

SIN AND EXPIATION IN THE PLAYS OF T. S. ELIOT

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Abstract:

Sin and its expiation is a major theme in Eliot's plays. He has tried to solve the basic problem of man's existence from the Christian point of view, rejecting Greek and Freudian stand-point. In Christianity due to original sin man is a sinner by birth; he has to expiate his sins by spiritual enlightenment, by total submission to God, repentance and sacrifice. Becket, Harry Celia, Colby and Claverton suffer from different kinds of sin as inherited sin, personal sin and deadly sins; such as greed, lust, selfishness, covetousness, unfaithfulness, false pretenses etc. They expiate their sins in their own way. The present research paper attempts to study sin and expiation in the plays of T. S. Eliot.

Key Words: Sin, expiation, existence, spiritual, sacrifice, repentance.

When Eliot declared in 1926 that he was “Classicist in literature, royalist in politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion”, he seriously meant that he was adhering to the basics. In 1939 he wrote in the *Criterion* “for myself, a right political philosophy came more and more to imply a right theology and economics to depend upon right ethics”. In his opinion man's primary problem is to free himself from the temptations of evil and love a righteous ethical life, a life purged of the original sin. An attempt to escape the original sin will be suicidal and, therefore, he must face it and only then he can get redemption. It is only through expiation, man can be purgated and absolved of sin.

Eliot's message is: we are all sinners but we can get rid of sin, and save ourselves and our people by self-analysis and expiation. Eliot considers sin and expiation as the primary factor in the existence of man. So he presents sin in all its phases, aspects and kinds. Sin and expiation are closely related concepts in Christianity. Sin is breaking of God's laws, the behavior which goes against the teaching of the *Bible*, the conduct that defies norms prescribe by the Church and is a part of mankind's nature.

Eliot's emphasis on contemporary society is obvious. He looks at the modern problem and analyses the plays from the Christian point of view. He finds that all kinds of breakdowns in man's life have their origin in sin, sin in family, sin in society, sin in thought and action and social and moral sin as well. Eliot's view of life is essentially Christian. He wrote his plays with the intention of propagating the Christian values of life. The choice of such themes as conflict between good and evil, sin and expiation, selfishness and sacrifice, cruelty and love clearly reveal the religious purpose of his drama. There is always a Jesus pattern in ritual of martyrdom and the protagonists of his plays are martyrs and expiate man's original sin.

All of Eliot's plays deal in one way or another with his Christian conception of human freedom. Typically, the dramatic situation involves the hero's discovery of the Catholic view of life as the only tenable one, no matter how painful is that recognition. By recognizing divine necessity, the central character frees himself from subjection to human desires of the flesh, from the horror of the world's apparent disorder, and ultimately from the human limitations of physical death. By recognizing the existence of free-will, he also gains release from the determinism of the modern scientific world view. And typically, as the hero's discovery is made manifest, those around him demonstrate levels of awareness of the true meaning of freedom, which is the first step of expiation.

The plays of Eliot are written on the important Christian themes: First of all, he believes in the imperfectability of human soul. It is all due to original sin but if he reposes his faith in Church and follows the light from it, he is likely to make his life better here and hereafter. What is required is that man should repent for his mistakes, misdeeds and sins; he should make confession of them and should be ready to follow the Godly ways of life, which is the best way of expiation. Eliot thinks that faithlessness is a sin. A man must have faith and he should rigidly follow his faith. He must fight against the forces of evil and disbelief, sometimes he might have to sacrifice for the sake of belief but he must stick to his faith as Thomas Becket, Harry, Celia, Colby and Claverton do in the plays.

