

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: A Metaphor for the Contemporary World

JapPreet Kaur Bhangu

Professor, Department of Management & Humanities, SLIET Longowal, Punjab

Abstract: The paper looks at T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as providing a label for the modern world. In literature, as also in common parlance, it has been the most appropriate way to voice the sentiment of the twentieth century, and it seems it will continue to be in the twenty-first century as well. Written in 1922 in the wake of the devastation caused due to the First World War and the Spanish Flu pandemic, the poem portrayed modern civilisations' social, moral, and cultural decay. A hundred years later, as the world continues to be under the shadow of war, technology-caused environmental crises, the Covid-19 pandemic, increasing polarisation due to race, ethnicity, or religion, and a comprehensive breakdown of human values, morality and ethics, Eliot's poem might as well have been written today about the present world. The paper looks at the poem as echoing the central sentiment and issues governing the contemporary world. It examines the validity of ways suggested in the poem to make life meaningful again.

Keywords: Contemporary/Past Waste Lands, Mythical, Multicultural, Violation, Apathy

T.S. Eliot published *The Waste Land* along with his explanatory notes in 1922. Even so, the poem felt like it needed to be more explicit, more precise, and easier to follow. Despite the fact that numerous studies over the years have tried to explain its complexities, the poem has continued to intrigue readers and students of literature. That, however, has not come in the way of the widespread use of the expression 'waste-land' to describe the contemporary modern culture and the human condition. That it is made use of even by those who have not read the poem aptly indicates how Eliot's worldview has embedded itself into the collective unconscious. A hundred years later, the poem's vast range of themes, references, and ideas

continues to engage the interest of poetry lovers and scholars. The anniversary year becomes an occasion to revisit the poem and review Eliot's portrayal of problems and their solutions concerning the present time. The paper explores some of the themes expressed in the poem to assess their relevance in the contemporary global scene.

Eliot wrote the poem while the world was reeling under the devastating effects of the First World War and the Spanish Flu pandemic. The poem attempted to find a sense of order and meaning in the world, a kind of continuity in the march of human civilisation.

It made a fascinating read with its innovative and complex use of myth, legends, multi-vocality, multi-locales, and multiple allusions borrowed from various languages, religions, and cultures. In a way, the poem was a multicultural offering long before the emergence of multi-ethnic voices in English literature. Today, the narrative of global progress notwithstanding, the world has not changed much, and the moral, spiritual, and cultural decay of the past continues to plague human civilisation. To take a broad view of the past, since the writing of the poem, the world witnessed another large-scale dance of destruction during the Second World War. Consequent to the atomic bombing at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there began, with greater vigour, a questioning of everything that was held sacred in the past. There has also been a rise and fall of robust regimes and political systems, even as the struggle for democracy, rights, equality, and justice has remained perpetual, ever watchful. There was a break with colonialism, and the colonised started 'writing back' to stake a claim to the global consciousness. The progress in the field of technology, it was believed, would bring the world closer in terms of physical distance. Psychologically, however, it has led to a breakdown of community and social relations, causing individuals to be increasingly isolated and lonely.

Additionally, polarisation in terms of ethnicity, religion, class, etc., has further divided humanity. On top of it all, environmental degradation has emerged as a severe threat to our civilisation. More visibly, the Covid pandemic is not yet over, and the shadow of war looms

ominously over the world. Under such circumstances, it is no wonder that the central premise of *The Waste Land*, namely, how to regain faith in the reign of "Shantih," continues to be a relevant and valid yearning.

As an outsider, an American in England, Eliot perhaps understood the significance of incorporating the cultural experience of the colonies into English literature instinctively. His extensive reading helped him project a universal, globalised vision to use the term without its negative connotations of the centre ignoring the margins. At the same time, this must be noted that the poem was not about giving a right due to the cultural wisdom possessed by different races long suppressed and exploited under colonisation. Instead, Eliot's vision focused on finding meaning from the idea of an idealised cultural past and infusing the present with its vigour of positivity and optimism. His faith in the potential of literature to act as an agent of moral meaning and restitution is what has kept the poem relevant across time and generations. The poem creates a context which facilitates reading across cultures. While it is true that the texts from different sources are interpreted in relation to the English reality, their presence in the poem successfully reflects a sense of common, collective desire for meaning to existence, both as an individual and as a community. The poem indicates the consequences of forsaking humane values in the name of development and progress or for personal selfish motives, another element that ensures its status as a 'timeless' work of literature.

