

THE SYMPTOMS OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE LOVE SONGS OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK BY T.S. ELIOT

Vijay D. Mangukiya, Ph. D.

Assistant Professor, Shree J.D.Gabani Com. Coll. and Shree S.A.S. Coll. of Mgt., Surat

Abstract

The works of T.S. Eliot are frequently interpreted in terms of the contemporary time-spirit as he is influenced by his time and its scenario. His poems are the analysis of crisis and disillusionment. He was extremely miserable with the plight of his generation. Thus, Eliot has been regarded as one giving voice to the modern spirit of weariness and disillusionment. His poems show the shadow of time-spirit, the predicament of modern man, the futility and misery of modern existence. In short, it can be said that his poems are the depiction of contemporary moods, which depict the plight of a soul which is caught in a state of irremediable crisis in age of anxiety. Decadence and various types of mental diseases were the outcome these crises and disillusionment that are visible in his poems. The researcher has attempted to discuss the symptoms of decadence and mental illness which are the outcomes of disillusionment with reference to his epoch-making poem: The Love Songs of J. Alfred Prufrock. In this poem, Eliot presents the despair and passivity of a middle-aged man, J. Alfred Prufrock who has become a victim of mental disorder, restlessness, insecurity, sterility and hopelessness of modern life.

Key Words J. Alfred Prufrock, disillusionment, decadence, disorder



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The works of T.S. Eliot are frequently interpreted in terms of the contemporary time-spirit as he is considerably influenced by his time and its scenario. The story of the misfortunes of modern society is the story of his poems. Eliot's poetry has relevance not merely to the modern peculiar human situation but also to the universal human predicament. His poems are the analysis of 'crisis' and 'contemporary disillusionment'. Contemporary disillusionment constitutes a part of the raw material of his art. Almost every aspect of the epoch of modern consciousness and every problem of modern life engage his attention. He was extremely miserable with the plight of his generation. He feels tormented and worried for his age. To quote one critic in this reference:

"Eliot...feels at every turn that human life is now ignoble,
sordid or tame and he is haunted or tormented by intimations
that it has once otherwise." (George, 126)

Thus, Eliot has been regarded as one giving voice to the modern spirit of weariness and disillusionment. His poems show the shadow of time-spirit, the predicament of modern man,

the futility and misery of modern existence. In short, it can be said that his poems are the depiction of contemporary moods, which depict the plight of a soul which is caught in a state of irremediable crisis in age of anxiety. Decadence and various types of mental diseases were the outcome this crises and disillusionment that are inevitably and explicitly visible in his poems. The researcher is going to explore how Eliot projects the symptoms of decadence and mental trauma which are the outcomes of disillusionment with reference to his epoch-making poems: *The Love Songs of J. Alfred Prufrock*

The Love Songs of J. Alfred Prufrock is published in the 1917 volume of verses and is one of the best known of Eliot's poems. Eliot presents in this poem the despair and passivity of a middle-aged man, J. Alfred Prufrock. Here, is a poet who has thoroughly immersed himself in the destructive element, the sordidness, the stupidity and the ugliness of modern life. T.S. Eliot is aware of the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. He is familiar with the plight of modern times; the creeping, choking atmosphere of a spiritual miasma, the isolation and rootlessness, the insecurity and sterility, the hopelessness enveloping the world. He has given vent to this sense of boredom and futility of modern life in his first significant poem *The Love Songs of J. Alfred Prufrock* and other poems which were published in the same collection.

In *The Love Songs* Eliot created the moods of ironic and cynical repulsion, of disillusionment and nervous intensity by presenting an urban setting of squalor, dirt and seediness. Prufrock, a central character of this poem, is in love, but his love song is never sung. Being a coward and introspective by nature, he mediates too much whether he should reveal his love to the lady he loves, but he is undone. The very beginning of the poem paints a shaggy atmosphere of an urban life. This is how the poet begins the poem:

“Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:”

(Eliot, 11)

Here, one finds that there is not placid and peaceful sunset. It fills the imagination with thoughts of disease and helplessness, of ether which is not the breath of the spirit, but the deadener of consciousness and volition, of the contrast between the wide stretches of the sky and the vigor and vitality of man reduced to the living death of anesthesia. The comparison of the evening to a patient etherized upon a table established the tone of the poem. Prufrock and evening are identical. The image of 'half deserted streets' suggest the muffled sounds of restless nights and violence. The 'on night cheap hotels' suggest fruitless dissatisfied sexual relations in the past. There is also something common between Prufrock and the 'streets that follow like a tedious argument'. Each is unstable and shifting. The streets will lead nowhere, and similarly the reflections of Prufrock will bear no fruit. Thus, the squalor and seediness of the urban surroundings is set up in the beginning of the poem.

Having established the relationship between Prufrock and the evening scene, the poet presents a picture of Prufrock himself in following lines:

“With a bald spot in the middle of my hair-
They will say: ‘How his hair is growing thin!
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted
by a simple pin...”

(Eliot, 12)

Prufrock is a middle aged dandy. He is in love, but he does not have guts to bring himself to propose to his lady, because he is aware of his growing age, his bald head and his impotence. Being introspective, he passes his most of time in thinking. He feels that his proposal to that lady is 'an overwhelming question' to him. He says: "Do I dare/Disturb the universe?" He suffers from emotional constipation and a paralysis of will. He is a man caught in a sense of defeated idealism and tortured by unsatisfied desire. Prufrock is an aging romantic entrapped by a rotting world of pseudo-gentility. Though he is aware of beauty, he is too inhibited to seek it, too hesitant to reach for it and too surrounded by the sordidness to achieve it. Prufrock is confined and isolated by time. Growing older, achieving nothing, he spends his life in tea parties and chatting which leads him to grow old and death. . He is a 'homeless tramp living' in 'promiscuous sexuality and drug addiction' (Ward, 22). According to Gordon, Prufrock is 'the lost soul in a parisian bar' who 'is the predecessor of those wanderers of the city'. (42) He is one of the wanderers of the metropolitan cities who

is the regular visitor of the salons and coffee bars which suggest his hypocrisies and trivialities of the urban area. He also knows the beautiful ladies sitting in that saloon enjoying their tea-party. Prufrock himself confesses this in the following lines,

“For I have known them all already, known them all
Have I known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons...
And I have known the arms already, known them all-
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare.”

(Eliot, 13)

He thinks of time as meaningless events but as allowing for willed action or choice. He thinks too much but does not transfer his thought into action. He postpones his planning of the proposal to that lady and thus not becoming a beginner. He repeatedly and obsessively talks of it- ‘There will be time, there will be time’. He does not initiate any action but rather is acted upon.

Prufrock is aware of his disillusioned state; he feels that the emptiness of social events, ‘the evenings, mornings, afternoons’. Yet his inner life is equally futile. His succession of desires and fears, his longing for beauty and sympathy are tinged with irony with a mocking sense that they will never be more than private pain, and it will at the end add fuel to his disillusioned state. His hopes, aspirations and fears are divorced from his public life. Though they take the form of desire for love and fear of contempt, they are of a personal intensity he cannot expose to the world. On the one hand, he imagines the possibility of life in heroic terms- ‘time to murder and create’, ‘to have squeezed the universe into a ball; on the other hand, he recognizes the facts of his daily life- ‘and time yet for a hundred indecisions/ And for a hundred visions and revisions/ Before the taking of a toast and tea’, ‘After the cups, the marmalade, the tea’. He is affected by ‘Arms that are braceleted and white and bare’ and by ‘perfume from dress’, yet these feelings are never expressed. Truly speaking, in his objective life, his subjective life is never revealed. Prufrock enters into the room of one of the ‘cheap hotels’ where “...the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo.”

Michelangelo, the Italian sculptor, was known for his strength and virility. The reference to Michelangelo brings out the contrast to Prufrock’s physical decay and impotency. Prufrock’s inability to articulate his feelings is in contrast to the linguistic self-assurance of the women who can effortlessly converse of Michelangelo. His tragedy is that he is a man driven by

desire for something that he cannot achieve. Thus, while he cannot abandon the illusions of the fantasy world, he cannot accept the realities of the other world in which the women talk of Michelangelo. His illusions for getting love and sympathy are disillusioned against the vast forces of reality within which he is surrounded. His hopes are frustrated and ignored and also not taken care of. Thus, there is an awful between separation Prufrock, who feels within himself a possibility which he cannot express and cannot even define, as he says 'It is impossible to say just what I mean' and Prufrock's other self the women who 'come and go, talking of Michelangelo'. Moreover, Prufrock remains procrastinate and thoughtful devoid of communication with others. Even he wishes to convey what feels, but it is so much more than words can express. He does not act or create; he responds to what he observes which reflect his sordid nature/ For him, there is time for visions and revisions, but there is no time for willed choice. The incessant repetition of 'there will be time' not only implies doubt but is itself a way of losing time, of thinking so constantly about it that it passes without use. Prufrock can neither forget it nor escape it.

It is observed that he has 'wept and prayed' but can announce no joyous news as he is indecisive and unheroic. Certainly the lady seems an object of sensual desire but that desire will be shattered by the actuality. He not only wishes to ask something; he wishes to tell something, to receive a response to his own experience and need. He cannot act because he fears that nothing in the external world will correspond with his felt reality, that the lady may not have the similar feelings for him. For it is easier and less painful to live as he always has and to present to the world only his disillusioned and frustrated self which suits social life.

His inner and outer lives are opposed, and he longs to draw the sequence of external events and the succession of his feelings together. Though the life he observes is dreary and mechanical, he imagines a life somehow transcendent and shared. The poem, then, is primarily concerned with 'the split' between Prufrock's inner and outer life, with his inability to take the chance of living according to his own feelings and desire and, hence, with his surrender to time in the form of an empty round of events. The 'you' and 'I' with which the poem begins and the 'we' with which it ends are often regarded as simply two aspects Prufrock's self. One seems to be the external social self which is most in control, yet the other, inner self, is led to question. He represents a split-consciousness, a division between inner self and outer self. His inner self is entrapped by the outer surroundings.

There is a gap between actual and ideal world, a paralysis between the will to act and the social restraints. His inner aspirations are shattered by the harsh outer self which is devoid of love, sympathy, harmony or integrity leading one to disillusioned state. The outer surrounding is wholly controlled by the social dogmas and conventions, but his inner self is not controlled by his emotions as he is full of sensual desires and expecting much which will never be granted to him according to his sweet will. Being 'trapped in social world' (Manju Jain), Prufrock has become so wholly his superficial self that his truer self can never take control. Being 'split in acquired self and buried self', he is 'indecisive and skeptical in his self interpretation'. There is also 'dislocation between his romantic and actual life'. (Jain, 32-42) He is full of romantic feelings in his heart for a lady whom he loves and wishes to establish a 'rapport' with her. He knows the ground reality and his drawbacks and even he has a fear of being rejected by that lady. One finds a displacement of his romantic feelings at this stage. There is a disruption and disturbance in his 'actual' self and 'ideal world'. That is why is upset, 'afraid of action, timid and fastidious'. (32-42) There is an 'inadequacy in both dream world and actual world' because of his shortcoming and incompetence. Nancy K. Gish rightly observes in this point of view:

"Prufrock's despair is largely for the submergence of his inner self, the passionate capacity of which he is aware but which he cannot reveal. It is also a developing disillusion with external time, an increasing realization that he is caught in it and subject to it." (Gish, 15)

Both his internal and external lives are in its continuity in their separate ways; both are part of what is known, 'all already' (Eliot, 13) to him. There is a conflict between an external self- the coffee spoons, the insect pinned to a wall and those evoking his inner desires- the 'arms that are braced and white and bare', 'the perfume from a dress', the 'arms that lie along a table'. (13)

There is a 'disjunction between two planes of reality' (Jain, 32-42) in Prufrock's character. It means to tell that there is no coherence between Prufrock's inner self and his outer self. The time in outer self moves remarkably fast. Time moves faster in outer self, for example, one finds evenings, restless nights, October night, weeks and days of hands, minutes, mornings, afternoons, days and ways, dusk and sunset. This repeated time is in contrast to the indecisive and introspective Prufrock who idly sits in salon observing coffee spoons, tea and

cakes and ices, dooryards, sprinkled streets, novels, teacups and skirts that trail along the floor. All are joined with allusions to passing the time-baldness, greatness, Hamlet's indecision, growing old. All this emphasizes the outer life of clock time, of external event and situation in which he wishes to act but cannot. In outer reality, there is action, but in the inner self, there is still thought. This thought has never been converted into action what he is supposed to do. So the disjunction between two plains of reality is found in this contrast that in outer circumstances there is a continuous flow of time, but in the inner world there lies fear, anxiety and alienation as his 'desire' is inexpressible as he says, 'it is impossible to say just what I mean to say'. The poem's sadness develops with the movement of his thought from possibility to what is lost already lost before attempted, from 'there will be time' to 'And would it have been worth it, after all...?' He is anxious to be rejected by that lady and by the society where he has to pass his rest of the life. Thus, his self is 'fragmented and elusive. Observes Nancy K Gish in this respect

"...weariness and futility, the images of loneliness and frustration, and the constant repetition of lines and phrases like the constantly repeated days and hours and coffee spoons of life. The anguish of Prufrock's isolation and the split between his inner and outer self is explicit..."

(Gish, 14)

As a matter of fact, he has 'lost his touch with the inner reality'. His self is unsure of his selfhood. His inner self does not find its place in outer planes of reality and thus this state leads him to be disillusioned and bored in his life. He is divided within himself because he is no longer sincerely within the tradition. There is a 'desire' in him, but there is no satisfaction in other self. There is a 'schism between social self and buried life' (Jain). His hopes and aspirations are not taken care of and thus he is 'buried'. It means there is complete breakup between two selves of the same personality. For him, the world is 'unromantic and absurd' (Jain). He has lost his complete grasp from those feelings which are inexpressible. These feelings, so intense and indefinable, lead to the overwhelming question which is impossible to express. In this reference, it is quoted by one critic, "Prufrock, the perfect gentlemen, is tormented by the Meaningless gentility, conventionality and socializing by which he is surrounded, and by his inability to

express his anguish. Uncertain of his own identity, he feels he has heard something *other* but is unable to respond.”

(Mackean, 38)

He is significantly encased in flame, swathed in his own torment as Prufrock's inner self is hidden from others by his own fears and by the surface of social convention. The result is emotional frustration, and self-dissection or disillusionment. Thus, Prufrock's world is Hell-like where he lives in a routine of daily events idly sitting in salon waiting for his love to be expressed. 'Tea and cakes and ices', 'the cups, the marmalade, the tea'; 'the streets' all the formulated round of things and experiences of his Hell-like world which lead him nowhere, but seem to hinder the asking of the question. That is why after becoming fed up with his distressed self, he acknowledges his failure: 'No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be'. Hamlet, though torn between conflicting desires, made a choice in the end. Prufrock, preoccupied with fulfilling social expectations, is unable to do so. Although the overwhelming question is trivialized, these choices were beyond his capabilities. He cannot escape the social self bound by time, following a cycle of days and hours in fixed and pointless activity. Being tired of his routine and monotonous life, Prufrock withdraws into the world of his day-dreams. He wishes to be a crab that can run across the sea, but the harsh reality always forces him back to his conventional self. His inner self could dwell in that sea; his outer self would never enter it. Unable to join his two selves he can neither live there nor escape its call. Recalled to his social self by human voices, he cannot bear that intense reality, and his sense of drowning is realization of his own death in life. He remains an observer, aware of his world but unable to attain or even define what else he longs for, because the world he inhabits shows no sign of containing any alternative. The 'mermaids' are lovely in his imagination, but the real beautiful ladies may have said, 'That is not what I meant at all'. In Prufrock's society, there is no permanent value; nothing endures except the Hell of inner isolation and outer routines of the cosmopolitan citizens which are equally unbearable.

Thus, Prufrock is also a neurotic character suffering from psychic conflict, disorder, discomfort and anxiety. He is like a patient who is etherized and thus becoming somnolent. Becoming drowsy and sleepy from the beginning of the poem, he takes comfort in the thought that there will be enough time to make a decision. His indecisiveness and procrastination serve only to increase the tension and heighten his awareness that he will

have nothing except nourishing the dreams in somnolence. He is going to a sophisticated party and has a special mission, being an irresolute person for whom the simplest decision is a matter of strain, speculation and distress. One finds that the 'play of thought and feelings which are paralyzed by 'two planes of reality'.

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