

Historicizing the Feminine: Treatment of Women in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract- T.S. Eliot's monumental work, *The Waste Land* contains a considerably large frame of reference. The poem, aptly termed as a modern day epic, draws a parallel between the biblical waste land and the modern world of degenerating values, morals and ethical concerns. With a satirical jibe at the corruption, greed and commercialization of modern life, the poem records the trajectory of the retrogression of humanity using several women characters as representatives of different historical segments. *The Waste Land* features multiple women characters chosen from different historical and mythological periods to stress on the plight of women within the patriarchal discourse down the ages. *The Waste Land* incorporates a diversity of women characters, both earthly and divine, ordinary and extraordinary, ancient and modern to document how irrespective of class, social position, time and abilities, women have been marginalized and subjugated to a patriarchal order since prehistoric ages. In *The Waste Land*, the demoralization, the degeneration of humanity and loss of values permeating the world find expression through its women characters who are the victims of a historically persistent male dominated culture. This paper seeks to analyze the treatment of women by T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* and the way they reflect in themselves the perils that the humanity have been facing since ages.

Keywords: historical, mythological, patriarchal discourse, prehistoric

INTRODUCTION

The Waste Land is a literary masterpiece of T.S. Eliot and one of the greatest poems ever written in literature. The poem incorporates multiple dramatic voices, symbols and allusions drawn from different cultures and historical periods to reflect the spiritual, mental and physical degeneration of modern life. Through the poem Eliot points to the degeneration of modern civilization, which was caused by loss of faith in religion, commercialization of love, mental

tension and the effects of the First World War. Eliot situates this degeneration primarily around women. Most of the characters of the poem are women, and the majority of the allusions made throughout the poem revolve around women and their relationship to men. Eliot uses different mythical as well as historical women characters to highlight the decaying modern society that resembles the biblical wasteland. The women characters in *The Waste Land* are taken from sources belonging to different spatial and temporal zones to highlight how women over the ages have been oppressed and marginalized by the dominant patriarchal discourse. The poem also shows how the pervasive spiritual, mental and physical aridity of the modern day wasteland have affected and aggravated the sufferings of women. *The Waste Land* incorporates the fusion of a wide array of elements ranging from myths, historical symbols, fragments of popular songs, to real life characters. The poem includes women of mythical origins belonging to classical Greek and Roman myths, particularly Ovid's *Metamorphoses* alongside the contemporary women of the post-World War I Europe. The women characters in the poem have no commonality within themselves but they stand as reminders of different kinds of problems that women have been facing throughout history. Throughout the poem Eliot poetically underscores the problematic consequences of genderizing and creating disparities among men and women. Eliot portrays the abuse of women and the violence against women in *The Waste Land* as indicators of the corruption prevalent in the post War England.

The poem *The Waste Land* opens with the epigraphic reference to is the Sibyl of Cumae. The story of the Sibyl of Cumae comes from the *Satyricon* of Petronius. The Sibyls were ancient priestesses capable of prophecy. The Sibyl referred to in *The*

Waste Land was also one such priestess who was offered to grant her a wish in exchange for her virginity. The Sybil took a handful of sand and asked to live as many years as the grains of sand she held but she forgot to ask for eternal youth. As because she forgot to ask for perpetual youth, she grew old and withered and finally shrank so small by her age that she was hung up in a jar and only her voice was left. So when some boys asked her what she wants she told them that she wants death. Eliot uses the story of Sibyl of Cumae as an epigraph because the inhabitants of the modern wasteland also have the death wish. The Sybil of Cumae mirrors the modern people who are spiritually so hollow that life seems to be without any kinds of substance of sensitivity for them. Like Sibyl, even death is desirable for the wasteland dwellers, because death provides one escape route from the emptiness, pain and barrenness of modern life. *The Waste Land* is a poetic response to the fragmented world ravaged by the World War

