CHAPTER IV
"The Limbo of Suffering:" Portrait of a Lady

Portrait of a Lady deals with the theme of failure in love between a lady and a young man. Through certain powerful images, the poet presents the limbo of suffering that characterises modern life. The poem has an epigraph from The Jew of Malta:

Thou hast committed —
Fornication: but that was in another country.
And besides, the wench is dead.

It suggests the element of uncertainty in the relationship between the lady and the attractive young man.

The poem is divided into three parts. Part I deals with a foggy afternoon where boredom exists. A true love and happy love cannot exist and flourish in such an atmosphere. Part II relates itself to April twilight in which the lady recalls her past life. And the youth feels restless and tries to go away from the lady. Part III concerns itself with the October night when the youth admits that there is a break in emotional harmony between the lady and himself. These themes — boredom, emotion, sterility, failure of sexual relationship — are very well developed through some concrete images.
In Part I of the poem, there is the image of time presented through the cycle of seasons which suggests that the lady is a professional and hence cultured and accommodative.

Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon

You have the scene arrange itself -- as it will seem to do --
With 'I have saved this afternoon for you;' (2-3)

In the next three lines the time imagery acquires the historical and the cultural significance and introduces a melancholy note

And four wax candles in the darkened room,
Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,
An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb
Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid. (4-7)

In the next lines, the lady and the Young man pretend to establish emotional harmony by an ironical invocation of a Polish artist and Chopin, the musician.

We have been, let us say, to hear the latest Pole
Transmit the Preludes, through his hair and finger-tips.
'So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul
Should be resurrected only among friends
Some two or three, who will not touch the bloom
That is rubbed and questioned in the concert room.' (8-13)

Here, the lady's approach and the Youngman's response are both developed in musical terms which provide metaphors of malicious innuendo. The metaphors give polite expression to the lady and indicate the quality of reception in the Youth. The implications of the lady's "music" set up a prelude in the youth's mind that is at least a definite false note, after which there is only one escape --- the masculine escape to externals.¹

Here, we have the false setting. The lady and the Youth have developed a snobbish interest in music. The Youth hears in the yearning music of her, the wearisome, thin wailing 'violence mingled with remote cornets.' The two look forward to different things. The Young man finds only boredom. The lady seeks emotional harmony. She has no rest in life because it is composed of odds and ends. She wishes to have a friend in life to find that harmony. She likes to have friendship with many men. Here the poet suggests that there is a break down of moral valves in this woman who lost her identity.

Both -- the lady and the youngman -- display their interest in values in human life. So the Young man likes to run

away from her, even though he receives something from her. This is because of their having no sense of values in their physical relationship. In a successful love affair, there should be both physical and moral relationship. As they have no such values, there is a complete break down of love relationship. This is the way of modern life. Sex is meant for the biological needs without caring for higher functions, the functions that are associated with culture and religion. In the words of T.S. Eliot:

This is a world in which, I, and the majority of my fellow beings, live in that perpetual distraction from God which exposes us to the one great peril.2

As the young man indulges himself in aimless sex, he is terribly bored. The deeper values that are associated with sex have vanished totally. The love of the body cannot bring about any happiness to him. Eventually the youth would like to escape from such relations. George Williamson says:

the section ends with the youth's attempt to escape the intimate atmosphere established by the lady, and the "tobacco trance" is his counter for the one she sought to induce. Of course, 'the atmosphere of Juliet's tomb'

becomes ironic in the love tryst prepared for this Romeo by an older Juliet.

Naturally, the love relationship between the lady and the Youth fails. This is because of their loss of moral identity.

Part II of the poem is fraught with the imagery of spring flowers. The cyclic, seasonal and biological operations throw light on the consciousness of the lady.

Now that the lilacs are in bloom
She has a bowl of lilacs in her room
And twists one in her fingers while she talks.

(41-43)

Usually the spring is the month of youthfulness and vigour but Eliot deliberately inverts the familiar meaning of the spring imagery and comments on the unawakened religious consciousness of the people. In the words of Grover Smith, the spring imagery reveals the emotional frustration of the protagonists who have lost something precious in their lives:

The imagery of the spring flowers here objectifies her frustration and her own pricked certitude. The seasonal cycle in the poem begins with winter, and after the brief scent of the spring, it declines again to the dead season; thus the quiver of life in lilacs and

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hyacinths is futile. But precisely through his confrontation with the hidden personal valves in the cycle, as he becomes troubled by her attention to these tokens of awakening life, the young man is forced to experience the psychological climax of the affairs. ⁴

In the spring season, there must be a close attraction of the two individuals, but the young man in the poem cannot pretend to desire intimacy because he is guilty of obtuseness. On the other hand, he is a product of this disintegrated society in which such intimacy cannot be established because of lack of proper communal life. Eliot says:

Our society is in danger of disintegration when there is a lack of contact between the people of different areas of activity. ⁵

Eliot feels that a close personal intimacy should take persons to the possibility of contended silence. This cannot be realised by the lady and the young man. So the young man plunges helpless into an emotion compounded of embarrassment and of something which might pass for scruple but which is more like arrogance. On the other hand, the lady has no power to attract him. Their emotional relationship is not natural but artificial like the lilac in April which dies quickly. The lady

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crushes one of the lilacs, thereby suggesting the theme of the failure of their emotional relationship. It also conveys their failure to feel the spontaneity and vigour in life.

'Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know
What life is, you who hold it in your hands;'
(Slowly twisting the lilacs stalks)
'You let it flow from you, you let it flow.' (44-47)

This shows the apathy of the young man. George Williamson comments on the imagery of the spring flower.

'Now spring, the poet appropriately adds flower imagery to the musical imagery in developing the relationship which the lady calls friendship. This new imagery serves to intensify the feelings of the lady and to make more intolerable, the tension of the youth.\(^6\)

This spring imagery symbolises the cruel youth which has no remorse. It reminds the lady of her own past-self which may perhaps never be dug up again.

'Yet with these April sunsets, that somehow recall
My buried life, and Paris in the spring,
I feel immeasurably at place, and find the world
To be wonderful and Youthful, after all.' (52-55)

the lady sees the April sunsets and remembers her past life of Paris spring which was peaceful, wonderful and youthful. Now

her life is not spontaneous or youthful because the youth is cruel. All these suggest that she had exploited her youth in the past and that she is now a remnant of the past and has no more the vigour of the past. The young man cannot possibly establish emotional intimacy with her. The poet reveals the response of the youth through the imagery of musical sounds and develops the theme of failure of the emotional intimacy that has led to the loss of their inner rhythm of life.

The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune
Of a broken violin on an August afternoon: (56-57)

Her musical voice has changed into the out of tune sound of a broken violin. Metaphorically speaking, the lady is the broken violin and the temperament of the youth is like the August afternoon. George Williamson observes:

As her buried life becomes more and more obtrusive he becomes more and more uncomfortable until flight again is the only escape.

Here, the appeal of the lady to her 'buried-life' and to Paris in the spring, conveys to The Young Man an unmanageable fact that she is no mere instrument of monotonous meaning, but a wasted human heart. The idea of 'buried-life refers to one's inscrutable which craves self expression. The Protagonist experiences the pressure to release the suppressed life and realise her true identity.

Next few lines of the poem throw light on the modern man's withdrawal from the area of conscious and authentic existence. This is revealed in the following lines:

You will go on, and when you have prevailed
You can say: at this point many a one has failed.
But what have I, but what have I, my friend,
To give you, what can you receive from me?
Only the friendship and the sympathy
Of one about to reach her journey's end (62-67)

The young man realises that he has been fixed by a formulated phrase and it was too late for him to convert the basis of his inauthentic existence which he led more to conform to his description by others than to live and fulfil his own self, and realise his own urges. The lady is not free and is fixed in the grove which time has cut out for her. In the last line of the second section, there is an intensity of the protagonist feeling of self consciousness.

You will see me any morning in the park
Reading the comics and the sporting page
Particularly I remark
An English countess goes upon the stage
A Greek was murdered at a Polish dance,
Another bank defaulter has confessed.
I keep my countenance
I remain self-possessed (71-78)
These lines throw light on the man's cowardly escape from an awkward position. It also throws light on the moral perturbation of the youth. Thus these lines reflect the identity crisis of the two.

Part III of the poem begins with the Stair image.

I mount the stairs and turn the handle of the door  
And feel as if I had mounted on my hands and knees.  

(86-87)

Here the stair image that appeared in *Prufrock* figures in. The image creates hellish sordidness and moral horror. The young man is humiliated for committing an action that had destroyed his moral values. He becomes a typical representative of modern man who goes in the wrong way. T.S. Eliot says:

We also live in a mass civilization following many wrong ambitions and wrong desires and that if our society renounces completely its obedience to God, it will become no better and possibly worse. 8

The smells of hyacinths across the garden may suggest the idea of the loss of vitality due to their indulgence in lust. Again mounting down on hands and knees imagery suggests how man has fallen a prey to his animal instincts. Grover Smith makes a very relevant observation:

The imagery in the section ... especially the figurative mounting on hands and knees, the smile falling heavily among the bric-a-brac and mental shape shifting to bear to parrot to ape ... suggests a kind of dehumanisation, as if through his abashment, the crest fallen young man had become a bungling animal.\(^9\)

This passage shows that the young man is fickle minded. He doesn't have any individuality which is a trait of identity.

And I must borrow every changing shape
To find expression ... dance, dance
Like a dancing bear,
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape (109-112)

This shows that he is thoroughly dehumanised and he suffers from self disgust. What invests man with the status of a human being is the consciousness and its rejection leads him, something less than human, an object which does not have any consciousness to realise its destiny. Grover Smith rightly observes that both the lady and the young man are responsible for their loss of values and in turn their loss of identity.

He has not a word of remorse for his conduct; nor has he a motive for understatement. From the evidence in the poem, it is true, that one would be hard put to demonstrate that he had been wilfully brutal. One would hesitate, furthermore, to

impute to him any active responsibility for their sterile relationship: an emotion cannot be coerced. On the other hand, he is guilty of having been obtuse ... the lady, despite her undeniable merit, is tedious by nature makes him intolerable and indeed despicable.10

These lines throw light on the theme of emotional frustration. This is because they do not have spiritual values in their lives. Only by perceiving spiritual values, they can recover their lost identity and get rid of their despair and frustration. The same idea recurs in Eliot's Christianity and Culture. According to Eliot, not merely individuals but the wide civilization needs the cultivation of spiritual life. Thus in this poem the emotional frustration of the youth becomes the emotional frustration of the whole civilization. This is realized perhaps, to the fullest, in The Waste Land as shown in the following chapter.