CHAPTER III
Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is unique in that it deals with the theme of alienation which is an outcome of modern life. In the words of Leavis it represents a complete break with the 19th century tradition and new start.1

In the modern Society, people like Prufrock find it difficult to preserve their identity. Prufrock has a spiritual vacuum. He endeavours to improve his position in the society by better clothing. The poet brings out a contrast between the early life of Prufrock and his later life. He like Hamlet, oscillates and easily drifts into a reverie. He is unable to meet the reality of life. His awareness of his incompetence prevents him from making amorous advances. In a way he is drowned in the sea of reality. Through certain powerful images, the poet brings out the identity crisis of Prufrock.

Prufrock's passivity is portrayed by means of the image of a patient etherised upon a table. In the words of the poet

Let us go then, you and I,

When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon table; (1-3)

This image reflects the twentieth century scientific advancement in which man has lost his essential identity and is at the mercy of science for the restoration of that identity. In the words of George Williamson,

Prufrock sees evening in the aspect of etherisation, and the metaphor of etherisation suggests the desire for inactivity to the point of enforced release from pain. All of this simply projects the mind of the speaker - a mind, it would appear, that is in conflict, but presumably concerned with love.²

The evening stands for Prufrock's sickness and the colour which can express this idea is yellow, the traditional colour that symbolises disease and decay.

In the room the Women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo (13-14)

Common women without any knowledge of art discuss the great artist Michelangelo. They cannot estimate the value of the artist. Prufrock selects a place for his destination, the place that cannot solve his emotional problems. This again

connotes the hypocrisy and the snobbery of the modern city dwellers. More over, lack of definite goal is also hinted at. We may tune with D.H. Harding and say.

Self blame and self contempt have a very definite place, for instance in 'Prufrock.' Portrait of a Lady and Geronsion. And the sense of the present as the smoky candle-end of time and heroic age growth shabby or golden age turned pingbeck is accompanied by hints that we have only our illusions to blame for our disappointments.\(^3\)

The poet finds fault with the modern urban society and its mechanical ways of living that leads one into the world of illusions and to the loss of one's identity. An excessive dry intellect and the lack of emotional experience account for the shallow and the self evasive behaviour which produce a sense of boredom. So like an able surgeon the poet wants to operate on the ulcer of the present society.

Oh! do not ask, "what is it?"
Let us go and make our visit. (11-12)

This shows the need for meaning in life. It also suggests one's decisiveness to act but what is despicable is inactivity.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes.

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The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the
window-panes.
Licked its tongue into the corners of the
evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains.
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from
chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep. (15–22)

Here 'the imagery of yellow fog' throws light on the inactive
mental state of Prufrock. The words 'cat' and 'yellow' suggest
inactivity that evokes in him a feeling of the loss of his
personality. Cats are not active during the day time. 'Yellow'
signifies autumn and withering spring. Night follows evening.
Night is a symbol of death. Naturally, the ageing of Prufrock
is not the right time for love affairs. Williamson makes the
following observation on the imagery of fog and cat.

With the fog as a cat, we have another
reflection of his mental state; desire which
ends in inertia. If the cat image suggests
sex it also suggests the greater desire of
inactivity. The speaker sees the evening in
aspects of somnolence or of action lapsing into
inaction, both artificial and natural sleep and
etherisation.4

4 George Williamson, A Readers Guide to T.S. Eliot (London:
Thames and Hudson, 1955), p. 60.
Action or inaction, decision or indecision are concepts related to time. Here the time imagery is brought into the theme of mental indecision and the desire for escape.

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.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'
Time to turn back and descend the stair. (23-39)

These lines hint at the indecision of the protagonist who finds relief in postponement. The reference of time sharpens the state of his mental indecision. Escape is good until the crucial moment when the question arises. Though the protagonist is indecisive he says that he may act in future. He acts not according to his will but according to what others have made of
him. So he is alienated from his own self and has become a man who has lost his sense of identity. He cannot take any major decision.

In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute
will reverse. (47-48)

Convinced of his incompetence and impotency, he would prefer to compromise with time which would be far easier than confrontation with it. He knows that time allows but little consciousness. Where the human breeds the inhuman and where there is death in every moment of life.

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;

(49- 51)

Prufrock cannot face the reality. He fails to assert his true self because he has lost the redeeming features in his personality. He has become a play thing of otherselves which hold him in complete sway such as arms that are white and bare, light brown hair and perfume. These images -- White bare arms, brown hair, perfume -- suggest the theme of fragility and superficiality of his life. The life of outward appearances is revealed in the following lines.
And I have known the arms already, known them all --
Arms that are bracelated and white and bare
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)
Is it a perfume from a dress
That makes so digress? (62-66)

Here he does not assert his identity. He instead, prefers to surrender his 'self' to the will of others. What makes him digress is his own timidity and self consciousness. His self pity and self disgust fill his inauthentic being.

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas. (73-74)

Grover Smith makes the following comment on the image of sea and pair of ragged claws:

"With this image just before the climax of the dramatic structure. Prufrock perceives his lack of instinct, of mindless appetite, which would have given him a realisable aim and which, Ofcourse, would have made him at home in those depths where at present he exists abnormally." 5

These lines of Grover Smith throw light on Prufrock's inner self suppressed by timidity. F.O. Matthiessen says:

One can glimpse, beneath the banal surfaces

and futile indecisions of his life, his perception of beauty, his understanding of the meaning of love and sympathy, of an utter inability to gain them.  

