



A STUDY OF SPIRITUAL ARDITY AND RELIGIOUS STERILITY IN T. S. ELIOT'S THE WASTE LAND, GERONITION AND THE HOLLOW MEN

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The synergetic impact of capitalist economy and the various theories, from philosophy, science and psychology, made modern man doubtful of his religious way life, which resulted in his religious barrenness. In the pursuit of materialism, people turned blind to the religious mode of life. Spirituality, prayer, sacrifice and worship were alien words to the modern so called enlightened man. This has been evinced artistically by Eliot. He explore the deep recesses and hidden territories of the collective modern mind .He mixed different genres which are far in time and space to portray the spiritual and religious breakdown of the modern world. His poems, *The Waste Land*, *Geronition* and *The Hollow Men*, symbolized the religious barrenness and spiritual vacuity which have alienated modern humanity, from its Creator, God. The paper aims to analyze the religious sterility and spiritual aridity through close textual analysis of these poems.

Key words: Bareness, materialism, enlightened, genres, breakdown, deep recesses

The deadly disintegration of modern Europe created a vacuum in man's religious sensibility which had earlier given him a prestigious position of the vicegerent of God on earth. Religion has become now marginalized and privatized. God has been banished from all the facets of human life and man is lost in the world of symbolically dry stones and barren land. It was first Liberalism and Humanism which contributed to the man's loss of faith. Humanism pleaded for the man-centered world, puncturing the notion of the world being the test for hereafter. Therefore Consolidation of the faculties which guarantee free and so called decent living to a man is the sole purpose of humanism. Liberalism gave much freedom to man so much so that he rejected the spiritual side of his being. Humanists have lulled the people into false belief that man is the center of the universe and that he has got potential to achieve excellence without any divine inspiration or motivation, Gray protests against this notion when he writes:

The role of humanist thought in shaping the past century's worst regimes is easily demonstrable, but it is passed over, or denied, by those who harp on about the crimes of religion. Yet the mass murders of the twentieth century were not perpetuated by some latter day version of the Spanish Inquisition. They were carried out by atheist regimes in the service of Enlightenment ideals of progress.... the result has been a form of tyranny, new in history that commits vast crimes in the pursuit of heaven on earth (44).

Eliot saw people around him running after the material pursuits of life and neglecting faith in religion. The poet gives us a clear picture of the world which was caught in the swamp of chaos, and meaningless existence lived hollowly on a physical and materialistic plane. He showed the ugly faces of such deadly forces using his artistic and intellectual bent of mind. The widespread declining values make the man helpless and hopeless beast that remains blind to moral and spiritual values. Lack of faith, spiritual hollowness and emotional sterility are the negative features of the contemporary age. The life lived by the people in the contemporary times is almost dead spiritually as well as morally. Man's mind has become a battle field where a hectic tussle is going on between good and evil; and between faith and skepticism.

The theme of spiritual barrenness is fully elaborately in *The waste Land*. Eliot employs different fragments, myths, symbols and phrases as objective correlatives to lament over the spiritual sterility and religious disbelief that are much prevalent in the modern world which is spiritually dry and barren. The poem uses mythical method to diagnose the intensity of the religious fragmentation. The First section of the poem "The Burial of the Dead" expresses the theme of the fertility and death. Tiresias, the representative of humanity sets himself to the task of examining the modern society and finds it spiritually sterile and inert. The month of April revives memory and desire equally in human beings and plants. It is cruel as it reminds the people of the barren land of their spiritual barrenness, making them wish for regeneration which needs pains and effort, they hardly bother to take. The lack of religious faith and spiritual death is paradoxically reflected at the outset of the poem.

