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Islamic Perspectives on Twentieth-Century English Literature: T. S. Eliot and Islam

Mukhtorova Maftuna Ilkhom kizi,
Doctoral Student of Bukhara State University

***Abstract:** The article analyses Islamic perspectives on T. S. Eliot's works. In English literary discussion, Eliot is an indispensable name. He is widely discussed in the classrooms and beyond. However, the secular orientation of most scholars of English literature seems to have a role in concealing the religious leanings of the poet. Eliot was deeply involved in the philosophical discourse and debate. Eliot turns to religion for giving order to a disorderly world. Actually, religious sensitivity is a discovery for Eliot. This particular aspect of open-endedness of Eliot's search for remedies for the moral rotteness and spiritual dryness makes a strong case for Islamic teachings. The Islamic moral code is perhaps the best answer to the intricate problem Eliot presents in his poetry. Such a possibility makes Islam more relevant to Eliot studies.*

***Key words:** Islamic teachings, the Islamic moral, religious sensitivity, English literature, Eliot and Islam, the philosophical discourse.*

Introduction

The poet, critic, essayist and playwright T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) is one of the most prominent figures in the English literary world, especially of twentieth-century British culture. During his lifetime, his works were published in both countries; and more importantly, the American and British worlds were at the back of his mind when he composed his well-known works such as “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915), *The Waste Land* (1922) and others. What is more, *The Waste Land* was simultaneously published in *The Dial* in New York and *The Criterion* in London in 1922 (Davidson, 1994: 131); *Four Quartets* was first published in New York in 1943 and then in London in 1944.

However, based on whatever information is attainable from various sources, it can be safely said that there are issues in his marital life as well as in his views which can be looked at (and need to be seen) from Islamic perspectives, as such an intellectual endeavour will benefit readers by way of informing

them about the Islamic viewpoints on various aspects of Eliot's life and worldview. For this reason, before discussing the Islamic perspective on his work, in what follows, I will touch on various aspects of Eliot's life and provide Islamic viewpoints on them. Even though Eliot's smoking and drinking habits can be associated with greater susceptibility to stress caused by his sour marital relationship with Vivienne and consequent severe distress, such addictive behaviours as cigarette smoking and alcoholism – either as a lifestyle choice or an alleviating or palliative factor – cannot be justified in Islam. Islam does not allow smoking or drinking in any such circumstances. Resorting to such practices is not Islamically the best way to alleviate one's distress or to resolve depressive symptoms. In Islam, "health is a trust from God that should be protected and enhanced so as to be able to fulfil the purpose of creation" [1, 135]. Therefore, things that are harmful to one's own health or to that of others are prohibited in Islam. Given such harmful effects of smoking, there is a general consensus among Islamic scholars that, it is "either completely prohibited or abhorrent to such a degree as to be prohibited" [2, 6]. Considering the physical, psychological, addictive, and financial aspects of smoking and based on Qur'anic verses.

Hence, both the Qur'an and hadith contain verses and passages with clear guidance on khamr or intoxicants. In the primary sources of Islam – Qur'an and hadith – there is unambiguous evidence that unequivocally prohibits alcoholism and other addictions that cause long-term illness or, break or weaken the familial-social fabric as well as moral and religious values. For example, alcohol was previously often associated with moral "vices, such as homoeroticism with handsome cupbearers" [3, 526]. Like smoking, intoxicants also have harmful effects on people's mind and health as well as their religion and work, as it proliferates "spiritual, material, and moral evils ... in societies and nations" [4, 35]. Healthwise, it is now a proven fact that "a relationship exists between wine, alcohol, or any substance found within the wine, and a disease or health-related condition" [Code of Federal Regulations, 2014: 36]. Since Islam lays a great emphasis on the protection of good health, both physically and psychologically, the Qur'an explicitly forbids wine and alcohol. After preparing Islam's adherents mentally and psychologically through a process of gradualism to abstain from the consumption of wine and alcohol, Islam finally prohibited it in absolute terms. Several hadiths prohibit alcoholism.

