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T. S. Eliot
A Universal Poet With Appeal to Indian Spirituality

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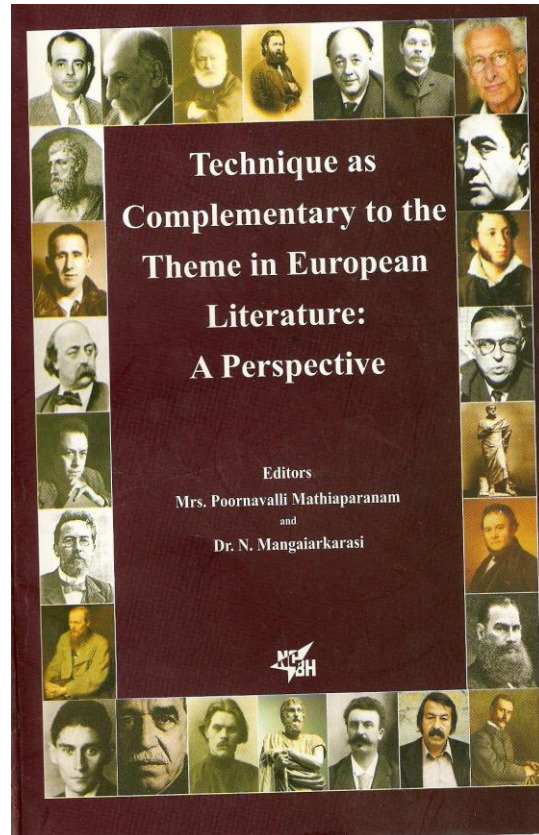
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A Universal Poet With Appeal to Indian Spirituality

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A Religious Guest!

“For those who were young in the twenties of this century, T.S Eliot created the meaning of our time.” This tribute paid to the poet-playwright is very appropriate when we consider the output of his work and the influence he wielded on contemporary literary life. The time he lived delighted in an anti-religious mood and he himself was the victim of distracting claims of friends and alternative careers. Still his whole work can be conceived as his own biography, wherein he enlarged, in poem after poem, on the character of a man who conceives of his life as a religious guest.

A Balance between Realms

Believing that drama, of all literary genres, has the greatest capacity to recreate a complete and ordered world, Eliot became a king of the dramatic structure, to lead the audience Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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to a sense of religious awareness which sought to accomplish by demonstrating the presence of the supernatural order in the natural. His religious concern to integrate the real with the ideal made him carve out for himself a space place in English literature. In each of his plays he has portrayed the plight of the individual who perceives the order of God, but is forced to exist in the natural world and has to strike a balance between both realms.

To portray the impact of spiritual principle
On the lives of man in a form which could be
Artistically ordered without losing contact
With actual experience has remained the basic
dramatic goal in all the his plays (Smith, 1963:31).

Declaring His Faith - Awakened Soul Lightening the Path of Un-awakened Ones!

It was in 1934 with the writing of *The Rock* that the opportunity came for Eliot to declare sharply his Christian faith by which hope and meaning can be achieved to the infinite cycles of time, the absence of which will draw man farther from God and nearer to the dust. In this work we see Eliot declaring the need to remember death, remember God and build. His church is reiterated and the need for a leader is also set forth. This idea runs through all the plays of Eliot. Eliot portrays the awakened soul lightening the path of un-awakened ones.

The spiritual Quest which begins by a sense of guilt leading to the recognition and acceptance of sin, making a choice and surrendering oneself to the divine order culminates in the realizing of the 'Best self' in the hero or heroine; in the other set of characters and chorus there is the realization of the 'second best' self. Eliot was able to use drama as a vehicle to express his spiritual and religious views since it provided him with objectivity and subdued any manifest moral teaching. But all the plays are attempts to communicate a religious message.

Childhood Influences

This high calling of literary vocation can be traced to the personality-molding years of Eliot's childhood and the influences on his thinking. Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri. His father, Henry Ware Eliot was a St. Louis merchant and his mother Charlotte Champe was a school teacher. In 1670 Eliot's ancestors had migrated to America from East Coker, Somerset in England. In America the Eliot's were new England Puritans who became comfortably wealthy.

The Eliots were not heroes but they had a taste for a kind of moral challenge. His grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot was an ideal Eliot, who stood for piety and social uplift. He was a professor of metaphysics, and a Unitarian leader, advocated women's suffrage and prohibition. From the beginning Eliot was found to be an exceptional boy. His mother, perceiving his mature thinking, spoke to him as an equal. High-minded and plain living, Charlotte Champe Eliot exhorted her children every day, to strive towards perfection and to

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make the best of every faculty and control every tendency to evil. The poet inherited from his mother the love of poetry and moral zeal, but his father was more than a friend to him.

