

Mysticism and Sufism in T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'

Mariwan N. Hasan

Assistant Lecturer, Department of English, School of Basic Education, University of Sulaimani, Kurdistan / Iraq

Latef Saeed Noori (PhD)

Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Kirkuk, Iraq

Majeed Saeed HamaSalih (PhD Student)

Ministry of Awqaf and religious Affairs, Mashkhalan Mosque

Abstract

Eliot's metaphysical and spiritual poetry backs the notion that God's inclination to relate to the world gives some human beings some specific spiritual power, which can be attained merely via challenging and vigorous nonphysical exercises that makes them perceive life in a way different from others. The diversity of poetry, that Eliot had written, such as 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', is an amalgamation of spiritual and philosophical notions, which endeavours to elucidate the internal sense of belief and embody an artistic and effective stream that it depends on and contributes to Sufism.

Keywords: Sufism, Eliot, Prufrock, FitzGerald, Khayyam

Introduction

T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1917), is one of Eliot's early poems that attracted the attention of several critics. A vast majority of these critics believe that this poem indicates that Eliot was not religious when he composed it, but they might have not considered what Eliot says in this regard, "Religion (Christian or non-Christian) gives an apparent meaning to life, provides the framework for a culture and protects the mass of humanity from boredom and despair" (Eliot, 1949: 32). Perhaps Lyndall Gordon is the only one who has a different attitude concerning this subject and states that Eliot's "experiences in the spring of 1910 marked the beginning of his religious journey" (qtd. in Fairman, 2008: 14). However, she did not discuss this in detail to specify whether Eliot's intention was towards Christianity or mysticism/Sufism. Both Eliot's and Gordon's speeches clearly denote that Eliot regarded religion as an essential psychological factor that plays a vital role in the behaviour of the individual and society as a whole and when it diminishes the community may confront social instability since religion could be considered the main source of the spiritual values that give meaning to the individual's life without which the individual will be a hollow and empty creature.

Critics study Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism from Unitarianism on 29 June 1927; for instance Ronald Bush considers Eliot's conversion as a start into a religious life (Bush, 2004: 8-9), and Caroline Philips (1995: 1-4) thinks that Eliot's religious development witnesses some shifts, which she divides to two different stages. She believes that Eliot was in search for faith in the first stage which puts him in despair and believes it to be because of his conversion into Christianity in 1927, and the second stage in her view started from 1927. But Caroline Philips has not specified the date for the beginning of the first stage of Eliot's search for faith. Robert Graves does not seem to be satisfied with Eliot's poetry written after his conversion, he says 'for my part I wish that he had stopped at *Hollow Men*' (Graves, 1955: 129). On the contrary, Gordon thinks that Eliot's spiritual journey has started in 1910 and he experienced a moment of silence as he realised another real world, but she does not see 1927 as a turning-point in Eliot's search for religion, she rather sees 1917 as a big shift in Eliot's religious quest when his search took a pure Christian identity, in which Eliot shows interest in the life of religious people (Gordon, 2000: 3). Furthermore, Pinion (1986: 31) believes a great shift is noticed in Eliot's life after 1915, and that Eliot was in a quest of a religious belief due to the failure of his first marriage. But Natalie Albertson (2012: 10) argues that Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism uncovers his wish, frankly, to align himself with common beliefs that are the most authoritative and Peter Ackroyd also asserts that Eliot said that he did not like 'being a squatter' (Ackroyd 1984: 165) and he further comments that "the purposes of {Eliot's conversion} were two-fold. One: the Church of England offered Eliot some hope for himself, and I think Eliot needed some resting place. But secondly, it attached Eliot to the English community and English culture. About thirty years later Eliot describes his religious views that he combined "a catholic cast of mind, a Calvinist heritage, and a Puritanical temperament" (Eliot 209). He reveals a wide spiritual interest, in a radio interview on September 26, 1959 by Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk during which Eliot states that "I see the path of progress for modern man in his occupation with his own self, with his inner being." (qtd. in Wilson 335-336).