In his celebrated essay, "Tradition and Individual Talent," Eliot states that tradition. "involves, in the first place, the historical sense . . . [which] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that ... the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timelessness as well as of the temporal and the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional" (38).

The poem may be seen as a superb application of the above statement. The return to the past in the poem, thus, is not an exercise in nostalgia. Rather, the aim is to explore how to recover meaning embodied in literature, history, and mythology and apply it to refresh contemporary reality. Eliot's use of myth, legends, and literary allusions suggests the continued presence of the past experience in the making of present identity and culture. The multiple shifting voices in the poem demonstrate how reality cannot be comprehended with any single viewpoint alone and/or by ignoring multiplicity contributed to by many other, even contrary, ideas. While the trend of looking towards a historical and believed to be glorious past is shared among numerous ethnic communities seeking to assert identity, Eliot, in the poem, keeps the narrative open-ended, multicultural, and fluid, with each reference adding to the central sentiment of the poem. With the epitaph referring to Sibyl, Eliot sets the poem's mood to that of a bundle of riddles for the readers to unravel. The Sibyls in Greek mythology were women who possessed great prophetic powers. However, when asked questions, their answers were like riddles, which had to be interpreted by the listeners. As per the myth, the Sibyl of Cumae had her wish for long life granted by Apollo. Nevertheless, since she had forgotten to ask for eternal youth, the blessing became a curse. She continued to grow old but would not die even as she lost her youth and prophetic powers. So, when asked, "what do you want?" she answered, "I want to die." The reference to Sibyl is one to indicate what it means to exist without purpose and, second, to hint at various themes simultaneously. Thus, Eliot creates the first of a series of powerful images in the poem: life suspended between living and dying, caught in a web of its own making due to certain choices made in life. Every image is in a fragmented form, more as in jumbled leaves, which contain Sibyl's answers to questions. This strategy enables Eliot to load multiple meanings, allowing readers to find echoes in various other sources they might know of and interpret whichever way they want to.

Thus, Eliot presents a collage of myths gathered from multiple sources in the poem. He employs what he called the mythical method, a term he coined in his review of James Joyce's novel, *Ulysses*. Eliot describes this method as a "way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history," and that in "using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr Joyce is pursuing a method which others can pursue after him" (483). In *The Waste Land*, Eliot is doing precisely that; looking towards the past to understand the knowledge that has disappeared in the present. Through the mythical method, it becomes possible to reveal which, at times, is satirical by showing how much the present has degenerated; comparative to highlight the essential similarities with the days gone by; historically neutral, indicating the possibility of a revival in the future; confused in its fusion of the realistic and the fantastic; ordering in its approach to ideas related to morality, ethics, and passion. The mythical method does not offer an escape to a better past but an entry into a confusing present. The use of myths ensures that a reader actively participates in the poem working out its multiple meanings to make sense of one's reality. It is almost as if one is on a quest for oneself. Since myths are an eternal part of human consciousness, reference to so many of them taken from various cultures ensures an overflowing of the essence of the collective experience. It demonstrates the ever-lasting appeal of the poem. After all, every generation looks towards these cultural vignettes of knowledge and wisdom to make sense of contemporary problems and mysteries.

The motif of *The Waste Land* gives the framework to the narrative as Eliot explores ways of surviving the emotional and spiritual sterility of contemporary reality. The ancient myths of the fertility of land linked to a god/king with its parallels in India, Egypt, and Greece, as well as the Christian myth of death and resurrection of Christ, facilitate the articulation of collective and individual yearnings for spiritual base and fulfilment. In the legend, the

kingdom turned into a *Waste Land* due to a curse on the Fisher King. As a result, the crops did not grow, and the animals could not reproduce. The curse could be removed only when a knight undertook a quest for the Grail and asked for the meanings of certain symbols displayed in the castle. Eliot combines the myths of the Holy Grail and the Fisher King, whereby as a solution, God must die so that he can be born again and make the land and the people fertile. Christ did this on resurrection and how he saved his followers from spiritual death. Eliot believes that by reconnecting with cultural wisdom, contemporary civilisation may heal and rejuvenate itself. Cleanth Brooks, in his analysis of the poem, rightly observes that "life devoid of meaning is death..." (60). The fact that people have lost the knowledge of good and evil keeps them from being alive, which becomes the justification for viewing the modern *Waste Land* as a realm in which people do not even exist. The most significant fault, then, is to do nothing, to remain in a state of disinterest, ennui, indifference, and apathy. Apathy, which Giles Mitchell aptly describes "as a retreat into the self, the barren land of the uncommitted life in a flight from humanness and death" (Mitchell 27), has sadly become a common characteristic of modern life. Though Eliot draws extensively from his faith in Christianity, he does not claim his religion alone as having all the answers. That is also why the poem continues to appeal across cultures since the statement of problems and their solutions are realistic and entirely relatable.

