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## **T.S. Eliot's Quest for the Meaning on Spiritual Wasteland after the First World War**

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The First World War that broke out in 1914 shook the foundations of the human civilisation as it had no parallels in death, destruction and suffering. Humanity had never witnessed such a massacre in such a short span of time. The war not only affected the course of modern history but the magnitude of destruction injured the psyche of the people and affected the outlook of man towards life. The long cherished values were destroyed. The period of relative peace and prosperity ended with the beginning of this war. Henry James puts it as:

“The plunge of civilisation into this abyss of blood and darkness...is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and ‘meaning’ is too tragic for any words.” (Fussell, 8)

The experience of the soldiers at the battle front was brutal as nobody had seen or even imagined the horrors of ‘Trench warfare’ at such a vast scale. There was a general sense of futility of war among the soldiers and a feeling of despair and disillusionment among the younger generation. The anguish further intensified when they found that after the end of the war there was no vision of the better world that had been promised by the leaders all over the world. The conditions of the younger soldiers even worsened after they were disbanded from the army and had no job as the world witnessed an economic depression soon after the war. The soldiers who had fought with their life at stake found the post war period as a more frustrating one. (Chopra, 18)

The World War affected the life of each and everybody in Europe in particular and the whole world in general. The life in Europe was not the same as before. People had experienced the greatest shock of their lives and it had its repercussions on the moral, ethical, religious, social and spiritual front. It had its impact not only in the political field but also in the social areas also. The agony that the war produced was unbearable and it led to the change in certain ideas of man that changed the whole outlook of humanity. There was a marked shift in the ideas and ideology of the people: the ideas and ideals that the old generations cherished were thought to be no longer valid in the new period. The war brought into the mind of the people an idea that the progress of humanity cannot be measured in terms of material progress as it had taken a toll on the spiritual, human, ethical and moral values of the civilisation. D. H. Lawrence in his novel, *Kangaroo*, writes:

“It was in 1915, the old world ended. In winter 1915-16, the spirit of old London collapsed, the city, in some way, perished, perished from being the heart of the world and became a vortex of broken passions, lusts, hopes, fears and horrors. The integrity of London collapsed, and the genuine debasement began...” (Lawrence, 240)

As a result of the various changes that were taking place in towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of twentieth century, the modes of writing along with the style and

the themes of writing were also changing. The writers of twentieth century believed it to be an age of cultural and moral disintegration. On the one side were the tremendous achievements of science and technology of the nineteenth century but on the contrary, the twentieth century man witnessed a spiritual, religious and moral disintegration. Almost all the writers were perceptible of this change and disintegration. The shift was visible in the society and in the literature. Even before the war literature where the anxiety, fear, disappointment and disintegration precipitated, the literature of late nineteenth century had echoes of the change that was going to take place.

Eliot pinpoints the devastating effects of war in some of his poems. The most famous one is The Waste Land. He declares London as an 'Unreal city'. London is the universal temporal symbol of the Western civilisation that underwent a decline and degeneration. There is no emotional connectedness between the people. The sense of belongingness with each other is gone. Together they form a 'crowd' that is walking up and down the London Bridge as if they were corpses and not living human beings. There is fog in the minds of the people who are unable to have the right perception. The scene is similar to Dante's Inferno where the poet wanders on the multitude of the dead. The people that Eliot talks of are not physically dead, but they are spiritually and emotionally undone:

Unreal city,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (CP&P, 62)

The short sightedness of the people is because they are unable to perceive the reality beyond physical or material domain. It is not only London that Eliot talks of. The problem is universal. It cannot be limited to one country or a continent. In the last section he declares:

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
Vienna London  
Unreal (CP&P, 72)

These are all cities without God. Without faith in religion, there is rootless humanity. Instead of oneness, there is a heap of broken images. We come across 'fear in a handful of dust', 'troubled, confused', 'dirty ears', 'Stumps of time', 'Savagely still', 'rudely forced', 'Burning burning burning' in The Waste Land. It is symptomatic of the crisis in consciousness. Eliot has underlined the catastrophe by making the poem a complex one. Here is a life of diminishing returns, a failed economics, failed civilization. An empty chapel makes a failed religion. There is no hope because man cannot understand the reality in totality. He can only know 'broken images'.

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. (CP&P, 61)

There is no relief, no shelter, no sound of spiritual thirst quenching water of hope. There are dry stones of progressing humanity. Man has made material progress but there is a spiritual retreat. That is why the connection is lost. The city is not connected with the heavens above and the landscape around. There is guilt in the conscience. Here nothing comes out of nothing. This is spiritual void, religious blankness and moral vacuum:

I can connect

Nothing with nothing.

