Eliot’s Views On Modern Man And His Condition In The Modern World

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T. S. Eliot as an Ideologist
T.S. Eliot has been universally recognized by the peers as the greatest poet writing in English language of this century. The Twentieth century, in English literature, is marked with the emergence of new and varied values in all fields of life. The social, economic, political and literary values have undergone tremendous changes in the modern age. In all his poems, Eliot made an attempt to express the bitterness of modern and materialistic life. The spiritual degeneration of man can be seen in his poems. It is said that human nature seldom changes and these denizens of Eliot’s Inferno are basically similar to their predecessor in the realm of poetry. But in giving them vitality and individuality, Eliot has evolved a new pattern in poetic technique and achieved a remarkable position in the history of poetical innovation. Eliot was a symbolist from the beginning to the end of his career, and he takes recourse to both conventional symbols and personal ones. Eliot is a true writer of his age. The fact is that he was a spokesman of his age. One of his greatest achievements consists in having given expression to the dominant anxieties and feelings of his age. In 1928, Eliot declared that his general point of view has become “Classicist in literature, Royalist in politics and Anglo Catholic in religion”. He is a modern poet not merely because of the novelty of his themes and by a keen awareness of his time but chiefly because he has evolved a new method of poetic communication. He saw the deep significance of the relationship between poetry and rhythm and idiom of ordinary speech. T S Eliot stands out as a dominant figure of his times. The circumstances of his life and his unique temperament led him through all the movements and influences of his age. Though centered in himself, in search of his artistic personality, he became a part of all he saw and felt. As a result, he could have his own ideas or opinions about everything he came across. Hence he is called an ‘ideologist’.

T.S. Eliot has been recognized as a major poet of the modern age. W.B. Yeats is his only rival to the highest place in modern English poetry. The poetry of both the poets is still an enigma to many a reader for the simple reason that they tend to be difficult, obscure and complex.

Eliot’s poetry, criticism and also his memories are made for actual life and he builds up an atmosphere of romance out of things of life seen and felt by him. It is the world we live in which we are all confronted; the world we know with all its frustrations, its defects, its antagonisms and its errors. The mind that sees is not intensive.

All his life, Eliot was subjected to the pressure of the world around him, its politics, its current of vital ideas and being both sensitive and alertly responsible. As he had got all the above characteristics he could have his own dream for everything. Thus, Eliot, undoubtedly, can be called as a prominent ideologist of the twentieth century.

Eliot’s view on the Modern Man
(a) as depicted in ‘The Waste Land’:
T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land which is, according to F.R. Leavis, “great and positive achievement” is the best depiction of modern human’s life. Modern people’s problems especially after the World War, have become extremely intricate. As the natural world has become barren outwardly because of massive death and destruction, the internal state of humans has become complex as well as perverted. They are going through a life-in-death situation, always in fear of death like “a handful of dust” (Burial of the Dead). Moral values have lost dignity. Perverted sex has become a part and parcel in their daily lives. In fact, innocence is considered as perversion. Like Prufrock, every modern human is hopeless. In this waste land, the modern men are like “heap of broken images” (Burial of the Dead), where “the dead tree gives no shelter, cricket no relief” (Burial of the Dead). Humans have lost true feeling for others, and that’s why, in sex, love does prevail no more. The typist girl, after making love like a machine, feels “glad” when the job is “over” (The Fire Sermon).

Women have to remain cautious always to prevent their partners from going away to other women, they are used mere as a tool to produce children; the overt taking of contraceptives destroy their health, yet, they can’t bear giving birth anymore, so, they need pills. But, then, their husbands do not tolerate having such ugly and unproductive wives. Such is the condition of a conjugal life in the modern age. Besides, homosexuality has become a terrible
threat to moral values. In “The Fire Sermon”, we see the Smyrna merchant to go through such relationship. Faith in God is overshadowed by the power of money and personal enjoyment. Men, busy for their own business purposes, are crossing the London Bridge at 9 am which is the time of Christ’s crucifixion, meaning that, they are forgetting religious dogmas and emphasizing more on their worldly jobs.

(b) The Hollow Men
“The Hollow Men” also is a shorter but still a nice portrayal of modern people. Modern men suffer from spiritual paralysis, spiritual decay:

“Shape without form…./Paralysed force….”

Modernity has brought them to such a state that they have become straw figure, like a scarecrow (Part II) which, in a blow of wind, moves, otherwise has no dynamism of itself. In the poem, the speaker utters:

“This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised ….”

The reference to stone image is also found in The Waste Land, where modern men are compared to stony rubbish. Modern men have become stone-hearted; vacuity, emptiness and nihilism have grasped them.

