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**ANALYSIS OF THE HOLLOW MEN IN THE LIGHT OF TRADITION
AND INDIVIDUAL TALENT**

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ABSTRACT:

This research analyses the well-known poet T.S. Eliot's poem, The Hollow Men, and his critical essay, Tradition and Individual Talent. In the essay, he mainly talks about two things: the aspects of tradition in poetry and the theory of impersonality. He says that no poet has his complete meaning altogether alone. He must have a connection with the traditional attitudes of poetry and art. The researchers trace out the traditional aspects and allusions to history in The Hollow Men in order to determine whether Eliot has followed his own claim or not. This research paper also focuses on the theory of impersonality in poetry. The researcher finds such elements that talk about subjectivity and personality of the author, although Eliot promotes objectivity. After critically analyzing Eliot's poem, keeping the theory of impersonality in mind, the researcher concludes that Eliot himself is subjective in his poetry.

Introduction:

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on 20th September, 1888, at St. Louis Missouri, an industrial city in U.S.A. He died on 4th January, 1965 at the age of seventy six and his literary career spreads over 45 years. He was an American-British poet, playwright, literary and social critic. He was one of the major poets of 20th century. He came to Europe and stayed in London during WWI. He worked as a professor of poetry at Harvard University and remained director of Faber and Faber by composing and publishing a number of plays. In his youth, Eliot was understandably regarded as a rebel because his ideas about modern society were radical. He depicted modern society as materialistic, spiritually barren and disillusioned in his masterpiece like *The Hollow Men*. (Martin & Martin 1988; Crawford, 1989; Asher & Asher, 1995; Craig & Douglas, 2006; Faber & Faber, 2011)

T.S. Eliot (1920), a renowned literary and social figure of his time, in his essay, *Tradition and Individual Talent*, writes that “a great poet, in his writing of himself, writes of his age”(p.2). In his essay, *The Metaphysical Poets* (1921), he comments on the modern age that our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing on a refined sensibility, must produce various complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, doing violence to the syntax, in order to force, to dislocate, if necessary, language into his meaning (p.4). He has a great variety in his poetry, plays and critical compositions. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948(Maxwell, 2015).

The essay, *Tradition and Individual Talent*, was first published in 1919, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, as a critical article. The essay may be considered as an unofficial manifesto of Eliot's critical creed because it contains all those critical principles from which his criticism has been derived. It is a declaration of Eliot's critical creed and these principles are the basis of all his subsequent criticism (Moody, 1994; Joyce, 2009; Maxwell, 2015)

Research Questions:

1. How does tradition involve a historical sense or historical timelessness?
2. What actually does tradition or historical timelessness mean?
3. What is meant by depersonalization in poetry?

Literature Review:

Thomas Stearns Eliot is one of the major poets and literary critics of the modern age. His name has become synonymous with the movement of modernism that comes to the realm of literature especially in criticism. He belongs to the long line of poet-critics, after Wordsworth, who has talked about poetry and the poetic process. All of his works are iconic but *The Hollow Men* is an important landmark in the history of English poetry, and three of the most talked about poems of 20th century.

In this research paper, as mentioned earlier, the research has two dimensions: one is the critical essay, *Tradition and Individual Talent*, and the other one comprises of the poem, *The Hollow Men*. David Spurr (1984), a well-known critic, in his book, *Conflicts in Consciousness: T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Criticism*, writes that the mental forces at work in Eliot's description of the poetic process serve as an analogy to the conflicts besetting the speaker in the poem. The speaker cannot speak, finds it impossible to say just what he means. He cannot find apt

equivalents for his overwhelming emotions and intentions. This poem thematically highlights the chaotic, diseased and defected nature of modern society through complex imagery. The protagonist of the poem procrastinates and is unable to make any decision in his life, representing the modern man. Between visions and revisions, he is unable to create something new and substantial. In the above passage, David Spurr relates this flaw of the hollow men to the inability of Eliot.

