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TREATMENT OF RELIGION IN THE DRAMATIC WORKS OF T.S. ELIOT*

Nasser Maleki**
E-mail: maleki_n5@yahoo.com

Majid Farahian***
E-mail: majid_fa53@yahoo.com

Abstract

T.S. Eliot took to the writing of poetic dramas in order to instill religious awareness among his readers which has a subtle under-pattern of great validity in changing the life outlook of men and women with a modicum of sensibility. He was very much concerned about the fate of a society moving inexorably toward thoroughgoing secularism and the materialism which accompanies it. It is in this context that Eliot cautioned his readers to note that secular humanism was not enough. He held that urgent need was some form of religious belief in God. With this perspective in mind, in this article the treatment of religion in the Eliot's dramas is undertaken to be examined. This article also argues that through his poetic dramas Eliot touches on the various problems connected with religious awareness and spiritual values.

Key Words: Eliot, poetic drama, religiosity, secularism, sense of doubleness.

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** - Assistant Professor Razi University

*** - Lecturer of Islamic Azad University-Kermanshah Branch

Introduction

The intellectual world of the 1920s was treated to a delicious irony. A pioneer of the modernist movement, T. S. Eliot, known for his fragmented, elusive poetry, became, in his own words, a "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion." The author of *The Waste Land*, that obscure work of dark despair, began to accept assignments from the Anglican Church; however, his contemporaries did not readily accept the genuineness of his new commitment to liturgical Christianity. Even some of his friends had the idea that it was not the true religion which had inspired Eliot and maintained that 'he had simply tendered his soul to the establishment' and 'the mainstream society'. But appearances can be deceiving as they were in Eliot's case (Cooper, 2007:26). He truly believed that the very existence of Western civilization was threatened and knew of only one alternative: a vigorous rediscovery of what it means to live Christianly. Eliot was deeply convinced that there is a close relationship between art and religion and believed that without it, the recourse to any form of utopian vision would not be of much avail. His studies in anthropology at Harvard had already introduced him to the sociocultural importance of religion as a primordial binding force in society. A common set of transcendental beliefs made it possible for a people to experience the plentitude of a vital communal life and the psychological and emotional reassurances that come with authentic belonging (Cooper, 2007: 26). This wide-awakened sensibility along with his vigorous appetite for spiritual comfort and maladies of the soul with his disposition and intellectual rigor which required something more substantial to solve his inner conflicts led Eliot to introduce religious elements in his poetry and drama and in one way or another, each of his plays touches man's religious side (Gervais, 1995).

Eliot has tried to convey something deep and culturally meaningful through his poetic dramas. They explain the way Eliot looked at the pace of things and events that affect human beings in one from or another. In his dramas, he is primarily concerned with illuminating the areas of life which are shut off from the ordinary work-a-day awareness. His theological tendencies and interest have come out as dramas of salvation and submission to God in an age increasingly devoted to the secular panaceas promised by the mechanized production of wellbeing through the wanders of materialism, down to earth commodity consumption and wealth accumulations (Cooper, 2007). The religious question of the day, as extrapolated by Eliot, is

that one should be a man of transparent honesty, free from dissimulation and self delusion. The true moral is that even if one commits errors of judgment or those arising from fault of character, one should allow himself to be exposed to a shaft of sunlight to avail psychological vigor and freedom. As Eliot's dramatic sensibility developed, his awareness of religion and its necessity in contemporary life got sharply focused. That Eliot handled religious themes in his dramas with consummate skill is recognized the world over, the cause of play - writing is served best when it is not divorced from the religious of time.

Discussion

In the essay on Marston (1934), which is of great interest in understanding the line of approach he made in his plays, Eliot observed:

It is possible that what distinguishes poetic drama from prosaic drama is a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once.

In poetic drama a certain apparent irrelevance may be the symptom of this doubleness; or the drama has an under – pattern, less manifest than the theatrical one. We sometimes feel, in following the word and behavior of some of the characters of Dostoevsky, that they are living at once one place that we know and on some other plane of reality from which we are shut out (Eliot, 1985: 239).

