

A Paranoid Tale of Prufrock Mirrored In the Anguish of Existentialism Encompassing both Dreams and Nightmare

¹Homayra Binte Bahar, ²Bidisha Zaman

¹Lecturer, Department of English, Southeast University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

²Lecturer, Department of English, Southeast University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT: *Existentialism is a philosophic standpoint that leads human beings to a path of conscious existence. The transient life of human beings generates thoughts that evolve around both optimistic and pessimistic attitudes. T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" penetrates the anguish and absurdity of life where dreams and nightmares make parallel co existence. Prufrock aspires to be a welcomed, loving and sociable character, but the superciliousness and intriguing attitude of society sets him back and keeps him aloof from all sorts of social interactions. He lacks internal moral strength to raise his voice against the prejudices and superstitions of society. His lingering passivity forbids him to nurture the optimism that takes a failed attempt to make him free from existential anguish. This poem concentrates on the stream of consciousness where it starts with an in between condition of consciousness and unconsciousness and ends up abruptly without any solution. This paper focuses the theme of abruptness which in turns reveals the anguish of Prufrock as a modern man.*

KEYWORDS: *Alienation, Anguish, Dilemma, Duplicity, Existentialism*

Human existence is a celestial identification that can be perceived by delicate and logical analysis. Our existence has its roots to inscrutable and vague ideologies begotten from the dilemma between existence and non existence. The parallel co-existence of life and death gives birth to the overwhelming feeling of consciousness. So a conscious being that means being in consciousness where a person is tormented both mentally and morally as well as is confused, disturbed and conflicted extracting out the meaning of human existence in the panorama of existential crisis. Psychological crisis of a man creates anguish and pain that are essentially incorporated with fear, lack of confidence and persistent indecision. Eliot's creation of modern man in "The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock" epitomized the central character as lost existence who in every moment undergoing an endless argumentation with his own self. The very vivid and impressionistic outside world has cast a more lucrative and empowering picturesque in his visionary mind which ultimately propels his confused thought to be engaged in imaginative self argumentation, like "Let us go then you and I".....Here "you" is transferred to the "I" inhabitants of the outside world where Prufrock has existence but overshadowed with indecisions and duplicity.

Existentialism is a 20th century philosophical viewpoint which gives priority to existence over essence. It focuses upon the analysis of existence and of the way humans find themselves existing in the world. It gives primacy in significance to existence, in the sense of my existence as a conscious subject, rather than to any essence which may be assigned to me, any definition of me, any explanation of me by science or philosophy or religious or politics. In simpler terms, it is concerned with the discovery of self and the significance of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. The idea is that people are searching to find out who and what they are throughout life as they make choices based on their experiences, beliefs, and outlook. And personal choices become unique without the necessity of an objective form of truth. An existentialist believes that a person should be forced to choose and be responsible without the help of laws, ethnic rules, or traditions.

Existentialism takes into consideration the underlying concepts:

- Human free will
- Human nature is chosen through life choices
- A person is best when struggling against their individual nature, fighting for life
- Decisions are not without stress and consequences
- There are things that are not rational
- Personal responsibility and discipline is crucial
- Society is unnatural and its traditional religious and secular rules are arbitrary
- Worldly desire is futile

After the Great Depression and World War II, there was a great sense of hopelessness and anguish in the society. At that time the idea of Existentialism came out. The spirit of optimism that used to prevail in the society was destroyed by World War I and its mid-century calamities. This despair had been articulated by existentialist philosophers well into the 1970s and continued on to this day as a popular way of thinking and reasoning (with the freedom to choose one's preferred moral belief system and lifestyle). In Eliot's creation the modern man Prufrock resembles the persisting depression and moral decay of the alienated society. He becomes the axis of hope and hopelessness, decisions and indecisions, love and hatred and dream and nightmare. Eliot starts the poem abruptly in a stream of consciousness "being etherized upon a table" and it meets the end without maintaining any chronology where the protagonist revolves around the whirlpool of oceanic confusions of life and hesitantly dreams of a "mermaid" which brings the hope of good life and good sense. Throughout the existential saga of pain and suffering only a few people in life can make some meaning of life where the majority lies in floating condition in an ocean of confusion. Their mind moves like a pendulum spinning on the thought "where to begin and where to end", "what to do and what not to do" representing the confusion of Hamlet- "to be or not to be".