Eliot was a highly sensitive person, so his mother always tried to protect him from apprehending the jarring aspects of New America especially in his childhood. As he grew up he had to face the most important of his grandfathers' laws-the subordination of self-interests to the good of community and church.

Eliot developed a personality both complex and elusive. The poet-to-be went to school in St. Louis studied at the University of Harvard, at the Sorbonne in France and at Oxford, where he also taught until he settled in London in 1914.,in 1927 he became a naturalized Englishman.

Formative Years

Myriad were the influences that shaped Eliot in his formative years. As a thinker, he evinced great interest in Byron from his teens. His characters are seldom heroic but they share in common with Byron's heroes in the Eastern romances a characteristic burden of blight and guilt attributable it may be, to a common Adam's curse of Calvinism. Anyone of the band of Eliot's Holloman could say with Childe Harold himself.

I look upon the peopled desert past,
As on a place of agony and strife,
Where, for some sin, to sorrow I was,
Cast to act and suffer (Byron quoted in Page 1970:220)

Eliot was aware of this kind of sin and spiritual malady even as early as 1914, though he became a Christian believer only by 1926. Having been brought up as a Unitarian he himself confesses in a letter to his sister as to how he had had no faith at all. But gradually he moved from complete skepticism to religious faith. This acceptance of religious faith is referred to as his conversion. But even before his conversion he was preoccupied with the concept of the original sin and man's tendency toward depravity.

At Harvard

At Harvard Eliot was a disciple of Irving Babbitt. It is said that it was he who made Eliot "truly cultivated" (Gordon, 1977:19.) Babbitt inspired his students to read the classics and also warned them against the dangers of the modern secular world. Eliot had been a listener to the lectures of Henri Bergson in Paris. Eliot adopted Bergson's methodology for the new kind of poetry in which he cultivated indirect habits of mind. "Discard solid intellectual supports, Bergson urged" "admit only the fluid consciousness and intuitions in the making" (Ibid., p. 38.)

Eliot had left for Paris as a student of poetry and returned a student of Philosophy.

Turning to Indian Philosophy

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His austere upbringing and the Unitarian faith to which he was unable to subscribe made him a friend of Realists, especially Bertrand Russell, who became a real friend to him. Their friendship had started from the time when Russell visited America while Eliot was at Harvard. But in 1914 when Eliot came back to London from Paris he could no longer accept the philosophy of Russell on symbolic knowledge. Instead Eliot turned to Indian philosophy and for two years devoted himself to the work of Oxford idealist, F.H. Bradley. His doctoral dissertation was "The experience and objects of knowledge in the philosophy of Bradley". During this period he taught philosophy to the undergraduate classes. Apart from his interest in philosophy, Eliot evinced great interest in musical concerts and operas since his return from Europe.

Impact of Contemporary Masters of Literature

Eliot's literary career was nurtured by the profound influence of Masters of the literary tradition of his time and the past. The French symbolists, who acknowledged Poe as their master, inspired Eliot to regard poetry as consisting in the musical evocation of moods, vague, subtle and evanescent. Eliot acknowledges his debt to the English post-Arthur Symonds through whom the French Symbolist movement reached English poetry.

Eliot also greatly appreciated La Forge, whom he set up as his master in conversational rhythm. The French poet Baudelaire initiated Eliot into the new possibilities of a new stock of imagery of contemporary life and to him Eliot has paid tremendous tribute. Baudelaire and his followers proved that "Poetry is not to inform but to suggest and evoke; not to name things, but to create their atmosphere" (Weinberg, 1969).

Interest in Mysticism and Psychology

Even before he became a Christian, Eliot had always revered Dante both for the grand simplicity of his style and for the profundity of his genius. The Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, Donne and the meta-physical poets contributed to the making of Eliot as a poet. Eliot also owes much to the poetic drama of Webster and Tourneur which was an example to him of the union of thought and passion and its dramatic speech rhythms.

Eliot was also a keen student of psychology; some of his student cards at Harvard show his interest in mysticism and the psychology of religious experience. From Dostoevsky he learned to exploit personal problems in his writing – how the genuine and personal universe of characters can be explored through the study of their weaknesses and infirmities. Eliot admired the new English writers like Hawthorne and Henry James. He marveled at their "exceptional awareness of spiritual reality, their profound sensitiveness to good and evil, and their 'extraordinary power to convey honor'" (Matheissen, 1958:9).

All these influences can be discerned from his poems, plays and critical writings. These influences made him see the world as a very relativistic and disorderly place.

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Inclination to be a Religious Poet

Eliot's inclination to be a religious poet surfaces in his early poetry.

The Wasteland which was published in 1921-22 seems to have originated in the purely personal record of a man who saw himself as a potential candidate for the religious life but was constrained by his own nature and distracted by domestic claims.

