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Different Facets of a Modern Seeker: An Attempt to Demystify T. S. Eliot

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Abstract

The paper attempts to study the religious and spiritual leanings of T. S. Eliot. It is an attempt to see deep into the images woven by him in his poetry and understand the inner turmoil that he underwent. T.S. Eliot was the most influential poet of the Modern Period. He paved a new path for poets of his times, encouraged them to wade away from the iambic patterns of poetry and concentrate on the individual voice of the poets. Readers of T.S. Eliot and his close circle of friends often discerned a difference between his private devotion and his public display of it. This paper tries to diffuse the mist that surrounds this enigmatic poet and help understand him better.

Keywords- Seeker, Religion, Modern Period, Puritanism, Unitarianism, Indian Philosophy

Introduction

T.S. Eliot introduced a sea of change in the poetic world. He was looked upon with suspicion because of his cosmopolitan attachments and his friendship with his fellow-American Ezra Pound. This duo was especially disliked by the admirers of the Georgian Poetry books. Eliot slowly carved a niche for himself in the English society by writing about the country churchyards and his own family roots. More than any other poet, T.S. Eliot maneuvered and charted a new course of poetry in the Modern Period of English Literature. It was earlier believed that poets could dwell upon certain aspects only. T.S. Eliot in the first two decades of the 20th century made it known through his writings that poets may and should write about the sordid details avoided by the poets of yore. He pioneered a new meter and gave poetry a new language. The traditional iambic patterns of English poetry took a back seat and the poet's individual voice came to the fore. The initiative of this disengagement had been taken, though quirkily, by Browning and Whitman. Eliot's style fractured the traditional mould completely.

The poet also meddled with religious questions. He posed several critical questions which were challenging and looked into the various aspects of culture. His impressive body of criticism is

commendable. His opinions and ideas, however, were rarely appealing in the first go. He proposed ideals that appear to be far removed from practicality and even obnoxious at times. He often induced several complexities that were difficult to unravel. Readers however keep going back to his works with the hope of laying hands on new meanings and wisdom. Roland Tamplin, in his book, A Preface to T.S. Eliot wrote:

There is guilt and suffering in the man, which, if not quite relished, seems at times entertained and lacking in proportion. He was a curious combination of warmth and stiffness, of concern and coldness. At times he seems too emphatic in his certainties, at others haggard by unwarranted nightmare. His poems and plays volunteer his private life to the public, but he wished desperately to remain private and concealed. There has been a lot of speculation about Eliot's psychology, his sexuality and his suffering.... I have tried, as far as I can, to use Eliot as a clue to the poetry rather than poetry as a clue to Eliot. (Tamplin, 1988:p. 10)

In 1927, T.S. Eliot formerly embraced the religion of England, which he had been following since 1914. His ancestors were Puritans. His grandfather, however, had left the Massachusetts Church for the Unitarian Church and Eliot was groomed as a Unitarian. Unitarians believed in equality and took keen interest in the affairs of the social world. They had a liberal outlook and were active participants of antiwar and anti slavery movements. Those who knew T.S. Eliot closely could detect the colours of both Puritanism and Unitarianism in him.

Puritans believed in predestination. They lead a life of moderation. They held the Sabbath in the Old Testament fashion, spent hours reading and learning the scriptures. While others played and rejoiced on the Sabbath, the Puritans stayed at home, trying to gain a better understanding of God. Nathaniel Hawthorne gave a vivid description of Puritan way of life in *The Scarlet Letter*:

...the Puritans compressed whatever mirth and public joy they deemed allowable to human infirmity; thereby so far dispelling the customary cloud, that, for the space of a single holiday, they appeared scarcely more grave than most other communities at a period of general affliction..(Hawthorne)

Eliot was often concerned about his Puritan settler ancestors. He dwelled at length about this concern in his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948). He diligently devoured Puritan texts and believed that a church embraced two segments of population in its fold: the conscious, thoughtful Christians and some others who were always lingering on the fringes. These handfuls on the borders did not go very deep into religious affairs. Church going and sermons were no more than routine and a matter of conformity. It was a matter of social tenacity and coherence.

Eliot believed that God's grace will emancipate all but , at the same time, he was also aware of the division between a handful of superior souls and a big crowd of men who were capable of exhibiting a conforming behaviour. Strangely enough, one description of a Puritan, given by John Cotton comes very close to the description of T.S. Eliot himself. Cotton, a seventeenth century Bostonian wrote:

There is another combination of virtues strangely mixed in every lively holy Christian, and that is, Diligence in worldly businesses, and yet deadnesse to the world; such a mystery as none can read, but they that know it. (Cotton John 38)

Off and on, throughout his writing career, readers could see flashes of his Puritan and Unitarian sides. But Eliot gave up his Unitarian faith and pondered over the various forms of religion and faith. 'Primitive faith' also allured him for some time. In the eighteenth century, explorers and settlers came in contact with the tribal population. Their religion which was based on spiritualism appeared to provide answers for human fear and even gave a ray of hope for ardent seekers. In a review of an anthology of North American Indian songs and chants, Eliot mentioned the necessity for a poet to know all facets of a topic so as to give it an apt treatment in their own writings. Additional information may be exploited further by the writers. Similarly, primitive religion gives an idea of the origin of faith on earth. Learning from which a modern seeker may chart his own path across the 'wasteland' to the oasis of peace and tranquility.

