

***The Dilemma Of The Poet In T. S. Eliot's
"The Love Song Of J. Alfred Prufrock"***

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1-general background

No doubt, T. S. Eliot is one of the pioneer of modern poetry who employs his faculty to throw back the chaos and loss of identity in modern life.

The complexity and perplexity of the modern urbanization, the fragility and ignorance of the inner world of the individual make the modern man, or more accurately the poet live in utter isolation. Besides, the cruelty and poignancy of the two world wars, the progress and variety of technology in which tools supersede man, have their impacts on the mind of the modern poets. They as individuals in such society and represent the mouthpiece of their age, react vehemently and try to do their best to make a compromise between their needs and redeeming the cracked situation of modern world. Among these contradictions, the modern poet finds himself impotent to give a clear – cut idea in his poem. Therefore; the poem becomes a blurred picture which reflect the confusing mentality of the poet himself.

This chaotic society gives birth to difficult, abstruse, inward and complex poetry. The poetry of the modern age is indirect, symbolic, fragmented and allusive. The literature of this age, like life, is varied and challenging. The poem serves to be like a riddle which baffles the reader.

However, modern poetry is not only a clear criticism and a fundamental record of modern life, it is also a mirror which reflects the tortures and agonies of the modern poet's society. The poet who seems to be shattered, is the product of the culture in which he was

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brought up. Therefore; "the crisis in English poetry.... Is a part of the moral, intellectual, social and economic crises of English and the Europe in which we are living today,"(1). To use V. D. S. pinto's words.

Modern poets are cleaved into two parts. Some of them are concerned with the state of society experiences; but all are concerned with the quality of their individual responses to their age.

The sense of tedium and boredom has occupied people during this age. With this respect, D. H. Lawrence says, "they are bored because they experience nothing. And they experience nothing because the wonder has gone out of them. And when the wonder has gone out of man he is dead"(2).

The modern age has witnessed the rise of so many theories and trends which have played a great role in creating such kind of poetry. The view of man as a biological phenomenon, a prey to instinctual desires makes the modern poets unable to arrive at a commonly accepted picture of man.

As we know, this age has attested the most destructive wars in the whole history. The effects that the two world wars have left, are very brutal and poignant on literature in general. Thus, the outcome of poetry in these wars is "considered part and parcel of modern poetry"(3). This poignant impacts of these two world wars are focused on the mentality of the modern poet and his way of thinking, feeling and how he reacts toward the enormous changes which have taken place during his time. He cannot even live peacefully since his sense of security has disappeared. The war has "dispelled the dream of security which had lulled {them}"(4).

People, during and after the first world ware to some extent, optimist that a better world might emerge from the grim conflict, but this was just a wish which has never been fulfilled because they

were shocked to find that the image of war turns to be ugly, in contrast the concept of heroism and enthusiasm.

Likewise, the impact of urbanization perplexes the modern poets. In the modern age, the modern poetry" looked not to the countryside, but to the great city ---the new poetry was also a city poetry"(5). The modern city with all its dreadful images because its coloring background.

The city takes role. It becomes the controlling focus of political, economic and cultural life. Its scene in modern poetry is represented by cruelty, inhumanity, ugliness and despair as hell. It is a place where people lose themselves. So, this modern civilization teaches man how to kill instead of teaching him how to live peacefully and safely. Thus, the more man becomes civilized, the more savage he becomes. Therefore; civilization has left chronic touches on modern life in general.

Even the role of language is seriously questioned during the modern era. An acute digression of its use can be detected through many poems of this period. The tendency of verse to sound like prose is one of the important features of modern poetry as John Burgess Wilson rightly says, "the divided – line between prose and poetry is very thin indeed"(6). Language is no longer a traditional means of communication because of the fragmentation and deformatization that modern English language suffers from. So, to understand a certain poem, it demands to make the reader interfere to complete what is lacked or hidden.

So, the modern poet goes in a journey to get self-knowledge. He is "the enthusiastic explorer of the self which modern society tends to shatter into incongruous halves"(7). To achieve this heroic task, the modern poet believes that the inner world of the individual is not a place to be ignored. Therefore; from the ending of the first world war onward, many writers turned from public affairs to a

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concern with the inner world of the individual which leads to the concept of alienation in which the individual especially the intellectuals feel a kind of spiritual and psychological alienation from their own society because of the great gap between them.

The modern poet strives to acclimatize with his society but in vain. This sense is considered one of the most outstanding features of modern poetry. It is more than a feeling of alienation, but as John Middleton Murry says, "the sense that we are exiled from our own country, that our rightful heritage has been usurped from us"(8). In the modern age, man is not still regarded as the crown of creation. His superiority is not so marked as before because of the dehumanization of man and the glorification of technology and scientific discovery.

The modern poet, then, begins to look to the east as a solution for his dilemma. The east stands for a shelter which those intellectuals try to restore in order to protect themselves from dehumanization that faces every single person in modern world, except the in east which represent the place of morality, humanity, virtue and religion.

All these dilemmas oblige the individual of this era to lose his role in the society, furthermore, to lose his identity as a human being who has the right to have a personality and live peacefully and properly. This situation leads the modern poet to think hesitantly about his society. So, his poem is shrouded in disorder and distortion.

This sensitive state of poet is precisely criticized by T. S. Eliot in his most significant poem, "*the love song of J.Alfred Prufrock*".

II. "The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

According to what has been exposed, one can imagine the chaotic society of the modern age. This chaos, in turn, leads to the perplexity in the mentality of those intellectuals. The modern poet finds himself in an unplayable situation. He is tossed between his pleasure and his public responsibility which both disappoint him.

Since the poet is an acknowledged legislator of the world and has the sensitivity towards such anarchy, his poetry embodies all his feeling, thoughts, actions and reactions concerning what has happened during the twentieth century.

