

## Moral Degradation of Modern People's Life after the World War I: The Study of Void Modernism and the Eternal Human Problems through the Phenomenal Poem the West Land by T.S Eliot

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**Abstract:** After the world war II in 1920s there has been created the void situation in the society. The desolate condition has found by the modern people. They were having the predicament life with stranded fate and the consequence has came negatively upon their life which was called the moral degradation. Most of the critics felt to write about their disrupt feelings towards the immoral sides of the fashioned people with empty hearts. T. S Eliot was a scintillating figure who did attempt to write and depicted the picture of modernism and dilemma of actual morality. To show the disposition about his ideologies regarding moral dilemma and voidness in modern people's life, Eliot has been written his magnificent piece of poem named The Waste Land (1922). After the publication of this remarkable poem, the modern society of that time has been shaken like anything. Because this poem did deconstruct the structure of modernism and the concoctation of other elements. After the postwar the emptiness in modern people has been presented as like the disease of the age. However Eliot did divide this poem into five incredibly meaningful parts where he did use some mythical elements. The effort of this paper is to show how the poem The West Land symbolically suggested the death of spiritual quest of men. Therefore asked some dispute kind of questions on modernism. Through this paper i will attempt to expose the picture of modern people's void life which has given by the name of west land. Eliot actually tried to tie the uncomfortable zone with the human's universal problems and also he intended to discern a possible way of coming out from that eternal malaise in human life.

**Keywords:** Postwar, Modernism, Voidness, Age of worry, T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

### INTRODUCTION

The Waste Land has been considered one of the phenomenal work of T. S. Eliot in twentieth century English literature. From the perspectives of significant contexts, such as modern people's desolate life style which was very prominent matter in this long narrative poem by T.S. Eliot. He did elucidate about different school of doctrines including history, religion, literature, mythology and so on salient subject matters. Therefore he did the amalgamation of them in order to prove how the term modernism was suffering from the essence of true life. The title of the poem itself did present the giant meaning and told us the gravity of this poem's predominant segments. Bhagawati remarked about this great poem,

*"I hold this book to be the most important expression which the present age has found. ...In using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity..." [1].*

As a modern writer, Eliot has been depicted the scenario of modern lives and pointed out the drawbacks in order to lead a good and positive life. The

modern people's desperate life's goal became one of the serious thing and a matter of worry in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. O'Gorman said, 'the worries' of modern times in a bold manner and explained the psychological journey of the human mind "to find significant meaning in this mental experience and to integrate it into acts of human moral choice and vision" [2].

In the words of Bhagawati we can further notice that, in the poem The Waste Land Eliot did bring the essential tensions of the past history and also did refer some important mythical elements from both the western and eastern world. "contemporary malaise into an eternal problem of man" [1].

The Waste Land was a poem where we can see the modernism and mechanical life's routine in a very significant way. Eliot was very much concerned on the emptiness and nothingness of the modern life and in very convincing style he did portray those voidness successfully. Eliot used the mechanism of 'split up' for exposing the isolated and fragmented modern life as like the name of the poem. The title clearly proclaimed

that the poem is not about exotic life, or any kind of romantic poem. Instead of the elements of sensation or the merriments, 'The Waste Land' did refer about the waste human land which has known as lifeless, fruitless, absurdness and full of uncertainty. Eliot has created this subject of void human life after he saw the moral degradation in the people's of London city. To correlate with the past and also with the future, Eliot has been used some significant mythical examples. And through the words of Bhagawati we can also understand the intention of Eliot's plan to explain the modern people's emptiness.

*"...past and the present merge together and antiquity is brought into the embrace of contemporaneity, so that a poem of four hundred thirty lines acquires a disillusionment in the cultural history of the entire human nation." [1].*

### **ELIOT'S DEPICTION OF MODERN LIFE'S VACUITY**

The writing time of the poem 'The Waste Land' was after the world war I. In that time the society of England has been shattered drastically from both the sides of social and technological fields of human lives. Modernism became the disease of that time, as it has devoured the ethical, religious parts of a man. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the sustainable situation of society, religion and culture became fragile from its origin. The utmost force of modernity did challenge the traditional ways of human's endeavours and experience. Normal human life got transferred with the flow of highest speed in social and technological fields. This was happened because of the mass dislocation of population by war, empire and economic change and also the mixing of cultures and classes. To portray the disillusion of human life, the poem has been sectioned into five parts. Each parts did depict the futile, unusual and void modern life of London. The more we do proceed inside of the poem, the more we get the emptiness and vain modern life's imagery.

