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Research Article:


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The events of the first two decades of the twentieth century provided Eliot and other writers the raw material which their sensibilities were to manipulate to produce varied and complex results in writing. The scientific and technological advancements of this period brought about the “ethics of competition” (Bantock 17). In the opinion of G. H. Bantock, the effect of this is that man was reduced to the level of the economic man. Man’s community relationships were at the mercy of the “cash nexus”, and his psychological motivations were thought of largely in terms of self-interest (17). There were also 19th Century philosophical notions such as Darwinism, Marxism and Freudianism that challenged the framework on which man’s confidence and rationale depended in previous centuries. The consequence of this according to Harry Blamires was “a weakening of religious faith and a tottering sense of man’s ability to control his own destiny” (5). Life during this period therefore witnessed an increasing moral, spiritual and cultural deterioration as the society was getting more materialistic and individualistic and people who could not fit within this new social structure found themselves in a marginal existence. As Mark Burton and Carolyn Kagan observe “marginalization is a shifting phenomenon, linked to social status” (Burton and Kagan). In poems like “The Love Song”, and “Portrait” social status is a major determinant of the psychological and ideological position of the individual in society. Using the perspectives of these psychologist, we will examine how individuals in Eliot’s poetry find themselves “in positions of oppression, exclusion, vulnerability or discrimination” (Burton and Kagan) resulting from their own inadequacies which psychologists explain in terms of personality traits.

This paper argues that in Eliot’s two poems understudy, the personae represent the predicament of human existence in the twentieth century milieu where
the attempt to define oneself and/or others lead to marginal experiences for the
personae. It explores the subjectivity of the individual in a civilization overcome by
overwhelming decay and man’s emptiness, fixation and resignation. The poems,
written in an epoch of economic individualism, social decay and religious doubt,
illustrate how individual inadequacies act as parenthetical marks that disconnect
twentieth century existence and cause some social classes or individuals to live on
the margin of their society. The paper discusses two poems which reveal that
marginality resulting from the individual’s incompetence have severe consequences.
Eliot, in much of his poetry, depicts a civilization that is chaotic and disorderly; a
civilization in which people have ‘private wisdom’. His poetry project men whose
speeches are “endless palaver” and whose hearts embody “reciprocal distrust”
(Eliot, Collected Poems 169) in their personal abilities and the social system. The
consequence is a power class that exist at the Centre and a powerless class that exist
at the margin.

Through the Structuralist model of Jonathan Culler, this paper interprets the
vertical and horizontal levels of meaning and shows that in an era characterized by
“miserable cities… wretched generations of enlightened men / Betrayal in the maze
of their ingenuity” (Eliot, Collected Poems 169) it becomes difficult for individuals to
define their space and still maintain meaningful contact and companionship. This
approach allows for a more informed reading of the literariness or the aesthetic
value of the poems, showing how the linguistic code and convention communicate
the idea that attempts at defining personal space leads to disconnection and
marginality in existence. Northrop Frye is quoted by Terry Eagleton to have stated
that “literature is an “autonomous verbal structure quite cut off from any references
beyond itself, a sealed inward looking realm which contain(s) life and reality in a
system of verbal relationship” (30). Within the system each element reorders the
symbolic relations it shares with other elements in the system. Such reshuffling does
not involve “any kind of reality outside it” (80).

While Frye’s position is relevant to the understanding of how verbal
structures reveal levels of marginality, Jonathan Culler’s Structuralist Poetics
provides yet another useful dimension. Culler stipulates four conventions that
should guide readers’ approach to poetry. He talks about the convention of
significance which states that poem express “a significant attitude to some problems
concerning man and /or his relationship to his universe” (115). The analysis in this
paper shows that the attitude is that of man’s marginality and disconnection from
his universe. The second convention is that of “metaphorical coherence” which
states that meaning is revealed both at the literal and the metaphoric levels. This convention allows us to interpret the metaphors and literariness of the poem in relation to the issue of marginality. The convention of “poetic tradition” according to Culler allows the reader to assume allusions used in other poetry and to equate them to other poetic figures. Analyzing some of Eliot’s allusions, we will show how they function in the revelation of or in prefiguring the characters’ marginal existence. Finally, the convention of thematic unity permits the reader to consider meaning as a product of all the parts that makes up the poem. To achieve this thematic unity, this analyses draw examples from various parts of the poems to show that marginality is one of the central concerns raised by the poet. Overall, Culler’s conventions provide a model for interpreting the vertical and horizontal levels of meaning with a focus on how textual elements relate in meaning making and how such textual elements relate to meaning beyond the text itself.

