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Puritanism, T. S. Eliot and his Plays

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Puritanism finds its origin in the term 'puritan' which means 'follower of pure religion'. Historically, puritans were those people who were dissatisfied with what they claimed to be an in complete break with the Catholic Church at Rome that the Church of England had made. Defining Puritanism, James C. Spadling says, " Puritanism, a reform movement in the Church of England during the late 16th and 17th centuries, sought to carry the Reformation beyond the stage it reached at the beginning of the reign of queen Elizabeth I(1588-1603)".¹ Describing the origin of Puritan, he further says, " The name Puritan apparently was first used in the 1560s against those who thought it was necessary to 'purify' the church of England from remnants Roman Catholic 'popery'".²

In view of the above-mentioned definitions of Puritanism, a dominant note emerges that Puritans sincerely felt that the movement of English reformation by itself was insufficient and unsatisfactory. In other words, the Puritans were the Protestants who preferred radical changes regarding the religious reforms. They adhered to the strict discipline and principles as their code of conduct, as held by their devout forefathers. Thus, Puritanism can be considered to be a movement of reform within the main movement, emphasizing the call to restore 'the pure religion'.

Medieval Christianity , which forms the substance of Puritanism, has its basis in the dogma of ' Original Sin'. Eve, as a result of the act of her disobedience, was the first sinner and all the human beings who follow, inherit the guilt of that sin. This is how the human life assumes the dimension of tragedy. Commenting on the result of the sinful ingratitude of God's creatures, Mr Batron Perry says, " The natural man who was afflicted with a hereditary taint so central and natural pervasive as to contaminate every natural impulse, every human faculty, every social and creative achievement."³ Therefore, redemption from the Original Sin could be attained only by God's own self-sacrifice, of course through Christ, who is God incarnate.

Thus, in view of the helplessness of men and God's determination to redeem some of them to natural life, he places the whole burden of his regeneration on the divine mercy through the 'covenant of Grace'. This covenant , the Puritans believed, was a true contract of mutual obligation in which the condition for the mortal partner was faith. This mutual contract takes pace between God and man. Since God is omnipotent, it is His will that matters. As per His predetermination , some few people are restored to their natural life. However, it exclusively

depends upon God's will as to who those individuals will be. They are called 'elect'. 'Election', in other words, is a manifestation of God's Grace.

As regards the doctrine of 'predestination', man is predestined to either salvation or damnation. However, through the 'covenant of works', God had given him the right of free will, so that man could attain salvation progressively through good works and virtuous life. Whereas it is not possible only through the 'covenant of works', the 'covenant of Grace', also plays its part, which means that man is not judged for his actions alone. And thus, he should not trouble himself about the consequences of his conduct on earth. Harisharan S.Ahluwalia, quoting Perry Miller, says, "The covenant theology held to both the grace and consent, to the decree of God and the full responsibility of man, to assurance in spite of sin and morality in spite of assurance."⁴

Throwing light on the doctrine of 'election' Mr.Ralph Batron Perry remarks, "Man's destiny is transposed from this world to the next where he forever suffers the deserved penalty for his sin, or in his regenerate condition forever enjoys restored favour of God."⁵

Therefore, since man is imperfect, the task of religion is essentially to counsel him of perfection. He can strive to achieve perfection. With the best of his efforts to repudiate flesh, he must yield to its appetites. And however much he condemns the world in which he lives as futile, he must accept the condition which it imposes. And though a Christian may condemn the natural intellect, he cannot live by faith alone. Intellectual powers do not only help him to adapt himself to the natural environment, but to elucidate and interpret faith itself.

As result, the Puritans became highly responsive to stricter discipline and morality in social life. Man, fallen as he is, has no option but to lead a virtuous life, if he is to regain the state of perfection. The Puritans were thus extremely serious about their moral purpose. So much so that, they believed, if man sincerely took the 'covenant of works', the 'Kingdom of God would follow. In short, the Puritans came to be strongly opposed to amusements and recreations, which, they believed, were impediments in their way to regain the redeeming love of God. It is in this context that the Puritans attacked the Elizabethan stage.

Thus, the Puritan life was a human life saturated with its natural and temporal surroundings, and ennobled by human faculties.

