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THE WASTE LAND BY T. S. ELIOT : AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract:- *The Waste Land* is an essay in creating a poem on grand scale out of the vision of a devitalized world, a world that has denied the spiritual life. The poem affords a terrifying picture of a phantasmagoria of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history seen through the eyes of an impersonal observer, Tiresias. Actually, *The Waste Land* is located nowhere and it is present everywhere in the minds of the individuals. It is the spiritual Waste land of you and I presented in a number of frustrated sexual images signifying death. It is a cosmic vision into the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is modern civilization. The poem is full of broken images which is also the state of modern civilization. Here, Eliot describes an age without purpose being haunted by fear.

Keywords: Myth, Holy Grail, Chapel Perilous, Philomel, Tiresias, King Oedipus, King Fisher.

INTRODUCTION:

The Waste Land first appeared in 'The Dial' and was published in book in 1922. Seldom has a poet created such a sensation in the literary world. To many readers who took the poem seriously, it was nothing but a willful obscurantism: that the poet was deliberately making his work difficult for the readers when he could have written in a simpler form. The eleven pages notes appended to a poem of 433 lines only made matters worse; surely Eliot was piling obscurity on obscurity and was making fun of readers' choice. According to some critics, it was a series of slightly related separate poems. Alec Brown remarked "It is a set of shorter poems tagged together." Other critics felt that T.S. Eliot looked on life not directly but through the spectacle of books. E. V. Lucas, a noted critic, thought that the poet found inspiration in literature rather than in life. *The Statesman* asserted "The parodies are cheap and the imitation inferior". Similar view was supported by *Times Literary Supplement* which was of the opinion that the poem was nothing but parodying without taste or skill. In fact, the poem has been regarded as a sort of scholarly nonsense. It was hoped that it would wane gradually and would sink itself. But when Cleanth Brooks analyzed the poem in the light of Foot Notes, he declared the poem a highly condensed epic where T.S. Eliot has assimilated the four Waste Lands:

I. Wasteland of King Oedipus: Oedipus has sex with his mother. His country suffered. Later on through his penance, the country became prosperous.

II. Wasteland of King Fisher: His soldiers ravished the nuns of the chapel Perilous said to contain the Holy Grail. The king became impotent and his land suffered from famine. The king hoped that a knight would come and go to church Perilous and his sin would be washed. This would be followed by his rebirth- of the body of Fisher King and prosperity to his land.

III. The Biblical Waste-land: it is mentioned in the Old Testament. The land and the people suffered because the people worshipped idols. Prophet Ezekiel wanted them to give up idolatry. The decay and desolation of the Biblical Wasteland is mentioned by Eliot.

IV. Modern Wasteland: Due to sin of sex and fire of lust and hatred and evils of material civilization and lack of faith and devotion, through suffering and penance and 'DA'- Give, Sympathize, Control- the modern Wasteland can be saved from chaos and ruin. This will mark the rebirth of a new world, the resurrection of humanity.

Thus, the central vision of *The Waste Land* is carried through the myth of Holy Grail, the vegetation myth along with the myth of Tiresias, who has lived the life of both a man and a woman, is blind but gifted with prophetic vision and constitutes the central unifying thread of the poem:—"What Tiresias sees, in fact is the substance of the poem, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias." says T.S. Eliot in his Foot Notes section 3 line 218.

In this way, *The Waste Land* becomes a powerful epic of the Moral Vacuity, Spiritual Sterility, Sexual Perversion and Emotional Drought which is elucidated with the help of characters like Countess Marie, Madame Sosostris, Belladonna, Lil, Mr. Sweeney and Mrs. Porter, Mr. Eugenides, The Typist Girl with young man Carbuncular, Phlebas, followed by the events like the wicked pack of cards, waiting of Belladonna for her lover in her splendid drawing room, the scene of the pub where two ladies frankly discuss the perversion in sex, the scene of the typist girl who makes love to her healthy but lustful lover, and the journey of Sir Parsifal to Chapel Perilous, and the situations like the spiritual chaos when Gunga was sunken and gods, demons and men heard the sound of thunder, and interpreted the meaning in their own way as per their suitability which are artificially organized into pattern to make it an objective correlative of the dilapidated, degenerated and perverse contemporary human society. That is why, any study of a single canto in isolation will not only be incomplete but also damaging to the total thematic design of the poem, where all men are one man, all women are one woman, all cities are one city and all wars are one war.