Cognizant of the fact that marginality is a concept that is more rooted in Sociology and Psychology than in Literature, Structuralist tenets will be used in conjunction with ideas and concepts from Psychology in discussing the manifestation of marginality in the poems. This interdisciplinary approach is likely to yield a better understanding. The use of ideas from social psychology in the interpretation of “The Love Song” and “Portrait of a Lady” is particularly relevant because these are poems in which Eliot is concerned with social personalities and social situations where people experience marginality resulting not necessarily from social conventions but from unique personal traits and inadequacies. Although there are multiple definitions of marginality, that of the International Geographical Union (IGU) offers an interesting dimension. The IGU defines marginality as “the temporary state of having been put aside of living in relative isolation, at the edge of a system (cultural, social, political or economic), [...] in mind, when one excludes certain domains or phenomena from one’s thinking because they do not correspond to the mainstream philosophy” (qtd. in Gurung and Kollmair 10). The IGU definition of marginality is relevant to the understanding of the concept as used in this paper because the analyses deal with the lives of individuals that experience some form of isolation or that exist at the “edge of a system” because of their inability to integrate. Although the social system plays a role in the exclusion of the individuals, their personal attributes are more instrumental to their experience of marginality. For example, the ladies talking about Michel Angelo create a social ideal to which Prufrock finds it difficult to measure up. Or the exotic setting of the lady’s room in “Portrait” indirectly establishes the social expectation which the young man thinks
The tendency for the characters to disconnect themselves from society and to lead marginal lives, either because of their individual inadequacies or because of societal limitations, is a reflection of Eliot’s attempt to disconnect his being from his poetry. Unlike the metaphysical poets who express personal emotion in order to create or maintain contact, especially with ladies, Eliot prefers a “dissociation of sensibility” (103). Eliot’s idea of impersonality is misleading because traces of his life experiences either advertently or inadvertently filter into his poetry. To disconnect the poet from the poem is to disconnect the creator from the creature, or to say that the personal experiences and personal past of the poet are useless, especially in relation to their poetry.

Throughout Eliot’s poetry, especially his early poems, individual inadequacies such as paralysis, age and the avoidance or incompetence in communication revolve around love relationships and serve as barriers that constantly disconnect the characters from any meaningful existence. Modern man’s failure to master communication coupled with his inability to act leads to marginal existence. There is no attempt at “restructuring and even destabilizing of power” (Hybridity, 1), and detached individuals live at the periphery where they whine but never make any real attempt to move to the Centre because they fear the societal mores that define and determine the existential condition at the Centre. Mark Burton and Carolyn Kagan rightly observe that “Marginalization is at the core of exclusion from fulfilling and full social lives at individual, interpersonal and societal levels. People who are marginalized have relatively little control over their lives and the resources available to them”1. Most of Eliot’s characters can easily be placed in this category because of their personal feelings of defectiveness or as a result of the social values that limit control over both their lives and resources.

“The Love Song” is a monologue that dramatizes the mind-set and attitude of the tragi-comic middle age man Prufrock, whose incapability to interact and
communicate with those in his world leaves him at the periphery of life with nothing but the necessity to frame an overwhelming question which he shirks from because he lacks the nerve. Prufrock’s paralysis and his consequent absence from the world of action are signaled in the title of the poem. It is a love song, which is suggestive of the act or art of singing, but this song is never sung because of the singer’s inadequacies and inability to live in the larger context of his society. The enthusiasm of the song is undermined by the epigraph rendered by Count Guido de Montebello, who is living in the peripheral world of hell. This allusion from Dante’s *Inferno* coupled with the absence of any nomenclatural indications to Prufrock illustrates the speaker’s paralysis and absence from his world. The poem is also replete with images of enervation and paralysis such as the evening described like an individual undergoing surgery: “Like a patient etherized upon a table” (Eliot, *Collected Poems* 13). The image of the anesthetized patient underscores Prufrock’s sedentariness and logically keeps him out of the context of normal social life. The simile comparing the evening setting to a patient about to undergo a surgical operation suggests very strongly the speaker’s inactive state which brings about his exclusion from meaningful participation in society. Other symbols in the poem that suggest the speaker’s timidity, inactiveness and consequent marginality are conveyed in the third stanza through the metaphors of the cat and fog:

> The yellow fog that rubs it back upon window pane  
> The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-pane  
> Licked its tongue into the corner of the evening,  
> Lingered upon the pools that stands in drains  
> Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,  
> Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap, m  
> And seeing that it was soft October night  
> Curled once about the house and fell asleep. (Eliot, *Collected Poems* 13)

The image of “fog” and “smoke” obviously can be equated with that of a cat. The fog/smoke like cat is outside and seems to be looking into the room where the women are discussing idly. The position of the cat is typically marginal. Its existence is outside of the world of the women and it is only looking into it. This image therefore conveys Prufrock’s outsider status in an explicit manner. According to Edward Lobb, these animal correlations “suggest something of Prufrock’s alienation” (169). The activity of the cat or fog around the window-pane is suggestive of Prufrock who is unable to penetrate the world of the women; he
desires physical contact but has been relegated to the outer limits of the world in which he lives.

Another individual inadequacy that Prufrock suffers from and which helps to make his marginal existence more profound is his inability to communicate. David Spurr is of the opinion that one of the central obsessions is “the problem of speech”\textsuperscript{2}. The failure to use words in an authentic and articulate manner perpetually keeps Prufrock on the outer limits of his society as his vision and yearning for love is never really communicated. Prufrock is projected as someone who does not even know how begin expressing his thoughts or feelings:

\begin{quote}
It is impossible to say just what I, mean-
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in a pattern on a screen:
Would it have been worthwhile?
If one, setting a pillow or throwing off a Shawl,
And turning towards the windows should say:
‘That is not it at all,
That is not what I mean, at all’ (Eliot, \textit{Collected Poems} 16-17).
\end{quote}

Prufrock’s inability to say what he means results from the fact that he is ideologically marginalized. He is engaged in “the ideological definition of one’s marginalized identity in the interest of the dominant groups in society” (Burton and Kagan). The individual creates the condition for their own marginality by being over sensitive and self-critiquing. He bears a love message for the lady, which is a potential way of linking up with society, but he is unable to even begin delivering the message. This inability is reflected by the word “impossible” which is indicative of the difficulty to communicate his vision and desires. Prufrock therefore has no hope of beginning and by implication no hope of breaking out of his confined existence. This, probably, is because of his over sensitive consciousness—he thinks he already knows the response of the lady: “that is not it at all, / That is not what I mean, at all” (Eliot, \textit{Collected Poems} 17). The repetition of these lines shows the degree of lack of communication and comprehension between Prufrock and the women. The characters thus experience a linguistic difficulty which keeps them disconnected with Prufrock assuming the possible lesser term in the binary pair.

When Gurung and Kollmair point out that “Gender, age and disability are important components in the vulnerability to marginality…” (15), they raise an idea
that is important in understanding the characters’ inability to break out the limits of their world and to enter into that of the ladies. The dynamics of age and gender comes into play. For Prufrock, it is his realization of age that limits him, but for the male in “Portrait” it is his consciousness of the lady’s age. Prufrock’s cry “I grow old, I grow old” (Eiot, *Collected Poems* 17) establishes a context for interpreting the role of age in self-perception and how it functions in the creation of a marginal situation. His obsession with his age is a factor that affects his ability to relate to the women. Prufrock’s marginality arises from his self-consciousness and what Annesha Mandal and Arindam Modak describe as a “conflict between the social self and the inner self…” (4). This self-conscious conflict is related to age when Prufrock’s reveals his own observation about his age: “Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in / upon a platter,” (Eliot, *Collected Poems*). The image of a “slightly bald” head suggests Prufrock’s recognition of his age, a factor that disconnects him from the world of the ladies thereby making him marginal. Throughout the poem, “Prufrock’s idiosyncratic personality” (Lobb 167) plays a central role in determining his marginality.

Related ideas of marginality caused by individual inadequacies are also evident in “Portrait”, a poem which focuses not so much on the lady’s portrait as the title suggests but on a description of the young man’s view and disconnection from the lady. Analyzing the poem in terms of “conversational fragments” (109), Lothar Honnighausen states that the poem captures “[t]he awkward relationship between a reluctant male and a sentimentalizing female” (108). The reluctance of the male is analyzed here as a component of his nature that makes him susceptible to a marginal existence. The “frustrated and remorseful reflections” (Honnighausen 108) of the male lover project the exotic world of the lady and reflects his inertia and inability to engage in a meaningful conversation with the lady.

The inability of the young man and the woman to communicate their respective aspirations leads to a sense of marginality expressed in the young man’s rather reclining attitude. The young man in this poem, like Prufrock, is the character that exists at the margin of a society typified by refined values and conventions. He has ideologically and psychologically identified himself as incapable of inhabiting the refined world of the high-class lady. The anguish, guilt and self-reproach that characterize the mood of the lovers are consequent upon their inability to express their desires towards each other. This causes the young man to prefer the zone of the marginal while leaving the woman in the Centre. The opening line of the poem set an atmosphere for things to be said or to be left unsaid. The assumption here is that
if things are said, they will connect and live in a similar world but if things are not said then they will remain separated:

Among the smoke and fog of the December afternoon
You have the scene arrange itself—as it will.
Seen to do—
With “I have saved this afternoon for you”
And four waxes candles in the darkened room
Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,
An atmosphere of Juliet’s tomb
Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid (Eliot, *Collected Poems* 18)

The lady’s room is an exotic one; its wax candles and rings of light give it the atmosphere of a tomb. By comparing the lady’s room to the setting of a tomb, the speaker is being satirical about her rarefied pretensions and repeated desire for love. The room is a symbol of the Centre; the point from where power and influence radiates and controls the rest of the society. The setting frightens the young man into self-possession: “I keep my countenance/ I remain self-possessed (Eliot, *Poems* 20), and he prefers the world outside the room.

Unable to communicate through speech, the young man thinks of other means through which he can reach out to the lady. From his self-possessed world, he struggles to create a connection with the lady. He insists that he:

Must borrow every changing shape
To find expression—dance, dance
Like a dancing bear
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape
Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance (Eliot, *Collected Poems* 22)

Unfortunate for him, every move to connect ends in disconnectedness. The young man and Prufrock become epitomes of modern people who have failed to use language in connecting themselves. The only option left is the instinctive method of animals. Dancing, crying and chatting are emotional rather than reasonable means of communication. The failure of even this method is expressed in the persona’s immediate desire for fantasy - “tobacco trance”. He prefers the banalities of the Margin to the refined mannerisms of the Centre. The failure of language and speech is also expressed in the simile that compares the speaker’s voice to the tune of a
broken violin: “The voice returns like the insistent out of tune / of a broken, violin on the August afternoon” (Eliot, *Collected Poems* 22). The violin is part of the sophistication of the Centre that scares away the young man.

The notion of fixation is also evident in “Portrait” wherein the reader encounters the psychological impasse of a sensitive individual whose actual existence is defined by various degrees of marginality caused by him. The young man exhibits his inability to act or move towards the older lady with whom he has a detached relationship because in his conception the lady is at the source of existential power, and he is at the margin. Like Prufrock, the male in the poem is a man of thought and not of action. Excessive thinking inactivates his ability to act out his innate feelings of love for the lady. The lady on her part suffers the same emotional paralysis as her guest. Having rarefied or over-defined her high class values, which has scared the young lover, she now feels a profound sense of disconnection and loneliness in her world. Grover Smith points out that the lady’s disapproval signals her regret over the fact that they are not yet friends (10). She laments:

I have been wondering frequently of late
(But our beginning never knows our end)
Why we have not developed into friends
I feel like one who smiles and turning shall remark
Suddenly, his expression in a glass. (Eliot, *Collected Poems* 21)

The lady’s cry that they have not become friends suggests that there is still an interstitial space that separates the Centre where she lives from the Margin where the young man is located. Both the lady and the young man have become akin in experience; they share similar emotions of seclusion and a conceited attitude towards music. Her attempt to compose harmony or to bridge the interstitial space through music fails as it tends to be boring and unattractive to her guest. The young man complains that:

Among the winding of the violins
And the ariettes
Of cracked cornets
Inside my brain a dull tom – tom begins
Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own,
Capricious monotone. (Eliot, *Collected Poems* 19)
The unattractiveness of the music is suggested by the “dull tom-tom” which is “absurdly hammering” in his brain a “capricious monotone”. The negation of music shows the failure to bridge the gaps between the two worlds with music. The young man opts for the world where he will simply smoke, drink bear and correct his watch with the city clock.

