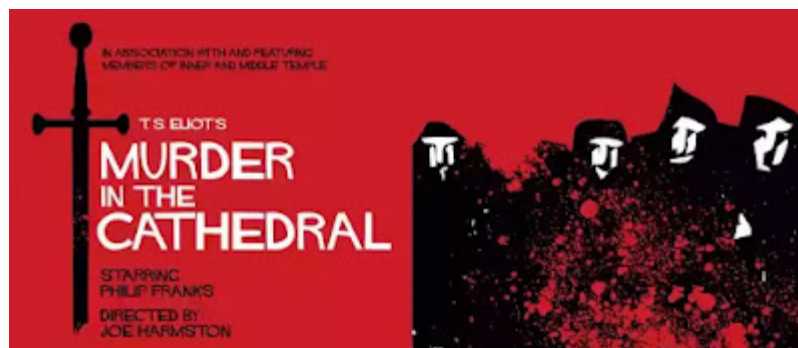


# ENGLISH POETRY AND DRAMA

## [PAPER –I]

### *INTRODUCTION*

*T. S. Eliot* was a dominant influence in the field of drama in the first half of the twentieth century. Long before attempting this kind of drama, Eliot had been writing critically on the subject. It is noteworthy that Eliot's interest in drama had long preceded his experiments with the dramatic form. There is also a noticeable element of drama in his poetry itself.



Poetic Drama

Eliot's views on *poetic drama* are valuable and significant, and are chiefly to be found in his essays: *The Four Elizabethan Dramatists*, *Rhetoric and Poetic Drama*, *A dialogue on Dramatic poetry, poetry and Drama* and *the Possibility of Poetic Drama*.

### **A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry:-**

Written in 1928, the views expressed in it are tentative as Eliot was still feeling his way. Different points of view are presented and discussed in it. It is agreed that in the Modern Age drama is often to be considered in relation to politics, religion and ethics. The problems connected with drama are very complex and thus it is, difficult to formulate the laws of drama. It is also agreed that drama does not merely provide entertainment: there should also be a moral intention on the dramatist's part.

The importance of form in *poetic drama* is discussed. Form is essential to the success of poetic drama just as the ballet imposes order and pattern on the dancer's movements, and has a permanent form. Ballet is a kind of liturgy. Drama, too, originated in the Church. The Mass is a small drama, having all the unities. By going back to the source of its origin, drama can gain strength and vitality. Drama cannot afford to cut itself off from the ritual and liturgy of the Church.

The form of modern drama can be either prose or verse. The notion that verse is an artificial medium and that it limits emotional range and realistic truth is wrong. Verse is the medium of the ephemeral and the permanent, while prose merely deals with the universal and the superficial. Hence the need for poetic drama. It is wrong to condemn the Elizabethan dramatist for mixing poetry and drama. Verse and drama are not separate entities but are fused together in a really creative work. In moments of dramatic tension, poetry becomes dramatic. The poetic and dramatic patterns are indistinguishable. The greatest drama is poetic drama, and poetic excellence can compensate for dramatic defects. Shakespeare's plays are the complete fusion of the two. His finest poetry is to be found in his most dramatic scenes.

What the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists lacked was suitable dramatic conventions and this very drawback affected the development of poetic drama in the modern age. The chaos, the lack of moral, social and artistic conventions in the modern age made it difficult for poetic drama to be revived. It is a mistake to feel that the nation already having a great period of *English drama* in the Elizabethan era cannot expect another such period of greatness. The craving for poetic drama being permanent in human nature, its revival is very much possible in the modern age. If it has failed to be revived so far, it is because attempts have been made by poets lacking the knowledge of the stage, or by those who knew the stage but were no poets.

Suitable *dramatic conventions* have to be evolved for poetic drama to be possible. A new form of verse will have to be developed. The dramatic convention of the three unities is useful as it leads to concentration and intensity. Verse drama is not artificial; it expresses the permanent and the universal.

## **Rhetoric and Poetic Drama:-**

Written in 1919, the essay examines the nature and place of rhetoric in poetic drama. It is wrong, says Eliot, to condemn all rhetoric and hold it synonymous with bad writing. Again it is a mistake to hold that rhetoric is a kind of mannerism to be avoided. There is a rhetoric of substance as well, and such rhetoric is not bad. It is the adaptation of our manner to the variety of our thoughts and feelings on various subjects, that gives rise to true rhetoric. Shakespeare's use of rhetorical expression was right precisely because of such an adaptation. Kyd and Marlowe lacked this ability to adapt, and as a result, they are bombastic and dull. Truly fine rhetoric results from those situations in which a character sees himself or another character in a dramatic light. It is when a character tries to move the audience through direct appeal that fake rhetoric rises. Spectators must always observe from outside, though with complete understanding.