An existentialist is identified as a religious moralist, agnostic relativist, or an amoral atheist. Kierkegaard, a religious philosopher, Nietzsche, an anti-Christian, Sartre, an atheist, and Camus an atheist, are credited for their works and writings about existentialism. Sartre is noted for bringing the most international awareness to existentialism in the 20th century. Each one of them agreed on the lack of precision, power and control that human beings have over their existence which lead them to a life that is in no way complete or fully satisfied. Existentialists believe this crisis of human beings arise when society imposes their belief, values and rules over them, thus it destroys their individualism, dehumanize them and reduce them to being an object.

Prufrock is nobody in the figurative world of clumsiness and anguish. He considers himself as an etherized patient who being half conscious visualizes and experiences his journey of life through stream of consciousness. He does not feel active, decisive and sprightly but very much conscious of his existential failure in reaching peak of tranquility. Apparently, of course he seems to be escapist who prefers to dormant under the coziness of drowsiness. But a meticulous and scrupulous outcast on his feeling essentially depicts his acute and intense suffering for being incapable, inconfident and absolutely confusing for being a part of society having influential existence. He is devoid of free choice and free decision. He belongs to acquiring free will, but simultaneously the innate drive, required expedite, equal amount of self esteem and obsessive social phobia are taking part in de existentializing his being from his own self.

Prufrock is a partly existential creation of Eliot who is shocked and tormented by the tedious argument of society where people socialize with mocking attitude overwhelmed by an "insidious intent". So, the ultimate question regarding the meaninglessness of human existence is continuously knocking on the conscious mind of Prufrock. This ethical question endows Prufrock with a prophetic status. The very "conscious" mind of Prufrock knows that "life goes on" no matter what we feel of, think of or bother about. This simply reflects the existential suffering of Prufrock as a modern man. He is the epitomic representation of every moment of every modern

man in anguish, torment and psychological disequilibrium. He features out intense and intriguing swallowing of typical modern life, the penetrating moral crisis of human soul eventualized in permanent pain.

It can be philosophized that the metabolism of Prufrock's character is the strongest power but undiscovered as an influential modern man. So, like Sartre's existential man Eliot's Lost Hero Prufrock momentarily demonstrates his will power to murder and create, to prepare a face to meet the faces we meet. He is longing for regeneration and his good hope parallelly incorporates with Shelly's "West Wind" where the Renaissance spirit foretells "when winter comes can spring be far behind". So there will be time, time for a radical change to burnish the rustic society which is caught by jaundiced and morbid ideologies and haunted by phobia and terror. A weak minded confused man like him is kindled to his existential anguish failing to find a good place for him in the "mask wearing" society which for the time being brings forth revolutionary spirit in him. But this self rejoice of living in a revolutionized and reformed world deems out in a second. His confusion gallops him; his inconfidence takes control over him and makes him go through "start hundred visions and revisions" before "the taking of a toast and tea". His rapid change of character is the absolute feature of a modern man whose mind keeps moving like a pendulum from positive sphere to negative sphere. Every modern man in Eliot's poem is dramatically confused, agitated and emotional.

Prufrock like very much of a modern man seems to be worried about his outlandish appearance and going old. The wrong norms and social formula fix him on the wall of comments and mockery. Shallowness of the society which ponders over the external look of the people creates negative anticipation in Prufrock's mind about his successful physical intercourse. It ultimately makes him unable to face the society and to create his bold existence around tidy settings of society. He cannot make assurance of himself as a man who has every possible quality to attract ladies and socialize with them. He is absolutely vulnerable to very shaking thought concerning his justification of success and failure in life. He simply cannot be happy with what he has. His self love and self esteem are even affected by others' comments and judgments. This is the extreme level of his moral anguish. A person who does feel every moment of his dislike to society is corrupted and unscrupulous but his ideological free will is not given attention and moral empowerment.

