



Idea of Liberation: Women of Canterbury in Thomas Stearns Eliot's Murder in the cathedral psychological liberation versus Religious oppression

Poonam Rawat

Department of English, HNB Garhwal University (A Central University), BGR Campus Pauri(Garhwal)246001 Uttarakhand

*Corresponding Author Email: dr.poonambrawat@gmail.com

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Abstract: 'In T. S. Eliot's murder in the cathedral, the poor women of Canterbury, establishing the fact that the prime problem of woman is that of liberty, whether it is the movement headed by the feminists or the simple woman in a liturgical play. In presenting women of Canterbury as a group in a Chorus, Eliot overlaps the psychological problems by actually making them the followers of Becket. It is a literary trick of the playwright to convert the situation, the psychological problems into the religious sacrifice which in the light of the existence of the situation is a suppression, and not solution. The poor guys are toys suppressed one by their individual lots and second by Eliot, in assigning them the sacrificial mood of living. Eliot could have taken the women individually and must have emphasized upon their psychological liberation. Eliot, makes Murder in the Cathedral religious with equal thought that all aims and plants are ruled by time. Eliot must attach importance to the Almighty and, so, is himself an anti-feminist, relaying the fact that the biology granted to any one cannot be changed but accepted.

Keywords: Liberation- Psychological Liberation versus religious oppression

Introduction

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on 26th Spetember 1888, in Saint Louis, Missouri, an industrial city in the least of united states of America. He descended in both sides from puritan families.

Eliot's use of characters in the main plot of the play as 'poor women of Canterbury, establishing the fact that the prime problem of woman is that of liberty, whether it is the movement headed by the feminists or the simple woman in a liturgical play. What really matters is Eliot's idea of liberation, no matter for the need of his own dramatic presentation it has diversified a religious turn. The fact is that the women of Canterbury' come as a generalized group and not the individuals who should have their individual psychological problems. Eliot in a way is an anti-feminist because he is a chauvinist. Instead of taking up the psychological suppression, which very much, apparently, crosses the floors of dramatic presentation, Eliot has either concealed their individualistic problems of psychological liberation, or has collectively put them into a mood of religious sublimation. The conditions of women are not different from that of the radicals, but the simple difference is that he has defended or changed the psychological demand of liberation into a religious oppression. Eliot's craftsmanship succeeds for his tactful conversion of the psychological situation into a religious sublimation such that the idea of liberation takes a sinful form of religious oppression.

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situation is a suppression, and not solution. The poor guys are toys suppressed one by their individual lots and second by Eliot, in assigning them the sacrificial mood of living. Eliot could have taken the women individually and must have emphasized upon their psychological liberation. He has put them as subordinates to the male characters in the play because their problems are biological, and not religious; neither do they show inclination towards economic equality. Since their problem is biological, or at least born of it, they require biological revolution more than the liberal and the Marxist feminists do. It is the biological way of the radical feminists which seems at the root of the suppression or the repression the poor women of Canterbury feel. In a way, they seem under a repression and not suppression in which men are supposed to have constructed female sexuality to serve not women's but men's needs. The women of Canterbury are ordinary women, just like puppets in the hand of God and after then in the hands of male society. If the women of Canterbury need a repression free solution, they have to adopt either the way of the radical women or the way of God who could alone respond to their psychological problem. Eliot, makes **Murder in the Cathedral** religious with equal thought that all aims and plants are ruled by time. Eliot must attach importance to the Almighty and, so, is himself an anti-feminist, relaying the fact that the biology granted to any one cannot be changed but accepted. His idea behind the religious play with the Women of Canterbury, as the supporter of the theme, has been contrived on a similar thought. But the psychological problem still remains a psychological problem, because it owes more to radical feminism and less to saintly belief.

The immediate problem of the women of Canterbury is expressed in the following lines:

We are not ignorant women, we know what we
must expect and not expect.
We know of oppression and torture,
We know of extortion and violence,
Destitution, disease.

(Complete poems & plays of T.S. Eliot, P. 257)

The speech establish the fact very clearly that the women are oppressed and tortured. It describes a lot of violence and extortion. So far the narration describes, it is never that the oppression, torture, violence and extortion are ment to show the religious cause behind their suffering. These surely discuss and analyse their own psychological problems which have more a feminist reasoning than a religious implication. In a similar tone of frustration and suffering, they speak about ills of the time:

God gave us always some reason, some hope;
but now a new terror
Has soiled us, which none can avert, none can avoid,
flowing
Under our feet and over the sky

(Complete poems & plays of T.S. Eliot, P. 257)

It is not clear whether the ills are psychological, or religious. But one thing is certain that the women of Canterbury are miserable on account of suffering they undergone. We say that are psychological sufferers for two main reasons. First, they are women living in the twentieth century England, where point of religion is all secondary to a sexual fulfillment. The times are scientific and the biological needs have a supremacy over the religious belief and behaviour. Second women of Canterbury never speak of the religious torture and violence. Violence is always physical and solutions also must rest somewhere in the physical, or the biological responses. But Eliot has tried to solve a psychological problem in a religious way which plans the conversion of the question of psychological liberation into a religious oppression. We can call it a solution forced upon by Eliot for his own purposes of exceeding on the stage



with the religious theme. The oppression is double edged, one at the hands of Mr. Eliot, the other in the religious demand of the play.

