

A Critical Analysis of T S Eliot's Poem the Journey of the Magi Based On His Theory of Impersonality

SALINI.L.R

The twentieth century is marked by the rise of multiple voices in the realm of English poetry. T. S. Eliot is considered as the important figure of this age who addressed the concerns of the age. What makes Eliot unique from his contemporaries is his Europeanism, the awareness of belonging to a tradition than that of his language. Eliot at a particular point of his life got converted to Christianity in order to satisfy his longing for European tradition and culture. For him Christianity was the most effective measure against the corruption of totalitarianism and that could save the modern man from being completely atomized and going adrift. This transformation is depicted in one of his poems titled "Journey of the Magi". In this paper I am trying to read Eliot's poems "Journey of the Magi" in the light of his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent", where he brings out the concept of "Impersonality Theory."

Thomas Stearns Eliot popularly known as T S Eliot is one of the greatest literary critic of twentieth century who introduced a different perspective in analysis of a literary text. His major works include *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* , *The Waste Land*, *The Quartets* and *The Hollow Man*. He published his essay Tradition and Individual Talent in the year 1919. He introduced the concept of tradition, impersonality and depersonalization. The essay questions the notions of poetic expressions. According to him the mind of poet is like platinum he should not be affected by feelings and emotions. He says 'the poet has no personality to express but a particular medium which is only a medium and not a personality in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways.' The tradition and conventions form part of the medium and poet can act as an excellent medium of cultural heritage. Eliot through his poems tries to convey the fragmented realities of life. Here I am trying to analyse some of his poems on the basis of this theory. He rejects the Wordsworth idea of poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and emotions recollected in tranquillity. He believes in the intensity of pressure which fuses emotion and experiences. He gives more important to the poem than the poet. He firmly believed that we should criticize

and appreciate a poem more than a poet. He asserted his theory of impersonality by comparing the mind of the poet to platinum. He gives a scientific sort of explanation in substantiating his views. He says that just like platinum which acts as a catalyst in a chemical reaction and still remains unaffected by the constituent element of a chemical reaction, the mind of the poet should remain unaffected by emotions and feelings. A perfect poet will be able to distinguish between the “the man who suffers and the mind which creates”. Though the artist is the creator of literary works, the poet’s personal experiences, thoughts and feelings has no role in his artistic productions. He compares the mind of a poet to a receptacle for storing feelings, emotions and phrases, which combines to form a new combination of emotions. He defined impersonal theory of poetry in relation to the metaphysical theory of the unity of soul.

He says “the poet has no personality to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways.” Those impressions and experiences which constitute poetry will not have anything to do with the poet’s personality. In his view the duty of a poet is not to find new emotions but to use ordinary emotions to express feelings. These ordinary emotions should not be the “actual emotions of the poet”. He criticized the Romantic tradition. On the other hand he admired the concept of “unified sensibility” in Metaphysical poetry. He vehemently criticized William Wordsworth theory of poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity”. Thus he dismisses the theory of self expression in poetry. He claims that poetry arises out of a concentration of experiences. In his view “poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality”. Then he defines significant emotion as that emotion which is expressed in a poem but has nothing to do with the life of poet. He states that “emotion of art is impersonal”. He adds that in order to achieve this impersonality the poet should be able to willingly submit himself to the work of art. Then they will be able to express freely without being constrained by the personal emotions, When emotions become impersonal the poet will be compelled to write with a different persona or mask. His theory of impersonality and depersonalization questions various notions regarding what constitutes a poem and how a poet remains detached from emotions in the production of a literary

work. This paper mainly focuses on critically analysing his theory of impersonality by evaluating his poem *the Journey Of The Magi* published in the year 1927.

The poem journey of the magi mainly deals with the theme of divine birth. It describes the journey of three wise men to see the new born Christ. During their way to see the baby they have to suffer many difficulties. He begins the poem by accusing the bad weather. They started their journey during the chilling cold weather of winter. Even the camels had to suffer much. He admits that many times he regretted for beginning the journey. They were sad for leaving the material and sexual pleasures of life which includes summer palaces, drinking sherbet and enjoying sex with women. The camels are described as sick and dirty. The camel drivers were running to find women and water. There was not even a spark of fire to warm their bodies. The cities and villages were not very hostile. The villages were in filthy condition. Beside they had to bear a lot of economic constraints due to high price of commodities. They really had a very bad and hard time in their life. They travelled during the whole night with a feeling that what they had done is a great folly. After that they saw some signs of green vegetation. The “temperate valley with its trees”, vine leaves, meadows, smelling of vegetation, running stream, water mill beating the darkness below the snow line, suggests the coming of spring after a long winter. The man dicing the silver reminds us of the betrayal of Christ for silver. It reminds us of the birth and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. But at the end the poet remains perplexed as he was unable to find out whether his journey marked a new birth or death. He concludes by saying that he hopes for another death.

