

Normalizing J. Alfred Prufrock

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Abstract:

In this new age of sexual radicalism and fluid gender possibilities, T. S Eliot's *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* is a work of genius and a prospective hub of exploration. In this masterwork, Prufrock's gender anxiety, misogyny, and cross-gender identification questioned the grandiose theories, political and philosophical agenda's that formulated him as a 'potential queer'. This study will revise and reexamine the socially constructed performances of misogynist Prufrock in different social situations in which expectations of performance are, sometimes traumatically, imposed. This reading will enquire the overwhelming questions of J. Alfred Prufrock and attempt to justify the action of gender and sexuality T. S Eliot indicated in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The power structure of society is to capitalize the human vulnerabilities. This article will claim that Prufrock struggles to fit in the norms of the society is entirely arbitrary, created, constructed, accepted and established by a façade of normality.

Key Words: Normalcy, Queer, Appearance Anxiety, Misogyny, Gender Performance.

Introduction:

The 20th century is a time that started to struggle to give space where marginal identities will flourish, where sexual definition will remain fluid, and where experimentation will be the norm. In the poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the tortured psyche of Prufrock is looking for such reality. His questions project his repressed self. At the same time, these questions lead us to question the norms of society. In an era when human lives are increasingly measured and weighed concerning the medical and scientific, notions of what is "normal" have changed drastically. While it is no longer useful to think of a person's particular race, gender, sexual orientation, or choice as "normal," the concept continues to haunt us in other ways. In *The End of Normal (2013)*, Lennard J. Davis explores changing perceptions of body and mind in social, cultural, and political life as the twenty-first century unfolds. When the body becomes the identity of the person, it becomes obvious that something is to overcome or fix. Then, the option for their actions becomes limited. The first question of Prufrock echoes this limitation. He declares "And indeed there will be time, /To

wonder, ‘Do I dare?’ and, ‘Do I dare?’/Time to turn back and descend the stair,” (Eliot, 37-40). This question and repetition of this question show how he is circling around the social norms that deter him to take actions. He does not have the strength to force the moment to its crisis. “The poem's question-and-response framework arises in the epigraph from Dante's *The Inferno*. The excerpt captures Dante's dialogue with Guido da Montefeltro in the eighth circle of Hell, wherein Guido decides to respond because he no longer fears shameful repercussions. The speech unfolds as a reply to Dante's question; Montrefeltro himself describes his words as a "response" and concludes by stating that he will "answer." (Bostick, 6) Here, another striking aspect of the epigraph is its rhetoric of “shame”. The concluding statement of Montefeltro that “I answer you without fear of infamy” is leading us to the idea of how Montefeltro is exiled from society’s acceptance. Now, as they are trapped in Hell, there is no more fear of society and overcome such shame. Like Montefeltro, Prufrock is trapped into the hell of the society that deters him answer the questions that lead towards infamy. This, not Prufrock’s failure that he cannot open up his mind rather it’s the society that does not give liberation to all for sharing their thoughts without the fear of being ashamed.

When Christianity began to spread widely in the fourth and fifth centuries in the Mediterranean world, same-sex intimacy was ritually unclean and religiously interdicted, homosexuality became increasingly taboo. By the late middle ages, it had almost completely disappeared as a “normal” human institution in most of Europe. When the colonial period began, European powers began to export their culture to other parts of the world. Interdiction of homosexual activity was just one of the values they spread. Many people realize or wish to admit idealized homosexual relationships featured heavily in art forms praises the purity and exquisite beauty of same-sex relationships. In short, homosexuality has often been “normal” in human cultures. But religious practices superstitious foundations for morality and systems of ethics and social norms still label them as sinners and attempt to stigmatize homosexuals. *“In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of diagnoses, thereby implying that it is a normal variant of sexual behavior. Since then, when homosexuals have sought professional help for emotional problems, psychiatrists have tended increasingly to assist them to believe that their emotional discomfort is the result of society's bias and intolerance and to accept and enjoy their preference for individuals of the same sex”* (Brill, 219).

Normative gaze creates certain values, standards that objectively creates violence, misguides social consciousness. As Prufrock is hyper-aware about “The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,” (Eliot, 56). These eyes kindle the fear that his identity will be judged unfairly. His appearance perceived by society will be the measure of him. He is feeling formulated, wriggling on the wall and dependent on the changing gaze of others. This feeling intensified with Prufrock’s fear of ageing which shows his male body dissatisfaction.

