

Ecological Concerns in *The Waste Land*: A Poststructuralist Reading

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Abstract

The Waste Land constructs its own unique ecosystem through its fragmentary yet interconnected structure and invites readers to read it through an ecological lens, potentially re-establishing the relevance of the poem similar to its initial reception when published in 1922. The anxiety present within the poem arises from a separation not only among people, but also from people's separation from the natural world. A poststructuralist reading of the poem evokes the latent strain of the poem that is the corrosion of nature engendering the waste land. This methodology seeks to bridge the gap between ecology and theory.

Keywords: ecology, dualism, anthropocentrism, modernity, ethics

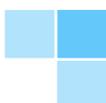


I

T.S. Eliot is considered to have laid the foundation of modernist poetry with the influential association of Ezra Pound in the early decades of the twentieth century. Published in 1922, *The Waste Land* created tides in the ocean of Anglo-American poetry which according to Eliot and his acolytes had almost become dormant and stagnant. This landmark poem, a cornerstone of modernism, was capable of creating a violent literary controversy owing to its radical technical innovations. Observing the mythical method, use of the free verse, urban imagery some critics and readers recognized its greatness immediately, but no less were the stalwarts baffled by its obscurity, copious allusions, disjunctive narrative, stream-of-consciousness technique of merging identities and fragmentation. If ambiguity is taken to be a hallmark of great literature as established by William Empson, *The Waste Land* is an epitome of this kind which has yielded to a plethora of interpretations. The poem has been interpreted variably ranging from the expression of the disillusionment of the post-war generation, mapping the universal tragedy of man and loss of spirituality and lack of faith to the personal wasteland of Eliot who was haunted by sexual frustration, impotency and failure of marital relationship. The objective approach based reading initiated since the inception of the poem came to be replaced gradually first in the 1970s with the publication of the facsimile edition of Eliot's manuscript/typescript and secondly in the 1980s when the letters of Eliot were published. *Viva Modern Critical Interpretations of T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land* (2008) and *The Cambridge Companion to The Waste Land* (2015) testify to the fascination it hold for critics even after a century of its birth.

Howsoever varied be the interpretations of the poem, one thing is indisputable that the poem offers a critique of modernity which exhibits the banal aspect of excessive materialism devouring the soul of man and woman. Uncontrolled desires get the better of the conscience of people and in diagnosing this tendency Eliot strikes at a perennial crisis of existence, Today, when the world is terribly affected by ecological imbalance, climate change and environmental crisis which can be seen as the off-shoot of rabid scientific and technological advancements, the necessity of discerning the ecological wisdom and the warning embodied in such a great literary work as *The Waste Land* and accordingly changing the ways of life becomes mandatory. Hence, in this article, I seek to highlight what is latent in *The Waste Land*: the ecological wisdom of the poem. The poem evidently exhibits the degeneration of human values, loss of faith, deterioration of man-woman relationship but at the back of it is the separation of man from nature at multiple levels. The ethical values, atrophied in the metaphorical wasteland, constitute the core concern of the poem and it bears a striking resemblance with Leopold's 'land ethic' as quoted by Sue Ellen Campbell, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (131). The absent or latent in the poem forms the core of what is supposedly present on the surface and in unearthing the absent or deconstructing the manifest the poststructuralist approach will play a vital role.

There are obvious grounds for analyzing the poem from ecocritical perspective. Firstly, the city landscape in *The Waste Land* has been pitted against the backdrop of changing weathers and seasons, failure of rain, burning desert, scorching heat, dry mountains, polluted and shrunken rivers namely the Thames and the Ganga, drooping trees, crouching forests and thundering etc. And if we look at this juxtaposition we find that the lack of ecological consciousness and the human inability to establish unity with



the patterns of nature correspond to the degradation of human life. Secondly, apropos of the two anthropological works- Miss Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and Sir J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* – which serve to illuminate the understanding of symbolism, imagery and structure of the poem; one can safely maintain that the unity of human and natural world has been emphasized. Thirdly, by analyzing the use of myths contained in the two sources mentioned above, it is also evident that Eliot refrains from asserting the superiority of Christianity over the pre-existing pagan religions. Undoubtedly, Eliot borrows myths from Christian theology but in the same anthropological spirit as he takes from the pagan religions of the Eastern Europe and the Asia. In an attempt to establish that the early works of Eliot were informed by an anthropological spirit, the renowned Indian scholar on Eliot, Rajnath remarks:

