

Eliot's Concept of Life in the Waste Land

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Abstract— Literature is the reflection of human life and society. It has been continued right from the time of Chaucer to the present day. A good number of poets, dramatists, novelists and writers of other genre of literature have focused it more or less in all ages. T.S Eliot is one of the eminent personalities amongst them. He is not only a poet but also a critic and philosopher. He has portrayed the picture of human life and society in his poems. The Waste Land is the most relevant work of Eliot revealing the psychoanalysis of man in the present century. The poet has followed the mythical method in composing this poem. Thus, he shows comparison and contrast of values by citing the instances of the past and the present. He has taken allusions from the whole world and tried to present a panoramic view of the humanity fret in fever of the world and are burning in the fire of lust, greed and infatuation. Ultimately, he has tried to give solution through spiritual elevation suggested in The Gita, The Upanishad and other theologies.

Keywords— Spiritual Elevation, Theology, psychoanalysis, Lust and Infatuation

I. INTRODUCTION

T.S. Eliot is considered one of the distinguished literary figures and philosophers of the 20th century. He has left tremendous impact on the style and theme of modern poetry. He differs with the Romantics in his poetic theory – “Poetry is not the turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion. It is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.”(1). He asserts that poetry should not be personality oriented. It should be objective like science. He has succeeded in doing so by adopting the cultural and philosophical epithets across the world. Eliot shows his faith in the philosophy of Lord Buddha that desire is the root cause of our sufferings and miseries in life. Similarly, Eliot presents a Christian notion of peace that ‘His peace is our peace’. The same thing has been reiterated in “The Gita” by Lord Krishna that man always expects fruits against his action that is the cause of his suffering. Instead, he should work incessantly without the expectation of fruit against his work. It will set him free from the bondage of world and make him fully unattached and selfless performer. Eliot has also realized the seriousness of this inner or spiritual crisis. He

presents that man frets in fever of the world. His life is diseased and disorganized.

II. DISCUSSION

“The Waste Land” of T.S. Eliot is a significant work of the 20th century revealing the disillusionment caused by the First World War. The poem also shows dissatisfaction with the scientific achievement and industrial progress of Europe that is fragmented with destruction and disillusion of human values. The poet says that in this century man does not try to elevate himself spiritually and the land is completely barren and waste where there is no drip of spiritual water –“the Thames will be tar and the Ganga will be sunken”.

Moreover, the poet opines that the man in the present century can feel the real essence of life only when he lives spiritual or religious life. Only spiritualism can make him aware of the cardinal virtues of life. It is the same message by Lord Krishna in “The Gita”. Lord Krishna says that “man can reach me only through devotion”.

Eliot also depicts various factors of degeneration and disintegration of modern civilization in “The Waste Land.” These are obsession for sex, lack of faith and moral values. There is no natural human relationship among human beings in the society due to commercialization and modernization in the present century. All this causes mental tension and frustration in man.

The poet delineates that sex is an important aspect of our life and essential for procreation. However, in the present scenario it is noticed that it has been perverted and man is engaged in mechanical animal coupling for pecuniary benefits. It has also eroded moral values and proved a hurdle in man's spiritual progress. Easy sexual relationship is found among all sections of the society Eliot presents all this in the first part of “The Waste Land” through the story of German princess. The

story of Lil and three daughters of Thames express it. The typist girl and her boy friend are involved in mechanical sexual relations. Nor only this, the words of St. Augustine present the picture of European lust:

“To carthage than I came

Burning, burning burning burning.” (2)

Eliot also presents a comparison between ancient and modern time through mythical method. He juxtaposes the things of the past with those of the present. (3) He says that in ancient time people observed old or cardinal values of humanity. They believed in Christianity and lived their life up to the moral values. Elderly people and saints were given proper value in the society. But, today religion and these values are merely objects of child’s play and manifestation. Money is the god of modern people. People go to the church and temple only to perform their routine work. Religion has been the subject matter of manifestation. All this shows a big gap between profession and practice. Religion and faith are not considered the important part of life. It has resulted in general deterioration of the standard of life.