From the beginning, we witness that he is experiencing a masculinity threat which results from his lower confidence in his physical ability, perceived himself as less muscular, and showed greater bodily dissatisfaction. He is lamenting that "I grow old... I grow old.../I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled." (Eliot, 120). Prufrock's intense, persistent fear of being watched and judged by others affects his emotional regression. The masculine expectations of the society for professional and economic success create a youthful nervousness. Prufrock feared that he would reach old age before accomplishing anything meaningful. The hysteric psychological distress allows Prufrock to be nervous and anxious in public and he repeats "do I dare/ Disturb the universe?"

Even the city streets are an impending parallel with the question of Prufrock that haunt and follow like a tedious argument "Of insidious intent/to lead you to an overwhelming question..." (Eliot, 10). Prufrock knows the acceptability of his answers and that's why he says: "oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'" (Eliot, p 11) Like the questions of Prufrock, many questions have been silenced in society. Prufrock's simultaneous resistance to the question shows his confidence in knowing society very well that will never allow "the other", "the marginal" to disturb "the centre". The moment the body enters into the process of being controlled it becomes the 'other'. They are either labelled as sick or healthy, sane or mad, criminal or good. Lennard J. Davis locates this power relation by mentioning "normalcy is a location of bio-power" (128). In psychoanalysis, the gaze occupies a very important state of mind which becomes anxious with the self-awareness to be looked at and can be seen. This anxious state of mind locates the self as to be looked at and loses its autonomy as a visible object. Being an object to the material world of reality, the gaze plays an important role to identify one's identity as self or object. The fragmented body parts of Prufrock and the body parts of the people described by Prufrock show how we see each other only based on outside features. To Prufrock, they reduced to "eyes", "faces", and "arms". On the other hand, Prufrock filters only the comments of others on his inadequacies. "My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin-/ (They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"). (Eliot, 41-42) This line clearly shows that Prufrock is suffering from masculinity threat, a traditionally male role norm that leads him to depression, stigma and deferment.

The insecurities of Prufrock reflect the anxieties of many men on their sense of inadequate masculinity that society demands. Prufrock's painful awareness of thin arms and legs, probably premature baldness (ll. 40-41, 44, 82, 122) is humiliating and crushing to expose his secret thoughts with "an overwhelming question". His fears about his own body's lacks are parallel to his concerns about language and the possibility of communicating meaning as he thinks and knows that "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" (Eliot, 104).

Several research works have already made a biographical approach in understanding Eliot's stance on sexuality and gender. But this study will not relate the enigma of Eliot's personality to understand Prufrock. The undeniably queer, homoerotic, and misogynists attitude of Prufrock shows his strategies with his identity. The social constructions of masculinity, femininity lead Prufrock towards the overwhelming questions regarding his uniquely ambiguous identity. Prufrock is afraid of venting about his unacceptable emotions and gender ambiguity. Gender is socially constructed as meaning in language. Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Judith Butler and Kristeva elaborately discussed how the speaking subject itself is constructed in discourse. Judith Butler argued that gender is performative. And that "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body. . . ." (xiv-xv) This post/modern poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* will show a fundamental cluster of concepts of dramatic voice and performance of gender.

Gender ambiguity begins with the very first line "Let us go then, you and I, (Eliot, 1) the line exploits the gender indifference of the English "I" and "you." Such indetermination forces the construction of gender in discourse about the poem. Moreover, recognizing Eliot's understanding of gender as performative highlights the extent to which competing critical claims to assign Eliot's own sex/gender identity, through these scenes, are themselves ultimately a refusal of the very portrait Eliot himself offers of the self as a performance which actualizes some among the self's many fluid possibilities. The loss of a stable subject (comparing him to John the Baptist, Lazarus, Hamlet) is one of the formative elements of the modern, and that instability is most fundamentally realized in the conception that gender is itself a performance. And, perhaps, Eliot's implied belief that gender is what one does can help illuminate the personal decisions that often resist interpretation. In concrete social settings, Eliot teases language to reveal the painful dialectic between production and reproduction of gender categories, between gender performed and gender experienced as imposed. At an overarching level, Prufrock fails to face society and achieve union with the norms. Thus, he becomes an Other, an object for knowledge, and with culture and tradition of a fragmented self in its ultimate condition.

