

A REFLECTION OF DECODING CHRISTIANITY IN THE POETIC PLAY OF T. S. ELIOT: MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL AS WELL AS THE FAMILY RECONNECTIVITY, INCLUDING MYSTICISM IN THE WORKS OF ELIOT

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Abstract:

T.S. Eliot had made his great endowment as one of the major poet, playwright and critic in the twentieth century literature. In the beginning of the twentieth century English Literature his influence could be witnessed greatly. Eliot was very innovative in his works and had excelled in rich ambiguity. And that's why his works demonstrates a variety of interpretations and are multifaceted and open. Eliot had great skills in the genre of poetic plays, and he had also made conspicuous ground for himself in the field of criticism. The publication of the *Murder in Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion* or reconnectedness has made poetic drama prominent, and it became popular among the contemporary writers. My effort here is to decode the influence of Christianity in the light of his two specific works *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and *The Family Reunion* (1939) and Eliot as Mystic.

Key words: Christianity, Poetic drama, Redemption, Paradox, Religion, Mysticism

Theory of Poetic Drama in the Works of Eliot:

Through the conservative dramatic essay of Eliot, "Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" in 1928, it is clearly expressed that that "genuine drama" reflects a contrast between rituals and realism." Eliot had different opinions from the Absentee's realism, and was of the opinion that realism to be restricted up to some extent in the outside world to produce classical harmony. In consequence, Eliot propagated multiple conventional patterns and forms, encompassing the Mass and Greek drama. While in the same stream, he has created advanced verse forms, for according to him Shakespearean blank verse would be insufficient to express modern experience. According to Eliot Modern religious drama, "should have the ability to arouse the excitement and feeling even in those who do not believe in any religion. "He has chosen Redemption as the major theme of all his plays and had explored it in different ways.

Eliot's tribute has heartiest respect for Dryden. He was inspired by Dryden and that's why he inherited different theories from the theory of Dryden of poetic drama and had established the literary basis of the theory as well as practice of English poetic drama in the twentieth century. The most remarkable fact here is that Eliot had written his theory of poetic drama as a poet and critic. Eliot has completely advocated the theory of complete unity of poetry and drama. Eliot has believed that poetry cannot be separated from drama. Based upon this theory of poetic drama, he says that if poetry is isolated from drama completely in that case it would be difficult to say that who would be greater dramatist Shakespeare or Ibsen. Drama is dramatic because drama is most poetic. In short all poetry tends towards drama, all drama tends towards poetry. Eliot insisted that "if our verse is to have so wide a range that it can say anything that has it be said, it follows that it will not be 'poetry' all the time. It will only be 'poetry' when the dramatic situation has reached such a point of intensity that poetry becomes the natural utterance, because then it is the only language in which the emotions can be expressed at all" is one of the most important insistence about the unity of poetry and drama.

Aims and objectives:

The aim of this study is to understand Eliot's Poetic Drama and how the influence of Christian religion affected Eliot's creation of drama with reference to *Murder In Cathedral* (1935) and *The Family Reunion* (1939) along with Eliot as a mystic. It is perhaps too early to know what it perhaps means and not least because the word itself covers so many ambiguous phenomena. There are varied examples religion appears as a cover for political expectations, aspirations and resentments. The study charts Eliot as a Christian intellectual with reference to his works *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion* with the objective to understand how Christian faith influenced his drama. An effort is also made here to understand the influence of mysticism on Eliot.

Christian influence on Eliot and his drama:

Eliot from his early childhood till his maturity was rooted to live a disciplined and systematic life of a true Christian. Actually Eliot is himself very religious, disciplined and god fearing. Actually his life and personality was very systematic and composed. It has also come to light that he had converted to Anglicanism in 1927. The turning point came not with his conversion in 1927 but in 1914 when he first explored the motives, ordeals and achievements of saints. There is the collection of his preference that is *Lancelot Andrews* (1928). "In modern age Eliot had chosen a revival of Poetic drama as a medium, for he was preoccupied with dramatic element in poetry, while in the later years he seemed more inclined with the drama as a medium of mass appeal. Eliot held static belief on his theories and continued being the remainder of the same throughout of his life. Still, in his writings, he seems wrestling with the difficulties of having reached to any sort of belief system and with both the personal and societal ability to live out one's faith. His works with religious undertones signify this struggle. Nevertheless, Christianity opened the doors of intellectual growth for him and molded him into a person who knew that faith was meant to serve as an inspiration for an ordered life than finding salvation through dogmas. Eliot borrowed the public language of Christian liturgy, hymns, and the sermon. The Church of England promised him more intellectual dependence than religious refinements. In *The Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, he says, "only a Christian Culture would have produced a Voltaire and Nietzsche." So in the wake of liberal humanism for which bore no promise to him he believed that Christian faith served as a solace for his intellectual yearnings. This is explicitly visible through his play, *Reunion*, Harry, like Eliot, was in a state of indifference to any belief, particularly the Christian one before conversion. In the 1930's the momentary Christian aggressiveness of Eliot soon faded into more philosophical reaction. It is in the *Murder in Cathedral* he chooses a Catholic theme and in *Reunion* he is dazed out of his own conversion, through intellectual transport of a higher level. The views of Eliot's in his plays are different from what Christianity has to offer. As reflected by both his plays, his vision and consciousness cannot be identified with theoretic of Christianity.

Eliot was everything when he is a seeker and a discoverer: seeking to reconcile the culture he saw with what he hoped it to be; seeking to reconcile an inner despair with a parallel want of faith. Infact, Christianity served in preparing his philosophical thinking but served no more than a mere foundation on which he erected the premises of his viewpoints. Eliot knew that an adherent of Christian faith was free in choice of his worship. But, in his plays, he shows that a right choice leads to redemption and a wrong one leads to state of death in life. Thomas, in the play *Murder*, and Harry in the play, *Reunion*, shows that a right choice is the repentance which leads to the goal of redemption. Eliot believes that soul is a representative of 'Satan' and 'Mind' is a representative of God, are not always secular and one. This state of spiritual consciousness is a still point at which a character enjoys the bliss of trance mediation and happiness. Thomas after crossing over the zone of spiritual consciousness, in *Murder*, as portrayed in his 'action suffering' speech, appears allusive to the Chorus and the Priests as

they still understand him in the physical order. Harry, in *Reunion*, seems chaotic to his mother Amy, when he opens his intention to leave Wishwood and become a missionary.

Harry's consciousness drives him to holiness. Amy is having the puritan attitude of Christ, who addresses his mother as a woman. The relationships of Harry with the three different women itself symbolizes the continuous and sequential spiritual action of the play. Out of the three women Agatha helps for Harry to take right decision in the spiritual quest. She tells him of his spiritual life as: "You are the consciousness of your happy family. Its bird sent flying through the Purgatorial flame." Eliot presents Thomas in the manner of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. Thomas accepts death as the will of almighty and devotes himself to God and Church. Thomas experiences redemption through his moral catastrophe. Eliot has learned from Shakespeare that a psychological situation can also lead a character to a spiritual and a philosophical end. It is in view of the psychological situations, aroused by Shakespeare, that in the *Reunion*, Harry reminds us of Hamlet by discarding his mother all the time and is restless to atone and obliterate the sins of his father. Eliot develops Harry in Shakespearean way to handle conflicts and situations, but the solution reached at by Harry is what makes it detached from Shakespeare's work. Both *The Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion* as verse dramas have themes of tragedy as well as Christian appropriations. As written by Lyndall Gordon: Eliot meant to recast this ordeal of soul for a modern audience clutching cheap gods. He brought it off by a supreme act of self-effacement-call it 'impersonality'. To test for him the pattern of spiritual biography, and to do so in an age skeptical towards belief, was not a matter of self-expression; there was a higher purpose: to leave behind a vessel that future generations might fill.

Understanding Eliot's Mysticism:

Mysticism is one of the long existed religious traditions in every religion, culture and literary form, and indicates a direct experience of the divine.

