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The Reflection of Social Atomism in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

Muhammed Metin ÇAMELİ**

Abstract

World War I is known to have been one of the most transformative events in the tumultuous history of the twentieth century. The war with its drastic social and political influences has led to a revival of interest in studying the recesses of human mind in the field of literature. Modernism as a literary movement, especially in the wake of World War I, has had its leading role in exploring human psyche, but has simultaneously become the focal point of numerous discussions with its elusive nature. This contentious aspect of modernism can be said to have become manifest in its tackling the issues of social fragmentation, solipsism, and capitalism within literary realm. The entirety of the referred points also falls into the scope of Social Atomism Theory which is believed to have gained prominence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At this point, it must be noted that, one of the most well-known poems of modern period, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, provides an apt site for delving into the concept of social atomism. Relevantly, this article aims to elucidate the ways in which the experiences of Prufrock align with those of an alienated or socially atomised individual.

Key Words: Modernism, Modern Poetry, Prufrock, Social Atomism, Alienation

J. Alfred Prufrock'ın Aşk Şarkısı Adlı Şiirde Sosyal Atomizm Kavramının Yansımaları

Özet

Yirminci yüzyılın çalkantılı tarihi içerisinde, Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nın en dönüştürücü olaylardan birisi olduğu bilinmektedir. Bu savaş, köklü sosyal ve politik etkileriyle, edebiyat alanında insan aklının derinliklerini inceleme arzusunu tetiklemiştir. Edebi bir akım olarak modernizm, özellikle Birinci Dünya Savaşı sonrasında, insan ruhunu çözümleyebilmekte öncü bir rol edinmiştir fakat eş zamanlı olarak, tanımlanması zor doğası ile birçok tartışmanın merkezinde yer almıştır. Modernizm akımının bu tartışmalı yönünün, toplumsal bölünme, tekbencilik ve kapitalizm hususlarının edebi alanda ele alınmasında daha fazla ortaya çıktığı iddia edilebilir. Atfedilen noktaların tümü, on dokuzuncu ve yirminci yüzyıllarda önem kazanan, Sosyal Atomizm Teorisi kapsamında da çalışılmaktadır. Bu noktada, modern dönemin en iyi bilinen şiirlerinden olan *J. Alfred Prufrock'ın Aşk Şarkısı*'nın sosyal atomizm kavramının araştırılması adına sağlam bir zemin hazırladığı vurgulanmalıdır. Bu makale, Prufrock karakterinin modern dönemdeki deneyimlerinin yabancılaşmış ya da adeta parçalara bölünmüş gibi hisseden bir bireyin deneyimleri ile örtüşen yanlarını detaylıca açığa çıkarmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Modernizm, Modern Şiir, Prufrock, Sosyal Atomizm, Yabancılaşma

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Introduction

The philosophical and literary meditations upon humanity, particularly as of the Age of Reason in the world of Western Europe, are known to have been characterised by their questioning of well-established assumptions of the earlier periods. Replacing the Renaissance humanism and Romantic spirituality with rationalism, intellectuals of the Enlightenment can be said to have fostered a firm belief in the strength of the human intellect and knowledge to better understand the universe. This tendency to redefine the world through the power of the mind is believed to have come alongside with the emergence of a plausible answer to the baffling question of what modernity means as well. For many historians and literary theorists, the Enlightenment (or the Age of Reason in the 18th century) is synonymous with modernity (Bressler, 2007, p. 96). Based on this perspective, the term “modernity” designates the necessity of being governed by rational thought. More pointedly, modernity can be said to stand for an overwhelming sense of resentment against awe-inspiring doctrines of preceding periods since it advocates things which are in a constant flux. As Anthony Giddens pinpoints “[o]ne of the most obvious characteristics separating modern era from any other period preceding it is modernity’s extreme dynamism. The modern world is a runaway world: it affects pre-existing social practices and modes of behaviour” (1991, p.16). Giddens’ remarks imply that modernity requires deep contemplation upon people’s situatedness in the world. It must also be underlined that the 1900s is cited to have been marked by its chaotic atmosphere with the outbreak of World War I and the shift from modernity to modernism has also been the focal point of literary discussions. Deriving from the same root word “modern”, modernism is mostly referred as a literary and aesthetic movement which heavily relies on the view that the essence of truth must be explored through new methods. Thus, modernism in literature entails contemplating the veracity of what was held to be true thereby simultaneously giving free rein to liberal thoughts. When the psychological and physical devastation of the traumatic events to which modern age bore witness was transposed into literature, as Christopher McVey pertinently argues “*literary modernism branded itself with the rhetoric of novelty, energetic liberation and daring experimentation*” (2019, p. 67). The reference to daring experimentation brings to mind the fact that modernist literature has heralded a new era during which a vast number of distinguished literary figures such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Butler Yeats, Bernard Shaw, Ezra Pound, and Thomas Stearns Eliot came into prominence by means of their deployment of novel literary strategies. To illustrate, Joyce and Woolf’s using the stream of consciousness as a narrative mode in their novels is known to have introduced a striking aspect of going deeper into the recesses of the individuals’ minds.

