

The Great Indian Wasteland: Intersections between Eliot's *The Waste Land* and India through the First World War

Md. Shahnawaz

Abstract

Renewed significance has been given to the First World War (henceforth WWI) in Indian history and the meaning of this war for India's role globally. Along with 1.4 million Indian soldiers, India Munition Board also supplied food, raw materials, and textiles for the WWI. Hence, resources were drained from across the country, and taxes and revenues kept increasing. The Indian combatants and non-combatants were effaced from the entire grand narrative despite incurring the loss of thousands of youth resulting in fragmented families, widespread famine, and an atmosphere of terror and uncertainty. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* naturally establishes a connection with the historical context of the post-war era that perfectly illustrates the lived reality and condition of colonial India that suffered disillusionment, despair, and exposition to spiritual and socio-economic bankruptcy. My paper will analyse *The Waste Land* from a postcolonial perspective and demonstrate the eccentricities and intersections between Eliot's fragmented poem about a barren land and India during and after the WWI. In this context, I would like to analyse literature in English and bhasha languages to understand the plight of Indians and the lack of representation in the Great War and its influence on Indian Writing. The entire gamut of WWI writing has been conducted by Europeans with the key motive to glorify their own nation, martyrs, and political representatives. However, the hegemonic discourse was soon challenged by experiences of the Commonwealth which started writing back. Voices from the periphery started consolidating their presence and profound maltreatment meted out to the people of the colonised nations during the event of the WWI. The allegory and thematics of "The Waste Land" will provide new insights to the subaltern voices in the fictional works including *The Eyes of Asia*, *Across the Blackwaters*, *Bandhan Hara*, and "Usne Kaha Tha", and highlight the aporia associated with the WWI narrative.

Keywords: Wasteland, First World War, subaltern, representation, exploitation



1. Depletion of Indian Resources

Europe was engaged in a crisis, arms rivalry, and two Balkan wars over a span of several years before thrusting into the most monstrous war that was mired in impasse and bloodbath for four years. Millions of Europeans and non-Europeans were killed by the end of the Great War that concluded in November 1918. The violence and horror of this continental war could not be contained within the trenches as civil life also suffered from a shortage of resources. The brutalities were never forgotten as the families re-lived them after their men returned with severe physical and psychological injuries. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* exposes the underbelly of Victorian industrial age where the living was in close proximity with the dead. The poem is written in a form of prosopopoeia where he addresses the dead soldiers and the deceased land. The shell-shocked soldiers recounted their experiences while others incurred dismembered limbs and faces. The WWI left behind a sea of unidentified corpses and graves along with many others "neither living nor dead" (Eliot 24). Although India was a part of the inner circle of the WWI, the close connection between India and Britain, brought lasting reverberations on the economic, social, and political apparatus to colonial India. The Great War created a dramatic inflexion in the global trajectory that enormously expanded India's military enrolments and depleted the human and material resources. When Britain declared war on 4th August 1914, Lord Charles Hardinge (then Viceroy of India) declared that India, too, would be partaking in their war, without even consulting the Indian leaders. However, the news of the outbreak of war was welcomed by the Indian leaders and a widespread proclamation of loyalty was pledged. The native princes contributed their loyalty by proclaiming that it was their duty to adhere firmly to their old loyalty to the British Government. Moreover, propagandists blurred the distinction between the real and the ideal, coaxing young men towards their doom. On one hand, we saw groups of men enlisting in the Imperial Army, not for economic reasons but because they believed that was the most honourable and fitting thing to do owing to the 'martial' class they belonged to. On the other hand, some people had nothing to do with the cause of the war but volunteered to fight for the Allied Parties. These were poor, uneducated peasants who left their lands to join the army ranks to escape from poverty. Along with these voluntary enlistments, the British officers also recruited men forcibly.