The maxim, return to the sources, is a good one, More intelligibly put, it is that the poet should know everything that has been accomplished in poetry (accomplished, not merely produced) since its beginnings in order to know what he is doing himself. He should be aware of all the metamorphoses of poetry that illustrate the stratifications of history that cover savagery. For the artist is, in an impersonal sense, the most conscious of men; he is therefore the most and the least civilized and civilizable; he is the most competent to understand both civilized and primitive [1919:1036].

Eliot considered a poet's role as social and historically significant. He diligently wove his texts into a seamless piece, while he himself assumed the role of a critic, anthropologist and an ancient artisan so that his personality, voice, tradition and culture shone through. In 'The Dry Salvages' Eliot presented life not sequentially, but all its facets were displayed simultaneously. The primitive is however shown as hovering around. Eliot elucidates how primitive responses of savagery and realization co exist together. In one go Eliot addressed both the seekers and those who appear to float on the surface. He advised the worldly men and women to continue with their routine, repetitive and meaningless activities. They may worry about their bank balance and their outward appearances.

Some others will be busy proclaiming that the path shown to them by their leaders is unmistakable and will lead to salvation. The most significant thing, however, is to remember that, all this while, we are being watched by a Supreme Being. No matter how significant and powerful a stature an individual achieves, he will prosper only if he willingly chooses to stay amidst the flock, being looked after by the divine shepherd in his holy fold. The seekers hence are advised to stay away from the material world. He should opt for a life in the lap of nature, amidst animals and people of primitive culture.

It is hard for those who live near a Bank
To doubt the security of their money.
...Do you think that the Faith has conquered the World
And that lions no longer need keepers?
...Men! Polish your teeth on rising and retiring;
Women! Polish your fingernails;
You polish the tooth of the dog and the talon of the cat.(The Rock,VI)

The most significant event in Eliot's spiritual journey was the 'awakening' he experienced in Boston in 1910. It was a turning point in the spiritual pursuit of T.S. Eliot. But his friends failed to fathom the in Stephen Spender elaborated:

He had a vision of the relationship of the living with the dead through the patterns of rituals that extend into the modern world the pieties that remain unaltered from the past. He thought that when these rituals were disrupted— and when, indeed, the observance of them was not the foremost aim of the living— there would be no connection of the living with the dead, of the present with the past.(Stephen Spender (*T.S. Eliot*: Viking Press, 1975, p. 7)

For Eliot, the experience was deep rooted. So moved was he after this vision that he penned it down in *The Wasteland*. He painted this vision with a poet's brush and projected it in the shape of a hyacinth garden where communion with the high priestess is enjoyed. This vision shook him to the core and for quite some time he remained dazed and speechless.

Eliot's teachers at Harvard, especially Irving Babitt, Charles Lanman and James Woods, introduced him to Indian thought and philosophy. Babbitt had diligently scoured over Pali manuscripts and other Buddhist documents. Having kindled within the curiosity to learn more, Eliot began to read Hindu scriptures and literature. Under the tutelage of James Woods, Eliot read the Yoga Sutras. Though, it is said that Eliot had ceased to read eastern scriptures after 1913, its influence lingered for long in his writings. In his Page-Borbours lectures which he gave at the University of Virginia in 1933 he made these comments about his courtship with the East:

Two years spent 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. A good half of the effort of understanding what the Indian philosophers were after--and their subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys. (T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, pp. 40-41)

Eliot often alludes to Indian thoughts and philosophies in his writings. References to the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagwat Gita, Patanjali's Yoga Sutras are very common. Most prominent example is the poem *The Wasteland*. This poem appears to be an amalgamation of all the philosophies that had influenced Eliot in his lifetime including Koran. The poem ends with:

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih (Eliot *Wasteland*)

There have been many speculations as to why T.S. Eliot used these phrases in his work. Smith made his observation: "Over against the prospect of its irremediable calamity stands the counsel of the Aryan myth, to give, sympathize, and be controlled, that all may come at length to peace." On a close look, one can easily gauge from *The Wasteland* that T.S. Eliot was desperately looking for answers and meanings that human life posed on a thinking mind. He was aware of the passage of time. Seasons made their entrances and exits while human beings sought ways to cope. The trouble however does not cease here. Fear, constant fear of the unknown impairs almost everyone once in a while. The consequences of the various meaningless, futile and even needless acts that they perform haunt them day and night:

...And I was frightened. He said, Marie

Marie, hold on tight (Eliot *Wasteland*)

