

T. S. ELIOT AS A MODERN POET: A STUDY OF *EAST COKER*

Blessy Mary Mathew, Department of English, Madras Christian College, Chennai

Abstract:

Thomas Stearns Eliot is one of the daring innovators of 20th century poetry. He is a well known modern poet who is successful in balancing the characteristics of modern poetry and his spiritual ideologies. He followed the belief that poetry should aim at the representation of the complexities of modern civilisation in language. East Coker, the second poem in the Four Quartets, reveals Eliot's insight into the cyclical nature of life. In tone and content, East Coker is a perfect modern poem.

Keywords: *Modern poetry, Four Quartets, Fragmented form, Allusions, Diction and style.*

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri. He was educated at Harvard and was settled in England where he was for a time a schoolmaster and bank clerk. Later he became the literary editor for the publishing house Faber and Faber. He was one of the daring innovators of 20th century poetry and he never compromised with the public or indeed with the language. According to Eliot the emotion of art is impersonal. He discarded the romantic notion about the ability of man to become perfect because he was always haunted by the Christian concept of Original Sin. He is well known for his Impersonality Theory of Poetry, Dissociation of Sensibility, Objective Correlative and 'Mythical Method.'

Both in poetry and criticism, Eliot sort discipline and structure. In poetry he sorts to reintroduce a combination of intelligence and wit and unity of feeling and thought. He strongly disliked the tradition in art that promoted expressions of emotion and spontaneity. Eliotian poetry is rich in metaphysical conceit, irony and mythical echoes and it is a poetry which is contained, impersonal and carefully crafted. Karl Shapiro remarks, "What we find in Eliot is... frozen poems with an ice-pick at the core and a lots of allusions from other peoples' work". According to Eliot, a poet should "transmit his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal". Stephen Spender praised him as, "To our generation, Eliot was the poet of poets".

Eliot was a poet who believed that poetry should aim at the representation of the complexities of modern civilization in language. The *Waste Land*, the pioneer work of Eliot exposed cultural barbarity and decadence of the early 20th century. He also exposes the consequences of modernity. The most controversial aspect of modern movement was its rejection of tradition. Modernism stresses on the freedom of expression, experimentalism, experimentation, radicalism etc. The technique of modern literature is often involved in the rejection of intelligible plots or characterisation in novels or the invention in poetry that rejected clear interpretations. Modern poetry is known for its very usual and obscure style. The heart of this vagueness mirrors the complexities of modern life and poetry as a medium reflects the entire problems of modern man. These issues are artistically reflected in the poems of T. S. Eliot.

Modern poetry dramatizes the problems of modern world in terms of values, ethics, social and psychological problems. Modern poets seek to understand the split within the modern man who resorts a new way in perceiving the world and life because of the radical changes brought about by the first and second world wars. Poetry of Eliot, on one hand, shows the catastrophe faced by modern man and on the other hand suggests the solution for each problem.

East Coker is the second poem in Eliot's *Four Quartets*, a set of four poems which includes *Burnt Norton*, *East Coker*, *The Dry Salvages* and the *Little Gidding*. The common theme which connects all these

poems together is religion. The titles are named after the villages in England to which Eliot has some connection. The Universal law of birth, life, growth, decay and death is one of the key concepts in the poems. The evils of renaissance humanism and the gloomy picture of contemporary humanism are well represented by Eliot in the *Quartets*. He finds the affirmation of spiritual values such as Christian humility, hope of Grace, redemption, salvation through atonement, confession, purgation etc. as the only way through which the modern man could untangle the intricacies of modernity and materialism.

East Coker carries certain features of modern poetry which exalts Eliot as a modern poet, an incomparable asset of modern poetic tradition. Fragmented form is one of the most important characteristics of the modern poetry. The modernists tended to deviate from the traditional forms of writing and invent new forms. *East Coker* is a long poem like *Waste Land* divided into five sessions. There is no consistent rhyme scheme or meter (free verse). The sessions are not consistent of length and there is not a set form.

Allusion is one of the major features of modern poetry which Eliot employed in his poem *East Coker*. It is an interesting element of modernist literary works because the modernists believed in Ezra Pound's motto 'make it new'. Allusions are brief and indirect reference to a person, place, thing or idea of historical, cultural, literary or political significance. The poem starts with the line "In my beginning is my end" which has direct reference to the beginning verse of Bible, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth"(Genesis 1:1). It depicts the inescapable cyclic nature of life.

There is a time for building
And a time for living and for generation
And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane
And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots
And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto (lines 9-13).

These lines go on par with the verses from the Book of Ecclesiastes in Bible (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8) where Solomon says "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven"(Ecclesiastes 3:1). Again towards the end of the poem Eliot reiterate the same idea in the lines

There is a time for the evening under starlight,
A time for the evening under lamplight (lines 200-201).

Jesus Christ is another important allusion used in the poem *East Coker*. Being an Anglican and a man who was always haunted by the idea of the Original Sin, Eliot found Jesus as the only way for redemption.

The wounded surgeon plies the steel
That questions the distempered part;
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel
The sharp compassion of the healer's art
Resolving the enigma of the fever chart (lines 149-153).

The wounded surgeon here refers to Jesus whose bleeding hands are endowed with the compassion of a healer's art. The 'bleeding hands' also depicts the crucifixion of Christ, the saviour who died for the sins of the world.

In diction and style *East Coker* employs the characteristics of modern poetry. The poet used simple and direct expressions in the poem but having deeper significance. Modern poets have chosen to be free in the use of meter which is a peculiarity of the poem *East Coker* as well. In theme, modern poetry attempts to dramatise the problems of the modern age. Eliot in *East Coker* criticises the materialistic pleasures enjoyed by the modern men.

Feet rising and falling,
Eating and drinking. Dung and death (lines 46-47).

It sums up the living system introduced by the Renaissance Humanism. Modern man is not concerned

about his spiritual enlightenment. His complete focus is upon the worldly things. As the Epicurien philosophy states 'eat, drink and be merry' is the only concern of the modern man. Eliot is burdened with the spiritual decay of the modern society and he wants them to be still and know about themselves and their spiritual death.

East Coker by T.S. Eliot, in its tone and content, is a perfect example of a modern poem. He compiles the elements of modernism and spirituality together so that it gives the reader a perfect solution for his problems rooted in materialism. Eliot is one of the prominent figures in the 20th century literature who considered modern writers as bearers of a new tradition.

We do not imitate, we are changed: and our work is the work of the changed man; we have not borrowed, we have been quickened and we become bearers of a tradition”- T. S. Eliot

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