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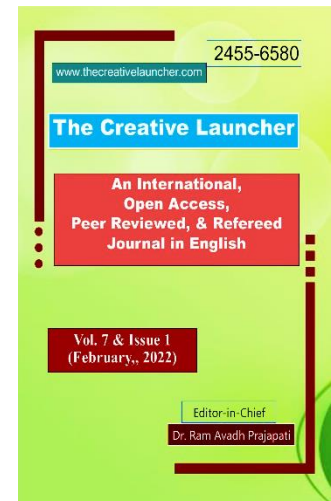
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Theme of Redemption in Eliot's *The Family Reunion*

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Abstract

Thomas Sterns Eliot's second full length poetic play, *The Family Reunion* is known for its modernity in the matter of expression but medievalism for its contents. Nobody can ignore its importance about its recognition and contribution as a modern play. With this play Eliot presented different kinds of religious modernistic themes. It shows a kind of mirror to the psychological state of human beings. Eliot has presented the spiritual struggle of a lonely

character, Harry who is suffering from the hallucination and experiences of having involvement in the act of sinister and desire for its atonement. Harry seems to be unavoidably burdened with the curse which is related to his familial background. Ultimately, he decides to expiate for the same. His feelings of expiation become so strong that he resigns the comfortable ways of life at the place where his family used to reside, the name of the place has been described as Wishwood although none of the wishes seems finely been perfected. He follows the path of self-denial for gaining redemption for himself and his community. Different kinds of mythical and religious images have been used and created to prove its religious concerns. The alteration of Eumenides from hounds of hell is justified not only by “Oresteia of Aeschylus. With this play, Eliot has tried to explain the idea that suffering leans to atonement. Eliot attempted to connect the classical with the modern. This play has two levels of reality. On the surface level, there is a reunion of the family members of Harry. On the deeper level, Furies pursue Harry. Agatha helps Harry to follow the bright angels. He suffers for redemption. This play reflects Eliot’s recurrent preoccupation with Original Sin. The play is remarkable to greater concerns which is related to a purgatorial confrontation between the human spirit and the Divine spirits which may be called as the Supreme Power. Eliot emphasizes the possibility of salvation through redemption.

Keywords: Atonement, Curse, Purgatory, Salvation, Sin, Suffering, Redemption, Myth

One of the most important figures in the modern literary scenario of Europe is Thomas Stearns Eliot. He esteemed high for his outstanding contribution to poetry, literary criticism and for the revival of poetic drama. He completed his second play *The Family Reunion* in the year 1939. This play is a tragic comic melodrama opened in London in West Minster theatre in March 1939. The play deals with a number of literary and socio-cultural preferences of the poet. The main concern of Eliot here is the recreation of Aeschylus myth in socio-cultural perspective of contemporary England. Eliot in the midst of third decade of twentieth century wrote *Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama* which being fragments were in an unfinished form. Eliot rewrote the play in a coherent fashion and thus resulted into *The Family Reunion*.

The Family Reunion, unlike its preceding play *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), is a play for a secular audience. Yet it deals with the Christian values in terms of human feelings and limitations so that they might be acceptable to all. The recreation of the myth of Aeschylus serves the same function of transmuting Christian values into everyday experiences of evils and angels. The trilogy *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides* were written by Aeschylus (525 B.C. – 456 B.C.). It is the theme of *Agamemnon* that was to be renewed by Eliot. In this great tragedy, Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra and brother of Electra, slew Clytemnestra, his mother and her lover to avenge the death of his father. He was pursued by Erinyes for the crime of killing his mother. Eliot recreates a myth and constructs the play around the guilt and the heavy burden of the crime of a supposed murder, committed by the central character of the play. The action of the protagonist ultimately leads to the complex theme of sin and expiation. Discussing the theme of the play Herbert Howarth rightly remarks:

The central construction of the play is the flight of the man from his Furies and his progress, with the help of wise counsel to knowledge and self-knowledge by which he realises that, he must not flee but face them and self-control by which he sets out to face his expiation. (Howarth, 324-325)

Furies were Roman goddesses, adopted from Erinyes of Greek mythology. In Greek mythology Orestes theme is considered as an archetypal experience. Eliot's treatment of this theme on modern canvas involves a ritual which is enacted once again to bring about self-knowledge. The spectator in due course of development of action feels himself "caught by a ritual... at the moment when the Furies reveal themselves" (Howarth, 325). The theme is archetypal as it refers to primordial emotions of guilt, suffering and salvation leading to redemption. The prime concern of T.S. Eliot had been the endless conflict of warring emotions. Thus, the external features of the characters fall in subordination to it.