The Tehsildars were given the responsibility to find recruits for the war and they were captured forcibly from villages. Prisoners were released from local prisons to assist in recruitments. In *India, Empire, and First World War Culture: Writings, Images and Songs*, Das informs that between August 1914 and December 1919, the British Indian Government recruited 877, 068 combatants and 563, 369 non-combatants from the Indian subcontinent, making a total of 1, 440, 437 men for the purpose of war, of whom over 74, 000 never made it back home. During 1914 and 1915 over 140, 000 sepoys fought on the Western Front which included battles in Ypres (1914), Festubert (1915), Neuve Chapelle (1915), and Loos (1915) (Das 35). Over 600, 000 men were deployed in Mesopotamia while the Cavalry which was camped in France until 1918, was sent to Palestine. India provided over 50, 000 non-combatants for the Western Front and about 348, 735 non-combatants for Mesopotamia by the end of 1919 (Das 35). Along with the supply of men, it was the India Munition Board who was responsible for supplying food, raw materials, and textiles for war. The war had put enormous stress on the economic fabric that had long-term consequences on the self-sufficiency movement of Swadeshi. Thus, resources were being drained from across the country, and taxes and revenues kept on increasing. As



a result, the WWI created imbalances in the power dynamics and changed the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, henceforth.

T.S. Eliot first came to Europe in 1914 to pursue Ph.D. in Philosophy at Harvard University but he spent most of the war years as a banker in London and later, emerged as a reputed poet. Even though Eliot was not a soldier, he experienced the war as a civilian that influenced much of his thought and authorial content throughout his life as his work pivoted the disintegration of society, land, and mankind. *The Waste Land* has been read as an outpouring of a profound person stricken by grief and distress or an outburst following the disillusionment and despair of the age, or simply as an elegy to a dead friend. Nonetheless, the poem is more layered than all of these since it is essentially a war poem that unfolds various emotions which have been repressed in the darkest corners of the minds of people who have endured the war, both, directly and from afar. Most of the political leaders of colonial India, including Gandhi, began thinking of self-rule or Swaraj during the years of the WWI and commenced the process of decolonisation in the Indian subcontinent that eventually attained fruition after thirty years of freedom struggle. As a result, the WWI can be considered as a catalyst to subsequent developments in colonial policies and nationalist politics that took place during the inter-war period in India. The WWI, thus, initiated a new era of British atrocities upon the Indian populace that pointed towards the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, the 1943 Bengal Famine, communal violence provoked by the British government, and the Partition. Additionally, the immediate post-war period witnessed a demographic calamity as India incurred over 17 million deaths due to the influenza pandemic that enveloped the entire world from 1918 to 1919.

The war became a grand narrative and its memory is preserved in the form of museums, letters, memoirs, and photographs across the globe. The discursive reduction of it quantified India to mere numbers of soldiers given, soldiers lost, tons of food sent, and money spent. These soldiers were effaced from the entire grand narrative despite India incurring the loss of thousands of youth, resulting in fragmented families, widespread famine, and an atmosphere of terror and uncertainty. This absence or fragmentary memorialization mirrors the ineffability of the war. The linguistic collapse is because of two significant reasons; firstly, the letters to and fro were rigorously censored by the imperial forces, and more importantly, the psychological strain left the soldiers unable to express their experiences in a suitable manner. The title of the poem can also be understood as a reference to 'no man's land', a landscape torn between the soldiers' pre-war life and their experience in the trenches and battlefields. The war ushered new forms of violence and turned India into a wasteland that witnessed similar dehumanizing images of carelessly transposed corpses, vacant eyes, and empty streets presented by Eliot in his poem.

2. Indian Historiography in the WWI

The representation of India as a wasteland brings more insight into historiography since the socio-political upheavals surrounding the freedom movement, Independence, and Partition of India became the central narrative, pushing all other incidents to the periphery. There has been a great sense of ambiguity regarding India's contribution to the British War during the time of rising nationalist consciousness. Even after a century, the words of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and other British trench poets bring about anxiety and a sense of foreboding. While rumbling through the pages of works of Ford Madox Ford, D.H. Lawrence, and Richard Aldington, a series of emotions like outrage, sympathy, and



