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T.S. Eliot's Concept of Idea, Emotion, and Poetry: An Overview

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Abstract:

T. S. Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' has ample hints which show the difference between idea, emotion, and poetry. Although Eliot propounds impersonal or objective theory of poetry, yet role of emotions is also found to be significant in it. Eliot's theory also suggests that experiences are the outcome of feelings and emotions. His impersonal theory of poetry proves that poetry emerges out of idea and emotions, which have to play an important role in the creation of poetry. But, he also asserts that the poet has to become as far impersonal as possible and has to try to escape from his emotions and personality in order to ensure the emergence of impersonal poetry. The paper analyzes Eliot's concept of idea, emotion, and poetry.

Keywords: Idea, Emotion, Poetry, Impersonal, Feeling, Experience, Impression, Psychology.

T. S. Eliot's essay – 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' begins with the idea of tradition and individual talent and ends with the impersonal theory of poetry propounded by him as against the romantic theory of poetry by William Wordsworth. There are ample hints in the essay which illustrate the difference between idea, emotion, and poetry and prove that poetry emerges out of idea and emotion. Although Eliot propounds impersonal or objective theory of poetry, yet role of emotions is also found to be significant in it. Eliot, on the one hand, maintains that 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" (300), and on the other hand, he writes, "The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use ordinary ones and, in making them up into poetry to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all" (300). Both these statements seem to be contradictory, for if poetry is an escape from emotions, how can ordinary emotions be incorporated into poetry? These statements may be paradoxical, but these give a fair idea of the kind of emotion Eliot is talking about, and also, the essay gives a fair amount of clues which suggest the difference between idea and emotion.

He, in the essay, refutes Wordsworth's theory of poetry, i.e., "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquillity" (180), and tries to replace it with his own concept of poetry. He writes: "It is a concentration, and a new thing

resulting from concentration, of a very great number of experiences. Which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation" (300). He discards emotion and does not want the poet to express his emotions and personality; rather he wants him to escape from both of these. But, at the same time, he wants the poet to possess both emotion and personality and writes: "Only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to escape from these things" (300).

He also gives due importance to emotions when he writes that it is not the business of the poet to find new emotion, but to use ordinary ones, but at the same time, he also maintains that "Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality" (299). This is an important remark in view of defining emotion, experiences, and idea. He tries to stress upon the fact that the "emotion of art is impersonal" (301). He also writes, "The poet has not a 'personality to express', but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experience combine in peculiar and unexpected ways" (300). All the above statements seem to be incongruous; but these also make it clear that on the one hand, he discourages use of emotions in poetry, and on the other hand also advocates use of ordinary emotions. He wants the poet to keep his personality away from his creation; at the same time he also wants him to use ordinary emotions. There seems to be a conflict in his views and his theory becomes ambiguous.

His concept of poetry is found to be against the psychological theory of poetry which gives topmost priority to the study of poet's psyche and his personality. He proclaims that the emotion of the art as impersonal, whereas, according to psychological theories, no art can be impersonal; since it has been created by a person, his personality and emotions will definitely find a place in it and will definitely get reflected in his art. But, when Eliot writes: "The experience, you will notice, the elements which enter the presence of transforming catalyst, are of two kinds; emotions and feelings" (297-98), it becomes clear that there, definitely, is a difference between experience, emotion, and feeling. And, also that emotions and feelings are the parts of experience. It also becomes clear that it is the emotions and feelings that form an experience. According to him, "The effect of a work of art upon the person who enjoys it is an experience different in kind from any experience not of art. It may be formed out of one emotion, or may be a combination of several; and various feelings" (298). The above remark by Eliot establishes that experiences are the outcome of feelings and emotions, and also that emotions and feeling play a very significant role in creation, i.e., of poetry.

When a writer or a poet or any observer looks at some object, the first thing that happens simultaneously is the creation of impressions in his mind. The object, first of all, casts its impression upon the mind of the observer. The impression, later on, gets transformed into emotions automatically. No deliberate attempt is required for getting impression transformed into emotions and feelings, which afterwards gets turned into experience, as per the hint given by

Eliot. These experiences in the act of contemplation or concentration, in their turn, get transformed into idea, which, later on, may be held to be responsible for creation of poetry.

