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FAIR SEX, THE SECOND SEX: A HISTORICAL - LITERARY PERSPECTIVE IN THE POETRY OF T.S.ELIOT

Dr. RUHUL AMIN MANDAL

Assistant Professor, Sitananda College, Vidyasagar University, W.B



**Dr. RUHUL AMIN
MANDAL**

ABSTRACT

The study tends to depict how Eliot treated women as mere second sex in his poetry. It further explores Eliot's misogynic, female-hater temperament and the reasons behind this abhorrence against women. The subjugation of women, throughout centuries, from ancient to present time has been done by male in patriarchal society. Eliot in his poetry, through the allusions of myth, history, religion, literature and philosophy not only narrates the degenerated state of women but also contributes to it by his fun, ridicule and satire of women. Instead of breaking the notion of patriarchy, Eliot becomes a torch-bearer of patriarchy and contributes to perpetuate the process of subjugation of women by strengthening the mechanisms of women subordination. The study tries to show how Eliot becomes a misogynist by his constant tirade against woman.

Key Words: Patriarchy, misogynist, subjugation, mechanism, tirade.

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INTRODUCTION

Since its inception both the Eastern and the Western civilization are pervasively patriarchal. It is male-centered and male-controlled. The mechanism is maneuvered in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, scientific, artistic and so on. From the time of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the Vedic civilization, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the Hebrew *Bible* and the Greek philosophy through the Middle Ages, to the present, the fair sex tends to be defined by negative traits to the male as the human norm, hence as an *Other*, by her lack of male powers and of the male character traits that are presumed, in the patriarchal view, to have achieved the memorable inventions and works of civilization. In the process the women themselves are taught to assimilate the patriarchal view of male as the superior and female as the

subordinator to male and are so conditioned to derogate and degrade their own sex and thus to cooperate in the process of their own degeneration and subordination. Aristotle's comment may be cited in this respect. He said in *Politics*, "Again, as between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject. And the same must also necessarily apply in the case of mankind as a whole; therefore all men that differ as widely as the soul does from the body and the human being from the lower animal (and this is the condition of those whose function is the use of the body and from whom this is the best that is forthcoming) these are by nature slaves, for whom to be governed by this kind of authority [20] is advantageous, inasmuch as it is advantageous to the subject things already mentioned." The concept of male prerogatives and female subordination is largely a cultural construct

that is generated by the dominant patriarchal biases of our civilization. As Simone de Beauvoir put it, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine." True to the opinion of Beauvoir it is found that the supposed great literary works are mainly dominated by masculine ideology, mostly written by men and the great characters are all males. Eliot is a right heir and descendant to this tradition.

Eliot's attitude to Fair Sex:

Women have been subjected to diverse kinds of tortures and exploitations such as physical assault, torture, sexual harassment at home and workplace, deprivation leading to surrender, marketization of women, prostitution, treating women as second sex or other. As a poet Eliot may be great for his artistic excellence and brilliant technical mastery but his misogynistic attitude remains a cardinal force of his poetry throughout his career. From personal life to poetic creativity Eliot proves himself to be a perfect female hater. In his poetry he not only narrates, through historical, literary and mythological allusions, the degenerated state of women but also contributes to the process of this degeneration. Eliot bears the legacy of patriarchal domination which renders women as merely '*Other*', in comparison to the dominant subject, '*man*', who is assumed to represent humanity at large. In his writings there remains little space for social, economic, cultural and political freedom of women. In Eliot's poetry women are very often presented in a bitter and cynical manner and depicted as fickle, faithless, fleshly, meretricious creatures, having no capability of higher thinking and creativity. Women in Eliot are very often presented as merely sexual object. In a covert way he seems to support the mechanism which helps to establish and perpetuate male domination and female subordination. His depiction of women seems to establish the fact that he is following the foot-step of those patriarchal writers, from ancient to the recent time, whose works focus on the male protagonists and embody masculine traits and feelings and pursue masculine interest in masculine fields of action. Eliot not only plays the role of torch-bearer in this respect, his tirade against women

sometimes labeled him as a 'misogynist'. His savage tirade against women can't be justified by any argument, whatever may be the reasons. His gender biasness is well illustrated by Laurie. J. MacDiarmid:

"Eliot's fall from political grace is ascribed primarily to his racist and sexist fantasies and his (improperly) private life. Our equally unseemly interest in Eliot's sins expresses itself in the repeated exposure of our speculation about his somewhat flamboyant sexual and religious masquerades – his hasty marriage, recognition of his own sexual neurosis in the diagnosis and rejection of his wife, his clandestine conversion, his monk-like habits, and his obsessive moral self-abuse or flagellation. In a turn-of-the-century age characterized by pervasive skepticism, Eliot's intellectual (and yet eroticized) Christian mysticism strikes us as an important attempt to escape his own domestic horrors and pervasive sexuality."

Justification:

MacDiarmid's statement is no exaggeration, for Eliot's poetry is steeped in crude misogynic, inflammatory expressions. He leaves no stone unturned to ridicule and make fun of the fair sex in many of his great poems. Mythical, historical and literary references of violence against women are successively presented not with the motive of unfolding the naked truth of how women have been victimized in male-dominated civilization throughout centuries, but to establish and further consolidate his phallic prejudice. Violence against women gets new dimension in Eliot's poem as he uses diverse rhetorical means to sharpen his tirade with the help of his huge historical knowledge and sharp intellect. Eliot's misogynic female-hater temperament is born out of the orthodox puritan sexual morality, a familial legacy; his failed marital life; his monk-like temperament of self-sacrifice and self-surrender for the sake of attaining perfection in poetic inspiration or his search for a divine goal through poetic aestheticism; the masochistic pleasure of self-abuse and self-condemnation, a primitive religious cult and the poet's fear of erotic relationship with any woman ; his castration of the self – a surrender or

sacrifice to realize the divinity transforming him into a John the Baptist, an Adonis, a Jesus, a Virgin Mary or a Buddha? Eliot's conception of poet as cultural saviour and the poetic creation a process of an austere, immaculate, self-surrender, an artistic incarnation which ultimately transcends to a Divine – needs to be analyzed carefully and meticulously. The conception is well developed in his germinal essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" where Eliot repeatedly speaks of the need of self-sacrifice:

"The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality...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."

The analogy between artistic self and divine self is merged and the difference between them is blurred. This artistic view of Eliot is mixed up with his psycho-neurotic eccentric behavior and religious taboos. Moreover, the poet's continuous ill-health tells upon to develop this vision of life. Eliot's psycho-sexual neurosis led him to recoil from developing any healthy physical relationship with Vivien. Or it may be that he was an impotent and his failure finds outlet in attacking women in various ways. His reference to Tiresias and his bi-sexuality indicates at this important aspect of his poetic pronouncement. Whatever may be the reasons the phenomenon of violence against women is vivid and forceful in his poetry. His antipathy against women tends to develop and display its force and ferocity from his very first anthology *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917). The refrain he used in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' aptly shows his misogynic attitude. Prufrock's mental journey turns up to a fashionable saloon where he visualizes: 'In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo.' The couplet's underlying meanings are extremely derogatory and insulting to the women in general. The persona seems to suggest that the women who gather in the salon are merely pleasure-seeking creatures, having no artistic taste, aesthetic sense and cultural value. They 'come and go' with an altogether different purpose. Their overt gesture, flamboyancy, and

casual, matter of fact discussion of the great artist and his god-like creation show the ladies' shallow nature. Their 'talking of Michelangelo' is a mockery of the great sculptor, painter and poet who loved God and man alike and transmuted his personal agony in his art. Eliot lashes upon the ladies more scathingly while he refers to the mythological episode of Salome and John the Baptist-