A little later, Marston is credited with the creative talent of giving us the sense of something behind, more real than any of his personages and their action. The reference to Dostoevsky and his characters, in the excerpt above, indicates that Eliot was interested in poetic drama because it facilitates the conveyance of the sense of double in a manner that is compact and concise. In prosaic drama, the element of 'doubleness' is lost in the portrayal of the fact-world. However, since Eliot was a poet, he found the revival of poetic drama necessary for making people aware of the strange world of the submerged pattern of feeling in man's unconscious mind. Eliot has made a reference about this frame of experience in the context of his observation on Marston's play, *Sophonisba*¹:

In spite of the tumultuousness of the action, and the ferocity and horror of the play, there is an underlying serenity; and as we

familiarize ourselves with the play we perceive a pattern which we perceive in our own lives only at rare moments of inattention and detachments, drowsing in sunlight (Eliot, 1985: 232).

Keeping in mind this factor of the submerged 'self' getting illuminated unbidden for certain durations, Eliot has tried to convey something deeper, culturally meaningful, through his poetic dramas beginning with his most religious play *Murder in the Cathedral*.¹ Here, Eliot reveals the fact that English drama can function as an outstanding standard for new religious drama. He further recognizes the legitimacy, even the necessary integrating the popular (modern drama) with that of religious drama to the extent that they are both ordered by a common attitude towards Christian principles and ethics (Dell Dotto, 2006).

Murder in the Cathedral centers around the factors responsible for the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket. In this liturgical drama, Eliot succeeds well in giving an impartial representation of politics, both temporal and churchly, which lead to the murder of the Archbishop. The dramatist has projected the personality of Becket with dignity even as the celebrity is torn between acting and suffering. It is symbolic of Becket's religious strength (Eliot, 1957).

In his sermon delivered to the audience in the cathedral on Christmas Morning, 1170, Becket expresses his thoughts on the unique importance of 'Christian martyrdom':

A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for saints are not made by accident. Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of man's will to become a saint. Martyrdom is always the design of God. It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even glory of being a martyr. (Eliot, 1959: 49)

From this observation of Becket, it is clear that Eliot has projected that powerful personality of the Archbishop, who rose to glory of martyrdom in terms of true faith in the ordainment of God. He was caught in the web of politics arising out of the tussle between King Henry II of England and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, and between Becket and his opponents in the Anglican Church. Since religion is an aspect of life, it is expected of its adherents to live it out. Archbishop Becket acquits well as a Christian.

In spite of all the blandishments and threats, Becket maintains his equilibrium. The struggle of Thomas within himself is searching, in the sense that he realizes that martyrdom cannot be only self-willed. One must have implicit faith in the Divine will and in spirit of self-abnegation, without forsaking the religious good and leave events at the mercy of God.

Chastened by the ascetics of mind after his becoming the Archbishop, and more so, after having withstood the ordeals of life in exile and the subsequent return to England in an uncertain atmosphere filled with threatening hints and gestures, Becket had trained his will to resign himself to the working of the design of God. It is reasonable to assume that when Eliot wrote *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), he was developing his viewpoint of a saintly personality. (Tamplin, 1988, 35-36). In the *Choruses from The Rock* (1934), he had come to realize the truth that unless one willingly abdicates the feeling-pattern woven around self-pride, one cannot make any worthwhile headway towards spirituality. He wrote:

I say to you: Make perfect your will.
I say: take no thought of the harvest,
But only of proper sowing (Eliot, 1959: 65).

This is what Becket had come to value. Apotheosis of man is only possible when man has divested himself of all the allurements, secular and pseudo-spiritual both. He has to have a courageous and clean personality, and then alone can he become fearless of death.

Murder in the Cathedral can also be studied with advantage in respect of Eliot's views that men of religion are needed even in the sphere of politics. Political institutions and secular affairs, if left to unregenerate, power-hungry people ultimately lead to disaster. Before the arrival of Archbishop Becket from Exile, the third priest reflectively comments on the confused situation prevailing at the time, which sums up Eliot's views on the political craft of politicians and influential barons:

I see nothing quite conclusive in the art of temporal government,
But violence, duplicity and frequent malversation.
King rules or barons rule:
The strong man strongly and the weak man caprice (Eliot, 1987: 250).