The idea contained in the above paragraph may further be elaborated. There is no doubt that observation always gives rise to impressions. These impressions are very important for man, because these are found to be guiding him throughout his life. Psychologists, like, Sigmund Freud find these impressions only to be behind man's all actions on earth. These are considered to be moulding and shaping a man's personality. Every activity a man performs on the earth is under the influence of these impressions imprinted upon his mind. The personality of the man is also an expression of impulses, and these impulses are responsible for all the whims and eccentricities of man. But, these impulses themselves are the expressions of impressions. So, it becomes apparent that impressions play the most vital role in the life of a man and these impressions themselves guide him throughout his life; and it is these impressions that shape and mould his personality too. The impressions not only form the personality of man, but also get transformed into emotions. Emotions, later on, become experience, and experiences get turned into idea. All these elements remain present while creation of poetry.

Eliot himself says that the poet should not strive to find new emotions; rather, he should use ordinary emotions and work them up into poetry. It suggests that emotions should be worked up into poetry and the poet may also use the emotions, which even he himself has not felt. In his own words: "Emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well those familiar to him" (300). The statement clearly implies that the poet may use such emotions in his poetry as might not have been felt by the poet himself. It also proves that emotions are of two types, i.e., personal and impersonal. 'Personal emotions' are the emotions that the poet possesses naturally and 'impersonal emotions' are the emotions that the poet obtains from learning; these may be termed as acquired or borrowed emotions. It is also clear that the emotions that are to be used in poetry, may be got acquired from some other source also, it may be, from reading extensively and learning from varied observations too. After going through some books or some poetry, one can feel some emotions which are not his own, but of some other writer or poet. So, feeling his own emotions, for a poet, is not necessary, he may derive them from other sources. But Eliot himself says that it "will even be affirmed that much learning deadens or perverts poetic sensibility" (296). Thus, learning is important for him, because it enables him to be conscious of his place in time and tradition and also of his contemporaneity. Learning also makes the outlook of a man wider and it also gives him fresh insight to visualize and perceive life in a better way. But, Eliot feels that much learning might pervert or deaden a poet's sensibility. So, it is obvious that learning also shapes the personality of a man and his ideas become mature by learning. It is also evident that learning and receiving ideas, feelings, and emotions from other sources is also important. What Eliot wants to stress upon is that although the emotions received from learning might not be his own, yet such borrowed emotions may also play an important role in creation of poetry.

As has already been mentioned, impressions are the first outcome of any observation and also that these impressions keep on guiding and directing the actions of man throughout his life. These impressions form and shape the personality of a man and get expressed in his actions. Now, when Eliot says that the experiences and impressions which are important for man and which form or constitute his personality may find no place in his poetry, he seeks to establish impersonal nature of poetry, which he has been trying to establish in his essay- 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. The concept that the impressions and expressions which have become important in the poetry or which have entered the poetry might not play any significant role in the man, the personality, lays emphasis upon the fact that the personality of the poet and his poetry are two different things and are just opposite to each other. The personality should not enter the poetry and also the poetry should not express the personality. It also suggests that the poet may inherit emotions and experiences of his predecessors and use them in his poetry in order to maintain tradition, for "Tradition is "the aggregate of poetic modes created by the long lines of poets from Homer to the poets of yesterday" (54). Eliot wants continuance of literary tradition, and declares such poetry to be of superior kind as keeps within the tradition.

It is also clear that the poet does not write under influence of all of his impressions and experiences, rather he uses some of them, which might or might not play a significant part in the man, the personality. Here, he seems to be hinting at the impersonal nature of poetry, for if the poet does not use his emotions, impressions, and experiences in his poetry, he is sure to become impersonal. So, this is a very important statement made by him which stresses upon the impersonal nature of poetry, and this is what he tries to establish in his whole essay- 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'.

So, it is clear, by now, that experience, emotion, and idea are three different things and all the three play their own role in the creation of poetry. Experiences are formed out of the emotion, which in their own turn emerge from the impressions received by the poet from time to time during his lifetime. The poet has to get his emotions and experiences separated from his poetry. This is the most difficult thing for a poet to do, and herein only, one finds Eliot committing a mistake by wanting the poet to separate emotion and experience from his personality. First of all, without probing deep into the psyche of the poet, no one would be able to judge as to which emotions and experiences constitute the personality of the poet or which of them are important for him, and, further, their separation from the personality of the poet is the most difficult phenomenon. One has to employ psychological tools to find out the above distinction and Eliot has completely ignored the psychology of the poet. It seems to be very difficult for the poet to separate emotion and experience from his personality; and even if, anyhow, he manages to do so, how will it be confirmed that he has been able to separate emotion and experience from his personality? Thus, the statement leads the poet as well as the critic to a very confusing state.