I. Although thematically more complex and extensive than a war poem, *The Waste Land* gives expression to the post World War trauma that pervaded Europe. In the first section of the poem "The Burial of the Dead", Eliot uses the character Marie Larisch, an Austrian Countess to draw a contrast between the pre-war and the post war times. The background of *The Waste Land* was the fragmentation of Europe after the war and also the years leading up to the war because many bigger territories were either annexed or fragmented into smaller countries. Such fragmentation resulted in great political chaos and made numerous people confront with identity crisis. The aristocratic lady Marie Larisch was one such victim of the political crisis. Eliot uses few lines from the diary of Marie Larisch which he found on a train while travelling in Switzerland. Marie in the poem talks about enjoying her childhood in Germany-

Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade, And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten, And drank coffee, and talked for an hour. (Eliot 79)

Marie Larisch shares a memory of pre-war times, of innocence, loveliness and the orderly world before the destruction of the war. Marie's memory provides an emotional tone, it reminds of the safety, security, assurance and confidence that are no longer available in the post war period. Marie's character reflects how people of Europe long for their past days. The next women character that Eliot uses in *The Waste Land* is of the hyacinth girl. In the poem the lines of the hyacinth girl are superposed with some snatches of a song sung by a sailor from Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*. The song of the star crossed lover *Tristan and Isolde* reminds the hyacinth girl of her failed relationship with her lover and makes her sad. The allusion to *Tristan and Isolde* is used by Eliot to indicate that true love is not possible in the

wasteland. Hyacinth is a symbol of fertility but the hyacinth girl and her lover are incapable of speech because they are either overwhelmed with their feelings or because they are not so committed towards each other. The hyacinth girl and her beloved cannot articulate their feelings towards each other which is suggestive of the impossibility of love in the wasteland.

Madam Sosostris, a fortune teller is the third women character that the readers come across in *The Wasteland*. Madam Sosostris is named after a character from Aldous Huxley's novel *Chrome Yellow*. Madam Sosostris uses a pack of cards to tell the fortunes of different people. Madam Sosostris also has a bad cold, which indicates that her fortune telling is impaired. Eliot says

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante, Had a bad cold, nevertheless Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe, With a wicked pack of cards. (Eliot 80)

Her character is a representative of the contemporary problems in the wasteland. People in the wasteland do not want to look for real solutions. Instead of

turning to God they are looking for cheap solutions. They are not willing to work hard and delve deep to address the problems.

Madam Sosostri refers to Belladonna, another women character in the poem. Belladonna in *The Waste Land* refers to the subject of Leonardo Da Vinci's famous painting *Mona Lisa*. Critic Walter Pater called Mona Lisa "the Lady of the Rock." The word Belladonna means both beautiful and poisonous. Belladonna in the poem is a part of Madam Sosostri's bundle of tarot cards.

The second part of *The Waste Land*, "A Game of Chess" is significant in its depiction of women. In "A Game of Chess" Eliot uses women characters of different social class to show that women has always been in a subordinate position in their relation to men in history. In this section Eliot presents the plight of three women – an aristocratic woman, a lower class women and a neurotic women who are struggling with different kinds of problems related to the modern life. Although the title is taken from *A Game of Chess* by Thomas Middleton, act of betrayal alluded to in this section is taken from his play *Women Beware Women*. In this play *Women Beware Women* a young lady is seduced by a nobleman while her mother in law is diverted by another women called Olivia in the background. Through this section Eliot shows that there are enmity and prejudices among women which always prevent the formation

of women's solidarity. The section begins with a rich women dressing up in her opulent room. Eliot uses powerful diction and metaphors to depict the rich women's exquisite way of dressing up while making oblique references to historical characters such as Cleopatra, Queen Dido and Belinda from *The Rape of the Lock*. Eliot's use the word laquearia to refer to the ceiling of the bedroom of the rich lady alludes to Virgil's Aeneid. Virgil in the Aeneid describes queen Dido's elaborate laid banquet in the honour of her lover Aeneas who does not turn up and finally abandons her, leading to Dido's downfall. The room of the rich lady is lavishly decorated, including the carving of a dolphin and a painting depicting the rape of Philomela by king Tereus. Philomela is a recurring character of *The Waste Land*. Philomela is a mythical character taken from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Philomela was raped by her own brother-in-law king Tereus who even cut out her tongue after the heinous act so that she could not reveal the truth to others. In spite of losing her tongue, Philomela managed to convey the truth to her sister Procne. Then in order to escape Tereus's rage, the two sisters ran away and Philomela became a nightingale and Procne a swallow. As Eliot says