The multiple references and characters recreate the despair and disillusionment and convey the yearning to escape it. To briefly examine a few of Eliot's images of *the Waste Land*, April is the cruellest month since it forces a stirring, a becoming conscious of the world coming to life around. Winter, on the other hand, is preferred since it keeps one warm and forgetful. Marie, a symbol of the rootless wasteland society, spends her time reading or going on a trip to fashionable spots. In the *Waste Land*, there is no faith in the "Son of God," through whom God might speak. There are only rocks or stone idols, more like "A heap of broken

images." Hence, the Son of God cannot be the saviour since the people no longer believe in God. As a result, they constantly exist under the shadow of death, afraid of being reduced to a handful of dust, mere mortals without any sense of their spiritual selves. They no longer live or love with passion and faith, instead remaining locked in futile relationships.

As Eliot narrates, Hyacinths, earlier a symbol of love and fertility, are now found 'neither Living nor dead,' like Tristan. From Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*, Tristan lies sick with an open wound waiting for his beloved Isolde to arrive. However, as he gets up, when at last she arrives, his wound bursts open, leaving him in a torrent of blood, thus reminding him that love can no longer exist in *the Waste Land*. The spiritually wise women, the Sibyls of the past, have degenerated into Madame Sosostriis, a fortune-teller from Aldous Huxley's novel *Crome Yellow* (1921). Madame Sosostriis, "known to be the wisest woman in Europe," is a vulgar fortune-teller with a pack of "wicked" cards. She remains busy in the occult practice and does not possess any spirituality. The figures on her cards are those of death, but according to her, death is final, with no scope of rebirth and resurrection. So she warns the man who has come to consult her against death by water. She has no wisdom to see that this kind of death might lead to a new life. The ideas of renewal and transformation, an essential part of the fertility myth, have disappeared from *the Waste Land*. Again, the modern city, London or any other, is the 'Unreal City,' a city of broken images, where a crowd of people flows over London Bridge. The image is drawn from Dante's *Inferno*. However, as Eliot portrays, every person in the crowd of daily commuters is essentially lonely, isolated and locked within, with eyes "fixed...before his feet," scared of making any connection with others. Eliot thus recreates images of sordid and dreary life in the metropolitan cities. Unlike in the past, when people wanted gods to be reborn to save them, in the modern age, they exist reconciled to the way their lives are and quite indifferent to any suggestion of hope and meaning. Hence Stetson, another character in the poem, does not want the "corpse to sprout"

but rather wants to ensure that the dead remains buried and forgotten. Thus, *the Waste Land* is totally cut off from the natural and spiritual worlds. As Eliot addresses the reader as "...my likeness, my brother," he establishes the reader's connection with the inhabitants of *the Waste Land*, thus painting everyone as equally responsible for the contemporary decay. As the author's voice gives way to readers', it enhances the scope of the poem even as it adds to the confusion and chaos.

In "A Game of Chess," Eliot refers to the myth of Philomel, who, after her rape by her sister's husband, was transformed into a nightingale with a haunting song. Her rape was such a horrendous crime that the land had turned arid. In the parallel myth of the Fisher King, according to a version, the land had turned sterile after some maidens frequenting the shrine were raped. Thus, the violation of women in mythology is a symbol of the breakdown of spiritual, moral, and religious codes, a terrible fate for the victims and the perpetrators of the sin. In the modern *Waste Land*, however, as Eliot portrays through the two women characters, the Lady of the rocks and the Lady of situations, there is the rule of lust, and people are involved in meaningless, unsatisfying relationships. The nightingale's song has the power to fill the desert with its "inviolable voice," which gets reduced to the meaningless "jug jug" in the modern *Waste Land* revealing spiritual and emotional emptiness. In the next section, Eliot also continues to paint *the Waste Land's* horror, boredom, and desolation.