In the same book, David Spurr writes about *The Hollow Men* that it portrays a poetic consciousness and continuation of passive acts of denial and alienation. To common observations, *The Hollow Men* expresses the depth of Eliot's despair; it replaces the richly chaotic style of Eliot's poetry with an austerity of expression. His despairs, his disillusionments are no illustration of personal weakness; they are perfectly objective, because they are essential moments in the progress of the intellectual soul (p.91). *The Hollow Men* highlights the spiritual paralysis of modern society. It talks about the modern man's lack of Christian faith and spirit. It criticizes modern man for his meaningless and purposeless routines of life. In the above passage, Spurr mentions the resemblance between *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*. He says that *The Hollow Men* replaces the rich austerity of *The Waste Land* via continuation of the same subject-matter. Both the poems epitomize the chaotic and fragmented cosmos of modern society. He further adds that by observing *The Hollow Men* with an ordinary eye, it reveals the despairs of Eliot but his despairs, his disillusionments are completely objective and impersonal, highlighting the dilemmas of a diseased modern man.

Harriet Davidson (1999), a well-known critic, in her research article, *The Concept of Tradition*, says that Eliot's concept of tradition is globally comprehensive rather than elite, aesthetically restricted. It is, moreover, immanently socially real and changing rather than transcendently ideal and timeless. Largely unconscious, tradition is mainly transmitted through social breeding and imbibed through basic linguistic training through some of its most conscious achievements demand a special conscious effort to understand them. Tradition contains both good and bad, and requires constant criticism and change to keep it vital and worthy. For Eliot, tradition, being inextricably linked with language, constitutes the preconditioned and preconditioning matrix and medium of our thought (p. 1). Davidson, in this excerpt from her research, talks about Eliot's concept of tradition. She comments that Eliot's concept of tradition is not restricted to the aesthetics of certain classes but transcends the social. It is not something which comes through inheritance but is the result of timeless imitation of poets from history. Moreover, he adds that tradition sometimes needs a conscious effort to make the poetry vital and worthy.

Michael Schmidt (1979), in his book *An Introduction to Fifty Modern British Poets*, says that to Eliot, tradition is a matter of accretion and alteration. Each new work of literature relates to, and subtly alters, every new work that has come before. The writer acquires tradition by labor; he must develop a historical sense to appreciate both the past and present. All literature is finally contemporary, no writer can be judged from outside of this living tradition (p.121). Schmidt, through these lines, comments that Eliot gives the concept of tradition as a concept which changes and grows with time. Every new work by some means is the altered form of an already existing literary work. Furthermore, he adds that writers acquire the sense of tradition through great labor and they must be in a position to appreciate both the past and present sense of

tradition. No writer has a definition in isolation, and he/she must have a sense of belonging to the history. Therefore, no writer could be judged out of the context of tradition.

A German critic, Jürgen Kramer (1975), in his research article, T.S. Eliot's Concept of Tradition: A Re-evaluation, comments:

The influence of Eliot's essay, Tradition and Individual Talent, was epoch-making in literary criticism. The methodological principle with which he intended to re-vitalize the (aesthetic and moral) values inherent in great literary works of by-gone epochs for the present (in order to establish them as compulsory artistic norms for contemporary criticism and, implicitly, as moral criteria for social praxis) was that of a potentially dialectical concept of tradition (p.20).

All these critics explored different aspects related to the selected poem. It is evident that there is not a single research paper which solely focus on The Hollow Men and Tradition and Individual Talent together. Consequently, the current research paper fulfills this gap and tries to present a knowledgeable combination of the literary pieces by the same author i.e. Eliot.

Methodology of the Research:

Primary and secondary sources for this research paper are poems and the critical essay. Here, the researcher analyses the poem, The Hollow Men, in light of the critical essay, Tradition and Individual Talent. The essay serves as the theoretical framework for the research. In this research, arguments are based on textual references.

