



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

## Impact of the Great War in T.S. Eliot's the Wasteland

Rishika Sharma

Research Scholar, University of Jammu, Jammu & Kashmir, India

**Abstract:**

Literature is the reflection of society. What our society is and what we are gets reflected through our literature. This paper deals with the impact of the Great War in T.S. Eliot's masterpiece *The Wasteland*. An attempt has been made to unravel the changes that penetrated into the lives of modern civilization, because of the Great War, through this piece of literature. *The Wasteland* stands as an excellent example of the disillusionment and spiritual bankruptcy of the modern era especially after the world plunged into a devastating war that resulted into millions of deaths.

**Keywords:** Great War, disillusionment, dehumanization.

War, wherever and whenever it occurs has a deadly and devastating effect not only on the countries concerned but also on entire globe in one way or the other. The First World War or the Great War had a deep seeded impact upon the minds of the citizens of this world. The Great War started on 28<sup>th</sup> of July, 1914 and ended up on 11<sup>th</sup> of November, 1918, so, almost four and a half years witnessed this great destructive war resulting in around 16 million deaths. The mortality rate was very high because of greater involvement of science and technology. Mordis Eksteins in his book *Rites of Spring* comments that, "Europe slumped into a monumental melancholy . . . and the utopian social dreams evoked by wartime rhetoric were brutally erased by inflation, unemployment and widespread deprivation, not to mention an influenza epidemic that ravaged the world in 1918-1919 and killed more people than the war itself" (235). It is not that before the Great War no war occurred, but the impact and level of destruction which resulted from this war was never ever felt before.

Wars, revolts, disasters or any other incident (major or minor) not only affect the societies but art forms as well including literature. The poets, writers, painters living under particular circumstances portray those circumstances in their respective works of art. Literature as we all know is the reflection of a society and therefore in turn gets affected by contemporary events. So, this Great War, we are talking about, also had a lasting impact upon world literatures. In this paper an attempt has been made to focus upon the impact of the Great War in T. S. Eliot's masterpiece, *The Wasteland*.

T. S. Eliot, a well-known literary personality of 20<sup>th</sup> century published *The Wasteland* in 1922, after the Great War was over, and this poem established Eliot's reputation as a great poet of his times. One of the longest poems written in English with 434 lines and five sections, the poem is termed as a "modern classic." To quote Harold Bloom, *The Wasteland* can be read as "a testament to the disillusionment of a generation, an exposition of the manifest despair and spiritual bankruptcy of the years after World War I." (40) Thus we can say that the poem deals with the disillusionment of the modern man which resulted from the Great War. The poem depicts the image of modern world through the perspective of a man finding himself hopeless and confused. The work is a reflection of Eliot's first-hand experience of the Great War.

*The Wasteland* is written in a mosaic or collage pattern and the poet deliberately used this particular technique because he wanted to portray the fragmentation that had crept into the lives of modern man. The poem is full of broken images signifying the state of modern civilization. In this context a critic, Daniel Hopp observes that, "Eliot's personal perception of the cultural wasteland round him led to the creation of the poem, and further, his need for the personal expression of his own psychological difficulties at that time led to the creation of a poetic expression that served a specific personal need through the creation of such apparent objectivity" (191). The title of the poem is itself symbolic of the death and destruction that resulted from the Great War. Not only the land, but man too has become totally degenerated and his inner self has become a wasteland. The impact of the war was so immense that men of the age were constantly being haunted by the fear of death and these fears of death, destruction and spiritual decay have been magnificently portrayed in *The Wasteland*.

*The Wasteland* has an epigraph written in Latin and the entire theme of the poem gets reflected through it. Paraphrased, the epigraph says:

“For once I saw with my very own eyes the  
Sibyl at Cumae, hanging in a cage and when  
The boys said to her, “Sibyl, what do you want?”  
She answered, “I want to die.”