“And upside down in the air were towers

Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours,

And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted” (2)

Present century is devoid of spiritual and moral strength. They are not ready to accept the truth of life and death. The doctrine of Hindu philosophy provides spiritual and philosophical support to this theme. He accepts the doctrine of “The Gita” that the sensibility and the fragmentation of the social life could be perceived through it. He also depicts life in terms of the divine law. His aim is to transcend his characters through spirituality up to self-realization, atonement and absolution. Similarly, Sammuel Becket presents the cycle of birth and death in the following sentences:

“We do not know very much of the future except that from generation to generation the same thing happens again and again” (4)

In the view of the poet, man is frequently haunted by the fear of death. The human soul is longing for immortality. Man must be concerned with spiritual and secular salvation. However, people run after materialistic achievement. They sacrifice their spirituality for wealth and thus he falls in modern waste land that is agonizing for human soul.

The poem has been divided into five sections:- The Burial of the dead, The Game of Chess, The Fire Sermon, Death by Water and What the Thunder said!

The first section, the Burial of the Dead suggests the men who have lost their faith in spirituality; religion and God in the commercialized society are dead:

“Unreal city

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many

I had thought death has undone so many” (2)

The second section, A Game of Chess presents the picture of modern suffocating overburdened life. The poet reminds it with the imagery of Mrs. Eonitone seated in a room of London full of luxurious items:

“The chair she sat is like burnished throne

Glowed on the marble, where the floss

Held up by standards wrought with twisted vines

From which golden cupid on peeped out” (2)

The third section entitled The Fire Sermon has been extracted from Buddha’s sermon that man in the present century is burning in the fire of lust, infatuation, greed and desire that is the root cause of all his grief and worries. The title also suggests modern man’s sexual depravity.

In the fourth section entitled Death by Water Tiresias asserts that the people in the present century are money minded. They have forgotten spiritual values in their life. They always run after materialistic gain. He cites the example of a trader namely Phlebas who always thinks about profit and loss, pleasure and enjoyment. B. C. Southern says:

“Phleabs the Phoenician, a forth night drowned, forget the cry of gull and the swell of the Cornish seas, and the profit did loss and the cargo on tin. An undersea current carried him through the ages of the past. Imagine it a terrible end for a man once so handsome and tall” (5)

Once again, the poet depicts that man in the present century is morally and spiritually dead. He presents this view in the fifth section of the poem, *What the Thunder Said*. The poet says that modern man has killed Christ by his indifferent neglect. Eliot following his poetic theory of comparison and contrast refers to the *Vrihadayranayak Upanishad*. He opines that in ancient time when India was undergoing the crisis of fraught and famine, people prayed to God for divine help. God, the creator spoke to them in thunder:

‘Da’, ‘Da’, ‘Da’,

The words ‘Da’, ‘Da’, ‘Da’ reveal the secret of man’s spiritual rebirth. The first Da means Datta i.e. to give. The man must donate or sacrifice for the needed person. Second Da means Dayadhama i.e. to sympathize. We must sympathize with our fellowman. We should give up ego and work for the betterment of the society. Third Da means Damyata i.e. self control. It means man should control his mind and multiplying desire only then he can be spiritually elevated and get salvation.

Thus, the poet is very close to the message of “The Gita” that man should have detachment to attain spiritual bliss. It is important for his self-purification. Each one is confined in his own-self. We have lost the key words of human sympathy and brotherhood.

“We think of the key, each in his prison thinking of the key, each confine in a prison” (2)

Thus, Eliot’s philosophy and his experimental thoughts warn the society to be aware of evil and of irrational faith. L.N.Mishra comments:

“... The great poet and playwright of 20th century traversed like a search light in the sky of criticism and creative art”. (6)

III. CONCLUSIONS

The poet reveals the truth of life. He emphasizes that the salvation or Atma Gyan can be achieved

through introspection or self-realization. This message has been given by “The Gita”, *The Upanishad* and *The Waste Land*.

IV. REFERENCES

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