The sense of duplicity within every modern man is major motif in Eliot's "The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (12). In this poem the hero is helplessly captured in an interminable situation where a quarrel between his own desire to love by his individual spirit and the unwanted social obligations that make him surrender to the social norms and rules. Eric Sigg in his book affirms that Eliot depicts duplicity between the "character and environment" and between the warning elements with a single soul". This duplicity makes him suffer painfully and helplessly. Prufrock has to make collaboration between his two selves the personal and the social and at the end of the day he makes himself the mocking scapegoat of his existential crisis. His life has been "measured out by coffee spoons" which casts light on his meticulous social observation and his failure to find a suitable place for him in "dying voices" of society. He in true sense does not morally exist in the midst of fake and mask wearing society. Man tries to make himself accepted by society making adjustments with a sort of compromise. Joseph Conrad strikes the idea even further. He states that "we can at times be compelled into a mysterious recognition of our opposite as our true self" (The Norton Anthology of English Literature 847). Man is nevertheless, instinctively and naturally a creature different from what he puts forward the public. Man again has a sense of duplicity regarding his own self. He suffers yet he is unwilling and incapable to bring any revolution to shake down society. Prufrock in anguish tells us "'the eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase (the must to do social conventions)

*And when I am formulated sprawling on a pin
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wriggling wall
Then how should I begin*

In a book entitled T.S Eliot, The Longer Poems, Derek Teraversi is of opinion that badness is within the man not within the society. According to him man is psychologically handicapped and unable to take necessary actions. Hugh Kenner in his the invisible poets specifies that the self conflict in Prufrock, who stands

for the modern man and himself and also his conflict with the society no more than a fool (20). The fact is explicitly expressed in the poem where Prufrock is analyzing himself as “at times indeed almost ridiculous. / Almost, at times the fool (lines 118-19). So Prufrock ultimately returns back to his own self which would result into two dilemmas: his inability to communicate and, consequently, his isolation.

Prufrock’s penetrating isolation speaks for his extreme loneliness and saga of bleeding experience which he has gone through every common life style of a modern man. There is no actual action. Things are taking place around but he is a passive audience who can intensely and acutely feel, realize and perceive his anguish born from his incapability to communicate with the current social prejudices. In this sense, all the actions take place in the speaker’s mind, like walking through narrow streets, coming from the dead, disturbing the universe, scuttling across the floors of silent seas and other references to action, interspersed throughout the poem, are fake, false and wrapped with Prufrock’s imaginative spirit. Actions take place in his mind and he just passively and of course negatively personifies every thing of his surrounding mundane life. He does nothing. He is far removed or better can be termed anchored in a desolate island of his obscure and confused mind. He is isolated. He can’t enjoy being with others or if he can it’s so painful. G.B. Harrison in his book *Major British Writers*, describe these people as “people whose pleasure are so sordid and so feeble that they seem almost sadder than their pains.” (830).

Prufrock’s severe isolation suddenly makes him mentally stronger and decisive. His existential crisis fuels him with a momentary spirit to change the universe like ‘squeezed the universe into a ball and to roll it to an overwhelming question and the hidden imagery of his lines “I m Lazarus, come from the dead....that is not what I meant at all...that is not at all...”

This is actually the meaninglessness of human existence. From where we come and where we go we have no idea. This is very much instinct of a human being. Man is inborn isolated. He is thrown into this unknown planet to survive alone. But man on the other hand believes in fraternity, so he can make society which gives birth to nonaesthetic prejudices and confusions. So, again the isolated individuality comes to man’s life and amid all social attractions and pleasures and business where man is lone with his own self, with his conscious unimaginative power. So our modern hero Prufrock is conscious of every particle of his city life. His isolation and sense of meaninglessness is focuses through “overwhelming question”. Nevertheless human features are more evident in Eliot’s poetry. Man suffers an impoverishment of emotional vitality. He is bound to live according to the social norms and cultures. Man’s life is partly sordid and sensual. But unlike Camus’ Okonko or outsider Prufrock is not stronger enough to raise his voice of spirit to bring the change. He is shaken and undecided as well as questioned by his divided mind hundred times before taking any initiative to be a social part or to squeeze the universe in order to settle down existing social wrongs.

