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T.S. ELIOT'S CONCEPT OF POETRY VERSUS OBJECTIVE POETRY

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ABSTRACT

T. S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" besides dealing with the concepts of 'tradition' and the 'individual talent', also comes up with his concept of impersonal theory of poetry in which he emphasizes on an objective approach to writing or creation. He emphasizes on the fact that the poet must not express his personal feelings and emotions in his poetry, rather, he should remain detached and disinterested and keep his personality away from his poetry. What Eliot tries to establish through his impersonal theory is objective poetry. He wants poetry to be judged purely on the basis of its intrinsic qualities. He does not want the critic to take any historical or biographical details about the poet into consideration with a view to arriving at a clear understanding and comprehension of the poem under criticism. This very approach makes his impersonal theory of poetry impersonal and objective. He wants the poet to surrender his personality to something more valuable, i.e., tradition. The poet has to try to escape from emotion and ensure that his personality should not get expressed in it; otherwise, he may commit the error of becoming 'personal'. It also seems that his aim is to draw a dividing line between the 'good' and the 'bad' poetry. To sum up, it may be said that through his impersonal theory of poetry, Eliot lays emphasis on writing of objective poetry and discards subjective poetry altogether. He, thus, recommends objective poetry for the poets of the modern age.

Keywords: Impersonality, Objective poetry, Romantic poetry, Subjective Poetry, Tradition.

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T. S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" besides dealing with the concepts of 'tradition' and the 'individual talent', also comes up with his concept of impersonal theory of poetry. "This Impersonal theory of poetry is of great significance for new criticism. Here in this theory is the first hint for the critic not to involve himself in historical, sociological or biographical details about the poet, but to take the poem as a work of art independent of the personality and emotions of the poet, and to contemplate its text without reference to the poet, and analyze its structure, study its images, its poetic phraseology, its rhythm and such other aesthetic qualities" (Chandra 57).

In "Preface to Lyrical Ballads", Wordsworth writes: "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquillity" (180). Reacting against this romantic theory of poetry, Eliot writes: "We must believe that 'emotion recollected in tranquility' is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquillity"(300). This statement clearly indicates that before propounding a new theory of poetry, he wants to make sure that Wordsworth's widely accepted theory of poetry is demolished, for he feels that he could be able to find a place for himself among the greatest critics, only when he succeeds in

demolishing some of the old established citadels of the theories of poetry. His intention can better be understood in the following lines: "The great problem for later poets and critics is to make a place for themselves in the already well-occupied Parthenon of poetry and criticism; and this they can do only by demolishing some old reputation and asking him to quit" (Chandra 269). So, after making the above statement he goes on to present his own new impersonal theory of poetry in the following words: "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). These lines clearly indicate that as against the subjective poetry, it is the objective poetry which finds a place in his theory, for an "objective work is one in which the author presents the invented situation or the fictional characters and their thoughts, feelings, and actions and undertakes to remain detached and noncommittal" (Abrams 197). Eliot's concept of 'concentration, of a very great number of experiences' makes it clear that poetry is not 'spontaneous overflow', rather it is 'deliberate concentration, and, thus, he tries to replace Wordsworth's theory of subjective poetry with his own theory of objective poetry. Since he seems to be emphasizing on the objective approach to writing or creation, therefore, he discourages subjective approach to writing in which "the author incorporates personal experiences, or projects into the narrative his or her personal disposition, judgments, values and feelings" (Abrams 196-197).

William Wordsworth's theory of romantic poetry strictly lays stress upon the subjective poetry—poetry that concerns itself with the delineation of the personal feelings and emotions of the poet. Romantic poets are imaginative and escapists; they are soon upset with this world and want to live in some unseen and utopian world. Fancy and imagination are the most important elements of Romantic poetry which deals with the beauty of nature, dreams, mysteries, beauty, love, liberty, etc., whereas, objective or classical poetry is just opposite to it.

Eliot, thus, emphasizes on an objective approach to writing or creation, for an objective author "maintains aesthetic distance, as opposed to a subjective author who is personally involved with the characters and actions represented in work of literature, and as opposed also to an author who uses a literary work to present and to make persuasive his or her personal beliefs" (Abrams 174). Eliot also emphasizes on the fact that the poet must not express his personal feelings and emotions in his poetry; rather, he should keep away from his poetry or creation. So, according to Eliot's theory, the poet has to keep away from his poetry and should not allow his personality enter it, in other words, he has to remain detached and disinterested while writing poetry. The above statements make it very clear that what Eliot tries to establish through his impersonal theory of poetry is 'objective poetry'. It is also a fact that Romanticism in the 19th century grew up as a reaction against the neo-classical poetry of the 18th century, so, when Eliot discards Wordsworth's theory of poetry, it becomes evident that Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry seeks to re-establish neo-classical poetry which was objective in tone.

Eliot himself writes that "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" (297). Romantic poets and critics are much concerned with the biographical details of the poet, whereas, Eliot wants the critics to pay attention to poetry only and not to the poet's personal life and other biographical details about him. He wants poetry to be judged purely on the basis of its intrinsic qualities. The above statement confirms it that the impersonal theory of poetry propounded by T.S. Eliot advocates objective poetry, which may be judged on the basis of its inherent qualities only, for poetry is a thing in itself and all the answers about a certain piece of poetry, while critically analyzing and evaluating it, should be found in poetry itself. He does not want the critic to take any historical or biographical details about the poet into consideration with a view to arriving at a clear understanding and comprehension of the poem under criticism; rather, he emphasizes on the fact that the critic should concentrate solely upon the poem itself without

caring much for such other considerations. This very approach makes his theory of poetry impersonal and objective, which seems to be his sole aim while propounding his theory of poetry.