understanding, washes over us. Salman Rushdie writes in *Midnight's Children* that “[a] nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will— except in a dream we all agreed to dream” (129-130). Thus showing India as a country had found its voice and could write its own history. In such societies, history guided by the sense of nationality seeks to justify the erroneous decisions and rash actions taken by its leaders that had unknowingly caused great loss of human resources. That history seeks to praise the nation through a specific version of its past and adopts a strategy of exclusion when it is met with a counter-narrative that attempts to reveal a much darker truth. On one hand, where the quest for India’s freedom struggle is celebrated and represented as a part of history in which the entire nation is made to take pride in, at the same time, the fact that these national leaders were in favour of the War, with the ambition of attaining Home Rule at the end of it, was carefully hidden and removed from the public and official memory. As a result, national and personal histories are being tampered with by the imperial narratives which have a heavy influence on public history and the body of fictional work that is produced around it. Therefore, post-war India remains a mystery unknown to most and difficult to grasp for others who try to achieve a retrospective glance at it. In various ways, India shares a similarity with Eliot’s “The Waste Land” which is a problem text despite its significance in literature because of the elusive nature of the poetry that makes it challenging for the readers to categorize and comprehend its meaning.

The Great War brought about an intense crisis in Europe that threatened to destroy Western culture. It also brought doom among the Indian masses through four years of inhuman warfare and socio-political and economic adversity that echoes through the first segment of *The Waste Land*, “The Burial of the Dead”, and simultaneously pervades throughout the poem and the war period across colonial India. The causes of the war are now as transparent as the effects that gave rise to disillusionment not only among the general people but also the political leaders. Without any intention of disregarding the freedom fighters and martyrs, I would like to question the social structuring and motivations behind the prior allegiance and following withdrawal of participation and denial of honourable mention of the Indian soldiers in the Indian writing of history. One of the most challenging considerations for me would render in questioning the stark deviation in intentions of the Indian political leaders that cost the nation millions of young men and uncountable depletion of resources. From an Indian perspective, the WWI took place in the very midst of national uprisings and dynamic national successes which precipitated a miscalculated agenda taken by the political representatives. The 1857 mutiny had gradually resulted in a demand for ‘Home Rule’. But the misplaced notions of earning British veneration and global recognition by means of devoting unflinching support in the WWI proved to be miscarried mission. A quick retraction and suppression of the entire act of solidarity ensued from the WWI debacle. The hopes of ‘Swaraj’ became a distant dream bringing the national movements to a halt, and affliction and drought to millions of Indians. This gives rise to the question of responsibility. The British were most definitely at the helm of mass misery but the Indian political leaders cannot be exempted from sharing equal responsibility for their misguided undertaking of treating their countrymen with complete disregard. The chauvinism of the political leaders must be brought into



question, along with the ingratiating representation of India during the Great War by the authors, annalists, historians, and academicians. The impact of the war drove away all the sorry consequences or sympathies to people that displayed pride, greed, and ulterior motives. Moreover, postcolonial reading of *The Waste Land* has exposed the grievously dissipating ramifications of the war on the notions of cultural and racial supremacy that had prevailed unquestioned thus far. Underscored by the relentless chaos and violence, the war to end all wars became an irony.

India was certainly in the midst of a politically charged environment and it had a potent impact on the consciousness of the collective population which made it even more difficult to document and thus, understand the extent of trauma experienced. The Indian troops sent abroad were suddenly thrown into a foreign land to kill an unknown enemy and they were exposed to new cultures and geographies for which they were completely unprepared. Some of the soldiers were barely out of their teenage years and the horrors of the battlefield left a lasting impression on the way they negotiated the rest of their life back in the homeland. Along with its youth, India also provided almost 1.7 lakh animals for the warfare that proved to be a game-changer for the Allied Parties. Life was drained off India, leaving the land desiccated. The lifeless image of India is particularly striking since it is a spirited land known for its fertility all year round. *The Waste Land* also gives a sense of milking the human reservoir of its vital energy and life form wherein, even the month of April that ushers springtime seems like the “cruellest month” (Eliot 23).