Eliot draws the comparison and he contrasts his April with the April in Chaucer's prologue, to make his audience understand that we modern men have lost zeal and religious fervor which was alive in traditional world. The world of Chaucer was full of religious faith were people like Chaucer would go on pilgrimage to pay homage to saints. The poet also refers to the religious texts and traditions. In "The Burial of the Dead" there is a mention of "the dead tree giving no shelter the cricket no relief, reminds one of evil days" (23) described in the Bible. It shows the dismal and dilapidated picture of contemporary human existence. The spiritual draught and the religious barrenness of the collective modern mind are highlighted by Eliot through Biblical references. He reminds the wastelanders of the warning of the prophet to his followers to turn to God. Eliot contextualizes the prophetic voice of Ezekiel to bring the realization that modern world moved far away from God. They are faithless and have lost faith in spiritual values. They hardly bother about it and the damage is so deep that it needs the spiritual force of some angel or saint to drive sins out of their hearts. However, the poet has got no such a hope, because the modern people do not remember even the sacrifice of Christ, who saved the mankind. They have turned blind to the call of Christ and have thus made their land spiritually dry and sandy:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow

Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,

You cannot say or guess

You know only a heap of broken images (19-22).

There seems to be one solace and hope in the desolate and dry, barren land that according to Tiresias is "the shadow of red rocks" (26). However, this too proves to be an illusion as we are reminded of "fear in a handful of dust" (30). It is a fear of death which changes human body into dust. There is no hope of drawing water from the rock as was done by a prophet Moses. Rock is a biblical symbol of church which is accompanied with shadow, the conventional sign of illusion (Brooker and Bentley 68). People in the contemporary world have severed their ties with the religious symbols and thus they will have to suffer the pain of 'death in life' till the real death, which is not illusion, overpowers them. In this barren land people like Madame Sosostri is dabbling in spiritual. She knows nothing about the spirituality as she fails to find the "Hanged Man" (55) in the Tarot pack. It is a reference to Christ who has been forgotten by the wastelanders. The pack of Tarot cards was used in ancient times in Egypt to foretell the rise and the fall of the Nile River. However, in modern times, it has been reduced to a mere forbidden act of fortune telling. In this way Eliot again shows the religious disintegration of the modern chaotic world by comparing and contrasting it with the past when predictions in connection with spiritual matters would come true.

To live life devoid of any direction and meaning is to live a hellish life where there is despair, pain and torture. London has become an “Unreal City” (60), which has lost contact with nature. The poet has taken it from a French poet, Baudelaire’s poem about Paris as he himself talks about it in his notes to the poem. He shares Baudelaire’s vision of a city which undermines man’s faith in spiritual pursuits. It is a place where nothing substantial grows and every department of life is in topsy-turvy. The people have taken liberty with religious and cultural values. London is a living hell, reminding us of Dante’s “Inferno”, where he is standing at the gate of hell, getting surprised to see of people passing through hell. Eliot evokes the Dante’s scene to share with us that London is a hell through which people are passing engaged in their meaningless routine work, soul less people, living a dead life:

Unreal city

Under the brown fog of winter dawn
A crowd flowed over a London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many,
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet (60-65).

The City of London is a place where people live hellish life, a mechanical and boring existence for removed from spirituality. They don’t cultivate spiritual values; they are faithless people who have turned their back to religious pursuits (Bantley and Brooker 178).

Passional participation in religion teaches a man how to put a check on illegal carnal desires. It guides a man how to channelize the boiling sexual desires in a proper way. The waste landers are oblivious of it. They consider religion as an impediment which curbs their so called freedom. This takes us to “The Game of Chess” and “The Fire sermon” parts of *The Waste Land*, where the pleasure-seeking people in gross violation of the religious and ethical norms sink deep in the mire of soul-less existence where their only occupation is to engage in love-less sexual encounters. The sexual perversion is at the cost of spiritual values. The sections are rife with fragments and scenes of love less sexual acts which visibly reveal that sex, earlier a source of procreation, now in the contemporary world has been reduced to a mere animalistic pleasure. It has been divested off its religious obligation. People use abortive pills and other synthetic methods to stop procreation. They derive sexual pleasure by even going outside their marital knot. All these things are the outcome of lack of faith in religion. Sexual deviancy has aggravated their faithlessness and spiritual drought as is said by Buddha in his famous sermon. The sacred river of Thames in the modern world has been transformed into polluted water which is symbolically portrayed by as the loss of spirituality in “The Fire sermon. The water has lost its purification and thus there is no scope of the revival of spiritual values. The phrases, “Tolling reminiscent bells” (383), and “voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells” (384-85), in “What the Thunder Said”, are the indicators of religious disintegration of the world. The land is completely sterile people do not like to be roused from the spiritual slumber. They still attend the churches but not with love and enthusiasm. The singing of the bells is still heard but it doesn’t act as panacea of the modern malaises as the spiritual damage seems to be beyond repair.

