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THE ROLE OF THE CHORUS IN T.S.ELIOT'S "MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL"

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I analyze the role of chorus in TS Eliot's verse drama *Murder in the Cathedral*(1935). The chorus, which acts as a mouthpiece of Eliot, creates a distancing effect , gives the spectators a lens through which they can find a reflection of themselves as a stranger , a watcher and as a critic. The chorus which had undergone a renewal in the twentieth century ,portraying a sense of resurgence in theater broke with the chimera of naturalism of late nineteenth century in drama.

Keywords: Chorus , verse drama , objective correlative , murder , dramatist

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INTRODUCTION

T .S.Eliot is one of the most distinguished poets of twentieth century literature. He got great acclaim for his poem- The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock (1915), considered as one of the masterpieces produced by him. He wrote some of the greatest and best-known poems namely, The Waste Land (1922), The Hollow Men (1925), Ash Wednesday (1930), and Four Quartets (1945). He was awarded with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948, for his impeccable contribution in the field of literature.

Born in 1888 into a Boston Brahmin family with roots in England and New England, Eliot's preoccupation with literature started at an early age with his readings of Mark Twain's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer(1876).From the year 1898 to 1905, Eliot studied in the Smith Academy, where he studied Latin, Ancient Greek, German, and French. He began to write poetry when he was fourteen under the influence of Edward Fitzgerald's Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, a translation of the poetry of Omar Khayyam. During the first eighteen years of his life, he lived in St.Louis and studied at Harvard University. However in 1910, he left the United States for the Sorbonne, after earning undergraduate and master's degrees. He returned to Harvard to pursue doctorate in philosophy but came back to settle in England in 1914. In London he came across his friend and guide Ezra Pound with whom he collaborated to publish some of his best works ,one of them being The Waste Land (1922). His major poetry works include Ash Wednesday (1930) and Four Quartets (1943); his

books of literary and social criticism include *The Sacred Wood* (1920), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), *After Strange Gods* (1934), and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1940) in his later part of life. Eliot became an important dramatist and playwright, whose verse dramas include *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk*, (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1958) .

In this paper, I begin to look forth the functions of chorus in Eliot's verse drama *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). Eliot through this verse drama depicts the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170, first performed in 1935. Eliot alludes to the writing of Edward Grim, a clerk who was an eyewitness to the event. The play, dealing with an individual's opposition to authority, was written at the time of rising fascism in Central Europe. Some material that the producer asked Eliot to remove or replace during the writing was added into the poem "Burnt Norton", which was the first poem of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

Role of Chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral*

The word 'chorus' is derived from the Greek word *Choros* that implies a dance accompanied by singing. It came to be incorporated at the festivals held in the honor of Gods, especially to honor God Dionysus and eventually it became an important part of Greek drama. The chorus acted as a mouthpiece of the dramatist which had a powerful impact on the audiences. The insight of the drama was stated by the chorus and hence the drama was universalized. The chorus expressed the anxieties, fears, and judgment of the average citizen marking their opinions as verdict in history. This is precisely how chorus becomes a critic of the drama. It can exemplify the past, can pass a judgment on present and throw light on the future. In Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, 272 lines out of total of 1443 lines are given to the chorus which forms nearly 19 percent of the play.

In his early life, Eliot's treatment of women in his writings was unsympathetic. He was even labeled by some of his readers as a 'misogynist'. However, down the lane when we consider his later works, we find that Eliot has produced women in a brighter outlook. To justify this statement, I take the example of his consideration of women characters to form part of the chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral*. The women chorus putting their feminine traits of emotion and subtleness brings out the subject of martyrdom of Thomas Becket. The women chorus seems to seize the opportunity to question the dominance of logos, the point of reference of truth which is the 'man'. The text is largely male-centric as the setting dates back to medieval times. At the outset of this drama, we get a sense of the rigidity of male hierarchy in the society of the twelfth century England, where the female counterpart takes the position of the 'other'. Her status therefore in the twelfth century society makes the audiences of the play assume her position to be of limited scope. The logocentricism is felt through the dialogue of the second priest who goes on to address women as foolish, immodest, and babbling. To counter this explicit patriarchy, the speech of the women chorus starts with the first person pronoun, hence giving way to the assertion of female writings. The necessary allusion can be made here to the concept of *écriture féminine* by Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), where she asserts "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies". Her point lies in subverting and transcending the male discourses or the phallogocentric system of writing by *écriture féminine* writing whereby the women write in the first person and hence create their own language free from male hegemony.

The idea of the Original Sin of Adam and Eve in the course of which men and women down the lane underwent sufferings has been well embossed by the women chorus of Eliot. The depiction of the emotions of suffering and sadness has been well defined by the chorus in which through the lyrics, women chorus also premonishes the upcoming danger in the life of Thomas Becket. When the Fourth Tempter propels Becket to take note of his actions and its consequent sufferings, the chorus highlights this through its position of insecurity that lingers on in a person's life and men are mere puppets in the hands of destiny.

The theme of martyrdom which holds central to *Murder in the Cathedral* is to a large extent dependent on the chorus. In elaborating the character of Becket, and in amalgamating between the protagonist and the commonality, the chorus takes part in the ethereal evolvment which the diverse characters and audiences

undergo. Chorus embodies the consolidated progression towards the consciousness. Eliot's theory of poetic drama concerning not only with the socio-economic problems of the outer world but also with the inner psychic mental abilities of an individual is clearly indicated through the voice of the chorus. In this respect, the play gives account of Becket's spiritual struggle with the temptations.

The significance of employing the chorus also lies in T.S.Eliot's approach to hide his dramatic weakness of fine characterization and of a well-knit plot. The reasons as to be largely dependent on the chorus for the action of the play were- one, that Eliot did not have too many historical accounts of the incident of St. Thomas Becket's martyrdom, the second reason was that Eliot wanted to focus on themes of martyrdom and death in the play through the women chorus and the third reason being, the writer who had already become adept in writing some of the best poems could write the verses better than framing a drama. Hence the cries of women chorus could cover his dramatic weakness and the defects of his theatrical endeavor.

The chorus tries to recreate the passions and sufferings of martyrdom of Becket onstage through Eliot's tool of 'objective correlative'. According to Eliot in his essay "Hamlet and His Problems", "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked."

It is the chorus that acts as a lens to Becket that he sees his deplorable end approaching. Thus, through the chorus, the spectators in different layers of acceptance or rejection see a reflection of themselves as an on-looker, observer, and as a gazer.

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