Surprisingly enough, when there is an allusion to pagan ritual, it is taken as myth but when there is a reference to Christ it is taken as a dogma by the critics trying to prove that the early Eliot is a Christian, just as allusions to Hinduism and Buddhism are taken as dogmas by the critics interpreting the early Eliot as a Hindu or Buddhist poet. (37)

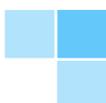
Rajnath's insight is congruous with Eliot's intention of exhibiting the influence of pagan myths and rituals on Christianity. Another perceptive critic on Eliot, Elizabeth Drew shows how Miss Weston in her work, *From Ritual to Romance*, traces the vegetation rituals and fertility rites of primitive cultures which influenced Christianity. In *T.S. Eliot: The Design of his Poetry*, Drew writes:

The Sumerian-Babylonian god Tammuz, the Phoenician-Greek Adonis, the Phrygian Attis and the Egyptian Osiris were all expressions of the primitive imagination which conceived of the cycle of the seasons as the life of a god who controlled the energies of nature, and who nevertheless had to submit to the power of death. But the death was not permanent; it was followed by a resurrection. (61)

Miss Weston goes on to establish that the origin of the Grail legend can be traced back to the sect of the Gnostics who were declared to be heretics by the Church. She speculates that when these Gnostics travelled into Western Europe the older symbols were transformed into their Christian forms "making the Lance and the Grail part of the Christian story, instead of having their old fertility significance as the male and female sex symbols" (62).

I would like to assert here that although Eliot did not compose *The Waste Land* keeping in mind the ecological issues or environmental crisis with which we are grappling today, the criticism of anthropocentrism is implied in the poem. It is clearly evident when Eliot sets a great store by those pagan rituals and practices which combine nature and divinity. This observation is also corroborated by what Lynn White Jr. says about the Christian dogma of creation:

God had given man the *Bible*, the book of scripture. But since God had made nature, nature must also reveal the divine mentality. The religious study of nature for the better understanding of God was known as natural theology. In the early church and always in the Greek East, nature was conceived primarily as a symbolic system through which God speaks to men. (11)



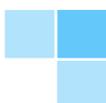
Lynn further explains that the anthropocentric turn of Christianity is responsible for the ecological crisis we are going through. The central ethos of the western world is permeated with the Christian belief that the animal and the plant kingdoms exist only to serve the interests of men. Further he says that Christianity, in contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions, exacerbated the dualism of man and nature.

Hence, it is pertinent to mention here that *The Waste Land* offers a sharp critique of such a dualism. Throughout the poem Eliot emphasizes the separation between man and different aspects of nature, such as seasons, earth, fire, water and sky imbued with spirituality, as the root cause of the malaise of modern civilization. Ecologists such as Glotfelty consider "the modern estrangement from nature as the basis of our social and psychological ills" (*The Ecocriticism Reader* xxi). Eliot's worldview as embodied in *The Waste Land* propounds a wholeness and unity of life where human beings are expected to understand the deeper significance of their relationship with various aspects of the natural world. Eliot seems to be propounding a Christianity shorn of its hollow ritualism and anthropocentrism. In addition, it is not difficult to prove that the attitude of early Eliot towards Christianity, in poems such as "A Fable for Feasters", "Hippopotamus", "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" and "Gerontion", is ironical and attacking.

