

Theme of Sterility in ‘The Waste Land- T.S. Eliot’

by

Nuzhat Tazin Ahmed

Lecturer

**Eastern University
Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1205
Bangladesh**

Email: tazin111@yahoo.com

Abstract

In this paper I shall present a psychological critique of the modernist poet T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Waste Land” which is one of the greatest artistic reflection on the ‘lost generation’ of the post World War I, where my attempt is to show the massive impact of ‘sterility’-as represented by Eliot, a resultant factor of the horrendous decimation of world war I, through which a barren, withered, debauched world view has emerged which controls the psychodynamics of the post war generation and has driven them into a limbo of nihilism.

Key words: Sterility, T.S. Eliot, Penance, Redemption, Regeneration

Introduction

Narrated through the stream of consciousness by the blind and androgynous seer, Tiresias of Greek myth, the literary collage of post world war I era, The Waste Land depicts a secularized world in need of spiritual redemption. Devaluation of all standard norms, morals, aesthetic values caused by the great war-imprisoned the souls of the whole generation and they got metamorphosed into the ‘hollow men’, venturing through a morbid world of fearful ennui, which is the predicament of the post war generation. The world has turned into a waste land where the inhabitants are caught in a limbo of strained nerves, bankrupt ideals and nauseating sterility , whose only cure suggested by Eliot, is a religious rebirth of spirit and of the very core of the

chaotic contemporary world. In the epic scale narration it has captured the near collapse of the ‘twenty centuries’ of Christian ideologies.

‘What shall I do.....we ever do?’ (L-130-134)

– is the pathetic cry of desperation arising out of the empty, vacant core of the post war civilization.

By conjoining many wastelands, Eliot has successfully made a thematic coherence of prediction and solution for the modern wastelander. In *The Waste Land*, there is the allusion of ‘Biblical Wasteland’ where there are rocks but no water, the ‘Wasteland of the Spirit’ from which all morals and spiritual springs have evaporated, the ‘Wasteland of Impotency’ where no rejuvenation takes place and the ‘Wasteland of Sterility’ where sex has become merely a mechanical means of animal satisfaction rather than a potent, life-giving source of regeneration.

‘Sterility’ is exposed in multifarious dimensions and has encapsulated the whole myth of the decaying spiritual and cultural legacy of the exhausted civilization of modern era. Eliot’s use of ‘Urban City’, which is the pinnacle of human achievement is nothing but an ‘unreal city’ burning in the fire of lust- is a symbol of ‘neither completely dead, but nor really alive either’. The physical urban landscape covered with the ‘brown fog’ is not a mere physical existence but a symbol of spiritually bankrupt inhabitants who are caught in a state of in-betweenness but unconscious of being eclipsed by the death of their souls.

The Fisher King with his impotence and barrenness of his land, is an apt symbol of modern man’s inability to be in viable relationship that procreates life. Loveless marriage and sex have become a mockery to the sacred bondage of man-woman relationship. Marriage and child birth, which are fundamental in human regeneration have been devalued, Eliot included a pregnancy that Lil ‘nearly died of’ and a husband obsessed with sex, only wants physical gratification ‘good time’ from his wife. It is a charade of all the traditional values of the sanctity of marriage and love.

Sexual intimacy has become an assault. The typist girl accepts her lover's approach but remains indifferent. Even the lover only gratifies his carnal lust without any feeling of inner fulfillment. This sort of loveless mechanical sex is pervasively prevalent in modern era which is outburst into nervous breakdown and physical depression. Eliot felt that this physical and mental depression is ultimately withering the essence of living of the modern wastelanders. Their senses are numbed into sterile incompetence. People are destroying the natural circle of reproduction preferring sterile sex to fertility and exhausting their spiritual and cultural legacy, which found horrifying expression in the vulgarized eruption of sexual malady- in the abuse of the three Thames daughters, illicit relation of Mr. Sweeney with Mrs. Porter and her daughters and in the homosexuality of Mr. Eugenides.

Woman is the incarnation of nature's procreation but women of modern wasteland are victim of boredom, loveless marriage, mechanical sex and violation, whose sad song has degenerated into the mechanical sound of ' Jug jug jug jug jug jug' failing to touch the stony souls of modern wastelanders. The degeneration and abuse of women has sterilized the 'life force' of nature itself.

As the Fisher King's impotence led to his land's barrenness, similarly sexual orgy of modern men is diminishing hopes of regeneration of the modern wasteland. Due to futility, vulgarity, lack of emotions and love, none of the encounters that are explored and mentioned in 'The Waste Land' are regenerative. In fact, the sexual failure in modern wasteland is actually the outer symptom of inner malady. This horrendous truth is expressed through every possible means by Eliot. Eliot further has laid before us the possible solution of this decay. To him the sterile modern human civilization waits in dire distress for a revival or regeneration. Both the vegetation myths and grail quest that are frequently referred to in the poem fits Eliot's earnest hope- the quest for spiritual salvation and redemption through prayer, penance and self-abnegation after a life of sin. This is the only hope left for this frenetic modern wasteland. His theme is not the statement of faith-held and agreed upon nor is it the projection of a 'new' system of beliefs rather is the 'rehabilitation of a system of belief '- the only sanctuary for the wastelanders of modern era is religious comfort and healing.

Scars of World War I impregnated the post war period with excruciating torment and agony of loss. Sheer horror of total collapse is imminent. Sexual orgy, detachment from other human beings, negation of meaningful existence and lack of soul's contentment chilled the fertile spirit of modern men. Every moment of this decaying civilization is adding up to the amalgamation of cynicism, amorality, despair and frivolity but still the human race is in deep slumber of forgetfulness- to them 'April is the cruelest month. (L-1)

The foundation of a healthy society is a disciplined sexual relationship. When sex is beyond restriction and control, it takes the path of perversion and creates havoc. In 'The Waste Land' Eliot's handling of the theme of sterility and 'need of rebirth through penance' shows the ultimate option of continual survival of harmonious existence.

Conclusion

If the call for regeneration is overlooked, restriction and control for sex is denied, moral awakening never takes place then the supremacy of human being will be doomed to oblivion and nothing but a mere sham of supreme human race will struggle eternally for meaningful existence in the pit of darkness.

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