Eliot's plays show that Eliot did not dislike this world and its ways, rather he liked it very much because it is God's creation. However the trouble is that most people do not regard it as created by God. They consider it differently. The result is estrangement of human relationship, perversion of moral and ethical values, debauchery and corruption. The path of affirmation requires the observance of the good-will towards others. This is what Eliot has said in the two of his plays, *The Confidential Clerk* and *The Cocktail Party* where characters get a new vision of life, when they free themselves from the clutches of egotism, pride and self-importance. Sometimes a person feels the mood of weariness, sense of aloofness, a sort of detachment from the worldly matters of life; for such a person, the negative way is the best way. In fact both the Christian ways require selflessness, love and sacrifice on the part of its followers. Both are the ways of God and lead up to him. Thus Eliot presents the predominance of the negative way in *The Elder Statesman* where Mr. Claverton renounces the world of politics and accepts the life of austerity, moral discipline and meditation.

The play *Murder in the Cathedral* is not just a dramatization of Thomas Becket; it is a deep searching study of the significance of martyrdom. In Becket's martyrdom we have both the sense of sin and fate modified by the Christian idea of sainthood and crucifixion. The notion of sainthood and crucifixion is embodied in the character of Becket. The play as a whole contains the sin-laden God figure in the person of the Archbishop with his antagonist. It develops several similarities between the Gospel accounts of Christ's passion and Thomas's martyrdom. The most obvious analogy is between the crucifixion of Christ and the murder of Becket; and the acceptance of death by both Christ and the martyr as a part of God's design for the redemption of mankind.

Becket's martyrdom can be broadly analyzed into two parts; his struggle towards awareness of himself as God's elect and his total submission to the will of God. The first episode may be called the temptation episode and the second part the episode of self-purification of Becket through the state of intellectual darkness which separates man from God. In this state of darkness perfect humility is achieved by the Christian soul and Becket comes to be aware of limitation of human knowledge. The theme of Becket's martyrdom has been given a universal appeal by presenting it as a common cause of Christianity-the triumph of cross.

In the play, *The Family Reunion*, Harry shares the sins of humanity or we can say parents sin on son. Father and son both thought to murder their wives. Although there was no actual murder but there was the intention of murder. In Christianity intention is as evil as deed. We can say father's sins are on son or the son receives sins in inheritance. Eliot has transferred much of the guilt from Amy. It is Harry's father who falls in love with another and plans to murder his legal partner. Amy, although, she knows his love for Agatha, keeps him. In doing this, she may be thought to have killed the real man. Thus Amy too is involved in the tangle of sin. She uses a person in an inhuman way and seeks to impose her will upon all around her; therefore, she is equally guilty of willing someone else's death. The theme, sin and expiation, in Eliot's play are largely in the pattern of Greek drama. Eliot has perceived a relation between the Greek 'Furies' and maddened conscience. The Furies at first haunt Harry like the fateful spirit of revenge but towards the end of the play appear as the bright angels whom he gladly follows. This transition is an indication of the fact that the hero accepts the Christian idea of original sin for expiation. The furies follow Harry not for what he

himself has done, but for the sin of his father. In this supernatural predicament, Harry discovers the necessity of Christianity for resolution can come only by accepting an original sin which was not his own but his father's only.

Agatha says that it is the story of sin and expiation, not a crime and punishment. Sin can be expiated variously. In Christianity, it must be willing and conscious sacrifice; she shares the consciousness of the sin of the Monchenseys' with Harry so that both of them may expiate it. She calls him "the consciousness of his unhappy family" burning in the purgatorial flames and advises him to resolve the crises. He thus symbolizes the spiritually rich man in quest of belief who has met another fellow quester who has gained insight into the meaning of this quest and his family symbolizes the whole of humanity in spiritual travail.

So the play *The Family Reunion* is a play of sin and expiation. Harry, Mary and Agatha belong more or less to the first group. All of the participants except Mary may be described as "conscious participants" in the drama of sin and expiation. It is indeed wholly fanciful to suggest that the play is intended as an allegory illustrating the Christian concept of original sin and the necessity of expiation. In an allegorical interpretation of it, Amy would stand for the world, her husband for man and Agatha for orthodoxy. Man married to the world discovers a better love but that love is guilty especially in the eyes of the world, and man himself cannot get rid of sense of betrayal and guilt. In *The Cocktail Party*, the theme is again the loneliness of human beings, with emphasis on the choice they must make. The Chamberlaynes' marriage comes to grief; Celia Coplestone has an affair with Edward Chamberlaynes, Peter Quilpe is in love with Celia, but both fail to see her as she is, and is in love only with some aspiration of her own. Celia's choice means relinquishing ordinary social life for religious discipline and communion with God through devoted nursing followed by martyrdom amongst a remote primitive people. The Chamberlaynes' choice is to face the knowledge of their difficulty in loving and giving. They make the best of a bad job, and they go on with conventional social duties as represented for them by the cocktail party.

