

**THE CONCEPTS OF SPIRITUALISM AND MATERIALISM AS REFLECTED IN THE SELECT POETRY OF T.S. ELIOT**

**Rajashekara M N**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Govt. SKSJ Technological Institute

K R Circle, Bangalore

mn\_rajashekara@yahoo.co.in

&

**Dr. S Venkateswaran**

Formerly Professor

RIESI, Bangalore

**Abstract**

*The principal objective of this paper is to understand T.S. Eliot's views on Spiritualism and Materialism. As Eliot was a spiritualist, he has written many spiritual poems based on spiritual and moral values. Eliot made an attempt to express the bitterness of modern and materialistic life. The spiritual degeneration of the modern man can be seen in his poems. Today, religion and spiritualism are fast deteriorating. Materialism is rapidly getting hold of them. Today's world is a materialistic world. In this material world man becomes spiritually degenerated and dead. Modern man becomes a possessor of modern materialism. Materialism ignores the religious faith and spiritualism in modern society. Thus, religion and materialism lost their values in society. At this time, T.S. Eliot gave a great contribution to revive their lost values and positions. His view helps us in understanding the situation or condition in which the modern man is living. The paper focuses on bringing out Eliot's ideas on Spiritualism and Materialism which are realistic and relevant in the present scenario.*

**Keywords:** Spiritualism, Materialism, Modern Man etc.

**T.S. Eliot as a Spiritualist**

T.S. Eliot stands out as a dominant figure of his times. He has been universally recognized by the peers as the greatest poet writing in English language of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The circumstances of his life and his unique temperament led him through all the movements and influences of his age. Though centered in himself, in search of his artistic personality, he became a part of all he saw and felt. As a result, he could have had his own ideas or opinions about everything he came across. Hence he is called an 'ideologist'.

T.S. Eliot was a versatile writer. During his long creative career, he wrote poetry, prose, drama, critical and social essays, etc. He was a spiritualist, because he has written many spiritual poems based on spiritual and moral values.

Eliot is a true writer of his age. The fact is that he was a spokesman of his age. In all his poems, Eliot made an attempt to express the bitterness of modern and materialistic life. The spiritual degeneration of man can be seen in his poems.

Today, religion and spiritualism are fast deteriorating. Materialism is rapidly getting hold of them. Today's world is a materialistic world. In this material world man becomes spiritually degenerated and dead. Modern man becomes a possessor of modern materialism. Materialism ignores the religious faith and spiritualism in modern society. Thus, religion and materialism lost their values in society. At this time, T.S. Eliot gave a great contribution to revive their lost values and positions. Through his spiritual poems, he is acclaimed as 'spiritualist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century'.

Most of his poems, directly or indirectly refer to the modern mechanized life. For example, in 'The Waste Land' he has used wider theme. It can be studied as a bitter criticism of the hollow and rootless modern civilization. And the possibility of spiritual rebirth is a constantly recurring theme in Eliot.

### **Spiritualism & Materialism as depicted in 'The Waste Land'**

'The Waste Land' is the most important and the greatest achievement of T.S. Eliot. It symbolizes the modern civilization which is compared to a waste land. One of the important themes of 'The Waste Land' is a vision of dissolution and spiritual drought. This spiritual drought arises from the degeneration, vulgarization and commercialization of sex. Eliot's study of the fertility myths of different people had convinced him that sex-act is the source of life and vitality, when it is exercised for the sake of procreation and when it is an expression of love. But when it is severed from its primary function, and is exercised for the sake of momentary pleasure or monetary benefit, it becomes a source of degeneration and corruption. It then represents the primacy of the flesh over the spirit, and this results in spiritual decay and death.

Another important theme of 'The Waste Land' is sexual perversion among the middle-class people. This is seen in the mechanical relationship of the typist and the clerk. The typist gives herself to the clerk with a sense of total indifference and apathy. There is neither repulsion nor any pleasure, and this absence of feeling is a measure of the sterility of the age.

T.S. Eliot says that modern man is a materialist. He is more interested in material possessions, physical comforts than in spiritual values. It can be seen in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. In 'The Waste Land', Tiresias, who is called as protagonist and Eliot's spokesman, does speak in the opening lines. Eliot maintains that there exists in the universe only one substance called matter. So the concept of the soul as it is understood in religion is a myth, a figment of the imagination. The materialist therefore rejects the spiritual and tends to devote

himself exclusively to satisfy his physical, mental, and financial needs. But Eliot is a Christian existentialist and spiritualist. He holds the spirit as a real existence apart from matter and that human life is a stage for the upliftment of the spirit. As such, the modern materialistic life is a waste land for the human soul, since there grows in it nothing that can nourish the spirit.

Eliot suggests that worldly men are primarily materialists who would not pursue noble spiritual life, though their souls demand lofty spiritual nourishment. Engrossed in worldly pursuits, they consider spiritualism futile and wastage of energy. Hence Tiresias suggests that the month of April is the most painful period for the materialists of 'The Waste Land'.

Here, Tiresias speaks to the materialist who is supposed to be present before him. Tiresias calls man the 'Son of Man'. In other words, man is an erring creature. This materialistic man cannot feel or guess that there is in his heart the soul that shines as the sun in the country of his physical body and throbs with life in his heart. For, he believes in materialism whose doctrine denies the independent existence of the soul as apart from matter. He also believes in dry season which has reduced Christianity to a ruined church with broken images of God, Christ, saints, and others. In the opinion of Tiresias, materialism of modern man has shattered all the old ideals of Christianity and all the concepts related to it. The Christian church has become only a 'heap of broken images'.

There are overtones of the Upanishad. In the poem the expression 'where the sun beats' can be seen as a symbol of the human heart in which the atman shines as the Sun to illuminate the country in the form of the physical body. 'A heap of broken images' represents religion as a ruined temple with broken idols. The 'cricket' is synecdocheism for Nature. And 'Water' is a symbol of agape. It represents the selfless Christian brotherly love as the water of human kindness, compassion and affection. Needless to say, 'the dry stone' is a personal symbol of the materialistic heart.

Speaking to the materialist, Tiresias says that the materialist is unable to see, or imagine the spiritual world in which the soul functions as the sun pulsates to mark time. Materialism cannot afford comfortable shelter in moments of distress. It is like a dead tree which cannot give any shelter to traveler.

Tiresias advises the materialist to come under the shelter of Christianity, the rock shelter which is red with Christ's blood. The shadow of umbrella of Christianity is peaceful and comfortable. Tiresias further comments that the shadow of modern man's materialistic selfishness starts chasing him in the morning and enters his being only in the evening. But if he comes in under the umbrella of Christianity, he shall see the shadow of Christ walking beside him to protect him from all kinds of suffering. Tiresias also promises him the spiritual light which will show him that his physical body is only a handful of mortal dust. It will also lead him to the conclusion that his concern for his future or his anxiety for his safety and security is only an empty fear. It is so because modern materialist's mental world is based on his mortal body which is nothing but a handful of dust and will soon perish.

The protagonist Tiresias recalls his encounter with a fake Madame Sosostris, who is supposed to be wisest woman in Europe. She put before him some eight cards with their faces downwards. Then to prove that she possessed the power of seeing things not present to her senses even, she started handing him the cards one by one. She also described the picture printed on each of them, without looking at them.

After describing the four cards Madame Sosostris describes the last four cards. The first of these had the picture of the man with three staves. It was a hint that the picture was that of the fisher king. The sixth card bore the picture of the wheel of fortune. The seventh card had the image of one-eyed merchant. The eighth card was a blank. The one-eyed merchant carried on his back only blankness. He had his love eye fixed on the worldly wealth. So he would bear home as a traveler of life only blankness and nothing else. She added that she could not pray into the nature of the blankness since she was forbidden to do so. Madame Sosostris however feared that the materialist represented by one-eyed merchant would drown him-self in the ocean of worldly desires, thus suffer spiritual death. The clairvoyante implied that the absence of the hanger-man card connected the modern man's drowning in the ocean of materialistic desires.

Tiresias, who is the spokesman of Eliot, recalls that once he stood on the London Bridge and watched the view of the city and also the people crossing the bridge. He noticed that the people were under the fuddling fog of the dawn of materialism. The effect of the doctrine of materialism had frozen their human souls just as the winter freezes the human body. These materialistic men do not show any inclination towards spiritual pursuits. They are too much engrossed in worldly activities. The crowds of people crossing the bridge were crossing it for materialistic business. The picture of its crowds of color, masses of hollow men who are dead in the midst of living flowing over London Bridge on the way to work, the slaves of time, each with his eyes fixed before his feet, watching the next slip only, make the poet exclaim, "I had not thought death had undone so many". Many people exhaled short a deep sighs reflecting their misery.

According to Eliot, the materialist looks upon spiritual pursuits as futile and doesn't believe in the independent existence of soul, God, Heaven or Hell. Tiresias also refers to the Christian brotherly Love as 'water' of human kindness. This is God's love for mankind. He feels that land is devoid of this water and has only rocks of materialism. The lakes of the waste land are dry. Besides rocks, this land is marked with sandy roads. The road is sandy because the land has been turned into a desert by a severe spiritual drought.

The road is dry being subject to the dry weather of dry materialistic season. Leaving the low level bread and butter, it goes up rocky slope of materialistic philosophy. Thus it turns by turns and twists among the mountains of the materialistic theories, such as Sensationalism, Agnosticism, Dialectical Materialism etc. Obviously, these materialistic theories can be considered as rocks for the human soul. Tiresias tells that the mind of the materialistic man is full of mountains of worldly ambitions and sensual desires; there is no mental peace or

silence of meditation. The mental sky is covered with clouds of anxiety and fear of poverty, accident, misfortunes, etc. But the clouds are dry and unfruitful. In other words, they are imaginings with empty thunders. Nevertheless they shatter the peace of the place frequently. In the waste land of the materialist's mind, there is no solitude even. Tiresias also says that the materialists peep out of their poor cottages and express contempt for the red sullen faces of their unfulfilled desires. Here 'red sullen faces' symbolize unfulfilled desires of mankind. Tiresias makes a scathing attack on the materialists.

Tiresias, the protagonist, tells that the doctrine of materialism denies the independent existence of the soul apart from the body. The soul is the first cause of life in the body. There is an ironic reference to the materialistic attitude. Selfishness has made the world a 'Waste Land'. In the message of the thunder, there is a reference to 'Brihadaranyak Upanishad'. The triple progeny of Prajapati Gods, Men and Asuras dwelt as disciples with their father. Having passed through their studentship, the Gods said, "Speak to us your worship". He spoke to them the syllable. 'Da'. "Have you understood? He said. "We have understood" they said, "You tell us Damyata-subdue yourselves". "Yes" he said "You have understood". Men understood it as 'Dattat' or 'Give' Asuras as 'Dayadhvam' or be compassionate.

### **Spiritualism & Materialism as depicted in 'The Hollow Men'**

"The Hollow Men" published in 1925 is one of Eliot's most significant poems. It echoes the ideas he expressed in his remarkable poem "The Waste Land". In all his early poems Eliot was deeply concerned about the predicament of modern man in a mechanized society. "The Hollow Men" is a direct expression of this awareness. He doesn't make fun of the fallen state of western man but there is despair and also understanding and sympathy on the part of the poet as one involved in this crisis.

The first stanza of the poem presents a picture of modern man and his world. Man in this materialistic world has become a machine himself. Men today are 'Hollow men', 'stuffed men', like the scare-crows. Their heads are filled with straw and materialistic activities. They lack spiritual strength and spiritual knowledge. Modern man's life is purposeless. Their talk is as meaningless as sound produced by the wind when it blows over dry grass.

The materialists have got the external appearance of men but they do not have the spiritual vitality which alone can make them human. Their shades are formed not by the use of appropriate tints but because of an absence of light. Here 'light' means the spiritual light. The stuffed men's hollowness is due to the absence of spiritual substance in them and not because some elements of vigour in them give them the appearance of hollowness. They are marked by the paralyzed force or arrested will, a fundamental inability to act up to one's decisions or even to take decisions.

Self-destruction by deeds is not as damning as this self-destruction by the absence of action. This feeling of the impossibility of communication is Eliot's theme in the early poems. What appears in 'The Waste Land' is a more convincingly pathetic form in the hyacinth passage:

“I could not speak, and my eyes failed,  
I was neither living nor dead, and I knew nothing,  
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.”

‘The Hollow Men’ develops the horror of death. Materialistic world is a valley of dying stars, lost values, darkness and stillness, which doesn’t in the least resemble a peace. Life is nothing but this broken jaw of air last kingdoms, a packed image which suggests the deadness and dryness of existence, its incapacity for articulation and communication and its isolation from a body within which it could function as a living member.

‘The broken jaw’ is a highly suggestive objective-correlative to Eliot’s theme of the inarticulate. A man’s happiness depends on the free and successful expression of one’s own personality. But this is impossible in ‘The waste Land’. ‘The broken jaw’ symbolizes the loss of spiritual values and self-expression. Hence, they gather together on the banks of this tumid river and avoid speech. This horror of loveless loving and the struggle for communication will be over only if the redeeming symbol of the eyes reappears.

The hollow men will ever be condemned to group together and avoid speech on the banks of the tumid river of death unless the eyes reappear and give them the vision of the heaven. They will be sightless unless a miracle takes place and instills religious faith in them. The curse which has be fallen both the land and its people, can be revoked only by a complete surrender to the power and the glory of god.

The materialistic man is referred to as the hollow man or empty man, because he is spiritually dead and materially awoken. The hollow men are stuffed effigies in whom no human machine is working. Here human machine refers to soul, but it is spiritually dead. People are devoid of any healthy instincts which characterize actual living human beings. They are not made out of human blood and bone but out of crossed staves, ‘crow’s skin’ and ‘rat’s coat’. In the place of the tissue of the brain, we find only straw. The brain of the human does not have any spiritual values or ideas. Here ‘straw’ means ‘dry grass’ which symbolizes the emptiness of human brain.

The symbols of the eyes which are the only hope overcoming the shadow cannot belong to any vision of romantic illusion. In part I, they are the ‘direct eyes’ of those of assured faith who have died, but later the symbol absorbs much richer implications. The openings of part II is somewhat ambiguous. It must be taken to mean that the poet dares not meet the direct eyes in dreams, for they light his ruins, reveal the lovely freedom of wind and free and arouse poetic and spiritual memories ‘instant and solemn’ in place of the quiet and meaningless voices of the opening lines. His world is a dying planet, doomed to extinction and he prays to be left in it, a stuffed effigy, a scare crow ‘behaving as the wind behaves’ that is acted upon, not acting, having no responsibility for his own fate.

The hollow man symbolizes emptiness, loneliness, darkness and death. We are reminded again of Dante and Beatrice, of how after his repentance she bathed him in the river of Lethe and her stern glare reappeared again as smiling encouragement, as ‘eyes of light’. We are

reminded of how she conducted him upwards and he saw the divine essence as a 'multifoliate rose' of saints, the crown consummation of that willing condemnation to the spiritual purgatory of death's twilight kingdom. But the conclusion again is devoid of hope. This vision of the multifoliate rose is only the hope of empty men, not what they are going to achieve because they are incapable of any action towards climbing the mount purgatory which must precede it.

### **Conclusion**

In the present study, an attempt has been made to bring out T.S. Eliot's view on Spiritualism and Materialism. This view helps us to understand the situation or condition in which the modern man is living. It also helps him to get rid of many of his problems if he follows the ideologies of T.S. Eliot. To conclude, Eliot's ideologies are realistic and relevant in the present scenario.

It may be appropriate if the scholars, the researchers, the writers and the editors concentrated on Eliot not only as an ideologist and spiritualist, but also as a classicist, mystic, metaphysical poet, royalist in politics and Anglo-catholic in religion.

### **Works Cited:**

1. Faber and Faber "The Complete Poems and Plays of T S Eliot". Glasgow, R.
  - a. MacLehose and Company Limited, The University Press Glasgow, 1970.
2. Drew, Elizabeth. A, "T.S.Eliot: The Design of His Poetry". New York Scribner, 1949.
3. Gordon, Lyndall. "The Wasteland and the Other Poems", London: Faber and Faber,
  - a. 1940.
4. Leonard Unger "T S Eliot: A Selected Critique". New York. Rinehart, 1948
5. Scofield, Martin. "T.S. Eliot: The Poems". London Faber and Faber, 1994.
6. Sigg, Eric. "The American T.S. Eliot". New York: Cambridge University Press,
  - a. 1989.
7. Williamson, George, "A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot: a poem-By Poem Analysis", New
  - a. York; Noonday press; 1956.