

## A Qualitative Analysis of the Poem “The Waste Land” to Investigate Spiritual Sterility, Moral Degradation of the Post-war Modern People and the Path of Salvation

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### ABSTRACT

This paper's overriding concern is to analyze the moral degradation, spiritual sterility, fragmentation, damaged psyche of humanity, the disillusionment of early twentieth-century post-war modern Europe and of course the path of salvation that are enormously manifest in the Thomas Stearns Eliot's poem 'The Waste Land'. In the question of regeneration or salvation, Eliot in this poem instructs the morally and spiritually sterile modern man to follow the Indian philosophy, Vedas and Upanishads, the storehouse of knowledge, relief, and source of spiritualism, redemption and salvation. And also he concludes the poem with the sense that if they practise them in their life as instructed, there will be nothing but Shantih, shantih, shantih (peace and tranquility) in their life. This paper thus attempts to dissect how the poem develops exerting the acute sense of spiritual infertility, moral degradation, sexual perversion, meaninglessness in the human relationship of the post-war-devastated and dysfunctional world and concludes with the instruction of the path of salvation.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper's most prominent aim is to investigate how the poem 'The Waste Land' comes to grips with the fact of moral degradation and spiritual sterility of the wastelanders after the first world war shock and of course the way of coming out of this critical situation. T.S Eliot's poem 'The Waste Land' was published in 1922 after World War I that took a heavy toll on the people and exerted a negative impact on the society. This is because, all these negative aspects were brought into this poem 'The Waste Land' as the literature is the imitation of real life (Abrams, 1971). In the truest sense of the term, millions of innocent people even women and children were killed indiscriminately. "The death toll for the armed forces in World War I was appalling. Around nine million soldiers were killed, which was about 15 percent of all combatants. Besides, millions more were permanently disabled by the war; of British war veterans, for example, 41,000 lost a limb in the fighting. In Britain, it became common to talk of a 'lost generation'. Such was a particularly appropriate phrase for the situation in France, where 20 percent of those between the ages of 20 and 40 in 1914 were

killed" (Wikibooks,2019). Millions died from famine and disease at the end of the war and 20 million people died from Spanish Flu between 1918-89. Mordis Eksteins in his book *Rites of Spring* rightly said that, "Europe slumped into a monumental melancholy. and the utopian social dreams evoked by wartime rhetoric were brutally erased by inflation, unemployment, and widespread deprivation, not to mention an influenza epidemic that ravaged the world in 1918-1919 and killed more people than the war itself" (Ekstein,1989). All sorts of negative aspects were brought into this poem 'The Waste Land' as the literature is the mirror of real life. In Bloom's words: "The Waste Land is a poem of the city, and like a city, it is crowded with people of all classes and types. Marie, Madame Sosostris, Stetson, the childless couple, the prolific parents Lil and Albert, the gossipy publican, the typist, the clerk, Tiresias, and other nameless speakers walk the streets or preside over the parlors and public rooms of Eliot unreal city" (Bloom,2009). Likewise, W.B Yeats skillfully narrates post-war dysfunctional modern Europe in his poem "The Second Coming":  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
(Line 2-7)

In the truest sense of the term, "*The Waste Land*" can be read as "a testament to the disillusionment of a generation, an exposition of the manifest despair and spiritual bankruptcy of the years after World War I (Bloom, 1999). So it can be drastically said that this poem's main concern centers around the death, destruction, and disillusionment of the modern man resulted from the Great War. In a like manner, the mosaic writing pattern and the diction (broken images, red rock, and the dry grass, etc.) of the poem hint at the fragmentation and the dysfunctional modern man's life. Daniel Hopp comments that "Eliot's perception of the cultural wasteland around him led to the creation of the poem, and further, his need for the personal expression of his psychological difficulties at that time led to the creation of a poetic expression that served a specific personal need through the creation of such apparent objectivity" (Hipp, 2005).