II

Before attempting an analysis of the ecological concerns hidden in *The Waste Land*, it is pertinent to discuss the points of convergence between deep ecology and poststructuralism. In fact, there have been theoretical discontents associated with ecocriticism owing to its fundamental assumptions being in contrast to poststructuralism. The ecocritical practice shows its preference for the realist texts which tend to restore significance to the outside world. In this way it is opposed to the poststructuralist trend of contemporary literary theory that tries to restore significance to the 'word', leading to the linguistic turn in humanities. Although in its course of evolution ecocriticism has become more diverse, interdisciplinary and heterogeneous, it has not tried to engage itself with the problems posed by the representation of the outside world in the text. Such contentions have not escaped the attention of the scholars who are considered as the progenitors of environmental studies and ecocriticism. Serpil Oppermann states that ecocritics have misunderstood poststructuralism and quoting Lawrence Buell he writes, "That is why the "first wave of ecocriticism" ... confused the epistemological question of how we know the world with the ontological question of the status of that world" (156). So, it is significant here to correlate ecocriticism and poststructuralism by making it clear that even deconstruction does not deny the existence of reality outside text. Reality is there but only as a deconstructive interpretive object. Further, one of the earliest contributors to *The Ecocritical Reader* Sue Ellen Campbell in her essay entitled, "The Land and Language of Desire: Where Deep Ecology and Post-Structuralism Meet" points out many parallels between the two. Hence, on the basis of ideas propounded by such scholars we can prepare grounds for the meeting of ecology and poststructuralism in *The Waste Land*.

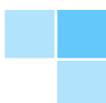
The rise of ecocriticism is linked to the rise of poststructuralism in the 1970s and both deep ecology and theory critique the dominant structures of western culture such as "logocentrism", "phallogocentrism", "patriarchy", "technocracy" etc. If poststructuralism exposes the inferiorization of women, black, oriental, irrational, absent and writing as 'the other' of man, white, occidental, rational, present and speech, ecocriticism also points out the domination of nature and environment by man. Ecologists as well as poststructuralists



eye technology with suspicion and relate its advancement to the project of enlightenment leading to modernity. We have already seen in the first part of this article that how the anthropocentric bias of Christianity caused the dualism between man and nature. What is more surprising is that even the rise of scientific temper in Europe during the renaissance, and thereafter the tradition of enlightenment aggravated this dualism.

The Waste Land, in its texture as well structure both, offers a critique of modernity at different levels and enmeshed in it is the criticism of World War I. Although the poem explicitly does not make any reference to the war except in the pub scene of 'The Game of Chess', there are numerous stances in his personal correspondences to show that Eliot, like any other European, was traumatized by the experience of war. "Everyone's individual fortunes lives are so swallowed up in the one great tragedy, that one almost ceases to have personal experience or emotions, as such as one has seen so unimportant" ("To His Father" 23 Dec. 1917). *The Waste Land* is neither a commentary on the Great War nor it takes any position about the terrible conflict. The war is seeping deep into the texture of the poem. It is seen nowhere but present everywhere. Falling towers, heap of broken images, neurotic denizens, scattered bones and structural fragmentation bring strongly the picture of war and its aftermath to the mind of the reader. Further, the sort of disapproval Eliot shows for the modern ways of life, it can be categorized as a critique of civilization based on the advancement of science and technology. By implication it is a critique of the tradition of enlightenment grounded in the principles of logic, reason and rationality. Needless to say that Eliot eyed the post-renaissance development of European society with suspicion. He was, therefore, critical of secular and democratic values which gained ascendancy with enlightenment. He declared, "I am an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature and royalist in politics" (*For Lancelot Andrews* 7). Consequently, industrialization and urbanization led to colonialism and the scramble for colonies engendered two disastrous wars in the twentieth century. What is noticeable here is that during this entire course of development triggered by modernity, ecology has been at the receiving end of destruction. This orgy of development has engendered inevitable environmental crisis. Lynn White Jr. rightly asserts, "Our ecological crisis is the product of an emerging, entirely novel, democratic culture. The issue is whether a democratic world can survive its implications" (*The Ecocriticism Reader* 6). The point is that the dualism present in the western thought is the root cause of this crisis. The domination of nature by the human beings has been concomitant with progress and development. *The Waste Land* issues a strong warning against this dualism and time and again the poem insists on going back to the ways of life marked by the unity of human and natural worlds. Apropos of this F. R. Leavis writes, "Vegetation cults, fertility rituals, with their sympathetic magic, represent a harmony of human culture with the natural environment, and express an extreme sense of unity of life" (*New Bearings in English Poetry* 93).