"The Burial of the Dead" was the first part of this long poem. This significant part has represented a physical wasteland and buried human awareness. Eliot has been exhibited this important matter of human's buried awareness with the example of a corpse hidden in April which was considered as "the cruellest month". Eliot then continued his incredibly noticeable imageries till the section five and also did continue to discern the possible solution to the problems of modern life that can ruin any human drastically. From first section to the final section, Eliot has been portrayed some grave unpleasant situations of modern life including sexual abuse, lust, dishonesty, hypocrisy, ignorance, the aimless life style, hyper-reality and so on. Basically Eliot did describe the dull life of London beyond the bodily portrayal and has gone towards soul. Lockerd has remarked this as:

*"In other words, the corruption that pervades Eliot's vision goes beyond bodily corruption, though it often manifests itself in the bodies of the citizens of London".*

Lockerd has again gone on to elucidate about the vain life of London's people, "I harbour no delusions about Eliot as a saint whose poetry transforms the decadent bodies of Wilde and Brooke into a perfectly balanced vision of sweetness and light. The Waste Land is not a happy poem. It is riddled with the same unsettling sexual, political, and racial anxieties that tortured Rupert Brooke".

By the above lines of Lockerd, we can say that The Waste Land poem did convey the significant messages of void life of modern people who did suffer from severe disease of spurious modernism which has the ability to destroy the innocent people's lives. Compared with other literary writers, Eliot was the only writer who has come up with The Waste Land in order to reveal the drawback of modernism. Therefore he has nailed it through his charismatic way of constructing the poem. Through this poem, we can understand Eliot's worried nature related the London city. Thus his outcry got proved like the attributes of prophets, as the prophet's only concern is always centered about saving his community from hell fire. From the excessive worriedness Eliot did write a private letter to his friend Conrad Aiken in 1914. He said, in 1914,

*"I hate university towns and university people, who are the same everywhere, with pregnant wives, sprawling children, many books and hideous pictures on the walls... Oxford is very pretty, but I don't like to be dead." [2].*

Eliot's first wife Vivienne Haigh-wood Eliot was the person by whom he got the inspiration of composing the poem. In his sixties through a private paper he did confess that the reason of writing the poem was his wife, he remarked,

*"I believe that I came to persuade myself that I was in love with her simply because I wanted to burn my boats and commit myself to staying in England. And she persuaded herself (also under the influence of Pound) that she would save the poet by keeping him in England. ...To her, the marriage brought no happiness. ...To me, it brought the state of mind out of which came The Waste Land"[2].*

The Waste Land was a poem of turbulence and did show that how Europe has been suffered from the severe voidness in a form of modernism. To depict a terrific and distorted image of Europe it has also made us remember the breath-taking lines by Joseph Conrad in Heart of Darkness. "The horror! The horror". Eliot's

portrayal of moral and cultural decline in London did suggest a terrifying change. And that change was modernism. Sing did say that about the modernism,

*“spiritual darkness in the modern age” and “state of spiritual degeneration” (Sing 46).*

### **MORAL AND SPIRITUAL DECLINE OF MODERN LIFE**

The Waste Land has divided into five sections and each section did carry the different and significant titles. The first section named ‘The Burial of the Dead’ which has exhibited the futility of modern life and the buried human consciousness. The second section entitled ‘A Game of Chess’ where the experience of sexual abuse and lifeless relationship between lover and beloved, similarly, between husband and wife has been depicted. This section basically showed the real scenario of failure sexual relationship. There were two poles regarding love. The first one did represent with upper class modern love, while the other one expressed the lower middle class or working class. And the problem has been occurred in terms of sexual relationship between married couples. The third section titled ‘The Fire Sermon’ that mainly elucidated the desire and lust for sex in human life. Eliot has suggested that London city got full of lust and desire as we have seen through the prostitution just right over the Thames river.

The fourth section entitled ‘Death by Water’ proved the idea of never-escaping death. The fifth and final section titled ‘What the Thunder Said’ which actually a section to find the solutions that has been addressed throughout the four previous sections. Eliot also turned towards the Eastern religion to cure the critical situation of London. As a whole the poem contained,

*“...theme of barrenness, decay and death, and the quest for life and resurrection which he found in these anthropological sources with the Christian story and with Buddhist and other oriental analogies, and incorporating into the poem both examples and symbols of the failure of modern civilization, moral squalor and social vacuum -” [1].*

The title of the first section has been referred about death and resurrection. This section did begin with, “April is the cruellest month,” which was one of the most mentioned lines in by the critics and most important reference in the poem. This line was also familiar with Chaucer’s poem The Canterbury Tales (1475): “Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote”.

