

The Portrayal of Women in T S Eliot's Poems with Special reference to the Themes of Oppression, Satire and Myth

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Abstract There is a gap of over ninety years between the advent of T. S. Eliot as a major poet and the literature of our own time. An approach to Eliot at the end of twentieth Century might lead one to believe that Eliot is now out dated, that he belongs to the twenties and that the intellectual, emotional and spiritual tendencies of that period were different from our own. But it would be helpful to remember that relevance of Eliot's poetry goes back to 15th – 16th centuries and forward to the 21st century and even beyond. The position of the women faced drastic changes but the real question remains the same. T S Eliot tried in his poetry to showcase the cruel connection between men and women. In order to raise the injustice and oppression felt by women, he took the help of satire and myth. In this paper an attempt has been made to show the oppression of women with Eliot's use of satire and myth.

Eliot's *The Waste Land* can be declared as one of the most daring and fearless works of the twentieth century. Eliot has been used to seeing women like slaves not just of their own husbands but also slaves of the torturous and maltreating society. These appear to be the main reasons why this work appears to be very expressive on the author's views on the issues regarding gender, sexuality and ill-treatment with women. Here, violence can be described as the power misused by one adult in a relationship to control another. The control and fear find its place in a relationship through violence and other forms of abuse. This violence can be physical, psychological, social, or sexual.

Throughout *The Waste Land* women overrule the themes. Modern and mythological amalgamations of characters of females dominate the atmosphere. On and off savage relationships are displayed. Here personal relationships are portrayed; however, there is always a connection between individual and society. This connection is discussed fiercely. The women in T S Eliot's poetry are left with a choice to raise their voice or keep mum about the atrocities forced on them. In both the cases they are helpless because either ways takes them to the path of subjugation. In this way, these women are a symbol of a paralysed society where enslaved entities are struggling to raise their voice. Eliot depicts the female voice as a tussle between modern and mythological world. Contemporary and mythical characters are merged in the poem, revealing the inefficiency of communication in a world where struggle of power

continues. Eliot has used the methods of juxtaposing mythical women from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* against the contemporary characters from *The Waste Land*. According to a very prominent American writer Zora Neale Hurston, if women are silent about their pain, men will kill them and presume that women are enjoying their own killing. (Hurston) T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* narrates the struggle for personal identity against the surge of modern oppressions. Men and women are compared and contrasted; likewise there are also possibilities of finding the parallel relationship between the individual and society. Here Eliot echoes the universal truth that the women must choose between the courage to speak out against their male oppressors or keep mum and suffer in silence.

Ovid's *Metamorphosis* is an example from history that shows us how the voice of women has been silenced since centuries and how the males dominate women if they try to raise their voice. The voice can be silenced forever. According to the myth King Tereus had raped his wife's sister who was pure and innocent and when she threatened him to reveal his evil deed to the world, he went to the hiatus of crime and cut her tongue. The revenge took place when enraged Philomela and her sister served Tereus the feast made of his own son. When Tereus came to know about the fact that he had eaten his own son, he was full of fury and transformed into hoopoe (a bird). Philomela and her sister fearing the rage of King Tereus, transformed into a nightingale and swallow respectively. Ovid had used metamorphosis as a mark of restoration of the purity of Philomela. Eliot has deliberately weaves the moments of her transformation into images. Philomela was wounded by the king mentally and physically but still she filled the atmosphere with her melodious songs. Still she sings and still the humanity follows "Jug Jug" to dirty ears. (97-103).

In the poem 'Sweeney among the Nightingales' (1920), Eliot portrays Sweeney in terms of animal imagery. Sweeney is portrayed as totally devoid of human attributes. The word "Nightingales" is now used for a woman who is a prostitute, a fallen woman. But this word is associated with the Greek myth. The Greek myth tells us that Philomela was cheated and raped by her sister's husband who later cut her tongue so that she could not reveal his heinous deed. Later she was changed into a singing bird. Sweeney's murder is a purely cold blooded murder to get some feeling of excitement out of it. But the last stanza which concludes the whole atmosphere is an example of the fusion of levity and seriousness.

The nightingales are singing near

The convent of the sacred Heart

And sang within the bloody wood

When Agamemnon cried aloud

And let their liquid sifting fall

To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud

Sweeney is about to murder and nightingales are singing and excreting. They are the witness of such acts in the past when Agamemnon was put to death by his wife. Here, Eliot has used the device of parallelism which stresses a point in common between the past and the present. During Agamemnon's murder they were singing and excreting and now to they are doing the same. The image of the nightingales excreting and staining the shroud covering the dead body Agamemnon is an example of mixture of levity and seriousness. The seriousness of the past is ridiculed by using 'their liquid sifting fall/To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud'.

Eliot was gifted with the quality of juxtaposing and telescoping the past and the present and underscoring the timeless quality of the myth. The mythical method is reflected by similitude and contrast which stress at once the point in common between the bygone era and the present age and the ways in which they are demonstrably unlike each other.

