

Prufrock: A Modern Seeker for Postmodern Resolution

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Abstract: This article mainly reflects on Prufrock's urge for postmodern deliverance to overcome the anxiety of modernism. To reach this goal, it has deliberately been brought into discussion how Prufrock's repressed soul strives for deconstructing modernism. Sigmund Freud's theory of repression, Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction and tenets of modernism as well as postmodernism have been analyzed to draw the conclusion. Prufrock represents the breakdown in belief and thought in contemporary modern world. In doing so, he struggles for establishing his identity as he is. This underlying urge of Prufrock is the area of concentration in this study.

Keywords: Modernism, postmodernism, individualism, repression, deconstruction and identity

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is considered to be a manifesto of modernism that at the same time voices an urge for postmodern celebration of individualism. T S Eliot designs the poem incorporating a modern man's crises, limitations and frustrations. However, he cannot draw a conclusion to all those crises a modern man necessarily needs to undergo. In theory and practice, the idea of modernism is embedded in the concepts like despair, loneliness and fragmentation. The modern society fails to manage a way out of this imprisonment as their beliefs and age-old ideas experience a shake to the roots. To break down such an idiosyncratic feature of modernism there is heard repeated urges in multiple writings as in this particular poem. This very urge therefore brings into context a celebrated theory that is postmodernism, but fails to embrace it straightforwardly as it was not even in thoughts during the

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era of modernism. Here in this article the poem has been deconstructed to bring out the urge of Prufrock that much clearly seeks a shelter in postmodernism to escape the disillusionment of modernism.

In the beginning of the twentieth century when T. S. Eliot was constructing this poem, modernism was proceeding toward the peak. It is therefore natural that the poem epitomizes many of the essential features of modernism. By the time, modernism announced its arrival in the history of human thoughts; the society was experiencing breakdowns in beliefs and ideologies. But such unsettlement could not necessarily drive individual to establish selfness putting aside all riddles of fragmentations. T S Eliot himself in the poem could not transcend the boundary of confusions that he depicts through Prufrock. Therefore, throughout the poem the underlying tone of melancholy that mourns the confinement of a modern man within the barriers of confusions and dilemmas seeks for a way out. The modern society definitely creates space for individual but restricts the celebration of individualism. Prufrock strives for being unleashed from knots of all such tumults and establishing a self that has been suppressed under confusions until now. This particular desire of him reflects on the inevitability of postmodern celebration of individualism in order to liberate one's self. At the same time, it also indicates the struggle the repressed self of a person continually deals with. Consequently, postmodernism to some extent creates space for a repressed self of a person to come out of the imprisonment of modern confusion. A repressed self of Prufrock strives for establishing his truths driving away the truths of the society and how postmodernism brings an end to this crisis.

Modernism breaches the tie with the earlier age of Enlightenment mainly grounded on the cornerstone of 'collective truth'. Hugh Kenner, a critic and a teacher, terms prufrock as "a name and a voice." (Lazaro, 1989) Therefore, Prufrock's voice preaches a new truth of emancipating individuals. Society names individuals in order to refer to certain features that a person is built with and carries within his self. But as soon as anyone belonging to the society strives for a voice, he therefore strives for being unbridled from the trap of categorization. Throughout the poem, Eliot makes lots of observations that define well the character named Prufrock. The poem starts with an invitation that according to some of the critics is an urge for being accompanied with the alter ego of Prufrock, but visibly there is no one around Prufrock (Shahane, 1993). Essential it is to mention a few lines which would interpret the condition of Prufrock much clearly:

Modernist features in it such a way as to register a deep nostalgia for an earlier age when faith was full and authority intact ... there is a tone of lament, pessimism and despair about the world which finds its appropriate representation in these 'fractured' art forms. (Barry, 1994)