Truly, Eliot wanted his poetry to explicate the damaged psyche of humanity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The trauma of World War I questions the effort of the poet who wants to bring a change in society through verse. But the modern writer like Eliot wants to capture the post-war devastated and paralyzed Europe and its culture. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917) spells out this sense of mental paralysis as the ostensible "speaker wonders whether he should eat a piece of fruit, make a radical change, or if he has the fortitude to keep living. Humanity's collectively damaged psyche prevented people from communicating with one another, an idea that Eliot explored in many works, including "A Game of Chess" (the second part of *The Waste Land*) and "The Hollow Men" (Spark Notes, 2019).

Not only Eliot in this poem explicates the spiritual sterility and moral degradation of the modern people but also demonstrates them the path of salvation. To T.S. Eliot, all the sufferings, perversion, sterilities and desolation can come to the termination only if the wastelanders follow Indian philosophy, Vedas and Upanishads. Regeneration and salvation can be possible if the wastelanders feel seven very words from Sanskrit by the names of Da, Datta, Dayadhvam, Damayata, Ganga, Himalayas and Shantih (the storehouse of knowledge, relief, and source of spiritualism, redemption, and salvation) and practise them as instructed

### SPIRITUAL STERILITY AND MORAL DEGRADATION

'The dead tree', 'the dry stone', 'red rock', 'heap of broken images', 'the cricket', 'wrinkle female breast', 'the dry grass', 'The Burial' and 'corpse' like hundreds of words used in the poem 'The Waste Land' are shrouded in an acute sense of spiritual sterility and of course moral degradation of devastated postwar modern world, a world of spiritual and moral decadence. The death or the burial of the dead is, in Christianity, considered to be the path of regeneration or

rebirth or the eternal life. As Emily Dickinson states in his poem "This world is not Conclusion:

'THIS world is not conclusion;  
A sequel stands beyond,  
Invisible, as music,  
But positive, as sound'.

(Line: 1-4)

Again, Lucius Annaeus Seneca comments:

'This day which thou fearest so much, and which thou callest thy last, is the birthday of an Eternity' (Douglas, 1917).

But it is grievous to say that the modern people are so spiritually and morally degraded that they judge spiritual regeneration to be painful as spiritual rebirth requires strenuous physical and mental exertion. This is because 'they dislike to be roused from their death-in-life' (Cleant, 1938). The month of April, to Chaucer, blesses Europe with sweet shower putting an end of draught or sterility and reinvigorates roots of trees. And of course, April's rain charms people with different sorts of grains and colorful flowers. And the dead land becomes green and productive again. Which is why, 'at this very wonderful time of the year, people set out for a pilgrimage to make them spiritually enriched (Classical Arts Universe, 2018). In contrast, being spiritually and morally dead, modern people regard April, a month of spring and full of activity, or potentiality or regeneration, as 'cruellest' one and inversely welcome winter, a time of indolence, death and decay. Winter is, in fact, the time with no stirring of life, little activity, the hopelessness of life or forgetfulness of strenuous effort to stir up. All these things aforementioned are very much welcoming to the spiritually dead modern people. As Eliot comments:

'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...'

(Section: I. The Burial of The Dead, Line: 1-5)

The word 'Memory' used in these lines denotes the memories of the glorious past and 'desire' corresponds to the yearning for the spiritual and moral regeneration of the future. In the truest sense of the term, memories of the celebrated past and the desire for rebirth or potential future are mingled with the present by April (Month of summer) that symbolizes rebirth. Again, the line 'The dry stones no sound of water' symbolizes the idea of spiritually dead wasteland in which the modern materialism takes the modern men out of the spiritual thoughts while 'dry stones' stands for sterility and 'no sound of water' refers to no possibility of rebirth or regeneration as 'water is a vital source of life' (Water and Culture, 2019). So, there is no water, there is no life.