Though the dramatic presentation of oyster shell cheap hotel connotes the romantic and erotic relationship, it also mirrors the marginal social culture. The narrator, Prufrock who is by turns observer and actor, describes the lifestyle of urban lifestyle, silently responds in language redolent of failure, impotence, and consequent self-loathing "I do not think that they will sing to me." (Eliot, 125) This poem is a script of masculine gender performance which is at once normative and coercive and incorporates subsidiary expectations about the performance of the feminine. Moreover, it was recognized by a community of observers; indeed, in fulfilment of the gender script of femininity. The narrative is taken up by Prufrock, the male speaker, whose internal monologue offers a

scene of great sensuality: "And I have known the arms already, known them all-/Arms that are braceleted and white and bare" (Eliot, 61- 62). It becomes a founding site of one of the controlling conceits of the poem, the interruption of desire in language. The narrator simply speaks in the unmarked gender of the first person, avoiding pronoun reference to the narrator must have required a good deal of care. Some narrative produces what it presupposes; Some research presumes the narrator in this poem is male because he "acts male." Thus with the collaboration of the reader, the narrator is shown performing unsuccessful masculinity. Prufrock constitutes a certain crisis in both sexuality and language. Accordingly, a fundamental part of the fragmentation and instability evinced by J. Alfred Prufrock stems from the loss of a stable subject, and that instability is most flagrantly projected in the alternative possibilities for the performance of gender. The attempt to determine the meaning of the instability of sexual difference and gender performance was a common thread among both male and female modernists. This is not the failure of Prufrock rather this is the failure of society that fails to accommodate all sorts of people who deserve to accomplish the association of desire with dignified identity.

Prufrock refuses to perform of the gender expectations his actions summon into the poem from its surrounding community of discourse. Words fail; the mind of this man is completely opaque to the ritual quality type relationship. Thus, he is endlessly recurring and never progressing, which is shockingly clear in the parataxis of Prufrock's procrastinations. Throughout the poem, Eliot, unlike Dante, is uncertain about the sex of the desired love object. Several attempts are done to posit Prufrock as queer. This study claims that Prufrock is born out of his time or era or generation. His inner conflict is the in-betweenness of homo and heterosexuality. This study is not an attempt to strengthen the idea of queer rather whatever he is it should be acceptable. The performance of gender which constructs a subject with quite different gender possibilities, homoerotic rather than heterosexual is unacceptable as a norm. This uncertainty creates the emptiness of the centre. This possibility of being queer violates normative gender expectations.

Society shapes the individual in its image. Prufrock knows that exposure of his identity will disturb the universe, he will be rejected for sure. Because of his appearance and the answer to the overwhelming questions of his identity, he will be criticized as he has known them all already. As Prufrock is not performing according to the male code of society, he is shown as feminine. This is not only stereotyped masculinity but also foregrounds degraded prejudices related to masculinity and femininity. His hesitations, apparently purposeless procrastinations and coyness posit him as a feminine character rather than a modest or repressed self who doubts the acceptability of his queer self in society. Some critics claim that Prufrock fails to perform as a masculine gender. He is reluctant to give details, coy about his age, avoids any discussion of his gender and moves on to other subjects. But the concept of gender and gender performance itself is a constructed and

established idea by society. In our society, men are often motivated to deny appearance concerns and this type of apprehensions are associated with femininity. To go against the constructed ideology of the society about gender performance, Prufrock does not get any support from his surroundings who have already formulated him based on his physical appearances. Even male hysteria is not socially acceptable. So Prufrock's anxiety is not simply psychological rather cultural and political also. Prufrock wants to expose his sexual and intellectual anxiety by saying "if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:" (Eliot, 105). And like all other marginalized identities of the society, Prufrock is imagining the victimization and looking for a death wish. He does not want to be treated as the pinned insect. But at the same time, he is looking for better days when society will accommodate all. He is not procrastinating rather optimistic that "And indeed there will be time" (Eliot, 25).

The internal anxieties and conflicts lead him towards disabling emotional relationship with the female characters. "In the room the women come and go" (Eliot, 35). Through this refrain Prufrock expresses simultaneously his utter frustration at being misunderstood by them. Not only that his ceaseless anxieties relish his intellectual strengths, using his mental superiority as a means of belittling and dehumanizing women. He forever feels misunderstood in his relationships with women: "If one, settling a pillow by her head/Should say: "That is not what I meant at all;/That is not it, at all." (Eliot, 108-110). Prufrock seems unable to connect his surroundings. He constantly fails to associate him with any characters. He is switching his mind from Lazarus, John the Baptist, Hamlet to Polonius. "The etherized patient reflects Prufrock's mind. Both are sick, isolated, passive and unable to communicate." (Lobb, 169). As Prufrock says "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" [Eliot, 104])." Prufrock knows well that the answer to the overwhelming question would not be understood or accepted. The interior monologue indicates Prufrock's inability to connect in this hellish existence. There is no resurrection from his emotional death. Prufrock's aging may be a self-delusion. His internal emotional conflicts and his overwhelming question are self-confessed. Prufrock continuously regards himself and others as fragmented, objectified beings expresses his sexual anxiety as well as the difficulties of human interaction. In this love song, Prufrock's turmoil shows how he is unable to love his world, women and his own identity. Prufrock does not have the freedom to sing his love song. Meaningless routines and success stories of life are the demand of society. Prufrock does not find any hope in that. He has a vision of freedom. But this artificial life only instigates to "prepare a face" and meet other prepared faces, not people.