The modern age prefers the conversational style to rhetorical style. But this conversational style often becomes rhetorical and removed from the manner of direct speech. Style must be adapted to the infinite emotions and feelings that are to be expressed and this dramatic sense is rare in modern drama.

Successful *poetic drama* implies careful selection of only typical and universal human emotions and giving them artistic form. Poetic sense and dramatic perception must be fused, and the language suitably varied according to feeling and emotion. In poetic drama, rhetoric is any inflation or adornment of speech which is not done for any particular effect but for general impressiveness." Rhetoric, used artistically and

dramatically, has a significant place in poetic drama. Eliot favors a dramatic use of language as opposed to an emphasis on realism in language.

### **Four Elizabethan Dramatists:-**

This essay written in 1924 is significant as it presents the main tendencies of *Eliot's dramatic criticism*. Eliot here points out that it is Charles Lamb's dramatic criticism that began the deplorable separation of drama from poetry and from literature. Lamb praised the Elizabethan plays for their poetry and criticized them for their failure on stage. But the opinion that poetry and drama are separate is wrong. In reality they are two aspects of the same thing. William Archer and Swinburne made popular, the view that drama and literature are two separate things. Eliot thinks that elements of drama and literature are both integral parts of a play and cannot be separated. Eliot disagrees with the view that Elizabethan drama was inferior to modern drama because it lacked the quality of realism. He feels that the one great fault of Elizabethan drama, and this fault was shared by modern drama, was its lack of artistic conventions.

Playwrights should work within suitable dramatic conventions. Greek drama was superior because of its emphasis on conventions. The Elizabethan drama's weakness lay not in lack of realism but in its attempts at realism; not in its conventions, but its lack of conventions. The Elizabethans had no firm idea of what they aimed at. When the dramatists worked towards realism, from within certain unrealistic conventions like the soliloquy, the aside, and the ghost, the result was remarkably bad. There has been too much realism in English plays. Although the material for any piece of art comes from actual life, necessary conditions for any work of art is an "abstraction from actual life play need not mirror life; it cannot provide photographic realism. A great work of art implies setting a limit to realism. Art imposes form and pattern upon life, and this means a certain withdrawal from life. A strictly realist drama is an escape from the conditions and limitations set by art. Only poetic drama can be artistic. Eliot is against realism in dramatic themes. Themes for drama can be taken

from life but treated artistically. In other words, there should be artistic ordering and selection of material.

## **The Possibility of Poetic Drama:-**

The few *poetic plays* written in the modern age are academic and insipid and unsuccessful, on stage. This failure is ascribed to the fact that the conditions are not favorable for it to flourish. There are other forms of literature to divert people's attention. But Eliot feels that poetic drama is possible in the modern age. Poetry and drama cannot be separated, for drama is only one among several forms of poetry. Drama is not a separate genre, but the most permanent form of poetry. It is capable of greater variety than any other poetic form.

The immense expressive powers of dramatic poetry made it possible for the Elizabethans to express such varied and new thoughts and images. "Their blank verse became capable of a subtlety and consciousness, even an intellectual power, that no blank verse since has developed or repeated." Shakespeare developed blank verse to its fullest potential. There is nothing more that a modern dramatist can do to improve it. Hence he should avoid it. Permanent literature is always a presentation of thought and feeling through inter-related events, actions and objects of the external world. A representation of both thought and feeling as it occurs in great literature, such as Plato's Dialogues, is too difficult to achieve. Eliot thus points out that dramatization of philosophy must be avoided in modern drama. Modern drama should concentrate on feeling. Contemporary issues may be dealt with, but unobtrusively.

Drama aims at entertainment, and poetic drama should also aim at it, if it wants to be popular. Poetic drama can be possible in the modern age if dramatists take it as a form of entertainment and treat it so as to make it a form of art. People will stand any amount of poetry if the drama entertains.

## Poetry and Drama:-

This lecture delivered in 1950 states: The complete *theory of poetic drama*, as expounded by Eliot, while throwing valuable light on his own dramatic practices. He reviews, expounds and analyses his earlier opinions.

Eliot was convinced that poetic drama can often achieve much more than prose drama. Poetry should not be used as a mere decoration to the drama, but should justify itself dramatically. Also, a theme for which prose is adequate must not be chosen for poetic drama, nor should the play merely be fine poetry fitted into a dramatic mold. Poetry which gives pleasure to a cultured few should be avoided as it is superfluous. Use of verse in drama is objected to on the basis of it being artificial. But the prose spoken by the characters on stage is equally far removed (in vocabulary, syntax and rhythm) from ordinary speech as verse is. Distinguishing between prose, verse, and ordinary speech, Eliot points out that daily speech is far below the level of either verse or prose.