Sue Ellen Campbell says that a common point between post-structuralism and ecology is that both deny any entity as self-enclosed, private piece of property: neither a deer, nor a person, nor a text nor a piece of land. Both criticize the traditional sense of a separate, independent authoritative centre of value or meaning. Centers are replaced by networks everywhere. So far as the structure of *The Waste Land* is concerned, it has always been baffling for readers to understand the poem as a unified whole. The scattered and disconnected voices, disjointed ideas, disjunctive narrative and non-linear alignment of sections yield easily to a poststructuralist reading of the poem. The poem is an epitome of fragmentation. Soon after its publication, Eliot felt the necessity of supplying the poem

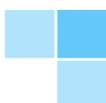


with notes and this act was seen as an attempt to impose a kind of unity or order on the structure of the poem. It can also be said that the notes sought to highlight the underlying unity or order set by the mythical method. J.E.G. Kaiser in his essay entitled, 'Disciplining *The Waste Land*, or How to Lead Critics into Temptation' argues that if the poem is read without external attempt of disciplining, it is a poem that expresses the impossibility of "formulating a totalizing order" and deconstructs the same. He asserts:

Yet the more the world- and the poem- is catalogued, divided, fragmented, the more insistent becomes the pervasive sense of disorder. Read in this way, the poem suggests the postmodern possibility that the individual's relation to the world, and to him or herself, is fundamentally ambiguous and obscure. In this postmodern, poststructuralist reading, Eliot's poem is indeed what Wilson had early termed a "cry *de profundis*", "a profound demonstration of the deconstruction not only of individual identity but also of the fundamental categories through which the individual in modernity has heretofore understood the world (237).

By the use of technology man has tried not only to tame the spontaneous forces of nature but also disrupted its patterns for which humanity is paying a huge price today. The epigraph of *The Waste Land*, taken from the *Satyricon* of Petronius, describes how the Sybil of Cumae, a famous prophetess, was seen by Trimalchio. He is speaking to the Sybil who was granted a life of as many years as she had grains of dust in her hand. But she forgot to ask for eternal youth, and so grew old and decimated. On being asked, 'What do you want?,' she replied, 'I wish to die'. Her situation is akin to Tennyson's character Tithonus. So, whenever human beings transgress the natural patterns of life, they are most likely to have such a tragic situation. Attaining immortality, on literal/physical level, implies refutation of the cycle of birth and death. It also suggests acquisition of power to become invincible and such a power can never be static. This is a perfect instance which shows how human beings came to associate knowledge, here symbolized by the Sybil, with power. Both knowledge and power acted hand in glove with each other for the exploitation of 'the other'. There is no denial of the fact that such a thoughtless application of wisdom has engendered the ecological imbalance and environmental crisis. From the poststructural viewpoint we can demonstrate the deconstruction of authority which is represented by the figure of prophetess.

The very title of the poem, *The Waste Land*, brings to the mind of the reader the absence of rejuvenating picture of nature embellished with dense grooves, cool shades, chirping of birds such as nightingale, hermit-thrush, cicada, and water bodies etc as the markers of fertility, growth and life. It is, therefore, not surprising that the images of death abound in 'The Burial of the Dead'. In fact the death wish highlighted in the epigraph pervades the entire poem. Further, the contrast between the natural world and the human world can be seen from epistemological stand point. In the lines "April is the cruelest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/ Memory and desire, stirring/ dull roots with spring rain" (*The Complete Poems*...61). The nature (season) is perfectly fine in its place here but it is the diseased human consciousness that finds it as the cruelest month. This is how nature is deprived of 'agency' and subordinated to human consciousness. Its flora and fauna here succumb to pathetic fallacy. This loss of spiritual consciousness corresponds to the misappropriation of nature. The denizens of *The Waste Land* consider nature as a source of physical comfort so their attitude towards it is akin to an economist's