Concept of Tradition: Its Implications for The Hollow Men:

This section of the research paper focuses on the analysis of Eliot's poetry by tracing out the traditional elements in his poetry. Here, the researcher initially throws light on Eliot's concept of tradition or historical sense in literature which he has presented in his essay Tradition and Individual Talent, then analyses Eliot's poetry in the light of his own critical essay. One poem is under consideration i.e. The Hollow Men. The point of discussion and goal to achieve is to find out the elements of tradition adopted or taken up by Eliot in the poem.

The Hollow Men starts with two epigraphs. The first epigraph "Mistah Kurtz- he dead" refers to a character Mr. Kurtz in the novel Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad. Kurtz is an immoral and corrupt trader who fashions himself into a demigod to gain power in Africa. When he dies finally at the bank of river, the narrator witnesses his death and records Kurtz's last words as, "The horror! The horror" (p. 116). It reveals his moral shortcomings and the implications of European imperialism resulting in those horrors. So this epigraph is a quote from Conrad's novel narrating the moment after Kurtz's death.

The second epigraph "A penny for the Old Guy" is an allusion to Guy Fawkes (an annual commemoration observed on 5 November 1605), who tried to blow up the British Parliament but failed and was caught by the officials. Fawkes was a catholic and tried to overthrow the protestant monarchy of King James I. English people celebrate his downfall on November 5 by burning his effigies. Therefore, this epigraph is the voice of a child who offers effigies for burning and is begging for pennies.

The Hollow Men begins with reference to two persons who can be considered the two versions of the 'hollow men' of the poem. Both, Kurtz, and Fawkes tried to live immoral lives full of anarchy and chaos. By understanding the context of these allusions, we can understand the setting and central motif of the poem. Eliot begins his poem by referring to the past. He relates the poem he writes in his present time to traditional and historical characters.

The poem has been divided into five sections. Eliot alludes in the first section to Dante's *Inferno* and Greek mythology. In these allusions, death is figuratively described as crossing the river Styx i.e. "Those who have crossed/with the direct eyes, to death's other kingdoms". "The Hollow Men", with their dried souls and paralyzed bodies are unable to cross the river Styx to cross over into heaven or hell. On the other hand, those who have crossed that river in the past are remembered these men as hollow men. These lines set up a parallel between the characters like Kurtz, Fawkes and "The Hollow Men". In this way, Eliot juxtaposes the situation of past with the present arena of modern men.

In the fourth part of the poem, Eliot alludes to the great medieval poem *The Divine Comedy* by Dante. In the third stanza of this section in the lines, "sightless, unless/The eyes reappear/As the perpetual star/Multifoliate rose", Eliot shows the strong influence of Dante on him. In Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, paradise is imagined as a rose whose petals are made up of angels, saints and the mother of Jesus (*The image of heaven in Dante's Paradiso 32*). He also refers to God as "single star". Dante is among those literary figures that have inspired others in the history of literature. For Eliot, he is an authority at the apex of history of literature. That's why Eliot adds Dante's colour to his poetry.

In the fifth section of the poem, Eliot adds: "Here we go round the prickly pear/ Prickly pear, prickly pear/ Here we go round the prickly pear/ At five o'clock in the morning." In these lines, Eliot refers to the episode of Jesus Christ's resurrection in the Bible. Eliot says, instead of dancing around the mulberry bush, the hollow men's chorus goes around the prickly pear which is a type of cactus—a useless plant. In Christian ritual, a dance happens at 5 o'clock in the morning with a song that talks about Christian salvation. This very time at 5 o'clock is the time of Christ's resurrection; but hollow men are dancing around a prickly pear, which is useless. It is an ironic statement made by Eliot about the absurdity of modern man. For clarifying his idea, Eliot refers to the Bible which adds beauty to his art, to his imagery.

In the same section, in the line "For thine is the kingdom", Eliot alludes to the Lord's Prayer which is the most famous prayer in Christendom. This prayer was recited by Jesus Christ as a model how to pray. Again, Eliot is referring to history to show the resemblance in the events and episodes of past with contemporary events described in his poetry.

