

The Presence of Eliot in Intizar Husain's Basti

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Article Received: 11/10/2022,

Article Accepted: 19/11/2022,

Published Online: 21/11/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.11.10

Abstract:

This paper traces the modernist and existentialist elements through Thomas Sterns Eliot's works in Intizar Husain's Urdu novel *Basti* (1979), translated by Frances W. Pritchett in 1995. The influence of Eliot's three works namely "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock" (1915), "The Waste Land" (1922), and "The Hollow Men" (1925) are majorly trailed in the novel. By marking the presence of Eliot in *Basti*, similarity in the experiences of the individual is drawn between a post First World War Western world and the post Partitions worlds of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. In this paper, modern and existentialist themes such as alienation, meaninglessness and absurdity, religion and atheism, social criticism et cetera are explored, marking parallels in the experience of the self during times of social, political, economic, and communal crisis.

Keywords: Partition, War Narrative, Trauma, Modernism

Revolutionary theories of the late nineteenth century by thinkers, philosophers, and scientists such as Nietzsche, Marx, Darwin, and Freud as well as the rapidly changing technology of the time, followed by the horrors of the First World War, birthed a world with a ruptured foundation. In the words of critic SobiaKiran in the essay "Modernism and the Progressive Movement in Urdu Literature", "Modernism deliberately broke with Western traditions of certainty. It came into being as they were collapsing. It challenged all the old modes... rejected certainties in religion, philosophy, psychology and politics... distrust the stability and order offered in earlier literary works..." (176). Beginning in the West, the influence of literary modernism with its relevance of the context, themes, and ideas, has proved to be influential in works of literature across the world.

This form of unravelling and grasping contemporary life was also witnessed in Urdu literature with The Progressive Writers Movement, and writers like Saadat Hassan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, and Kaafi Azmi among many others. This essay, hence, is an attempt to discern the impacts of Western Modernism in Urdu literature. Two prominent flag-bearers through which this essay bids to study this influence are Thomas Sterns Eliot (1888 – 1965) and Intizar Husain (born 1925). Taking up the most prominent works of modern poetry by T. S. Eliot, namely, "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock", "The Waste Land", and "The Hollow Men", it analyses their influence in Intizar Husain's *Basti*, which is also considered one of the most notable works of partition literature in Urdu. This essay is divided into three parts: the first section examines the

presence of Eliot's character of Alfred J. Prufrock from the poem, "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock" in Husain's protagonist, Zakir, the second section demonstrates Husain's city in Pakistan as Eliot's 'wasteland' from his poem "The Waste Land", and the third section equates the characters of Basti with the 'hollow men' from Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men".

The title of the novel *Basti* epistemologically refers to an area of settlement or a colony. Alluding to the idea of home and belongingness instantaneously, the title indicates a story of displacement and migration that rampantly arose during the arduous times of partition in the late nineteenth century in the Indian subcontinent. It would be unjustified to not emphasize the autobiographical elements of these themes. Along with millions of people, Husain too was a sufferer of the political as well as communal crisis of those times. Being born in 1923, Husain spent his early youth in Bulandshahar, Uttar Pradesh, and migrated to the newly formed Pakistan during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. This traumatic experience stained Husain's life with a severe ache of displacement and belongingness for a "home" that can be seen in most of his works.

His novel *Basti*, is a text written on similar grounds about the horrors and trauma that an individual had to go through during partition as well as the political crisis of the Bangladesh War of 1971. With the context of the wars and the suffering of the individual, it is only apparent that it was greatly influenced by the Modernist Movements of the West that had become popular in the Urdu literature to deal with Partition writings. The naming of the protagonist as Zakir is the first most visible modernist element in the text. Literally translating to 'one who remembers', the name of the protagonist alludes to the modernist fascination with history. To hit home the point, Husain not only proceeds to choose the profession of the protagonist as a history teacher but also embellished the text with lines like:

Again, the same wretched history. How boring it is teaching history to boys. And studying history? Other people's history can be read comfortably, the way a novel can be read comfortably. But my own history? I'm on the run from my own history, and catching my breath in the present. Escapist. But the merciless present pushes us back again toward our history. (Husain68)

Having no escape from the past, Zakir's character, throughout the text, is shown struggling to grapple with his past. This 'presence of the past' motif reiterates the two newly formed nation's struggle to come to terms with their catastrophic realities. It is also interesting to notice that the question of history dealt with in the text evokes directly one of the prominent modernist writers and critics, William Butler Yeats's 'Gyre Theory'. Indicating towards the circularity of history, Butler's 'Gyre Theory' is evident in the loop of wars and displacement that Zakir experiences first between India and Pakistan and then between West Pakistan (now Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

In reading *Basti*, the feelings of crisis and existential emptiness can be found to be overpowering throughout the narrative. In this context, the article "*Basti- The Retelling of a Modernist Perspective*" mentions: "It's mood of melancholy and rampant use of

mythology becomes a reflection of modernism- where there is a need to move back to the classical past and to the origins of humanity.”