In a like manner, the word 'dust' connects the reader with the idea of the wasteland and of course with the notion of the creation of humanity out of dust. Feeling 'fear in a handful of dust' links to the idea of feeling fear of Godlike figure or spirituality. This very phrase 'Fear in a handful of dust' can be traced in John Donne's prose:

"...what's become of man's great extent and proportion, when himself shrinks himself and consumes himself to a handful of dust; ..." (Donne, 1923).

Again in the line,

'...you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust, you shall return...' (The Holy Bible,2008)

In the truest sense of the term, because of their spiritual-ity and moral decadence "humanity backs into the dust from whence it came" (Some Media Studies,2018). Likewise, The phrases 'The dry stones no sound of water' and 'The cricket of no relief symbolize the ideas of sterile wasteland where the modern materialism takes the modern men out of the spiritual thoughts. In a like manner, in this poem, the very imagery 'A heap of broken images' has been extracted from the Bible in which it explicates the God's punishment for the people who commit sins violating the commands of God and therefore they become the inhabitants of the world of spiritual decadence. As God said to the Jews for worshipping idols in Ezekiel 6 verse 4:

"And your altars shall be desolate, and your images shall be broken: and I will cast down your slain men before your idols." (The Holy Bible,2008)

Truly, the phrase 'the broken images' designates the faith or spiritual relation between God and human beings shattered by materialistic thoughts and actions of the modern people.

Again, desolated, barren wasteland devoid of all morality, spirituality, and humanity has arrested the attention of Tiresias, the protagonist of the poem. In the poem, we find him dead anxious about the worst condition of post-war devastated Europe. It has been completely barren, rocky where trees are difficult to be traced even branches can't spring up, there is no water or even sound of water that is considered to be the source of life. This is because, we observe the trees to be dead and the modern people living in Europe are found to be about to die. Truly, the thoughts and ideas of the modern people are morally and spiritually dead as they grow from the materialistic land. So, modern civilization is the product of materialism that replaces spirituality or morality.

## SEXUAL DEGENERACY

Sex, to a greater extent, is a sacred activity and so does it have spiritual significance. Moreover, sexual activity or intercourse has been, no doubt, maintaining human bonding and of course the system of multiplication of a race from the dawn of the civilization (Diamond, Jared,1991). This is why, it is said that sex is the source of life. But in the modern age, unfortunately, sex lost its functions and hence it has become dysfunctional. And therefore sex has lost its spiritual significance too in modern Europe. It has become nothing but a matter of physical satisfaction, animalistic pleasure or intrigue. Eliot in this poem explicates sexuality as a measuring tool that shows how morally and spiritually modern people degraded. Harriet Davidson comments that "The Waste Land" can be read as a poem about the proper and improper"; more clearly; it "returns again and again to "improper sexual desire, temptation, and surrender and their often tragic consequences" (Davidson,1994). T.S Eliot focuses on the theme of sex in different perspectives, for instance, having sex for earning money or prostitution, maintaining a

marital relationship and homosexuality. But almost all the sexual perspectives go unproductive and of course futile.

"The second section, "A Game of Chess" provides deeper insight into the failure of love. In the magnificent opening lines the poet, with a kind of buried irony, portrays a lady sitting at her dressing-table. He brings to bear all the forces of past great art upon this woman" (Stephen, Spender,1986).

Sex, as portrayed in the poem, seems to be dysfunctional because it has lost its nature of mutuality. Here Eliot discloses the idea of the sex of the modern people with the idea of violence or rape like an outrageous act. The section title 'A Game of Chess' has been extracted from Thomas Middleton's play "Women Beware Women" in which a situation of playing chess has been created for hiding a rape. In the play we find the Duke to be lascivious who is wild to rape a widow's daughter-in-law namely Bianca. To commit this heinous crime Duke sends his accomplice Livia to distract Bianca's mother-in-law's attention to Bianca. She successfully distracts the attention of Bianca's Mother-in-law's attention by playing a game of chess as she has been instructed. And in the meantime, Duke rapes Bianca. To speak the truth, rape is outrageous, violent and of course mentally challenging activity that breaks the natural law of sexual mutuality or the law of mutuality of God.