"The Fire Sermon" opens in the autumn or winter when the River Thames flows but does not seem to symbolise sacredness and security. Its tent is broken, and its past beauty has disappeared. Its waters are polluted; "The river sweats/Oil and tar/The barges drift/With the turning tide..." Hence it is no longer an inviting haunt for lovers. All the "nymphs are departed," now there are only the society girls who "wash their feet in soda water." The poet sits weeping by the "waters of Leman," an obvious parody of the psalm about the exiled Hebrews in Babylon; "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down yea, we wept, when we

remembered Zion." (Psalms CXXXVII: I). In the modern *Waste Land*, however, Leman, or "mistress," suggests lust rather than pure love. The sexual encounters in *the Waste Land* constitute a mere mechanical, physical activity, the "rattle of the bones" and the grotesque "chuckle spread from ear to ear." The image of the human engine, which "waits/Like a taxi throbbing..." conveys how the body functions without controlling the mind. The lady typist's sexual encounter with a young man having a red sunburnt face, perhaps due to habits of intemperance, is also without passion. While the woman does not feel anything, the young man is not bothered by her lack of response. In *the Waste Land*, thus, the act of love is another kind of living death, as mechanical as putting on a record on the gramophone, merely an unconscious action. Thus, Eliot repeatedly creates images that reflect contemporary existence's disgust and terror.

Eliot continuously establishes parallels between the poem's contemporary and past Waste Lands. All the myths referred to indicate the consequences of violating some moral, religious, or ethical code, the repercussions of which, however, are not only borne by the perpetrators and the victims of the crime but also by the entire society. A terrible crime is against the entire humanity; hence, the entire land feels its burden and punishment. As myths are common to all cultures, it becomes easy to relate to the inherent unfairness and injustice. Its reverberations are felt deeply in one's soul, leaving one aghast and deeply ashamed, almost as if responsible for what was done to the victim. However, surprisingly, Eliot does not end the poem on a dark note. Changing tone, he expresses faith that the world can still recover from the edge. The escape is possible if the people realign themselves to humane values and undergo repentance for the wrongs committed.

For inspiration, Eliot turns to India. He hints at the solution embodied in the state of "Shantih," or peace which passes understanding. But it is a journey for those who wish to undertake, and that too on one's own. Moreover, like Christ, one must be prepared to go

through the ordeals of agony, even descent into hell. Eliot goes to the very beginning of the Aryan culture to indicate that the rain is waiting to fall in *the Waste Land*. There are black clouds over Himavant, a holy mountain in the Himalayas, even as the river Ganga is "sunken." The entire world seems to be waiting for something momentous to happen, "Then spoke the thunder/Da." The creator, Prajapati, has uttered the answer, which the three groups of gods, demons and humans interpret differently by adding other syllables to the original word. Thus three words are formed; *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, and *Damyata*, meaning 'give, sympathise, control,' respectively. The three directions must be viewed as applicable to the inhabitants of *the Waste Land*. All these collectively indicate the way out of desolation and decay. Human beings must break out of the prisons of isolation, self-centredness, uncontrollable sexual urge, and boredom, using "the key/ Turn in the door once and turn once..." The poem thus ends with hope if so chosen and desired.

To conclude, the poem demonstrates that the past is never dead. It continues to be a presence, forever affecting and shaping the future of mankind. By making the past accessible and relatable, Eliot thus invents the myth of the modern *Waste Land*. Through the fragmented images and references taken from different languages and cultures, Eliot successfully establishes the consequences of a life spent amidst the breakdown of values. Ultimately, it is about the loss; of faith, passion, love, values, and humanness, and Eliot wants the readers to feel its consequent horror, futility, and anarchy. At the same time, he reiterates faith in salvation as long as one is willing to learn and change. Whether through religion, myths, legends, history, or literature, the choice of affecting change is there for anyone willing to launch on their own quest. The myths and symbols are well integrated into the text to convey disparate experiences holding the key to finding solutions. At the same time, like in a riddle, Eliot refuses to provide any final answers and keeps the element of choice alive for the readers. Thus, the poem is much more than a mere metaphor for contemporary times. As a great work

of literature, it shows a mirror to reality while simultaneously keeping the possibility of redemption always viable for mankind. The solution, however, is meant for those brave enough to toil in the world of ideas. Those who seek are sure to find the treasure hidden deep under layers in numerous cultures across generations.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Brooks, Cleanth. "The Waste Land: Critique of the Myth." *A Collection of Critical Essays on The Waste Land*, edited by Jay Martin, Prentice Hall, 1968, pp. 59-86.
- Eliot, T. S. "The Waste Land." *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. Faber & Faber, 1999, pp.21-46.
- . "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal*, vol. 19, 1982, pp.36-42.
- . "Ulysses, Order and Myth." *The Dial*, November 1923, pp. 480-83.
- Mitchell, Giles. "T.S.Eliot's The Waste Land: Death Fear, Apathy, and Dehumanization." *American Imago*, vol. 43, no. 1, Spring 1986, pp. 23-33.