How true it is! – the nature of politics is such. With certain exceptions the politicians are self-seeking, and are prepared at the first available opportunity to forsake community-interest for their personal aggrandizement. It is in this background that Eliot averred that the true spirit of religion has a chastening effect on the tone and temper of politics. The Archbishop underscores the importance of a living belief in a Godhead for immunizing the temporal affairs from inner rot and degeneration:

Temporal power, to build a good world,
To keep order, as the world knows order,
Those who put their faith in worldly order.
Not controlled by the order of God,
In confident ignorance, but arrest disorder,
Make it fast, breed fatal disease,
Degrade what they exalt. (Eliot, 1987:250)

In an earlier draft, Eliot is more categorical about the shiftiness of politicians: Those who trust only in temporal order, 'Are stabilizing chaos, perpetuate disorder' (Browne, 1969:49). The vital question of human existence would remain unanswered, unless it is enlarged and chiselled by the living faith in God. Without a reference to Divinity, one can neither enjoy peace nor get rejuvenated all the time, otherwise the worldly existence remains a torment and burden from which there is no escape. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot repeatedly stresses that wheel of life would flounder, rather stop, unless one becomes perpetually conscious that it is really linked to the Divine pattern. It is foolishness on the part of man to think that the wheel of life is pinioned to one's ego.

In the *Murder in the Cathedral* Eliot has put in dynamic perspective, his views of life and religion linked to the Archbishop's arguments in his defense, in terms of his encounter with the tempters, priests and knights. Eliot's second play, *The Family Reunion*, provides an illuminating study of Lord Harry Monchensey, son of Lady Monchensey, who bears within him an 'untranslatable' burden of guilt. Harry's psyche is shadowed by the guilt-feeling that his wife, who was dead, was murdered by him. Even as it is true that he did not actually push his wife overboard, Harry is haunted by the Christian feeling of guilt. According to Christianity, the slightest entertainment of a murderous thought for somebody is sufficient to cause a feeling of guilt. Harry feels that most people do not feel the need for a 'clean'

view of life. Harry echoes Eliot's firmly held belief that a human soul has to pass through a process of purgation before he can have a higher view of life, and that is attainable when one unifies one's inner religious being with that of outer social being to become in line with high-church Anglican thought (Rowan, 2004). In the setting of modern conditions which are extremely complex, it is essentially a Herculean job to arrive at a clean view of life, free of any guilty-feeling. Guilt in a human being is multi-layered, and it takes a long period of soul-searching for man to be free of the guilt-burden. Eliot understood the attendant difficulties in such a venture:

The life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying (to a greater or lesser extent) jarring and incompatible ones (Kearns, 1987: 85).

Eliot's observation is psychologically tenable; and in the modern life, it is the only way man can free himself from the burden of guilt, arising either out of the contemplated action or the actual one. As the sequence of events take place in the play, there is also a need for true friendship. Harry finds it in his aunt, Agatha. Harry in his talk with Agatha makes an allusion about his dead wife:

Perhaps my life has only been a dream
Dreamt through me by the minds of others, perhaps
I only dreamt I pushed her (Eliot, 1987:333).

Earlier, aunt Agatha had told Harry about the lonely life of his father. Agatha also tells him that on one occasion she had come to know that Harry's father was thinking of putting an end to the life of Harry's mother when she was carrying Harry in her womb with three months for his birth (Eliot, 1987:334). Agatha being a woman would have been unwomanly had she allowed Harry's father to go on with his mad freak. It is in this background that Harry confides in his aunt Agatha; he disburdens his bosom and lets her help him recover his native equilibrium.

Life in deepened awareness has to be explored; and then one realizes, like Harry, that things which look discouraging in the beginning may finally turn out to be exhilarating. This is how Harry fares in *The Family Reunion*. By the end of the play, it dawns upon Harry that one cannot have any meaningful understanding of good,

unless one is also prepared to recognize the true nature of evil. True moral sense is stabilized with the awareness of the role of sin and evil in life. Aunt Agatha tells Harry that theirs is a story of sin and expiation; purification of the mind can take place only when one is not afraid of the light of the day. In this strange way of getting aware of one's destiny, one may succeed in scotching sin in instinctual birth; in the setting of modern civilization, one has to run through the entire gamut beginning from its recognition to its final absolution:

It is certain
That the knowledge of it must precede the expiation
It is possible that sin may strain and struggle
In this dark instinctive birth,
To come to consciousness
And so find expurgation (Eliot, 1987:333).

