

Eliot and Tradition

By Dr Ananda Bormudoi

Among all other English poets and critics, T.S. Eliot's influence on Assamese literature is the greatest. The Assamese poets of the fifties of the last century were very heavily influenced by Eliot and all major modern Assamese poets admitted the fact. There is an academic aspect of the situation. In *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* Elleke Boehmer writes, "Montage effects and mythic adaptations, as we know, were championed by Anglo-American modernist poetry. This poetry, in particular the work of T.S. Eliot, formed a staple part of the university syllabuses with which most of the writers of independence came into contact. In literary circles from Ibadan to Wellington modernist techniques were popular. Writers turned to their own spiritual traditions, therefore, both as the source of new national identity, and also as a mythic resource with which to structure poetic collages." (OUP, 1995, p.204) Students and teachers of English literature as well as modern poets and critics learnt from Eliot's poetic technique and its theory of criticism. His ideas on tradition, impersonality, objective correlative, perfect and imperfect critic were greatly influential on modernism.



Gareth Reeves has pointed out in his essay 'T. S. Eliot and the ideas of tradition' that the emotional and philosophical origins of the essay are closely allied to Eliot's doctoral thesis on the philosophy of F. H. Bradley. He wrote it as a philosophy graduate student at Harvard and completed it in England in 1916. The world War prevented him from submitting it and it was later published in 1964. The critic shows that the thesis was the basis for Eliot's theoretical, critical and poetic development. In Eliot's work the idea of order is important. That idea of order in terms of history, emotion and art is important in Eliot's essay on tradition. This search for order influenced modernist mind-set in need for stability in a disintegrating post-war world.

The Sacred Wood which contains the essay ‘Tradition and Individual Talent’ was first published in 1920 but for reader today the essay offers a lot of strikingly original ideas about poetry and criticism. Some of our critics even today look for what they can call novelty in a poet and when they find it, they praise it. But Eliot finds that the best part and the most individual part of the poet’s work may be those in which the dead poets and ancestors most vigorously asserted their immortality. About tradition Eliot very clearly says that it cannot just be inherited. It has to be obtained with great labour. The first necessary thing is a historical sense. This historical sense does not mean the pastness of the past but of its presence. This is a keen awareness of the past. This is a sense of the timeless and the temporal. A poet or an artist cannot have complete meaning alone. He should be compared and contrasted with the dead poets and writers when a new work of art arrives, something happens to all the works of art that preceded it. The order is readjusted. Thus the past should be altered by the present as such as the present is directed by the past. The conscious present is an awareness of the past. It is in the context of a poet’s relation to tradition that Eliot talks about depersonalization. Here art comes close to science.

Eliot says about honest criticism and appreciation that it is always directed upon the poetry and not the poet. About a poet’s relation to a poem, Eliot says that in a perfect artist the suffering man will be separate from the creative mind. Finally Eliot defines poetry as not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion, not an expression of personality but an escape from personality. To Eliot the emotion of art is important and a poet can reach it by surrendering himself to the work to be done.

Young poets and critics even today can learn a lot from Eliot’s sense of tradition and individual talent.