

## A Multicultural View on “To The Indians Who Died in Africa”, by T. S. Eliot

By  
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*Exile is predicted on the existence of, love for, and a real bond with one's native place; the universal truth of exile is not that one has lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an unexpected, unwelcome loss.*

Edward W. Said, 1993, p.12.

**Abstract:** It is known that T. S. Eliot is one of the greatest poets and critics of the Twentieth Century Literature and that his life and work are full of polemical issues. On the one hand, he is regarded as a poet whose verses bring tradition and the individual talent side by side. On the other hand, his cultural thought is crammed of ambiguity once he introduces himself as anglo-catholic in religion, monarchist in politics and classicist in literature. However, his points of view head toward many other directions, including some multicultural paths. His legacy is so dynamic and complex that it allows us to stress that he anticipated some positions which would be vogue in the postmodern era. Based on these arguments, some of his poems can be reread under a multicultural approach, and this is the case of “To The Indians Who Died in Africa”, a poem which the content deals with the enterprises of the British empire in the colonized lands of India and Africa.

Key-words: tradition/poetry/post-colonialism

**Resumo:** Sabe-se que T. S. Eliot é um dos mais importantes poetas e críticos do século vinte e que sua vida e obra estão impregnadas de tópicos polêmicos. Por um lado, ele é reconhecido como um poeta, cuja obra apresenta tradição e talento individual lado a lado. Por outro lado, o seu pensamento no campo da cultura está eivado de ambiguidades, uma vez que ele se apresenta como anglo-católico em religião, monarquista em política e classicista em literatura. Entretanto, os seus pontos de vista apontam para muitas direções, incluindo algumas tendências multiculturais. O seu legado é tão dinâmico e complexo que nos permite argumentar que ele antecipou algumas posições que seriam voga na era pós-moderna. Com base nestas assertivas, alguns de seus poemas podem ser relidos sob a ótica multicultural e este é o caso de “To The Indians Who Died in Africa”, um poema que traz em seu bojo algumas investidas do Império Britânico nas colônias da Índia e da África.

Palavras-chave: tradição/poesia/pós-colonialismo

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## **Introduction:**

Before addressing some remarks on the poem mentioned in the title of this essay, I would like to stress that T. S. Eliot's life and work provide us with a compelling doubt about his *status quo* in the western literary history once he is regarded as a traditionalist, *id est*, anglo-catholic in religion, monarchist in politics and classicist in literature and art, but his formation and work point towards, among other directions, to some multicultural paths.

In spite of being born in America and made England his home, Eliot's formation exhibits a solid comprehension of the eastern philosophy and languages, and this fact allowed him to write on issues related to the imperial adventures in India, Africa and elsewhere with a subtle criticism.

In fact, tradition and rupture run side by side in Eliot's work and thought. His legacy is so complex and dynamic that it set up the basis for the movement of New Criticism as well as it provided support for determined concepts inserted into the breast of some postmodern theories as we can find out in Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, a text which evokes Eliot's postulations in order to criticize the American foreign affairs, as it informs below:

*Even if we were to allow, as many have, that the United States foreign policy is principally altruistic and dedicated to such unimpeachable goals as freedom and democracy, there is considerable room for skepticism. The relevance of T. S. Eliot's remarks in "Tradition and The Individual Talent" about the historical sense are demonstrably important. (1994, p. 55)*

In his paradigmatic book *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, T. S. Eliot argues that the regional culture, which he nominates as satellite culture, has two remarkable reasons to avoid being absorbed by the prevailing culture of a nation. The first is the proper instinct of survival which generates in part of the people of the peripheral area a feeling of inferiority or failure. The second reason for the maintenance of the peripheral cultural dwells in the fact that an advance of that condition would produce a rupture, a cut that leads to the split of the nation and this is only valid in the case of secession.

On the other hand, part of the same population can go towards the opposite direction if those individuals believe that the absorption by the stronger culture can provide them with greater power and prestige. In this case the status quo of those members will be considered affiliated to the colonizer mentality, what presupposes a reactionary position which does not contribute to the process of cultural identity of a region or a nation.