*So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues, "Jug Jug" to dirty ears. (Eliot 82)*

Philomela's song in the voice of a bird expresses her longing to tell the story that the king prevented her from telling. *The Waste Land* incorporates oblique references to the stories of all these women characters to show that women over the ages have been a victim of men's guile and cunning.

In "A Game of Chess" Eliot is using women characters to show that in the wasteland love has been supplanted by lust and even sexuality has been relegated to animality. Eliot in *The Waste Land* depicts the moral corruption and degeneration of the modern society. The artistic depiction of sexual violence foreshadows several other moments in the poem, such as the woman Lil who suffers from the

physical complications arising out of her childbirth and the young typist girl who is a victim of the humdrum of modern life and has no genuine interest in love. After the story of Philomela, Eliot portrays the story of a neurotic women who suffers from loneliness and boredom and is forcing someone most probably her husband to respond to her questions but receives no response. Through the character of the neurotic women Eliot is trying to show that modern people are deprived of any meaningful existence. They are frustrated as well as confused and alienated from religion or any spiritual support system. The neurotic women is unable to decide what to do with her own life.

*"What shall I do now? What shall I do?"
"I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
"With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow? "What shall we ever do?" (Eliot 84)*

These lines also contain a reference to the Goddess Demeter, the Greek Goddess of the harvest and agriculture. Demeter was the mother of Proserpine, who was abducted by the king of the underworld, Pluto. After her daughter was abducted, Demeter went around searching for her daughter with her hair open. While she was looking for her daughter in a disturbed state, crops failed on earth. Finally, she made a pact with Pluto who agreed to send her daughter for six months making that period ideal for crops. However, unlike Demeter who rushed around in a disturbed state in search for her daughter, in the wasteland the neurotic women are rushing for no clear reason or purpose, and she achieves nothing. The people of wasteland are confused, and they are unable to find any meaning in life. So, the problem faced by the neurotic women is a general problem affecting everybody in the wasteland. Her empty, aimless routine makes one reminded of the aimless running of rats among the dead bones.

The next scene in the poem shifts to a London bar where two ladies talk about a third women named Lil. Lil's husband has come back from the army after four years. Lil is getting old, and she cannot satisfy her husband. Moreover, her last abortion has ruined her health. She is afraid of repeated motherhood. She is confused and frustrated. Lil's condition highlights the predicament of modern women that they must

maintain the physical beauty as well as the ability to bear children. Moreover, the farewell words of the ladies in the bar, "Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night" alludes to Ophelia's farewell in Hamlet. The reference to Ophelia is used by Eliot to show how women over the ages have suffered for their male counterparts. Lil is a victim of a marriage driven by lust. Eliot points out that anything that is genuine is not possible in the wasteland and human relationships in the wasteland are driven by mere artificiality, debauchery and lust causing women to be its worst victims. This idea is further emphasized upon through the character of a women typist in the section *The Fire Sermon* whose life has been caught up in the artificiality of modern life. After returning to her home from her work, she feels too exhausted and bored to find pleasure in the act of lovemaking with her lover. Her relationship with her lover is one without any spiritual or emotional substance and it is so mundane that even sex between them is nothing but a monotonous activity. In the section of *The Wasteland*, "The Fire Sermon", Eliot has placed side by side women characters from both myth and the contemporary world. In this part Eliot gives a description of the river Thames which is a witness of the physical and moral decay of the modern world. As Eliot says