One such hadith reads:

Truly, Allah has cursed khamr and has cursed the one who produces it, the one for whom it is produced, the one who drinks it, the one who serves it, the one who carries it, the one for whom it is carried, the one who sells it, the one who earns from the sale of it, the one who buys it, and the one for whom it is bought. (qtd. in [4, 37])

As regards substance abuse and its adverse consequences including associated social problems, consumption of intoxicants and smoking are closely correlated, as both are important risk factors for many health problems. So, it is clear that T. S. Eliot's chain-smoking habit and drinking bout are not approved in Islam. Considering their harmfulness, for students of T. S. Eliot, especially those from Muslim backgrounds, it is not advisable to emulate this particular lifestyle choice of the poet even though his literary merits are beyond reproach and many of his ideas certainly deserve respect, intolerance and prejudice which is directed against Jews. It manifests in various ways, especially in caricaturing Jewish people. In the past, mainly in Christian literature, Jews were characterised as "enemies of Christian society, blasphemous, blind Christ killers" and were associated with usury, "feces (especially from the thirteenth century onward), filth, and smell" that supposedly "contaminated Christian society" [5, 19].

Contemporary stereotypes of the Jewish community can be characterised as both positive and negative. The positive or benign ones include “powerful,” “good businessmen,” “trying to get the best jobs,” “having a high regard for property,” “intelligent,” “good citizens,” “religious,” “family-oriented,” “ambitious” and so on and so forth; while some of the negative ones are “manipulative,” “materialistic,” “clannish, money-loving, dishonest, aggressive, individualistic,” “never being content,” and many more [6, 461]. However, such a tendency to hold stereotypes evolves out of extensive ethnocentric biases against a particular community.

Such stereotypes are inspired and endorsed by assumptions of biological determinism and social Darwinism or by essentialist interpretation of a particular group of people, which inevitably leads to racism. It may suffice here to state that Islam regards the entire human race as one entity and does not entertain any such notion of singling out and stigmatising a community.

The message of Islam is not addressed to any specific race, rather to all human beings. If Islam had any room for racial difference or discrimination, it would have sent divergent communications to various groups according to their racial or biological specifications if there were any. Verse 4:1 of the Qur’an establishes a common origin and uniform human identity of all:

O humankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer, Who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women. And remain conscious of God, in whose name you demand [your rights] from one another, and of these ties of kinship. Verily, God is ever watchful over you!

Since all human beings have come from the single family of Adam and Eve, they share all core features and all are susceptible to social and cultural influences. Hence, Islam rejects the existence of any positive or negative stereotypes of any human community. Separating one particular group of people and associating them exclusively with certain character traits and inclinations are not supported by Islam. All human beings are born in a state of *fitrah* (innate and pristine human nature which is inclined to goodness), as a well-known statement of Prophet Muhammad reads: “Every child is born in [a state of] *fitrah*.” However, there are forces of evil in society encapsulated in the idea of Satan, which humans need to fight, avoid and

prevail upon. God sent prophets and revelations to help them triumph over the evil. In this continuous battle to win over the evil in the end, all humans are supposed to share the same concerns and work together towards Islamic Perspectives On Twentieth-Century English Literature blissfulness and salvation. Giving a racial and religious group a sense of otherness and thus caricaturing them in order to establish a sense of superiority is outside the pale of the Islamic worldview.

Conclusion

As an influential writer, critic, and philosopher, Eliot had unparalleled leverage in the English literary tradition. What is more, he is a highly religious poet who seeks to face the moral degeneration and social contagion of the Western world through religion. Although a devoutly Christian poet, he did not seem to find a solution in Christianity to the crisis in post-war Europe. Hence he looked to the East for guidance, inspirations, and answers to his metaphysical concerns. If Islam is included in Eliot’s Eastern models of philosophy and religion, his search for alternative sources of wisdom and religious belief as well as for a new moral order and spiritual values will have a new dimension. Keeping this novelty of approach in mind, in this article I have discussed various aspects of Eliot’s life as well as his poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and *The Waste Land* from Islamic perspectives.

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