In “The Love Song” and “Portrait” marginality is a choice conditioned by the young lover’s lack of nerve. Although the ladies’ exotic worlds in both poems create a Centre that seems too powerful to accommodate the young male lovers, their own inadequacies pronounce more. They prefer their chosen world at the margin to the power steering Centre of the ladies. Marginality, therefore, becomes a deliberate choice necessitated by excessive self-scrutiny, enervation and the fear to communicate. Self-marginalization is also evident in “Gerontion” which deals with another character that shrinks from a life fully lived. Gerontion’s self-absorption and anxiety reflect his craving and shrinking from a tremendous experience. The speaker is an old man who has led a marginal life and is now meditating on the loss of feeling and meaning in his dried up and unheroic life. He equally meditates on the general decay of humanity through religious and historical decadence. His paralytic nature is announced in the epigraph which signals the persona’s lack of youthful vigor, followed by his association to age: “Here I am, an old man in a dry mouth” (Eliot, Collected Poems 39).

Apart from “The Love Song” and “Portrait”, Eliot also reveals individuals whose inability to communicate or whose deliberate avoidance of communication leads to marginal existence in poems like “The Hollow Man” and The Waste Land. The hollow men exist on the margin of two worlds – the physical world where they do not desire to live and the transcendental world where they desire to belong. Like the characters in other early poem, the hollow men lack the nerve to face the transcendental reality of the world beyond, especially given that they cannot even communicate effectively. The senselessness of their speech is conveyed by the simile that compares it to the noise produced by wind in dry grass. Phrases like “dried voices”, “whisper”, and “quiet and meaningless” illustrate the fact that the attempt to speak is also difficult and useless. The images of the “broken jaw” in the fourth stanza suggest both desolation and failure to communicate. Because of the difficulties faced by the hollow men, they “group together and avoid speech”; they prefer to be silent instead of making meaningless sounds like “rat’s feet over broken glasses” (Eliot, Collected Poems 89). In their silence, they remain the only inhabitants of this world at the brink of eternity.
In the twentieth century civilization characterized by individualist ideologies, every attempt at defining individual or collective space leads to increasing disconnection and marginality between the individual and other individuals, the individual and society, the individual and God, or the individual and nature. Through much of Eliot’s poetry the necessity to speak is projected as a means of breaking not only the silence between individuals but also as a means of bridging the gap between the Centre and the Margin. Psychologists have argued that the personal traits of the individual are important in determining the marginal status of people. The way the person is or the individual nature of the person, as seen in the case of the lovers in Eliot’s poetry, contributes to their feeling and sense of marginality. As a result of the fact that most of the attempts to speak fail because of the people’s incapacity and fear, the individuals who yearn to move from the margin to the center end up not moving. David Spur is of the opinion that the failure in communication results not from the inadequacy of words. Rather, it comes from the speaker’s impotence, which can be viewed as an individual trait that makes the person vulnerable to marginality. In the case of Prufrock, the presentation of his personality shows that he has distinct nature which facilitates his marginality. Ahmad Satam Al-Jumaily analyzes this distinct personality trait as elements of a tragic hero and notes that “From the beginning of the text he is presented with a split in his spirit, a weakness in his character, a disease in his mentality, a sadness in his mood, and a fear in his shaken personality” (111). Al-Jumaily’s observation is plausible because the poem ends with Prufrock still trapped in his world from where he contemplates his fate in the sphere of the women. Unlike Prufrock who announces an ambitious desire to go and visit the lady but never goes, in “Portrait” the young actually visits the lady three times but like Prufrock he lacks the nerve to express his emotions.

END NOTES

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