



## The Religion of the Self: Patrick White And T. S Eliot

\* Amita Malhotra(Kalra)

\* Associate Professor, Department of English, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru P G College, Faridabad

### ABSTRACT

*Patrick White, the first Australian writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, uses cosmopolitan themes in his novels. He goes far deeper into the realms of the psyche and tries to bring forth the reality. White's imagination brings out the inner circle of the self and hence, the theme of alienation, the idea of atonement through suffering and ultimately the oneness of the self with God!*

*It is quite amazing that T. S. Eliot, the true Renaissance man, too was touched by the human futility and lack of belief. He explored a broad region of the dark labyrinth of man's inner world. As a result we received 'J. Alfred Prufrock' and 'The Waste Land'. The present paper is an attempt to study and identify the resemblance of ideas, themes and above all, the representation of the religion of the self, in the works of both the enlightened writers!*

**Keywords : The Quest for Self, Illusion and Enlightenment, Nirvana and Anatta.**

Patrick White was the first Australian writer to receive the Nobel Prize. The citation concluded White's 'Epic psychology narrative art which has introduced a new continent into literature'. The Nobel Prize Winner Australian writer actually stands a little apart from his native literary tradition by virtue of his cosmopolitan themes and his typical modernism. As a rebel artist, White plunges into the unforeseen areas of the psychic experiences of the individual. At the same time, he shares the common concerns of writers of today in his portrayal of human alienation, in terms of social and intellectual situations. Using the irony of human life as the principal motif, White studies the predicament of modern man who suffers in his self-conceived world of ambitions and illusions. The obvious isolation of the individual and his quest for identity is given a universal extension through his novels. The present paper is an attempt to study closely the quest of self for fulfillment as also inherent in the poetry of T.S Eliot. The world Eliot portrays poses a threat to man's existence because Eliot believes that it is a world devoid of any generally accepted standards of belief.

T. S. Eliot's Prufrock in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock and Patrick White's Stan in

The Tree of Man presents a picture of two individuals, who fail to justify their existence when life does not seem to have any meaning except birth, copulation and death. Whereas Prufrock is the confession of J. Alfred Prufrock, one of the denizens of this infernal world, Stan Parker of

The Tree of Man impresses the readers with its unfolding of complex chains of events and encounters in life.

Transformation of individual when in contact with the reality is not achieved by the soul alone. The soul has to be in co-operation with the conscious mind of the individual. Those who are dead spiritually in White's world are not dead for any lack of soul activity that goes on anyway. In spite of that, they are dead because they fail to make any meaningful connection with the soul. In The Tree of Man, the separate lives of Stan and Amy Parker clearly reveals this essential difference between the living and the dead. Stan is willing to surrender to the writhing movements of the soul, whether this appears to him in the symbolic form of a flash of lightning or in a dream. Amy, the wife, turns away from these things with fear. She is

chained and bound to the human world and is afraid to enter the uncharted region of the soul. Like all of White's dead, she is encapsulated, caught in the cocoon of her own making - a cocoon of illusion which is known as Maya in the East. She craves for solidity and permanence. She tries this by possessing her husband, then making the lost boy in the flood her own child and then clinging to the silver nutmeg grater. In this craving, she finds her security and her imprisonment. She does not awaken to real life. As compared to her, Stan Parker, anxious to break out of the cocoon of his false self, struggles to higher consciousness and finally achieves oneness with the soul.

The Tree of Man is perhaps the most in tune with traditional Indian culture. In writing this novel, White attempted to warm us up to spirituality he had experienced as a child in the Australian countryside. White describes the crucial incident in Flaws in the Glass: A Self Portrait:

'I lay where I had fallen; half blinded by rain, under a pale sky, cursing through watery lips a God in whom I did not believe. I began laughing finally, at my own helplessness and hopelessness, in the mud and the stench from my filthy old oilskin. My disbelief appeared as farcical as my fall. At that moment I was truly humbled'. White felt the presence of God. He was appalled at the spiritual and emotional emptiness in Australian life. The Tree becomes a mandalic image in The Tree of Man. In it White strives to reveal the extraordinary behind the ordinary through the lives of Stan and Amy Parker. The central symbol, the Tree, stands for the creative potentiality of man, which has many branches each growing towards light in its own separate ways. Thus, we find that every individual is capable of experiencing real life. Only most choose not to. Unlike the heroes in the ancient mythical dramas, White's characters are not passively chosen by God and do what they are told. In his world the creative factor lies in the conscious attitude of the individual. It is that what White has in common with existentialism; the individual must accept responsibility of his own life and make of it what he can.