Due to these considerations, we can take into account that Eliot's postulations fit the process of colonization of a country but not the process of imperial colonization once it is known the desire of the majority of the people of the colonized lands to break their ties with the metropolis and to build their own history and cultural identity. I believe this is exact the predominant feeling in the hearts and minds of those people from Africa and Asia that were colonized by the British.

It is also important to underscore that the English colonizers used to take people from one colony and displace them into another, in an operation which set colonies against colonies and protected the English from the direct involvement with the natives. This kind of process usually ends in abrogation whose outcomes just favored the colonizer.

Thus, it is based on the belief that T. S. Eliot's work and thought anticipate some points which would be current in the postmodern era that some of his minor poems can be reread under a multicultural approach. This is the case of "To the Indians Who Died in Africa", a poem whose content depicts the enterprise of the English Empire in the colonized lands of India and Africa.

### **A Post-colonial Reading of "To The Indians Who Died in Africa"**

In the opening lines of the poem, Eliot records that it attends the request of Miss Cornelia Sorabji for Queen Mary's Book for India (Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1943), what means that his conceptions in the poem stand for a view from the inside of the empire, an English or Western optic.

The first verse points towards many different possible readings, but I will outline two contrasting views. One addresses to a possible universal wish related to the human beings and consists in being brought up and live in his/her own birthplace. On the other hand, such a verse allows an interpretation that a man's destination is not the migration, and avoiding this movement, the foreigners would not knock at the first world societies' doors.

The ambiguity of the verse is here a profit if we take into account that whether "a man's destination is his own village", then, we can figure out that Eliot was saying to his fellow Englishmen: it is time to bring back "our boys" from India, Africa, etc. I do not have any evidence to support my arguments on Eliot's thought except the opening for inference provided by the text itself as I emphasized in the former paragraph.

The second verse must be divided for an accurate analysis once the first part of it presents dignity and honor of being the master of his own fire, which implies that it was acquired through

independent work, and not as a concession purveyed by the colonizer or anyone else, whilst the second part of the verse is very depreciative for the woman's condition.

It is known that paradox is a figure of speech which is the mark of this verse considering that its beginning confers *decorum* and nobility but it could have formatted a more just postulation for the second part of the verse if it had inserted woman at man's side in work and did the same directing man at woman's side in the kitchen.

The first two verses clearly show that they were made up as a reflection on the issues concerning the British domination abroad, especially in India and in Africa. They express what should be, and this idea goes deeper in the following verse: "To sit in front of his own door at sunset", in which a time for contemplation is demanded, and the sunset's presence points out the possibility of communion with nature. The only way to fulfill this wish consists in the preservation of the environment, and it is necessary a strong opposition on the industrial and large scale trade that devastate the natural resources.

The end of this stanza addresses to family, tradition, and memory, all of them fitting Eliot's ideology. Moreover, a multicultural view is of paramount importance for postmodernism, and consequently, these verses exhibit the neighbors sharing the same space under the security guaranteed by the progeny and the feeling of being together in a harmonious process of alterity.

It is remarkable to emphasize that the last verse: "grandson playing in the dust together" is read now with a sense of nostalgia once the children of postmodern era do not play in the dust but before the computer's screen in the privileged centers while the children of the devastated areas of the peripheral nations, especially in Africa and in the Middle-East, roam under debris of their destructed cities and countries.

Another important point to stress on those final verses of the first stanza is their concern with space. It is supposed that the “dust” in which “his grandson” and “his neighbors’ grandson” are playing belong to the natives and it is a fruit harvested from a negation, *id est*, the denying of displacement, the refusal to migrate, and whose primary cause is the individual identity that is blended with the space, and in the case of the Indians and the Africans, their identity turns into a post-colonial one, once it is only a wondering in the poem and can be only put into practice after the departure of the empire.

All these conjectures came to light from a poem written by a poet whose profile is regarded as conservative, but I will defend the bard arguing that Eliot’s ideas are close to those of the American literary movement of the 1930s entitled New Criticism which was born from an intention of establishing a new pattern in the American literary theory and criticism, and it is known that the New Critics aimed at forging something different from those eurocentric conceptions in the making of poetry and poetical criticism that were vogue until the emergence of *the Southern School*.

