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IMPERSONAL THEORY OF POETRY: AN IMITATION OF EARLIER
CONCEPTS AND THEORIES

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ABSTRACT

T. S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" was published in the year 1919 in which his views on impersonality of the artist first appeared. The Impersonal theory propounded by T.S. Eliot is an attempt to break free from the subjective approach of historical, biographical, and sociological schools of criticism. Eliot while propounding impersonal theory of poetry does not come up with any original or new concept, but simply advocates objective poetry which also does not allow any entrance of the poet's personality into poetry. He in the above essay tries to establish his point only by rejecting Wordsworth's theory of poetry and in this very act does not carefully look into the mistakes that have crept into his own theory. Eliot is pre-determined and prejudiced; therefore, he just tries to achieve his end as soon as possible and does not even bother for the originality and validity of his ideas. The metaphysical poetry also influenced him and he feels that it was in the metaphysical poetry that one could find a 'unification of sensibility'. John Keats' concept of 'Negative Capability' also seems to be a strong source of Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry. Furthermore, the impersonal theory of poetry is also opposed to psycho-analytical criticism. It may be concluded that Eliot has frequently borrowed from the earlier critics, but has presented them before the literary world in the garb of new words and phrases, namely, 'dissociation of sensibility', 'unification of sensibility', 'objective correlative', 'tradition', 'individual talent', etc.

Keywords: Tradition, Poetry, Symbolism, Metaphysical Poetry, Unification of Sensibility, Negative Capability.

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T. S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" was published in the year 1919 in which his views on impersonality of the artist first appeared. "This Impersonal theory of poetry is of great significance for new criticism. Here in this theory is the first hint for the critic not to involve himself in historical, sociological or biographical details about the poet, but to take the poem as a work of art independent of the personality and emotions of the poet, and to contemplate its text without reference to the poet, and analyze its structure, study its images, its poetic phraseology, its rhythm and such other aesthetic qualities" (Chandra

57). The above statement makes it very clear that the Impersonal theory propounded by T.S. Eliot is an attempt to break free from the subjective approach of historical, biographical, and sociological schools of criticism which give foremost importance to the history and biographical details about the poet, and it also becomes apparent that he is trying to lay emphasis on objective poetry, which may be judged on the basis of its intrinsic qualities only.

When Eliot writes: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (300), he tries to establish that the personal emotion of the poet and his personality remain insignificant while writing of a poem. They have nothing to do with the writing of great poetry, and, so, must be kept away from poetry. According to him, the poet must try to remain as far impersonal as possible, and any entrance of the poet's personality into the poetry is strictly prohibited by him. The poet has to try to escape from emotion and ensure that his personality should not get expressed; otherwise, he may commit the error of becoming personal which according to Eliot is a great fault on the part of the poet. Earlier in the essay, he has given due importance to emotions when he writes that "The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him." (Eliot 300). He also writes that "the poet has, not a personality to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways" (Eliot 299). All these statements seem contradictory. On the one hand, he writes that poetry is an escape from emotions and on the other hand, he advocates the use of ordinary emotions by the poet. If the poet uses ordinary emotions, how is it possible for him to escape from emotions, so using ordinary emotions and escaping from these simultaneously is not possible. If the poet has already used the ordinary emotions, what is the use of escaping from it? The poet in using ordinary emotions has already expressed his emotions, for the emotion and personality of the poet are inseparable, personality cannot keep away from emotions and also the emotions are the integral part of the personality. So, either the poet can use ordinary emotions or he can escape from the emotions. Using the emotions and escaping from them at one and the same time is not at all possible. The situation worsens when he writes that "Only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to escape from these things" (300), because it lays pre-condition that before writing any poetry the poet must have emotion and personality and also that he must try to escape from these. The situation becomes interesting when he declares that "we must believe that 'emotion recollected in tranquility' is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquility" (300), but "it is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from concentration, of a very great number of experience. Which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation" (300). It may be said that Eliot seems to be making mistake, because, first of all, he does not make it clear as to how emotions are to be separated from experiences. Experiences will definitely have emotions attached to them and emotions, if according to him, are separated from experiences in the act of deliberate concentration one finds that he kills the very soul of imitation which he seems to be advocating in the guise of 'tradition', for imitation is not a servile copying of human actions, but a representation of these, and it is in this very act of representation that one finds art to be emerging out. He also commits another mistake when he wants the poet to separate impressions and emotions, because emotions are the natural outcome of various impressions which man receives from time to time during the course of his life, so it is not possible for the poet to separate impressions and emotions.