The revival of interest in exploring unknown sides and complex thoughts of human can be claimed to have become fully manifest in the realm of poetry in the twentieth century. Amongst the influential poets of the period, Thomas Stearns Eliot stands out with his ability to benefit from the strength of his words while alluding to the overwhelming sense of estrangement experienced by individuals in a war-stricken, poverty-stricken society. The poetic voice of Eliot impels his readers to ruminate over certain atrocities

endured by the mass and empathise with their disillusionment originating from an oppressive existence. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915), *The Waste Land* (1922), *The Hollow Men* (1925) are some of the most popular poems in which Eliot underscores the experiences of desolation, psychic disruption and fragmentation endemic among citizens of post-war Western society. These experiences can be said to have arisen out of the hardship of conforming to altering circumstances of urban life. Given the fact that urbanisation or modernisation has allowed no room for solidarity under the thumb of capitalist hegemony, characters in the poetry of Eliot posit themselves as anguished figures attempting to express their lack of sense of belonging to sustainable city life. Likewise, the character of Prufrock in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is ostensibly portrayed as a despondent persona on the grounds that much of what comes out of his mouth sounds as articulations resulting from his repressed psyche. Prufrock speaks through a discourse which is geared towards positioning him away from the expectations of modern city life inasmuch as there seems to be a disjunction between his self-internalised habits and constantly changing values of westernised lifestyles. That is to say, individuals of Prufrock's world are compelled to bow to the demands of modernisation which can be associated with capitalism, indoctrination, and required conformity to ideologies of the new century. The prerequisite of getting accustomed to organising daily life in line with modern standardisations, therefore, provides a fertile ground for the emergence of an atomised society. The members of an atomised society are threatened by a resurgence of division or fragmentation which causes them not to collaborate or communicate with each other effectively. As Paul Spicker elucidates, “societies which promote solidarity can, however, be contrasted with the idea of an atomised society. People become like atoms, or very small particles, which are all distinct from each other” (2006, p. 150). As has been stated, Prufrock fits into this description of an atomised individual whose dissatisfaction with the increasing solipsistic individualism of his time is felt in the entirety of the poem. Relevantly, this study aims to elaborate on the ways in which *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* can be interpreted under the guidance of the concept of Social Atomism as a sociological theory so as to render the agony of Mr Prufrock more intelligible and his suppressed voice more audible to contemporary readers.

The study presents *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* as a poetic response to the modern world's shifting social order and displays individuals of the period shattering themselves against the insurmountable obstacle of capitalist indoctrination. Moreover, the study underscores that the lack of self-liberation results in the creation of a social order where the imminence of social atomism can be affiliated with the annihilation of tightly knit social units. While persevering to fulfil sanctioned roles by modernisation, human beings are stripped of their emotional connectedness and they are assumed to define selfhood based on the material conditions of their existence. The study especially distinguishes itself from prior studies concerned with Prufrock by foregrounding the character as a socially atomised man figure. Whereas the vast majority of existent research name the character of Prufrock as a mere symbol of anomie or alienation, this

research reoccupies these notions from different angles and contributes to the existing literature by offering a more comprehensive analysis of the character in line with the concept of social atomism and drawing attention to the dyad between sociology and literature as two closely connected interdisciplinary fields. The study impels contemporary readers to reflect upon the manner in which things in modern culture impinge upon individuals' daily lives as represented through personal experiences of Prufrock.