"*the love song of J. Alfred Prufrock*"(9). presents the dilemma of the poet who seems to be hesitant, isolated, timid and spiritually numb. In the poem, the character of the poet is incarnated in the personality of Prufrock. He becomes the spokesman of his creator (Eliot). The poet uses Prufrock as "a symbol of the shy, hesitant, self-conscious young man who is out of place in a capitalist society... He is a symbol of helplessness and hesitation"(10). The suffering of Prufrock in this poem reflects the suffering of the poet himself. The "you and I" of the first line "may be thought of as two parts of Prufrock's personality, one part urging him to go, to participate in experience; the other parts holding back, withdrawing, retreating"(11).

The poem pictures the poet who is beset by fears of involvement in life, of relationships with other people. This situation creates the poet's own internal conflict. In "*the love song of J. Alfred Prufrock*" the poet comes to realize that the modern age is not encouraging place to recite poetry. This is shown clearly in the imagery of the first fourteen lines which establishes the atmosphere of disillusionment and passivity that suffuses the poem. The conceit in which the speaker compares the evening to an etherized patient "Like a patient etherized upon a table" (L.3) violates the reader's

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expectations concerning the lyrical landscape and presents instead an image of sterility in an urban landscape which seems inimical to human life. The "half-deserted streets" in the poem express the poet's isolation, and although he tries to find a refuge of retreat in these lonely avenues, they seem to be "muttering" to him, as if reminding him of his predicament.

The dirty, urban streets are not only the ugly space of the city but also the spaces of the poet's mind, the wandering paths of his undirected thought. Thus, the streets which are "like a tedious argument" (L.8) are also the twists and turns of an inner argument of conflict that the poet conducts with himself. In the poem, we see the poet is afraid of the destination of his mental journey which is suggested by the speaker, that overwhelming question which will force him to confront the meaninglessness of his life. Throughout poem, he is torn between a desire to change his life and at the same time a fear of change. To the poet, the vision of modern life is not clear. He falls in a challenge between allowing himself the triviality of a polite society and the anonymity of the desolate urban landscape.

The poet's anger reaches its culmination at the end of the first fourteenth lines passage. The sense of meaninglessness and trivialization is reinforced in the couplet; "In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo". Here, Eliot uses rhyme to juxtapose the grand and mundane ironically, and the rhyming of "Michelangelo" "and the singsong phrase" "com and go" suggests a general trivialization of culture. In the image of the women speaking of Michelangelo as they would of any item of gossip, Eliot satirizes the trivial, social interest in the aesthetic. The poet says that real beauty has become only a subject for society's chitchat.

The consciousness presented in the poem is an intensely anxious and impotent one in that the poet is unable to draw

conclusion about anything. Eliot uses his faculty to make everything in the poem contribute to his aim, i.e. to show the dilemma of the poet even the structure. Therefore; the division of the poem into short and disjointed section, the succession of short, anxious question, and the ellipses are formal elements that contributed greatly to the general atmosphere of mental confusion, anxiety and frustration in the poet's mind. For example, the first verse paragraph, in which the speaker suggests a visit to his audience, is followed by a pair of short, rhyming lines that have no relation to the preceding lines; "In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo" (L 13- 14). These lines make the reader ask about what room and women the poet talks about. Also the singsong lines surface eerily, only to give way to eight lines of a description of the autumnal fog that shrouds in some urban street. The barrage of questions such as "Do I dare?" "Do I dare?" "So how should I presume?" "and how should I begin?" is another important formal feature that conveys that neurotic indecision and anxiety in Prufrock's mind. No direct answers are given to these questions.

The ellipses which follow the image of the ragged claws in the middle of the poem also function to represent the poet's suppression of painful thoughts. The self-loathing and wish for oblivion implicit in his self image as a "pair of ragged claws,/ scuttling across the floor of silent seas" (L. 73-74) are too terrible for the poet of fact. According to the poet the atmosphere of modern age becomes sick and every corner in the society breathes that sickness.

At the end of the poem, we see the longing of the poet for more primitive and mysterious life which is evoked by the mermaids. But the poet comes to realize that even the mermaid's alluring song, which is very beautiful, is not for him. This image conveys the poet's longing for beauty or, perhaps, love, but even this

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dream lasts shortly. He again brings us back to the trivial chitchat, the "human voices" which wake us from the lovely and mysterious fantasy, shown by the song of the mermaids.

Notes

- 1- V.D.S pinto, *Crisis in English poetry* (England) arrow books ltd. (1963),p. 13.
- 2- Chalfont St. Giles. *An anthology of modern verse* (oxford: oxford university press, 1970) p xix.
- 3- Boris ford, ed, *the modern age* (GB: penguin books Ltd, 1964),p.154.
- 4- Herbet Grierson and J.C. Smith, *A critical history of English poetry* (GB: penguin books, 1962),p.462.
- 5- Boris ford, ed. *The modern age*, p.65.
- 6- Joha burgess Wilson *English literature* (London: Longman group, 1958), p.284.
- 7- Jabber Hashim Habib, *Heghes conception of the role of the poet*. Unpublished thesis (Baghdad: university of Baghdad, 1987) p.11.
- 8- James reeves *the critical sense* (GB: Heinemann educational books Ltd, 1974),p.3.
- 9- Kamal Ayad Gad, *al-mustansirya literary Review* (Baghdad: al maaref press, 1977-1978),p.37.
- 10- James E.miller et al *the united states in literature*, (n.y: Scott, Foresman and company, 1989), p.531. all subsequent references to the poem would be to this edition.
- 11- James E.miller et al *the united states in literature*, (n.y: Scott, Foresman and company, 1989), p.531.

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