Eliot does not lay down any guidelines whatsoever as to how the experiences and impressions are to be separated from the personality. It is easy to say, but difficult to implement. It has time and again been stressed upon that it is the impressions, which form the personality of the man

and all his actions, get guided, directed, and controlled by these impressions; the man cannot get rid of these impressions throughout his life. He may make any attempts to do so, but he may not be able to get freed from the impact of these impressions upon his mind and these will continue to get expressed in his actions. So, the personality of the poet and the impressions, which he receives from time to time in his life, cannot be separated. At some point of time when these impressions get buried into the unconscious, he may not be guided by them directly, but indirectly. If it is difficult to separate impressions from the personality, it is further difficult to analyze as to which experiences and impressions were important for him as a man, and which experiences and impressions became important for him as a poet. This can be analyzed only through complete psychoanalysis of the personality of the man as well as the poet. Furthermore, it is very difficult for the poet not to let these experiences and impressions enter his poetry. Eliot must have suggested some technique in order to find out as to how separation of impressions from the personality is possible. It may also be said that poetry, under such restrictions and conditions, becomes a deliberate attempt and does not remain a natural phenomenon or a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings as was defined by William Wordsworth. As Eliot's theory of poetry does not give due importance to intensity of emotions and feelings, it is opposed to the concept of romanticism, for "The stylistic keynote of Romanticism is intensity, and its watch word is imagination" (843).

The above discussion has made it clear that an implementation of Eliot's ideas needs complete psychoanalysis not only of the poet, but also of the poetry. It is only then, one can judge as to which experiences and impressions are important for the man and which not. After it is judged through psychology, one will have to judge as to whether these elements have got expressed in his poetry or not; and also a close and careful study will have to reveal as to whether the impressions and experiences which have found a place in the poetry are playing any part in the man or not. So, Eliot's theory may need help of a psychologist or, at least, psychological criticism has to be employed in order to delve deep into the personality of the poet.

Eliot has divided emotions into many categories, namely, "positive and negative emotions" (299), "the structural emotion" (299), etc. Such a division marks that although emotions may be of varied nature, yet these have to be escaped from. He has earlier in the essay said that the poet is not supposed to find new emotions, rather, he is supposed to use ordinary ones and, while turning them into poetry he is supposed to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all, which implies that on the one hand, he wants the poet not to express his emotions, which represent his personality, in his poetry, and on the other hand, he wants the poet to use ordinary emotions in his poetry. It makes it clear that emotions are a significant part of poetry, and the poet cannot escape from them. But, the most important thing one learns from above statements is that although emotions might be of diverse nature, yet all these emotions form experiences, which in their turn, in attempt of deliberate concentration, get transformed into an idea, and, thus, poetry emerges out.

So, to sum up, the long chain of observation, impression, emotions, feelings, experiences, and idea form poetry; this poetry, according to Eliot, should be impersonal only. And poetry can become impersonal only deliberately; nothing is spontaneous in his theory and the very act of concentration of so many experiences is also deliberate. "There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate" (300); and creation of poetry, for Eliot, is also deliberate. For him, it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor tranquillity; it is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from concentration of a very great number of experiences. Which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. It can also be said that impersonal poetry is possible only when the poet keeps himself away from the domain of his own poetry. Eliot wants the poet to keep away from his emotions too, but he also advocates use of ordinary emotions or even the emotions that can be borrowed from other sources as well as learning. The theory has many contradictions which are confusing and thus, baffle the readers as well as the poet, yet Eliot's intentions are clear, and he wants to replace Wordsworth's personal theory with his impersonal theory of poetry. His theory also establishes that idea, feelings, and emotions play a vital role in creation of poetry, and the poet must work them up into poetry. All that the poet has to do is to try to become as far impersonal as possible and has to try to escape from his emotions and personality in order to ensure the emergence of impersonal poetry, which Eliot tries to establish through his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'.

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