The Epigraph of the poem is taken from 1st century A.D. Roman poet Petronius, who narrates the tragic story of Sybil of Cumae, who now is leading a life of death which sets the mood of the poem and launches the readers directly into the first movement.

I. The Burial of The Dead: Here Chaucer's month of April is the cruelest, mixing memory and desire where the German Countess Marie Larisch is drinking coffee with her lover, stops at Starnbergersee and then Sun basking at Hofgarten. Such a disturbing and terrifying picture of the contemporary society is summed up by Tiresias who calls man a heap of broken images which echoes The Biblical Wasteland of Saint Ezekiel, where he says:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? (W.L. Canto I, Line 19-20)
The same perversion and defilement of life is at the centre of the second canto.

II. A Game of Chess: it is taken from Thomas Middleton's play *Women Beware Women* in which the image of Belladonna seated in burnished throne and surrounded by the flames of seven branched candelabra, gives the synthetic effect of drawing room where the spiritual significance of the change of Philomel is understood in terms of Jug Jug sound to dirty ears:

The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
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. (W.L. Canto 2, Line 99-103)

which finally melts into the scene of Pub, where Lil and her lady friend are talking about the unnatural abortions through contraceptive pills which has made Lil so old at the age of 31. Here we find Eliot's grim and acute criticism of the unspiritual and immoral life of the modern Waste Land. The people inhabiting here are anxiety-ridden. Through the refrain "Hurry up please it's Time," Eliot warns that it is time to renounce this mechanical life of the Waste Land dominated by lust and he exhorts to recognize the spiritual validity of human life.

The picture of the very perversion of the aim of the marriage and healthy relationship degenerating into lust has been elaborated in the 3rd section of the poem.

III. The Fire Sermon: Here the philosophy of the East is mixed with the philosophy of the West in terms of the message of Lord Buddha and confession of Saint Augustine. The picture and the plight of the Typist Girl with her job and her lover, the young man Carbuncular is a pathetic story of the depth to which the modern society has fallen, as her love making and its aftermath are ironically juxtaposed with the Thames daughters of Spenser are followed by a reference to a song of Olivia in Gold Smith's *The Vicar of the Wakefield* (1766) where:

When lovely woman stoops to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone,
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,
And puts a record on the gramophone. (W. L. Canto 3, Line 253-256)

IV. Death By Water: Albeit this canto consisted of 93 lines, but T.S. Eliot reduced them to 10 only where he has summed up the gist of life by saying that all men are voyagers in the sea of life, and are subjected to its flux, Fear and Death. So, they must learn a lesson from the tragic death of Phoenician Sailor Phlebas, who lost his life in the mad pursuit of commerce and wealth. Here the poet gives a general message to all:

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you. (W.L.Canto 4, Line 319-321)

V. What The Thunder Said: The final section is a beautiful commentary on the sterile and disintegrated life of the modern man where the earlier absence of water is replaced by a longing for water:

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no 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. (W. L. Canto 5, Line 331-335)

The biblical journey of Emmaus merges into the journey of Sir Parsifal who passes through a number of obstructions and confronts maternal lamentation followed by the spiritual decline in the society where Thunder spoke Da-Da-Da which was interpreted as Datta by men, Dayadhvam by demons and Damyata by gods. The narrator Tiresias in order to set his lands in order, to unite the three segments takes lines, one from Dante's Purgatory that emphasizes the importance of pain and willing acceptance of suffering for self-reform, then a line from Latin poem describing the transformation of Philomel emphasizing the importance of spiritual discipline, and third line from a French sonnet that highlights the complete detachment from worldly possessions for spiritual rebirth. These are three fragments, which will restore sanity to mad Hieronymo so as to shower the final bliss of Shantih- Shantih- Shantih upon the bruised psyche and defiled soul of man.

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