The broken fingernails of dirty hands. (CP&P, 70)

The connection is lost with the human beings as well as with God. That is why man is unable to understand the reality. He tries to connect parts with his intelligence but the parts do not combine to make the whole. Stephen Spender comments on the poem saying:

“The central theme of *The Waste Land* is the breakdown of civilisation, and the conditioning of those who live within it by that breakdown, so that every situation is a symptom of the collapse of values. This theme is prevented from being journalistic (expressing the despair of a post-war generation merely) by the vision of the whole past civilisation within which the contemporary examples of modern life are enclosed. Further, there is an elegiac theme. Although the personal grief is transcended, it is felt there with a poignancy reminiscent of *In Memoriam*.” (Stephen Spender, 106)

The poem opens with April, the best of months but it turns out to be the cruellest. There is a general recession. Love has lapsed and the beauty of life has taken a plunge. The tense is imperfect:

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain. (CP&P, 61)

Time does not move forward. It has not come to a stop but is already moving back. ‘Memory and desire’ have been mixed. The mind goes to the past but there are no ‘emotions recollected in tranquillity’. It is symptomatic of the disease of mind, a crisis in consciousness. It is a benighted world. The wastelanders are man and women at their worst. They are the parasites who live upon each other; the aesthetes who seek a good time. There are no sacred springs of life or love or the symbiotic relationships where lovers grow in love and progress towards eternity. What sprouts here is hopelessness. There is a scene of a failed civilisation; there are no houses, certainly no homes. There is no regard for time and place, age or generation. There are extramarital relations. Marriage is no longer a sacramental or sanctimonious bond. Lil must plaster, paint and repair her face. Like Prufrock, she must ‘prepare a face to meet the faces that faces’ she meets:

Now Albert is coming back, make yourself a bit smart.  
He’ll want to know what you done with the money he gave you  
To get yourself some teeth. (CP&P, 66)

The Waste Land is an amphitheatre of people from all walks of life, from all places and all times speaking all sorts of languages. The aim of this is to give the poem a universal appeal. All wastelanders are creatures of time. In time they have been undone but in their time they try to make the best of time. “Hurry up please it is Time” and “Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song” show their relationship with time. They all are subject to time. Their relationship with time is more of a struggle. Their devices have failed them. In their worldliness they have lost the world. They are following their natural drives and have undone themselves. The world of wastelanders tries to transcend but fails. They are not on the significant soil. There is nothing to ease the pain. They have no ethical core and they are unable to enter into religious sphere. There is no Shakespearean transformation into something ‘rich and strange’. Memory has failed. Memory cannot look forward and desire looks forward to a dead end. The wasteland is an endgame. The poem has an epigraph from Satyricon by Petronius:

“Nam Sibilium quidm cumisegoipse oculismeis ampulla pendere, et cum illipucri dicerent.”(CP&P, 59)

In *Sybil*, we see the failure of rational understanding of life. The divine mystery is sought to be rationalised in terms of time. Death is avoided which of course cannot be done. She was in the cage of her own wishfulness. The example is very valid as the modern society and the modern rational man is in the cage of his own wishfulness. He considers the material and rational progress as the only end of life and therefore ignores the spiritual. Earlier Eliot had written “The horror, the horror” from Joseph Conrad’s ‘*The Heart of Darkness*’, both the quotations suggesting a vision of moral emptiness. Life having lost all charms, death can only be a welcome release, the way out.

The Waste Land epitomises man’s aspirations coming to a naught because of man’s rational understanding of his existence. Death and despair loom large. Tension and frustration characterise individual characters as well as the groups. All is summed succinctly in the section ‘Death by Water’. The mode is sometimes narrative and sometimes dramatic. The poem depicts the society between the wars as the poem was written around 1922. There is no fellow feeling or any kinship. They do not constitute a community or a Christian brotherhood.

Eliot’s depiction of the society in the poems like ‘The Choruses From The Rock’ is of a society that is surviving without religion. It is a society that is going on mechanically. London is a time kept city but it is a city without God:

I journeyed to London, to the timekept city,  
Where the River flows, with foreign flotations.  
There I was told: we have too many churches,  
And too few chop-houses. There I was told:  
Let the vicars retire. Men do not need the Church  
In the place where they work, but where they spend their Sundays.  
In the City, we need no bells:  
Let them waken the suburbs. (CP&P, 147)

With the material progress, man has grown more and more forgetful of God and he is not aware of this fact. He has invented explanations to coax his rational mind. The explanations have been validated with the proofs of science. With such happenings, a chasm has been created between man and God. This chasm has been created by man himself. It is a desert of his own wishfulness. It is not physical but mental:

Forgetful, you neglect your shrines and churches;  
The men you are in these times deride  
What has been done of good, you find explanations  
To satisfy the rational and enlightened mind.  
Second, you neglect and belittle the desert.  
The desert is not remote in southern tropics,  
The desert is not only around the corner,  
The desert is squeezed in the tube-train next to you,  
The desert is in the heart of your brother. (CP&P, 148-149)

Men have turned their back towards the House of God. They have given up the Church and the values imparted by the Church. It is now a mere building that is seldom visited and that too as a matter of a ritual or custom:

Has the Church failed mankind, or has mankind failed the Church?