However, the introductory line was very depressing and conveyed the message of pessimism where Chaucer’s introductory line from the Prologue

was optimistic about the month of April. April has considered as the month of revive because it can insert life to dead soul and dead nature. But without any doubt Eliot’s pessimistic nature started and proclaimed April as ‘the cruellest month’. This month has notified the reader that he is going to commence a dark and hopeless poem. Throughout the first section and also in the other four sections Eliot has exhibited the fragmented thoughts, speeches, symbols and images. The first seven lines used the images of spring, such as

*“breeding / Lilacs,” “Dull roots with spring rain.”, and “sunlight”. Eliot informed to the reader “Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee/ With a shower of rain;” in the line number 8. It clearly suggested that the time (season) has been shifted from spring to summer. In line number 19, the tone of the poem got changed. The poet has begun to provide us some visual images about the wasteland of modern society. Eliot asked questions; “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?” [3].*

Eliot did use the biblical passage, addressing the reader as “Son of man.” As he didn’t know for sure about the “heap of broken images” and their place. Therefore he has informed the reader that he “cannot say, or guess” what the main roots of this wasteland are, because, the readers were only introduced to a place which was completely void, dead, unproductive and without life. The use of a dead land proved as a strong image by Eliot and suggested the actual wasteland which he has been portrayed of modern society of London after the world war I.

*“I will show you something different.” Then he invites the reader to join on a journey with the poet, which will be like a tour of this modern real wasteland. In line 43, we have been introduced to Madame Sosostris who is considered “the wisest woman in Europe” [3].*

Eliot did delineate this issue to show how superstitious, ignorant people of London were blind and believed in a fortune-teller. Towards the end of this section, Eliot discussed about a “corpse” that is hidden beneath the garden-soil; he was anxious whether somehow it came out or “sprout”. He did ask,

*“That corpse you planted last year in your garden,/ Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? [3].*

The presence of corpse here did show the consciousness and wisdom, which has been lurked under all these stupid and superstitious beliefs of modern people.

In the section, A Game of Chess, Eliot has changed his focus from death to sex. The Title has been taken from Thomas Middleton's two plays A Game at Chess and Women Beware Women. At the very beginning of the section, Eliot did depict the exotic image of a wealthy woman, who used to sit in a chair "like a burnished throne." The scene also did include,

*"standards wrought with fruited vines," a "seven branched candelabra," and "jewels" [3].*

All these wealthy imageries proved the sophisticate belongings of the lady. Though she was having all types of luxurious comfort, but on the other hands he was suffering from neurotic psychological disorder. She was aimless and ignorant, that is why she didn't know what she has done, or what she is doing and what she will do tomorrow. She then asked,

*"What shall I do now? What shall I do?"* [3].

The next paragraph has turned its attention from idle upper class to the lower class or working class that has been presented as a group of without respect. In this way we have seen about Lil and her husband Albert's dismissal scene from the army. Lil and her husband Albert who had just been "demobbed," or dismissed from the army. Lil was having a conversation with one of her friends, who did advise her to be smarter. She continued to say,

*"make yourself a bit smart./ He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you"* [3].

"HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME" this lines proclaimed the final reminder from the pub to warn the customers that it is time to close the pub or bar. The stereotypical thoughts we have been caught through Lil's husband who did expect her wife Lil should give him time to make the physical activities. As he felt he was right to expect like that because his job has been taken for around four years. Lil already has lost her attractiveness because she has got five children. And also she used to take pill to control child birth. As a result she became weaker, did lost her teeth and deprived from a graceful face. These are the symbols of loveless sex in modern era where this was true for both the rich and poor society's people.

The Fire Sermon was the section based on the lust and sexual abuse. Eliot has taken the title named The Fire Sermon from Buddha's teaching. As he did teach Fire sermons to his followers and advised them to guard from the fires of lust and other passions which have the abilities to destroy people and create obstacles

in the process of regeneration. In this way Eliot has been portrayed a scenario of lust and showed that London city is burning of sexual desire. The nymphs (prostitutes) were the examples of excessive desire of sex. In the summer night, they came in the Thames river for satisfying their customers but didn't leave any single sign of their vicious deed. To express the intensity of their crime in the Thames river Eliot remarked,

*"testimony of summer nights" that includes "empty bottles," "Silk handkerchiefs," or "cigarette ends," and so on, it is not possible to trace out the crime next morning. Following this interval, Eliot introduces the character of Tiresias, a mythological, prophetic figure who was turned into a hermaphrodite that indicated by the phrases "throbbing between two / lives" and "Old man with wrinkled female breasts." [3].*

Tiresias was the another person of having lust for sex, therefore he has experienced both male and female sex in his lifetime. In other ways we have seen that The nymphs were also being raped many times. All these events actually conveyed the message that London has ruined its purity and as whole the whole Europe was burning out of horrific expectation regarding sexual relationships.