Now, we come to T.S.Eliot's Puritan background. As a matter of fact, right from his birth he had had a very strict and formal upbringing. As a part of Puritan his heritage, Eliot was not allowed to read any book which would encourage immorality and evil. Elaborating this aspect, T.S.Matthews says, "Little Tom's(Eliot) precocious reading was not exactly censored, but there were certain books—vulgar stuff—he was not allowed to read."⁶ Right from the beginning Eliot was given a Puritan training, as a portrait of the ten-year-old Eliot drawn by his sister "shows him in profile, in a hard chair, dressed in the formal suit and laced boots prescribed for well-brought-up little boys these days.....downcast on the open book in his left hand."⁷

Quite habitually, or unwittingly, Eliot grew aware of his position as a human being—a mortal and a sinner. Herbert Read, his friend, gives a curious account of his nature: “I always felt that I was in the presence of a remorseful man, of one who had some sorrow or guilt.”⁸ In a way, he was born with a sense of sin and he learned about hell and damnation when he was merely an infant.

During his Harvard days, where he took up philosophy for the undergraduate studies, with his deep-rooted Puritan background Eliot was immensely influenced by T.E.Hulme’s belief in the idea of original sin. That Eliot was deeply impressed by Hulme’s views is quite obvious from Eliot’s own statement which is as follows, “I agree with what Hulme says. It is to the immense credit of Hulme that he found out for himself that there is an *absolute* to which man can never attain.”⁹ Further, in his essay “Second Thoughts about Humanism”, he observes, “What is important is what nobody realizes—the dogmas like Original Sin, which are the closest expression of the categories of the religious attitude.”¹⁰

On account of the above description about Eliot’s Puritan heritage as well as his tendency to abide by it, it is quite obvious that he was deeply influenced by Puritanism.

Having brought out the relationship between Puritanism and Eliot, let us now trace and explore Puritan traits in his first major play *Murder in the Cathedral*. Preoccupied as Eliot with his Puritan doctrine of ‘original sin’, and his awful realization of the depravity of man as a result, the main theme in his plays can be described as ‘the theme of separation’ God, as once he had enjoyed a blissful communion with Him before his ‘Fall’. For this purpose, the action of his plays, *Murder in the Cathedral* in particular, is to make perfect the will of the protagonist, Thomas Beckett. Like Eliot himself, the protagonist stands in the way of completing the action in the end of the play, while the other characters only partially comprehend his spiritual awakening because of their commitment to a pattern of life they are unable to share.

In the play, Eliot writes about a wretched creature(Becket) who by surrendering his will completely to the will of God apprehends perfection. The very aim by which Eliot is motivated to write the the play is inspired by his Puritan bent of mind. The plot of the play is based on the historical facts, in so far as it deals with the martyrdom of Beckett in the Cathedral of Canterbury on a dark December of 1970, because of his refusal of as the head of the Church to surrender to the law of King. Nevertheless, Eliot was not concerned with the particular issues involved in the Church-state tensions of Middle Ages. His interest lay in the human drama of the Archbishop, in his interior motivations as a martyr. Eliot himself says about it that “I wanted to concentrate on death and martyrdom.”¹¹ In other words, he wanted to present Becket as a man of ‘election’, who increasingly felt the necessity of atoning for the sin of the world.

The Chorus also plays a significant role in its pronouncement of the hollowness and meaninglessness among people following their faithlessness in God. They form a group of wise women in the play, though individually they too belong to the stream of common people who

have lost their religious sense as they live and partly live, who are collectively capable of comprehending the mysterious ways of the working of God upon the human beings. On Becket's return from exile every body is happy, but the Chorus sense a doom looming large on Becket. The wretchedness of the earthly life is vividly described by Chorus in symbols in the following lines:

There is no rest in this house. There is
No rest in the streets.
I hear a restless movement of feet. And
The air is heavy and thick.
Thick and heavy the sky.¹²

Even when the Four Tempters are united, they give forth a voice of understanding and wisdom. In fact, what they speak together is an outcome of the victory of Becket's higher-self over his lower-self. The Tempters yield and unveil themselves at last. They acknowledge:

Man's life is a cheat and a disappointment;
All things are unreal,
Unreal an disappointing.....¹³

The Chorus, which can see through things, foresees an impending danger and finds itself in a state of hopelessness and helplessness. In a flash of spiritual light, the Archbishop experiences change in himself as though the chain has broken and the way was clear. In a moment of exaltation, he speaks out:

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain;
Temptation shall not come in this way again.¹⁴