These features of modernism much well describe Prufrock. Earlier age of faith and authority is lost, and suddenly Prufrock discovers himself within a modern, faithless world. He, therefore, wonders on the 'half-deserted streets' (Eliot, L.5), in 'sawdust restaurants' (Eliot, L.8). Despair of loneliness grasps his soul and that is where Prufrock gets metamorphosed into a modern man. Prufrock finds his life 'measured out...with coffee spoons (Eliot, L.52).' Life of him is measured because he has not ever ventured to step on the other side of the boundary. His confusions are well expressed in a single question repeated for several times – "Do I dare?" The lament of him intensifies when he discovers the society continuously is formulating structures to categorize him, to confine him. Therefore, Prufrock utters those lines finding no way out –

And I have known the eyes already, known them all –
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
And when I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume? (Eliot, L.55-60)

Prufrock already knows very well his surroundings and he finds it utterly depressing. In this regard, below-mentioned lines can carry relevance – "he has heard the same voices, seen the same people. He knows that society very well and he does not like it. He finds it trivial and boring" (Lazaro, 1989).

In such a human world where "traditional systems of religious belief were undergoing considerable scrutiny (Coote, 1985)" and "the new interest in anthropology had revealed both the importance of belief in the maintenance of an ordered society (Coote, 1985)", the society more concentrates on material gains, sophistication and elitism than contemplating on the soul. Trapped thus in such society, Prufrock strives. He wants to liberate his repressed self from fears and confusions. Throughout the poem Prufrock elaborates on his "not-ness" to suggest what he "is". Like Guido in hell, well-illustrated in the epigraph (Shahane, 1993), Prufrock says everything about his life to the reader, but in reality he is afraid of exposing it to his surround. In the course of the poem, Prufrock makes it clearer that "I am no prophet," (Eliot, 83) that "That is not what I meant, at all," (Eliot, L.97) that "I am not prince Hamlet" (Eliot, L.111) Inevitable then the question comes, "who he is?" Prufrock knows clearly who he is, but he is not courageous enough to declare it to the world. This is because "modern man lives in a world, which, in the words of Max Weber, a second and perhaps greater sociologist, is going through a state of Entzauberung – literally unmagicking – the disenchantment or disillusion (Coote, 1985)." It,

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therefore, certainly becomes difficult to establish something when it is under process. The trauma, Prufrock experiences, finds a significant illustration as his time sees how modern dilemmas are gradually turning extreme. The tone merged with melancholy and confusion therefore seeks an identity bereft of despair, rather celebrating individualism.

It is now important to go into Freudian psychoanalysis to analyze Prufrock's repressed self. "This is the idea of repression, which is the 'forgetting' or 'ignoring' of unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires or traumatic past events, so that they are forced out of conscious awareness and into the realm of the unconscious (Barry, 1995)." In the poem, there is no visible recollection of Prufrock's past events or desires or unresolved conflicts. There is therefore no straightforward way of 'forgetting' or 'ignoring' on the part of Prufrock's unconscious. However, throughout the poem Prufrock undergoes a process of repression. He is even 'afraid' of confronting the world. In the very beginning of the poem, when Prufrock with his obscure companion wishes for an evening out in almost deserted corners, spontaneously his words lead to a question that he much consciously avoids to bring into words – "To lead you to an overwhelming question... /Oh, do not ask, 'what is it?' / Let us go and make our visit." (Eliot, L.10-12)

The lines express it much clearly that Prufrock has repressed one of the most obvious questions during his conversation with someone unknown to the reader. The question therefore remains 'why has he done so?' Few stanzas after this one, it is found that Prufrock is not confident enough to expose his true self to the world. He repeatedly faces the same question 'Do I dare?' It would be easier to analyze if the lines are quoted here –

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
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 chain,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin -
(They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!")
Do I dare
Disturb the universe? (Eliot, L.37-47)

This long stanza adapted from the poem delineates it much clearly that Prufrock is entangled in a dichotomy. He is scared of exposing what he is as he is counting on the sneering society. Even at the end of the poem Prufrock cannot come out of this dilemma. Therefore such on-going and

persistent repression of his true self spoils the essence of existence which definitely anyone never welcomes.