"Dramatic prose is as artificial as verse, and conversely verse can be as natural as prose". The audience approaches a verse play with a preconceived idea of the play and the language of the play as two separate things, where as it does not regard the prose as different from ordinary speech. This is bad, for the effect and enjoyment of dramatic speech should be unconscious. For this reason the mixture of prose and verse in the same play should be avoided in the modern age. There being a prejudice towards poetry, prose should be used sparingly. Verse should be flexible enough to accommodate every situation and every scene and if there are scenes which cannot be put in verse, either verse should be developed for it or the introduction of such a scene is to be avoided. The flexible verse will not be poetry all the time. "It will be poetry only when dramatic situation has reached such a point of intensity that poetry becomes the natural utterance, because then it is the only language in which the emotion can be expressed at all."

Verse should be used throughout so that the effect of the verse rhythm can be enjoyed by the listener's without consciously doing so. Eliot cites the opening scene of Hamlet as a perfect example of the use of verse in drama. There is nothing superfluous and each line is dramatically justified, leading to a feeling of dramatic inevitability. Nor is the audience conscious of whether the medium is verse or prose. The verse is transparent, the audience attends not to the poetry but to the meaning of the poetry. The dramatic poetry has a musical design which intensifies the emotional effect of the scene.

Eliot refers to plays of Synge as written in prose, but in reality poetic. But the scope of poetic plays in prose is limited. Dramatic verse can be used to say the most matter-of-fact things.

Eliot on His Practice of Poetic Drama:-

When he started writing plays, he realized that his experience of writing poetry was not going to be of much help. The problem of communication is not so urgent in poetry as it is in poetic drama. What the dramatist writes has to make an immediate impact upon an unknown and unprepared audience and it would be interpreted and guided by unknown actors and producers. The artist, therefore, has to practice greater self-control, always keeping in mind the law of dramatic effectiveness.

### **Murder in The Cathedral:-**

In his first play he had an advantage in the subject being from a remote period in history. This remoteness, with picturesque costumes of another age, made verse easily acceptable. Being a religious play it appealed to the select audience which patronized such plays. Though a success, it did not solve the general problems, such as that of language. Writing about a remote period, Eliot could not use modern vocabulary or style. Nor did he want to be archaic, as he "sought to emphasize the theme's contemporary significance". He made use of a neutral style "neither of the present nor of the past." He carefully avoided the Shakespearean model for his verse, as blank

verse had lost its flexibility and had become unsuitable for dramatic dialogue. Instead, he kept in mind the verse form in *Everyman*.

But he could not develop a verse capable of being used generally. In this play he made extensive use of the chorus-choral verses being easier to write and because it could hide certain defects in dramatic technique. By choosing a mythological subject, using the chorus and avoiding blank verse, he avoided competing with the realistic play. But if verse play was to regain its position, it should openly compete with prose drama. This led him to choose for his next play, *The Family Reunion*, themes and characters from the contemporary world.

### **The Family Reunion:-**

It is a play about modern life. He worked out a verse form close to the rhythm of modern life and he has used this verse form ever since. "It is a line of varying length with varying number of syllables, with a caesura and three stresses." However, this verse style was developed at the cost of plot and character. The device of using four minor characters as the chorus was unsuitable for general use. Their speeches are unrelated to action whereas in drama, poetry should not interrupt action but relate to both character and action. The defect in this play is that its poetic passages are not dramatically justified. The Greek story and the modern situation are not properly reconciled.

### **The Cocktail Party:-**

In this third play *The Cocktail Party*, he tried to avoid these faults. He practiced artistic self-restraint and avoided the use of poetry that has no dramatic justification. He also made use of the dramatic device of suspense.

### **Conclusion:-**

Eliot is convinced that good poetic plays come from poets learning to write plays, rather than from prose dramatists. Poetic drama, he says, is an ideal; an ideal which is unattainable. It is only through constant exploration and experimentation that one can get closer to this ideal. There is a "fringe of indefinite feelings", that only poetic drama can express in moments of great intensity. At such moments dramatic poetry becomes similar to music, imposing order on human action and feelings. Poetic drama brings us in to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation.

### **Summary of Eliot's Views:-**

- (1) Verse is the true language of dramatic action rather than a restriction on drama.
- (2) Poetry is integral, not incidental to drama.
- (3) Lack of poetic drama is due to:
  - (a) Lack of a strong, continuous tradition.
  - (b) The idea that a nation cannot have two great periods of drama.
  - (c) The quest for realism and naturalism in the theatre.
- (4) Prose is just as unreal as verse, in so far as being remote from everyday speech.
- (5) Prose is limited in depth and intensity of expression.
- (6) Undramatic poets and un-poetic dramatists have led to the decline of poetic drama.
- (7) A new dramatic verse is required which must be flexible enough to say anything and "transparent enough not to be considered poetic".
- (8) Rhetoric has its place in drama where action and characters call for it.
- (9) Verse is superior to prose as a dramatic language, not only because it can give greater depth and richness of meaning, but because it can give a play greater unity of action, emotion and mood.