Hollow Men in the Light of Theory of Impersonality:

This section focuses on Eliot's theory of impersonality presented in his critical essay *Tradition and Individual Talent*. The researchers analyse *The Hollow Men* in the light of this theory. The researchers tried to find out whether Eliot has followed his theory in his poetic practice or not, whether he is impersonal in his approach or not.

T.S. Eliot is of the opinion that the artist must surrender himself to something substantial in the tradition that is more valuable than him. He should allow himself to be shaped and

rectified by the past to acquire the sense of tradition throughout his literary career. Initially, his self and his individuality might assert themselves, but as he develops his canon, there must be greater and greater sacrifice and extinction of personality. Consequently, it will lead him to objectivity rather subjectivity. It will not lead him to an iconoclastic practice that stands at crossroads with past literature, but it would bring a sense of belonging with the history and past. Through continuous sacrifices, an artist will not stand far from the stream of history, but he will stand as traditional by acquiring the sense of tradition. An appreciable piece of literature would be then traditional if it is a living whole of all poetry that has ever been written in the history. It is not worthy to preach personality all the time but to galvanize the traditional elements in poetry. The personality of a poet is just a medium that has the same significance as a catalyst has in a chemical reaction. His passions, his emotions must be depersonalized, and he must forget his personal joys and grievances or sorrows while composing poetry. That is why Eliot adds that honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry. Furthermore, he says in the essay that the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates.

The range of maturity of an artist is measured in terms of the degree to which he digests and transforms passions into something novel and substantial. The artist suffers i.e. he has experiences, but it is his mind that transmutes his experiences into something different and new. His personality does not find any expression in his poetry; it is merely like a catalytic agent in the process of poetic creation. Moreover, he adds in the essay that the mind of the poet is the shred of platinum in a chemical reaction and poetry is organization rather than inspiration.

In these lines, Eliot compares the mind of a poet with a catalyst or a jar in which countless feelings, emotions and passions are stored, and they remain there until organized and united by the poet into a new substantial form. The greatness of a literary piece does not depend on the components and substance of the poem; it depends upon the intensity of the process of poetic composition. The more united the fragments and pieces of chaotic emotions and feelings in the poetry of a poet, the more intense will be the poem and the greater will be the creation. The experience and impressions that are more important for the poet may not find a place in his poetry and he should come up with something universal and novel. Thus, Eliot rejects romantic subjectivity and emphasizes on the role of a poet as a scientist who preaches objectivity. Eliot says that the difference between art and the event is always absolute. In other words, there must be difference between artistic emotions and the personal emotion of an artist. In his essay, Eliot rejects Wordsworth's theory/definition of poetry i.e. its origin in emotions recollected in tranquillity, and argues that poetry is not a turning loose of emotions, but an escape from emotions; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.

Eliot points out that in the process of poetic composition there is neither completely personal emotion, nor recollection, nor tranquillity; it is only the result of combining concentrated experiences into a new form. Here, Eliot does not deny the role of personality or emotions of the poet, but he only emphasizes the notion that a poet must be impersonal in his approach to poetry. He must not talk thoroughly about himself. He must not pen down personal emotions all the time.

Initially, the researcher digs out such instances and elements that portray the dogmas of Eliot's personal life. The *Hollow Men* represents a poetic consciousness in intense nostalgia

through the acts of denial and alienation. It expresses both the depth of Eliot's personal despair and the dilemmas of spiritual and civilizational malaise.

Eliot had an intimate relationship with Emily Hale. She was more than a companion and less than a fiancée for Eliot. Eliot wrote many letters to her that enclosed their secret and intimate affair. After the death of Eliot's first wife, Vivienne Hough Wood, Hale locked up and sealed those letters in the archives of Princeton University for fifty years. Those letters seemed to offer a scandal more than a fair relationship. The letters were of such great importance that they were banned from display and boxed for fifty years (Skemer, 2017).

