and based on close and accrete observation... Eliot shows a particular fondness for the metaphysical conceits with its subtle blend of emotion and intellect. (538)

The poem is also remarkable for literary and biblical allusions. Prufrock intends to compare his indecisive nature and cowardice with that of Prince Hamlet of William Shakespeare. But then he likens himself to an attendant of Hamlet, Prufrock says: "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; / Am an attendant lord..." (Sen 5).

The title of the poem *The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is appropriate, suggestive and meaningful. The poet describes the cowardice, despair and indecisive nature of the central character of this poem J. Alfred Prufrock. Eliot is indebted to Dante for Prufrock ensembles 'Guide' who is one of the characters of *Inferno*; Prufrock is a man who represents the despair of the middle-aged man. He is in love but he cannot express his love before his beloved. He is always disturbed whether he should propose to her or not. It is the tragedy of his life. The irony is proposed by the word love song since the poem can be anything but a love song.

The poem is also remarkable for its diction and style. This is devoid of rhetorical features or any complicated structure. The words are very familiar and common. The language is forceful, impressive and clear. The poet asserts in the room women come and go talking of Michelangelo. Its style is classical.

Thus, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is the masterpiece by T.S. Eliot. Its theme is dramatic and impersonal. Sometimes it is difficult to understand because of its unconventional elements. The imagery and the rhythms are delightful as well as interesting.

Mr. Prufrock is the central character of this popular dramatic monologue. He is the protagonist of the poem. He loves a young beauty but does not have so much courage to express his heartfelt emotions before his darling. He desires to have a visit with her so that he may express his love. He prefers evening as the most suitable time when the atmosphere is as calm as an etherized patient lying on the table in the operation theatre. Prufrock states:

Let us go then, you and I.
 When the evening is spread against the sky
 Like a patient etherized upon a table;
 Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets. (130)

Prufrock is an aged romantic lover who always goes on thinking about his sweetheart. He loves her from the bottom of his heart but he is a man of indetermination, indecision and unable to carry his plan to execute. He tries again and again to propose to her. He is not able to decide what to do and what not to do and how should he express his deep feelings for his beloved in her presence?

Evaluating Prufrock's character J.P. Sen aptly remarks:

J. Alfred Prufrock—who is modern Romeo in all his amorous qualities but with none of his strength and determination.... He is a product of the modern age and suffers from the prevailing temper of cynicism and skepticism, but he is more a victim than a hero. (5)

In the concluding lines of the poem Prufrock says that he has heard the mermaids singing and dancing each to each. He has long experience of the company of the women since he has spent his mornings, afternoons and evenings sitting in the restaurant at tea-table. He is well aware of his problem and he is not bold enough to face the realities of life. He considers what his darling might say when he would propose to her. He postpones his decision one after another. George Williamson analyses his situation:

Prufrock is such a character who never really faces his inner conflict or frustrated self, and hence is incapable of a direct expression of it, to say nothing of solution. Here the most revealing lines in the poem are:

Is it perfume from a dress
 That makes me so digress? (68)

Prufrock possesses certain imperfections and weaknesses physically as well as mentally. He is getting old. The major part of his head is bald, which is the symbol of cowardice. His arms and legs are very thin. He is afraid of his baldness that may lead to him. Seeing his baldness, thin legs and arms women may comment on him. Prufrock says:

(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")
 My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
 My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin -
 (They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!") (131-132)

Prufrock is conscious about his physical ugliness so he will wear fashionable garments with his mounting collar as generally cricket players are observed during playing the match. He will have a sober necktie asserted by a pin. He is afraid that his thin legs and arms may lead young women to hate him and his baldness cannot be hidden and concealed by their sparkling eyes in spite of wearing fashionable dresses.

Prufrock is a tragic character who does not like his old age and his baldness. He is also aware of his cowardice and indecisive nature. There is always a problem for him how he can propose to his sweetheart. He refers to William Shakespeare's Hamlet and compares himself to him. Although Prufrock resembles Hamlet with all his doubts and uncertainties and ever-changing moods, he has none of the great qualities of the tragic hero. Prufrock himself immediately changes his intention and asserts that he cannot compare himself to Hamlet. Since Hamlet has so many features. He is brave, noble, great and young prince on the contrary, Prufrock is nothing before Hamlet so he compares himself to the servant of Hamlet. Prufrock asserts: "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; / Am an attendant lord,..." (134).

The above lines make clear that Prufrock does not have qualities like that of Hamlet, he can be compared to a courtier attending on Hamlet. In this regard, J.P. Sen points out;

Prufrock has none of the great qualities of the tragic hero but more like Laforgue's modernization of the character of Hamlet, Prufrock is an embodiment of Laforguean qualities of self-irony and mockery... Eliot gives a classic exposition of Prufrock's cynicism, despair, disillusion and skepticism which are an extension not only of the poet's own doubts

and uncertainties but they also convey in ample measure the hollowness and boredom of modern life. (5-6)

In spite of his best efforts, Prufrock has not been able to show his courage. He has no caliber to reach a decision whether he should express to his beloved or not. There is always a debate between his romantic and realist self. His heart is romantic self and his mind is realist self. Prufrock, therefore, represents a split consciousness, a division between heart and mind. His romantic self provokes him to go to his beloved and express to her. His mind represents his realist self and it suggests him not to hurry in the matter for there is a lot of time to express his love. In fact, Prufrock is coward and he is not bold enough to face his lady. He has spent all his life in the rich society and he knows very well all the men and the women who are coming and going in the room. Prufrock says:

For I have known them all already, know them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall (132)

Prufrock says that he is familiar with the beautiful ladies for he has spent morning, afternoons and evenings with them. He has passed all his life in taking tea and coffee with them. He is also familiar with the voices that are coming from the father room. Thus, T.S. Eliot has expressed the hollowness of the modern life through Prufrock.

As a matter of fact, Prufrock is a pathetic figure that fails to live up to his wish and world. He is familiar with his tragic flaw but when the time comes of action, his cowardice makes him unable to act. So, he takes shelter of fasting and praying in order to get the courage but there is no use. In fact, Prufrock is an aged romantic lover who is physically incapable to marry his darling. But mentally, he longs for her.

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