



MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL: A DIVINE COMEDY

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ABSTRACT

Predominantly, Dante Alighieri's chef-d'oeuvre, *The Divine Comedy* represents the odyssey of the soul towards the omniscient, obviously from a literary panorama, and is inextricably interlinked with another literary maestro, T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. In Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, we find the redemption of a soul, i.e. Becket's life was sacrificed for a greater cause. An Archbishop, adored both by Anglican Community and Roman Catholic Church, has given a way his own life. So, from this angel of vision of historicity as well as intertextual specificity, both are closely associated.

KEYWORDS : Realism, dilemma, christianity, buddhism, hinduism, hope, regeneration, martyrdom

T.S. Eliot, a critic and a poet, like an one man army, changed both the currency and skeleton of poetry. He injected new blood into the veins of poetry and worked as a doctor of surgery. We can divide Eliot's poetic career into three stages which mark the development of Eliot, the artist also. The most important stage in Eliot's life is his conversion into Christianity after which he began to search for the 'still point of the wheel of time'. His poetic drama, *Murder in the Cathedral* was written after his conversion into Christianity. The first stage, which is known as the stage of darkness, has poems like *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915), and *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Hollow Men* (1925). After his conversion into Christianity, he began to live in a state of light and darkness when he became a 'British Subject', and the member of the Anglican Church. In this stage his great achievements are like *Journey of a Magi* and obviously *Ash Wednesday*, but the final stage in which he became an instrument of God, covers poems like *Four Quartets* and other dramas like *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion*, and *The Cocktail Party* (1949). The play, *Murder in the Cathedral* describes the anxieties and finally the overcome from the situation which marks the oscillating movement between light and darkness.

Historical events serve as the base of Eliot's play. George Bell, the then Bishop of Chichester, requested Eliot to write a play for the Canterbury Festival (1935), which was held in the month of June. Eliot was highly influenced by the historical events, described by Edward Grim in his works. Edward Grim himself saw the events took place in 1170. The 'Murder' is the assassination of Thomas Becket in December 1170. Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was a friend of King Henry II. Henry II made a misjudgement and employed Becket as Lord Chancellor of England. As a result of their cordial relationship, Henry II also appointed Becket (Lord Chancellor) as the Archbishop of Canterbury. Actually Henry II wanted that Thomas would work according to his instruction as he was doing as Lord Chancellor. But Henry's thought proved to be futile. Henry was disturbed by the ongoing conflicts with the Church officials. The clergy demanded supremacy about their activities over State's affairs. Henry appointed Becket, his friend, as Archbishop, to destroy the cold revolt of the clergymen, but Henry was totally astonished to see that Becket was not acting according to his wish. Thomas Becket, as Archbishop of Canterbury began to give more privileges to the clergymen. As a result, Henry gave order to exile Thomas, and Becket lived in Europe for seven years. When Prince Henry was made the successor by Bishop of York, Becket entered Canterbury for a superficial reconciliation and was brutally murdered by four Knights (in December 1170) who said that they acted according to the king's will.

Eliot plays a trick with the historical events. His play starts before Thomas's entrance into Canterbury. Eliot makes distances with the historical events and Henry II's personal

conflict with Becket and injects religious blood into the veins of the play. So, the superstructure, upon the historical base, becomes purely religious. Eliot deals with the theme of martyrdom where Becket struggles for sainthood. The significance of martyrdom becomes the soul concern to Eliot. This development of the theme of the play also marks the development of Eliot's literary career, after his conversion into Christianity in 1927. The hesitations, about Becket's choice of future, echoes the tribulations found in *Journey of a Magi* and *Ash Wednesday*.

Martyrdom means witness. Becket sacrifices his life for his religious stand point, not for any worldly concern. In his life time, Eliot was highly influenced by the Oriental philosophy of Christianity and Occidental philosophy of Buddhism. In Becket, we see a purely religious phenomenon which helps him to see the reality of God's will, which is considered as the sacred centre of the eternal wheel. On the circumference of this eternally moving wheel, the worldly lives are acting and suffering to reach the still point to become part of this system which is controlled by God.