The poem is named as a love song – but the sense of hopelessness and uncertainty, resignation to fate suggest Prufrock has already foreseen and accepted the verdict of society. The possibility of gaining his authentic self creates constant tension to the point of existential paralysis. Prufrock's questions distinguish him from all others. The critical delay of an honest answer to the questions continues throughout the poem. Even the

question never rises fully because of the “hundred indecisions ... and revisions” (Eliot,14). The established social norms influence his every decision and in the end, become the reason for his indecision. Time becomes Prufrock's defence mechanism that will allow him to prepare a face to meet other faces, to blend in with the “they” in a world in which murder and creation are equated indifferently. Prufrock knows the currency of his hidden identity as he has known the evenings, mornings, and afternoons.

Conclusion:

Highlighting many perspectives from critical social theory and research, this commentary explores the conceptions of normalisation particularly relevant to gender and sexuality performance. Starting by disentangling the complex relationship between norms, normality, normalization, and this article argues that Prufrock is normal and his actions are justified. The norm constantly makes him inferior so that he cannot voice his rights and create hindrance in the illusory world of normalcy. The discriminatory process identifies the inferiors first by categorizing some standards created by the superior in society. By surveillances, society controls the ‘other’. Visibility is a trap. How can Prufrock feel normal in the abnormal surroundings? Whoever is not fit for the capitalized society, they are considered and treated as ‘other’. Prufrock is uncomfortable with the assigned gender, struggling with external forces and their inner self. “You and I” represent the gender forces within them. The conventional demands of masculinity create discomfort in Prufrock's gender performativity. Prufrock is in self-rebellion against the assigned genders. CyrenaPondrom's article, “The Gender Performativity in *The Waste Land*” clarifies how T. S Eliot is concerned about non-normative sexualities. By presenting Prufrock as ‘queer’, Eliot destabilizes the boundaries of sexual identity.

If the landscape or surface urban life of tea cups represents his conscious state, then, the deep, formless sea represents his unconscious and the antithesis of the urban artificial life. The unconstrained singing of the mermaid, "riding seaward on the waves shows the freedom that is missing in Prufrock's world. The poem shows the recurring death wish of Prufrock for being unable to cope with the social norms. The eternal footman, Lazarus and the chambers of the sea are the signifiers of his wish. The shallowness, superficiality and uncertainty of Prufrock's life dehumanize him as “a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (Eliot, 73-74). His unconscious now demands a purifying power from the hell he lives in. “If “Prufrock” is a poem of fragments and erotic embarrassment, a poem of longing for escape from sexual and cosmic loneliness, it is also a poem haunted by the fear of conclusion, and this is perhaps the true significance of Prufrock's scenarios of being pinned, beheaded, or drowned. The alternative is to hold in suspension various possibilities, just as Prufrock contains within himself both genders, and the strategy of aposiopsis is vital in accomplishing this end.” (Lobb 181) He revises a lot to reverse the whole reality. But the final line alludes “we drown” (Eliot 130) the unified identity can only

be achieved through death. Prufrock is dragged out of his death wish and returns to a reality in which they are drowning in feelings of anxiety, inadequacy and alienation.

The norms of a gender binary reinforce stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion. Prufrock is depressed as he is unable to enjoy his identity and perform accordingly. "Adorno (1951) argues that 'normal' behaviour, in adapting to a sick society, merges to its illness. In a sick society, the sickness of individuals becomes the norm" (quoted in Ipperciel, 45). T.S Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* foregrounds this façade of normalcy very clearly. Prufrock pushes the boundaries of gender to a degree none of Eliot's other characters quite attain. The paralyzing fear of Prufrock is for the identity displacement that LGBT people endure every day. Through Prufrock's inner turmoil, Eliot zooms in the repressive ideologies of the bourgeois society.

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