(c) ‘Ash Wednesday’
In ‘Ash Wednesday’, the depiction of modern men is also similar but not elaborately portrayed. By the way, here also, it is evident that modern man is spiritually barren and in quest for moral purification. Religion is the best possible solution for them. It represents the struggle of any devotee in this age. Here a devotee struggles going through self-examination, self-exploration, penitence and moving towards the path of spirituality.

These three poems of TS Eliot represent the true and real picture of modern man. They deal with the aspiration to move from spiritual barrenness to hope for ‘salvation’.

Eliot’s view on Modern Man’s Condition/Problems in the Modern World:
Man suffers an impoverishment of emotional vitality. He lives according to the rules of the empty social conventions and those of a decadent culture. Man’s life is partly sordid and sensual. He is to some extent aware of his isolation and footlessness. He feels himself entangled in a corrupt, decaying, Ugly Society. All of these features, however, could be categorized into three major groups. Each group, in turn, would show a series of subsidiary relating problems which would make a whole entity. The duplicity of man, lack of communication among men, and man’s isolation are three basic predicaments of man, making him more and more alienated, although, these motifs are common to Eliot’s poetry.

(a) The Duplicity of Man:
The sense of duplicity within the modern man is a major motif in Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. In this poem the protagonist Prufrock is helplessly caught in an interminable quarrel between his own desire to live by himself and the obligation to submit to the social conventions. Eric Sigg in his book, The American T. S. Eliot, affirms that Eliot depicts the duplicity between the “warning elements within a single soul”. This duplicity makes Prufrock suffer helplessly. The two selves, that is, the personal and the social, have to tolerate each other (188-9).

To the people in the society Prufrock, the representative of the modern Man, has a different self to put forward. This self as Eliot expresses is something artificial that should be prepared:

“There will be time, there will be time to prepare
a face to meet the faces that you meet” (Lines 26-27).

Man, in order to be accepted by others, tries to make himself as similar to them as possible. Joseph Conrad strikes the idea even further. He states: “We can at times be compelled into a mysterious recognition of our opposite as our true self”19. Man is nevertheless, instinctively and naturally a creature different from what he puts forward in the public. It is palpable, for example, in his getting bored with his fellowmen as soon as they try to penetrate to his personal life. In this sense man is a hypocrite, a double dealer.

Man again has a sense of duplicity regarding his own self. He suffers in the society yet he is unwilling, actually unable, to do something about it. In a book entitled T. S. Eliot: The Longer Poems, Derek Teraversi is of the
opinion that the badness is within the man not in the society. According to Traversi, man is psychologically handicapped. He is unable to take the necessary actions.

The idea of duplicity in its both aspects, within the man and between the man and society, has a general impact on him. Hugh Kenner in his *The Invisible Poet* specifies that the conflict between Prufrock, who stands for the modern man, and himself and also his conflict with the society “condemns him to boredom and passivity”. He considers man’s role in the society no more than that of a fool. The fact is expressed, explicitly, in the poem where Prufrock is analyzing himself as:

“\begin{quote}
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous
Almost, at times, the Fool\end{quote}” (lines 118-119).

As a result of this view, Prufrock retreats to his own self which would result in two other problems: his inability to communicate and consequently his isolation.

(b) Lack of Communication among Men
Lack of communication among men is another basic theme functioning in “The Love Song”. The idea is presented by Martin Scofield in *T.S. Eliot: The Poems*. He, however, puts an emphasis on “a positive relationship between a man and a woman. Nevertheless, Prufrock seems to be unable to communicate with all of those who are around him, both men and women. It is interesting, in the same manner that others are equally unable to have a positive relation with him. Thus, the idea can be studied from a communal point of view. Inability to communicate is common to all. Yet, the problem with Prufrock is that he is aware of this fact; others are not. Although it seems that others are having conversations as

“In the room the women come and go
Talking Michelangelo” (Lines 13-14/35-36).

Talking about Michelangelo would be a kind of escape each speaker resorts to not to be touched by the other person’s real words about real life situation. The Michelangelo talk, in other words, is not a genuine way of communication since it does not penetrate to real alive people’s life. Tangible communication infiltrates the communicators’ mind and makes a way to their inner selves. Thus defined, there appears no sign of communication in the Michelangelo talk where some women would presumably maneuver over some already-known, stereotyped talk about Michelangelo who, in his turn, being an artist, is deliberately chosen by Eliot as a source of attraction to women. Thus he acts as an entertaining subject to talk about. Nevertheless, the women would, as the nature of such talks importunes, concentrate on out witting each other by putting across deeper familiarity with the artist and his works. They do not, however, get into real conversation about their real alive fellow people. This might have the same cause as Prufrock’s being reticent.

