Romantic Dryness in T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"

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Abstract

The present paper discusses the problem of alienation, which is configured as a gendered issue in T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. In the modern waste land of the twentieth century, romantic relations are torn apart, and love and intimacy become as impossible as the marriage of heaven and hell. The inhabitants of the waste land are buffetted by extreme pangs of loneliness and a profound sense of solitude. These wastelanders are bereft of hope to relate to the Other. They are emotionally paralysed, living in a completely subjective world and alienated from any eternal reality. Emotional sterility and the failure of love between man and woman form a kind of thematic nucleus for The Waste Land. Lovers in the poem sputter into paralysis and silence. They are unable to communicate and share reciprocal feelings. Instead, they lead a solipsistic and self-centred existence, which is devoid of love and romance. Indeed, the waste land is a psychological state that emanates from a complete breakdown in One's relation to the Other. Relations in the poem vindicate the degradation of values, the the absence of love, and the dissolution of marriage. Emotional dryness becomes the individual's lot and predicament in the modern age.

Modernity has left indelible scars on the individual's psychological equilibrium. Man becomes a deformed product of the sterile modern times, psychologically ostracised, leading an alienated existence. Interpersonal alienation becomes the defining characteristic of the moder man, who dwells in an unbearable loneliness and solitude. The social psychologist Joseph G. Keegan describes the alienated man as the one "[whose] basic identity has either vanished or become so nebulous as to be practically nonexistent. We may say that alienation is a condition of psychological existence that is emotionally and motivationally flat and dispirited, devoid of meaninglessness to self as well as to others."[1] The present paper is mainly concerened with emotional alienation, which is depicted by the Modernist poet T.S. Eliot in his poem "The Waste Land", which is divided into five sections.

In "The Burial of the Dead", emotional coldness is evident in the description of April as "the cruelest month"[2]. So, the season of lovers brings no love for the inhabitants of the waste land. Winter, which is symbolic of death, is the most comfortable season for the inhabitants of the dead life because it maintains a minimal frozen life. As the speaker says, "Winter kept us warm, covering/Earth in forgetful snow, feeding/A little life with dried tubers" (1:5-7). The lines figure a wastelander, who is bereft of hope, paralyzed, living in a completely subjective world and alienated from any external reality. The passivity of the speaker is emphasized by the use of a static tense: the present participle. The end of the verbs, 'breeding', 'mixing', 'stirring', 'covering', 'feeding', implies a lack of motion and action.

The episode of the hyacinth girl reveals a man, who suffers from emotional paralysis. When meeting the Hyacinth girl, he could not dare to confess his romantic love for her. The lover of the hyacinth girl says: "I could not/ Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither/ Living nor dead, and I new nothing" (1:38-40). The line "Your arms full, and your hair wet" suggests sexuality and regeneration. However, the speaker seems to be ill-prepared to become a good husband and father. The speaker's remoteness and silence is further emphasized as follows: "Looking into the heart of light silence" (1:41). The heart might be a reference to the Victorian dictum: "man is the head and woman the heart." The moment in the Hyacinth Garden does not reach its expected consumption. It demonstrates an impotence from the part of the male, which leads inevitably to the crisis and subversion of desire. Commenting on the scene, the critic Gabrielle McIntire states that

> desire recognizes its own failure even in the moment it is felt; the moment of desire is already strange and estranged from the subject. In his response to desire the lover turns *not* toward the ostensible subject, but inward, away from the 'hyacinth girl', to a desolation borrowed from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* [...] desolate and empty is the sea.[3]

So, this episode presents a picture of failing love. This feeling is intensified by alluding to Wagner's opera, a song of unattainable love. According to the story, Tristan, being wounded, was lying in his castle by the vast and desolate sea waiting for Isolde to console and heal him. But Isolde was unable to reach Tristan in due time; as a result, he died of desperation and hopelessness. Hence, to ensure health and fertility, man and woman should be united. According to Joseph Campbell, "There is one theory that the Holy Grail represented the center of perfect harmony, the search for perfection, for totality and unity."[4] Fertility of the

waste land cannot be accomplished except through the harmony of sexes. In this regard, Brooker and Bentley state that:

> In philosophical terms, the male is a subject and the female is an object. Health and fruitfulness require the unity of male and female, of subject and object, either before time in immediate experience or after time in transcendent experience. The irresolvable dualism of subject and object (and of man and woman) in the centre is inseparable from the triumph of the relational consciousness of that locks both into closed systems and prevents communion [5]

The quote is invokes Eliot's mentor, the American idealist philosopher F.H. Bradley, who posist that Transcendental and immediate experiences are the ideal states where subject and object (male and female) constitute one whole; while relational experience is the state of division or dualism.

The second section of the poem, 'A Game of Chess', opens with a tragic vision of love. It alludes to the famous lovers Antony and Cleopatra whose romantic love incited a war in which Antony died and Cleopatra committed suicide. In the modern age, which is marked by individualism and self-centredness, communication fails even between husband and wife, who are isolated and alienated from each other despite their apparent unitedness by marriage. The woman whose "nerves are bad to-night", is hypothetically a wife with her aloof and indifferent husband. The lines suggest a complete breakdown between the sexes, who fail to connect at all levels. The woman, who suffers from a great despair because of her husband's lovelessnes and callousness, pleads: "stay with me./ Speak to me. Why do you never speak?, speak"(2:111-12), but the man rejects her request. The door, which is constantly buffeted by the wind, is the best metaphor for his state of mind.

The man's indifference and unresponsiveness to his demanding and embittered lonely wife is reinforced by the poet's allusion to Dido. According to the story, Dido was deeply in love with Aeneid, but the latter did not reciprocate this love with her. Because the mission of founding Rome was more important than this love, Aeneid left her. As a result, Dido committed suicide. This story is similar to that between the nervous woman and the indifferent man. Both of them are probably incapable of love.

Alienation in "A Game of Chess"is further emphasized by the fact that the section, unlike the others, takes place exclusively on the inside of rooms. The original title of the

section is “In the Cage”, a reminiscent of the Sibyl in the epigraph. In her commentary on women’s isolation in this section, Brooker and Bentley observe that: “the women in this part of *the waste land* are all entrapped, like the Sibyl, they are isolated and withered in their ability to know, to be, and to bear. Like her, these women are enclosed and dangled as decorations or amusements for men.” (Reading The Waste Land 96)

Self-fulfillment in “The Waste Land” is lacking mainly due to this indifference and ignorance of the “Other”. The husband in “A Game of Chess” is blind to his wife’s existence, who desperately cries: “Do you see nothing?”(2:122). This man’s mind runs only on death, nihilism and nothingness. According to Brooker, “Nothingness in Eliot’s view, is an overwhelming and terrifying beast devouring the inhabitants of the contemporary wasteland. The idea of absence, or nothingness, as a perilous presence is not unique to Eliot, it has figured prominently in the thought of modern existentialist theologians” [6]

Responding to his wife’s querulous demands for answer, the husband’s answers suggest that he only thinks of nothingness and death. When, the wife asks: “What are you thinking of?”(2:113), her husband replies: “I think we are in rat’s alley/ where the dead men lost their bones” (2:115-16). Longing for replies that would set her troubled mind at rest, the woman hysterically asks: “Do/ You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember nothing/Nothing?” (2:121-24), the husband responds after a long silence: “I remember/ These are pears that were his eyes” (2:125-26). The answers suggest not only this man’s absent mindedness, but his alienation and detachment from reality itself. He seems to be emotionally and spiritually dead: “Are you alive, or no?”(2:127). The woman’s question implies that her companion is sunk in a state of vertigo. The couple’s conversation implies a neurological belittling description of self.

The nervous woman wants her husband to wrap her in a blanket of love and sympathy without which she would fail and break. She longs for a romantic declaration of love from her husband, and feels that unless he talks to her, her nerves will snap. But the man remains silent or answers his wife’s questions in incomplete sentences, which indicates his unwillingness to respond to her; it seems as if she is knocking on his nerves. The gaps in the passage indicate silence. The wife becomes more annoyed by her husband’s aloofness. Trying to raise any interest in him, she says: “I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street/With my hair down, so what shall we do tomorrow?/What shall we ever do”(2:131-34). The woman wants, by this act, to assert her femininity and evoke her husband’s masculinity. For the woman, madness

remains the only option, or possibly effective method to earn sympathy. But the man remains indifferent showing no response. The woman fails to awaken his silent bonds of affection because he does not look like a masculine. The couple's attempt to avoid rain is symbolic of their avoidance of salvation and fertility.