Geronition is a sad plight of a man who is faithless. The sighting of the poem evokes spiritual sterility. The narrator weaves personal history with more universal themes to form a reverie of remembrance interspersed with remembered fragments from the Bible, from the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic poets. At the very outset, the narrator identifies himself as an old man “waiting for rain” (2) in a dry month. The words, ‘Signs’ and ‘wonders’ are having Christian interpretation as these happened to be part of what was expected from Christ the savior of mankind in the sacred scriptures. The coming of Christ child at charismas in the darkest time of year is indicated by “The word within a word, unable to speak word / swaddled with darkness” (17-18). It elucidates the lost faith in church and spirituality. According to Batra, “Geronition is the predicament of a disbeliever, of a man whose life is devoid of faith” (48) that has left him spiritually shattered upon the shore of history. Scientific rationalism has taken away faith from him. This is the demon which has plucked out faith from the hearts of men in the world. He is “unable to embrace the Savior in full faith. He searches for signs just as just as unbelievers do, for he belongs to a time when all the dogma is in doubt except the dogma of sciences which we have read in newspapers (qtd. in Haldar, 25). The old man may get absolved off the sins only when he confesses before the priest. However, there seems to be no such a hope. The intensity of disbelief and faithlessness is evident from the assertion of Geronition in his lament: “I have lost my sight, smell, and hearing and touch how I should use it for your closer Contact” (59-60). The images of wind and dryness also point towards lack of faith in Christianity and spiritual dryness as is

observed by Kristian Smidt. He believes that in “*Geronition*, disbelief in the Christian faith is a central theme” (138).

In the *The Hollow Men*, Eliot mirrors the materialistic nature of men who have polluted their soul with their immoral actions. Their prayer for divine has become blasphemous and corrupted. The lack of faith is again portrayed in this poem also. The hollow men look for spiritual salvation but they fail to get the same. Their mind, full of doubt and this shadow of doubt separate them from God. The imagery used in the poem is reminiscent of the Bible. Various symbols and images in the poem, exhibit the lack of faith & spiritual sterility. The influence of Dante’s religious poem, *The Divine comedy* also contributes to the poems theme, using the Dante’s terminology of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *paradiso*.

The poet highlights the depth of spiritual hollowness by depicting the spiritless life of the men, the representative of modern civilization. In this poem the society is lost in the formation of belief and spirituality, as it is one of its interpretations. The human values, like wisdom, spirituality and sublime morality structured on unflinching faith in religious teachings and practices are again nowhere seen here also. Their predicament is same to that of wastelanders. They are like scarecrows, lacking inner passion and vitality. They live in a place devoid of any spiritual hope as is evident from the images of “dead land” (39), a “Cactus land” (40) and a ‘Valley of dying stars’ (54). The allusion to Guy Fawkes may refer to the sense of sin and remorse he was having for telling the names of conspirators. Santwana Haldar states that, ‘The Hollow Men’ are suffering for which they are damned... their damned souls are not eligible to cross to “deaths other kingdom”... Death’s other Kingdom refers to the Divine comedy precisely, to the description of those spiritually alive for the lack of knowledge of good and evil” (60). They are afraid to face their God and those souls who with their actions and decisions managed to live in an eternal world. The poet subsequently uses the phrases “Death’s dream Kingdom” (20) and “twilight Kingdom” (65) which has been beautifully explicated by Haldar, who believes, “Death’s dream Kingdom... contains the damned soul. The speaker is one such damned soul who is afraid the ‘direct eyes’ the eyes of the damned are likened to the sun light on a broken column; these voices are also likened to the winds singing which is more distant and more solemn than a fading star” (61). The narrator in the poem wants to be one among them who will not be damned in Hell and he would rather prefer to remain in disguise, as “Rat’s Coat” or “Crow Skin” (33). He wants to avoid suffering by being unconscious. The lines “Not that final meeting / In the twilight Kingdom (37-38) is a reference to inferno of Dante where the damned soul wait for Divine punishment of throwing into hell fire. The desire of the hollow men’s desire to worship God is a futile yearning, as the land they are occupying is dead and surrounded by ‘Stone Images’ (41). There is an irony in their futile desire to worship God. How can a man coupled with power of sinful desires, experience a spiritual bliss?