With the repetition of two lines, all in all, there are three places in the poem where Eliot refers to the lack of communication. Line 97 is repeated in line 110. Here one can observe that Prufrock is uncommunicative because he fears to be misinterpreted.

The fear of being misinterpreted is basic to Prufrock’s preference to be silent. This fear, as expressed in lines 97 and 110, results from the consciousness on the part of Prufrock of the idea of lack of communication. In the two lines Prufrock imagines that he would be able to break the ice and talk to someone, a woman in this case, what would be the outcome of that? Prufrock believes it as being misinterpreted by the lady. She would say:

“That is not what I meant at all.
That is not at all”(lines 97-98,109-110).

In this way Prufrock never tries a conversation and he remains silent. There is also another cause for Prufrock’s silence. In lines 103 and 117 he explicitly alludes to the fact. Line 103 reads: “It is impossible to say just what I mean”! He seems to be willing to express what he has inside. Yet, he seems devoid of the means, hence words. Eliot carries on with this idea to line 117 where he briefly and beautifully summarizes Prufrock: “full of sentence, but a bit obtuse” (13). Lack of communication as a theme of modern man’s, Prufrock’s life, in turn, brings up the problem of isolation.
(c) The Problem of Isolation

The theme of isolation of the modern man is also central to Eliot’s “The Love Song”. Here, Eliot tries to show man as a creature isolated from the community. This man is unable to go to the public. As it was discussed earlier man is struggling between two selves: Social self, that is, what he puts forward in community, and his own self, a being living by himself. In “The Love Song” these two seem to be at odds with each other. This oddity, by itself, implies that human relations are futile and useless as well. Man should retreat to the remote distances of his mind. The poem, as a whole, affirms the idea. The poem is a monologue not a conversation.

“The Love Song”, being a monologue, is again a symptom of Prufrock’s isolation. In this sense, all of the actions take place in the speaker’s mind. There is no actual action. “Walking at dust through narrow streets”, “coming from the dead”, “disturbing the universe”, even such minute actions of “scuttling across the floors of silent seas” and other references to action, interspersed throughout the poem, are fake and false actions taking place in Prufrock’s imagination. He does nothing. He is far removed from the actual world to perform an action. He is isolated. He cannot enjoy being with others or if he can, it’s so painful to him. Others’ experience is no better. G.B. Harrison in his book Major British Writers, describe these people as “people whose pleasures are so sordid and so feeble that they seem almost sadder than their pains”.

Prufrock’s isolation is reported in different ways in “The Love Song”. In a series of lines one can observe that Prufrock considers himself a man who stands out of the community. He looks at people from outside of their groups. This can be traced in lines 42, 44, 49, 55 and 63. Except for the lines 42 and 44 in the remaining lines Prufrock is addressing the people. He alludes to different parts of their bodies.

“For I have known them all already, known them all” (Line 49)
“And I have known the eyes already, known them all” (Line 55)
“And I have known the arms already, known them all”(Line 62)

A close study shows that Prufrock, through naming the parts of the body, emphasizes that neither of them appeal to him as a whole. Neither could compensate for his isolation. Sexual connotations are evident.

The idea of isolation, however, finds a new dimension in lines 42 and 44. In these lines Prufrock shows himself conscious of the people around him. He believes that they look at him questioningly. They are fault finding. The most terrible scene takes place when they, Prufrock imagines it, begin to talk about him physical deficiencies. His hair and his arms as well as his legs are the targets of their criticism.

“They will say: ‘How his hair growing thin!” (Line 42)
“They will say: ‘How his arms and legs are thin!” (Line 44)

This sense of consciousness about the surroundings is described as a hindrance to coming to an understanding of the surroundings. The McGraw-Hill Guide to English Literature affirms the idea “The consciousness presented in the poem is an intensely anxious and important one in that the speaker is unable to draw conclusions about anything”. He is nervous about that. He thinks that he is under their scrutiny. Thus, he feels more isolated from them. He, consequently, gets to the point that finds “the chambers of the see” the only suitable place for him to dwell in (line 129). D.E.S. Maxwell in an essay, entitled “The Early Poem,” in the book Critics On T.S. Eliot states that, “Prufrock… never penetrates beyond ‘the cups, the marmalade, the tea’ to a conclusion either with the ladies in the poem or with his surrounding.

Duplicity, lack of communication, and isolation are three major predicaments from which Prufrock suffers in “The Love Song”. The society seems to have a share in that. Yet, prufrock, the representative of the modern man, himself, seems to be responsible for his sufferings. That is because everything happens within him. As a result, he becomes more and more alienated; hence the affliction of the modern man.

REFERENCES: