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Contemporary Relevance of *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*

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Abstract:

The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock is a representative poem of 20th-century modern literature. Thematically this poem deals with anxieties and agonies of the speaker persona, J Alfred Prufrock, which are a result of his disillusionment in the modern society he is part of. This paper attempts to analyse this 20th-century poem and its relevance in contemporary times. Widely read and taught in academic institutions across the world, *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* penetrates through the psyche of a disturbed modern man, who has witnessed war, industrialisation and what not. This paper will uphold why this poem is a must read and so famous among poetry lovers. Contemporary men are living the themes that Eliot has talked of the poem under study. Written in 1915, this poem continues to be a referential piece of writing for the present generation and perhaps for all those to come.

Keywords: Modern man, conflict, anxiety, disillusionment, war, industrialization.

Introduction

The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock is considered to be Eliot's earliest significant works. It was written in 1911 and published in 1915 in the collection "Prufrock and Other Observations." This poem is a dramatic monologue whose thoughtful protagonist speaker seems to have set on an endeavour to propose to the lady he loves. He is also thinking about a several things which include his anxieties, feelings of alienation, chaos and confusion. He also seeks the help of soliloquies to let out all the negative thoughts that occur to him while he is preparing to reach out to the woman he loves. As is seen in a dramatic monologue, this poem has an implied listener. There is a woman who Prufrock is in love with and is planning to propose to. Eliot's main focus here seems to be the expression of Prufrock's anxious thoughts than to remind the readers of the form of poem that he has written it in because very soon we seem to lose track of the listener and we are left only with

Prufrock and what he has to say. Unlike, for example, Arnold's *Dover Beach*, which is also a dramatic monologue written in Victorian era, where the readers are not less than thrice reminded of the presence of the silent listener, it is so only once in *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*, in the very opening lines, "Let's go then you and I," we for sure know there is a "you". This is what characterised the modern writers. They did not care about the form they wrote in but about the content they wrote about. The 20-th century poetry was "more symbolist and cerebral" as David Daiches has rightly observed.

Twentieth-century poetry was led by TS Eliot and his close friend Ezra Pound. However, among the famous contributors to modernism comes the name of Thomas Ernest Hulme. An English critic and poet Hulme contributed his writings to the weekly British literary magazine "The New Age" and showed his aversion towards everything that was romantic in life. Hulme served in the first world war as an artillery man and wrote for "The New Age". He wrote "War Notes" under the pen name North Staffs and "A Notebook". It was in 1917 that he died in the war by being killed by a shell. He laid the ground for the modernist poets who were to come and write rich literature. 'He declared war not only on what he considered to be the romantic view of life and of art but also on "the weltanschauung... of all philosophy since Renaissance," (Daiches, 1122). The loss of optimism that defines the modern literature has its source in TE Hulme's pessimistic outlook. Characters in the modern literature feel a sense of alienation, conflict, anxiety and pessimism, all of which can be seen in Eliot's *Prufrock* and almost every second contemporary man.

T S Eliot, a representative modern poet, wrote in the era when the world was mourning. Modern Poetry is characterized by non-linearity and fragmentation. Eliot's "The Wasteland" is the best example, where the people are lost and feel alienated in the world which has become a wasteland. There is also fragmented narrative in the poem which is without any sort of coherence of time and place. Modern poetry is intellectual and cerebral and lacks embellishments like imagery from nature and sonnets of love. Grotesque side of life and pessimism have a vital place in modern poetry.

Eliot, being the most important modern poet, writes some gruesome yet intellectual poetry. His poems are filled with the realisation of the meaninglessness of life, and his settings are the anaesthetic world he lived in. This realisation leads to anguish that overtakes him and it reflects

from almost all his poetic personas and also has a direct effect on his audiences. In addition to the traditional dramatic style that he adheres to in his writings and the mythical methods which are primarily recurrent in his magnum opus, *The Wasteland*, Eliot also uses modernist techniques, like fragmented and non-linear narratives, to drive home his point.

From the title of the poem "Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock", one might anticipate inferring altogether different meanings from the poem. However, as we go deep into and through the lines of the poem, the scene completely changes. The original title of this poem was "Prufrock Among the Women", but Eliot changed it to the present title in 1915. Written before the First World War and published after it, this masterpiece revolves around a certain Mr. Prufrock and his dilemmas, insecurities and confusions, but it is a 140-lined poem which is about a whole bunch of people who breathed in the modern, world war era and has not ceased to be relevant even now, more than a century later. This poem is a bleak but an accurate picture of poor modern man and speaks about the severe modern times where he is lost. Belonging to the age of wars and anguish, Eliot very appropriately goes against romantics in his poems and gives voice to the anxieties of people. There is nothing like spontaneous overflowing of powerful emotions and recollection of these emotions in tranquillity. Rather this poem is a result of Eliot's deep contemplation over the unfortunate situation where modern man finds himself trapped. In this poem Eliot has least cared about the metre, rhyme, rhythm and pleasantries of nature in the poem. Instead, there are dark, ugly and grotesque pictures like "smoke", "fog", "drains" "restless nights", "cheap hotels", "sawdust restaurants", etc.

The Theme of Anxiety and Prufrock Syndrome in Present Times

The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock is a dramatic monologue, a typical modern work of literature that tells the story of a middle aged man who is planning to propose to a woman who he loves. Eliot has meticulously verified Prufrock's insecurities and apprehensions of being rejected, which emerge as a result of his deeming himself inferior to the women who are too much into elite Renaissance artists, "In the room the women come and go, Talking of Michael Angelo".

Prufrock has also a very low self esteem because of the way his arms and legs look. His thin arms and legs are a huge bother for him and probably also a big bump in the way of fulfilling his ambitions and achieving his goals. He is highly conscious of the clothes he is wearing. Prufrock

is paranoid about being judged and rejected for the way he looks and dresses. This causes him intense anxiety.

"My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin

My necktie rich and modest but asserted by a simple pin".

Simplicity appears to be a problem to Prufrock, even though he is very comfortably and properly dressed. His wish to be accepted and liked by other people makes him out rightly reject what suits him. Contemporary man's conflicts and anxieties are also expressed in Prufrock's confusion about whether to approach people. He wants to get into parties, talk to women and be known, but his insecurities keep him from doing that, and he ends up alone. The issues that Prufrock faced are faced by people in contemporary times and are studied under a broader psychological concept-social anxiety disorder.

Eliot's choice of the form of this poem is commendable. Being a psychological poem, which explores psychology of all the modern men, dramatic monologue is the most appropriate form this poem could be written. "In one respect, the poem has already seen past the psychological construction of the self: although psychology was a new discipline at that time." (Cooper, 48) The poem is also modern in that Psychology as a discipline was new in 1915, when the poem was composed. Freud and Jung were new arrivals in the world of disciplines. Nevertheless, being able to spill a man's psychological conflicts, confusions and dilemmas in such an excellent manner speaks for this poem as being ahead of its times and making it a good read for contemporary readers.

"The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock engages the reader's inner life by involving us in Prufrock's agonies so that they become our own in the course of the poem." (Cooper, 51). Prufrock's concerns in the poem echo our own. It is almost as if he is speaking on behalf of all of us. His statement about measuring life "in coffee spoons" echoes contemporary man's anguish about being bottled in an enclosed room with little to enjoy and cherish. One can easily tell that from the recent pandemic years that the world witnessed. Almost all young contemporary men would understand what Prufrock means when he thinks it is the time "to run back and descend the stairs". Contemporary man is the most confused and alone. The fear of failure and that of being

mocked and laughed at is what hinders contemporary man's progress. Modern man is afraid of being bullied which is enough to cause him worry.

The contemporary state of affairs is such that many people prefer death to an anxious life. A lot of young people yearn for death as if they have experienced all of what is there in the world to be experienced, a lot like Prufrock who talks of "...spit(ting)out all the butt-ends of my days and ways". It is the bullets in wars that people think are the full stop to their reason to live. It is the social media that distance people, mostly youth, from almost everything that is good in the world. Eliot's obsession with exhausted and wearied -off life is seen in his Preludes also, where he writes,

"The winter evening settles down

With smells of sticks in passageways.

Six o'clock.

The burnt-out ends soft smoky days."

This poem was composed during the first world war and the poet must have witnessed the repercussions that the killings had on the people. It is the world wars that led to Septimus Smith's suicide. Septimus Smith again stands as a representative of all the hundreds of men that surrendered to lunacy. Only after seeing the ravages of war did Ernest Hemingway come up with the term "Lost Generation". Contemporary men, undoubtedly, come under this category. The wars, globally or locally, have killed not only the ones directly involved but also those who are left behind. Prufrock as a man of 20th century has tasted this ache the panacea for which is still being sought after.

The Theme of Inferiority Complex and Bald Spot

The bald spot in Prufrock's head is one of the main reasons that bogs him down and pokes his self esteem and makes him procrastinate his endeavour to propose to his lady love. The act of proposing is only a metaphor for the dreams and goals of modern men. It stands for all the aspirations and pursuits of people that they strive for tirelessly. Prufrock's self-consciousness stems from the bald patch on his head. It causes him anxiety and frustration. As a result of these doubts he feels isolated in this world which is nothing less than hell. This bald patch symbolises the inferiority complexes that present youth face which erodes their self confidence and subsequently

makes them invalid for accomplishing any of their dreams and talents. Prufrock is desperately and helplessly conscious about his hair which is growing thin and his "arms and legs", which are also thin. This is the issue which the modern world is talking about when they condemn body shaming and talk about the issues of body dysmorphic disorders. Eliot has appended his poem with lines from Dante's "Inferno" which give Prufrock's small world an ambience of hell and speaks volumes about his chaotic mental state. The story of Prufrock resonates with the story of every contemporary man who is caught in a world where wars, pandemics, terrorism, isolation and depression feature, which characterize hell.

"I have measured my life in coffee spoons", says Prufrock. This implies modern man's claustrophobic existence. Spending days and nights in a very restricted and suffocating way, wanting to get out of the mess that life has become, is what chokes Prufrock.

The Theme of Inaction and Etherized World

"Let us go then, you and I,

When the evening is spread out against the sky,

Like a patient etherized upon a table:" This is how Eliot starts his specimen.

The evening described as "etherized" echoes the contemporary world and its denizens who are paralysed and benumbed. This is made more valid by the internet services like social media. Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp and the giant Instagram have sucked the agility out of people as a result of which they lay on their respective tables as "etherized patients" and we are left with only "half-deserted streets", and "restless nights" to witness. This inaction has led to increase in the number of people who are ailing from hazardous diseases like diabetes, cancer, obesity, depression etc. Doctors have enough to deliberate on that. The theme of inaction was later used in other works of literature also, the best example would be Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot". The inactivity of men has only increased since then and is at its highest in contemporary times. Belonging to the age of wars and urbanization, Prufrock complains about his physical inertia and inability to accomplish the task that seems of utmost importance to him.

Social Media and Prufrock's Idea of Masquerading

Nothing can convince a person to ignore the blessings of internet. At the same time nothing can blind people to how subtly internet has clipped off the wings of people. It has kept people confined to their rooms or their houses and ended their ties with the society altogether. Modern man is frozen by science and modernization. People have never masqueraded themselves so successfully before as they do now. No one is themselves these days. It is hard to trust people based on their social media profile which, no wonder, might be the most valid credential of citizens soon. Prufrock seems to be less pessimistic about the state of affairs he is surrounded by, than the speaker of "A Game of Chess" who sounds utterly pathetic and lost when she utters the words "what shall we do tomorrow? What shall we do tomorrow?" Prufrock has a task for tomorrow. He is looking for the time when he can put on a face to meet people,

"There will be time, there will be time,

To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet",

This urge of putting on masks for going to meet people arises from Prufrock's frustrations, confusions and insecurities and it is very true of contemporary world where the so called Snapchat filters and Instagram modifications have almost become ethics and norm for people. I know many people who can not go a day without sharing filtered pictures on social media. To wear a mask seems to be an attempt to be liked by people and to be validated by them, those people most of whom we barely know.

The likes and thumbs up on a person's social media post, defines their happiness, and sometimes their merit. Considering modern man's situations, the phrases like "hundred decisions", "hundred visions and revisions" is not even exaggeration. Modern man takes help of different sports, arts and skills to make sense of the banal life he is living. Every man is a writer on Facebook. To reach to a decision about one's career and profession is a tough call to take, there the career counselling.

Prufrock's wailing over the matter of " ...taking of a toast or tea" goes fits with modern man's dilemma about petty and mundane things, the glimpse of which can be found in his venturing into the game of social media where he puts up pictures of even the most mundane things, like having a breakfast, lunch, dinner, a vacation and have them liked by people.

Not in Yeatsian sense though, Eliot can be seen preoccupied with ageing. This consciousness again comes from Prufrock's self-doubt and anxiety.

"I grow old, I grow old,

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled,

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I get to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach. I have heard the mermaid singing each to other.

I do not think they will sing to me."

Prufrock attempts to alter his style to fit in the world, which he thinks is too alien for him. Unlike Yeats' old lusty man, who is nothing more than a "paltry thing", Eliot's Prufrock is an ambitious man, who, in pursuance of his goal, plans to change his ways of dressing and hair styling. The modern world is such that a man is made to question his self, identity and existence to feel at home. This is the amount of frustration and alienation that 20th- century world saw and continues to witness.

Prufrock's obsession with Prince Hamlet is every man's obsession with comparing themselves with others. Peer pressure is what we call it now. The aim to do everything that other people are doing, even if one's mental peace and emotional stability is at stake, is also one of the sources of contemporary man's anxiety and isolation which bothers Prufrock also. Michelangelo, an established genius though, does not necessarily declare all other people as meritless. Everyone has their merits, people forget. In the rush to excel more than others, people forget to catch a breath. This is probably what Emile Durkheim meant when he emphasized on social aspect of suicide and ignored the psychology aspect of it. And this is what causes tension and turmoil in people, more so now when the world is a place of cutthroat competition, and people are hell-bent on proving their worth to others.

Voice for Environment

One of the most critical issues that the world is facing is that of environmental degraded. Polluted air, water, soil are a source of numerous health hazards. Eliot's mention of the "yellow fog", "the yellow smoke", the "pools that stand in drains", "the soot that falls from chimneys", fits

well in the picture of present disturbed environment. The wars and the nuclear weapons did not destroy only humankind but have had adverse effects on nature also. Industrialisation has lead to the destruction of mother nature. In a very unromantic and modern way, Eliot's disturbed imagination forsees the environmental problems that are going to get worse if we do not mend our behaviour towards nature.

Conclusion

The finest literature is that which is ubiquitous and universal. Eliot's poems were written in a period when hope seemed to crumble and desperation took over. Whether it be *The Wasteland*, or *Preludes*, or the poem under reference, Eliot is mourning the loss of peace, faith and meaning. Prufrock, like many modern men, is battling with himself and the modern world that is likened to hell.

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