In fact, now the meaning was clear to him that he was a man of 'election' and that he was predestined to become a martyr. Martyrdom ceases to have any meaning for him as regards attaining to glory. He comes to realize that it was necessary to carry out his vocation of surrendering his will to the will of God. All Becket needed was to dissociate himself from the worldly motivations. In his new status of a Puritan convert and servant of God human-goal directed activity could not keep him within its control. With this ultimate realization, he prefers to make a vertical rather than horizontal move, which goes along the way of perfection. And even though he cannot himself be perfect, as a Puritan would believe, yet he would strive for it and apprehend it. In a dispassionate voice, Becket says:

I give my life

To the law of God above the law of Man.¹⁵

Ultimately, the Archbishop feels that victory cannot be achieved by exerting power, instead it lies in humble surrender of a sufferer. And only now the meaning of his own words that “action is suffering and suffering is action”, becomes clear to him, though he had uttered those words quite unwittingly in the beginning. As result, death assumes a different meaning to him. It now becomes a medium of making his will perfect. As the Archbishop’s, dialogue with the Four Tempters comes to an end, his ordeals and confusion also evaporates. The crucial period of his trial seems to be over. In other words, Becket succeeds in finding purpose at last. And now that he has known the purpose and seen clearly his calling, Becket’s endeavour will be to strive for it. Death will only lead him closer to the realization of his purpose.

The Family Reunion(1939) is analogous to *Murder in the Cathedral* in so far as it deals with the Puritan theme of ‘sin and expiation’. But unlike the preceding play, it runs on a double pattern. There is the surface drama, consisting of contemporary characters invited by Any, the matriarch of Wishwood, to her birthday, as she waits for the return of her eldest son, Harry, after a period of eight years. She also wishes him to settle at home as the head of family by marrying Mary, her distant cousin. But, there is also an inner drama, centring round Harry, which is a story of sin and expiation.

In this way, the present play offers a more powerful treatment of the protagonist’s deep trouble of soul in the modern age. The theme of ‘separation’ is treated in the initial stage in terms of human context—the separation of mother and child, which finally leads the protagonist to understand the true nature of separation, i.e., the separation from God. The human ties and relations are bound to fail in preference to divine union, as Harry ultimately comes to realize. But as the necessity of the society is indispensable for human beings, the peculiarities of their character make it difficult to tie them together in the long run with the result that tensions arise and strengthen, till finally the ties break and the human relations come to a sorry end. Harry, after having gone through a nightmarish spell of eight years, at last realizes the futility of human love and truthfulness of divine love.

In fact, the very nature of life, as compared with the life in Paradise, promises imperfections as a result of man’s sinfulness. As a result, salvation from sin, Eliot thinks, comes only with man’s realization that the sin is part of “some huge disaster, some monstrous mistake and aberration of all men of the world.”¹⁶ In other words, men are not ‘real’ unless they interpret their failure or disgust and restlessness in terms of Original Sin. This is what has been projected in *The Family Reunion*. Among other things, it signifies the continuity of man’s nature ever since the creation of the world.

The futility of worldly relations can be noticed in Harry’s life, who has a curious inghstory of his childhood. He has been brought up under the firm hand of his indomitable mother, Amy, his father having left the house when Harry was only a child. Though they had

entered into a marital life for sound family reasons, it turned out to be a 'loveless marriage' and only bred unhappiness and evil. Amy, after having been convinced of the failure of their married life naturally transferred her feelings of possession from her husband to Wishwood itself, her new home. But, for becoming a matriarch, she must first see to it that for exam had a child. Thus, Amy rather forced on the unwilling father a child, and it was no other than Harry.

In short, love cannot reach its perfection unless it is aimed at achieving the redeeming love of God, and so far as it is made in terms of human relations. It is contaminated and imperfect on the human level. Amy, for example, never in love with her husband yet she falls in love with Wishwood. And, she was, perhaps, looking forward to Harry's home-coming not so much out of love as for her wish to perpetuate Wishwood dynasty.

Therefore, in view of the above analysis of Eliot's hierarchy and his two of his major plays, *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion* it can decisively concluded that the plays carry to a large extent and at times overtly the Puritanical traits inherent in Eliot's temperament and psyche. And the playwright's chief concern seems to be to bring to light the sinful nature of man and his ultimate goal to try to mitigate that sin by austerity in thinking and behavior.

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