Atomism, Social Atomism Theory, and Its Role in Literature

The word "atom" is believed to have a Greek origin and it is described as the tiny element which is hard to be divided into fragments. As Michael E. Sommers clearly explains, "*The word atom comes from the Greek term atamos, meaning uncuttable. It refers to the fact that atoms are the basic units of elements and can't be broken down into smaller components that still retain the fundamental properties of that element*" (2008, p. 14). Etymology of the word with the stress upon its unbreakable nature also entails foregrounding the coiner of the word, namely, Democritus. The word was coined many centuries ago by Democritus from the negative prefix -a and the same tome = a cutting, to be used of a thing so small it could not be cut (Pepper, 1949, p. 15). The founder of Greek atomism, Democritus, is known to have contributed to scientific, philosophical, and cultural progress of ancient Greek society in the fourth century B.C by means of his application of the concept to these fields. The core of the idea of atomism by Democritus is that atoms coexist with the void. The void, considered "non-being", is thought to be just as real as the atoms. It was very important for Democritus that both exist: being and non-being, the atoms and the void (Magill & Aves, 2003, p. 332). Based on Democritus' view, it becomes evident that atoms operate very actively, they always interact with one another and the void organises the dynamics of the relationships among all of them. The validity of this notion, especially when applied to daily life, is that individuals experience changes, they get entrapped in certain circumstances and they sometimes get separated from each other under the effect of a factor as an equivalent of the void. Lancelot Law Whyte in the astute work *Essay on Atomism: From Democritus to 1960* emphasises likewise "[a]tomism certainly disrupts systems and studies isolated parts, and it must do so before it can direct its attention to the ordering relations of the parts in the various natural systems, and learn to put them together again as they were" (1961, p. 17). Whyte promulgates the idea that the science of atomism poses researchers the challenge of an insatiable quest of comprehending the complex and elusive nature of atoms which cooperate with and differ from one another in certain instances. Furthermore, as Vesselin Petrov indicates, "*ever since the ancient Greeks, this form has offered various explanations of the most primitive constituents of the universe and these atoms were held to exist in mechanistic relationships*" (2017, p. 87). Thus, seeking direction in life to understand the universe with the help of Democritus' atomism can be said to have served as a guideline for thinkers of ancient Greek society. Nevertheless, as the centuries have progressed, atomism, whose origin is traced back to the fourth century B.C., is known to have been transposed into other fields such as sociology, philosophy, and literature from

different angles. When applied into the field of sociology, atomism has been regarded as a theory which closely examines the widespread fragmentation and individualism, particularly since the beginning of Industrial Revolution. The derivative word of atom itself “atomism” or “social atomism”, as Kenneth L. Grasso clarifies, “*involves the denial of a strong, constitutive conception of community in which society is understood as an ingredient or constituent of the identity of individuals*” (2009, p. 183). The critic’s drawing attention to the tendency to deconstruct the notion of communal living in society can be said to be rooted in the radical transition from a primarily agricultural society to a modern industrial nation in the Industrial age. The emergence of new classes compounded by their demand of power in the government is known to have culminated in the widened gap between the rich and the poor. Considering the chaotic atmosphere created by industrialisation, the factory workers as estranged from their own labour, the eighteenth century occupies a central place within the historical process of capitalist modernisation and, therefore, falls into the scope of the field of sociology while addressing social atomism.

The conceptualisation of atomism as a sociological theory can be claimed to have gained more prominence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the social division among individuals is known to have increased because of hegemonic capitalism. Since then, people have been assumed to shoulder the responsibility of organising their lives in accordance with the precepts of a capitalist order, which reduces the interaction and mutual understanding among inhabitants of modern cities. On account of the progress in economy and the liberalist trend, as Charles Sheroover underlines, “*this thesis of social atomism portrayed society as akin to a material body that can always be broken down into its components*” (1989, p. 14). An explanation of atomised society from this perspective is totally congruous with the theoretical explanation of atomism in the field of sociology, because, as has been stated, “*social atomism requires people to face strangers, causing the connection between acquaintances to be weakened and individuals increasingly to become the basic unit of society*” (Liu & Kim, 2021, p. 24). However, there seems to exist a dichotomy between the definition of an ideal life for Ancient Greek society and that of the modern society. Whereas Democritus’ identification of atomism, especially when integrated into the realm of sociology, is more geared towards anticipating a society in which individual and community share duties in the creation of a civic order, social atomism of the modern century is marked by the absence of this collaborative work. In Ancient Greek society, people are there for each other, but in the modern age, this kind of harmonic society is destroyed. Instead, modern thought sees no harmony between individual and society. (Dağ, 2022, p. 100). Hence, anomic, lonely, and desperate individuals abound in this century, and they find themselves in a state of existential dilemma.