Under the light of Freudian psychoanalysis, it would be celebration to focus on the inner self of Prufrock –

“Freud suggested a three part ... model of the psyche, dividing it into the ego, the super-ego and, the id, these three ‘levels’ of the personality roughly corresponding to, respectively, the consciousness, the conscience, and the unconscious (Barry, 1995).”

Prufrock’s conscious is deliberately repressing his true self. He is not exposing what he is – “The conscious self projects the kind of image that is culturally and socially acceptable. But the unconscious finds ways and means to express itself too – and this is what literary texts and language allows ... The mechanisms of the unconscious, of desires and fears also required and acquired a language of their own (Nayar, 2010).” Prufrock therefore does not have the courage to show to the world that he is bald, he is growing old, his legs are thin. His conscious self is afraid of the outer world ignoring his innermost desires. He does not even dare go out in gathering, and that is why, he prefers half-deserted streets, evening time and dusty restaurants. His desire for living a life of his own is continually being repressed. It is not evident in the poem that Prufrock’s unconscious is hinting on his desires through any other medium except his active participation in the affairs of existence. However, what is clearly evident in the poem is that Prufrock’s free will as a being is undergoing continuous repression. It therefore calls for another essential philosophical idea in context regarding the human world, that is, existentialism –

“Sartre believed that man has no such ‘nature’ to fall back on. It is therefore useless to search for the meaning of life in general. We are condemned to improvise ... we must decide for ourselves how to live (Gaarder, 1996).” Prufrock’s relentless counting on the society jeopardizes the meaning of his on existence. It is not like that Prufrock believes in social terms; rather he is well onlooker of the fakeness of it. Still he cannot come out of the box because modernism is a process of disenchantment; and to achieve postmodernism’s goal of celebration it is essential to establish one’s wishes and desires tearing apart all confusions and complications. True meaning of Prufrock’s life seems to have stood on a turning point where he essentially needs to choose a single way – “Sartre says that man feels alien in a world without meaning...man’s feeling of alienation in the world creates a sense of despair, boredom, nausea and absurdity (Gaarder, 1996).”

Prufrock can hold on to his meaningless life where he cannot even bring out his true self. Therefore, adhering to such a miasma of life, Prufrock is sure to intensify the feeling of despair and boredom even more, according to the words of Sartre. On the other hand, as soon as Prufrock

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would choose to go beyond this stagnancy of life, he essentially needs to unveil his true self before the world and establishes his individualism. To rescue Prufrock from losing his conscious in the realm of Freudian unconscious, postmodernism is an inviting gateway. In the poem, Eliot fabricates Prufrock with the colors of modernism in which Prufrock searches for a place of relief; he goes to the beach and all other lonely places in the city. But it is human world that he is supposed to reside in. To re-establish his ground in this world he needs to be proud of his features and possessions. This is therefore what postmodernism suggests for.

“For the postmodernist...fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of beliefs (Barry, 1995).” Prufrock’s alienation from the outer world can be celebratory only when he would be able to come out of ‘formulated phrase’ and surpass ‘fixed systems of beliefs’ so far. It is therefore essential to embrace a system that celebrates selfness and that is what postmodernism essentially believes in as it is regarded as “a principled reaction to modernism and modernity (postmodernism, intro).” It is important now to understand the essence of modernism to reflect on the inevitability of postmodern escape gate for Prufrock –“In literature, finally, there was a rejection of traditional realism (chronological plots, continuous narratives relayed by omniscient narrators, ‘closed endings’, etc) in favor of experimental forms of various kinds (Barry, 1995).” It becomes clear in the definition that modernism epitomizes fragmentation. It is, therefore, a matter of concern whether this fragmentation heralds the celebration of liberation or not. However, from previous discussions, it also becomes clear that fragmentation of modernism preaches despair and boredom incessantly. Prufrock is suffocated as well under such discourse of modernism. This is why he is fearful of the world outside. It has been found that “the term ‘postmodernism’ was used in the 1930s, but its current sense and vogue can be said to have begun with Jean Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Barry, 1995).” It is evident as well that “it was in 1910 also that he wrote his earliest mature poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (Shahane, 1993).” Consequently Prufrock is not supposed to take shelter in postmodernism to escape the tensions of modernism. However, there is an undertone prevalent in the poem which seeks for postmodernism much boisterously. It would not be exaggerating to say anything like as “it could be said, then, that one way of establishing the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is to dissolve the sequential link between them, by retrospectively redefining certain aspects of modernism as postmodernist (Barry, 1995).” Both of these isms of thoughts share certain ideas like fragmentation and alienation, but it differs in the treatments. Prufrock’s unheard urge for a world valuing each and every sort of existence

