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ALLEGORY AS COMPLEXITY: ARTISTIC MODERNITY OF T. S. ELIOT

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ABSTRACT

Eliot's repute as a seasoned mentor of modernist age rests on his sparkling depiction of modern experiences in an inventive form. He remained a high-ranking signature in the arena of world literature. His obscurity has been a matter of great interest to the scholarly circle far across the globe. The research paper titled "*Allegory as Complexity: Artistic Modernity of T. S. Eliot*" aims to take into account the creative genius of Eliot in encompassing the curious narrative of his times by way of introducing his peculiarly innovative thoughts and style in his select poems.

**Key words:** complexity, predicament, creative creed, Apocalypse

"Because he had to open the door in this way, it was already wide open before he could be seen. He had first to slowly turn himself around one of the double doors, and he had to do it very carefully if he did not want to fall flat on his back before entering the room. He was still occupied with this difficult movement, unable to pay attention to anything else, when he heard the chief clerk exclaim a loud "Oh!" which sounded like the sighing of the wind."----Franz Kafka, "Metamorphosis" (33)

"Main Kore kagaz pe likhun phir ek Kaali nazm

Alakh Jagate Sannaton se phir sajaun bazm" --- Shaharyar, *Ek Kaali Nazm* (83)

T. S. Eliot's value as a creative genius remains unsurpassed even after a long gap of times. His immense complexity, confounded outlook, serious use of sometimes not so serious metaphors and numerous other ways to explore and feel the trauma and tribulations being faced by not only the generations of his own times, but also of the posterity, cannot be estimated as something common or as a matter of destiny that would have him in high esteem. The enormous use of complex vocabulary in tune with the allusive allegory of his themes makes him a genius of life and its adventures. Eliot estimates life in terms of a "panorama of futility" (*Ulysses, Order and Myth* 426) and his very depiction of the concrete metaphors of life in terms of the new belief and understanding is something pivotal in understanding Eliot in his holistic faculty. In his brilliant essay titled "*Tradition and the Individual Talent*" Eliot writes in full conviction about the vital role of tradition in the making of creative genius, "Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense...the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write

not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (Enright and Chickera, Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* 294).

"*The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*" is an account of the bleak melancholy of a modern man dealing with the dilemma of human existence. It is a panorama of failed beliefs in personal affairs and a deep rooted sense of self imposed isolation. The metaphor of initiating a figurative journey during twilight reveals the unexplored saga of two minds/ hearts in a single body. How the note of frustrated sensibility is reflected herein,

"Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherised upon a table" (Prufrock `111)

Quite interestingly the persona is engrossed with the tremendous odyssey of his own consciousness, quite reluctant to brood over the questions of subsistence itself, "To lead you to an overwhelming question.../ Oh do not ask, 'What is it?'/Let us go and make our visit (11). The fashionable stuff with its bifurcated self finds deeper expression in the flippancy of the women of elevated society, "In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo (11). However, the logic of torpor in the form of disenchanting melancholy is perceptible in the form of the persona's gross incapacity to act,

"And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'  
Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—" (12)

Intertextuality has been exploited with a view to associating the texts with a great literary tradition down the ages,

"No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress, start a scene or two, (15)  
The despondent fervor of a common man is associated with the universal phenomenon of life and death,  
"We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seawood red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown. (16)

"*Portrait of a Lady*" is a reflection upon the relationship reflected upon with regrets. It's like a velleity that failed to see the desired conclusion due to some effortlessness. The modern man's predicament with his regrets and roars is the metaphorical expression of his sense of fickle instability. Existential crisis, emotional breakdown, quest for identity, survival instinct and suicidal tendencies are the crux of Eliot's creative oeuvre,

"To find expression... dance, dance  
Like a dancing bear,  
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.  
Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance---" (Portrait of a Lady 21)

Death-wish has a genuine representation in Eliot. However the hope for the attainment of the infinite with a genuine smile amidst deeper turmoil cannot be ruled out,

"Now that we talk of dying ---

And should I have the right to smile? (Portrait of a Lady 21)

The peculiarity of Eliot is his deep rooted scholarship that comes out of his sense of understanding the ways and views of human affairs. His vision is an enigma; his observations are phenomenal in the context of a new society. His magnum opus "*The Waste Land*" is the passport to understand his creative creed. The issues pertaining to the modernist age have been critically evaluated and thoroughly reflected upon. Exhibiting a gloomy picture of the world in which the people of the Waste Land live, Eliot intends to put forth a break with the tradition. His is not a world of merely abstract intentions; rather his canvas is that of the seemingly absurd portrait of human survival,

"What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water." (The Waste Land, The Burial of the Dead, 51)

The fragmented nausea of human relationship can be viewed in the following extract of the poet where the soul lacks affinity with the self. The metaphor of meaninglessness in personal relationships seems to be the trend of the times,

"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. Think." (The Waste Land, A Game of Chess, 55)

However, for every spectacle and scene, Tiresias remains the universal observer. Nothing can go far from his prudence,

"I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs  
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—  
I too awaited the expected guest." (The Waste Land, The Fire Sermon 60)

The reference to Phlebas, the Phoenician sailor and his death in the context of contemporary times signifies a man's journey towards materialistic aspirations without a thought of spiritual salvation,

"Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,  
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell  
And the profit and loss." (The Waste Land, Death by Water 63)

The unfulfilled trauma of human psychology and the lack of empathy from the outer world is the paradox of human affairs. The ultimate journey is that of the calibrated action with the view of the Infinite,

"These fragments I have shored against my ruins  
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.  
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.  
Shantih shantih shantih" (The Waste Land, What the Thunder said 64)

The final note of Eliot's *The Waste Land* is highly suggestive in its visionary message and the following extract from Eliot's prose work titled "After Strange Gods" makes us believe in Eliot's thorough knowledge of

Sanskrit as well, "Two years in the study of Sanskrit under Charles Lanman and a year in the mazes of Patanjali's metaphysics under the guidance of James Woods, left me in a state of enlightened mystification" (After Strange Gods 40).

His another poem titled "*The Hollow Men*" (1925) is a brilliant example of Eliot's constructed allusions. Eliot depicts here the predicament of modern men in the context of their times. Seemingly, they look perfect and sane; however, internally they are frail and weak. The inability to act in consonance with the natural order of life can be highly perceived herein,

"We are the hollow men

We are the stuffed men

Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!" (The Hollow Men 77)

The hollow men are in fact vacant souls who have nothing to offer to the posterity. Lacking in spiritual sense of the existence, they are merely the form without content,

"Shape without form, shade without colour,

Paralysed force, gesture without motion;" (The Hollow Men 77)

The concrete imagery, as is typical of Eliot, finds expression at its best. The poet persona is well known to the saga of fragmented feelings against the backdrop of a morally decayed conscience,

"This is the dead land

This is cactus land

Here the stone images

Are raised, here they receive

The supplication of a dead man's hand

Under the twinkle of a fading star." (The Hollow Men 78)

The visionary view of the Apocalypse is immensely worth noting. The incompleteness of life is in contrast with the permanence that the death promises,

"For Thine is

Life is

For Thine is the

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper." (The Hollow Men 80)

In fine, it can be safely concluded that Eliot was a champion of modernist ideology. His vision was highly elevated. By way of showcasing the bleak absurdity and horrendous breakdown of moral values in contemporary contexts, Eliot did a superb job of narrating the most truthful saga of human experiences. The allegory of existential complexity finds its outcome in the form of creative sagacity of modernist times. Louis Menand aptly writes, "Yet he was a true avant-gardist, and he made a revolution. He changed the way poetry in English is written; he re-set the paradigm for literary criticism; and his work laid down the principles on which the modern English department is built. He is the most important figure in twentieth-century English-language literary

culture, a position he achieved with a relatively small amount of writing produced in a relatively brief amount of time and in unpromising circumstances”(Menand).

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