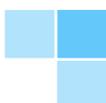
attitude towards material resources. It is evident in the lines, “winter kept us warm, covering/ earth in forgetful snow, feeding .../ summer surprised us ... / I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter” (*The Complete Poems...*61). One of the crucial concerns of ecocriticism is how our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it. This can be seen in the following lines which describe the lot of human beings who are used to barrenness:

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. (*The Complete Poems...*61)

The inhabitants of the waste land can't understand the significance of fertility, growth and rejuvenation. So, they are ruthlessly questioned by this prophetic voice. The historian Donald Worster explains, “we are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because how our ethical systems function” (27). Here, Eliot leaves no stone unturned in exposing the ethical bankruptcy of modern ways of life.

Another feature of this supposedly ‘Unreal’ cityscape is its being overcrowded and overpopulated where people exist only on the physical plane of existence. How strikingly the lines, “A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many / I had not thought death had undone so many”, drive our attention to the story behind such a scene (*The Complete Poems...*61). If “the brown fog” of the atmosphere indicates at the rapid industrialization, the dying population on the bridge is the outcome of a vulgar urbanization. Here the entire backdrop of corrosion of nature and deforestation comes to the fore. This modern waste land, alluding to the polluted lands of king Oedipus and Fisher king, also corresponds to the sick mental states of characters such as Madame Sosostris (a replica of the Sybil) and Belladonna.

The second part of the poem, ‘A Game of Chess’, delves deep into the lives and enclosed spaces of the characters. Although the opulent world of Cleopatra, Dido and Belladonna described here is extremely artificial and overwhelmed with cosmetics, “the sylvan scene” evokes the image of the Garden of Eden where Eve was seduced by Satan. Moreover, this context is correlated with the violation of Philomel and her metamorphosis into a nightingale crying in the desert. In fact, it suggests the degradation of human soul and its misconstruing the message of nature as, “And still she cried, and still the world pursues, / “Jug Jug” to dirty ears” (*The Complete Poems...*64). Here one can draw a parallel between social and natural ecology. The previously described highly sophisticated and artificial world undermines any healthy connection between human and non-human worlds. The next scene portrays a sick woman, mortally afflicted with sense of separation, saying, “My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me/ “Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak/ “What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?” (*The Complete Poems...*65). Such an unhealthy relationship between man and woman may be the result of an acute depression and nervous breakdown leading to impotency. The ‘pub scene’ continues with this theme of barrenness in which Albert, Lil and their friend prefer the sterile sex to fertility. Such unnatural desires have terrible impact on human body and a similar mindset is responsible for the exploitation of nature as well. In fact, such human actions make the waste land and such thoughts produce the waste-landers.



In *The Waste Land* Eliot shows not only man's separation from the natural world and his inability to comprehend the ethical scheme behind it, but also the uncontrolled desires and lust for carnal pleasure which reduce him to a self-centered agent of destruction. The third section entitled, 'The Fire Sermon' exhibits anthropocentrism at its peak. The speaker is surprised not to find pollution in the river Thames as he says, "The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,/ Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends/ Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed". In fact, by juxtaposition, the poet painstakingly evokes the image of nature as it existed once in the imagination of Spenser. Such an image of nature, free from pollutants, can be conceived only in the pre-industrial era. The rivers have been called the life lines of nations and it is an established fact that great civilizations of the past flourished on their banks. The Nile, the Congo, the Indus, the Tigris, the Huang He witnessed the birth of magnificent civilizations of the world. The most coveted thing in *The Waste Land* is water which is also the symbol of spiritual regeneration. Further, if we focus on the next image, "fishing in the dull canal", it makes a statement about the sustainability of man and nature. Fish also symbolizes the origin of life in water and dependence of man on it. The description of fishing near the gashouse shows how human actions have polluted water resources and disturbed the ecological balance. In such a degraded environment no healthy connection between man and nature is possible. The dissociation between the two is further aggravated by the noise pollution indicated in the lines, "But at the back from time to time I hear/ The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring/ Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring" (*The Complete Poems...67*). In addition, the flesh trade carried on by Mrs. Porter and her daughter gets the better of any spiritual communion between man and nature.

