

# Understanding T.S.Eliot's Concept of Tradition and Objectivity An Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

In this research paper the researcher will solely analyse Thomas Stearn Eliot's critical essay ' Tradition and Individual Talent' published in the ' The Egoist - Times Literary Supplement' in 1919. The aim of the research is to focus on the theory of poetry - the concept of tradition, impersonality, as put before us in his essay by T. S. Eliot. Hence, the present research paper will particularly analyse Eliot's critical creed ' Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality'. Thus it must be admitted that the essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent' by T.S. Eliot was an unofficial manifesto of his critical creed. The best argumentation is that the essay is replete with possibly all those critical principles from which his criticism has been derived.

Keywords: Tradition, impersonality, critical creed, emotion.

1. **The concept of tradition-** In the essay ' Tradition and Individual Talent' T. S. Eliot has pointed out that an artist must continually surrender himself to something which is more valuable than himself and to be very explicit it was the sense of the literary tradition. Eliot claims that an artist must allow his poetic sensibility to be shaped and modified by the past itself. His emotions and passions must be depersonalised ; in other words an artist must be as impersonal and objective as a scientist.. Hence, the argument by T.S. Eliot that the personality of the artist is not important, the important thing is the sense of tradition bears weight. Eliot is very clear on the point that Tradition in true sense of the term can not be inherited. Tradition or the sense of tradition can only be obtained with the source of hard labour. This labour is the labour of knowing the past writers. It is the critical labour of shifting the good from the bad, and of knowing what is good and useful. Only those who have the historical sense can obtain tradition. The historical sense includes a perception ' not only of the pastness of the past, but also of its presence. One who has the historical sense feels that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer down to his own day, including the literature of his own country, forms one continuous literary tradition.' This historical sense is the sense of the timeless and the temporal, as well as of the temporal and timeless together. It is this historical sense which makes a writer traditional. In a nutshell, sense of tradition implies a sort of recognition of the continuity of literature, a critical judgement as to which of the writers of the past continue to be significant in the present, and a knowledge of these significant writers obtained through painstaking efforts. In this way tradition represents the accumulated wisdom and experience of ages, and so its knowledge is essential for really great and noble achievements.
2. **The dynamic nature of tradition-** To understand the dynamic nature of tradition we must compare and contrast the work of an artist with the works of artists in the past. It is essential to form an idea of the real value and significance of a new writer and his work. T.S. Eliot give this view that a writer in the present it must seek guidance from the past, a writer must conform to the literary tradition. Here, it must be made clear that, as Eliot points out that ' just as the past directs the present so the present alters and modifies the past.' When a new work comes into existence, if it is really new and original, the whole literary tradition is modified, though ever so slightly. To quote Eliot " The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of

novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so, slightly altered." Every great poet like Virgil, Dante or Shakespeare, adds something to the literary tradition out of which the future poetry will be written. The comparison of the works of a poet in the present with the works of the past is made for the purposes of analysis, and for the forming of a better understanding of the new. Moreover, this comparison is reciprocal. The past helps to understand the present, and the present throws light on the past. It is by this comparison alone that we can shift the tradition from individual merits of a given work of art.

3. **The sense of tradition-** In the real sense of the term the sense of tradition is the consciousness of the main current, which does not all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. In other words, if the poet wants to know the tradition, the poet must judge critically what are the main trends and what are not. He must confine himself to the main trends to the conclusion of all that is incidental or topical. The poet must possess the critical gift in ample measure. He must also realise that the main literary trends are not determined by the great poets alone. Smaller poets also are significant. They are not to be ignored.
  
4. **Objectivity-** An artist must be as impersonal as a scientist. In a work of art the artist must depersonalise his emotions and passions. Here an emphasis has been given on the point that the personality of the artist is not important, the important thing is the sense of tradition. An artist must continually surrender himself to something which is more valuable than himself i.e. the sense of tradition. The poetic sensibility must be left to be shaped and modified by the past. Thus it must be admitted and understood that the personality of the poet is merely a medium having the same significance as a catalytic agent or a receptacle in which chemical reactions take place. That's why Eliot is of the view, "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon poetry". The mind of the poet is like a catalyst and the process of poetic creation is like the process of chemical reaction. Just as chemical reactions take place in the presence of a catalyst agent so also the poet's mind is the catalytic agent for combining different types of emotions into something new. This can be better understood by giving the following instance. If we suppose that there is a jar containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide. These two gases combine to form sulphurous acid while a fine filament of platinum is introduced into the jar. The combination takes place in the presence of the piece of platinum, but the metal does not undergo any change. It remains inert, neutral and unaffected. Thus the mind of the poet is the catalytic agent. It is necessary for combinations of emotions and experiences to take place, but it itself does not undergo any change during the process of poetic combination. The mind of the poet is constantly forming emotions and experiences into new wholes, but the new combination does not contain even a trace of the poet's mind, just as the newly formed sulphurous acid does not contain any trace of platinum. The poet's mind is like a jar containing numberless feelings, emotions etc., which remain there in an unorganised and chaotic form till "all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together". In this way the argument is that poetry is 'organisation rather than inspiration'. The greatness of a poem does not depend upon the greatness or intensity of emotions. The emotions are essential components of a poem. The greatness of a poem depends upon the intensity of the process of poetic composition. Just as a chemical reaction takes place in the presence of pressure, so also in the process of poetic composition the intensity of emotions is needed for the fusion of emotions. There is always a difference between the artistic emotion and the personal emotions of the poet. In fact, as Eliot argues, the poet has no personality to express, he is merely a medium, in which impressions and experiences combine in particular and expected ways. Eliot in this way totally rejects the romantic subjectivism. The poetic emotions and the personal emotions have a difference. The emotions of the poet may be simple or crude, but on the other side the emotions of his poetry maybe b-complex and refined. The poet main express only e ordinary emotions, but he must impart to to his ordinary emotions a new significance and a new meaning. Besides it is not necessary that they should be his personal emotions. Even emotions which he has never personally experienced can serve the purpose of poetry. The theory of poetry given by William Wordsworth is rejected by T.S.Eliot. William Wordsworth's theory of poetry has its origin in 'emotions recollected in tranquility' is rejected by Eliot on the ground that in the process of poetic composition there is neither emotion nor recollection nor tranquility. In the process of poetic composition there is only concentration of a number of experiences, and a new thing results from this concentration.

5. **Conclusion-** At last, it can be concluded that, as T.S.Eliot states, 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality.' Thus Eliot does not deny personality or emotion to the poet. Only he must depersonalise his emotions. There should be an extinction of his personality. This impersonality can be achieved only when the poet surrenders himself completely to the work that is to be done, and the poet can know what is to be done only if he requires a sense of tradition, the historic sense, which makes him conscious, not only of the present, but also of the present moment of the past, not only what is dead ; but of what is already living.

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