T. S. Eliot likewise tended to salvage some of the truths of life from the morass of romantic utopian visions. The ideal human relationships and images of the society were encompassed within the orbits of romanticism, based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. The Victorians, on the other hand,

were aware of the cultural crisis born of naked individualism, but still dreamt of enjoyment of beautiful world. T. S. Eliot disapproved of this view. Expressing his disapproval Eliot noted in his essay on Mathew Arnold in *The Study of Poetry*: 'But the essential advantage for a poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal; it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom and the horror and the glory'. Due to the absence of any spiritual driving force, man is forced to worship the material pursuits, taking him to a purely animal plane of existence. Eliot questions what a man should fall back to in the moments of the realization of the emptiness of life without belief. He wants to awaken man to a world of deeper meanings of life, but sadly enough, he has no other world to escape into. His portrayal of man is a helpless creature that is unable to make any decisions in his life. He can neither move forward nor can retrace his steps. Eliot articulates in his poetry *The Desire for Belief* and *The Understanding of its Importance to the Human Spirit*.

The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock is the confession of J. Alfred Prufrock. Its epigraph is a brief commentary on man's existence on this earth. Prufrock is one of us, trapped and unable to move, because of the mental state of inertia. Instead of imagining about the evening, as Wordsworth did, as 'beautiful', 'Calm and free', he feels that it is 'Spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a table'. In these lines lies the sum of man. He is helpless in a world devoid of any meaning for him. The world he wants to traverse with his friend is full of gloom and boredom. He may temporarily escape from it to another world of pleasure a world of 'restless nights in one night cheap hotels'. In this journey from a world of boredom to a world of release he has to counter the great challenging question pertaining to the problem of his existence. It 'overwhelms' him because he approaches it 'without belief or hope' and hence he sidetracks the issue: 'oh, do not ask, 'what is it? Let us go and make our visit.'

However he does not 'make' the proposed 'visit', though he imagines that he is in a salon and enjoying the frequent visits of women. His imagining journey continues taking him to

streets with yellow smoke, ultimately settling down on the roof tops of the houses. Fog, smoke and soot are animated whereas we do not visualize how Prufrock's world moves. As a matter of fact, they are the vaporous images of his nothingness. Eliot poses a recurrent eternal question of man's role in the universe. He believes that its exploration will lead to a deeper quest for meaning of life. Eliot's Prufrock is aware of the passive attitude of people around him. He has spent many evenings, mornings and afternoons with them in aimless pursuits as is obvious when he says, 'I have measured out my life with coffee spoons'. He refers to the mechanical rounds of routine life. He yearns to resolve his crisis and wishes to drive it towards an 'overwhelming question'. He never loses hope. He assesses his own real self. He cannot champion any cause, as Hamlet did. With the pure awareness of his hollowness, he feels that he has grown too old under the pressure of these moral questioning of his inner self. Failing to pursue his belief in the essential search for human values, he imagines himself a buffoon chanting a childish shyness full of despair. 'I grow old... I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled'.

Thus Eliot developed and expressed his views about the quest of life through his theory of objective correlation. He successfully portrays the protagonist, Prufrock, as White does with Stan, searching for some belief; some faith to fall back to Prufrock's seemingly failure in doing anything in fact shows his inner strength to accept the reality. Both Stan Parker and J. Alfred Prufrock are sailing on the same planes of consciousness. Both suffer from the hollowness, valuelessness and loss of spiritual authority. Both crave for Nirvana, although through different approaches. The transience of the materialism is the real source of disappointment. Having established this much, both Eliot and White have tried to enlighten the society about the nothingness of existence and furthermore leading to Anatta (egoless). If we develop our intuitive powers and scrutinize the nature of all things, all the layers of maya (illusion) will disappear and we will create a new world governed by humility, charity, love and a world of ultimate reality.

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