The content of the representations of individuals is determined by the sense of loneliness and dejection as a prevalent theme of modern literary productions as well. The central characters of the vast majority of novels, poems and plays of the twentieth century strike readers as representative figures of the existing alienation from community and

companion. Characters are presented as greatly distressed in their minds as a result of the discord between their own values and those of the newly developing modern world. Faced with severe conflicts, characters studied in modern literature do not seem to feel completely secure in this world and fall into doubts about their future. Redolent of the portrayal of the atomised society in Social Atomism Theory, the portrayal of humanity in modernist literature indicates that the escalating number of people who act as solitary participants in the community must be seen as a serious problem to be surmounted. To exemplify, the character of Prufrock can be regarded as the embodiment of the existential crisis experienced by many individuals of the modern century and his repudiation of the social expectations renders him an atomised man to a serious extent. Contemporary readers are given the message that individuals such as Prufrock cannot be expected to find any glimmer of hope for posterity.

Prufrock as the Poetic Embodiment of Atomised Individual

The title of the poem, from the right outset, implies that there is a conundrum in the story of Prufrock. Eliot merges the romance of the love song with the official full name of the character, which causes readers to feel confounded. On the one side, it gives the impression that it can be the articulation of an infatuation of a lover or the expression of the desire for the beloved, on the other side, it is characterised by a formality that does not correspond to the romantic arousal. As Russell Murphy states, “*such a name reads more like something found on a calling card than in the title of a composition as intimate as a love song. Lovers, after all, do not refer to each other, by their legal or formal names*” (2007, p. 292). This curious juxtaposition of romance with formality in the title is followed by the introduction of an epigraph from Dante’s *Inferno*, which invites readers to dwell on its function for the rest of the poem. The epigraph is a part of Canto 27 in *Inferno*, and when translated into English, it is understood that it reverberates with a voice from the depths of hell. It is the voice of the character, Guido da Montefeltro, who is an invented character of Dante as his alter-ego, and his fraudulence is the underlying reason of his self-inflicted fall. T. S. Eliot alludes to the presence of fictional characters and the state of hell in his own essay about Dante, which serves as a guideline to better make sense of the nature of *Inferno* with his remarks as follows:

It is worth pointing out again how very right was Dante to introduce among his historical characters at least one character who even to him could hardly have been more than a fiction. For the Inferno is relieved from any question of pettiness or arbitrariness in Dante’s selection of damned. It reminds us that Hell is not a place but a state; that man is damned or blessed in the creatures of his imagination as well as in men who have actually lived; and that Hell, though a state, is a state in which can only be thought of, and perhaps only experienced, by the projection of sensory images; and that the resurrection of the body has perhaps a deeper meaning than we understand (1932, p. 250).

One of the fictional characters in *Inferno* to which T. S. Eliot refers in his essay can be said to be Guido and his being positioned in hell can be considered evocative of the mundane state of men and prosaic reality with its undercurrents. In other words, the infernal entrapment of Guido in the company of other people who are bound by the mind-forged manacles of dishonesty could be seen as a clue about Prufrock’s own environment

before the poem begins. To be more precise, the hellish world and people who are entrenched in this world can be thought as counterparts of the modern world and its dwellers. Thus, the title and the epigraph as the initial symbols of dilemma inherent in the poem may indicate that what awaits readers is the depiction of experiences of Prufrock as a despondent man, a man who is bereft of hope in an atomised society by Eliot.

This implied despondency of Prufrock as inimical to blessedness of a romantic lover is more overtly accentuated in the opening stanza of the poem. When the poem begins, Prufrock salutes readers with a literary language that is marked by his determination to abandon the place where he lives. The opening speech of the character is suggestive of a life which is predicated upon boredom, discontent, and incomppliance with social conventions as it comes to the forefront as follows:

*Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent* (Eliot, 1915, p. 2140).