In the light of the discussion held in the above passage, it is clear that emotion and personality cannot be separated from each other and if it is at all possible to separate them, Eliot suggests nothing as to how these are these to be separated. Secondly, using ordinary emotions and escaping from them at one and the same time is not at all possible. Thirdly, emotions are formed only when one receives impressions after one observes something; emotions cannot emerge out of mere concentration. Further his statement that "impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality" (299) also

has some loopholes. First of all, how would it be possible for a critic or even the poet himself to decide as to which emotion was important for the poet and which constituted his personality, because there might be a case when the impressions and experiences expressed in poetry may be the impressions and experiences playing an important part in the personality itself. It may be accepted that the poet in such a case becomes personal and, thus, commits a mistake, but nobody could be in a position to judge as to which impressions and experiences were important or significant for the poet and which not. If it could not be judged clearly, then how a poet could be termed as personal or impersonal? So, the task of the critic in such a case becomes important. He will have to delve deep into the psyche of the poet in order to find out as to what lies hidden within his soul. In such a case, Eliot's theory will not hold correct, for psycho-analytical methods will be needed to be applied in order to delve deep into the psyche of the poet.

His tone in the above essay also seems to be hinting that even Eliot is not sure of what he himself is writing. On the one hand, he in the above discussed statements uses 'may' which suggests 'may' or 'may not be', he does not affirm anything, just seems to be making plain statements, but later on, he stresses upon the fact that the poet must keep away from his personality. In this way he is found to be on a cross-road—little hesitant and a little suspicious about the direction he has to move on to.

Thus, Eliot while propounding impersonal theory of poetry does not come up with an original or new concept, but simply advocates objective poetry which also does not allow any entrance of the poet's personality into poetry and which also is based on dry reasoning and dull themes, as far as the views of romantic poets and critics is concerned. His very approach seems to be negative, although he defines objective poetry in his own way. As has been mentioned earlier that he seems to be writing with a definite purpose of opposing and refuting Wordsworth's theory of poetry, so, it may be said that his very approach seems to be negative. And in attempt to propounding a theory of poetry with negative approach, he is certainly going to be prejudiced. And with a prejudiced mind creation of neither original nor new theory is possible. He in the above essay tries to establish his point only by rejecting Wordsworth's theory and in this very act does not carefully look into the mistakes that have crept into his own theory.

Besides these loopholes in his theory, the manner in which he tries to establish his point is also faulty. Chandra finds that the analogy in which Eliot has thought of, to prove impersonality of poetry is against the logic, for "in logic things of the same kind and category only can be compared" (269). He further adds that "the idea of the catalyst may be all right in the realm of material things, but what is the guarantee that the law that operates in natural things (in this particular instance, in chemistry) will also be operative in the realm of abstract ideas? The whole essay sounds like a very special argument to serve a pre-determined purpose of the writer" (269). Further, the above statement brings the fact to light that Eliot is pre-determined; he is rather prejudiced and this is the reason why he just tries to achieve his end as soon as possible and does not even bother for the originality and validity of his ideas. He compares the human mind with a shred of platinum. Platinum is not a living being and it cannot work by itself; someone has to perform experiments with the help of chemicals. But, on the other hand, human mind always keeps on working and thinking new ideas and it does not need any external agent to make it run. So, the comparison is inadequate. Human mind cannot free itself from thoughts and as has been mentioned earlier thoughts will definitely have emotions attached to them. So, the statement that "the mind of the poet is the shred of platinum" (Eliot 297) does not hold correct— it is invalid. As has time and again been mentioned that Eliot is not an original critic, so, he in his writing has exhibited a sort of tradition which is a process of "following the ways of the immediate generation before us." (Eliot 294). Or in the other words, it is an attempt to become a part of the great tradition of literature of Europe from Homer to the present day. He has not propounded any new or original theory, but has surrendered before the greater personality of the 'tradition of criticism', if the phrase is allowed to be coined in its truest sense. Critics had been using the word 'tradition' for centuries though their meaning was different as Eliot himself at the very outset of his essay writes: "We cannot refer to 'the tradition' or 'a tradition'; at most we employ the adjective in saying that the poetry of so-and-so is 'traditional' or even 'too traditional'" (Eliot 293). So, it is clear that the word tradition was in use earlier also, but Eliot gave it a definite meaning. He defines the word in his own peculiar way and tried to establish that tradition is "the aggregate of

poetic modes created by the long lines of the poets from Homer to the poets of yesterday" (Chandra 54). For earlier critics anything that was old and had a touch of past was traditional, for Eliot it has a definite meaning as stated earlier. So, though he widens the scope of the word 'tradition' and gives a definition and life to it, yet the very word tradition already had a meaning before he used it. So, it may be said that he used the frequently used word 'tradition', but made it look entirely new and exclusively his own.