Again, we find in the Poem Lil who surrenders her beauty, chastity and of course very youth to her husband, an army officer. She sacrifices all of them for the only sake of her husband's pleasure. Now she has lost her look or has to grow old because of stopping pregnancies or supporting abortion having pill as she has been instructed. As the poem states:

"I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,

It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said."

(She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)  
(Line: 158-160)

This is because, Lil seems to be concerned about her look as her husband Albert is returning home after finishing four years of military service. We trace Lil in a pub in which her friends around her arrest her attention advising her to enhance her physical attractiveness hinting at setting artificial teeth or be careful of other parts of the body as her husband has 'been in the army four years, he wants a good time'.

This is why, Lil has to regain her physical beauty lest her husband should leave her for others. As the poem narrates:

"And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said."

But, it is important to note that she keeps no money deposited which she was given by her husband for getting a set of teeth. However, their conversation ends with the words

"Ta ta. Goodnight. Goodnight.

Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night."

Keeping all decisions unsettled and of course, putting sadness and pathos into the story. Actually, "Who is responsible for her bearing five children? She? If not, why should she be looked down upon by her own man who has ruined her youth and beauty for his pleasure?" (Docplayer,2019).

Truly, this isolation in the husband-wife relationship appears when sex is sought to be the means of physical satisfaction or animalistic pleasure. To speak the truth, sexual perversities symbolize the sexual values of the spiritually

degraded contemporary modern world of desolation or indicate the failure sexual-relationship of the modern world. And therefore sex has become one of the reasons for spiritual death and desolation.

### MEANINGLESSNESS IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIP

In the poem, human relationships of the morally degraded modern world- relationships between the lover and the beloved, husband and wife or man to man- can be judged to be futile or meaningless. As a matter of fact, the presence of nothingness is manifest in the modern world, a world of no hope. It is important to note that a deep sense of nothingness in the human relations explodes into the futility of triviality. This is because the characters in this Poem lack the satisfaction in every stratum of life and there was also a frequent change in the approach of relationships as McGann described "Eliot's women live sterile lives with synthetic comforts and sex that substitute for love"(McGann, 1976. Vol.9:p18).

Gordon explains Eliot's idea of love as a sort of love that 'doesn't fit our usual categories, sexual or romantic' (Gordon,1991). The relationship between the lady and the lover depicted in the poem might have been romantic, meaningful or the sizzling chemistry would have been noticed in their relation. But unfortunately, their relationship is, at last, proved to be meaningless, trivial or futile. At the very outset of the scene, we observe that the lady is bursting to meet her lover. Her excitement rises so high that her hair is shining like fire and glowing as if they talked hearing the footstep of her lover. But when her lover appears we find him silent. Truly, the lady expected a stream of romantic or heart soothing words from her lover. But when her lover appears at her apartment, she finds her silent. She is, in truth, wild to know the fact of his silence asking:

"Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.  
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
I never know what you are thinking. Think."  
(Line: 12-14)

In reply, the lover says "I think we are in rats' alley" (115) in which dead men lost their bones. In truth, the Bible narrates the imagery of a dead valley full of dead bones that symbolizes the dead humanity or the men with a dead soul. Again, the lady asks her lover regarding the noise only to monopolize the conversation. But the lover replies again that the noise and the wind are nothing. So this nothingness hints at the meaninglessness in the relationship of the lady and the lover. Because,

"Nothing can come of nothing..."(Shakespeare,1994)

Besides, the word 'nothing' in the poem emphasizes the hollowness or the emptiness or a distance in their relationship. Their relationship is, in fact, proved to be worthless. And it, of course, indicates the mental hollowness of the waste landers. This is because, with the dirty ears, they can't hear or read the song of Nightingale that carries, no doubt, spiritual significance. As the poem narrates:

"Jug Jug" to dirty ears.'  
(Line: 103)

Truly, the term 'Jug Jug', a traditional way of denoting the song of Nightingale in Elizabethan poetry, is a term suggested for sexual intercourse as a joke. But the song of Nightingale, in past, possessed a spiritual tone. In respect of Nightingale song, there is a tale of transformation through suffering. The modern wastelander consider it to be the stimulation of sexual activity only. This is why, the lover-beloved romantic relationship is proved to be fruitless.

### THE PATH OF SALVATION

Even if the poem denotes the desolation, moral and spiritual degradation of the wasteland, an acute sense of salvation or redemption is vividly manifest from the very outset of the poem. The idea of dry, barren and desolation of the nature of the wasteland indicates the crying need for salvation. This is why, the speaker explicates the exigent of water symbolized the long-desired salvation of the wasteland. Likewise, the frequently used word water in the poem highlights the need for salvation. This is why, the speaker mentions "If there were only water amongst the rock" and "Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop". "Not only does the emergence of rain and water provide relief and salvation to the dry and arid land thus allowing for the regeneration of nature"<sup>1</sup>. Again, in the last section "What the Thunder Said" we observe that at the very moment of Christ's crucifixion, the thunder appears at the distant mountains denoting rain symbolized regeneration. In a like manner, Eliot in the poem connects one myth to another as an allusion to indicate the necessity of salvation for the wastelanders. The wasteland of the Fisher King, King Oedipus and of the biblical wasteland are mentioned in the poem as a reference to refer to the crying need for salvation.

To T.S. Eliot, all the sufferings, perversion, sterilities and desolation can come to the termination only if the wastelanders follow Indian philosophy, Vedas and Upanishads. Regeneration and salvation can be possible if the wastelanders feel seven very words from Sanskrit by the names of Da, Datta, Dayadhvam, Damayata, Ganga, Himalayas and Shantih and practise them as instructed. These words used in the poem as reference are substantial in Upanishad and Vedas. And they represent "seven days in a week, seven colors in the rainbow, seven suras, seven seas and seven steps around the sacred fire by a newly married couple." Sanskrit is, to Eliot, the storehouse of knowledge, relief, and source of spiritualism, redemption and salvation.

In the truest sense of the term, there was a time when India suffered from a terrible famine. All the rivers and especially Ganga dried up (S. Sen, 2001). The leaves of the trees turned grey. The whole forest and all the creatures were in great turmoil and cried for the rain as stated in the poem:

"And dry grass singing  
But sound of water over a rock  
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees  
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop  
But there is no water..." (Line 354- 358)

The same portrait has been portrayed in Oedipus Rex:  
A blight is on our harvest in the ear,  
A blight upon the grazing flocks and herds,

A blight on wives in travail; and withal  
Armed with his blazing torch the God of Plague...  
(Sophocles, 1912).

In that critical moment, men, gods and demons prayed to Prajapati for the instruction to extricate themselves from that great turmoil. Then Prajapati answered their prayer through a divine thunder uttering one word thrice, Da, Da, Da (S. Sen, 2001).

These words were interpreted by each group in their own ways.

The man explained 'Da' as 'Datta' which denotes 'to give'. Demons interpreted 'Da' as 'Dayadhvam' that means 'to sympathize'.

God took the word 'Da' as 'Damyata' to mean 'to control'. (S. Sen, 2001).

Truly, T.S. Eliot extracted the words from Brihadarayanak Upanishad:

"Manushaytam manushyatvam daane  
Devanam devatvam indriyannam damane  
Balbatte asursya ch balam dayanam asti."  
(Chatterjea, 2002).

