



“THE WASTELAND” AS A POST WAR LITERATURE

Abstract *T.S.Eliot's influence on literature during the 1930's is enormous. Born in St. Louis, Missouri(USA) he became a naturalized British resident. Spending eight years in business began his career as an Editor of 'Criterion' in 1923. The present research article is based on his famous poem "The Wasteland." Eliot's use of irregularities of rhyme scheme, vividly contrasting images, skillful use of rhythmic variations and the restrained power of his style distinguished him as a gifted, original artist. "The Wasteland" Eliot's prophetic poem has taken a strange, frightening truth in post-war London. It is a poem that describes barbarism of war, the wrecked world, and the poet puts forth a question about the possibility of redemption within the spiritual wasteland of 1922 Europe. Eliot hopes of holding fragments against ruins and finding roots that clutch by assembling a large number of texts and also brings together opposed religious doctrines. The poem 'The Wasteland' made a tremendous impact on the post-war generation, and is considered one of the most important documents of its age. The poem presents modern London as an arid waste land. The symbolic use of drought and flood, representing death and rebirth is referred to throughout. The poem progresses by abrupt transitions through five movements- 'The Burial of the Dead', 'A Game of Chess', 'The Fire Sermon', 'Death by Water', 'What the Thunder said'. The poet's preferential use of 'your', 'us' and 'our' by suppressing the first person singular indicates his desire to escape. It is the poet's belief that in doing so he can efface his individuality and its correlative responsibility. The main subtext of 'The Wasteland' poses question whether to change the mind or to change the world. The poem moves from personal events, the personal city of the protagonist and his inner world of horrors' to the impersonal and visionary, the desert of trial and release.*

KEY WORDS- *war, breakdown of civilization, individuality, futility, religious doctrines, Biblical impact, T.S.Eliot*

According to Nico Carpentier, "War is still an omnipresent phenomenon" and is "the universal norm in human history. The effect of war on human bodies is unimaginable. It not only destroys or mutilates the human bodies physically but also psychologically causing immense pain and traumas. Erikson (1976, 153) defines this individual trauma as "a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal forces that one cannot react to it efficiently." In this research paper I would like to relate "The Wasteland" as a post war literature. The poem is, then, a criticism of post-war European society. It deals with the evils of a society, and is an expression of a single protagonist through the various characters of Madame Sosostriis, Stetson, the Rich Lady, Philomela, a Typist, Mr. Eugenides, Phlebas.

T.S.Eliot became a naturalized British subject in 1927. He was born in St. Louis U.S.A. After working on different professions like teaching, business, editing he became a director of Faber and Faber, the

publishers. Eliot's poetry is marked by its witty irony, satire, the boredom, emptiness and pessimism of its own day. 'The Wasteland' is one of the most important documents of its age. This much discussed poem made a tremendous impact on the post-war generation. The poem is based on the legend of the Fisher King in the Arthurian cycle, it presents modern London as an arid, wasteland. Symbolism is used at length by T.S. Eliot. For example, the symbols of drought and flood represent 'death' and 'rebirth' and the poem progresses through five movements "The Burial of the Dead", "The Game of Chess", "The Fire Sermon", "Death by Water" and "What the Thunder Said". T.S. Eliot's works were influenced by the Indian philosophy, the Holy Gita, Vedas and Upanishads and Buddhism. Eliot was more modern and more civilized than most of his contemporaries. His true perception of modernity helped him to warn the society of the evils of unrestricted modernism by advocating through the Holy Bible and trying to show the way towards God. The reference of three 'shanties' at the end holds its status of an Upanishad on one hand while the references such as 'Holy Grail' and 'the myth of King Fisher' reflects the Christian mythology.

T.S. Eliot belonged to an era of degeneration when the whole part of Europe turned into a spiritually barren land – a waste land. The dominance of Christian culture on these areas has not taken them anywhere but to materialistic pursuits and endless sensual pleasures. The poet is very much concerned about the people's indifference to religion, sacred institutions and holiness. The poet feels death is an essential condition of life and that death is a gateway to rebirth and better life. The cyclical features of death and life are seen not only in humans but also in nature. Nature remains dormant in winter and enlivens in spring. After the World War I the society and the continent of Europe faced serious problems of disillusionment and cynicism and nihilism. Amidst this trauma emerged T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' when the European society was unsure about itself. In the chaotic and inhuman world it became a popular piece of work. As Cara Williams quotes Dupree in her essay 'Literary Analysis' for "The Wasteland" - "The work that best expressed the mood of a post war generation disillusioned by the loss of ideals and faith in progress." (Dupree 7) In 'The Waste Land' Eliot expressed not only the sorrowful condition of modern society but it was an expression of his personal feeling too. Eliot amalgamated rituals, myths and old beliefs to awaken the dead Christian principles among the people and to lead them to spiritual awareness and to reform. According to Dupree as quoted by Cara Williams "his reading in these and similar studies provided a way of seeing behind present day actions a substratum of past beliefs and practices that, though now lost to consciousness continue to inform our daily lives in hidden but significant ways."