All his ideas seem to have been taken from the earlier critics, especially, from Aristotle, Baudelaire, and Remy de Gourmont. He is constantly found to be under the influence of the French writers and critics. Even in this very essay, he reflects this influence in his own words when he writes: "We know, or we think we know, from the enormous mass of critical writing that has appeared in the French language the critical method or habit of the French; we only conclude (we are such unconscious people) that the French are more critical than we, and sometimes even plume ourselves a little with the fact, if the French were the less spontaneous" (293). This is not a co-incidence that he made a mention of the French critics and their critical writings here in this essay. This seems to have unconsciously crept into his essay, because he always thinks of the greatness of the French writers and critics—he ponders upon their writings deeply, so even though the mention of the French might be deliberate, the laws of psychology prove it that since he is always found to be under the influence of the French critics, therefore, he has made a mention of them unconsciously. So, it can be added that all the influences he had in his life and career keep on working on his mind and whatever he writes, it is only the reflection and representation of those impressions or influences.

He has frequently borrowed from the earlier critics, but has presented them before the literary world in the garb of new words and phrases, namely, 'dissociation of sensibility', 'unification of sensibility', 'objective correlative', etc. critics also hold the same view about his critical theories. L. N. Salingar in his essay "T. S. Eliot: Poet and Critic" writes that "What is valuable and suggestive in it, comes, directly or indirectly, from previous critics—the concept of poets' amalgamating power from Coleridge, the concept of multiple sensibility from Baudelaire and Remy de Gourmont" (340). William K. Wimsatt & Cleanth Brooks in their book *Literary Criticism: A short History* write: "The doctrine of the objective correlative is a kind of summation of what Eliot, along with Hulme and Pound, derived from the theory and practice of the French symbolists" (667). So, it is clear from the above statements that Eliot's theories, concepts, and notions lack originality. It may also be established that in his impersonal theory of poetry he only airs the views expressed by the earlier critics, i.e., the French symbolists, the Classicists, etc., in his own words.

The metaphysical poets of the 17th century also influenced him and he feels that it was in the metaphysical poetry that one could find a 'unification of sensibility'. Eliot feels that they amalgamate and fuse thought and feeling together, something that the later poets failed to do, especially, Milton, Dryden, Tennyson, and Browning. In his own words: "In one or two passages of Shelley's "Triumph of Life", in the second "Hyperion" there are traces of a struggle toward unification of sensibility. But Keats and Shelley died, and Tennyson and Browning ruminated" (Eliot 308).

'Negative Capability' is a term which was used by John Keats in the year 1817. He used it to "describe his conception of the receptivity necessary to the process of poetic creativity" (Drabble 689). He himself in a letter to Benjamin Bailey had written: "If a sparrow comes before my window, I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel" (Drabble 689) thereby meaning that he forgets his own existence and personality and get these merged into the personality and existence of the sparrow and starts behaving in a manner as if he himself had become a sparrow. He had also written to his brothers George and Thomas defining his concept of 'Negative Capability' as a state "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Drabble 689). 'Negative Capability' may also be taken to "characterize an impersonal, or objective, author who maintains aesthetic distance, as opposed to a subjective author who is personally involved with the characters and actions represented in work of literature, and as opposed also to an author who uses a literary work to present and to make persuasive his or her personal beliefs" (Abrams 174). The above statement makes it clear that 'negative capability' is nothing but impersonal or objective writing which has nothing to do with the personality of the poet and which does not find an expression in it as opposed to subjective poetry which is the rendering or delineation of the personality, views, thoughts, ideas,

point-of-view, or self of the poet himself. So, it is apparent from the above definitions of 'negative capability' that it, like the theory propounded by T.S Eliot, also favours objectivity in poetry. In the concept of 'negative capability', the poet has to keep his personality completely out of the domain of his work or poetry. He has to dissolve his own personality and enter the world of his subject in order to write great poetry. Any entrance of his personality into the world of his poetry will spoil it and his creation will become personal and subjective. So, understanding the emotions of his creation is the pre-requisite of writing great objective poetry. In the case of drama, one can say that no drama can be written unless the dramatist enters the world of his characters and understands the emotions, feelings, and sentiments of his characters at the same time having a complete knowledge of some other facts pertaining to the status and position in the society as well as the occupation and other minute details about his characters, it is only then that he would be able to delineate his characters truly, precisely, minutely, faithfully, and honestly. The poet should also be free from all kinds of prejudices so that he may write objectively without letting his personality to hamper his writing and effect it adversely as one finds in the case of subjective poetry. So, observance of 'negative capability' is very necessary in drama and the playwright or the poet has to make every attempt to keep his personality away from the world of his creation as is kept in the case of Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry.

