

**POETRY AS A DEVICE OF EMOTIONAL ENTREATY, A LACONIC
RECAPITULATION OF LIFE AND A PURSUIT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS- A STUDY ON
WAR POEMS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO T.S. ELIOT**

DHANESH SEBASTIAN

Abstract: It is axiomatic that the instinct for emotional entreaty is apparently perceptible in terms of the depth of emotion that every poetry carry. Personal emotion may be directly conveyed through a poem may be with the imagination and innovation of poetic devices such as metaphors, simile, conceits, etc. through the license that he enjoys. The continuing grief, bereavement in a warfare, the lingering hostility and yet more setbacks give only two options to a poet either to speak up or to stay mum. As William Radice puts it in his book *Poetry and Community*- “the emotional complexity of a poem lies in the paradox of a dark time of grief that may be challenged and attributed as a good time, fertile time and a creative time.”(37)

Most of the poems of T.S. Eliot draw a vivid sketch of the conscious experience of a man through his innovative device of ‘Stream of Consciousness’ as we see in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The poem *The Waste Land* is often read as a representation of the disillusionment that passes through the post-war generation. The words of Wilfred Owen- that the poetry is in the pity- echo even today. War poetry at times breeds catharsis releasing emotions such as pity or fear.

The genre of poetry, however, has gone through tremendous changes in terms of its exquisite and elegant choice, innovation and vocation. War poetry may be applied to a poet’s writing about any war; whether may it be World War I or World War II, or may it be American, Crimean, Boer or Spanish armada. Whatever or wherever it may be- poetry often acts as a device of emotional entreaty, a laconic recapitulation of life and a pursuit for human rights.

Thomas Stearns Eliot is regarded as ‘the most cited poet and incarnation of literary correctness in the English speaking world’ and hence a research on him may not be regarded as a great accolade; but may this study on his poems move with a relishing moment of glory.

Introduction:

“In my beginning is my end...

...In my end is my beginning.” (*East Coker* 1, 210)

Poetry across cultures and periods has often elucidated the representation and recapitulation of man’s life, of which emotions such as pity and fear become the driving force. Poetry might travel much faster than any war weapons and a poet’s beginning can be his end and his end his beginning. His abrupt end or full-stop might be metamorphosed into an ellipsis or continuity and therefore has alpha and omega in it. It talks about the past and it talks about the future. It has a beginning and an end. In accordance with the observation of Aristotle that he expatiates in his *Poetics* concerning the rhetorical device used in poetry- a poem may be used by its begetter as a technique to evoke and persuade the emotional response of the readers. In fact, Aristotle explains different categories of the rhetorical devices such as logos, pathos, ethos and kairos. While logos represent the use of logical ideas to persuade and appeal to the audience, pathos is being used as an appeal to the emotions of the audience. Ethos, on the contradictory, is used as an appeal based on the character of the speaker in relation with a community, nation or ideology. Finally, kairos involves an appeal to the timeliness of the argument. The third component – pathos, being the cynosure, makes us believe in the idea that poetry is a device of

emotional entreaty. Aristotle also employed ‘Catharsis’ (‘Katharsis’) as a metaphor in the *Poetics*, which he defines as the purification and purgation of emotions. Poetry is, as Wordsworth puts it ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ and this spontaneous and powerful feeling is driven as an emotional entreaty, limiting and making itself into a laconic recapitulation of life. Herbert Howarth has rightly renounced that Eliot in his poems has often established to show that a poet’s business was not just reporting feelings; but extending it and creating a shape that would possibly pave a way to convey it. Undoubtedly, Eliot’s poetry often portrayed itself as a process of ‘living by thought’. This inquiry into Eliot’s poetry as an emotional entreaty, a laconic recapitulation of life and a pursuit for human rights, may dispel our doubts and make us enlightened.

Emotional Entreaty, Laconic Recapitulation of Life and Pursuit for Human Rights: Every poetry embarks a universal entreaty to maintain a standardized behavior that later got baptized as human rights. Human Rights, while contemplating, is a seed- planted, watered and nurtured by the apex body called the International Law that later transfigured the outlook and enlarged the purview towards individual rights. This was the prime step, whereby the Bill of Rights got ratified on December 16, 1689 by the Act of the British Parliament. Even before the incarnation of the Bill, the idea of such a

framework was a spark ignited by none so ever other than poets. This, indeed, is not a *Defence of Poesy* that was once well enunciated by Sir Philip Sidney elucidating the divine origin and the social utilities of poetry. Much before the existence of the Bill, the ideas of rights and liberty travelled across the world that came out of the unbiased pen of poets.

“War does not determine who is Right- only who is left.” (Russell)

Bertrand Russell, a widely acclaimed British philosopher and critic, had the notion that war does not decide the cause; but rather its effects. In fact, Eliot's poems often communicated not only the cause of war; but also the effects that it showered on human conditions. Moreover, T.S Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* is a requiem, a song sung for the dead and the living awaiting to embrace death. It is right to affirm that Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a mere piece of elegy. Although it is a poem that consists of 434 lines, Eliot makes an attempt to project a complete view of civilization, of man's history and his failures and predicaments along with his persistent pursuit for salvation, through every word and line it contains. The poem is, therefore, an exposition that juxtaposes satire and prophecy. Undoubtedly, the readers of Eliot are often driven by the aura surrounded in his poetry taking them along with the European expedition and the experience of World War.