However, To Eliot, all the three explicate the path of salvation for humanity because man possesses all the three qualities i.e. human, demonic and angelic. Firstly, if the modern wastelanders want to be regenerated, they should give themselves or submit themselves to the noble cause or to the moral authority as 'Da' (Datta) instructs. More clearly, to give means to surrender the self to supreme authority (Noble Cause). In truth, to control the soul for the purpose of salvation is to submit one's soul to external force (Jha, 1996). But the modern wastelanders are morally and spiritually so degraded that they can't devote themselves to the noble cause or the moral authority. A man only can surrender or devote himself to the noble cause, when he will be engrossed in the moment of intense emotional excitement. Again, when a man will give himself over to the noble cause, he will comprehend the true meaning of life or the purpose of life that denotes the fact that a man should not live only for personal interest. He should dedicate himself to contribute to the benefits of other people around him. But not only he will make the people happy, satisfied and prosperous but also guide them to the path of salvation. "Such people suffer martyrdom, but the account of their suffering and martyrdom is not to be found in the obituaries (accounts of life and death that are daily published in the newspaper). It is not to be found in the accounts of their life and death carved on tombstones, which are covered with their cobwebs. Neither is it to be found in their wills, the seals of which are broken by lean lawyers, after they are dead, and their rooms are empty". Friends' book... denote

The thunder spoke to the man for the second time repeating 'DA' that stands for 'to sympathize'. Truly, a man should have no pride in his strength and power. They should dive themselves into sympathizing others. God suggested walking in the world of suffering of others coming out of the prison self. God spoke to the soul asleep in the prison to forget the ego existed in the mind. People 'should try their best efforts to sympathize others. They should learn the lesson

that each individual has a personal identity, status and life. Thus, it becomes their duty to create such an atmosphere in which each individual may live together, breathe together and rise together. And there will be no place for egoistic, selfish and bloody ways of life. Such ways may lead to a united, peaceful and disciplined life and finally to salvation, not to damnation.' S 2

Prajapati spoke to the man for the last time repeating 'DA' that denotes to control or self-control. In truth, to control means controlling one's over own desire. People had become much materialistic. They consider the people around them with the thread of wealth, money and property. Pains, sufferings and agonies of others are not a matter of taking into account for them. When people engross themselves in the action of turning all self desires into reality, they become unconscious to control the passions and desires and search the path of salvation. This is because, controlling passion and self-desire, people should hear their souls and apply spiritual discipline to be regenerated.

## METHODOLOGY

In qualitative research method, taking into account of the influence of post-war devastated modern world, the textual analysis of T.S Eliot's poem 'The Waste Land' has been done applying different sort of techniques and methods to find out the facts of moral degradation, spiritual sterility, fragmentation, damaged psyche of humanity, the disillusionment of post-war devastated modern Europe and of course the path of salvation that are enormously patent in words, phrases and sentences of the poem. Many research articles and books written on these very concerned issues have been sometimes summarized and sometimes analyzed through empirical observations for collecting data from direct and indirect sources to demonstrate our findings.

## CONCLUSION

After a long strenuous study, this paper has successfully reached its goal of finding the facts of moral degradation, sexual perversion, and meaninglessness in human relationships of post-war devastated modern European people and the path of salvation in the poem 'The Waste Land.' The diction of the poem (broken images, red rock and the dry grass, etc.) of the poem hints at the fragmentation and the dysfunctional modern man's life. Not only the poem's main themes center around the spiritual and moral degeneration of the modern people but also the path of salvation. T.S Eliot instructs the morally degraded modern people to follow Indian philosophy, Vedas and Upanishads, the storehouse of knowledge, relief, and source of spiritualism, redemption, salvation and of course regeneration. In the truest sense of the term, to Eliot, if they believe that suffering leads the people to the path of spiritual salvation, if they become submissive to the noble cause, if they sympathize, and if they learn self-control, they will attain spiritual regeneration. And then there will be nothing but "Shantih shantih shantih."

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