Seeking solace from the complexities of his condition, Prufrock utters his first statements in the form of a genuine offer to an unknown addressee who is primarily assumed to be his lover. Nonetheless, the ambiguity of the pronoun “you” coupled with the accentuation of the wrenching desire of separating himself from his surroundings imply that Prufrock could be referring to more than one person, basically, his friends, relatives, and people that he knows. Irrespective of the addressee of his initial utterances, the interposition of the evening’s being likened to a patient etherised upon a table as a heavy symbol can be said to implicitly draw attention to the existence of a disconnected society. The disruption of the sense of romanticism that the evening arouses with a rendition of a medical case points to a deeper and more insidious aspects of Prufrock’s society. In other words, the speaker gives readers the clue that the atmosphere is ruffled by disturbances and Eliot, here, portrays the human toll of bourgeois capitalism in loneliness and boredom (O’Connor, 2014, p. 1904). Based on O’Conner’s interpretation of the referred lines, it would be fitting to add that Prufrock aspires to liberate either his lover or all his beloved ones from facing a foreboding future.

The famous refrain in the poem “*In the room the women come and go, Talking of Michelangelo*” (Eliot, 1915, p. 2140) follows the first stanza and it interrupts the poetic narration as candid expressions of the mentally tormented Prufrock. Reminiscent of

Woolf's technique of stream of consciousness, Eliot's preference of integrating these lines into his poem serves as a facilitator of exploring the inner world of his protagonist. When Prufrock alludes to the existence of unidentified women who seem to be giving an effort to prove that they are knowledgeable about Michelangelo, especially under the guidance of the tone of the first stanza, he introduces individuals who have been indoctrinated by the modern society, indeed. It is not clear whether they are really cultivated or not and the lack of identification while referring to these women demonstrates that they represent the ones whose identities are constructed in line with the precepts of a capitalist system. As Wendy Steiner elucidates, "*Instead of a transcendent contact with beauty, passion, or art, the women offer Prufrock cocktail chat; he measures out his life in coffee spoons rather than asking the overwhelming question*" (1995, p. 135). Namely, the compulsion to socialise in the modern society through contact with these women is an impediment to Prufrock's self-actualisation because their cocktail chats and coffee spoons are strong indicatives of their being engulfed by capitalism. Anthony Giddens in *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* draws attention to this issue and underlines "[t]he institutional origins of this situation lie in the decline of traditional authority and the formation of a capitalistic urban culture. Capitalism creates consumers" (1991, p. 170). In line with Giddens' postulation, the women in the poem could be deemed as poetic representatives of capitalist indoctrination since they are unaware of the fact that they have been robbed of their real sense of selves by surrendering to the system which pushes them to internalise ideologies of capitalist modernity. It seems that their social identities become more important as Giddens points out "[s]ocial bonds and engagements increasingly thereafter recede in favour of an endless and obsessive preoccupation with social identity" (1991, p. 170). So long as people tend to take things for granted as these women do, Eliot's Prufrock insinuates that the number of socially atomised individuals may gradually increase. Their communication, social gatherings, and inclinations are superficial which makes Prufrock think that it is better to isolate himself from them. Prufrock's being driven by the will to extricate himself from this situation brings to mind the well-known description of the self in modern society which relates to the issue of social atomism to a large extent as Giddens also notes "[t]he self in modern society is frail, brittle, fractured, fragmented- such a conception is probably the pre-eminent outlook in current discussions of the self and modernity" (1991, p. 169).

Prufrock is burdened by the question of how to sustain a living in the hollows of the modern city life. Things seem to have been debased in Prufrock's age. Eliot invites readers to lend an ear to emotionally inhibited Prufrock whose accentuations come to the fore with a set of other unfolding lines suggestive of social atomism in the poem. In other words, readers are expected to conjure a socially atomised character who is dragged into a deep self-reflection when they confront the harsh realities of modern age through Prufrock's resorting to a literal voice in the lines as follows:

And indeed there will be time

For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,

*Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea (Eliot, 1915, p. 2140-41).*

Prufrock polemicizes against newly emerging values of industrialisation with his apprehensions revolving around a distorted concept of time. By referring to the yellow smoke which metaphorically brings to mind factories with abhorrent working conditions and fusing this image with his anticipation of the arrival of a different time period, the character can be claimed to be pushing himself forward into a much more distant and promising future. The reference to a need to prepare a face to meet other faces points to the co-existence of civilisation and decadence in that individuals as members of an industrialised nation conceal their real identities behind masks. In other words, in these lines, the character of Prufrock turns into a device through which Eliot chafes at the pervasive duplicity and superficiality of relationships which culminate in the proliferation of socially atomised human beings. The poet epitomises a civilisation in which human existence is concomitant with corruption. Individuals' recognition of themselves as autonomous beings is impeded by the tribulations of the time and capitalism coupled with repercussions of the war threaten the values and sentiments of solidarity.

