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**PRUFROCK AND ELIOT'S CRITICAL THEORY: A SPECTRUM OF TRADITION**

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**Abstract:**

*A momentous shift occurred in English literature in the Twentieth Century, among the figures who had a lasting influence in determining the new course English poetry was about to take was Thomas Stearns Eliot. Eliot's works have left an indelible impression on Modern English literature. His poetry, along with his prose and criticisms form a coda through which we can definitively trace Modernism's journey in English poetry. One of Eliot's earliest works, 'The Love Song Of J Alfred Prufrock' ushered in a new era of English poetry, but no poem can be read in isolation, especially one as iconoclastic as 'Prufrock', to trace 'Prufrock's genesis one has to turn towards Eliot's critical essays, it is in these critical works where we can find the seeds of his poetry. In his critical works Eliot formulates a specific framework through which his poetry operates, an attempt must be made to see Eliot's poetry and critical works in a whole for a wider sense of Modernist English Poetry, this practice will not only throw light on Eliot's literary philosophy, it may also suggest various contemporary philosophical currents which influenced Twentieth century English poetry, at a time when Europe was anticipating with bated breath for the World War.*

**Keywords:** *English Poetry, Modernist, Modernism, Language Polyphonic, Depersonalization, Science, Versification, etc.*

**Introduction:**

Twentieth Century Europe and its politics had a definitive effect as to how literature was perceived in the continent. Geo politics and aesthetics constantly clashed with each other, which in course of time assumed the form of a symbiotic relationship. World War was in the horizon, so was literary reckoning. The Modernist movement which swept English literature in the Twentieth century, had a variety of influences which fed them, in the case of poetry, the French influence was particularly potent. The modernists were hunting for a new language, new vistas through which they could explore the dynamic shift which was taking place in Europe, and one of the central figures of this quest was T. S. Eliot, a poet who was very much a product of his time, and also someone who was aware of historical tradition. It was this historical sense which informed the multi layered nature of his works. Eliot, who spent a considerable amount of his youth in Paris and delving into French poetry would come to engineer one of the most tectonic shifts in English Poetry, 'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock is one of the earliest specimens of this shift, this poem would suggest new directions to modern English poetry. To investigate Prufrock's multi layered impact on English literature one has to utilise the framework of his critical theory, his extensive critical works would lay the foundation stone upon which twentieth century English poetry will erect its building, it is in his critical theory where the germ of Eliot's poetry lies.



Investigating *Prufrock* through the prism of Eliot's critical theory will reveal to us how polyvocal forces of the twentieth century shaped modern English poetry.

***Prufrock* and Eliot's Critical Theory: A Spectrum of Tradition:**

Very few poets have had such a decisive influence over the poetry of a nation in a definite period of time as T. S. Eliot. Twentieth century Europe, anticipating the ominous onset of the War, was in a flux, so was contemporary literature. One of the overarching questions of the time was, as to how to construct a new language for this new age, because contemporary English poetry had hit a dead end. Before Eliot's arrival on the scene, contemporary English poetry was suffering from an identity crisis, tendencies towards Romantic indulgence and vapid Georgian lyrics had made poetry irrelevant in a rapidly changing world. So, when Eliot appeared on the scene armed with the training of French poetry, it was clear he wanted to bring something new.' *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* was first published in the June 1915 issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, and it immediately generated strong reactions, the signs were there, changes in the contours of English poetry had begun. One needs to investigate different forces at work here which triggered a definite transformation of English poetry towards Modernism. "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison among the dead" (Eliot, 58).

No work of literature has its meaning alone. Eliot, as we see here, is well aware of his historical tradition, this historical sense pervades throughout Eliot's poetry. Eliot's historical sense gives us a sense of the historical tradition he belongs in. If we trace Eliot's literary tradition, one will find the genesis of much of Eliot's poetry and criticisms in French literature. An avid reader of Baudelaire, Laforgue, Verlaine and many more, Eliot was well versed in French poetry from his youth, his literary sensibility, then, was very much attuned towards the transformative needs of contemporary English poetry. Eliot's poetry strikes us early with its aggressive versification, hitherto unseen in English poetry. *Prufrock* begins:

Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherised upon a table; (Eliot,13)