therefore find to breathe out in the air of postmodernism. As modernism and postmodernism opposes certain aspects of their discussion, under the light of Derrida's deconstruction theory Prufrock's rescue in the shelter of postmodernism finds a more relevant and solid ground –

“Deconstruction is a tactic of decentering, a way of reading, which first makes us aware of the centrality of central term. Then it attempts to subvert the central term so that marginalized term can be center (Barry, 1995).” Although modernism and postmodernism do not exist as binary opposites in the history, the seed of postmodernism is hidden in the soil of modernism. Without the arrival of postmodernism it would be impossible to look into modernist's despair. Therefore, the term postmodernism is marginalized under the guise of disappearance in the era of modernism, is repeatedly being invited as a soother. In the course of the poem Prufrock asks – “Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?” (Eliot, L.122)

As an individual Prufrock has the right to decide on which side he is going to keep his hair and to decide if he needs to eat a peach or not. He however cannot get out of accumulated confusions. It is because modernism creates a chance for coming out of ‘grand narrative’ but does not give permission to cling to that with self-conviction. It would be much relevant if quoted – “Some of the important characteristics of the literary modernism...a new emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity (Barry, 1995).” Now the question obviously comes which ‘grand narrative’ modernism is talking about that leaves the modern man Prufrock in the darkness of confusions. To answer this question, it is essential to reflect on history a little more –

“These ‘metanarratives’ [‘super-narratives’], which purport to explain and reassure are really illusions, fostered in order to smother difference, opposition and plurality...’Grand narratives’ of progress and human perfectability, then, are no longer tenable and the best we can hope for is a series of ‘mininarratives’, which are provisional, contingent, temporary and relative and which provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances. Postmodernity thus ‘deconstructs’ the basic aim of the Enlightenment, that is ‘the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject (Barry, 1995).” Deconstruction of grand narrative necessitates the birth of micro-narratives, that is, the tales of individuals. Coming out of the structure of generalization, individuals get the chance to discover an inner self composed of individualized wills. Such establishment of subjectivity is featured in modernism as well, as mentioned beforehand, but postmodernism encourages the expression of those leaving aside all confusions –

“The modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it (Barry, 1995).” This single line is supposed to bring a state of relief to all dilemmas and confusions to Prufrock's life. Prufrock is a

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modern wanderer who is dwelling in a state of embarrassment. He cannot cope with his society, neither he can ignore the social structures that he is mostly abhorrent of. His physical limitations and social status complicate his existence. Instead of concentrating on cultivating his free will, Prufrock is more concerned about the eye of the society, although he knows very well there is fakeness rooted in the soil of the society. His lack of adequate confidence and repeated states of confusions actually intensify his trauma more. However, underneath all such words, a cry for liberating his captivated soul echoes throughout the poem. It is a cry for establishing what Prufrock is rather than how much he keeps pace with the expectations of the society.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” embodies modernism with all its inseparable wings like alienations, fragmentations, despair and inabilities. These lamentations clearly seek for a gateway for liberation and celebration. This is what modernism fails to provide Prufrock with and leaves him behind as a lonely wanderer. Prufrock therefore strives alone to step out of the structure. He therefore only can break down this structural imprisonment if he goes under the umbrella of postmodernism. Postmodernism is tuned with the celebration of individual self and drive all sorts of lamentations as well as confusions away. Prufrock’s assimilation with postmodernism can give him the ultimate ground for self-exposure.

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