In a biography of 1973, T.S. Mathews predicted that these letters seem to promise Eliot's most private thoughts and feelings regarding the problems with his first wife. In the last section of the poem, in the phrase "Falls the shadow", Eliot reveals his personal despair about these letters. With the emphasis on the shadow in the final part of the poem, T.S. Mathews suggests that Eliot is talking about the promises that the letters seemed to pledge and assure. Here, Eliot makes a revelation of secret and private life. In such an instance, "The Hollow Men" offers shadowy and personal emotions though never in an autobiographical form. So, the poem, through its style, characterizes Eliot's personal revelation in the poem. The Hollow Men is a profoundly personal piece of literature that provides a glimpse, either secretly or explicitly, of Eliot's personal life.

The Hollow Men is the analysis of subjective realism and the states of The Hollow Men show the distraction, pretention, and escape of Eliot's own life. For instance:

The eyes are not here,
There are no eyes here,
We group together
And avoid speech,
Between the ideas
And the reality
Between the motion and the act
Falls the shadow. (52-59)

All these lines implicitly show Eliot's personal failures in love and personal shortcomings of life.

Conclusion:

Thomas Stearns Eliot was a renowned social and literary figure. He is widely known for his creed in critical and political compositions. In his critical essay, Tradition and Individual Talent, he presents a new conception of criticism through which he changes the basics of literary criticism. In his masterpiece like, The Hollow Men, he shows the modern civilization as futile and diseased. In such works, he describes the spiritual emptiness and sterility of modern men.

This research is the analysis of Eliot's poetry in light of his own critical essay, Tradition and Individual Talent. In his essay, he mainly discusses two things: the aspects of tradition and the theory of impersonality. He says that tradition cannot be inherited and talent is an inborn quality. Tradition involves historical sense or historical timelessness that means the fusion of past and present. For him, novelty does not support an approach that rejects traditional beliefs

and practices. No poet has his meaning alone; he must have a connection with the past and traditional attitudes of poetry and art. He must be compared and contrasted with the earlier poets and their works.

In the other part of the essay, he presents the theory of impersonality through which he rejects romanticism and subjectivity in poetry. Eliot is the supporter of objectivity in poetry. For him, poetry is not the turning loose of emotions but an escape from emotions. It is not the representation of personality but an extinction of personality. According to Eliot, the poet's creativity depends upon the process of depersonalization while worshipping personal attitudes can destroy it.

Significance and Conclusion of the Research:

After critically analyzing the poem of Eliot i.e. *The Hollow Men*, in the light of his critical essay the researcher concludes: Eliot is justified in his claim that a poet should allude to history and tradition. For instance, he alludes to Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, Tennyson, Ovid, Byron and Marvel etc. They are the figures who constitute the stream of history and tradition. He starts *The Hollow Men* with references to Joseph Conrad's work.

He alludes to Dante's *Inferno*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*. He refers to the Bible, Indian mythology and Lord Buddha. Briefly, the researcher finds Eliot justified in his claim that he makes in his essay. Therefore, Eliot has followed the tradition.

Eliot presents the theory of impersonality in his critical essay but does not follow his own conception. After applying Eliot's own theory on his poetry, the researcher finds no justification to this claim. Eliot propagates the concept of objectivity in his critical essay, but there is no such objective approach and extinction of personality in his poetry. He does not keep away his personal emotions from his artistic creation. He thoroughly discusses his personal affairs in his poetry i.e. his failed marriage and his own psychological conflicts. Eliot was a staunch believer in religion. Therefore, he consistently preaches morality, religion and ethics in his poetry. In other words, he deviates from what he says in his essay about extinction of personality.

The researcher concludes that Eliot's poetry has a subjective tone rather an objective one. His own feelings are more planted in his poetry than the things of outside world. Eliot is justified in his first claim about following the tradition but his second argument about extinction of personality has no ground in his practice of poetry.

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