The *Murder in the Cathedral* bears a story of converting the problem of psychological liberation into religious oppression. The torture and horror pointed out by the poor Women of Canterbury carry a similar gospel of the feminists thinking, but Eliot has assigned the mood of religious suppression than the psychological freedom to them. He does this because he has to serve his purpose of anti-feminism and also his religious martyrdom, instead of taking their psychological problem into account, the chorus begins in the last lines of the play, as:

Forgive us, O Lord, we acknowledge ourselves as
type of the Common man,
Of the men and women who shut the door and sit
by the fire.
Lord, have mercy upon us.
Christ, have mercy upon us.
Blessed Thomas, pray for us.

(Complete poems & plays of T.S. Eliot, P. 282)

The situation is so embodied that the women of Canterbury seem suppressed more by Mr. Eliot than the age itself. Instead of explaining the possibility of a psychological solution to problems of the women, Eliot keeps upon their head religious load which they can neither resist nor tolerate. Eliot believes that the age divides the man who could inspire it religiously and purify the hearts of the other men and women like the Lord himself. Women of Canterbury, he shows, are lethargic and incapable of any action because there is no one to inspire them. What actually the women need is man or the way to inspire them in their freedom struggle to get rid of the chauvinistic dominance in their life. They know only to wait and to see what destiny, the weapon of God's hand, does. We are made to act and suffer by the dictations of God and his wheel fate. Eliot assesses the moment of their suffering with a strong conviction that they should submit to the ways of God as to they submit to the ways of men. Eliot creates more confusion than they are confused of their problems. They have a tendency to liberate themselves from the throes of chauvinistic society but he makes them silent by forcing upon the religious bindings. We can never agree with the fact that Eliot is an anti-feminist in case of poor women of Canterbury. He has, instead, diverted the thinking to a rebel play. He makes them assured that the idea of liberation can be learnt from Thomas's preparedness for death. But death must include prayer. Eliot teaches them liberation so that life, which seems paradoxical because what they really want to liberate about is the male society. What exactly is the truth of liberation, to understand from Thomas's sacrifice, is the learning that women can be liberated only by conquering human biology. The point of conquering human biology is a matter of interpretation and not only understanding.

The play is said to be religious, whereas the problem raised by the Chorus seems to be social and not religious. Choruses in *Murder in the Cathedral* are aptly used and are in line with the old Greek tragedy. They are of great dramatic value in this play. Originally, in the Greek drama, Chorus was a company of singers or chanters. In the developed tragedy, it occupied the role of fluctuating between that of participants in, and interpreters of the action. After the first production of *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot remarked:

In making use of (the Chorus) we do not aim to copy Greek drama. There is a good deal about the Greek theatre that we do not know, and never shall know. But we know that some of its conventions cannot be ours. (The Need for poetic drama, P. 995)



The poor women of Canterbury are giving expression to command feeling, which usually runs deeper than individual feeling though it is not usually articulate. Their speeches create a certain atmosphere corresponding to the events, arousing pity, fear, hollowness etc. in every heart. It provides one of the most challenging problems for a producer of the play.

One fact must not be ignored that Eliot's play, **Murder in the Cathedral**, is also dominated by a sense of fear, which makes us to understand the differences between psychological liberation and religious oppression. The play, begins with a speech of 'Women of Canterbury' and there are a few Women of Canterbury who have felt some inner compulsion to come to the Cathedral. They say that they are forced to bear witness. They say in their next speech about Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who has been away from England for the previous seven years, but the poor women feel that it would not be safe for the Archbishop to come back to England.

Their speech creates a feeling of fear, because they think that winter would bring death from the sea, and also fears the unexpected which will begin the destructive cycle again. It does not mean that their feelings are the symbol of silent liberation against the Church and the male society, but they declare that they know about their self and about their limitations and problems. They are afraid to see their suffering. In reality, they are suppressed and not the liberated beings. Although they know all kinds of hardships and have witnessed all kinds of domestic misfortunes in the lives of the people. Their oppression and feelings may be religious because they have a feeling that God is with them, but now God is leaving them, and the heartache, which they are experiencing is more painful to them than the pain which a woman experiences at the time of giving birth to a child and even more painful than is felt by a dying man. These women of Canterbury make an appeal to the Archbishop, 'O! Thomas Archbishop, save us, save us'. Despite the fact, that there is no safety of Thomas in the Cathedral, he is coming back after seven years. That's why women are repeating their feelings because of fear, and fear of female character is a type of liberation, whether it is silent, or has no meaning in the Cathedral. The emphasis is on danger whether it is coming for Thomas or for the poor Women of Canterbury, but they are helpless and they can't do whatever they want. So is the dominated being totally different from the liberated being. The women of Canterbury are not liberated, but they are doing silent struggle against the society. The main object of the feminists is the liberation of women, which can only be brought about by women's struggles. At one level, they are poor women filled with a sense of fear, at another level, they offer a commentary on the action and preparing us for the developments of the story.

But in the last speech of the poor women, the nature order is re-established because the spiritual purpose of the action of the play has been achieved. According to them, they all need the mercy of God, and they all need a new type of liberation, which places women over against men. Infact, they all want to be psychologically liberated, but in a right way. They are spiritually perfect and, they have realized their actual self and identity. Finally, it is to be noted that Eliot has given some of his best poetry in the play to the Women of Canterbury. The women are, of course, not consciously poetic; they are simple, ordinary, almost ignorant person. We are not ignorant women, declare the Women of Canterbury, although this time they are not the liberated beings. But despite the fact that they are dominated being. their achievements are honoured.

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