



READING METAPHYSICAL POETS FROM T. S. ELIOT'S PERSPECTIVE

SHOWKAT HUSSAIN DAR

Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of English
Mewar University Rajasthan
INDIA

ABSTRACT

T. S. Eliot is a classicist in literature and supports orderliness both in art and criticism. He rejects impressionistic criticism of Arthur Symons and philosophical abstract and intellectual criticism of Arnold. He is the critic who was a creative artist first. He is in the tradition of English poet-critics from Sidney to Arnold. He is one of the greatest literary critics of England. He is the most influential critic of the modern age. He is like Dryden for most of his criticism is written in the form of prefaces to his works with the purpose of justifying his own poetic creations. As a critic Eliot speaks with authority and conviction. He had the rare gift of expressing his thoughts in lucid, striking, pointed and trenchant phrases as, "objective correlative," "disassociation of sensibility" and "tradition and the individual talent." Eliot does not accept didacticism or any other use of poetry as a necessary condition of poetic art. To him, poetry is an amusement. He believed that the function of criticism is the elucidation of art and the correction of taste and to bring back the poet to life. A key concept in the criticism of Eliot is that he constantly emphasizes using tradition as a basis for the comparison and analysis of literature.

INTRODUCTION

In "The Metaphysical Poets" T. S. Eliot highlights the appreciative features of metaphysical poets according to his own perception. He praises the Metaphysical poets on the basis of their subjective matter and their poetry. The essay investigates the metaphysical poetry by rational discussion based on its phenomena rather than by intuition or mysticism. This essay draws people's interest towards the Metaphysical poets.

Why Metaphysical poets were called Metaphysical? This is the question which Eliot mainly focuses on in "The Metaphysical Poets." According to him, Donne and Cowley use a device

considered metaphysical and that is the elaboration of a figure of speech to a level of a mind can think, i.e., Cowley compares the world to a chessboard whereas Donne compares two lovers to a pair of compass. The other reason is that there is “a development by rapid association of thought” which means that one thought leads to another. Eliot links Metaphysical poets to Elizabethan playwrights. He reinforces that Metaphysical poets are descendants of Elizabethan dramatists and have unified sensibility. One can find connection between anything. They (Metaphysical poets) found the world as unified whole. In their poetry, thought and feeling affected each other as both are unified whole.

Eliot in this essay puts on top John Donne and other Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century and lowers down the poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. According to him, Romanticism is a sentimental age (feelings were crude). The Victorian poets could not combine thought and feeling. They were self-conscious, instead of feeling and thought, they thought about their thoughts. On the other hand, the Metaphysical poets were able to combine thought and emotion and sensation in one untroubled unity. Their language exactly matched their experience and their feeling. Eliot writes: “Tennyson and Browning are poets and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified this sensibility.”

Eliot’s famous phrase “disassociation of sensibility” in this essay was to explain the change that came over English poetry after Donne and Marvell. “Disassociation of sensibility” is the division of thought and feeling, which according to Eliot is done by Dryden and other poets of the age. They are responsible for the disassociation. There is a loss of union of thought and feeling whereas in the Metaphysical poetry, there is no separation of thought and feeling. Chapman’s work is a creation of thought into feeling while a thought to Donne was an experience, which modifies his sensibility.

T. S Eliot’s essay “The Metaphysical Poets” is an important landmark in the history of literary criticism. It has brought about revaluation and re-assessment of Donne and other Metaphysical poets, and has caused a revival of interest in these poets, who had been neglected for a considerable time. “Disassociation of sensibility” and “unification of sensibility” the two phrases occur in this very essay. The former is used to describe the characteristic fault of later seventeenth century poetry. The opposite of this phrase “unification of sensibility” means a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, a recreation of thought into feelings. Such fusion of thought and feeling is good for poetry. Bad poetry results when there is “disassociation of sensibility” that is the poets inability to feel his thoughts. A poet may have best ideas, says Eliot, to communicate but they serve no purpose unless they are expressed as feelings. This essay has acquired universality because of these two phrases. The fact cannot be denied that Eliot’s essay “The Metaphysical Poets” had a strong influence in reviving an interest in the seventeenth century poets.



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