Like *The Waste Land*, *Gerontion* is also set and read as a genre of war poetry that moves through the interpenetration of war. Eliot transforms himself as an old man in *Gerontion*, wherein he 'lost his sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch.' (59) For him, it was 'to lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.' (56) For Eliot, inquisition might also represent the organization in the Roman Catholic Church of the late 12th to 19th centuries that punished people for not accepting its beliefs and practices.

“Till human voices wake us, and we drown.” (131)

It is an insatiable appetite for collective human voice urged by Eliot in the poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. It dramatizes certain human situations. The poem is a dramatization of the predicament of a man, whose ardent desire to find a meaning in life, goes in vain when he finds himself disillusioned with the society. As in the other poems of Eliot, this in particular takes the readers through the difficulties faced by individuals during the post-war years. Finally, disillusionment drives Prufrock to fantasy and daydreaming than neither the acceptance of his reality nor damnation. 'Damnation itself is an immediate form of salvation' (Maddrey, 128), said T.S Eliot in his essay on Baudelaire. Poets such as Eliot were more concerned about salvation than damnation. His poems had a shattering of fragmented ideas of both damnation and salvation, showcasing the sunny and gloomy side of things. Yet,

all his poems often made an attempt to strive and look for liberation that an individual seeks, whether it might be from slavery or any other restraint. War Poetry, if examined carefully, would find two aspects such as damnation and salvation as the last resort of a hapless man. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* ends thus to let the merciful human eyes to be struck and the human voices to be enunciated. “The three main extra-rational activities in modern life are religion, war and love.”- said Bertrand Russell. Eliot, indeed, often wrote on these extra-rational activities of modern life.

War Poetry is a product of the sword than pen. In fact, injustice might be vanquished better by pen than sword. As every poetry celebrates, perhaps, the moments of love, chivalry, courage, etc., this genre proclaims and celebrates the idea of anti-war. The poem *The Waste Land* gives us an absurd and weird idea of a barren land, making the readers to imagine 'the burial of the dead' and thus leading them through a burial ground. Phlebas the Phoenician, who falls a victim to 'death by water', appears before us. The body of Phlebas the Phoenician was torn apart by the creatures of the sea, as he drowned to death. Even the readers often fall victim to dilemma, because of the anecdotes listed by Eliot. Finally, Eliot made an attempt to make us reach the shore after a herculean combat, molding the readers to be rather spiritual and thus making them to give their ears to 'what the thunder said'. A poem, which began with the description of the cruelest month, April – as the readers saw fear in a handful of dust- came to witness- datta, dayadhvam, and damyata, a feeling of shantih.

Yet another distinctive feature of Eliot's poetry is 'stream of consciousness'. It is considered to be the mental flux of one's thoughts that portrays one's consciousness. If it were soliloquy and dramatic monologue that ceased drama before the arrival of realism in the late 18th century, 'the stream of consciousness' technique found its pastures in novels and poetry. One of the most popular modernist works arising out of the post-war disillusionment was Eliot's epic *The Waste Land*, a foundational literary text of modernism. The intention and emotion of a poet may be curtailed through the laconic recapitulation of a poem as one reads it. Eliot's original draft experienced a transformation by the magic quill of Ezra Pound, as he altered a poem provisionally titled '*He Do the Police in Different Voices*'. This poem brought together the disintegration and mental stability of Eliot's personal life, expatiating the culture around him that later got into perfection of poetry having the same features as of its creator and thus the reader is thrown into chaos and confusion, which is nothing but a heap of broken images.

Eliot's poems are also considered as a product of 'Hysteria'- a situation or state of mind, in which one's mind is emotionally driven in an uncontrollable way, because of fear, anger, etc. It certainly has an inherent influence of wartime hysteria. *The Waste Land*, in particular, was produced during the time of his personal difficulties. His marital bond with Vivienne, whom once he loved so dearly, was failing and thus 'things were falling apart'. Both suffered nervous disorders. Vivienne suffered from fatigue, colitis, insomnia and high temperature and later due to her mental instability, she was committed to a mental asylum. He had to embrace solitude and isolation due to his struggle with inguinal hernia. This isolation paved a way for his love towards literature. In fact, he began writing poetry as a boy of fourteen. Even his first poem *A Fable for Feasters* was written as a school exercise.