After returning to Canterbury, Thomas faces cordial welcome as well as apprehension of danger by the priests and the chorus respectively. He faces four Tempters and has to face a long encounter with them to choose his future. Tormented by the provocative suggestions, Thomas recognizes himself as a victim of deadly spiritual pride and wants to atone for it: "*I shall no longer act or suffer, to the sword's end./Now my good Angel, whom God appoints, To be my guardian, hover over the sword's points*". He submits his will in the will of God to achieve the reconciliation of all irreconcilables. He is now free from any kind of worldly bondings. Thomas begins to act according to the God's will: "*Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain; Temptation shall not come in this kind again*". Thomas declares his death for the death of Christ: "*My death for His death*" and "*I give my life/To the law of God above the law of Man*". Thus Thomas plays his part in the design made by God. Thomas becomes able to understand that "*A martyrdom is always the design of God*". But Thomas' sacrifice needs to be accepted by the common people. The efficacy of martyrdom is not completed if mankind cannot accept it as the design of God. The women of the Canterbury, who play the role of chorus, play a vital role in Thomas' martyrdom. The women have risen themselves from the fear of happening something bad to accept the reality. The development occurs from "*we do not wish anything to happen*" to be "*witness*" to the martyrdom. The rise and fall of the desire of the chorus adds extra dimension to the martyrdom of Thomas. They accept the fact that their future depends on the death of Becket, and Becket's blood will bring new flood to create "*spiritual fertility in a spiritual waste land*". The women pray to Thomas thus: "*O Lord Archbishop, O Thomas Archbishop, forgive us, pray for us that we may pray for you, out of our*

shame". Thus ,chorus takes active part in the martyrdom of Thomas.

The tragic death of Becket, in the hands of four Knights, does not make him a tragic hero. He becomes a martyr figure. Becket can not be equated with the conventional tragic heroes of Shakespeare as they are created to the 'greater glory of man'. Eliot creates Thomas to the 'greater glory of God'. Becket's death mankind's life enriched and fructified. so, unlike Shakespearean heroes, whose deaths bring destruction to the tragic plots, Becket's death brings spiritual welfare. Thus, Becket's death becomes a divine comedy. The act of martyrdom becomes an act of redemption. Pain and rejoicing are fused together here. The tired soul of Thomas Becket finally becomes a God figure.

There are lots of similarities between Jesus Christ and Becket. Christian martyr Thomas's return to Canterbury and his death reminds the death of Jesus, the savior of mankind .For the sake of humanity, Christ had to wear the crown of thorns. Becket sacrifices his life also for the sake of entire society. Becket's temptations, his death, his enrollment as saint in the list of martyrs, symbolically present the story of Christ's temptations, enactment of passion, His death, and Resurrection. Messenger's description of Thomas' entrance in to the city of Canterbury alludes to Christ's entrance in to Jerusalem on 'Palm Sunday'. Becket delivers Christmas morning sermon like Christ's sermon on the Mount. Thomas is murdered by four Knights and Christ was crucified by the worshipper of power. The inclusion of Thomas's name, in to the list of saints ,resembles to the Resurrection of Christ.

Thomas reciprocates the death of Christ in his own blood as a devoted Christian: "My blood given to pay for His Death/My death for His Death". Now the women of Canterbury can pray to Christ and Thomas in the same prayer: " Lord, have mercy upon us./Christ, have mercy upon us./Lord, have mercy upon us./Blessed Thomas ,pray for us".

Murder in the Cathedral was written in 1935,when T.S Eliot had already become a British subject. His individual 'I' became the collective 'I', in search of the still point of the eternally moving wheel of time controlled by divine God. In the final stage of his life, Eliot spoke about salvation as we all are suffering from Adam's curse. The whole earth becomes like a hospital. But who will treat us, patients? It is Jesus 'the wounded surgeon'. The Church is like a 'dyiny nurse' because people are neglecting the Church. The religious tone began to spread all over his poetry after his conversion in to Christianity. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral is a purely religious play. But his other two masterpieces, dealing with the theme of martyrdom, have touches both the secular and religious elements. The Family Reunion and The Cocktail Party have secular touches over their superficial structures but under the structures there runs highly spiritual flow of sin and expiation.

In The Family Reunion(1939),Harry's metaphysical anguish leads him to expiate the primeval sin in him ,and he goes to some unknown destination for the sake of his family and himself. In The Cocktail Party(1949), Celia, after rejection from Edward, "feels a sense of sin" something stranger than loneliness. She is frustrated in seeing that she has failed to attain what she has been searching for in Edward. So , she chooses the path of self realization. But ,Thomas' martyrdom is different both from the martyrdoms of Harry and Celia. After Thomas's death ,mankind's life is restored to normalcy and even fructified by the blood of Thomas. So, the tragedies in the cases of Harry and Celia, have different implications from that of Thomas'. Thomas' tragedy becomes, rather is transformed in to a divine comedy. Divine basically means relating to, coming from, or like god or a God. In The Divine Comedy

,Dante is the pilgrim on a journey through the inferno, purgatorio and paradise. This journey is like a torch-bearer to us for our quest in finding the truth, the ultimate meaning of life. Dante is like everyman figure going through the obstacles of life to reach in a goal, true happiness-God. In Murder in the Cathedral ,Thomas realizes the true meaning of life and sacrifices his life not for any personal cause , but for being a part of God's design. Thus , we can call Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral, a divine comedy.

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