The fourth section has been named by Death by Water. And this was the shortest of all five sections, commenced with a reference to "Phlebas the Phoenician," who was the dead sailor, also mentioned in the second section. Here it has been proved that Eliot's concern about death was continuing. In this part he did delineate a brief description of the sailor's body being torn apart by the sea

*"A current under sea / Picked his bones in whispers." [3].*

Phlebas was once tall and handsome but this section Death by water did show whatever you are, famous or unknown death will surely meet you without any doubt.

What the Thunder Said was the final section of the poem The Waste Land. The main ideas of this section has been attached with the theme of death and sterility. But to the contrary of the other four sections, this section did offer about hope and also tried to find the possible solutions to cure the modern society's disease of voidness. The introduction of this section did start with the discussion about Jesus Christ,

*"He who was living is now dead,/ We who were living are now dying/ With a little patience"* [3].

Then Eliot again did focus towards the moral corruption of modern era. To present this moral corruption, Eliot did use a list of historical cities that were destroyed and decayed. "Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London." London has been mentioned at the very end of this list. By doing so Eliot tried to entail that the modern cities were decayed like other cities before. By using the example of Jesus it was not certain that Eliot was very much obsessed with Christianity as he also used the example of Hinduism and Buddhism for attaining the essential ways to cure the disease of modernism. From Hinduism Eliot did use the scene from Hindu. The first 'DA' referred to 'Datta' which means 'to give' as it is the teachings from Hindu religion. 'Datta' means in Hinduism to sacrifice and give away whatever belongings we have to the needy people. The second 'DA' referred to 'Dayadhvam', that means 'to sympathize'. Here 'Dayadhvam' means to be kind and sympathize towards the creation such as humankind and everything. The final 'DA' referred to 'Damyata' that means 'to control'. The word 'Control' here counselled us to control our lust and desire (sexual). Eliot's mission was to make the corrections in the lives of modern people in London and also the whole Europe and as an experiment these three advice he gave for following. "Shantih shantih, shantih," which means 'peace' and that is why this line has been mentioned in the final line of this poem The Waste Land and made the modern people aware that in life peace is more important than lust or sexual desires.

Eliot actually did propose that following these three 'DA', humanity will regain its previous purity and meanings to live. As lifelessness and emptiness of the Modern Life in The Waste Land displayed the disillusionment, hopelessness, failure, voidness, ignorance of modern life. After reading this poem we have come across with the failure in various moods and conditions. Dishonesty and ignorance are the worst elements of modern life and for that reason Eliot was conscious about another regeneration of modern lives. To explain his ideologies, Hentea remarked that,

*"In light of the desolation of the West, Eliot feels that another renaissance is necessary; the preceding one tore Western society from its root, the Christian religion."* [4].

By writing the most famous poem The Waste Land, Eliot actually did endeavour to cure the predicament situations of modern life and as well as elucidated about its solution. Bhagawati remarked about this terrific failure of human kind in the poem The Waste Land,

*"human failure and of perennial quest for salvation"* [1].

When Eliot published The Waste Land in 1922, it was generally presented as the reaction of the cynicism in Europe following world war I. The generation of men and women have been affected by the horrible experience of world war I. Therefore they started to live a new life after the war. Though it was not easy to start a new life as life became bleak, hence many men and women were intensely depressed and aimless regarding their futures. Most of the critics named that era as 'Lost Generation' where Eliot's The Waste Land was the masterpiece.

### **THE TERM DISILLUSIONMENT UPHOLDS THE MAIN THEME IN THE WASTE LAND**

The noticeable catastrophe has been seen in the modern life style of English people in London. Here in this poem Eliot did show how the grip of modernism has been stretched throughout the people of London. In the first section of the poem, 'The Burial of the Dead', we have seen that how people became depended upon fortune-teller, Madame Sosostris'. And the ending part of this section we have noticed corpse are buried. Here corpse did represent human wisdom which was no longer existed. Eliot's indication was the current terrific affairs in modern society after the world war I. He remarked about the cynicism in various ways. In this section we have given attention that in the London Bridge, there was a crowd of busy office-going people who kept no time to even look at each other. Their unhappy state visible when,

*"Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet."* [3].

