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Lecture No. - 19

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English (Hons.)
DIII / Paper VI (Modern Literature)

Topic: J.S. Eliot and His AGE (continued.)

Eliot says in his essay on "The Stoicism of Seneca", that "every writer while writing himself writes his time." Social, political and cultural developments in the first two decades of the twentieth century and after, have, as such, a close impact on the works of Eliot. Almost in every field of life during the first two decades of the 20th Century we see a phenomenal pace of transition. There was a complete change of outlook all around. It appeared that the entire European civilization was crumbling. The political the social and the moral values which it had upheld for centuries were suddenly collapsing; and in their places were coming some cruelly implacable forces which paved the way for the first World War. All these crumbling facets of civilization are well delineated in "Decline of West" by the German writer Spengler which was to have a profound impact on the psyche of the literate of the age. Spengler, in this book, put forward the theory of cycle of civilizations. Rather than being a progress upon previous civilizations, according to Spengler,

② the present one too, had completed the half circle and was in the decline. at the time. All this forebode a very pessimistic outlook. David Craig describes the impact of "Decline of West" very well in his book "The Real Foundations: Literature and Social Change."

England which in the Victorian ~~era~~ era had enjoyed tremendous success in every field along with peace, prosperity and progress touching new heights, was, of course not able to insulate itself from the general European trend. The breakdown of the agrarian economy, which had started during the closing period of the Victorian age, was now complete. Industrialization and urbanization brought in their wake their own problems - the problems like that of overcrowding, house shortage, and a significant increase in vice and crime. The degradation of the environment accompanied the economic prosperity of England and the ugly face of urbanization was apparent in almost every industrial city. They had grown smoky and noisy with steam growing all around like mushrooms, turning them into "flowers of evil" as Baudelaire

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has termed it. Eliot has used this idea in the first section of "The Waste Land" titled "The Burial of the Dead".

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Another biggest perceivable change was regarding the sexual morality of the age. As public opinion fails to have a restraining power in a crowded city to the extent it does have in a rural setup, there was a loosening of sexual taboos, and an increase in sexual promiscuity was there for all to see. The ennui and boredom of the city life, its ~~loneliness~~ loneliness and a sense of unexplicable horror are well brought out by "A Game of Chess" section of "The Waste Land" as well as by "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock".

Human relationship became the biggest casualty in these circumstances as personal relationship was being determined more by minority considerations than by affections. Materialism ruled the roost. Individuals did not matter; they were secondary to the levelling collective interests of groups and classes. The rise of scientific spirit and rationalism brought into being by discoveries of Freud in the field of Psycho-

④logy, Bergson in the field of philosophy and Einstein in the field of Physics gave rise to questioning of accepted social beliefs. Almost everything and every behaviour was put to scrutiny of logic and objectivity. All forms of authority in politics, morality and religion faced a rebellion of one kind or another.

Special mention may be made of the Freudian interpretation of the unconscious which was further elaborated by his followers like Jung. Freud rendered the notions of sex and family relationship upside down. His theory of "Oedipus Complex" had profound impact on the society. Similarly Jung's theory of Collective Unconscious had a profound impact on art.

Eliot's preoccupation with the archetypal man and pre-historic past and their complex relationship with the present however, can be owed to his childhood days' in St. Louis as corroborated by Robert Crawford in his important book, "The Savage and the City in the Works of J.S. Eliot".
(To be continued.)