These lines were about to change the course of modern English poetry, one might imagine the shockwaves that went through the literary establishment of the time. Eliot, right from the beginning, sets himself apart, and he does this by versification, aggressive versification is central to Eliot's style, this style lends itself very effectively towards a fragmented reality Eliot was aiming at. Eliot did away with romantic indulgence, he aimed to 'depersonalize' poetry, and one way to do that was through detached, impersonal style of rendering, as Eliot himself wrote "The emotion of art is impersonal" (Eliot, 66). Eliot is known for incorporating polyphonic style from different sources, his poetry is always characterised by polyphonic suggestions he brings into literary tradition. Eliot, here, uses the language of science to tremendous effect, and he does this deliberately, one should remember that the age of the World War was an age of science as well, the discourse of science was gradually coming at the centre of a nation's consciousness. Science, is defined by the human urge to control, means through which man seeks empirical conclusions to anything ambivalent, so there is always a tension between the impersonal scientific endeavour and



the human urge to control, this ambivalent relationship between impersonal science and personal control was one of the most fascinating dilemmas of the early twentieth century, Eliot was well aware that the State fuelled increased footprint of science was about the human urge to dominate. Eliot employed scientific terminology to an impersonal and detached effect, this scientific bend of Eliot's mind assisted him to render his idea of depersonalization, this was a carefully thought out literary device, it was by design and not by accident, we can corroborate this claim if we refer to Eliot's 'Tradition and Individual Talent', where he describes the creative process of poetry through the image of a laboratory experiment. "There remains to define this process of depersonalization and its relation to the sense of tradition. It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. I shall, therefore, invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide" (Eliot, 61).

For Eliot, critical faculty and creative faculty went together, one must complement the other, no poetry of lasting influence can be crafted without a dynamic critical faculty. Eliot 'thought' and 'felt' simultaneously (A trait for which he appreciated the Metaphysical Poets). It was due to his stress on depersonalization which lent Eliot's literary scheme a scientific temper. As Stephen Spender writes: "The idea of shared research and the application of shared principles of comparison appealed to the side of him that liked at this time to think of criticism-and even, in large part, of creativity-as shared, laboratory tests and experiments. The fusion of criticism and creativity would be a fusion of poetry with science: "Probably...the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of sifting combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing; this frightful toil is as much critical as creative" - SE - 30 - (Spender, 80-81).

One cannot investigate *Prufrock* without attention to the long shadow Baudelaire casts on this poem. The figure of the 'Dandy' is at the centre of *Prufrock*. Prufrock's dandyism traces its genesis to French poetry. In *The Painter of Modern Life* Baudelaire writes:

'Dandyism borders upon the spiritual and stoical. But a dandy can never be a vulgarian.'

'Dandyism is a kind of religion'.

'Dandyism appears above all in periods of transition'

'Dandyism is the last spark of heroism' (Baudelaire, 28).

Echoes of *Prufrock* can be traced here. Eliot learned his art under the aegis of French masters, he was indebted to Baudelaire for his style, as Chinmoy Guha writes: 'Stephen Spender makes a very important point when he says unwittingly of Prufrock: 'He suffers, which means he is one of those who knows that he is in a Baudelairian Hell.' Prufrock's predicament can surely be traced back to Baudelaire's 'pauvreame solitaire' (the solitary poor soul).....The arresting metaphor of the evening spread against the sky, compared to a patient etherized upon table, has Lafourgian resonances, but it may, after all, have originated from Baudelaire's reference to the hospitals (L'Hopital se remplitde leurssoupirs: "Their groans overflow the hospital")' (Guha,104).

Through these we can get an idea the tradition Eliot followed while exploring the fragmented, twentieth century mind. Eliot's sudden and merciless versification portrayed the anxiety of contemporary mind, Eliot explored an age of psychological chaos and situated *Prufrock*



at the centre of it. Prufrock is someone who is aware of the futility of communication, he is enmeshed in a web of existential crisis which breeds in him a fear of mortality,

‘And indeed there will be time,  
To wonder ‘Do I dare?’ and, ‘Do I dare?’  
Time to run back descend the stair,  
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair-  
(They will say: ‘How his hair is growing thin!’) (Eliot,14)

B. Rajan writes of ‘Prufrock’

‘The overwhelming question has to be asked. It cannot be left to define or uncover itself. It must be forced into being in that passion for definition which can seize the moment and drive it to its crisis’ (Rajan,113).