A great number of the writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were influenced by the *Rubaiyat* of Omer Khayyam (1048-1131), which was translated by Edward Fitzgerald (1809-83) whose first

edition appeared in 1859 entitled *The Rubaiyat of Omer Khayyam, the astronomer-poet of Persia*. It is observed that many literary figures were fascinated by it. Eliot is among those writers who admitted the impact the poem had on his early poetry. The main theme of Khayyam's quatrains deal with "the position of mankind in creation, and his relation with the creator, and the mystery of death and hereafter." (Seyed-Gohrab 15). Khayyam stresses that man's origin is the spiritual world and his involvement in the material side has made him confused and consequently lost spiritual ease and stability in life:

There was a Door to which I found no Key:
There was a Veil past which I could not see:
Some little Talk awhile of Me and Thee

There seem'd - and then no more of Thee and Me. (XXXII, Harrison 342)

Prufrock's journey is a sort of search for the meaning of existence in two directions; a sort of a diving into the self and an outward one into life with death at the back of his mind.

Eliot was influenced by Khayyam's poems in the early stage of writing poetry. As in the Paris interview, Eliot, in his reply to the interviewer's question about those who influenced him, says: "I began I think about the age of fourteen, under the inspiration of Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyam*, to write a number of very gloomy and atheistical and despairing quatrains in the same style, which fortunately I suppressed completely—so completely that they don't exist. I never showed them to anybody" (qtd in Hall, 1992: 261). Omer Khayyam's poetry contained elements of Sufism, which is closely related with the spiritual side of humankind's life. Certain concepts and practices like poverty, perseverance, seclusion, withdrawal from the world, depriving the self, ecstasy, inward transformation, spiritual development are basic characteristics of Sufism. (Taqees Al-Ashkhaas, 40-44, Masaadir At-Talaqee, 35-37). He is further described 'as mystical Sufi poet influenced by Platonic traditions' (Martin and Sandra, 2011: 164). Moreover, Eliot was influenced by Dante and Dante has brought the idea of Sufism into the Western culture: 'the knowledge received about Sufism in the West by such men as Dante' (Michon and Roger, 2006: ix), could clearly indicate that Eliot was under the influence of Sufism.

The critics' clue to justify that Eliot was not religious at that period of his life when he wrote 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is that the character of the poem, Prufrock addresses someone to go with him, might be a female character. But this argument is very weak as they are not sure that the companion is a female character. Yet no one is certain that the person is a lady. I do believe that the person Prufrock asks to go with him be a female character because Prufrock is too shy to express himself; if one is too shy, how can he ask a lady to go with him during the darkness of the night to 'cheap hotels'? (6). In fact, it seems that Prufrock is talking with himself as a monologue. Cooper John Xiros postulates that Eliot was able to work through the mental and neurotic 'tropes' of character's internal fear till he could find a solution in the rescuing 'promise of Christian faith, namely, a place where one can rest at a 'still point', (51). Eliot presented their problems in a way that modern humanity think that what he presents is their personal experience, and Eliot could do this by implementing 'dramatic monologue', (51). Cox and Dyson also assert that the poem does not seem positive in its perspective, however, it suggests positive implications that Prufrock 'is a lost' being to be sympathised with due to 'his sin' of uncertainty. A great deal of impurity was seen in the setting of 'The Love Song' a common background for an ordinary person, but the attractiveness of the setting can be seen in the images which might refer to what Prufrock will probably be, (Cox & Dyson 188). Jain also states that Eliot and Laforgue used a technique of 'dédoublement', (the process of undoubling) or the splitting of the self into subject and object, into thinking of the self and observing of the self, 'itself think and act', such as the 'You' and 'I' of 'The Love Song'.

Therefore, this kind of division of the self is the outcome of acute self-unconsciousness which inactivates tendency and discourages one to do anything and even to feel. This self-consciousness will enable one to be aware of himself and those who are around him, similar to Prufrock. The technique of 'dédoublement' is good for exploring non-objective experience and mental problems in an intensive way, (Jain, 1991: 38). The poem, 'The Love Song' begins with a reference to Dante's *Inferno*. The reader notices that the epigraph refers to a journey which is a sort of a descent into the underworld, the inferno, whereby the reader, the persona and the 'you,' which perhaps suggests the unconscious double of Prufrock, are searching for some meaning of life that has spiritual, religious or philosophical implications. Thus it is a quest into the self and into life, death and afterlife. Prufrock experiences certain psychological unsettlement for which he needs a definite decision, "decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse." The speaker of the epigraph is a character called Guido, who speaks in the hellish world of his own:

Let us go then, you and I,
when the evening is spread out against the sky
like a patient etherized upon a table. (Lines, 1-3)

