

Eliot as the Poet of Modern Sensibility with special reference to *The Waste Land*

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Abstract. The present article is a reflection of modern society. There is no labour but gold, no love but lust, no wisdom but conspiracy, no spirituality but infertility. Yes, this is modern sensibility. Eliot, a versatile genius, extraordinary personality and a matchless poet has transformed the world in a different shape in his epic *The Waste Land*. Eliot appears as an engineer of words, doctor of thoughts, actor of soul, leader of humanism and master of realism. His literary life is a quest for a new path from physical to metaphysical world. This masterpiece reveals the evilness of the European society. He breaks through the world of imagination and comes on the surface of waste land.

Keywords : Modern sensibility; the second coming; disillusionment ; universal ruin; overeducated, considering ability, animal plane.

"Senselessness is the modern sensibility."

The beginning of modern age transformed the whole fabric of private and social life and wrought a revolutionary change in the thought and outlook of England, as W.B Yeats wrote :

All changed, changed utterly
A terrible beauty is born (Yeats 1998:15-16)

Modern era has been dominated by thoughts and visions regarding each and every aspects of the society. But there was a revolution of thought grafted at its top by none but Eliot, the master of vision. His vision intersects the world at every level. The land has been wasted; things fall apart; people have become hollow; there is no union in family, people prefer arms rather than man; sons become lovers; there is darkness in every heart; time is so hard that the people are in the hope of the second coming. This is the glimpse of modern era. The term 'Modern' is generally understood as expressing the state of being contemporary or possessing the qualities of current style of the early 20th century. Because the concept has two different accepted meanings, the characteristics that constitute modernism and the modern world need to be defined to understand the modern sensibility.

The modern age is most complex, complicated, baffling and revolutionary age in the history of the world. It is an age of most amazing, astounding and

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unimaginable scientific discoveries, inventions and advancement. There is other and darker side of the picture too. We have invented and stocked highly devastating war armaments such as atom bomb, antiballistic missiles, nuclear missiles, chemical and biological armaments which can kill millions of people in the twinkling of an eye. The whole world is sitting on the mouth of a live-volcano. If the world is to be saved, thinkers, philosophers, poets and literary men must come to the forefront, replacing the politicians, war-mongers and promoters of terrorism in the world.

The poetry of the modern age expresses the chaos and the changing scenario of life and society. Thomas Stearns Eliot, a universal poet, dramatist and Nobel-laureate was one of the most daring innovators of the 20th century poetry. He represents the high-mark of the modernist movement in English literature which affected art and culture around the four corners of the globe. Eliot appears as an engineer of words, doctor of thoughts, actor of soul, leader of humanism and master of realism. His *The Waste Land* is both a demonstration and a manifesto of what the new poetry wanted to do and could do. *The Waste land*, Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, Gerontion, The Hollow Men are great examples of modern sensibility. The modern consciousness has been defined by Stephen Spender as,

a sensibility to contemporary phenomena like
machinery, the industrial city and neurotic
behaviour. (Mundra 2001:22)

"The Time Literary Supplement" mentions modern sensibility as ,

The liveliness that comes from topicality and
the difficulty that come from intellectual
abstruseness.(22)

Eliot's poetry by virtue of its new imagery, new poetic technique, new versification and new diction expresses the finest consciousness of the modern age. The awakening of consciousness to brutal truth in the middle and late 1800's has led in Eliot's 20th century world to new laws of human reality. These laws reflect his sense of a mindless, snatching horror at the heart of life as we find in his "Rhapsody on a Windy Night".

The conditions of modern life have altered our perceptions of rhythm of modern life. The colloquial flatness and overtones of sophisticated exhaustion are expressed by the various ways by Eliot in *The Waste Land*. The early poetry of Eliot depicts man's predicament in the modern world. In this connection Delmore Schwartz remarks:

Eliot as the Poet of Modern Sensibility with special reference to *The Waste Land*

The width and the height and the depth of modern life are exhibited in his poetry, the agony and the horror of modern life are represented as inevitable to any human being who does not wish to deceive himself with systematic lies.(23)

Eliot expresses the chaos and disillusionment of modern people through his peculiar technique and the images of the metropolitan life. He was both a modernist and a traditionalist. He had his own generation in his bones and the poets of the past in the background. He had majestic background of the literature of many ages and had absorbed much of its spirit. He is not content merely to expose stupidity, hypocrisy, vanity but in lifting the veil makes us aware of mankind, all history behind and the horror of the human soul alone in *The Waste Land* unless it is redeemed by courage and faith.