Harry feels happy because he now has a different vision of life. When one gets relief from the lingering burden of sin, the sense of joy is almost incommunicable which can only be understood and appreciated by those who have a feeling of kinship on a psychic plane as was the case with Agatha and Harry.

The meaning of the title: *The Family Reunion* is that a particular family can be revived, provided there is a feeling of communion among the family members. The last chorus in the play is important for its content of pieces of wisdom; and if pondered over, there is no reason why human life even in modern conditions should not become religious. The focal point of Eliot's observation is that we can insure ourselves against many things, 'but not against the act of God (Eliot, 1987:348).' Religion means having a broad, cosmic oriented outlook, in which there is no scope for any restricted viewpoint. *The Family Reunion* provides a searching twilight for every thinking person to pause and purify himself.

Eliot's play *The Cocktail Party* is noted for its style, clever comedy and sharp social criticism. It examines contemporary civilization from a new angle and contains a satirical view of the present-day fetish for psychiatry and the overplayed role of cocktail parties, their patrons, as well as the cult of success-all taken together are a symptom of the dullness of modern social life. Superficially *The Cocktail Party* is an elegant comedy of manners, but beneath the surface, one can detect elements of mortality play. Edward Chamberlayne, a lawyer, and his wife Lavinia are estranged for a while, but later come closer to each

other in the same social profile constituted of *The Cocktail Party* and the inane social practice.

In Act One, scene three, an unidentified guest (To be disclosed later: Sir Henry Harcourt-Reiley) is a kind of psychiatrist who understands the malady afflicting men and women. He knows that it is a result of human or spiritual deprivation on the part of people afflicted by it. In the play, by prescribing a course of action to remedy the problem of patients, he succeeds. In order to assuage his feelings with regard to his wife, Lavinia, who has been missing for some time, he tells Edward:

Ah, but we die to each other daily,
What we know of other people
Is only our memory of the moments
During which we know them.
And they have changed since then.
To pretend that they and we are the same
Is a useful and convenient social convention
This must sometimes be broken.
We must also remember
That at every meeting we are meeting a stranger (Eliot,
1987: 348, 85).

The important point that is spelt out here is that we mistake the memory of a person for his actual reality at the material time. If one bears in mind this factor of ceaseless change, one can establish a tenable relationship with others, otherwise all relationship become infructuous and unevenviably bad. Maintaining a viable relationship, moment-to-moment, is the clue to personal and social happiness. To get bound with the image, of the past, of somebody and behave with him or her, in the present, in terms of the fixated impression is not a wise proposition. It is unreal as well as inhuman. The other damaging point of modern life is when man is psychically isolated form people around him as was Edward, in *The Cocktail Party*, who expresses symbolically the misery of himself before he gets reunited with his life Lavinia:

There was a door
And I could not open it.
I could not touch the handle.
Why could I not walk out of my prison?
What is hell? Hell is oneself,

Hell is alone, the other figures in it
Merely projection (Eliot, 1987:397).

Eliot modifies the Sartrean viewpoint 'Hell is other people' (Browne, 1969: 233). Eliot has a viewpoint similar to that of D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930), who also held that when man is cocooned within himself and is cut off from his fellow human beings in terms of the true communion of feeling and thoughts, his life becomes miserable. The main cause of neurosis in man is traceable to this fact of one being cut off from others (Lawrence, 1979:469). Further, Eliot is perceptive enough to remark that solitude, in itself, is not bad; but becomes excruciatingly unnerving when man is too weak to break through his shell. Then, the collapse of the individual takes place. When Reilly says to Celia: 'It isn't hell/Till you become incapable of anything else' (Eliot, 1987:419), he underscores the implications of loneliness and its effects on human being, which differ from man to man. In fact, solitude is necessary for strong-willed human being who have a capacity to think. It is in this context that Reilly's advise to Celia has relevance: 'Go in peace, my daughter. / Work out your salvation with diligence' (Eliot, 1987:420).