The woman's boredom and ennui are reminiscent of Eliot's wife,Vivien, for whom the routine life was both dull and horrifying. According to Ackroyd, "Vivien was still in poor health, and suffered from headaches and sleeplessness- no doubt aggravated by the fact that, while her husband was actively and continually engaged in work of some kind, she had very little to do and was becoming bored"[7] The theme of boredom also reappears in the episode of Lil, a married woman who, in the absence of her husband, spends her nights at a pub discussing abortion and adultery.

The woman's threat to rush out with her hair down is an hysterical act, which is also an attempt to project her femininity. This bodily language also occurs somewhere in "What the Thunder Said": "A woman drew her long black hair out tight/And fiddled whisper music on those strings" (5:277-78). The woman's neurosis is not just demonstrated by her foolish actions, but also by her stupid questions, like: "What is the wind doing?" (2:119).

The husband fails to give his wife the love and care she needs. He even wants to withdraw from his marital commitments. Therefore, marriage seems to lose its meaning; it is characterized by loveliness and apathy. Life itself is reduced to "nothing" and "silence". This episode of "A Game of Chess" presents a decayed mind and the consequent sterile sexual relationships. There is an absence of communication between the couple. The nervous woman is asking questions; but her husband remains silent and detached. To escape his wife's hysteria and wipe the painful reality out of consciousness, he turns to "Shakespearian rag" to provide him with solace. The Shakespearian rag is also a reference to the 'jazz age' with its hedonistic psychological mass hysteria. The roaring twenties, though marked by prohibition, results in an excessive alcohol consumption and sexual promiscuity.

Traditionally, marriage is a way of striving for unity, but in "The Waste Land", relationships between husband and wife are fragmentary. The man and woman are sterile; unable to create something larger than themselves. The middle class couple exemplifies Eliot's personal life with Vivien, which was in a state of messy disorders as a result of an early and failing marriage. Indeed, numerous connections have been made between "A Game

of Chess" and Eliot's failed marriage. The critic Stephen Spender, for instance, comments that:

> The dialogue […] spoken hysterically by the woman, not answered except by incommunicable and terrible thoughts by the man, is where the poem touches the poet most closely. It is the poem's innermost sanctum. This is the wound, the heart of suffering. The poet is here brought up against the exhibited conditioned behavior of the woman who speaks aloud: 'What shall we do tomorrow?/ What shall we ever do?' His unspoken comments have that immediacy of speech for which the only possible language is poetry. It is the poetry of real situations and projects a character which can only be Eliot himself. Comments such as 'I think we are in rat's alley/ Where the dead men lost their bones' are the poetry of immediate experience .[8]

So, "The Waste Land" might be an expression of an emotional pain, which is rooted in Eliot's relationship with his wife.

Like the previous episode, the second one, between Lil and Albert, demonstrates life as a hell of broken relationships. Sexual intercourse brings no joy. It is "love for love's sake". Both Albert and Lil are indifferent to each other. Such indifference entails an ignorance of the Other's existence. Marriage for Albert means just having "good time". It has nothing to do with love because Lil "nearly died of young George"(2:160). These "good times" have their tolls on her. They do not just make her look antique, but almost terminate her life. Marriage becomes a legalized sexual violence: "What you get married for if you don't want children?" (2:164). Richard Badenhausen posits that Eliot's works are

> Littered with male-female relationships marked by aborted communication and failures to achieve intimacy. In *The Waste Land*, for example, the speaker who asks the question "What you get married for if you don't want children?" can't conceive of any motivation for marriage other than progeny. The assumption is that marriage has little to do with love, affection, or friendship. In many respects, the poem serves to demonstrate the crisis of intimacy that had emerged in the post-war Britain, though it had not been discussed in that manner[9]

Hence, women's function is just to give pleasure; they are a means to an end. They are appreciated as a piece of delicious "gammon". The latter symbolizes uncleanness, greed, and stupidity.