The degradation of moral conviction emanating from the urge to conform to what is socially acceptable is a focal point of the ensuing stanzas of the poem as well. As Prufrock speaks, it becomes clearer that modern society stifles his individuality. Envisaging a world in which people subject themselves to the reality that modernity presents to them does not please him and the rectitude of his defiance of these circumstances can be read in the lines which are as follows:

*For I have known them all already, known them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.*

So how should I presume? (Eliot, 1915, p. 2141).

The amalgamation of the said with the unsaid could enable readers to presume that the trap of social atomism has been sprung for Prufrock and he is quite cognisant of the challenge that it poses to the society. Capitalist modernity comes alongside with the fragmentation of the society and Eliot, through the lenses of the anomic character of Prufrock, refers to the utter insubstantiality of individuals who have been caught in the frays of modern culture and class. As Thomas Augst points out, "*Having spent much of his adult life as a bank clerk, T. S. Eliot would make the routines of a white-collar worker an exemplum for the anomie of modern life in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock: I have measured out my life with coffee spoons*" (2003, p. 215). These lines also elucidate the place issues such as money and social status occupy in the lives of people during the Modern Age. Nevertheless, Prufrock is appalled by all these people who seem to have yielded to the corruption of good communal relationships. Under these conditions, Prufrock is guided by a sense of inevitability of his getting stuck in an atomised, alienated society.

In *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Eliot's poetic voice resounds with the anticipation of alienation setting in modern city life and expressed through Prufrock's utterances. A sense of loneliness which inhabits Prufrock's imagination is more explicitly transmitted to readers in the lines as follows:

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets

And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes

Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?

I should have been a pair of ragged claws

Scuttling across the floors of silent seas (Eliot, 1915, p. 2141-42).

These lines where Prufrock talks about his preference for being a pair of ragged claws rather than watching lonely men pulse with his mourning the passing of the age. His solitariness is not dissimilar to that of factory workers toiling under gruesome conditions or that of war-stricken individuals. This being the case, the lines can be said to foreground the bad effects of World War I upon the masses, particularly in terms of their hopelessness and feeling of estrangement. Long years of attrition which characterises the Great War is known to have resulted in the demise of Western civilization. Peter Wagner in *A Sociology of Modernity* elaborates upon the process of disintegration and the rise of capitalism plunging into the whole world on account of the war and stresses "*the working of a capitalist market economy had drastically changed many aspects of life. The process had a first culmination between the turn of the nineteenth century and the end of the First World War. During those years, the view that no new consolidated order might be establishable was widespread*" (1994, p. 57). It could be noted that Prufrock is one of the individuals who has been hamstrung by the regulations underlined by Wagner and he aspires to be an unrepressed man thereby dreaming of silent seas. His dream signifies a

totally different world which is far away from the carnage of World War I and its psychically devastating impacts.

The poetic rendition of the atomised, fragmented society becomes more manifest when Prufrock says that “*I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, I am pinned and wriggling on the wall*” (Eliot, 1915, p. 2141). The need to express how he feels by utilising adjectives such as “formulated,” “pinned and “wriggling” originates from his fretfulness about the social environment. Moreover, this can be regarded as a sort of self-representation which is fundamentally shaped by his endeavour to lead a life under the influence of capitalist modernity. The language of Prufrock lays bare the paralysing aspect of his having been torn between his inner self and outer self. The ultimate fact of his inability to estrange himself from social atomism is compounded by a suppressed desire to break free from this cycle and he finds himself in a state of in-betweenness. The enormity of what transpires in the period to which Prufrock alludes is expressed through one of the most ambivalent questions the character offers in the lines as below:

*Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet- and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid* (Eliot, 1915, p. 2142).