3. Literary Representation of India

Literary artists had a tough task grappling with the myriad contradictions and ethical paradoxes. They were challenged to accurately express the hypocritical patriotism and fanatical nationalism introduced by the WWI. Rather than just having a superficial discussion over the literature we have on our hands, our objective should focus on developing a lens through which we can delve deeper into the historical and cultural issues ensued by the Great War in the Indian subcontinent prior and post the distressing affair. Works such as “Usne Kaha Tha” by Chandradhar Sharma Guleri, *Udaas Naslein* by Abdullah Hussein, *Across the Blackwaters* by Mulk Raj Anand, and the expository essay, *Loraiyer Mul*, by Rabindranath Tagore opens up a critical discussion where we talk not only about the harrowing encounters by those present in the warfronts but also depict the complex relationship shared between the Indian subcontinent and the First World War. Indian literature seeks not only to respond to the war, but delves into a deeper level where it brings out the anxieties, aspirations, and dreams which are political yet appeal strongly to the emotions. When Eliot writes *The Waste Land*, the poem opens up a perspective about the tormenting experience that began with the war and concludes with what we are left with by the time the war comes to an end. The long war period also saw a radical change where India took a huge leap by shifting from an agro-based economy to a mercantile economy.

It was in December 1914 that *Sabujpatra*, a liberal Bengali magazine, published Tagore’s *Loraiyer Mul* or “The Roots of War”. Through this essay, Tagore tries to critique the war as a product of capitalism. In this appraisal essay Tagore writes, “[t]he World had never seen mastery on such gigantic scale. Europe’s field of conquest in Asia and Africa” (Jalil 184). This is the backdrop against which Eliot writes “The Waste Land”, grappling with the reasons and causes of this mindless massacre. The acres of wasteland makes us wonder “[w]hat are the roots that clutch, what branches grow [o]ut of this stony rubbish?



Son of man, [y]ou cannot say, or guess, for you know only [a] heap of broken images” (Eliot 23). The poem is deliberately written in a collage pattern to echo the fragmented state of modern civilization. Tagore points out that indeed it was capitalism that was the root cause of the war and further goes to explain that ‘trade’, which until that moment relied on a give and take arrangement, saw its dynamics rapidly transform into a master and slave relationship. The master, being the entrepreneur, controlled the market and was responsible for creating multiple impediments for the ones left behind. This desire to dominate became the root cause of the war. The trading parties were no longer restricted to business and commerce and became overwhelmed with a lust for world dominance. The European merchants, entrepreneurs, and business owners were well-acquainted with the luxuries and comfort that were directly related to one-way trafficking of profits and turned into a class of recalcitrant people driven solely by their capitalist agendas.

The Waste Land was Eliot’s attempt to break away from the hegemonic Victorian hierarchy that regarded war as a duty of the brave and a ubiquitous responsibility towards one’s nation. Colonial India also became a witness to similar kinds of nationalistic testimonies by overlooking the fact that the war was never theirs, to begin with. Numerous poems were written such as ‘England’s Cause is Ours’, ‘Ode to an Indian Army’, ‘India to England’, and other such works began to be published in various English journals echoing the rhetoric of India’s indisputable loyalty. But there were almost no words or vocabulary to portray the horrors of the war. No word in any language could effectively describe when the romance of the war radically transformed into images of pain, horror, and agony. When Tagore won the Nobel Prize in Literature for *Gitanjali* or *Song Offering* in 1913, he was a rage in the West where his art and philosophy were greatly recognised. However, when the wind of nationalism and hostility swept across the European continent leading to the WWI, Tagore saw this forthcoming war as an assault on humanity and raised his voice through his writings. When the entire Indian National Congress and leading Indian leaders were enthusiastically supporting the British in the war, Tagore opted out of the imperial propaganda, becoming an independent force against war and colonialism. He was able to look beyond the jingoism and realized the futility of attaining Home-Rule by sacrificing thousands of young Indian men.

In September 1914 India was bombarded by the Germans in Madras with the help of the battleship named ‘Emden’ which until then had been sinking ships in the Indian Ocean. This is also when the Indian soldiers met with a defeat at the battle of Mesopotamia. Khitimohan Sen in his book *Balaka Kabya Parikrama* translates Tagore’s “Jhorer Kheya” where he states that the poem was explicitly written during the war milieu when

[a] little of the roar of the First World War was reaching the country through newspapers ... look at the bloodshed tears where this war is true and real, waves of liquid fire are flowing, poison gas is spreading all around. Bombs are raining down from the skies. Anti-Aircraft guns are firing their shells from below and the skies are wrestling in death’s embrace. We have to find a path to steer the ship of human history to a shore of New Age.” (Chaudhuri 414)

Sen emphasises that “Jhorer Kheya” seeks to achieve a kind of hope during a time of utter despair. Not only land, but humans were left completely degenerated and one’s inner self had turned into a wasteland. The process of acute soul searching is resonant throughout

The Waste Land where the search for redemption, salvation, and reconciliation keeps lingering on.