Similarly, Julia's remark to Reilly on Celia opting for her own salvation has a great religious significance because to be truly religious means 'transhumanisation' which is difficult indeed.

.... And we know where she is going.
But what do we know of the terrors of the journey?
You and I don't know the process by which the human is
Transhumanised : what do we know of the king of suffering
they must undergo On the way of illumination (Eliot,
1987: 421).

Those who go on the path of spirit-adventure must know that they must face hardships.

Eliot's *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) is centered around Colby Simpson, who is the new Clerk to Sir Claude Mulhammer, a successful financier. Initially, Sir Claude thinks that Colby is his illegitimate son; but he turns out to be the son of a disappointed musician; Mrs. Guzzard is his mother who gives it to understand that her son is Sir Claude's son, though the latter had died at birth. Eliot, like Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* allows Colby Simpson and the other characters to discover their true identity.

When the fog, gathered around his birth, is cleared, Colby Simpson gets a satisfying life-role to fulfill. Being the son of a musician, it is but natural for him to opt for a musician's career than to remain tagged to the world of business. Colby is disenchanted with his present position as confidential clerk. To assuage Colby's feeling in this respect, Sir Claude tells him that he too had wanted to be a potter; by the force of circumstances, chiefly as per his father's desire, he became a financier. According to Sir Claude, a large majority of people live in two worlds- one of actual profession and the other arising out of their innate desire or hobby. Still, Sir Claude has a gleaming of religious awareness at certain moments:

But when I am alone, and look at one thing long enough,
I sometimes have that sense of identification
With the maker, of which I spoke – an agonizing ecstasy
Which makes life bearable (Eliot, 1987: 466).

However, Colby has a lurking feeling that there is something strangely inexplicable; and to this extent, he just cannot 'atone for', which Sir Claude could do, the actions of others. In spite of the feeling of uneasiness about the identity of his parent, Colby acquits himself well as a confidential Clerk. Yet, he remains divided in sensibility till such time it is revealed that his father was a musician. Through the observation of Lucasta and that of Colby Simpson, Eliot touches upon the possibility of one becoming religious. Lucasta tells Colby: 'It's awful for a man to have to give up, /A career that he's set his heart on, I'm sure: /But it's only the outer world that you've lost:/ You've still got your inner world –a world that's more real (Eliot, 1987:472).

It is an assessment by half. For a proper integration, the outer world has also to be taken into account, Colby Simpson feels that lack. Precisely, he is hesitant and makes conditional statement: 'If I were religious, God would walk in my garden / And that would make the world outside it real /And acceptable, I think (Eliot, 1987:474).

His problem is that of loneliness in the world, which is not the case with Eggerson, the earlier confidential clerk. He is integrated with the world as such, but Colby Simpson has yet to find his roots. His being reconciled to his parentage as also to the job he is engaged in both these problems stand in his integration.

Through such characters as Lucasta, who is the illegitimate offspring of Sir Claude, and Colby Simpson whose parental identification remains unresolved in the major part of the play, Eliot, by implication,

emphasizes the perpetuation of progeny through proper marital relationship. Any makeshift deviation from it means unedifying complications as Lucasta faced;

I thought you'd understand.
Little you know what it's like to be a bastard
And wanted by nobody. I know why you're shocked :
Claude has just accepted me like a debit item
Always in his cash account. I don't like myself.
I don't like the person I've forced myself to be (Eliot, 1987: 477).

This is Lucasta's gnawing sense of pain and shame on account of her birth, considered socially derogatory. If this is one point of view about the feeling of desolation among human being and in this respect, Lucasta is a representative symbol there is still another point of view which takes into account the wisdom behind the ancient belief of reincarnation. These concepts help man, in the actual setting of the twentieth century life, to quicken their awareness about the religious bases in life. It goes beyond the social context.