Prufrock’s existential crisis takes him to the world of nothingness where there is nothing that can structure his world. He is in state of ultimate rejection. He rejects all of the philosophies, sciences, political theories and religious norms which fail to reflect his existence as conscious being. ‘I m no prophet’.....this self utterance is politic, cautious, and meticulous but obtrude. Prufrock stands in anguish. He are stripped off the structure of knowledge, moral value and human relationship. In the first few line of the poem we get the touch of his mental stagnation.

Again the reflection of one line ‘do I dare’ reflects his mental instability and at the same time inability in getting into any relationship.

The theme of alienation pervades the poem all through. Alienation is the theme which Hegel opened up for the modern world on many levels and in many subtle forms. Prufrock gets alienated from the society through his thoughts and action just like a patient etherized upon a table-who is aloof, detached, and unable to relate with the society both mentally and physically. Prufrock is alienated from the social system and he does not know that his desires are system determined and system determining. He does not identify with the institution of his own society. He finds his society empty and meaningless-“ in the room women come and go...talking of Michelangelo.....”is a clear depiction of the meaninglessness of society.’ Talking of

Michelangelo” points towards the shallowness of the society where people interact with each other on a vague and baseless topic. On the other hand, the existentialists point out that all other personal human relations are poisoned by feelings of alienation from any other. Alienation affects all social and works, relations and most cruelly alienation dominates the relationship of love. “Michelangelo talk” in other words is not a genuine way of communication since it does not penetrate to real alive peoples’ life, in the case the speakers’ themselves. Tangible communication is generally referred to surface level of thought of society. It infiltrates no sign of heartfelt communication rather maneuvered and stereotyped talk where interaction is done only for the sake of it. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is commonly described as a “drama of literary anguish” presenting a stream of consciousness in the form of dramatic interior monologue. With its weariness, regret, embarrassment, longing, emasculation, sexual frustration, sense of decay, and weariness of mortality, Prufrock has become one of the most recognized voices in modern literature. The poem is an inner monologue, which means that everything in the poem is spoken from the inside of his mind and hesitantly reveals his personal feelings to a listener. Only the narrator talks and intentionally and unintentionally reveals information about him. The speaker expresses his thoughts about the dull, uneventful, mediocre life he leads as a result of his feelings of inadequacy and his fear of making decisions. Being unable to seize opportunities or take risks(especially with women), Prufrock lives in a world that is the same today as it was yesterday and will be the same as it is today. He does try to make progress, but his timidity and fear of failure inhibit him from taking any action.

It is true that Prufrock’s overtly expressed fears that seem to stem from his aging. For instance, he mentions the thinning of his hair in lines 40, 41, and 82 and the aging itself is mentioned toward the end of the poem:

I grow old...I grow old...

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled. (lines120-121)

However, all of Prufrock’s problems stem from his insecurity and inability to reveal his interests in the woman in the party. “How should I presume?” He asks several times throughout the poem (lines54 61, and 68). Prufrock is so entranced and frustrated by the women that every detail, including the arm ”bracelated and white and bare”(line63), the” long fingers” that smooth away the afternoon (line76), and the “skirts that trail along the floor” (line 102) become everything to him in that moment. Prufrock’s attitude toward the women at the party is highly ambivalent. Although he is completely obsessed by his unfulfilled desire, he also sees little value in them. -50) The fear that Prufrock has of the women is not simply fear of rejection, but also fear that the women who are the objects of his desire may turn out to be shallow.

Prufrock is dying from the moral decay of his generation. As Gertrude Stein told Ernest Hemingway, “You all are lost generation.” This sentiment is clearly evident in Eliot’s masterpiece. Prufrock’s reference to his fear at seeing the “eternal Footman” is the key image of the poem. Of course he was afraid, because not only he was coward, but he is an aging narcissist who has only recently come to realize that he has wasted his entire life. He has spent his days in petty luxury, and now, as he is dying, he sees that he has been spiritually starved. Eliot was telling the modern creator that it was no surprise that he or she is alienated from civilization, because civilization is no longer civilized. Modern culture has failed to instill values in the members, so individuals have retreated within themselves. The ego has become our idol. The problem with egotism, though, is not only that it is seen as evil in Christian Theology, but that it is useless to a person who has an inferiority complex. Prufrock, the quintessential “modern man”, clearly has an inferiority complex because he constantly requires validation from outside himself.

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