Like this Sibyl of Cumae, modern man has also been tormented by this Great War which resulted in ultimate destruction of mind, body and spirit. The poem starts with:

“April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.” (Lines 1-4)

In Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* there is a reference to April as a cheerful season but in *The Wasteland* Eliot contrasts it to the traditional meaning of April that is season of spring. In the season of spring new saplings emerge out of the earth’s crust but to Eliot’s modern man this season is not acceptable as he does not want to suffer the pangs of regeneration. The stirring of life is terribly painful for the waste landers. Rain, a symbol of regeneration is also hated by them. Winter is what the waste landers want as; “winter kept us warm, covering Earth in forgetful snow” (Lines 5-6)

The condition of modern humanity which is rootless and lacks any identity has been beautifully described in the following lines:

“What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man  
You cannot say or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree, gives no shelter, the cricket no relief  
And the dry stone no sound of water” (Lines 19-24)

This barren and lifeless wasteland stands as a metaphor for Europe during and after the World War I and Eliot terms it “Unreal City” (Line 60) and thus tries to bring out the horrors of life after the Great War. This “unreal City” being present London is full of artificiality and has been deprived of natural self. Human beings have lost their individuality and they are flowing like water from one direction to another. They have become emotionless and hardly bother about others.

In the next section of the poem “A Game of Chess” a similar pattern of hopelessness, despair and infertility has been followed. Omer Ogune in his article “Post war Trauma: A Game of chess in T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*.” states that, “The title of this part implies a relationship between the game and the social structure in general. In Chess, there is a hierarchical relationship between the pieces. Similarly, contemporary society in Eliot’s time has this kind of a formation in terms of social classes.” (2) This section develops the symbol of unfruitful lust and sexual degeneracy of the modern wasteland. The game of chess played by the modern waste landers is to trap and seduce one another which stands in stark contrast to the game of chess played by Ferdinand and Miranda in Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* where Miranda was ready to lose the game for the sake of her love. Love and contentment however find no place in *The Wasteland*. There is constant boredom and this boredom of modern waste landers has been reflected through constant repetition of words and phrases like “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME, HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME,” “Good night, Good night” etc. constant repetition of questions like “Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak” (Line 111) also focus upon the lack of communication which has crept into modern lifestyle.

To bring out the mechanization of the modern waste landers Eliot has beautifully twisted the phrase ‘human heart’ into “human engine” (Line 215) as it is now sans emotions, in his next part of the poem “The Fire Sermon.” The title of this section of the poem comes from Lord Buddha’s sermon which points out that through self-control one can be free from the carnal passions, and these very carnal passions of possession and control usually initiate the wars. In this section once again we come across a very mechanical description of love making. The lover

“Endeavours to engage her in caresses  
Which still are unreprieved, if undesired  
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once:  
Exploring hands encounter no defence:  
Him vanity require no response  
And makes a welcome of indifference.” (Lines 236-242)

And thereafter “Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over” (Line 251) brings out utter lack of emotional bonding between the lovers. In this context Cyrena Pondrom notes that the poem “is about failure to achieve union- with an Absolute, another, the self, an Object for knowledge and with culture and tradition- and fragmentation in its ultimate condition.” (Pondrom 427)

Furthermore, images like “broken tent” and “brown land” significantly imply the sterile and respite free life. Human beings have been reduced to the level of rats who are moving under the heaps of bones and these heaps of bones point towards the amount of deaths which resulted from the Great War.

The last section “What the Thunder Said” opens in the dry trenches and no-man’s land, the physical remains of the Great War. There is physical destruction and spiritual aridness. The emotionless, water like crowd of the first section of the poem has disappeared.

“He who was living is now dead  
We who were living are now dying  
With a little patience.” (Lines 327-329)

This section allegorically mediates upon the shock and aftermaths of the Great War.

“Murmur of Maternal lamentation  
Who are those hooded hordes swarming  
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth  
Ringed by flat horizon only.” (Lines 368-371)

Here “hooded hordes” stand for modern humanity lacking any individuality and “maternal lamentation” for lamentation of Europe after the Great War was over. A critic Maxwell points out that, “The first three sections of the poem deal with what we may call the social realities of the wasteland: with what its people seek and do . . . In the fifth part the emphasis changes and we are shown behind the social coverings to see directly the disease of the land and its people.” (Maxwell 101)

The contemporary situation has been time and again contrasted with mythical wastelands and Eliot wants to convey that rejuvenation is very much a possibility as it was in the cases of ancient and mythical wastelands. For T. S. Eliot man must repent and bow to the almighty if he desires to gain his morality and spirituality back. In the last section there is a thunder, which will be followed by the rain that would help to resurrect mankind. To quote Maxwell once again, “we are made to see that hope remains. The rain will fall when its coming has been paid for by sacrifice:” and for that “sacrifice of self” (114) is required.

To conclude, the Great War detached modern Europe and its citizens from its cultural tradition and T. S. Eliot by merging the two that is tradition and modernity in *The Wasteland* was trying to do his little bit to get modern humanity reclaim and rebuild the self that was lost during the period of the Great War.

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