Eliot's play, *The Elder Statesman* has a deep moral design. It is centered around the life of Lord Claverton who is an honored personage retired from active public life. In his earlier days, he was ambitious and did all he could to become successful. Now after retirement, he is physically weak and at the same time, heartily shaken mentally by facing three personages out of his past. They shadow him like 'ghosts'; the first is Federico Gomez, who has risen to the top in public life in a central American republic, where the key – word is success at any cost with no consideration of scruples or morals. Gomez may be called Lord Claverton's double in the sense that he also climbed the ladder of success by means open to question. The second personage that haunts Claverton comes in the form of Mrs. Carghill, who reminds him of his affair with her in the days gone by. His façade of respectability is shaken in a much more shocking manner than the encounter he had earlier with Gomez. The encounter with Mrs. Carghill proves damaging to the self – assumed respectability of the 'The Elder Statesman' who essentially falls in the company of 'The Hollow Men', poetized by Eliot in 1925. 'Mrs. Carghill is a very near relation to the women of 'The Waste Land'; and Claverton seems to have belonged with loitering heirs of city directors (Moody, 1979: 280). Eliot, as Louis Menand (2000:109), points out, "has implicitly

deplored the main stream of modern life and culture in liberalism, secularism and at times *laissez-faire*”.

As if it was not enough for Lord Claverton to get dismantled psychologically, the third encounter, with his son, Michael a second self-turns out to be still more disastrous, Lord Claverton is agonized over his son Michael's, decision to go abroad in order to start afresh, after losing his job and getting in to debts in England as also getting involved in affairs which did not bring a fair name either to himself or to his ailing father. Claverton says of his son that he is 'only a fugitive from reality', which is equally applicable to his own life, for the Elder Statesmen never faced the true compulsions of life and the moral issues flowing out of it. This is brought home shockingly to him by his son's remarks ... 'Those standards of conduct / you've always made so much of, for my benefit: / I wonder whether you always lived up to them' (Eliot, 1987: 560-61).

Claverton's daughter, Monic on a note of amiability introduces a piece of charming wisdom, and consequently smoothenes the ruffled feelings of her father and brother:

Father !you know that I would give my life for you .
Oh, how silly that phrase sounds! But there's no vocabulary
For love within a family, love that's lived in.
But not looked at, (Eliot, 1987: 561).

She appeals to them to forgive each other. Monica's crystalline purity of heart succeeds in distilling 'crampy' feelings of her father who is now impelled to confess to her:

What I want to escape from
Is myself , is the past . But what a coward I am,
To talk of escaping ! And what a hypocrite!
As few minutes ago I was pleading with Michael
Not to try to escape from his own past failures (Eliot, 1987:
565).

In this extract, Claverton feels penitent, 'Lear – like ', for king Lear in Shakespeare's drama was all innocent to Cordelia. It is a form of confession for Claverton to relieve himself of the discordant feelings-made before his son and daughter. It is the first step for Claverton to pierce through 'acted' parts and then to realize the worth of his true

self which had got twisted and distorted in terms of the false images he had got used to during the course of his successful career.

If a man has one person, just one in his life,
To whom he is willing to confess every thing --
And that includes, mind you, not only things criminal,
Not only turpitude, meanness and cowardice,
But also situations which are simply ridiculous,
When he has played the fool (as who has not?) --
Then he loves that person, and his love will save him.
I'm afraid that I've never loved anyone, really (Eliot, 1987:
568).

The time-honored adage: 'better late than never' is aptly applicable to the belated realization of Lord Claverton. That external suavity, polish and success can carry far enough, it is true; but in the ultimate analysis, one has also to take into account the moment – to – moment tick-ticking of one's subjectivity which is essentially, the inexhaustible center of moral sense. In the existential context, life-mystery has its own ways of redemption. This is what happens to Lord Claverton whose misery and agony is greatly lessened by the warm affection and understanding shown to him by his daughter, Monica. Human life gets divinified through human beings who cherish true love for others without any kind of expectation. While his son, Michael remains unsolicitous, his daughter, by showing uncorrupted womanly understanding of her father's plight, succeeds in purgating the mind of lord Claverton of the wayward affliction of his youthful days (Moody, 1979: 283). The Elder Statesman, at long last, becomes a real human being free of dissimulation and deception. He feels happy and experiences 'the peace that ensues upon contrition' (Eliot, 1987: 581).