Lil's husband is an oversexual dynamo, who gives no care to his wife's health; he just wants to quench his own sexual desires whenever he is swept by a sudden guest of passion.

The fact that another pregnancy might kill Lil indicates that her relationship with Albert is characterized by lack of spiritual love, consideration and marital commitments. In this respect, Campbell writes:

> What is marriage? The myth tells you what it is. It's the reunion of the separated duad. Originally you were one. You are now two in the world, but the recognition of the spiritual identity is what marriage is. It's different from a love affair. It has nothing to do with that. […]When people get married because they think it's a long-time love affair, they'll be divorced very soon, because all love affairs end in disappointment. But marriage is recognition of a spiritual identity [I]f we are distracted by certain sensuous interests, we'll marry the wrong person (Campbell 40).

Love is a way of transcending and overcoming brokenness, of retying and rebinding fragments into a whole. But in "The Waste Land", love fails; it connotes fragmentation rather than unity. Marriage becomes an alienating institution.

Relationship between husband and wife lacks any sense of love and respect. It is reduced to a mere physical approximation, to an expression of base desires, or to a means of corrupting the "Other". In Lil's case, it results in the deterioration of her health; though she is in her thirties, she looks so antique. Albert's relationship with his wife is devoid of any emotional commitment. He is interested only in the spurious ideal image of Lil; he conceives of her as a mere artificial construct: "He will want to know what you done with that money he gave you/To get yourself some teeth" (2:143-44). The name Lil is ironic; it's the name of a flower, which symbolizes beauty and youth. But, for Albert, women are reduced to commodities or material objects. As Lil's friend says: "He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,/And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said" (2:148-49). Before leaving to the army, Albert gave Lil money to have her teeth out and buy a new set. Lil's friend reminds her that Albert wants a good-looking wife, and if she does not perform her job, as a wife, properly, her husband will make off with other women, who are more attractive. Lil's passive reaction to her friend's warnings indicates that she loses even her sense of femininity. She is not afraid that her husband may have adultery with another woman. Lil's fixing of the artificial teeth signifies the unreality of the individual in the modern age. Not only the City that becomes Unreal, but the individual either.

Indeed**,** human relationships in "A Game of Chess" are doomed to failure. There is a break down of relations at all levels; even language fails as a connector or binder. The section

gives a good picture of the war between sexes in which there is a complete absence of harmony and genuine love. The latter becomes a mere illusion. The title of the section, a game of chess, is symbolic of the wicked play with emotions and sexual desire.

In "The Fire Sermon", love-making is barbaric; nowhere is there a sense of pure love. As a case in point, the relationships between Mrs. Porter and Sweeny do not provide any idealized vision of love. Both of them lost their dignity, showing no guilt for their physical depravity. The act of cleansing their feet in the soda water is ironic because according to the legend of The Holy Grail, the questing knight used to wash his feet in the soda water to keep himself pure, and to be able to understand the meaning of the Grail. The "moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter" is also ironic because the moon symbolizes purity. Mrs. Porter is an exemplar of the faithless modern woman. She is the antithesis of Philomel, who refused to submit to her oppressor and was "rudely forced".

Mrs. Porter's sordid relationship with Sweeny might be an implicit reference to Vivien's adulterous act with Bertrand Russell, and probably with other men. As Ackroyd contends, "there is no doubt that Vivien fluted with Russell, as she was in later years to flute with other men." (Ackroys 67) Suffering from many psychological and physical ailments, Vivien betrays her husband by seeking company of others because she could not find solace with her husband. This view is shared by the critic John Xiros Cooper, who writes:

> When ill, she was sunk in a sudden depression. For a time Eliot tried to keep up with her, but it was a losing battle and he became increasingly conscious of his inadequacy. Indeed, he may have contributed to her depression, as grew more remote and reserved; cold and distant might be another way of putting it. As a result, she sought solace in the company of others. It is difficult to know what kind of sexual relationship they had, but it could not have been a satisfying one. It is clear now that after a time, with her marriage sinking into desuetude, Vivien entered into a sexual relationship with Russell.[10]

Eliot's shock of marital betrayal had far reaching effects on his poetry including "The Waste Land". According to Eliot's biographer Ronald Bush, "Participating in the sense of emotional strangulation that suffuses that early poem, the betrayed women in The Waste Land also absorb the complex ambivalence associated in Eliot's mind with Vivien."[11] Thus, in his portrayal of adultery, Eliot is inspired by a personal experience; his ego was given a severe blow, when he discovered that his wife, Vivien, had an affair with Bertrand Russell. She is similar to Isolde, who is married to King Mark, but betrays him in an affair with Tristan.