Opening in a rich and stimulating space of Amritsar, Chandradhar Sharma Guleri posits the narrative of “Usne Kaha Tha”, translated as “She Had Said”, by shifting the focus to the trenches. Creating a glaring disparity between the two different spaces that the sepoy occupies, his home in Amritsar and later the war trenches in an unknown land, Guleri reveals the politics which exists within the system. The desolation and hopelessness of these young men become more profound since they have absolutely no knowledge about the political contingencies controlled by the men in power but had a direct impact upon their lives. In a circumstance where we have limited information about the incidents during the First World War, the words of the story evoke the world of the sepoy in its raw form. The narrative becomes an archive of some of the deepest anxieties and fantasies that a sepoy who is far away from home keeps pondering over. The story describes the streets of Amritsar in a pre-war scenario where the roads are full of hustle and bustle. On one hand, where the story shows the desperation of Lehna Singh where he strives to return to his homeland for the sake of his childhood memories and romance, on the other hand, the narrative is an epitome of commitment; a commitment not to the British government, not even to his own country but to a mother who wanted to protect her sons going to war. Lehna Singh dies not out of bravery, gallantry, or patriotism, as it was falsely proclaimed in the official records rather he died to preserve the sanctity of his promise made to a mother. The story takes away from the domain of war into an intimate realm of interpersonal relations and the inner workings of their minds.

Post-war effects and personal narratives truly bring out the impairments of the WWI. Owing to the lack of literacy and awareness, the soldiers who returned were not able to record their experiences to find a place in the larger history. Their stories and experiences were carried forward in the form of oral narrative which is not considered to be a credible source of history as compared to the hegemonic written accounts that bespeak stories of gallantry; stories of sacrifices; stories of brave men who received greater lands and higher pensions. Along with these narratives, there are narratives that are consciously ignored. These are the narratives of losses. The differences in narratives acquire a sharper critique when the Armistice was declared on 11th November 1918 and the war was officially over signifying the return of the remaining soldiers. Instead of acknowledging the efforts of the Indian soldiers, the British Indian government passed ‘The Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Bill’ on 6th February 1919, popularly known as the Rowlatt Bill, named after Justice Sir Sidney Rowlatt, before the Imperial Legislature in Delhi. It was earlier introduced in December 1918 and was meant to indefinitely extend the emergency measures that were put in place through the Defense of India Act 1915 during the First World War. On 18th March 1919, the Rowlatt Act was passed by the Imperial Legislative Council in Delhi and two days later it became a law, authorizing the government to arrest any Indian without a warrant and confine suspects without trial for up to one year. This resulted in widespread protests or ‘hartal’ implored by Gandhi on 30th March 1919, postponed to 6th April, along with protests led by Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew and Dr. Satyapal against the British Government in various parts of the nation. It was the arrest of the two latter leaders that prompted people to gather in the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar when General Dyer ordered his troops to open fire at the people killing hundreds of them. It is noteworthy that the firing troop included the same soldiers who had returned from the WWI. When we talk about a particular event be it the Holocaust, or the First



World War, or the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, these are not just public events but also personal trauma.

Conclusion

The mighty British Empire went on to win the war and expand its power in all forms, completely disregarding the rest of the ‘world’ involved in the First World War. It can be considered that Eliot employs seven languages in *The Waste Land* to give a voice to as many cultures as possible through his poem along with a sense of incomprehensibility of language to appropriately express the extent of horror and trauma inflicted by the WWI. It is befitting for such an extensive work to end with the ineffable “Shantih shantih shantih” (Eliot 39) that literally means peace. Nevertheless, Eliot tries to point towards a state of living that surpasses man-made law and order which eventually proved futile.

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