When Eliot says: 'only through time, time is conquered', (Eliot, 1987: 173) his is a paradoxical statement; but there is a great measure of truth in it. In the same manner, man is divinified through human love which is, of course, without the sting of carnality. Lord Claverton's life is fulfilled, rather redeemed through the crystalline pure love of his daughter, Monica. With reference to *The Elder Statesman*, it has been observed that Eliot sought to turn back on his life – time insistence on the negation of carnality, following his marriage with Valerie Eliot in 1957; but on the face of the view – point set forth in his play, *The Elder statesman* and in context of his

earlier writings on humanism, religion and Christianity, it would be improper to say that Eliot modified his earlier viewpoint (Eliot, 1979:279).

If one takes a closer look at his writings, prose and poetry both, one would find continuity in his thinking. Carnality, with all its overtones, is liable to get enmeshed within a bog of suffering and misery, unless the particular human being also knows the tremendous worth of the spirit of negation without which man's religious sense cannot develop.

Conclusion

Eliot's approach to art and its creation, in terms of his poems, dramas and critical writings, is indicative of the fact that he tried to grapple with the problems of his age from a religious and philosophical standpoint; and out of this encounter, wrote works of varying standpoints. By reading his drama, one gets a flavour of the spirit of Catholicism. He could not tolerate bigotry in any form. In his poems and plays there are allusions to Indian and Buddhist philosophies which are expressed in a specific context of his poetic and philosophical faith. Nonetheless, he appreciated the role of Christianity as a unifying and cultural force:

It is in Christianity that our arts have developed, it is in Christianity that the Laws of Europe have- until recently- been rooted. It is against a background Christianity that all our thought has significance. An individual European may not believe that the Christian Faith is true, and yet what he says, and makes and does, will all spring out of his heritage of Christian culture and depends upon that culture for its meaning. Only a Christian culture could have produced a Voltaire or a Nietzsche. I do not believe that the culture of Europe could survive the complete disappearance of the Christian Faith. And I am convinced of that, not merely because I am a Christian myself, but as a student of social biology. If Christianity goes, the whole of our culture goes (Eliot, 1948:122).

Eliot, while trying to incorporate some form of universality of the religious spirit into his poetry and drama, also took into account the liberating force of Christianity. He held that a true Christian would not waver in his faith in God and his fellow men, what ever the odds. In

this background, one can remember the glorious example of Thomas Becket whose life and myth has been dramatized skillfully in the play, *Murder in the Cathedral*. In this play, Eliot has elicited very clearly that Thomas Becket's canonization as Saint was merited, for he did not 'self-will' his martyrdom; rather in the very thick of pressure and counter-pressures, he maintained his serenity and prepared himself for his assassination when he was left with no choice. In this way, he vindicated his faith in the divinity of Christ.

His social plays: *The Family Reunion*, *The Cocktail Party*, *The Confidential Clerk* and *The Elder Statesman* are equally illuminating. Life gets on to a joyful proposition when one gets psychologically aware of sin and evil, as it was the case with Harry in *The Family Reunion*. *The Cocktail Party* reminds us about Lord Buddha's deathbed exhortation to his followers: 'work out your salvation, with diligence'. *The Confidential Clerk* and *The Elder Statement* point out that one should be true to one's self; and in *The Elder Statesman*, it is further held that one should not put a gloss on one's past. True wisdom lies owning it, then alone can one have a joyful relationship with one's near and dear ones. Not elaborating any more upon the concluding remarks on Eliot's quest for religion, what comes out palpably clear is that Eliot had a unified vision of life in which the pride of place was given to the true spirit of religion.

Notes

1. Marston's last completed play, *The Wonder of Women*, or *The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606), is a serious play about the rivalry of two Libyan kings for the love of Sophonisba. Derived from several classical sources including Appian, Levy, and Lucan, Sophonisba's main theme is personal integrity.
2. Holding that dramatic poetry is better fitted than prose to convey deepest feelings of man, Eliot has explained: It seems to me that beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life, when directed towards action- the part of life which prose drama is wholly adequate to express- there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; of feelings of which we can only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action....This peculiar range of sensibility can be expressed by dramatic poetry intensity'.

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