In the nineteenth century, humor and satire are almost interchangeable words. Both have same meaning and could be used as replacements for one another. The literature before the nineteenth century knew no intentional humor apart from satire. In the present age, humor is mingled not only with satire but also with irony, wit, pun, mirth ludicrousness etc. The apt mix of satire and humour can be seen in the poems of T S Eliot's Poems whenever he described the females in his poems. Eliot's poems initially came to public during the war and they were read as a kind of *vers de society*. Step by step only it was discovered that this small volume had started to create effect, as Wyndham Lewis described it, of the little musk that scents a whole room.

The satirical humour in "Aunt Helen" is identified when the lady is addressed by the observer as 'my maiden aunt'. The observer starts giving the details in the next lines and the focus shifts from 'Aunt Helen' to 'Miss Helen Slingsby' and her world Miss Helen controlled the life around her very mechanically. In her entire life she was cared for by servants to the number of four'. In the presence of the mistress servants hide the frustration and boredom behind the masks of efficiency. Shortly after the death of the mistress they change their conduct. This is presented through the strokes of humour.

And the footman sat upon the dining-table

Holding the second house maid on his knees

Who had always been so careful while he mistress lived.

Eliot presents how the mask of seriousness and gravity was attached with the faces of servants during their mistress's presence which was broken after the death of their mistress. Eliot makes a satirical effort

to project the duplicity of the modern world in a blend of seriousness and levity. Eliot's interest tends towards the satiric use of bathos:

Now when she died there was silence in heaven and silence at her end of the street.

Here, the humour is no larger a laughing humour. It is at best a chuckle. We are left with a comic examination of form on the one hand and of language on the other, which is essentially a matter of form also.

In the poem "Cousin Nancy" the observer simply announces its subject as "Miss Nancy Ellicott." The name begins with the characterization and the surname particularly ringing with New England efficiency and power. But this voice is less intent on characterization than on satire. Nancy is the representative of the new England efficiency and power. She

Strode across the hills and broke them,

rode across the hills and broke them-

The barren new England hills.-

Riding to hounds

Over the cow-pasture.

The observer undercuts the character of Nancy while describing her striding across the New England hill to break them. The seriousness of her effort soon vanishes, as the obstacles she "broke" are said to be "barren" and then executed when the site where she rode to hounds is revealed to be a cow-pasture. The new American modes are satirised when she tries to break the hills that seemed changeless. It makes no positive gains for her. The human beings are running an endless race purpose lessly. Literary values are mocked here when:

Miss Nancy Ellicott smoked

And danced all the modern dances;

And her aunts were not quite sure how they felt about it,

But they knew that it was modern.

The structure of *The Waste Land* is built on ironical dramatic scenes from modern life and ancient time. The myths are taken from *Ritual to Romance* and *The Golden Bough*. Eliot was very much proficient in memorising the myths and incorporating them into his own writings. The free usage of mythological gods and heroes is a deliberate effort to illustrate and capture the innocence and purity of the ancients. The

myths and metaphors, which are intended to expose the difference between the virtues of the ancients and the vices of the modern blended together expertly to enlarge and emphasize the message of hope even are in the life of the Waste Lander who is desperate and dissolute. The original myth has been changed and perverted according to the modern norms which clearly suggest Eliot's intention to provoke humour.

Very often the original story has been changed and Eliot has tried to fit the myth in modern norms. Here one can understand the vision of him to give occasional shades of humor to his poems.

In Waste Land, there is a scene where Mrs Porter and her daughter are washing their feet with sodawater. They want to look good to attract the opposite sex but all these are created to evoke ridiculousness. According to Abhinavgupta who was a great sanskrit scholar, anything can become an object of laughter if it is touched with Anouchitya or impropriety. In the portrayal of women Eliot uses myth and satire and after having read and analyzed Eliot's poems, it can be said that Eliot has been one of the most daring and fearless authors of the twentieth century.

Lyndall Gordon suggests that self realizations of Eliot have found place in the women characters of his poetry. Poetic confessions of Eliot has reflected in the portrayal of females and they are actually possessed more of him (401); in "The Waste Land," women have undergone a process and transformed into the mode of confession, displaying the brutal reality of the modern world. The poem ventures as an observation of contemporary relationships between the sexes. Eliot's concurrent women have shown and displayed lack of interest. There was no sign of enthusiasm but boredom has taken a strong place in their lives. For example, the typist and other women keep mum and accept their fates and situations and use their opinion only to acknowledge the situation. Sometimes they are the rebels like Philomela and takes revenge. In the portrayal of women Eliot uses myth and satire, characterized by the devices of parallelism and contrast. After having read and analyzed Eliot's poems, it can be said that Eliot has been one of the most daring and fearless authors of the twentieth century. Very deftly he depicted the most sensitive issues on morality and sexuality. His ability to package his words in a stirring manner has also influenced his poetry, drama, and critical ideas. But above all this, the most appealing thing in T S Eliot' poetry is the explicit representation of the reality on women's roles. Thus, it can be said that Eliot's poems serves as an appropriate example of a piece of literature which presents the painful actualities of women's life during the twentieth century, as well as twentieth first century.

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