The myth of Philomel tells a vey tragic story of the woe of sex. According to the myth, Philomel was raped by her brother- in- law and her tongue was cut in order to prevent her from spelling her sexual trauma. Reckless of the superego's censorship, Tereus blindly responded to his id's impulses ignoring that love, by convention, is reciprocal. It is never obtained by violence and controlling others, as in the case of Philomel, who, "by the barbarous king/So rudely forced" (2:99-100). In this respect, G.M. Hyde states that: "If modern man is spiritually crippled, he bears still deeper wounds in his passionate centers: one way or another, sterility is his lot. "The Waste Land" is about sterility: especially where it is about burning sexual desire, in the section founded on Buddha's The Fire Sermon."[12] So, the myth of Philomel suggests the degradation and cruelty of sex, and the absence of any ethical principles. The voice of the nightingale, which, traditionally, announces the coming of spring, becomes a euphemism for sex and sexual invitation.

In the same section, Mr. Eugenides, whose name ironically means 'well-bred', offers bribes in return for casual sex. His heart is on metropolitan whoring. Capitalism, in the modern age, renders money as a means of body-merchandising. As the speaker says: "Asked me in demotic French/ To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel/Followed by a weekend at the Metropole" (3:213-14). The lines suggest a homosexual meeting. This view is reinforced by Margaret C. Weirick, who comments that: "The invitation suggests an illicit affair, maybe heterosexual, maybe homosexual"[13]

The episode of the typist and the young man carbuncular reveals how love is sordid and mechanical. The poet's description of the typist, as a "human engine waits/Like a taxi throbbing waiting" (3:16-7), suggests a woman, who is numb and mechanical in her actions; this is further emphasized by the word "automatic". The woman becomes simply an automaton. As the poet describes her: "She smoothes her hair with automatic hand" (3:255). The typist's hand, like her sexual act, is automatic. Like the male speaker, in "A Game of Chess", who resorts to the Shakespearian Rag, the typist retreats to playing the gramophone to escape from the immediate present. She welcomes the clerk's rape with passivity and indifference: "Flushed and decided, he assaults at once; / Exploring hands encounter no defense; /His vanity require no response, / And makes a welcome of indifference" (3:239-42). This woman lacks a meaningful moral register to understand or to be conscious of her sexual degradation. The young man and the typist are united not by a genuine love, but rather by their indifference to each other. The clerk's sexual encounter with the typist leaves her with no pleasure or sense of sin. Unlike the hero, who receives revelation after his heroic act, the

young man carbuncular gropes his way back down the 'unlit' stairs towards the 'heart of darkness' from which he comes. As the poet says: "And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit…" (3:248).

In "The Fire Sermon", there is a breakdown of relationship between man and woman. Men think of women lustfully, as mere sex objects or instruments for the temporary relief of sexual and emotional needs. Men and women's relationship is sordid devoid of any sense of sympathy or romantic feelings. Romantic love, simply, does not exist. Because sexual involvement is a daily routine, it becomes a heavy burden. At the end of her mechanical sexual encounter with the young man carbuncular, the typist says: "Well now that it is done: and I'm glad it's over" (3:252). In "The Fire Sermon", love is reduced to transitory attachment and debased form of relationships, which are merely sexual: "The nymphs are departed/And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors-/Departed, have left no addressees"(3:179-81). Similarly, the three Thames-- Daughters were violated and used as objects of pleasure rather than genuine love. Their song of "weialala leai" suggests not only indifference, but the absence of guilt and dignity as well.