The modern age has been described as the age of anxiety, the age of interrogation, disintegration and spiritual crisis. Twentieth century English poetry and drama had been majorly marked with the mystical element. Eliot proved himself to be a great mystic of his age. T.S Eliot was an excellent scholar of the past and had a very deep spiritual outlook. He was the only literary artist from the west who was influenced greatly by the Indian philosophy. Eliot was influenced by the speculations of Indian Philosophers and spoke on the ego and experience of beauty. Eliot drew his inspiration not only from the literature of Christian mysticism but also from a variety of Hindu sources. According to Chatterjee, "The influence of Hinduism however is more important and pervasive in Eliot's poetry than that of Buddhism." "Eliot was very sensitive and conscious about the barren spiritual condition of his contemporary society, and through out his poetic career he sought to fulfill a prophetic role in his works by alerting readers back to their lack of spiritual consciousness. Eliot was greatly influenced by Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism: The Preeminent Study in the Nature and Development of the Spiritual Consciousness*.

The poetry of T.S. Eliot shows an increasing affinity to the tradition of Christian Mysticism, and can be outlined on the basis of his major lyrical works ranging from *Burnt Norton*, *The Waste Land* to *Ash Wednesday* and *Prufrock*. Paradox is the language of mysticism and the language of poetry: it is the essence of mystical experience and expression. The motive of mystic is to "capture momentary experience and to frame and preserve these moments in language" (Edel, 1973:127) But since these moments are beyond human reasoning, and since logic heavily relies on multiplicity and diversity, paradox is used to reconcile the conflicting opposites. The mystical experience, then, culminates in the unity with Divine in whom all multiplicity reconciles and become one. According to Cleanth Brooks: "the paradoxes spring from the very nature of the poets language: it is a language in which the connotations play as great a part as denotations" (1983:295). Mysticism, for convenience of our

understanding, can be defined as a ‘third kind of knowledge’, the other two being the ‘sensible and the super sensible’. In his approach to differentiate the sensible from the super sensible and to explain their hand in hand creation of ‘third kind of knowledge’, Eliot transcends the temporal experience, in which, rationalism cannot be conducted to the essence of things. The orthodox theme of his plays like *Murder* and *Reunion*, clearly shows that both Thomas and Harry intended upon redemption. In fact, Thomas in the *Murder* and Harry in the *Reunion* spiritually grow in order to be one with the divine, however their spiritual growth is more comparable to a Hindu saint or a Greek mystic as they insist upon self identification. Eliot had mastery in combining the mystical paradox and used it as a method of expression in his works to introduce issues directly related to a world of confusion, uncertainty and total loss on the individual level that prevailed in the twentieth century. Eliot, as a Christian, knew well about Christian schools of mysticism, but whatever he wrote was not necessarily based on Christian philosophy. The theme of his play *Murder* was based upon Christian ideology of redemption, but Thomas, throughout the play, did not express anywhere whether he sought for Christian redemption. Thomas tends towards a consciousness to reach the highest order, and not the Christian God itself. Similarly, Harry in the *Reunion* felt the presence of higher reality, for the attainment of which he neither needed puritan knowledge. Therefore, it can be well substantiated that Eliot sought to philosophical mysticism for human aberrations both in his poetry and plays.

Conclusion:

Thus, it can be stated that Eliot is really a genius writer. His intellectual journey has taken him down to various different parts most notably through his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927 to his philosophical oriental learning from 1930 to 1958. Eliot wrote religious and philosophical dramas like *The Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939) and others. Eliot has represented a new fate in everything that the people such as Lyton Strachy, were fighting and struggling against their repudiation of Victorianism and conventionality of belief and behavior in all its forms through his works.

The prominent works of Eliot appears to be believed that only orthodox Catholic Christianity is the persuasive solution to sufferings, personal as well as cultural, of the post world war. Eliot is really an intelligent, skilled and sharp writer to capture the genuine and authentic picture of his characters to impart them true colors of life. His contribution to literature is really valuable and grand. In ‘The Function of Criticism’, Eliot has written, that ‘the past should be transferred by the present as much as the present is directed or instructed by the past.’ Critics should make a work of art clear and transparent to the readers that should guide and match to their interest. The main effort has been made to unfold the Christian influence on two specific early plays that were penned down by T.S. Eliot and to comprehend Eliot’s unique relationship with Christian as well as Oriental Mysticism.

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