In Section IV of the poem there is hollowness in the valley as there is no light. This is spiritual darkness. ‘The dying star’ and “broken jaw of lost Kingdom” (56) is the echo of the images used in Old Testament. The “turnid river” (60), corresponds to river in Acheron in Dante’s ‘Inferno’ and stream of darkness in the *Heart of Darkness*. These lost souls may now move from despair to ray of hope. Haldar writes on the plight of these hollow men:

The lost souls through sightless, are yet hopeful of regaining eye sight after the curse of their stay in hell is over. The days of hope are symbolized through ‘perpetual star’ and the ‘multifoliate rose’ of death’s twilight kingdom. In the *paradiso*, the single star is Dante’s vision of Virgin Mary (XXIII) and rose is the vision of Mary and the saints in Heaven (XXII). The faith in the arrival of light (of beatitude) is then, the only hope of empty men (63).

Such is the intensity of spiritual barrenness that The hollow men only hope to be blessed but they are not capable of self-purification.

In the last section of the poem, the scene instead of progressing from the ‘multifoliate rose’ shows retrogression, as moves back to the despair and gloom of barren land, a backward movement in spiritual pursuit to the prickly pear of the ‘Cactus land’. This shows the powerful tussle of the speaker for the quest of spirituality in the desolate and barren hollow valley. The assailing doubts echo in nursery song, in which there is no spring; but winter and death. The word ‘Shadow’ is realized by these hollow men in myriad ways:

Between the idea

And the reality

Between the motion

And the act

Falls the Shadow (72-76).

The falling of the shadow is repeated in three stanzas of this part of the poem, with multiple meanings Shakti Batra appealingly illustrates it as:

First the shadow... falls between mind and matter, idea and reality. Second, the shadow falls between a feeling and response...by others... to that feeling. Third the shadow falls between all three dualities: lust and the sexual act... possibility and reality... in the realm of action... and between true reality ...essence... and the reflection of it on earth, ...descent”(85).

This idea is a highly philosophical one. Some attribute it to platonic Concept of duality. However, Grover Smith traces the idea of Eliot as Indian in origin. Smith opines that “Eliot gets it more immediately from Hindu Philosophy. The Three utterances Correspond to three persons of the Trimurti. Siva is the power in sex, death and rebirth (‘desire and spasm’); Brahma is the power in mind (‘Idea and reality’); Vishnu meditates between the two by his role of perceiver and redeemer” (qtd. In Batra 85).In the end hollow men try to pray by fail utterly. Their muttering seems to be their humble appeal to God to spare them. “For thine is / life is / for thine is the” (92-94). These fragment of Lord’s Prayer which seems to be child like sound. The hollow men get defeated and die at the end, not with any famine and devastation but with a whimper of defeat and gasp of exhaustion:

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper (95-98).

The poem ends with a despair and gloom which is found in the hearts of theses hollow men. They are damned and the hope of regeneration vanishes completely at the end of the poem.

To conclude, it is vivid vivid that the modern man has fallen from the grace which tradition had bestowed upon him. Eliot has successfully mirrored the objective correlative of the modern mind and he takes us through the comprehensive fragmentation of the modern humanity. In this way, throughout the survey of the modern civilization, it is concluded that it is spiritually, culturally and morally dead and barren. The stones, dead trees, dry stones without any sound of water, all represent symbolically the disintegration of the modern world of Europe. There is no respite from the scorching heat of the sun. The poet gives the artistic portrayal of such a break down by employing innovative techniques. He mixes the genres, traditions, religions and myths with his individual talent, dislocates them from their original contexts and then fits them in his own context to suit his purpose. Stream of consciousness, mythical method, objective correlative, fragmented narratives and juxtaposition, are the innovative modes of expression which purport the Psychological, intellectual, cultural and religious disintegrations of the collective modern mind. These act as the pointers of the predicament of the Western civilization which transcend the geographical boundaries and barriers of historical time.

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