The Waste Land begins with the protagonist musing on Spring.

"April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers."

These lines indicate the degradation of man and his sinking low into immorality. Man lives a 'Half life' and prefers to live in ignorance. The poem is divided into five different sections imaging five different scenes of an European society after the World War I. The first movement of the poem entitled "The Burial of the Dead" describes the seasons which are symbolic of 'memory and desire' and so the narrator's memory retreats to times in Munich to his beloved with her arms full of flowers and her hair dripping wet, to whom he gave hyacinths. He expected happiness and satisfaction but saw nothing. The narrator realizes the transience of human life and the true joy that cannot be found in transitory things. Today the poet is surrounded by a land of 'stony rubbish'. He becomes nostalgic about a fortune teller named Madame Sosostric who said he was "the drowned Phoenician Sailor." The major theme that he works upon is Death. Eliot asks his friend Stetson "That corpse you planted last year in your garden/Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?" -just as Christ's death redeemed humanity and revived life. Eliot refers to the frequent use of baptisms and rivers-as both "life givers" spiritually or physically. In 'A Game of Chess' the reader is transported from the streets of London to a gilded drawing room wherein thrones a jewel-bedecked lady who whines about her nerves and wonders what to do. From this upper crust of society the readers move to London's low life. In the first scene of 'A Game of Chess' a wealthy couple is seen living a dull melancholic routine, a forced relationship. Their life is artificial and each one self-absorbed that no communication takes place between them. The next scene in this section further reveals the peak of degradation of humans through the character of Lil and her husband, Alfred, discharged from military service. Lil is discussing with a group of friends. According to Cara Williams, "In this scene, sex is reduced to a duty a wife must perform to please her husband, and children are an obligation, not a joy." 'The Fire Sermon' opens with an image of the narrator sitting on the banks musing on the deplorable state of the world. In this stanza, a woman is seen in her apartment eating dinner with her lover-a young "carbuncular". The man hops into bed with this lonely female typist making love to her aggressively and when he leaves the poet remarks the attitude of 'indifference' and 'apathy' felt after the war with such lines as "Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:

'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over.'" Later the scene is by the river where the maids sing a song of lament, one of them crying over her loss of innocence to a similarly lustful man. The poet too had a spoiled relationship with his wife Vivienne and was languishing through an unhappy marriage. In spite of his troubled personal life and the nervous breakdown that he had, he had a ray of hope- a source of meaningful life when he writes- 'the pleasant whining of a mandoline.' "Death by Water" is the shortest section of the poem describing "Phlebas the Phoenician" lying dead in the sea. In 'Death by Water', there is the acceptance of the 'Living Water' by Phlebas the Phoenician who sheds the sinful nature after he experienced death by water- a representation of baptism. The dead Phlebas has forgotten "the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell/ and profit and the loss" lives separately from the sinful modern society. "Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you" is a message to the modern man who too requires 'Living Water.' "Its only when the spirit is cleansed the sins die, the human soul truly experiences life." 'Death by Water' and 'The Fire Sermon' are the two contradictory stanzas contrasting the two ideas- the fire of lust quenched with the living water. The theme of water wherein "The Waste Land" lacks water is depicted here. The arrival of rain finally at the close of poem is indicative of cleansing of sins, the washing away of misdeeds and the initiation of a new future. In

the final stanza the reader is transported to the Ganges and the Himalayas and back to the Thames and London Bridge, once again Western and Eastern traditions are linked. Much of influence of the Hindu Scripture the Upanishad is seen when Eliot quotes the Eastern dictum ; “Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. “London Bridge is falling down” is the deterioration of modern society and that man must decide for himself “Shall I at least set my hands in order ?”He has a choice of decay of society and meaninglessness of life on one hand and the life of significance on the other. But the decision is evident amidst the madness of the ruins of society when the poet says, “Shantih,Shantih,Shantih.” Eliot too experienced the meaninglessness of life and surrendered to the Living Water shedding off the dishonest worldly self. The poet experiences his personal feelings and his experiences through the stream of consciousness, his fragmented ideas are composed together to end on a note of peace- that peace that Eliot has experienced and wishes that modern man too attain it.

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