There are different interpretations for the 'you' and 'I' of 'The Love Song'. George Williamson says that he is not certain who the 'you' is but he is sure that the 'I' is the speaker. He postulates that the title suggests a female but 'the epigraph suggests a scene out of the world, on a submerged level', (Williamson 59). Kaplan further points out that the speaker of the poem is 'I', which might be Prufrock and the listener is 'you', might be

a woman. They might be the speaker's two selves; one of which urges him to go but the other part holds him back, (Kaplan 18). Cooper also believes that the addressee is a female, (51). Who are the 'you' and 'I' of the poem? Is 'I' the reader or Prufrock? It might be what Jain Manju calls it 'dédoulement' of the self into subject and object. The word dédoulement can be outlined as the undoubling or separating of the persona into subject and object. Moreover, it can be explained as dividing of the self into reasoning and noticing as the 'you' and 'I' in 'The Love Song'. Eliot pursued Lafourge in applying the dédoulement technique in his poem, 'The Love Song' which intensifies self-consciousness and shows the two sides of human soul through this technique.

Eliot's adoption of dédoulement weakens the idea of a wholeness self, proposing that it is split and fragmented. A continuous shift of 'the precarious nature of the self' (Jain 42) and the weak conceptual separation between rationality and irrationality, is noticed in the poem. Prufrock like Dostovsky's characters in *Crime and Punishment*, delves deep in two real worlds, of them, readers may hardly be able to see the other world other than the world we, humans live in. Prufrock says:

To say, 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all' (Lines, 94-95)

The above two lines show that Prufrock feels pain as he is very self-conscious and knows many things that ordinary or careless people do not know and as people do not understand his purpose he does not know how to convey his thought to make them understand, 'it is impossible to say what I mean!' (Line, 104).

This technique is called 'dedoulement', which is useful for the reader and the writer as the reader can easily attain the truth about the target character which is Prufrock in this poem. It is a tool for the writer to use one character with two roles; the same person speaks and listens simultaneously. Readers also can trust the words of this character, which thinks that he is talking with himself; therefore, he must reveal the truth about any issue that he intends to discuss. Accordingly, it can be said that Prufrock is addressing himself that is why he is blaming himself. It is very difficult for a person to easily blame himself for not being able to do anything in his life with companions or in front of people, especially if the audience or the companion is a lady. This proves again that Prufrock is communicating with himself that is why dares to blame himself, to show his inability in the companion of women, and to show his lack of self-confidence. One may ask if Prufrock, who might represent Eliot, is not irreligious in this stage, what can support this argument? It is undeniable that there are so many characteristics of Sufism in the poem. It is seen that Prufrock is telling himself to go during the evening through empty streets that look like deserts and the places that Prufrock wants to go to are 'cheap hotels' ('The Love Song of' 6), which shows another trait of Sufis as they do not prefer this material world to stay in expensive hotels but they would rather prefer a simple life quite contrary to the modern people who only seek expensive and new things no matter if they are not good for the spiritual aspects of the person. Prufrock's visit is not only a simple visit from one place to another; it can be named as an escape from the modern people who are immersed in materialism rather than spiritualism. Khayyam says:

Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse - and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness -
And Wilderness is Paradise endow. (XI, Harrison 339)

Sufis like to live in seclusion and sometimes they use a language that contains metaphysical or abstract concepts, which is not easy to understand. Khayyam also says :

Into this Universe, and why not knowing,
Nor *whence*, like Water wil-nilly flowing,
And Out of it, as Wind along the Waste,
I know not *whither*, willy-nilly blowing. (XXIX, Harrison 342)

Prufrock shares the same features of Sufis by his escape from the crowd into a solitary area, but there he saw some women or he created them only with his imagination. Idries Shah states that Sufis are 'roses among thorns' (Shah, 1999: 15).

The metaphysical features of the poem start very soon in 'The Love Song', 'When the evening is spread out against the sky/ Like a patient etherized upon a table' (2-3). It is evident that this kind of comparison is quite similar to the writings of the metaphysical writers, and the influence of the metaphysical writers is also noticeable and should not be neglected. The reason that Eliot was interested in the writings of the sixteenth century poets was perhaps because of the quality of their writings. Their writings concentrated on the spiritual aspects of life, which is like the life of Sufis as they are both interested in the spiritual life and not in the materialistic world. It is now clear that Prufrock is alienated due to his stout interest in the spiritual and religious life that many modern people discarded them in their lives because of the negative influences of the philosophical and scientific theories emerged in the twentieth century that deny the existence of God, like Marx's Marxism, Freud's Determinism and Darwin's Theory of Evolution. It may be something ordinary if one notices some reference in Eliot's works to these theories as Darwinian theory of Evolution is noticed in