Furthermore, the impersonal theory of poetry is also opposed to psycho-analytical criticism, which is the outcome of the modern and latest researches in psychology pioneered by Sigmund Freud and developed by Carl Gustav Jung. In it, the critic "probes deep into the inner recesses of the mind, conscious and sub-conscious, and seeks to bring out those primal impressions and complexes which become the nuclei of his imagery, his ideology and his emotional drives"(Chandra 18-19). So, attempts are made to study the psychology of the writer, the characters created by him, and also the psychology of the reader. No poetry as per the psychological concepts could be impersonal, because poetry emerges out of the complex composition of the personality of the poet. It cannot be kept away from the personality of the poet, because, even for creation, i.e., of poetry some or the other reason may be traced out. In other words, it may be said that there are so many factors that are responsible for the creation of a poem and psychology could not be totally ignored. But, if psychological theories are applied to all impersonal theories, none of them would hold correct, so would be the case with Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry. But what is more important to note is that for knowing which emotion or impression is significant or insignificant for a poet while writing of poetry in relation to Eliot's theory could generally be correctly estimated only through psychological or psycho-analytical criticism, which only can bring forth the reality. According to the psychology, no art can be impersonal because man's is a complex personality. It is full of impressions which the human mind receives from time to time. All the actions of men get guided and motivated by these impressions. Even when a poet writes poem or creates something new, he gets motivated and guided by these impressions, and even this very motivation to writing of poetry is the result of the impressions he has received in his life. Further all that he expresses in poetry is the result of these impressions, because in creation of poetry the poet pours out his heart and mind, so, he could never become impersonal, because his personality will automatically get itself expressed during the creation. So, impersonality of poetry may be emphasized on to any extent, the poet may be pressed hard to keep his personality away from his creation, the personality, the man, his emotions will definitely enter it knowingly or unknowingly, consciously or un-consciously. So, in the light of the above statements it may be established that psychology and its working upon a poet's mind cannot be ignored completely, and also that art can never become impersonal, and at least, if it, anyhow, succeeds in becoming personal, psychology will definitely be needed to find out as to whether or not the personality of a certain poet has entered his creation, i.e., the poem. So, Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry looks frail in the light of the above discussion and analysis.

Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry has many faults that have been pointed out. He himself has said: "novelty is better than repetition" (294), but he himself seems to be repeating the concepts and theories of the earlier critics. His theories lack originality, even his thoughts seem to be fragmented, and he lacks profundity one expects from an intellectual critic. His approach is negative. His remarks are not always supplemented with proper logic and detailed discussion. Yet, he has been successful in making his theory of

poetry look different amongst other theories of poetry, and also he has given a definite meaning and definition to words like 'tradition'. His style is terse and epigrammatic. His essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" reflects his affinity with the French critics and also it has earned for him a very high place in the history of English criticism despite all the shortcomings mentioned above.

To sum up, it may be said that Eliot remains indebted to so many other critics and poets for his conception of poetry, and it seems that whatever he received from others—from his predecessors—from French critics—from metaphysical poets— from tradition, from time to time, he accepted it gratefully and while propounding his theory of poetry had all these impressions and conceptions in his mind which at the time of composition of impersonal theory of poetry knowingly or unknowingly crept into it.

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Brief Biography of the Author

Hindi Poet, Translator, Orator, and Editor Dr. Rakesh Chandra Joshi has publication of an anthology of Hindi poems "*Kuchh Baatein Kavitaon Mein*", a collection of Hindi ghazals "*Pattharon Ke Shahar Mein*", and one translated book, namely, "*The Crowd Bears Witness*" to his credit. His research papers in English have been published in many international journals, books, and study materials. In addition to it, his poems and Hindi ghazals have also been published in national and international magazines and e-magazines on a regular basis. He worked as a Hindi Translator in EPFO, Ministry of Labour, Government of India and was posted at Mumbai for more than 6 years. Besides, he also worked as a Casual Announcer in AIR, Vividh Bharati for a very short duration of time. He joined Department of Higher Education, Uttarakhand in 2005. Presently, he is an Assistant Professor of English in Government PG College, Doiwala, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India.