Prufrock’s restlessness, his mortal anxiety is symptomatic of a generation who has been cornered into the smoke belching squalor of a grimy city.

‘I grow old...I grow old...  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled’ (Eliot,16)

Even the most innocuous of gestures are lifeless, an ambience of deadening repetitions haunt Prufrock, who knows nothing will change, nothing will force the moment., Prufrock is caught in a cyclical world where meaningless gestures repeat themselves without yielding anything,

‘In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo’(Eliot,14)  
‘For I have known them all already, known them all-  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.’(Eliot,14)

The whole landscape is one of sterility, Prufrock is someone who is a product and also a victim of this sterile landscape, this is the ‘modern sensibility’ which plagues Prufrock. As F. R. Leavis writes: ‘We have here, in short, poetry that expresses freely a modern sensibility, the ways of feeling, the modes of experience, of one fully alive in his own age’(Leavis,120).

Eliot exposes the anxieties of twentieth century mercilessly, exhortations of a romantic artist was not cutting ice anymore, instead he is replaced by the figure of a dandy, this is a figure of twentieth century industrialised Europe, an Europe which is politically and socially bankrupt, an Europe on the brink of a collapse. Through *Prufrock* Eliot’s acerbic humour dismantles the ashes of materialistic decadence.



‘The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative” in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked’ (Eliot,100). This concept of ‘objective correlative’ becomes immensely important in our effort to decipher *Prufrock*. This method helped *Prufrock* to assume a distance through which the aesthetic of the poem can be explored without the character’s or reader’s emotional involvement.

‘The yellow fog that runs its back upon the window-panes,  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle, on the window panes,  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,  
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,  
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,  
And seeing that it was a soft October night,  
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep’ (Eliot,13)

This is the depressing dullness of a grimy city. City scape is central to ‘*Prufrock*’s architecture, one cannot help but notice the resonances of Baudelaire’s Paris in the above lines. *Prufrock* dealt with a faithless age and its neurosis. Eliot, in his aggressive vitality fashioned a new language for a new time, a time when the modern man resides in a sterile, helpless ennui, as the world around him deals only in futile fixities:

‘And I have known the eyes already, known them all-  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin’ (Eliot,14)

English poetry had definitively turned a new page, it had shed the remnants of indulgent Romanticism and the redundant lifelessness of Georgian lyrics, through *Prufrock* English poetry went through a tectonic shift, modern alienation, frustrating loneliness in the industrialised cityscape came to form the central concern of poetry, language of neurosis was suited for this neurotic age, haunted by insecurities afflicted by maladies. Eliot was a poet of maladies, his deliberately ‘unpoetic’ versification suited the poetry of a time which dealt with newspapers and bulletins. In such times, a poet has to be detached to deal with an age whose symbols had become increasingly non personal in nature, Eliot achieves this in *Prufrock* with his feline humour, which keeps him at a distance with the character and age he is dealing with. *Prufrock* is a specimen of a



remarkable poem constructed by a masterful artist whose tradition and historical sense are synthesized into a quintessential 'Modern Poem', a modern poem whose critical faculty is indispensable to its creative scheme. *Prufrock* is as much a criticism, as it is a poem.

### **Conclusion:**

This essay ventured to show how a modern poet's critical faculty and historical sense came together to produce a modern poem, which keeps on having a lasting influence on English literature, in the investigations carried above one might also find some traces of the 'modern mind' which ushered in a new era of English poetry. Every age leaves its mark on poetry and vice versa, there comes a time in every age when the past sheds its skin to pave the way for future to arrive, Eliot's *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* occupies such a space, it also suggested a way for a new style of versification, and also brought in a paradigmatic shift to aesthetic standards of modern literature. *Prufrock* paved the way for the so called 'non glamorous' and 'unheroic' characters to take centre stage of poetry, their fears, anxieties, alienation was symptomatic of a time which was bleeding, Eliot employed all of his critical and traditional sense to revitalize poetry at that time, in effect, constructing new contours of literary criticism and tradition which would come to define 'Modernism'.

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