Prufrock finds that he is impotent. He does not see any means of making existence actual or concrete. He has become used to regrets and hesitations to do things in his life. His lack of action is in a way a lack of self realization. T.S. Eliot in his selected essays on Baudelaire remarks that it is action that is important:

So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good so far as we do evil or good, we are human; and it is better in a paradoxical way to do evil than to do nothing, at least we exist. It is true to say that the glory of man is his capacity for salvation, it is also true to say that his glory is his capacity for damnation. The worst that we can be said of most of our male factors from statesmen to thieves is that they are not men enough to be damned.

The life around Prufrock is illusory for it presents a vision, a seeming perfect existence.

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And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully! (75)

The mind beholds a sense of contentment and the body is satisfied with such trivial things as "tea and cakes and ices." Here one's attention is distracted because of the ordinary things. The protagonist returns to the world of non-being to the world of misused possibilities.

Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,
Stretched as the floor, here beside you and me.

(77-78)

There are other images that suggest things that pass into his receptive consciousness.

After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain ... (88-89)

Perhaps it is a futile exercise on his part to attempt to know the universe. His buried life reaches a mockheroic counterfeit, the miracle of history. The mocking voice of his rejected self can be heard through the historical imagery.

To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'-
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say 'That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all.' (94-98)

Prufrock does not make miraculous revelations but he resumes the
time-ridden existence, a life of indecisions and revisions and hesitations which characterise contemporary life. This is illustrated through the hair and peach imagery

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach? (122)

Weariness overtakes Prufrock,

I grow old ... I grow old ...
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled. (120-121)

Like Hamlet, the prince of uncertainty he cannot perform the action which he may like to perform. In the words of B.C. Southam:

the opening of whose best known soliloquy to be or not to be (Act III, SC - I) is echoed at the end of this line. Hamlet was given to self scrutiny and was tormented by indecisiveness. Thus Prufrock's sudden exclamation is to cut short the Hamlet like soliloquy he has just indulged in and to assert his own subordinate, unheroic role in life. 8

A well known critic like Elizabeth Drew holds almost the same view.

Mr. Prufrock is an unromantic and unprincely Hamlet in a tragical, comical, historical urban drama where the prison of a divided self in the tortures of neurotic conflict. The love-song as the epigraph implies will never be uttered outside the inferno of his own mind and the 'you' and 'I' of his soliloquy are the impulses within him to murder and create or to be or not to be concluding neither in suicide nor in the release of a chosen action but in the death-in-life of the abdication of will. 9

In the last part of the poem, we see the image of drowning. The protagonist is drowned in the sea of reality, reality of sordid and sophisticated life. Grover Smith says:

The reminder of the poem moves towards the image of drowning ... Henceforth Prufrock speaks of what would have happened and affirms the improbability of a favourable issue to his suit of their clash with decorous commonplaceness and above all of their unacceptability because they would have brought exposure ... he disclaims his pretensions ... the happy mermaid, atleast, will not insist that he wear a morning coat and a tie. But even the mermaid will not sing to him. His vision of them has been

disillusion into whose waters he has sunk deeper and deeper until recalled to intolerable real world and drowned in his subjective world of dreams.

This expression of Grover Smith is almost similar to the one expressed by George Williamson who says:

The imagery of the sea, begun with oyster shells, again emerges at this point. It is the imagery of his suppressed self .... The lyric note comes with the erotic imagery of mermaids and the hair of the waves recalls the dawn on the lady's arms. This watery, flowing imagery involves the relaxation of all effort offers a submerged fulfilment. It is ended when human voices wake us and we drown - with the intrusion of reality, which drowns the inner life, 'the us' in Prufrock. If this is a sublimation of the amorous Prufrock, it is a release of the timid Prufrock from the polite world which overcomes him. But reality returns and divided self is submerged again, not resolved.

Here the sea imagery is significant for it develops the theme of emotional frustration. We can possibly say that 'you' is not the

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lady or the second person in the poem. It shows the conflict in
the mind of the protagonist. Here the 'you' is the amorous self
which is suppressed by the timid self. It is to this suppressed
self that Prufrock addresses and excuses himself. The song is
divided between passion and timidity. So it is never sung in
the real world.

Towards the end, Prufrock's mind fails to perceive
the vision evoked by the singing of mermaids. So Prufrock
turns to the world of purity, to see if reality could be
discovered through fiction. The poet likes to ridicule the
sophisticated life of modern man who suffers emotionally. The
poet seems to suggest that there is a need for the restoration of
the full blooded and natural being rather than the sophisticated
man of today. F.R. Leavis almost reiterates this in his New
Bearings

Prufrock and Portrait of a Lady are concerned
with the directly personal embarrassments,
disillusions and distress of a sophisticated
Youngman.

The life of the modern man who is conscious of his
identity needs to be restored. Only then we can call our
civilization glorious. If Prufrock is a representative of this

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F.R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry (London: Chatto
civilization, it has also to restore his lost identity, otherwise both the man and modern civilization move towards damnation.

The poem thus, throws light on the identity crisis of the modern man. Like Prufrock, the modern man cannot face the complexities in life. Like Prufrock, the modern man suffers from the loneliness and inaction. There is a chasm between resolution and execution. A wanton woman causes Hamlet a mental agony. The bare arms of the lady and the perfume from her cause similar mental agony to Prufrock. Modern man's inability to overcome his suffering, such social, moral or psychological elements is the most central to the poem. So the so called modern emancipated spirit is in decay. We know this and so we get knowledge and help to reshape our lives which are obviously in moral confusion, and to restore our unique moral identity. The theme of the crisis of moral identity is exemplified in his powerful poem Portrait of a Lady.