The second section, 'A Game of Chess' has been decorated about sexual disorder. Both upper and lower classes did face the same dilemma regarding physical relationship. There Eliot did depict the loveless situation between lover and beloved which made their relationship more worst. While on one hand, the upper class lady, suffered from neurotic problem and said,

*"My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me./ "Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak."* [3].

To the contrary of upper class people, Eliot did present the lower class housewife as a victim of joyless and valueless sexual commodity of her husband. For example, the housewife, Lil, was completely shattered both in psychologically and physically. Lil was afraid when she got to know that her husband is coming back home after four years from the army, as she has been also advised by her friend that she needs to get ready for making love. Lil was not ready to make love as usual she did in the past because she was tired of having children. And on the other hands also she was becoming older because of taking

birth controlling pills.. Lil's condition became visible when we saw that

*"She's had five already, and nearly died of young George." [3].*

Hence the sexual disillusionment in both the upper and lower classes have been effectively depicted in this poem. Therefore this poem exhibited the sexual failure and void images of modern society. Bhagawati continued to remark on this matter of moral degradation of modern society,

*"degeneration and perversion being a symptom of spiritual decline" [1].*

### MODERN LIFE'S SIN AND CORRUPTION

Modern life means to present the people's life in an unconventional way, where there will be no sense of religious norms. This kind of issue forced Eliot to write the significant poem The Waste Land. He did focus the crisis of modern people through five sections in this poem. In the section three, 'The Fire Sermon', we have seen that the poet was lamenting for his people like a prophet because he has seen them to sink in sin and corruption. The sacred image of modern life has been taken away by the river-wave in every summer night, when the

*"The nymphs are departed". And the poet, sings a sad song and cries out loud, "By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept . . ./ Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song./ Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long." [5].*

There is a description of open prostitution right over the Thames River. Every summer night there is preparation for prostitution on the boat, discarding all human values, they involve in robotic sexual game. River helps them to be sinless and being innocent as it washes all the testimony of the sinned summer nights. As Eliot puts; The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed [3].

This is how the sin and corruption of modern life which was overflowed. That is why the poet became upset, disappointed, as a result he did sobbed like a prophet just beside the river Thames for his community. This was not the only inner sadness of Eliot but also the other poets did attempt to confront the predicament situation of modern times. Hentea was one of them. Hentea argued,

*"...we have personal poetry and personal criticism left to fester in an increasingly valueless society, all that Eliot tried to reform but could not." (306).*

At last the poet did seek for the solution after unveiling all these crises of modern life. He then went towards the Eastern religion such as Hinduism and Buddhism. One of the critics named Peter Childs told that,

*It paints a picture of a barren Western world of sexual and regenerative incapacity – and hence Eliot turns to Eastern religion, to the Hindu philosophy of the Vedas, for his final Sanskrit pronouncements of Datta, Dayadhvam, Damayata: give, sympathise, control.*

These above lines said about the possible solution and how we need to regain the lost values especially religious norms to cure the problems.. In the final section of the poem, Eliot did depict the physical wasteland which was lifeless, void and horrific. He said,

*"Here is no water but only rock/ Rock and no water and the sandy road" [3].*

We have noticed that he becomes optimistic suddenly in the later part of the final section. He actually did rely on religious belief. Eliot expected regeneration and a spiritual rebirth, and pondered that those things could stop the worst condition of modern people. Lockerd argued,

For Eliot, such discipline opens the door to rebirth and the peace that surpasses understanding. Yet what he provides in The Waste Land is not a simple solution to the problem of decadence. Like Huysmans, he turns to the cross of spiritual discipline as a source of hope, while still acknowledging the necessary and mysterious balance between death and rebirth. Eliot finds an answer to the problem of the decadent body in belief in the resurrection of the body.

### CONCLUSION

To sum up, the above discussion has been shown that Eliot's poem The Waste Land was the actual depiction of modern life's crisis. After the intense exploration of this poem, it has been revealed about the poem's real meaning. The Waste Land means the corruption, sin, voidness, futility, disillusionment, ignorance, lifeless living style of modern people. As well as the poet did suggest about the possible solution of these problems of modernism through religious and moral beliefs. This was the poet's final hope to restore the lost morality of the people in London as well as the whole Europe. Eliot took Easterners religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism. Because he contemplated that west is based on materialistic life styles and the outcome was the poem The Waste Land where the poet did portray the voidness of modern people and at the same

time tried to suggest some essential solution by his last section called What the Thunder Said.

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