East Coker is a poem, which appeared in Eliot's Four Quartets, talks about time and chaos that appears in nature as a result man goes in search of science neglecting religion. The poem begins abruptly showing 'rise and fall' (2), Houses 'removed, destroyed, restored' (3), 'old stone to new building, old timber to new fires'(5), etc. The element of contradiction that the universal readers have once witnessed through the pen of Charles Dickens, takes rebirth in *East Coker*. If Dickens had described the war of two cities such as Paris and London in his historical novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, which began renouncing- 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...' (Dickens, 3), here Eliot draws our attention to the universal truth of time as he says- 'Houses live and die: there is a time for building. And a time for living.'(9, 10) The only way to find salvation and to understand the universe is to embrace the divine by examining oneself and his brethren. The title *East Coker* is given with reference to Eliot's ancestral relation to a small community in England. The poem all together gives an element of hope that the small communities in England would survive even in times of war. Being written at the time of World War II, this poem conveys the message of standing united at the time of war. Poetry is a device of emotional entreaty that comes out, either due to attachment or detachment. Ultimately detachment often arises due to a prior experience of attachment.

"This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper" (*The Hollow Men* 97, 98)

Eliot's lines are at-times prophetic. *The Hollow Men* unfolds against a backdrop of the post-war Europe under the Treaty of Versailles, which he abominated. Religious conversions and questions on church and faith baffled him. There is yet a declamation that he makes- emotionally taken aback, seeing the world full

of chaos. Hence he proclaims- "we are the hollow men, we are the stuffed men."(1, 2) Whether it may be emotional attachment or detachment that Eliot carries in his poem, it often moves with an attempt to pursue human rights. His voice is a collective human voice- voice that carries all individual and collective emotions. His voice mingled with an emotional appeal is echoed even today-

"I am tired with my own life and the lives of those after me,

I am dying in my own death and deaths of those after me." (*A Song of Simeon* 34)

"A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year

For a journey, and such a long journey." (*The Journey of the Magi* 1-3)

The Journey of the Magi takes the readers through the toilsome task of travelling- a journey of the three kings. The journey was long and hard as they arrived Bethlehem to witness the birth of Christ. But, the final lines of the poem- 'I should be glad of another death' (43) - suggests that the wishes of the three kings were the indication of the death of Christ than his birth. Indeed, it was not a well-wishing rather an offering of Pandora's Box. Eliot's intention was to convey how and why, there is a decline of believers in the Catholic Church. His aversion to the Church and his conversion to the Church of England are reflected in the poem. *The Hippopotamus* is a poem written by Eliot after the First World War satirizing the Catholic Church. It is the hippo wrapped in mud, that becomes worthy of the celestial abode, while the Church remains below. Eliot's notion that 'the Church can sleep and feed at once' (24) - is taken on his aversion towards the Church, which he considers as corrupted. There are certain parallels that he draws between the hippo and the Church. The hippo, however, ascends to heaven despite its huge and heavy figure. When the Church is corrupt and the hippo looks lazy. However, the hippo, who lies in mud all day, 'shall be washed as white as snow, By all the martyr'd virgins kist.' (33, 34)

Objective correlative that objectifies a particular emotion in a situation that the writer adopts- is yet another device of Eliot to evoke emotional response in the minds of the readers. His writings swing between personal and impersonal feelings. His poetry is therefore a reflection of his personality that in the process of reading may get the invisible wings of impersonality. While considering poetry as an emotional entreaty, one may have to realize that poetry provides a room for oneself- a space of freedom. The aspects of war chosen by him in his poetry need to be analyzed as a figuration and assimilation of a public affair into a private concern.

Conclusion: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust." (30)

Eliot quotes thus in his poem, *The Waste Land*. Creating terror and fear in the minds of the readers- is the major device of Eliot's emotional appeal. His poems often left something for the readers to do- it needs to be considered as a feed to heed. A poet is a nightingale- Philomel, whose tongue even if cut,

chants truth being immortal and eternal. It is true with every poet that his end becomes his beginning- a voice that penetrates regardless of time and place. It is also the voice of the voiceless. Undoubtedly, Eliot is an archetype among poets, whose poems travel far and wide, holding the flambeau of human voice.

References:

1. Eliot, T.S. Selected Poems. London: Faber and Faber, 1954. Print. 1, 127p.
2. Leavis, F.R. New Bearings in English Poetry. London: Penguin Books, 1932. 175p.
3. Matheikal, Tomichan. English Poetry from John Donne to Ted Hughes. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2001. 143p.
4. Radice, William. Poetry and Community. New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2003.
5. Dutta, Kalyannath. Some Aspects of the Study of Literature. Kolkata: The Book World, 2010.
6. 'Wilfred Owen: "The Poetry is in the Pity."' March 2014. Accessed on 30 May 2017 <<http://blogs.bl.uk/english-and-drama/2014/03/wilfred-owen-the-poetry-is-in-the-pity.html>>
7. 'Modernity and War in the Poetry of T.S Eliot.' 1992. Accessed on 30 May 2017 <digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6434&context=gradschool>
8. Maddrey, Joseph. The Making of T.S Eliot: London. A Study of the Literary Influences. McFarland & Company, Inc Publishers, 1979.
9. 'Eliot's War Poetry: "Hysteria" to The Waste Land'. Palgrave Macmillan, London. Print ISBN 978-1-349-33205-2

Dhanesh Sebastian, Assistant Professor, M.E.S. College, Marampally, Aluva, Kerala