People often repine, murmur and are full of bitterness. They constantly think about the woes heaped up in man's share. Though Divine sympathy is known to soothe, they seek comfort in human company. These much-sought-after-comforts are always short lived though. Human beings have an undying fascination for their origin and purpose in Life. The poet is acutely aware of the 'forgetfulness' that Man has been endowed with. He forgets the purpose of assuming a human form and fail to see beyond what is visible to their earthly eyes:

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. (Eliot *Wasteland*)

The Church and all other institution, including Nature, where the poet sought refuge and comfort had failed to extend the same. There are several places of religious significance, buildings erected to enable Man to find answers and unravel the mysteries of his own life. But these structures are huge masses of bricks and concrete only as they fail to provide answers. They are mere structures of stone. They do not exude knowledge which like clean, fresh water which would wash away all doubt and despair. At various junctures of his life, Eliot allied with different faiths. But all these visitations proved to be a passing phase. At one such halts Eliot appeared to have exclaimed:

.....Only

There is shadow under this red rock

Come in under the shadow of this red rock

And I will show you something different. (Eliot *Wasteland*)

In the poem, when T.S. Eliot shared his experience at the hyacinth garden, possibly, he was referring to his discovery of the feminine principle within. During such awakenings, aspirants are enveloped in complete silence and temporarily withdrawn from the physical world to catch a glimpse of the 'heart of light and the silence of peace. Buddhist philosophy acknowledges a similar dakini principle:

In Buddhist tantra, iconic dakinis help arouse blissful energy in a practitioner, transforming defiled mental states, or klesas, into enlightened awareness. In Vajrayana iconography *prajna*, wisdom is often depicted as the female principle to be joined with *upaya*, or skillful means, the masculine principle. Thus the liberation of the female *dakini* is the boundlessness of *sunyata*, emptiness, which is the perfection of wisdom.

Madame Sosostriis and Teresias are projections of T.S. Eliot's psyche. Madame Sosostriis, the feminine principle is gifted tarot card reader. Teresias, the bind seer is the masculine principle in Eliot's psyche. In the present times of anxiety and doubt, Madame sosostriis too suffers from cold due the absence of a solid, reliable foundation rock. She has acquired the skill of seeing into the future with the help of her deck of cards, yet the truth is kept away from her and she fails to find the answers.

The cards laid out in front of Madame Sosostriis, when studied carefully revealed the biography of a seeker in the Modern times. Phoenician sailor is a worldly man yearning to taste eternal bliss through the attainment of knowledge. 'Those are pearls in his eye' suggest that with the arousal of this need to attain salvation, bad times cease to exist. The seeker is filled with a new zeal to seek and to find. Their proximity with the Mother Goddess, 'Balladona' keeps them hopeful and strong. 'Man of three staves' reveals the condition of the seeker, who waits every day for the dawn of

the eternal knowledge. 'Wheel never stops' explains that this search may continue through several lives until one attains salvation. 'One eyed merchant' is the worldly man- turned seeker who expects to have instant gains as they traverse their long journey. 'The Burden on his back' is the burden that the seeker carries with him as he is haunted by feelings of doubts and disillusion when he fails to see the ray of hope or the truth that he has been seeking so fervently. Teresias, the blind seer, is the male principle who knows but is helpless. He fails to act. He just stands and witnesses the meaningless and routine activities that human beings indulge in. Gods during the Modern Period had lost their powers. They were mere spectators.

The problem that Eliot encountered was that he knew but failed to reach. His Puritan and Unitarian background had tutored him to seek the divine in the external world through reading of sermons and other scriptures. His encounter with the Indian philosophy and religion was temporary. Having devoted a couple of years to the intensive study of Indian spiritual texts, Eliot had tasted the eternal bliss once. He was often haunted by a figure that Eliot associated with the Christ of Emmaus journey. In 'What the Thunder Said', Eliot gave expression to this inner experience:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you. (Wasteland)

Eliot undertook extensive reading in mysticism to determine the value of what he had experienced. In the absence of a reverend Guru, all Eliot could gather was that the vision he had was a state of heightened awareness and a strengthened belief in the existence of God. His close friends failed to comprehend or appreciate the keenness with which Eliot was groping in the dark abyss for that eternal blaze of light. Ezra Pound made a revealing comment:

In so far as Mr. Eliot's lurch after God, or his groping for right theology, is a desire for a central concept it is constructive and vital, it is a move towards the totalitarian...a revolt against European schizophrenia. (Tamplin 43)

Surrounded by people who had learned to exist on the surface, Eliot failed to connect the ideologies, philosophies to the real, peopled world. Eliot, even towards the end of his life failed to resolve the conflict between the City of Man and the City of God. Lord Krishna in Bhagwat Gita clearly states:

Set your Mind on Me, be devoted
To Me, worship Me, revere Me, and
Thus with Me as your goal, you will
Ultimately come to Me (Bhagwat Gita)

But T.S.Eliot chose to turn away. He was baptized in the Church of England on 29th June 1927. It was a step taken not out of intense devotion but more so as to make a public proclamation. To gain social acceptance in England, he had to embrace the English Church. Christian detachment failed to quench his thirst for the eternal truth, hence peace and contentment evaded him always.

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