

## **ECOLOGICAL NESCIENCE TO ECOLOGICAL WISDOM: A STUDY OF T.S ELIOT'S THE WASTE LAND**

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### ***Abstract***

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* foresees the present degeneration of humankind where man becomes a hapless victim of the corrupt modern civilization. Eliot uses the barrenness of land as a poignant locale to throw light on man's pointless exploitation of Mother Nature. He uses the title *The Waste Land* to depict the hopelessness prevalent in the contemporary society. In this modern era of industrialization and mechanization, where global warming and green house effect have become major threats, it is indeed germane to delve into the ecological concerns presented in literary works. Ecocriticism is a movement that emerged in the 1970s, which explores the link between literature and environment. The paper aims an ecocritical reading of T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, which brings out the need for ecological awareness. By painting the picture of an ecologically unbalanced and spiritually chaotic wasteland, Eliot showcases his ecological concerns, which prompt us to meditate on the relationship between human and Nature. The application of ecocritical framework to the poem reveals the ecological consciousness inherent in the poem.

**Keywords :** *degeneration, barrenness, wasteland, exploitation, industrialization, ecocriticism, ecological consciousness.*

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The influence of *The Waste Land* as a criticism on the condition of the twentieth century is immense. The term 'waste land' by its definition indicates a land left to run wild, undeveloped and untamed. But Eliot's wasteland is ironic, as civilization and the ensuing development has become the cause of the "waste." In this way, wasteland in the poem suggests our existence in a bleak and barren world, lifeless in both physical and spiritual sense. Ours is an intrinsic web of life, in which everything is connected to everything else. This interconnectedness, which is the basic underlying principle of ecology, is thwarted in *The Waste Land*.

The first section of *The Waste Land* is titled "The Burial of the Dead" which in fact is read on par with the burial of the fertility God itself, suggests sterility and barrenness. The poem opens with the following lines: "April is the cruelest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/Memory and Desire" (1-3). Eliot describes April as the cruelest month which is in stark contrast to the depiction of April in Chaucer's reverdie passage in the Prologue to *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's April is gentle and rejuvenating, whereas Eliot's April is cruel and breeds little life out of the dead. Thus the irony resides in the fact that rather than being a time of rebirth and regeneration, spring does not offer any scope for rejuvenation. We live in a world as meaningless as a spring without life. Thus the very beginning of the poem establishes the lack of fertility and barrenness pervading the modern civilization. The "dried tubers" are indicative of the fact that the environment is on a reverse action, sucking life out of everything that once it supported.

The sterility in nature is reflected in the human characters presented in the poem. Marie, the globetrotter, is introduced in the poem to suggest that the modern humankind is totally disengaged from Nature and natural cycles, just like Marie who spends much of her nights reading and travelling to south in the winter. Marie is the true representative of the modern wasteland with April being the cruelest month, winter providing warmth and summer bringing rain. According to Brooker and Bentley Marie "perceives the dualistic and paradoxical present as cruel because, in remembering the past and intuiting the future, she is left in a vacuum in the present moment, an absence in the middle of her life" (62). Her detachment from the present life does not just suggest her disintegration from the natural cycles of the season but a total neglect of her relation with nature. In this way we can say that Marie has neglected her own biospheric tendencies, leading to the present emptiness of her life.

The poem often reminds us of the absence of life in wasteland when "the dead tree gives no shelter" (23). Trees are the lungs of Nature which serves as a life supporting system to its members. But such a tree has become lifeless unable to provide shelter or support life forms, not even to a cricket. This transformation of the land to a 'desertscape' reflects what has come of our nature out of its constant exploitation

and negligence. What is being left is only "a heap of broken images" (22) referring to broken or incomplete memory.

Madame Sosostris was a much celebrated clairvoyant and the wisest of women in Europe, who could rightly predict the rise and fall of river Nile. But such an eminent personality has degraded herself into a mere cheap card reader, under a bridge. Once she was so close to nature that she understood and decoded even the slightest signs produced in nature. Now that she has distanced herself from the natural system she says "fear death by water" (55). Water is a very important element of nature known for its cleansing and regenerative abilities. Death by water in Shakespeare's *Tempest* is transformative in nature but when Madame Sosostris prophesies "fear death by water," she is almost saying fear transformation as well as regeneration. The desert landscape soon shifts to the dry urban cityscape of London. The city of dreams is portrayed as "unreal city" whose inhabitants are deeply entrenched in the mechanized routines of modern life. The brown fog that clogs the city is suggestive of the industrialization and the resulting pollution. The crowds tread their way up and down merely focusing their eyes upon their feet. This suggests not only hopelessness but the lack of a vision of the future. This lack of farsightedness is clearly reflected in the present environmental degradation which is completely devoid of an ecological conscience.