When the Church is no longer regarded, not even opposed, and men  
have forgotten  
All gods except Usury, Lust and Power. (CP&P, 161)

Eliot calls upon the so called civilised and advanced people to rethink and reframe their lives. The cities and houses have been designed but there is no aspiration on the part of men to understand the cosmic plan. They have enlightened themselves with physical knowledge but the understanding of the invisible has been ignored. Man is now lost in his own inventions and discoveries because they have not yet been able to decipher any meaning of man's life on this earth:

O miserable cities of designing men,  
O wretched generation of enlightened men,  
Betrayed in the mazes of your ingenuities,  
Sold by the proceeds of your proper inventions (CP&P, 154)

The literature during and after the war reflected the disorder that had engulfed the entire Europe. The writers and the artists could not but reflect this disorder in their works. There was a feeling among the common people that humanity had achieved the material progress at the cost of spiritual loss and this loss was the root cause of the entire chaos. Instead of moral and spiritual themes now the works of art were full of themes like anxiety, chaos, boredom and emptiness in human life. The horrors of the war increased the anguish of the people. It looked as if the civilisation was going towards self destruction. The frustration, melancholy, alienation and despair loomed large. It was considered as the worst of all the times and this pessimism only enlarged their fragmentation and segregation. The people had lost faith in the basic goodness of values and things. The reality in the literary pieces was now not possible in a hero centred plot as there was a need to present bewildering spectacles of disintegration and moral vacuity. The common and acceptable ending of the story where the protagonist 'lived happily ever after' was now abandoned.

There was a sense of shock and frustration that took decades to be overcome. The old order of civilisation of ethics and morality was destroyed and the superstructure of civilisation crumbled like a pack of cards. The religion was no more a source of hope for a better future in this or in the next world. The subject of all literary works was the social, cultural, moral and spiritual decay that followed the First World War.

Eliot has tried to propagate that the world is a cosmos not a chaos. Human beings are composed not simply of a materialistic or corporeal frame of existence; rather they have a higher level of consciousness and spirituality which is meant to manifest some higher form of life. The purpose is to unfold the order, the plan which leads to the realization that the universe has an idea which is already in God's mind. But the human reason is based on his finite operation of the physical nature and therefore his observation and understanding is not complete. To have the complete observation and experience, the realization of higher level of consciousness is needed. Man has to develop the faculties for the apprehension of the extra dimensional realities. The consciousness of the Supernatural, the Invisible is central to the poetry of Eliot. Eliot in 'Second Thoughts to Humanism' says:

"Man is man because he can recognize the supernatural realities, not because he can invent them. Either everything in man can be traced as a development from below, or something must come from above. There is no avoiding the dilemma: you must either be a naturalist or a supernaturalist. If you remove from the word 'human', all that belief in supernatural has given to man,

you can view him finally as no more than an extremely clever, adaptable and mischievous little animal.”(Eliot 1951, 485)

The poet proposes a philosophy of redemption through his poetry by creating an awareness of God in human beings. They try to work back to a unified sensibility and development of consciousness of God in human mind as an antidote to the fragmentation rampant in human psyche. They wanted us to look at the world not from the material and worldly angle but from the spiritual and religious point of view. They set out to explore the human destiny as a part of larger cosmic order. It is the invisible, the supernatural that hides beyond the visible that mankind has to discover in this life. There is a veil hiding it from the ordinary ego consciousness that is in man. He has to develop the spiritual consciousness to comprehend the invisible. It is the Infinite, the real cause and end of everything that the spiritual consciousness discovers in everything. It is lying hidden and mute and is unknowable and incomprehensible to the ordinary mind and logic. But when the cover from the ego consciousness is removed and an individual gets transformed into the spiritual consciousness, he spontaneously recognises this fact that is ineffable to ordinary mind.

What Eliot has proposed in his poetry is that humanity can have no consolation and hope unless they try to find hope in religion and God. Otherwise he will continue to move desperately and anxiously in various directions. Eliot in the Choruses from the *Rock* remarks:

man without GOD is a  
seed upon the wind: driven this way and that, and finding no place  
of lodgement and germination. (CP&P, 160)

There is meaning in human life and that meaning is in relation to God. What they try to propagate through their poetry is that man is not a mere speck in the universe that has come here by chance. He is a part of a cosmic plan. His existence on this earth has a potential and a potent meaning. The universe is not guided by chance events and blind forces. Behind formless is form and behind chance is design which human mind fails to comprehend. There is a crisis in the consciousness of man that prevents him see or apprehend the real meaning of his life. Both the poets teach a higher meaning and purpose to the humanity. For this the horizon of man's understanding has to be pushed forward.

He wants us to have a second look at the state of affairs. Do we belong to the wasteland? Or do we belong to the 'Garden of Eden'? God made the Garden and placed Adam and Eve in it for a life time together with providence as their guide.

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