I am not alone in this reasoning, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin indicate in *The Empire Writes Back – Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* that:

*Although New Criticism was almost immediately assimilated as Anglo-American, its roots were post-colonial, and in certain ways it served to allow the passage of post-colonial writers, whose traditions were by European definitions ‘childish’, ‘immature’, or ‘tributary’ (to adopt the most favored metaphors of the period, into the English canon ... (1989, p. 160).*

In spite of being relegated, in the Western Civilization, to a peripheral position, social history of the non-europeans is the destination of the first verse of the second stanza expressed in

“... he has many memories...”. In reality, those memories have their origin in the process of colonization when their culture, identity, security and hopes were all confiscated. The following verses denounce that the memories, which are resulted from the scar, are shared by the whole community, and the fact that the conversation carries on independently of the weather not only ratify the scar but exhibits its speech with all emotional charges in the minds of those who lived under imperial rule.

The whole second stanza turns around conversation and memory, two psychological instances which tie together the argument, the experiences, and the ingredients of history which are stored in the individual as well as in the collective minds of the colonized people. Then, the records on oppression, domination, subjugation contribute to shape the resistance of the local culture before the imperial agency, and the passage of the seasons metaphorizes the passing time and the transmission of the cultures from generation through generation.

The stanza closes with the presence of “foreign men” in “foreign place”, and the emphasis Eliot gave to the word “foreign” displays the empire in action. This policy consists in displace the human beings and turn them into invaders of the foreign lands. This process forced different peoples, who spoke completely different languages, to face and deal with the other colonized and their constraint meetings ended, generally, in conflict, whose result favored only the colonizer.

“A man’s destination is not his destiny” opens the third stanza pointing towards the Eliotian point of view that man’s destiny is his reunion with God, and for those who take this mentality for granted that verse states that man is not the master of his own future, of his own history. On the other hand, the mark of the ambiguity, which characterizes the poem, allows a reading based on the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized.

A man's destination in a colonial society is designed according to the imperial rule that, in general, forces the local citizen to search for shelter in one out of two possible ways, in other words, or he/she goes to the colonizer's side and becomes affiliated or he/she digs trenches for resistance, and I used the noun trench in the plural form so that the cultural resistance can be read as an amalgam of manifestations that includes politics, religion, science, music, thought, literature and the arts, added to those daily cultural habits peculiar to each region of the globe.

Still dealing with that verse, it is suggestive that its echoes are heard in the second and in the first part of the third verses which introduce the dichotomy expressed by the condition of being at home or into the exile. Here, it is clear that Eliot had in mind just the process of immigration based on the experience caught from the movement of the colonized, who were not yet writing back, but being displaced from India, Pakistan, Africa and other parts of the former British empire.

But Eliot did not consider, consciously, the process of internal colonization, in spite of his verses permitting us to address to such a question. The internal colonization occurs when a part of the nation overcomes the others in economical and political power and cultural influence, and one of the consequences is the internal migration which provides a kind of *inner exile*, a figure of speech I am coining to express the feeling of nostalgia and homesickness of those who are compelled to adhere to an internal displacement, a situation which is easily observable in large countries such as China, Brazil, Russia, Canada, Australia, and the United States, to quote only the largest, but we know that it comes about everywhere.

One of the main reasons for pulling the trigger of this process is the economy. People from the peripheral areas inside those countries are forced to migrate to the most developed



centers hunting for job and better way of life and this fact always contributes to the social disarrangement in both, the place of origin and the place of destiny.

This *inner exile* is also observable in the behavior of the migrants who are always making attempts in order to reconstruct the natural landscape of his/her homeland through some cultural activities which bring memories from home, as we can see in the Brazilian Northeast Fair in Rio de Janeiro City, and whose opportunity provides the migrants from that region to celebrate their identity through music, food, costume, and regional literature written in craft book that they call “cordel literature”.