"The Burial of the Dead" closes with a passage which literally alludes to the title of the section. "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? / Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?" (73). Planting a corpse totally subverts the idea of vegetation in which the fertile soil makes bed for the good seed to sprout, with proper care and nurturing. A corpse is already dead and lifeless; it provides no scope for a further rebirth. Yet again it is asked by the poetic persona whether it would bloom this year. This also suggests the false hope nurtured by the modern society upon a future that they think would sprout without any effort, out of nothingness. We humans have exploited and sucked the very life out of nature to the core that only corpses can be planted from now onwards.

The second section of the poem titled "A Game of Chess" provides snapshots of people who inhabit the wasteland, and how their lives are detached from each other, unable to communicate. The poem opens by introducing a woman alone at home waiting for her lover, but obviously in a sterile relationship. When he arrives, they do not speak but merely look at each other. The expression "burnished throne" has its reference to Cleopatra, whose love for Antony is celebrated as unconditional. This reference transposes the unconditional love with the modern predicament of conditional love, lacking vitality and sincerity:

Nothing again nothing

Do

You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

Nothing?

Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head? (120-127)

These lines reflect the lack of substance and warmth in human relationships. Man-woman relationship in the ecological and spiritual contexts should be a congenial one, which is necessary for harmony to exist in nature. Man has not only lost his connection with Mother Earth but also with his fellow beings. Thus the degradation of the ecosystem with its implication in the human realm suggest how everything is connected to everything else.

A second depiction of loveless relationship is portrayed through Lil and her husband Albert, who is returning to her after a long time. Their relationship portrays sex as a mere mechanized action. Much of the man-woman relationship that exists in the wasteland is fruitless of this sort. The line "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME" (141) occur many times in this section. This can be seen as a wakeup call for the entire humanity to start and initiate actions that would save the environment from a complete catastrophe.

The third section of The Wasteland is "The Fire Sermon" which depicts the picture of clear environmental degradation through the imagery of the polluted river:

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.

Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song. (173 - 176)

All civilizations grew and thrived on river banks. It paved the way for a rich culture deeply moored in moral and spiritual values. But development has surpassed every limit set by nature where mankind has become completely devoid of what is called an aristocratic spirit. It was then that the disintegration of human civilization started and culminated in the wasteland presented by the poem. Through the picture of contaminated river from where the nymphs have departed, it seems we perceive ultimate death and destruction right from where we began. The lines "The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends" ( 177-178) are ironic, suggesting that the river is almost on the verge of dying, having been clogged with all pollutants. Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes and cigarette ends are all products of modernity.

The poem gives another picture of loveless relationship through the typist and her lover. As the lover arrives and finds that the time is propitious for him, he assaults her. She put up no defence at all as she thinks "His vanity requires no response, / And makes a welcome of indifference" (241-242). After the act is done she is hardly aware of her departed lover and whatever half formed thoughts her brain allows to pass she says, "Well now that's done: and I' m glad it's over" (252). Here we can apply Heideggerian ecophilosophy, which allows things to unfold themselves in their own

way rather than assigning them an instrumental value which in a way commodifies the object. It states that "responsible human beings have an implicit duty to let things disclose themselves in their own inimitable way, rather than forcing them into meanings and identities that suit their own instrumental values" (Garrard 34). Here, equating Nature with the woman, we tend to understand that we have been assaulting Mother Earth in order to meet our physical and material needs. Nature has remained passive all this while, but it is certain that she would retaliate in no time, as we have crossed all boundaries set by nature.

The poem once again refers to the plight of river when it states that "The river sweats / oil and tar" (266-267). Sweating is a natural process, which releases the excessive and unwanted liquid from the body. Similarly when the river sweats, it gives out not what it is naturally composed of, that is water, but oil and tar. Moreover, water does not mix with oil. This suggests that memory and desire no longer mix and that they act counter to each other. Also, more than water, the river is full of unnatural elements like oil and tar, mainly an aftermath of industrialization. These substances create an extra layer over the water surface, which prevents the permeation of sunlight, suggesting that the river is choking to death, due to the lack of oxygen. Thus the river no longer supports any life forms within it. The expression "drift" in the line "The barges drift" (268), reflects the paradigmatic change that has happened to the river, over the years.

"The Fire Sermon" closes with an account of the nothingness of the post-modern world. It says,

I can connect

Nothing with nothing.

The broken fingernails of dirty hands.