*The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed. (Eliot 86)*

The nymphs are mythical spirits in the form of a young women. In the wasteland, the nymphs are not in a position to listen to the song of the wind or witness the beauty of Thames. The departure of the

nymphs signifies that any sort of spiritual or supernatural comfort is not available in the wasteland. Eliot again says-

*The nymphs are departed.
And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors; Departed, have left no addresses. (Eliot 86)*

The nymphs in their second appearance are real women of the twentieth century, which are deserted by their lovers. After the nymphs, Eliot obliquely refers to the story of Actaeon and Diana in *The Waste Land* from John Day's *Parliament of Beasts*. In the story, Actaeon was a young hunter who was shipwrecked and found himself on Diana's island.

But accidentally he stumbled upon Goddess Diana and her maiden's bedding. So, to preserve their shame, Diana turned Actaeon into a stag and set her dogs after him and he was killed. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot blends the story of Actaeon and Diana with the story of Mrs Porter and her daughter. Mrs Porter's story was a part of a ballad sung by soldiers during

the wartime. Mrs. Porter and her daughter ran a brothel in Cairo. In parallel to the myth of Actaeon and Diana, in wasteland it is Sweeny, an ordinary representative of the Londoners who comes to the brothel of Mrs. Porter. Therefore, through this contrast and parody Eliot hints at the moral corruption and licentiousness prevalent in London. While Diana unhesitatingly killed Actaeon just to

preserve her shame, in the modern-day wasteland morality has degraded so much that women like Mrs. Porter have relegated to brothel keeping.

The allusion to Philomela in “A Game of Chess” is picked up again in “The Fire Sermon.” Philomela’s voiceechoes throughout *The Waste Land*, reminding the readers of the exploitation of women by men.

Twit twit twit

Jug jug jug jug jug jug So rudely forc’d.

Tereu (Eliot 87)

In the last part of “The Fire Sermon”, we listen to the song of the three Thames’s daughters. The Thames’s daughters were sexually assaulted. The Thames’ daughters’ song is directly derived from the songs of the Rhine daughters of Wagner’s opera *Gotterdammerung* (The Twilight of Gods). According to the story, the Rhine daughters guarded the magic hoard of gold coveted by both gods and giants. The gold was stolen and restored. The loss of the gold represents the loss of the beauty and the charm of the Rhine. So, in the opera, the Rhine daughters lament the loss of the Rhine gold which damaged the river. *The Waste Land* the three Thames’s daughters lament the loss of virginity. They are the victims of fraud and each one has her own story to tell. The first Thames’ daughter lost her chastity in a narrow canoe at Richmond. The second Thames’s girl was ravished at Moorgate by a man. She remembers that after the act the ravisher was repentant and promised to reform himself. But the girl made no comment because that promise cannot undo what has been done to her. The third Thames’s daughter belongs to Margate Sands. She was ravished on the Margate Sands. The three Thames’ daughters represent the pathetic plight of women and show how women are always being oppressed by men.

The Waste Land employs women characters as representatives of the degeneration and widespread corruption prevalent in the post war Europe, especially England. Eliot uses the women characters to bring into light the physical, mental, and spiritual sterility in the wasteland because they are the worst victims of such sterility. In the wasteland, where there is no genuineness in love, no spiritual

substance in life and everything seems to be arid, women are degraded into sex objects. Moreover, in the wasteland even sex is meaningless and unpleasant. Mrs. Porter and her daughter reveal the lust and debauchery that has replaced normal sexuality in the wasteland. The women characters like the typist girl have lost importance of their humanity. Marie Larisch is a representative of the generation which was displaced and dislocated by war. Characters like the rich lady and the lady named Lil in “A Game of Chess” show the artificiality that weigh down the society. The plight of Philomela, Lil and the Thames’ daughters show the exploitation and oppression of women in the post war England. Eliot, however, instead of lending support to these miserable women, tries to show the bigger issues that the society was confronting. Eliot shows that the women are the most affected by the loss of fertility and therefore he depicts the women characters that make the pathetic condition of the wasteland more tangible.

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