In the later part of this section is depicted a public bar in the Lower Thames Street which portrays a somewhat different kind of life marked by harmony. A rejuvenating music emanating from "The pleasant whining of a mandolin/ And a clatter and chatter from within/ Where fisherman lounge at noon ..." This brief description gives a glimpse of communal life where we see a union of human, natural, and spiritual world. However, it is overshadowed by a picture of the Thames ravished by industrial and mechanical intervention:

The river sweets
 Oil and tar
 The barges drift
 With the turning tide

 The barges wash
 Drifting logs
 Down Greenwich reach
 Past the Isle of Dogs. (*The Complete Poems...69*)

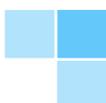
In addition to the imagist technique of writing, these lines depict a horrible image of water pollution. The prophetic potential of this picture is realized strongly when in the holy city of Varanasi I hear that tourist ships, barges and cargoes will be plying soon on the surface of the Ganga; and the river route from Varanasi to Kolkata will be utilized for transportation. At such moments this image of the sobbing Thames flashes across my mental eyes; and the stupidity of human actions is confirmed. Further, the portrayal of

seduction of the Thames daughters shows that man's exploitative attitude towards nature and woman is same. It can be an interesting case for ecofeminism. Therefore, Eliot invokes the preachings of the Buddha and Saint Augustine who emphasized self-control and disciplining of the senses. Only then human beings can learn to live with bare essentials without desiring for more than what is needed and this is the key to sustainable development.

'Death by Water' is the briefest and the most ambiguous section of the poem. The undercurrent of 'death wish' expressed by the Sybil is synchronized with the inevitability of death and hope of rebirth through baptism wherein water plays a crucial role. Here, the fruitful drowning of the God's effigy mentioned in the mystery religions and fertility cults is contrasted with the destructive drowning of Phlebas who was engulfed by the business of 'profit and loss' only. Seen from the post-structural viewpoint, the poem undermines the binary understanding of life over death. To be mindful of one's mortality is living in accordance with the law of nature.

The fifth section, 'What the Thunder Said' deals with the element of air. Here Eliot conjoins the context of the Grail Legend signified by the Chapel Perilous and questing knight with the Upanishadic reference to a moment of crisis symbolized by the sunken river Ganga and the Brahma's voice reverberating through thunder. Followed by the scene of Christ's crucifixion there is the description of precarious mountains without greenery and any source of water. Nature, as if seething with anger for revenge, has been robbed of its music in the following lines, "Not the cicada/ And dry grass singing .../ where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees / But there is no water". These lines culminate in showing total collapse of the European civilization in the lines, "Falling towers/ Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/ Vienna London/ Unreal" (*The Complete Poems...* 73). Even the word of wisdom pronounced by the Brahma as DA, interpreted as "Datta", "Dayadhvam", "Damayata", is delivered by thunder. The highest wisdom that human beings receive from the almighty is communicated only through nature. So, throughout *The Waste Land*, this separation between man and nature has been emphasized. The rich intertextuality of the poem makes its ecocritical reading more illuminating.

To conclude, such an apocalyptic vision expressed almost a century ago seems more relevant today when we see how the most powerful countries are left helpless by the terrible forces of nature unleashed by climate change. The channels are always replete with the news such as the USA facing a number of cyclones, Japan being washed away by the frequently occurring Tsunamis, Bombay, Delhi and Patna engulfed by deluges, Australia and Greece burning with high temperature and forest-fires, avalanches threatening the hill stations etc. In fact, these are not natural calamities but man-made disasters caused by ignoring the warnings enshrined in the literary masterpieces such as *The Waste Land*. This ecocritical analysis from poststructuralist viewpoint integrates discursivity with materiality and proves that there is no existence unmediated nature in anything we produce. This approach exhibits a correlation of language, literature, nature and culture. I am strongly of the view that this remarkable poem can be an integral part of the courses on 'Environmental Ethics'.



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