In this play, Amy's eldest son is Harry. He is a lonely individual who enacts the archetypal theme of meditating crime. The whole consequence was envisioned to be the representation of a modern foil to the worldwide involvement of religious purgation. After the act of meditating crime what is seen is an action in modern existence which embodies the age-old religious pattern and this pattern is very effectively revealed which elucidates the cyclic recurrence of the action. Grover Smith comments on Harry's position in thematic network of

the play and says, “Harry is explicating a family curse of which he is simply a victim... his father, now dead, plotted before the birth of Harry to murder his own wife” (Smith, 202). Harry is evident to be the central character of the play. On the occasion of Harry’s mother Amy’s birthday, there is a reunion of Monchensey family. For the past eight years Harry had been absent from his ancestral home Wishwood. Harry’s wife had failed to earn the approbation of the family. About a year ago, she had disappeared from the deck of the ship on which they were journeying in mid-Atlantic. Amy foresees Harry’s future in Wishwood and thinks that he “shall take command at Wishwood” (*The Family Reunion*, 95). Harry appears on the stage with the burden of guilt and is delineated in the images of infernal implications. Harry’s interactions with Amy further intensifies the feeling of alienation as he fails to be responsive to the call of his mother. Eliot here makes apt use of the symbol of window to illustrate the complex psychological make-up of the guilt bearing protagonist. Harry’s unpredictable abnegation to the blaze of light outside the window further confirms the detachment of the protagonist: “How can you sit in this blaze of light for all the world to look at?/ If you knew how you looked, when I saw you through the window!/ Do you like to be stared at by eyes through a window?” (*The Family Reunion*, 78)

The image of eyes a continual occurrence in the poems of T. S. Eliot. Here the image of eye after a convincing fusion with the symbol of window reminds us of an equally functional use of the same image in “Hollow Men” where the protagonist dares not meet the eyes “in dream/ In death’s dream kingdom” (*The Collected Poems*, 90). Harry feels haunted and spied by the pursuers. The eyes here also consolidate the protagonist’s guilt and fear being reflected in the eyes of Eumenides. The image also refers to the conscience which is both above and outside us and at the same time within us. Harry later on defines life in terms of this conscience, wherein he marks the beginning of a process towards redemption:

You are all people
To whom nothing has happened, at most a continual impact
Of external events. You have gone through life in sleep,
Never woken to the nightmare. I tell you, life would be unendurable
If you are wide awake. (*The Family Reunion*, 84)

The suffering of Harry brings into focus a number of parallel themes that contribute to the thematic structure of the play. It portrays the inaction of the contemporary Europe, which,

according to Eliot, is the most despicable crime. There is a constant re-echo of the themes of *The Waste Land*, *Gerontion*, *Hollow Men* and other poems. The detachment of Harry, which is evident in his interaction with other characters, further strengthens the similarities that exist between Harry and the protagonists of Eliot's earlier poems. Harry's spiritual struggle is shown in these lines:

So you must believe
That I suffer from delusions. It is not my conscience,
Not my mind, that is diseased, but the world I have to live in. (*The Family Reunion*, 84).

Harry's infernal spiritual struggle seems to be a natural extension of his wretched marriage and it continues to torment him even after the supposed murder of his wife. Grover Smith comments on the tormenting isolation of Harry and remarks:

Harry is no better off with his wife than he was before. 'She is nearer than ever'. His present horror, furthermore, only prolongs the tormenting revulsion he felt in his wretched marriage. He is suffering because of something deeper and earlier than drowning his wife. (Smith, 201)

Mary, Harry's childhood companion and the daughter of Amy's cousin, also shares Harry's spiritual problem. In Mary's company, he sees glimpse of a life of love and harmony, and remembers the happy carefree moments of his earlier life spent at Wishwood along with her. But she, who is regarded as an "embodiment of pent-up emotion" by D.E. Jones, fails in her attempt to earn the attention of Harry. The agonised self of Harry is further tormented by the Eumenides. The Eumenides here are pre-eminently of psychological significance since they are visible only to Harry:

They are here, I tell you. They are here.
Are you so imperceptive, have you such dull senses
That you could not see them? If I had realised
That you were so obtuse, I would not have listened
To your nonsense. (*The Family Reunion*, 111)

It is clear that Harry is on a different plane of thought. Since he is the central character of the play Eliot employs three characters Agatha, Mary and Downing to witness his spiritual education. Harry's interactions with Agatha sets into being a new phase of spiritual struggle of

the protagonist. It is the purgatorial one in which Harry is found to be like a helpless puppet in the hands of destiny. It is with this realisation that the process of purgation actually begins. Eliot follows the instruction of Saint John of the Cross for the purgation of a penitent individual, that he must divest himself of the love of created beings before the divine union can take place. It is Agatha, Amy's sister, who represents the instructions of St. John of the Cross in this part of the action which deals with the purgation of a guilty soul. If Harry's interactions with Mary portrays the inexpressible inferno, then those with Agatha depict the purgation of struggling soul. The revelations of Agatha about the past of Monchensey family culminates the realisation of the protagonist that he is a cursed soul and the curse is inherited from his family. Agatha tells him that his father who was leading a very tough life with a domineering woman, had become infatuated with Agatha and thinks of murdering his wife i.e. Harry's mother Amy. Agatha prevents him from doing so because she felt a sort of spiritual bond with the unknown life in the womb of Amy. This meditated crime seems to have infected the child with similar desire, just as in larger term, mankind is infected with the original sin which Adam had committed. Harry soon, after Agatha's revelation realises that he also shares the sin of his father as he too had a similar desire to get rid of his wife. Agatha's revelation imparts a just perspective to Harry's sense of guilt. This revelation also determines the course of action in the play as Harry is determined to expiate the sin, he has inherited. Harry on his spiritual development advances to knowledge from ignorance which paves way for redemption. Harry's confession to Agatha makes the idea more perceptible. He admits, "Perhaps my life has only been a dream/ Dreamt through me by the minds of others. Perhaps/ I only dreamt I pushed her." (*The Family Reunion*, 148)

Agatha reveals the secrets of the family which set into being the purgation of Harry's mind. and in the due course of discussion she also discloses the true end of the action when she asserts gravely, "What we have written is not a story of detection,/ Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation" (*The Family Reunion*, 148). Agatha now fully understands the curse of the family which Harry endures. She also understands the nature of the Eumenides and presents it before the audience:

It is possible that sin may strain and struggle
In its dark instinctive birth, to come to consciousness
And so find expurgation. It is possible

You are the consciousness of your unhappy family,

It's bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame. (*The Family Reunion*, 148)

She also clears all the doubts, fears and crises coiled within the mind of Harry. She sums up his agony by identifying child with curse as she takes curse to be a child by saying:

O my child, my curse,

You shall be fulfilled:

The knot shall be unknotted

And the crooked made straight. (*The Family Reunion*, 153)

Agatha further clarifies the knots of confusion and predicts Harry's firmness in her words:

What have I been saying?

I think I was saying

That you have a long journey.

You have nothing to stay for. (*The Family Reunion*, 153)

Agatha, thus, advises him to go away to complete his atonement by action or service, perhaps that of missionary and Harry sets off his pilgrimage to the desert where he hopes to find his destiny in Christian sainthood. He realises that he has been victimised by the invisible pursuers and was always haunted by shadows. He decides to discharge his responsibilities for family which is not confined only to a family reunion planned by his mother. He is not content to be the master of Wishwood. His mother's plan was thwarted. He is liberated from the confines of his family and aspires for a new union which may absolve the family of the curse. He is now haunted by divine inspiration. His business is now "not to run away" (*The Family Reunion*, 156) but to "pursue" (156), not to avoid being found but to "seek" (*The Family Reunion*, 156). This realisation ultimately centres all the possibilities of the action of redemption by Christian means only: "It is at once the hardest thing, and the only things possible./ Now they will lead me. I shall be safe with them;/ I am not safe here" (*The Family Reunion*, 156).