The Waste Land is a chart of devastated world after the First World War. Eliot's sense of the collapse of civilization is far broader than the mental horrors and depredations of war. The Waste Land suggests something of its concrete details and a feeling of universal ruin but the poem concerns spread outward to capture the moral, sexual and spiritual decay. According to G.S. George:

It is generally accepted view that Eliot's *The Waste Land* expressed the mood of weariness and disillusionment of post-war Europe, and that it is a sort of detached commentary on the disintegration of latter day civilization

(*The Critic* 2010:29)

Another marked feature of the philosophy of the modern age is the separation of thought from life, Charles Gore remarks:

The world in which we live today, can only be described as chaotic in the matter of religious beliefs.(20)

The political scenario of modern era was also filled with disillusionment. European society in those days was organised on a religious basis. After the Renaissance, this religious basis was replaced by a secular one. The Old Greek conception of Natural Law to provide human society a stable foundation that makes T.S. Eliot advocated a return to the conception of Catholic order of the society. The modern era was an influential period that shaped the development of western civilization throughout the twentieth century. A thorough analysis of modern philosophy, culture and art reveals the modernity and how the historical events of the era influenced life during the early nineties. T.S. Eliot's poem *The waste Land*

depicts and image of the modern world through the perspective of a man finding himself hopeless and confused about the condition of the society. Eliot, as a witness of the social turmoil and transformation surrounding the First World War, was heavily influenced by modernist movement. His works became the greatest expression of the perspective of modern mind. *The Waste Land*, the most renowned poem by Eliot, depicts search for redemption and renewal in a sterile and spiritually empty landscape. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is an examination of the tortured psyche of the prototypical modern who is overeducated, eloquent, neurotic and emotionally stilted. Eliot has succeeded in highlighting the dilemma of an enervated man as well as the sordidness and pettiness of modern urban civilization. It is a poem of mood or a state of experience of failure and frustration. In "Gerontion", Eliot gives us an aged man who looks back on his life and sees how he and western society have departed from the moral centre based on Christian teachings :

History has many cunning passages,
contrived corridors And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities (Southam 1969:34-36)

He says that throughout history, man has let his vanity guide him often to his ruin. Eliot speaks of those who lose their passion for the truth and right behaviour because of temptations in society that cause their values to become adulterated. This poem, peppered with vague references is a treatise on man deciding for himself what is right and wrong, good and evil in modern society.

The greatest work of Eliot *The Waste Land* is an ocean of modern sensibility, the epic of modern era. It reveals each and every aspect of modern society. The title is indicative of Eliot's attitude towards the society. He uses the idea of a dry and sterile waste land as a metaphor for Europe devastated by war and desperate for spiritual replenishment. Eliot has been in shaping the phenomenon called modern sensibility. So, the examination of the sensibility that emerges from Eliot's poetry will certainly enable us to arrive at a better understanding of modernism . Maxwell remarks, Eliot is the supreme example of the modern classicist. Poetry is the finest expression of the sensibility of the age and *The Waste Land* is the most representative poem of the modern age. It is regarded as the masterpiece of Eliot's private poetic workshop. It represents the sensibility of the post war Europe and also a universal truth. The presence of sterile degeneration and the necessity of regeneration and change is the general truth behind this poem. Referring to this poem Bullough has remarked:

The waste land goes beyond a mere diagnosis
of the spiritual distempers of the age; it is a
lament over man's fallen nature, a prophecy
and a promise.(Jain 1992:50)

Eliot as the Poet of Modern Sensibility with special reference to *The Waste Land*

The Waste Land is a looking glass of modern world. Sexual perversion, loss of faith and morality, lack of human relationship, commercialization of life, lack of will power, mental tension, war and politics, Life-in-death—such are the important themes of the poem. It is through these characters that he gives us the picture of our waste modern civilization. It is varied galaxy ranging from the simple and innocent Hyacinth girl to the Clairvoyante, Madam Sosotris, the prince of Naples to the one-eyed merchant. All these characters are embodied in one person in the figure of Tiresias, who represents the wisdom of both sexes, young and old and who fore suffers all.

In the opening lines, Eliot reveals the modernist approach of life. He suggests that the month of April is the most painful period for the materialists of the modern world, because they reject spirituality and tend to devote themselves to satisfy their physical needs. April signifies rebirth, but they prefer winter :

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land,
Mixing memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain. (Southam, 1-4)

He seeks a mist in the midst of the drought, a shower of hope to wash the world a new. The central conception of *The Waste Land* is the sexual impotence used as a symbol for the spiritual malady of the modern world. "The Burial of the Dead" begins with a lament over the loss of fertility. Tiresias, the protagonist spiritually distempered does not come across any sanguine experience. Indeed, the root of spirituality cannot strike in the waste land of modern man :

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.(20-23)

The Waste Land is an account of the modern civilization. It is a culmination of the theme of disillusionment explored on a universal scale. Thus the theme of *The Waste Land* is concerned with the waste land of the modern society. This condition is the result of the isolation from God. It means the collapse of moral and spiritual values. It also means the reduction of human life to the animal plane – birth, copulation and death. In this poem the relationship between people in the society is sterile, lifeless and dry. Eugenia Gunner notes :

Sexual love in *The Waste Land* is a
failure of spirit and loss of passion in
the world. (Internet)

The important aspect of modern sensibility is animality in modern human being. Sexual relationship between man and woman has become animal like, mechanical copulation and this is the basis of decay of modern civilization. Day Lewis declared in 1934 :

It is very much to Eliot's credit as a poet that he detected this death-wish in western civilization before it rose to the surface in the disillusionment of later war years. (Interent).

Thus, Eliot has powerfully presented the horror of unreal city, the blight of mechanical sexuality, the sense of spiritual emptiness breeding fear and hysteria. In such a situation, the Buddhist legend may give harmony and peace among modern people. Having followed the sermons of Buddha, people may improve their art of living and considering ability.

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