If the place is, as the Eliotian poem declares, the location of the two cultures, the local and the displaced one, thus it should be the place for the otherness, the alterity between the regional and the cross-culture in movement, and this is what would confer a special status to the place. But, this meeting has resulted much more in a clash of cultures than in the possibility of turning the place into a making one with hybridity as its id card.

The poem redeems itself in the following two verses when it points out that “Where a man dies bravely / At one with his destiny, that soil is his”, and addresses to the spiritual reality that man does not pursue the place, but the opposite. So, man could call his home where his heart and spirit are, and this feeling rescues the citizen from his/her displacement position and places him/her in the new soil.

In spite of the conceptions of universal truths have been under attack, it is remarkable to stress that such a verse deconstructs the idea of nation, and claims, unconsciously, for the abolishment of the boundaries and frontiers, what can be understood as the absence of the processes of internal and external colonizations.

The last verse “Let his village remember” fits Eliot’s clamor for tradition and for a return to the first arena, the village. However, the invitation for reminding implies that the narrative on his deed is part of the history, and it also implies the emergence of the voice and the memory of the village itself that is inserted in the new cultural order and registered in a new cultural map, besides being a record which circulates and passes from one generation through another as a treasure shared by the villagers.

“This was not your land, or ours: but a village in the Midlands, / And one in the Five Rivers, may have the same graveyard” are altruistic verses that sound senseless in a colonial situation where the midlands, the five rivers and the graveyards are all under imperial control and the native is deprived of any right concerning on the management of his own country and its natural resources.

The same contradiction appears in the following lines once the linear reading of the verses “Let those who go home tell the same story of you:/Of action with a common purpose, ... what is the fruit of action” is not possible, taking into account that the story the colonizer is telling on the colonized people is the one which hierarchizes the people through a division set up according to the predominant binarism of the Western Culture that categorizes the colonized cultures as inferior, underdeveloped and, sometimes, barbarous.

The propositions sound a kind of “treasure to share” if the colonized people take for granted the european values as universal truths and turn them into their own view of the world otherwise the opposite attempt should be consider as an insurrection that will demand a strong answer from the imperial power.

Unfortunately, the Indians who were kidnapped and used in some African nations, could not “sit in front of his own door at sunset”, nor see “his grandson, and his grandson’s neighbor’s

playing in the dust together”, once the agency of the colonialism forces the colonized Indians to face the colonized people from Africa in a conflictuous position in favor of the imperial affairs. In fact, the scars from the colonial times are still in the memory of those who lived under imperialistic domination or migrated from that condition to become a voice against the new forms of colonialism.

Eliot’s ambivalence in this poem is analogous to that one of Shakespeare in *The Tempest*, a play which received a host of interpretations, analyses, appropriations, and recreations in the postmodern era by the writers and critics from the former colonies in Africa, Caribs and Asia, demanding the independence of their countries from the European centers. That process was the materialization of what the Indian writer Salmon Rushdie called “the empire writes back”.

### **Conclusion:**

T. S. Eliot, as poet, critic, and man lived under postcolonialism in his native America, but he provided himself with an expatriate experience before turning to the center of the empire through the process of naturalization and making himself an interpreter and voice of the English empire. Nevertheless, Eliot’s poetry, as all great poetry in history, points towards many directions and it is the task of the critic to discover what his art is addressing us in a specific time, and I do believe in a reading under different approach, the one that brings up to date and aids to shape a new look to the future through poetry and theory.

Based upon these arguments, it is quite important to conclude that T. S. Eliot’s work and thought expressed, among others, in some of his “minor” poems are not only meaningful to the

modern poetry and social criticism but they are still very important for the art and criticism of the multicultural era and once approached together with Eliot's great poems and critical theories, they allow the name of T. S. Eliot to be included among the main poets and critics of the literature of the English language in all times.

So, in these multicultural days we are living, it is significant to stress that so important as to deconstruct the great canon of the English Literature, an operation proposed by theoreticians like Mishra and Hodge, is to put the canonical authors and works under multicultural microscope. I think that the dichotomy colonial/postcolonial is dissolved in the Eliot's poem approached here and transformed into a kind of message to the central voices inserted in his most famous poem, *The Waste Land*, as a kind of refrain: "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME".

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