The violet hour, in "The Fire Sermon", evokes sex; but it is equivalent to the ninth hour when Jesus Christ was crucified. According to Weirick, "the ninth hour […] is the hour in which Jesus died. The Biblical ninth hour is equivalent to three o'clock in the afternoon in our modern time scheme. They measured the beginning of day at dawn, which was considered to break at six o'clock in the morning" (Weirick 27). In the same vein, Cleanth Brooks writes: "Violet is one of the liturgical colors of the Church. It symbolizes repentance and it is the color of baptism."[14] But, in "The Waste Land", the violet hour is the propitious time for the animalistic and devolutionary sexual intercourse.

In "What the Thunder Said", Eliot compares the ideal relationship between two lovers to that between the sailor and a calm sea. The metaphor implies that relationship between lovers should be based on reciprocity rather than control, as in the case of Philomel and the typist. The line: "Your heart would have responded/Gaily, when invited, beating obedient/to controlling hands" (5:420-21), suggests that it did not, mainly because such relationship is based on 'control', rather on mutual understanding. Commenting on the passage, Alasdair D. F. Macrae writes: "Eliot uses the analogy of sailing to explore what can take place between two people. The good sailor does not impose rigid control on his boat; he accepts the power of wind and water and bases his steering of the boat on his understanding of this power. The boat

'responds gaily' as if glad to co-operate with man and wind and sea."[15] Macrae also adds that 'Your heart would have responded' as the boat had but the verb is conditional and he cannot offer the right control, the appropriate invitation. He cannot do so because he has no self-control" (Macrae 42).

In his Notes to "The Waste Land", Eliot informs us that Tiresias is the main personage in the poem, and that what he sees is the gist of the poem.[16] Indeed, what Tiresias sees, and what he symbolizes in the poem, is the sexual problem inherent in the modern age. Tiresias is the archetypal wise man, who has special knowledge about sexual experience. In one version of the myth, Tiresias was asked to arbitrate a quarrel between Hera and Zeus as to whether male or female enjoyed sex more. Tiresias answered that women enjoyed sex more, and as a result, she was blinded by Hera, who was furious at his reply. For compensation, Zeus gave him prophecy. In another version of the myth, Tiresias saw two snakes coupling and killed the female. As a punishment, he was turned into a woman for seven years. When he, years later, saw the same snakes coupling, he killed the male; consequently, he was transformed into a man. The myth of Tiresias shows how the battle between man and woman is destructive.

The use of the mythic figure, Tiresias, is very significant because, being both male and female; she symbolizes the unity of man and woman. In this context, Brooker and Bentley maintain that:

> An obvious implication is that androgyny is a mythic analogue of knowledge. Tiresias, therefore, sees all because he is a complete, self-contained structure of opposites. In the absence of androgyny, collaboration between male and female is the necessary condition of both health and knowledge. At this point in the analysis, it should be clear that categories normally compartmentalized into isolated mental cells should be thought of together. The categories are, first, erotic life and, second, intellectual life (Brooker and Bentley 116).

According to the myth, females are associated with direct experience, while males are associated with reason, faith, and all knowledge that is not observable. In the myth, "female closeness and male remoteness form the complementarity conditions for both health and knowledge. In *The Waste Land*, such complementarily does not exist, and as in myth, this absence of connection is associated with disease and waste" (Brooker and Bentley 116). In this view, "The Waste Land" is a psychological state that emanates from a complete breakdown in human relationships. Relations in the poem reveal the degradation of values, the

loss of love, and the dissolution of marriage. The individual cannot connect to anyone because he cannot even connect to himself.

Conclusion

"The waste land" is mainly concerened with the failure of male-female relationships. All the poem's sections present instances of the failure and fragmentation of romantic bondss.: the hyaacinth girl, the chess- playing middle-class couple, the conversation of Lil and her friend, the nymphs and their friends (the loitering heirs of city directors), Sweeney and Ms. Porter, the typsist and the clerk, the three women of London, and so on. In the poem, there is a lack or a total absence of interaction between characters, who are locked in themselves and incapable to belong or to connect to anyone. Indeed, there is an utter failure of union and communion between characters, who are emotionally aloof, remote, and sterile. This indifference or blindness to each other's existence is a pervasive state of the modern times when man and woman suffer from the pathos of distance. Hence, the individual who feels an urgent need for nearness and support is desperately in search for unity.

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