Harry's concerns are not confined to himself or his family but they are now aimed at humanity. It is this realisation which marks the culmination of purgation and serves to define its function:

A stony sanctuary and a primitive altar,

The heat of the sun and the icy vigil,

A care over lives of humble people,
The lesson of ignorance, of incurable diseases.
Such things are possible. (*The Family Reunion*, 157)

Harry sets forth a new journey towards salvation with firm determination that he “must follow the bright angels” (*The Family Reunion*, 157). The Eumenides have changed into bright angels and they will now guide him instead of pursuing him. Both Amy and Mary tried to dissuade him from the danger of such a life as planned by Harry but Agatha consoles them saying that the protagonist has “crossed the frontiers beyond which safety and dangers have different meaning” (162) and it “is his privilege” (162). Harry thus sets his ways to sainthood after having undergone severe spiritual purgation. He reminds us of the long journey to Bethlehem performed by three wise men of the East in “the very dead of winter” (*Collected Poems*, 89). He also reminds us of the Fisher king who sat upon the shore with arid planes behind him and after purging rites of “Ash Wednesday” enjoyed the beatific vision of “Marina” by regeneration of decayed human soul. The close of the play culminates the idea in ritual action which is participated in by Agatha and Mary. They both go round and round the birthday cake and blow out the candles one by one so their last words are spoken in dark. Eliot in this last speech of Agatha sums up all the paradoxes that constitutes the theme of spiritual and material preferences respectively associated with Harry and Amy:

This way the pilgrimage of expiation
Round and round the circle
Completing the charm
So the knot be unknotted
The crossed be uncrossed.
The crooked be made straight
And the curse be ended
By intercession pleading for another
By those who depart
In several directions
For their own redemption
And that of the departed –
May they rest in peace. (*The Family Reunion*, 175)

The Family Reunion is the tragedy of a lonely individual Harry and of the spiritual struggle which he faces in his life and from which he longs to escape. Thus, the play shows a purgatorial struggle where the struggle ends with redemption of not only Harry, but the family of Monchensey from the sin. The centrality of Harry in the thematic structure of the play is viewed by Maxwell too. He opines that when Harry “makes a decision and accepts the Eumenides as friendly, he affects the lives of other members of family” (Maxwell, 194).

A comparison of the themes of *The Family Reunion* and *Murder in the Cathedral* seems obligatory as both the plays portray the struggle of a single man against his destiny. Furies in this play reminds us of the Tempters in *Murder in the Cathedral*. When Harry finally faces Eumenides in a friendly way we are reminded of Becket, who bravely faces the tempters and rejects the temptations offered to him. Both Becket and Harry realize the worth of self-control and need to purge themselves of all that is material preferences. D.E. Jones discussing the correlation of these themes says, “Whereas, in his previous plays Eliot portrayed the fulfilment of a spiritual election in martyrdom, here – he traces the way in which man discovers in himself such an election” (Jones, 92).

It is remarkable here that Eliot keeps both the ends of the actions, the cause that issues forth the action in the murder of his wife by Harry and the consequences i.e. the consequences of Harry’s escape in search of divinity eclipsed, and the audience remain skeptic whether Harry was actually guilty of a pre-meditated crime. Eliot’s conscious use of scepticism which works upon virtually every association of Harry, even audience, is meant to highlight the archetypal manifestations of a family sin and the consequent need of penance and rid the family of it. Had it not been so, the play might have impressed us of Eliot’s advocacy to the cold-blooded murder of a wife by a husband. F.O. Mathiessen opines that the “Play ... curiously asks the audience to sentimentalize Harry’s own crime” (Mathiessen, 121). It is however not agreeable as the crime of Harry fails to exist by itself and functions in an inevitable consequence of the crime of his father.

This play also depicts the trials and temptations of a person who tries to live like a true Christian. Eliot had tentatively given the title *Fear in the Way*. This would have been an equally effective title of the play as Harry feels all the fears which poor women of Canterbury feel in the *Murder in the Cathedral*. The theme of *The Family Reunion* is a complex theme with many vibrations resounding together but the most conspicuous aspect of the theme which defines the

nature and experience of the play is the theme of redemption leading to salvation. It is evident that it is in the light of Eliot's commitments to Christianity, the play reveals its dramatic grandeur to the maximum.

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