His self-interrogation of whether he possesses the strength to force the moment to its crisis following tea and cake gatherings addresses the dissidence between individual and social environment. There exists a kind of an inscrutable power dominating the actions of people and compelling them to fall prey to extrinsic forces. That being said, Prufrock complains about the pressure to subserve the capitalist system which induces no dwelling space for genuine human bonds and reciprocal understanding for cementing their relationships. The emphasis which the character makes upon his weeping and praying solidifies the argument that the tone of the poem is utterly mournful. A sense of an impending apocalypse intrinsic to Prufrock's lines simultaneously conveys the implicit message that his ongoing trauma is embedded in the deficiencies of the modern society. It would be fitting to argue that Prufrock cannot feel up to the expectations of the society in which the formation of his self-identity is predicated upon his interaction with other people aspiring to catch up with the pace of constantly evolving circumstances either. Peter Wagner critically discusses the characteristics of the twentieth century social thought for the self-identity by referring to George Herbert Mead as follows:

A conception that allowed one to see both self-identity and society as emerging from the ways human beings actively relate to others was proposed by George

Herbert Mead and entered into the works of the Chicago School. For Mead, a “me” emerges from somebody’s perception of the attitude others hold towards her or him. My identity is formed from my way of combining the different “me”s I am confronted with. Mead’s conceptualization is a very open one. It allows for identities to emerge or not emerge, depending on the individual’s abilities to reconcile different expectations and on the divergence of expectations itself (1994, p. 154).

Prufrock negotiates with himself in such a world depicted by Wagner and struggles hard to come to terms with the inexorable inadequacy as regards being a modern individual which must conform to the mainstream of superficial relationships. However, he cannot reconcile the expectations of others; instead, he rails against the idea of defining his sense of self in accordance with the perceptions of others. This results in his becoming an atomistic individual who abhors what the modern city does to the mind of the individuals.

Prufrock is baffled by more existential questions and further challenged by discouraging fears arising in his mind as the atomistic individual. As the poetic narration progresses, Prufrock as a despondent loner compares himself with Hamlet, which indicates that there might be resemblances between them. However, Prufrock makes this striking comparison with a denial of their mutual sides and speaks as follows:

*No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous-
Almost, at times, the Fool (Eliot, 1915, p. 2143).*

Despite the vagueness of the meaning in Prufrock’s comparison, it still sounds rational in that both Prufrock and Hamlet can be said to put a lot of effort into deciphering the code of their own existence. Their speeches serve as precious sources to have insight into the experience of being a human in hard times. The iconic character, Hamlet, is famous for his contemplation of the meaning of life, and likewise, Prufrock as the anguished man of the atomised modern society, engages in a spiritual battle against his fragmented existence. He also harbours an intense fear of aging by wasting away his youth under the effect of agonising power of an atomised society arrayed against him when he says that:

I grow old...I grow old...

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each (Eliot, 1915, p. 2143).

His oscillation between what the modern world presents to him and what his inner turmoil signifies leads him to fall into habitual destitution as the character, at the end of his dramatic monologue, implies when he says that “*We have lingered in the chambers of the sea, By sea girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown, Till human voices wakes us and we drown*” (Eliot, 1915, p. 2143). His own voice resonates with a failure rather than a victory, and for readers, it makes the impression that he stops talking at a moment when he is incapacitated by the prolonged consideration of what it means to be an atomised individual of the modern world.

Conclusion

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by T. S. Eliot presents the threats posed by the atomised world in the twentieth century. The character of Prufrock symbolises an individual living in the modern age which is marked by dysfunctional relationships, capitalist hegemony, and the compulsion to conform to socially acceptable norms. More specifically, Eliot demonstrates that fragmented existence of people causes them to communicate with each other rather ineffectively. The world turns into a place which reflects the absence of unity and collaboration among people, namely, social atomism itself. The poetic world of T. S. Eliot invites contemporary readers to heighten their awareness about the plea of all people in the grip of a capitalism-stricken world. Eliot’s verse is arresting and it encourages readers to linger over social mores of the modern period. The perceived unpredictability of a new age is reflected through the touching monologue of Prufrock which abounds in symbolic implications as regards the decay, division in the society. His heart-felt desires for distancing himself from the clutches of a victimising world renders it possible to turn to the Theory of Social Atomism in order to justify his struggle. When analysed in line with the postulations of the theory, the experiences of Prufrock and the accentuations of what he feels in certain stanzas of the poem come together to rebel against the deficiencies of the system. The resentment of the character against the newly emerging social restraints and his skepticism about the validity of assumptions which define moral values of the time suffice to restate that the poem functions as a harsh critique of the entropic nature of the modern period. Viewing the poem through these lenses certainly sets an example to future studies which aim to reveal insights about human condition in modern times by adopting a literary approach feeding on sociology or sociological theories.

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