My people humble people who expect

Nothing. ( 301-305)

These lines once again talk about the loss of the interconnectedness that is essential for a happy and sustainable living. The nothingness is reflected in the postmodern self, its climate, relationships and in all walks of life. What is left behind is only the superficial connections, without intimacy and a genuine thought. Technology and artificiality has superadded all true relationships and we are left out in a spiritual vacuum. Our hands are dirty with sin, destroying our moral spirit and congeniality with nature. Eliot ironically calls the modern mankind "humble people who expect nothing" (304). In fact it was Nature who provided us with whatever we want and more, without expecting anything from us. But human greed has exhausted her so excessively that our diverse and throbbing ecosystem has reduced to a wasteland, barren and sterile, supporting nothing.

to Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning

O Lord Thou pluckest me out

O Lord Thou pluckest

Burning (307-311).

These closing lines evoke the picture of a dying Earth, burning and blazing in the purgatorial fires which accounts for the alarming rate in which global warming eats up our Earth. These lines are also a plea and final cry of mankind which yearns for an immediate redemption from the deadly Earth and hence wants to be plucked out and planted somewhere else by God.

The fourth section of *The Waste Land* titled "Death by Water" talks of the lack of transformation. The title also forces us to think of resurrection occurring in the act of death by water, common throughout mythologies. But here such a resurrection does not happen, though as Phlebas is literally decomposing in eddies.

The last and final section of *The Waste Land* titled "What the Thunder Said" provides us an apocalyptic vision, where the urban imagery merges with the natural. All that has been described previously as attributes of the wasteland of the poem is drawn together in this final section. The lines "He who was living is now dead/ We who were living are now dying" (328-329) are apocalyptic in nature which suggest that death and destruction have become synonymous with life in wasteland.

Here is no water but only rock

Rock and water and the sandy road

The road winding above among the mountains

Which are mountains of rock without water

If there were water we should stop and drink

Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think

If there were only water amongst the rock. (331-338)

We have reached a stage where there is no water left but only hard rock. Absence of water is apocalyptic in nature since no life thrives without water. Without water there can be no death by water. Without water, there can be no resurrection. The life in wasteland has also become stale and stagnant. Feeling and thinking has come to a stop, only to remember that this lack of thought in ecological conscience is the cause of the present deplorable condition.

There is not even silence in the mountains

But dry sterile thunder without rain

There is not even solitude in the mountains

But red sullen faces sneer and snarl

From mudcracked houses

If there were water

And no rock

If there were rock

And also water (341-349).

Material advancement of humankind has reached everywhere that the silence and serenity from the mountain tops have been blotted out. The thunder without rain is useless and it also suggests the disruption in natural cycles. As a result peace and happiness have become total strangers to humankind, with the residents from the city sneering and snarling within the buildings of the city. Once again the modern man laments the destruction he himself has caused and he hopes for a spring of water, which can bring about a complete change in the present scenario. He yearns for the sound of water over the rock. Similarly, the inhabitants of the modern wasteland longs for the lullaby of water gliding and brimming over the rocks. Even though this image evokes a positive imagery, the hopelessness and bleakness of the desertscape returns as the poet says "but there is no water" (359).

The unreal city is all cities, both past and present, all crumbling to the Unreal. "Falling towers/ Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/ Vienna London/ Unreal" (374-377). All cities of great cultural heritage at one point in history are now conflated into the Unreal city, the one decaying and dying. "Merged into the single Unreal City, it has become the wasteland, nothing more than the desiccated ruins turning to dust among the mountains" (Morrell n.p.). "London bridge is falling down falling down falling down" (427), suggests that there are no cities left and the people are still divorced from the natural world because it can no longer support them. The "falling towers" read along with the "Murmur of maternal lamentation" (368) gives us an apocalyptic view which is soon to happen. Outcries have already started in wasteland and is soon to resonate all over the world, from where life has been sucked out. These cries can be of Mother Earth herself lamenting on its lost vitality.

Towards the end, the Fisher King is sitting on the bank merely fishing contemplating whether he should restore fertility in his lands but the poem does not provide the reader with any attribute of hope as it says "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (431). As the poem comes to a close, all problems stated in the poem can be focused on the lack of one aspect, which Fritjof Capra calls 'crisis of perception'. Ultimately these problems must be seen as just different facets of one single crisis, which is largely a crisis of perception. It derives from the fact that most of us, and especially our large social institutions, subscribe to the concepts of an outdated worldview, a perception of reality inadequate for dealing with our overpopulated, globally interconnected world. (Capra 25)

What Capra advocates is a paradigm shift in our thoughts values and perceptions. This is exactly what Eliot's wasteland is lacking. What Eliot suggests through 'shanti shanti shanti' and the concepts of 'Datta, Dayadhvam and Damyata' can only be seen as a desirable goal. But this is a far cry.

## References

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