Eliot's family life with his wife Vivienne Highwood, who was highly emotional and prone to mental depressions, brought about a great a crisis in his life. Finally Eliot separated from her in 1933 after eighteen years of incompatibility, though he continued to be good to her and spent a lot of money on her medical bills.

In 1923 he went into a financial crisis and since his affairs were in a chaos, he started turning to the Church of England seeking comfort for his aching heart. He entered the church as communicant and was baptized in 1927. William Force Stead, a Church of England leader, introduced Eliot to the writings of a seventeenth century Anglican Bishop, Lancelot Andrews, whose exposition on the incarnation of Christ greatly appealed to the poet in Eliot. Slowly Eliot surrendered to the Anglo-Catholic belief because he thought that it was a means to set up a moral code for the individual who lived in the midst of a pagan and worldly generation.

The Concept of Original Sin

Eliot was profoundly influenced by T.S. Hulme regarding the concept of Original Sin. To Hulme, man is limited, a sinful creature, bitterly aware of perfection, but aware, also, of much that falls short of perfection. By strict discipline he can achieve a limited decency but it is folly for him to dream of a world in any, however distant future of "Man like gods."

Eliot modified and elaborated this view in a more traditional Christian fashion. He felt that the meaning of history has to be found not in history, but in man's relation to God, and God's relation to man. By self-examination, by prayer and by the purification of one's soul, man can make sense of time in his own times by relating it to eternity. At the age of thirty-eight when Eliot came into the fellowship of the Church of England, he realized the possibilities of saintliness within the fold of the Church - the mourning for the passion on Christ and the church, the mourning for the passion of Christ and the rejoicing for the salvation.

Release from Guilt-Complex

To Eliot, acceptance of traditional Anglo-Catholic dogma seems to have served as a release from his guilt-complex. In "Dry Salvages" he said that the sense of failure and guilt and consequent isolation which was a manifestation of original sin can be overcome by "Prayer observance, discipline thought and action" (T.S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages", Section V).

Saintliness in All

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Eliot also learned that it is not only the saint but the layman who can do his saint's work unobtrusively among ordinary people in the home, in the bank or the field. While this is typically a Christian teaching, it also sounded very Indian to many, through the doctrine of Nishkaamya Karma (performance of duty without attaching oneself to the results). The heroes whom he created after his conversion - the martyred Thomas, the missionary Harry, his own reminiscing self in the Four Quartets work out their salvation at home, among mostly common people and familiar English scenes.

High Moralism, Religion and Literature

Thus, Eliot, deeply rooted in the American Puritan tradition, high moral idealism, consciousness of the nature of evil commingled with severe self-discipline, became a poet who emphasized the importance of culture and community life. Beginning his literary career as a moralist he ended up as a religious poet. He laid stress on the need to cultivate a kind of art that flavors of Christian ideals. He did not want art to disintegrate into religious propaganda. Being a powerful Christian thinker he set out to exemplify many of his ideas in his *Idea of a Christian Society*. He "set himself to discover modes of experience absent from the world into which he was born: the saintly life, the Christian community, religious fear and hope" (Gordon, 1977:140).

This clearly characterizes and explains why many who read Eliot's *Waste Land* and such other works begin to see in his writings greater impact of the renascent Hinduism of the modern times propagated by Hindu exponents such as Vivekananda and Gandhi. In addition, Eliot also uses a few phrases from the Sanskrit classics in his works and this adds to the spiritual atmosphere in his works.

Eliot among His Contemporary Writers

Baudelaire, whose influence on Eliot had been mentioned earlier, had been alive to the spiritual decadence and corruptness around him. But, in spite of being sensitive religiously, he could not convey any message to the world, whereas Eliot prompted by his faith arrived at a universal exhortation of mankind. His language and ideas, thus, were seen to be close to the universal bases declared in the speeches and writings of Hindu Theological or Vedic Renaissance and Indian philosophy.

Eliot can be called the true voice of the Western world, with a message for the whole world which was being alienated from traditional moorings. Eliot believed that it was his duty to give humanity an old-new "Raison d'être." an aim of existence.

Creating a New World

In all his works, these three keywords 'order', discipline' and 'control' occur, and these watch-words could be made meaningful only in relation to society and community "a body of

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indefinite outline composed of both clergy and laity, of the more conscious, more spiritually and intellectually, development of both (Eliot, 1939:14).

Eliot said that this community would form the conscious mind and the conscience in individuals, and the conscience of the nation.

Since drama is the most social of all literary genres, Eliot was able to make his dramatic endeavor the matrix of the soul searching dictum which the Greeks explored in a different context – Knowing oneself or the attaining of self-knowledge. Within the Christian frame work, Eliot strove to depict the spiritual pilgrimage of the ‘self,’ the theme he returns to again and again in his poetry, and especially his plays.

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