Celia's sense of sin is connected with the Christian doctrine of expiation. The sense of sin is troubling her like a bad dream and the fear that it is more real than anything she believes in, frightens her. The sense of sin despaired her. She is prepared to expiate for her sin. In a sense she has created a God in man's image and the real man can never have up to it. So the first symptom of her illness is this awareness of solitude. The second symptom is a sense of sin which is strong in her. Despite the fact, she has always been taught to disbelieve in sin, but the sense of sin that oppresses her is not sin in ordinary sense; it goes deeper than the sense of personal wrong-doing while she thinks over about her affair with Edward.

Celia's position is different, is unique. She has a sense of sin not for anything specific, but a general sense and she desires to atone. A way is pointed out to her and accepted by her. The path chosen by Celia leads to crucifixion. Her sacrifice shows 'the power of the saint's sacrifice to fertilize the lives of others'. Celia has chosen the path of martyrdom. She has courage to face her own truth. She does not suffer as ordinary people suffer. She pays the highest price in suffering. Celia's death is upon the expiation of a group not for an individual. The expiation of a group is centered on Edward and on Lavinia who organizes the cocktail party. Celia's suffering is like that of Christ. She dies for the expiation of the sin of humanity.

In Eliot's plays upto the time of *The Cocktail Party* the predominant emphasis is on the negative aspect of Christian experience. While the Negative way is present in Celia's path to martyrdom, dramatic attention is divided equally between Celia's marriage to God and the Affirmative Way of Christian marriage represented by the Chamberlaynes. *The Cocktail Party* abandons the Christian tradition of sacrifice and expiation. Celia has to die for the group. This play is superior to *The Family Reunion* for two main reasons. The first is that expiation is satisfying and universal, the second the dramatic action is unconfused. Both the plays have the same theme the necessity of expiation, but expiation in this play is spiritually true. In *The Confidential Clerk* Eliot keeps the theme of sin and expiation hidden in the plot of the play. Coby's awareness of original sin is indicated by his desire to atone for his father's failing by following his vocation. He chooses to accept Mrs. Guzzard's statement as true because this gives him the

sense of liberation that comes through his determination to expiate for human failing towards God (symbolized by his father's frustration) by honestly taking to his father's profession with all devotion.

In *The Elder Statesman*, the theme of Sin and Expiation is presented in its barest possible outline. Eliot's last play marks a distinct change in his outlook. The central character Lord Claverton has certainly loveless married life like Harry and Edward. He suffers, like many other characters in Eliot's plays, from a sense of guilt and isolation, the reason in his case being his betrayal, out of moral cowardice, of two persons who trusted and loved him. In trying to evade his guilt, he has become a hollowman completely out of touch with reality and his relations with his family are a sham. He can find release from his burden only by acknowledging his failure to escape from his past and facing the reality of his guilt. The Act I shows Claverton's loneliness and relations to his shady past. Act II shows his deceptive life and his frantic effort to save Michael from those mistakes which he himself has committed. Act III offers resolution through Claverton's acceptance of reality through love or expiation of his past sins through love.

So, Eliot considers sin and expiation closely related concepts. He has presented the theme in all of his plays. He has tried to solve the basic problem of man's existence from the Christian point of view rejecting Greek and Freudian standpoint. Eliot has been able to give the solution to the problem of man at personal, family and social levels through his plays. The infusion of the Christian principle in his plays gave a great support to the suffering humanity.

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