'Sweeney Erect' (1919), but this does not imply that Eliot was interested in this theory and regards it as positive. There is evidence to prove this while Eliot referring to the brutal acts of Sweeney, he links this action with 'Ourang-Outang's action'. When Sufis disagree with what is happening in the society, they would rather prefer to stay alone and keep silent and worship God much more than the usual times. Moreover, they intend to wait and see the outcome of the wicked actions of the people who kill each other and do evil actions against each other. Prufrock has the same wish as he says to himself in line 84 of the poem; 'I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker'. There will be sometime in the future to ask all of these sordid people in the world for their actions, i.e., they will be judged upon one day and then punished for their wrong deeds 'That lift and drop a question on your plate' ('The Love Song' 30). When Sufis and Prufrock here in the poem become silent, it does not mean that he accepts the situation, on the contrary as they perceive that they cannot change the society easily; therefore, they will be obliged to ask God to change the world for them to a better condition if not, they will ask God to punish the wrong doers in the community. Then Prufrock is blaming people because he realises that people always look at the appearance of each other, and they decide by the appearance;

With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
(They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!") ('The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' 40-44)

Modern humans will not attempt to understand what is inside a person whose appearance is not so beautiful and attractive. For spiritual and religious people, especially for Sufis, what is inside is much more important than the appearance that is why Prufrock, whose outer shape is not so attractive, is worried about his appearance because people care about it, and that is what draws the attention of people to itself, otherwise; his worry is not for his appearance, 'To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and 'Do I dare?' ('The Love Song' 38). The modern people are so sordid that they even do not let pious, spiritual and religious people remain religious and pious that is what Prufrock laments and perhaps warns us against.

Prufrock becomes fed up with his life of critiquing modern humans' wrong conducts and faults and says 'Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,/ I have measured out my life with coffee spoons' ('The Love Song' 50-51). His advice was useless to them, and even, on the contrary, they affected him negatively by making him think of the girls that he saw in the restaurants whose arms were white and braceleted with brown hair:

And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!) ('The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' 62-64).

Prufrock is anxious for he realises that his moment of greatness, which was the time that he was away from these modern corrupt people, is about to end. His great time was the time that he like Sufis and religious people was 'fasting, crying and praying'

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker ('The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' 81-85).

These lines indicate that he lived a similar life of a Sufi because Sufis usually like to be alone and cry for their sins and the sins of the other people, which they find as a purification of the soul. Khayyam says:

Oh, Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,
And who with Eden didst devise the Snake;
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
Is blacken'd, Man's Forgiveness give - and take! (LVIII, Harrison 345)

Furthermore, fasting is another feature of the religious people. The question here is that, how can one say that Prufrock was not religious, and he was not living a life of a Sufi? Then praying is again another feature of the spiritual and religious people to thank their Creator for all the good things He bestows on them. Prufrock also prays to God to thank God as Sufis and all Muslims do, it is clear in line 81 of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'; 'But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed'. Prufrock was made hesitant and doubtful of his life, by the actions of the people of his own society as he may have been told that if you did everything that religious and spiritual people do, why they do not have a better life than that of the irreligious people in the twentieth century? But in fact, his life is much better than that of the unbelievers because there are hidden

rewards for the religious people and believers in the hereafter world, but many people do not know, or they disbelieve it. After some time of being doubtful of his life Prufrock ignores this and says that he is not a prophet that is why, God would not respond to his demands, but he considers himself an ordinary person as a Sufi. What makes Prufrock sad is the feeling of losing the great moments of his life until he loses his importance and becomes the servant of the king, like Polonius. Prufrock says:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do ('The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' 111-12).

To sum up, Prufrock lived a life of a Sufi. He was religious and his fasting, crying and thinking that he is not like a prophet but a human being is an indication of that. He realises the significance of this stage of his life that he lived like a Sufi. He also knows that he might lose it by thinking of worldly things and ignoring being a true servant to God. This world becomes a hell in the perspective of Sufis and Prufrock as they only see people committing crimes and evil actions. On the contrary, the hereafter world would become a paradise for them as no one will do anything wrong there, that is why Prufrock like Sufis did not prefer this life as compared to the life after death. Prufrock is very hopeless with the modern humans, 'Till human voices wake us, and we drown' ('The Love Song' 131).

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