There will be a time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of
hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate.
(*'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'*)

The persona's dilemma is undoubtedly the focal point. It shows how Prufrock is torn between attraction and repulsion, how he is trapped by sensual provocation and how he fails to retrace back. The mock-heroic comparison between him and John the Baptist, through the presentation of grand and trivial, serious and common-place is witty and well-planned and Eliot achieves unprecedented poetic success to create a situation and atmosphere that he wanted. But all is achieved at the cost of the women. The allusion immediately unfolds the story of Salome's frivolous and sensual nature, her insensitivity and cruelty; her lack of human feelings and respect for idealism. John the Baptist refused Salome's offer of love and therefore, he was decapitated by King Herod and his head was brought to Salome on a plate, the reward she wanted for dancing before the King. Here Eliot makes an implied comparison between Salome and modern ladies in a pub and his purpose is to depict the ladies of the saloon as frivolous, fickle and fleshly creatures living on animal plane. They are shorn of human values, culture and idealism. This sexual assault is shrewdly made and the poem achieves more than the expected success. 'The muttering retreats/ Of restless nights in one night cheap hotel' (*'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'*) explicitly expresses the fleshly pleasures of modern man. In the poem women have been presented as soft, sexual target of attack by male. The poet ridicules, abhors and attacks women in loathsome language without justification. Cassandra Laity and Nancy K. Gish refer to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Guber's *No Man's Land, The War of Words* and comments, "Early in-depth

studies of Eliot focused almost exclusively on his patriarchal images of woman, violence against women and aversion to the female body.”

Eliot exploits women to present the desolation, dirt, dreariness and sin of the modern cosmopolitan civilization. Eliot presents the prostitute thus:

The street-lamp said, 'Regard that woman
Who hesitates towards you in the light of
the door
Which opens on her like a grin.
You see the border of her dress
Is torn and stained with sand,
And you see the corner of her eye
Twists like a crooked pin.
(‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’, *Prufrock and
Other Observations*)

Eliot’s crude, nasty attack on women has no logical ground to defend. His tirade is not founded on reason. His presentation of women as irrational, insensitive, fleshly creatures, prone ever to devour its sexual prey, has no parallel in English literary history. In ‘Burbank with Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar’ Eliot directs his violent attack against women. Princess Volupine is presented with vicious, infidel and frivolous traits. Eliot attaches vices of sensuality, corruption of flesh, infidelity in love, greed for money with the Princess. First four lines of ‘Burbank...’ run thus:

Burbank crossed a little bridge
Descending at a small hotel;
Princess Volupine arrived,
They were together and he fell.
(*Poems*, 1920)

Irony and satire are levelled against women at large through Volupine’s jilted love affair. F. W. Bateson comments:

“On the surface the poem itself is a miniature comic drama describing Burbank’s brief love affair with the Princess Volupine and his displacement in her favours first of all by his compatriot Bleistein (‘Chicago Semite Viennese’) and then by Sir Ferdinand Klein, a knight-errant presumably of Lloyd George’s creation. But this simple story of feminine infidelity is

narrated in the poetic diction of high ironic scholarship.”

An extreme apathy and abhorrence for female body is found in Eliot’s description of Tiresias in *The Waste Land*:

I Tiresias, though blind throbbing between
two lives Old man with wrinkled female
breast, can see At the violent hour, the
evening hour that strives Homeward and
brings sailor home from sea. (‘The Fire
Sermon’, *The Waste Land*)

Though the extract has immense value of historical and cultural importance, Eliot’s description of Tiresias’ ‘wrinkled female breast’ is striking. Eliot used women throughout as mere sexual object to attain poetic effect. Rarely does he show respect and reverence to the fair sex. His deep sense of disregard of and disgust for carnal love is presented through the famous ‘clerk-typist’ episode and here too the woman is highlighted more cynically than the man. Although the cardinal concern is the cultural degradation and debasement, the sterility and emptiness of carnal love is focused. The sordid atmosphere of the lady’s room, her welcome mood of the clerk and the clerk’s seduction of the lady, her loveless casual sex - all indicate the poet’s misogynist approach. Eliot describes the moment of their sex thus:

The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavoured to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreprieved, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence;

And the passage ends with the snatch of Goldsmith:
When lovely women stoop to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone,
She smooths her hair with automatic
hand, And puts a record on the
gramophones.