The poem is written after T. S. Eliot's conversion to Christianity. It echoes the isolation he felt after being converted to Christianity. He doubts whether the change of religion would provide him with peace. His restlessness and religious desolation is expressed through this poem. It shows a different phase of his changing religious consciousness. By introducing the concept of incarnation in this poem he is actually narrating his journey towards his visions of God. His individual voice which he hides in other poems is reflected in this poem. So this poem negates the notion of “impersonality theory.” In this poem Eliot uses the theme connected to religion, this he chooses as an instrument of self-revelation, which shows his attachment to religious institutions. And the succeeding poems like *The Dry Salvages* in *Four Quartets*

reflected his religious intonations. He was preoccupied with the idea of God and religion to such an extent that he often ignored the nature and its beauty. His objectivity, over emphasize on reason won him the title of a poet who exalts “head over heart”. The introduction of this theory was mainly to deviate from the Romanticism, where they give much importance to the personality of the poet. Here are some lines from the poem where we can see Eliot’s dilemma in choosing Christianity as a religion .For example, in the last line “I should be glad of another death”, he doubts whether his adoption to Christianity was a right choice. Here also we can see a reflection of his personal emotions.

“...This: were we lead all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I have seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.”

This poem implicitly underlies the fact that he was not able to free his thoughts from the native Puritanism which bounded him to the religion of Christianity. His admiration for glorified past, which includes tradition ultimately lead him to the path of religious faith and glory. The birth mentioned in the poem can be a reference to the birth of Christ/Christianity which also marks the birth of religious consciousness in poem. Even the slight variations in his married life had tremendous influence on Eliot. At one point of his life he turned to become a Buddhist, which resulted in the production of sermons. The Journey of Magi published in 1927 is believed to be written as narrated by one of the magi, from his memories of his travel to Bethlehem. He describes the trials and tribulations they had to confront during their journey. When returned to their kingdom they were unable to live comfortably following their age old conventions. The lines in the poem which express their condition is as such

“We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation. “

So in spite of the claims of Eliot of poetry as an impersonal entity of the poet ,this poem is considered as a reading of his difficult journey prior to his conversion into Anglican Church in the year 1927.Eliot is making a kind of confession throughout the poem. Thus when we make an analysis we can find that his devotion to Christianity is also found in his later poem. It also negates his idea that the man who suffers will not become a creator. For example the Journey of the Magi is the result of his mental conflicts which he undergone during the period of religious conversion. So the point is that a poet cannot become impersonal in the production of a literary work. The unhappy married life is one of the reasons for the production of poems such as Waste Land. Similarly if we introspect any of his poem s his experiences in real life had a tremendous influence in the production of poems which mostly deal with birth and death. Also art cannot be produced in isolation. Moreover we cannot equate the mind of a poet to be a platinum unaffected by events, then he cannot become a poet but he can only become a scientist who collects and studies the facts. He always gives much importance to tradition and often tried to ignore the individual talents .In his view every writer should follow a tradition which pauses serious questions regarding the individuality of writer. Because if we follow Eliot’s tradition then we have to hide our individuality as a poet.

Poetry cannot be detached from the individual self of a poet. It is an expression of the self. The Eliot’s life is reflected in his poems. If we make an analysis of his life experiences and the poetry produced in that age we will get a clear picture of how his thoughts and experiences got reflected in his production of poems. The poem the Journey of the Magi is a very good example to validate this statement. The difficulties in his life which he has to undergo in his conversion to Christianity are explicitly described in the poem. Thus we can also argue that the poetry is not an escape from personality but an expression of personality.

WORKS CITED

TRADITION AND INDIVIDUAL TALENT essay by T S Eliot

The Journey Of the Magi poem by T S Eliot <http://www.poemhunter.com/>

T. S. Eliot in Mid-Career Ash Wednesday by T. S. Eliot; Journey of the Magi by T. S. Eliot; A Song for Simeon by T. S. Eliot; Animula by T. S. Eliot; Dante by T. S. Eliot <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20577744>

The Criticism of T. S. Eliot Author(s): René Wellek <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27538551> .

Eliot as Poet Author(s): Hyatt H. Waggoner <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27544314>

Canticle IV: Journey of the Magi (T. S. Eliot), Op. 86, for Counter-Tenor, Tenor, Baritone and Piano by Benjamin Britten; T. S. Eliot <http://www.jstor.org/stable/733747> .

T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi " Author(s): Rudolf Germer <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41155006> .

Language, History, and Text in Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" Author(s): Daniel A. Harris <http://www.jstor.org/stable/461761> .

The Archetypal Imagery of T. S. Eliot t Author(s): Genevieve W. Foster <http://www.jstor.org/stable/459088> .

T. S. Eliot's Poetry of Religious Desolation Author(s): Vincent B. Leitch <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3198931>