Modernist narrative technique like the use of a minimalist prose in a way where language creates a distance between the readers and the events can be seen in the text. The brief mention of episodes such as the introduction of electricity in Roopnagar, the slow progress towards urbanization with Shiraz and scooter cabs among many other things, are all elements of Modernism that are used by Husain in *Basti*. “The Electric pole in Roopnagar is so apparent that it becomes a symbol of change.” (12572) says critic Syed Afroz Ashrafi in the essay “Postmodernism in Urdu Fiction”. However, the most dominant Modernist influence in Intizar Hosain’s *Basti* has to be of T. S. Eliot.

Zakir and Prufrock

Zakir, the protagonist of Intizar Husain’s *Basti*, is eerily similar to the poetic persona of Eliot’s poem “**The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock**”. The line from *Basti*, “Nothing is happening outside. Everything is happening inside me.” (190) reflects the height of this resemblance between Zakir and Prufrock. Throughout their individual stories, both the characters can be seen living the reality that they had built inside their heads instead of the ones that surround them. A detachment from external reality, one’s surroundings, and the lack of action to get hold of one’s own life are the Prufrockian characteristics that can be seen to be predominant in Zakir.

In the poem, the epigraph by Dante with his idea of hell and damnation sets the mood of an eternal sense of crisis, which is a natural experience for most people who had to live through the excruciating Partition, Hosain included. But what is different here is that Eliot distances himself from the poetic persona of Alfred J. Prufrock to go by his ideology of the separation of the art from the artist whereas *Basti* contains the most autobiographical elements of all of Intizar Hosain’s works. The alienation effect brought in by urbanization, which is a popular trope of Modern writings, can be seen in both the characters of Zakir and Prufrock. “Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets, / The muttering retreats / Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels” (4-6) The roaming around of Prufrock in half-deserted streets is akin to the roaming around of Zakir on the streets of Shammnagar which Husain emphasizes on so much that Zakir can be seen involved in it right from the beginning till the very end of the text. The one-night cheap hotels that Prufrock talks of in the poem could provide space for intimacy but they had no comfort or attachment in them. This can stand as an irony for being lonely in an overpopulated refugee street of the city where Zakir lives in. With the crowded urban population in the settings of both the characters of Zakir and Prufrock, there prevails a sense of isolation. This sense of desolation of the urban landscape develops into the character’s emotional landscape which is a part of the Modernist experience.

Another echoing trait of both these characters is their failure as a lover. Prufrock puts it in his recurring lines, “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (13-14) while for Zakir, we see it in his failed relationship first with Sabirah and then with Anisah. Although he almost had an affair with both of these

women, he does not succeed in putting in the required effort to turn them into meaningful relationships. Even though with Anisah, he claims to be filled with “manly courage” (93), nevertheless, upon being invited into her house, he does not dare to go in and escapes with the shabby excuse, “But why should you go to all that trouble so late at night? I don’t want to bore you.” (94). This apprehension of Zakir echoes the fear Prufrock had that stopped him from approaching his beloved. However, this Prufrockian apprehension appears more visibly and intensely in terms of Zakir’s relationship with Sabirah. The discontinuity of communication between Sabirah and Zakir due to Partition and then due to the Bangladesh War of Liberation remained so because of Zakir’s inadequate effort towards their potentially romantic relationship. Zakir failed in attempting to reconnect with Sabirah even when he not only cherished the memory he has of her and their moment’s together but also discovered a link to her through his old friend Surrender.

Prufrock’s inability to gain control over his life and act is also seen in Zakir. Prufrock’s most epic lines, “There will be time, there will be time” (26) and “Do I dare / Disturb the universe?” (45-46) can be seen to be reflected in Zakir’s “I should go into my cave and sleep. And keep sleeping until the times have changed.” (185). Both the characters remain absent and are only mere spectators in their own lives. Prufrock’s line “No! I am not Prince Hamlet” (111) becomes another intertextual reference to William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1603). Portraying the indecisiveness of “To be, or not to be” (3.1) can also be seen in Zakir when he declares that he wants to go to India to meet Sabirah after receiving Surrender’s letter.

The poem and the novel were both set during times of war. Eliot published “The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock” during the First World War whereas *Basti* is set in the backdrop of Partition as well as the Bangladesh War. This brings out yet another affinity in both these texts because both the main characters present to us a sense of detachment from their realities, both of them are indifferent to the horrors of war and use escapism to disengage themselves from their surroundings. The line from the poem, “my head brought upon a platter” (82) is evoked multiple times in the novel. The most dominant allusion to this in the novel was when Zakir dreams of the headless city where the heads of the people are fed to the king’s serpents. Headless-ness, also invoked in the line, “If I’d left my head back there, I would have been safe. Those who have heads, and have brains in their heads, are in trouble today.” (198) also indicates the ‘thoughtless-ness’ of wars and how any retaliation against these meaningless bloodsheds is silenced by executing a person head thus turning them “headless” or dead.