(‘The Fire Sermon’, *The Waste Land*)

The presentation of the lady as unfeeling, lustful, and careless, indicates Eliot’s male prejudice. Her response to the gross, indecent way of enjoying sex suggests her insensitivity, immorality and impurity, but the male counterpart is safely guarded as he is not discussed anymore after the event. He uses all

his weapons of irony, sarcasm, and satire against women. The female figures he meticulously makes use of from history, myth and his own creation – are presented either as victim of male violence or the victim of the poet's own phallic prejudice. In *The Waste Land* alone Eliot presents a number of women as victim of violence in the past and the present. Some of them are Cleopatra, Dido, Elizabeth, Belinda, Cordelia, Ophelia, Bianca, Philomel, Hyacinth girl, Isolde, the Thames daughters of Spenser, Lil and the typist woman. The mythical female voices articulate their shattered human subjectivity. On the other hand, female figures of Eliot's own creation have been victimized by his constant attack of sarcasm, satire and ridicule. Either way, women have been subjected to contempt and violence.

The conjugal life of Eliot was unhappy and painful. About Eliot's married life Manju Jain comments, "Much has been written about their marriage. It appears to have caused them both intense suffering because of their contrasting temperaments, recurrent financial problems and Vivien's chronic illness." Conjugal discontent, fatigue and tension have been channelized into versified violence by Eliot. The unconventional jargon, staccato language and innovative poetic form reflect the broken and bizarre state of their own existence. Almost all through his poems Eliot criticized the falsities of the man-woman relationship, particularly the physical aspect of the relationship. Eliot's mundane women are shallow, hollow, flirtatious, deceitful and unfaithful. But very often women appear in his poetry as victims. The love-hate, attraction-repulsion relationship, in many ways, is a reflection of the Eliot-Vivien relationship. However, none of his poems can be literally interpreted in terms of the events of Eliot's marital problems with Vivien. Eliot himself initially denied any autobiographical intrusion in his poetry. During the W.W-I in 1917 he wrote to his father:

"...everyone's individual lives are so swallowed up in the one great tragedy that one almost ceases to have personal experiences or emotions, and such as one has seem so unimportant...I have lots of

things to write about if the time ever comes when people will attend them."

But a quite contrary opinion was made in a letter to his brother Henry about the autobiographical elements in *The Waste Land* "...to me it (*The Waste Land*) was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life, it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling." Eliot was horrified with the abyss of life and profoundly concerned with the insidious nature of mind. One pivotal theme of his poetry, from the beginning to the end, is the violence which erupted from the conflict of love and lust; guilt and remorse; surrender and withdrawal. And almost in every instance women have been presented as victim.

Conclusion

It is thus a proven fact that patriarchal ideology and domination pervade the cultural construct of both the Eastern and the Western civilization. Philosophical, religious, historical, literary and mythical documentations from ancient times to present, through the middle ages, reflect the common picture of male domination and female subordination where masculine comes to be identified as active, dominating, creative and rational and feminine as passive, timid, submissive and emotional. Instead of breaking this notion, Eliot contributes to this concept of patriarchy. He not only recounts to the allusions and references of violence against women in general, he enlarges the concept of feminine inferiority and aversion to fair sex. His tirade against women sometimes labeled him as a professed lady hater, a misogynist. In his writings fair sex is turned into not only second sex, but a kind of subhuman species. He uses women as a tool to sharpen his poetic possibility or in other words, his poetic success is achieved at the cost of the fair sex.

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