Eliot says that "the emotion of art is impersonal." (301), and any hint of poet's becoming personal is a great fault on his part. He should try to be as far as impersonal as possible and should not allow his personality to enter his poetry. It should not be a turning loose of emotion, rather, it should be an escape from emotion; and the poet must try to remain outside the domain of his own poetry. If a poet expresses his own emotions, or expresses his own personality in his poetry, he, in both the cases, commits the mistake of becoming 'personal'. And this is something that Eliot does not allow. He wants the poet to surrender his personality to something more valuable, i.e., tradition. In his own words: "What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (296). So, if a poet keeps his personality away from his poetry or creation, his poetry or creation becomes impersonal and objective, and this very idea forms the basis for Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry, thus, 'objectivism' is apparent in his concept.

Eliot's emphasis upon the fact that "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (297), clearly indicates that a perfect poet or artist does not let his personal feelings or emotions enter his poetry or art, for "the mind of the poet is the shred of platinum" (Eliot 297), which takes part in the reaction, but remains unaffected from it. The poet must write, but at the same time he should remain disinterested and keep himself away from his work. His personality should not be a part of his poetry. In his own words: "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). He, thus, tries to establish that the personal emotion of the poet and his personality—both—remain insignificant while writing of a poem. They have nothing to do with the writing of great poetry, and, so, must be kept away from poetry. According to

him, the sole objective of the poet should be to remain as far impersonal as possible, and, thus, he strictly prohibits any admittance of the poet's personality into his poetry. The poet has to try to escape from his emotions and ensure that his personality should not get expressed in his poetry; otherwise, he may commit the error of becoming personal which according to Eliot is a great fault on the part of the poet, for "the business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him." (Eliot 300). He also writes that "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 experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways" (Eliot 299). Eliot also dislikes seeking for new human emotions. He writes: "One error, in fact, of eccentricity in poetry is to seek for new human emotions to express; and in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse. The business of the poet is not to find new emotion, but to use ordinary ones and, in making them up into poetry to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all" (300). All these statements seem contradictory. On the one hand, he writes that poetry is an escape from emotions and on the other hand, he advocates the use of ordinary emotions by the poet. Escaping from emotions and using ordinary emotions simultaneously is not, at all, possible. But, still, it may be said that despite his contradictory statements, his intentions are very clear that he is trying to advocate the use of objective poetry, so, such contradictory statements may be overlooked.

When Eliot says that "there is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate" (Eliot 300), he seems to be talking of objective poetry, for subjective or romantic poetry is spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, but objective poetry is not spontaneous; it is written deliberately and the poet has to labour hard for it.

The structure and the form of poetry is also one of the most important things in objective poetry. The form of poetry consists of words,

rhythms, music, verse-pattern, etc. the classicists, through their words—their rhythm say more things than is possible in words. Eliot says: “There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in verse, and there is a smaller number of people who can express technical excellence. But very few know when there is an expression of significant emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet” (301). These lines not only want the poet to pay attention to the form of poetry, but also express the necessity of focusing the critics’ attention on the intrinsic qualities of the poem, and not on the history and biography of the poet, whereas, romantic poets neither pay much attention to the form of poetry, nor do they confine their attention solely to the intrinsic qualities of the poetry, in fact, they indulge themselves into the expression of personal feelings without caring much for its form.

Eliot wants every poet to reach ‘impersonality’ by surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. In his own words: “the emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done” (301). So, he wants every poet to forget his personality and try to be as far objective as possible. This is also one of the most essential characteristics of objective poetry.

This becomes apparent by now that the purpose of Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is to re-establish objective poetry as against the romantic or subjective poetry of William Wordsworth. His aim is to draw a dividing line between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ poetry. According to him, objective or impersonal poetry is ‘good’, and subjective or romantic poetry is ‘bad’, for it is a turning loose of emotions. In his own words: “To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim: for it would conduct to juster estimation of actual poetry, good or bad.” (301).

The neo-classical poets of the 18th century formulated some rules and conventions for writing of poetry and laid down some guidelines for the poets too, in which the main emphasis was laid upon maintaining the objectivity of poetry. Eliot also does the same thing and through his impersonal

theory of poetry defines objective poetry in the truest sense of the term.

To sum up, it may be said that Eliot through his impersonal theory of poetry emphasizes on writing of objective poetry and discards subjective poetry altogether. He strongly advocates that every poet should keep his personality away from his creation thereby maintaining that poetry should be written with an objective approach; and, thus, the kind of poetry he recommends for the poets of the modern age is objective poetry.

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Brief Biography of the Author

Hindi Poet, Translator, Orator, and Editor Dr. Rakesh Chandra Joshi has publication of an anthology of Hindi poems “*Kuchh Baatein Kavitaon Mein*”, a collection of Hindi ghazals “*Pattharon Ke Shahar Mein*”, and one translated book, namely, “*The Crowd Bears Witness*” to his credit. His research papers in English have been published in many international journals, books, and study materials. In addition to it, his poems and Hindi ghazals have also been published in national and international magazines and e-magazines on a regular basis. He worked as a Hindi Translator in EPFO, Ministry of Labour, Government of India and was posted at Mumbai for more than 6 years. Besides, he also worked as a Casual Announcer in AIR, Vividh Bharati for a very short duration of time. He joined Department of Higher Education, Uttarakhand in 2005. Presently, he is an Assistant Professor of English in Government PG College, Doiwala, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India.