The cityas ‘The Waste Land’

In the writing of *Basti*, Husain draws heavily from the Buddhist and Sanskrit traditional folklore of the Jataka tales and Panchatantra fables. In Eliot’s poem, “The Waste Land” lines such as, “Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. /*Shantihshantih shantih*” (433-434) illustrate the traces of Sanskrit mythicism and mysticism in the poem. What stands as testimony to the interconnectedness of Husain’s novel and Eliot’s poem is the explicit

reference to the poem's concluding lines that are linked through the lines "The source is water, the end is water. Om, shanti, shanti, shanti—" (187) from the novel.

Both texts are set in the backdrop of wars that transforms cities into ruins. Thus, the 'wasteland' spoken of by Eliot also fits in the context of the city that Zakir migrates to in Pakistan. Eliot, through "I had not thought death had undone so many." (63) and "He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying" (328-329) alludes to the innumerable deaths caused by wars. The same idea is mirrored by Husain in the lines, "In this age one harmful effect of war is that it doesn't allow buildings to acquire dignity. Tall, grand buildings don't have time to become old before some war breaks out, and the bombers destroy them.... The buildings, the places which hold our sorrows in trust, are reduced to nothingness in a moment by one single bomb." (130) The ruin of buildings establishes a sense of the loss of familiar spaces and a feeling of homelessness which proves to be an integral part of the modern experience. This becomes a cloaked indication of the plight of a humanitarian crisis that the people face during wars. As mentioned in the article "Basti- The Retelling of a Modernist Perspective", "Like T.S Eliot's "The Waste Land" where World War 1 is the nucleus of the reader's attention, the Pakistani Partition of 1947 becomes the center of the novel's impressionistic landscape which highlights an important feature in the novel; a cultural and human crisis taking place in not a village, a community, a home or a city but a Basti."

The natural 'waste land' that Eliot speaks of in his poem is also represented in the text through the character of Afzal who is obsessed with making Pakistan "beautiful" again. The constant presence of the awful state of Eliot's 'wasteland' is echoed greatly by Zakir's friend Afzal who frequently talks of the lessening number of flowers and trees in Pakistan. This also acknowledges the often neglected ecological disasters that come to the surface as a result of warfare.

The characters of Basti as 'The Hollow Men'

Furthermore, Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men" can be juxtaposed with *Basti* with a reference to the spiritual hollowness of the people of Pakistan during such times of political crisis. The relation is observable through the epigraph of the poem which refers to the early modernist text, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad. The epigraph to the poem incorporates the news of Mr Kurtz's death, whose character initially seemed legendary but proved to be hollow towards the end. This hollowness of the character of Kurtz is also recognized in the men of Eliot's poem as well as that of Husain's novel. Throughout the novel, it can be observed that almost every character questioned the other about the possibility of war and the uncertain future of Pakistan but nobody, including Zakir, seemed to have any answer to it. A sense of pointlessness and absurdity is portrayed in those questions that Eliot reiterates in his poem as, "Our dried voices, when / We whisper together / Are quiet and meaningless" (5-7). The use of the word 'dried' can also be seen as the drying of throats by repeating the same questions without getting to any form of resolution. Additionally, words like "whisper" and "quiet" indicate the fear that gets associated with the process of questioning the state's authority in turbulent

times. In this sense, the unanswerable questions repeated in *Basti* stand for the voicelessness of the masses against the state. This metaphorical silence, is also present in Eliot's line, "And voices are / In the wind's singing / More distant and more solemn" (25-27). Eliot's portrayal of the sense of alienation of a person from their voice lies parallel to *Basti* when Zakir hears the sound of his footsteps going away from him.

The emotional weight of the individual tragedies faced by each character in *Basti* produces a general feeling of emptiness and superficiality that prevails throughout the narrative. "Do I have weight, or not? When does it happen that a man becomes weightless, and when does it happen that a man's body becomes a burden to him, and his head a heavy load on his shoulders?" (152)

This weightlessness and hollowness experienced by Zakir is a shared phenomenon in people who go through the trauma of war, including the other characters of *Basti* like Abba Jan and Afzal. Eliot recounts similar experiences in the line, "Shape without form, shade without color, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion;" (11-12). Eliot, by the end of the poem, claims that the world ends "Not with a bang but a whimper." (98), the novel too ends with the whimper of pain and unhappiness of a lost war and the further divided country of Pakistan.

To conclude, these allusions to T. S. Eliot's writings in Husain's narrative not only contribute to a more accurate depiction of the destruction wrought by Partition and the Bangladesh War of Liberation, but they also help to better understand the struggle of the modern individual self during periods of political upheaval.

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