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EXPLORING SPIRITUAL DEGENERATION AND SALVATION IN T. S. ELIOT'S
THE WASTE LAND

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ABSTRACT

T. S. Eliot is one of the most influential poets of the 20th century. His most remarkable works include *The Waste Land* (1922), *Four Quartets* (1945), and *Murder in Cathedral* (1935). He also won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948 for his most outstanding contribution to the modern poetry. In his long poem *The Waste Land*, he vividly portrays the devastated landscape of the post-war modern European society through fragmented images, erudite allusions and symbols, and his astonishing use of blank verse which profoundly influenced the future poets. This devastation is rooted on cultural, emotional, mental, moral and spiritual level. This study observes modern man's tragic plight- infinite lust for materialistic things and comforts, excessive indulgence in sensual and sexual pleasures including perverse sex, emotional sterility and boredom of life which ultimately result in the disintegration of modern civilization and spiritual degeneration. Eliot depicts modern man's low faith towards God, religion and mankind. He also traces the neurotic and hysterical behavior, and complexities of the waste landers in different situations. He aspires to reaffirm the old lost values, norms and order in his contemporary society. To his people, he recommends the ultimate remedy- *Dutta* (give), *Dayadhvam* (be compassionate) and *Damyata* (self-control) which may finally lead them to salvation. The poet firmly believes that spirituality is the only tool to attain a fearless, blissful life in this world and also to reach God. The present paper explores the various aspects of spiritual degeneration and moral degradation in the form of dull and immoral life and it also focuses on the final solution to the problems of the post-war European denizens through the ways of spirituality.

Keywords: Spiritual degeneration, Materialism, Emotional sterility, Disintegration of modern civilization, Datta, Dayadhvam and Damyata

Introduction

The Waste Land, Eliot's the most influential and representative poem delineates the spiritual and emotional degeneracy of the modern world, especially after the First World War. The poem also deals with the loss of faith and morality, lack of human relationships, lack of will power, mental tension, criticism of life, commercialization of sex, sexual perversion and mechanical, boring sexual relations with total indifference and

apathy. The poem depicts modern man's predicament in most convincing manner through various sorts of imagery, allusions and symbols. After the First World War, things became totally changed, people became hollow, emotionless and felt utterly disillusioned. They lost their passion, lost their faith in God, behaved like mad persons, set up sexual relations without any feelings of love or attachment. The First War indeed strained their family relationships and increased tension and turmoil among them. The authoritarian pattern in family relationship got dismantled. Parent- child relationship got shattered. Women became out of control and the notion of male superiority suffered a serious blow. Political and religious skepticism, disillusionment, despair, cynicism, economic depression, unemployment, and acute shortage of all essential things immensely increased the hardships of life and caused stress and nervous breakdown. They lost humanity and became insensitive and callous to one another. Shaw observes: "the worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity." (Shaw, 2004: 28). W.B Yeats, in his poem *Easter 1916* also wrote:

All changed, changed utterly

A terrible beauty is born (Yeats, 1998: L15-16)

Such depressed and dark realities of life compelled a poet to write his poetry in very harsh, tragic tone, full of bitterness and pessimism. In the poem *The Waste Land*, Eliot is more concerned about the collapse of human civilization than mental horrors of the modern people. Stephen Spender too, comments about modern sensibility as "a sensibility to contemporary phenomena like machinery, the industrial city and neurotic behaviour." (Mundra, 2001:22) G. S. George also remarks:

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. (Tilak, 2010: 29)

Objectives

The main purpose of this research paper is to explore the spiritual degeneration of post-war European society by a careful analysis of the poem. The paper also discusses the different aspects of moral degradation of the spiritually dead denizens of the wasteland. The study finally aims at exploring the remedy of their perpetual diseases of low faith level in God and religion, gross materialism, excessive lust for sensual and sexual pleasures including perverse and passive sex, emotional sterility which remarkably reflects their spiritual degeneracy. The research does not get hold only finding the solution of the problems mentioned here, but also paves the way for salvation, the ultimate goal of mankind. The findings of this researcher may also prove to be highly effective and fruitful for the entire human race of the current world.

Methodology

The researcher has adopted qualitative research method in writing this paper. He has collected the relevant data in the form of books and research articles on the concerned issues apart from having the careful analysis of the text. He has also browsed some reliable websites in order to find some authentic and relevant data to meet the requirements of this research paper.

Spiritual Degeneration

This study observes that spiritual degeneration was all prevalent in the post-war European society. "Degeneration is a gradual descent into spiritual boredom, complacency, and, ultimately, compromise. The degenerating disciple experiences distance from God that often fosters disobedience and, in time, despondence. A person in this predicament is tempted to cease seeking and obeying God. There is a general lack of care- a spiritual apathy- that leads smack-dab into a spiritual slump." (Luchetti, 2021) Luchetti holds that degeneration happens gradually and in such a degenerated state a person does not enjoy his life rather lives a life full of monotony but being too much satisfied with whatever possessions he has or in whatever situation he lives, and never tries harder to come out of it; his life becomes full of compromises at all levels and hence he hardly enjoys the pleasures and freedom of life. He always feels downcast and despondent as he does not believe in God, the

supreme divine power who is kind and co-operative in all human actions. Being spiritually bankrupt, he lives a very cold, passive and dull life. In the poem, *The Waste Land* the researcher has found several cases of spiritual bankruptcy. The most important question arises here. What are the symptoms of spiritual degeneracy? The answer includes inordinate material desires and excessive attachment to them, endless lust for sensual and sexual pleasures, and extremely low faith level in God and religion. Modern people of the wasteland have all such symptoms. They waste money, energy and time to meet their endless selfish desires and do not care for their health and moral values. In order to get cured from the chronic disease of spiritual barrenness they must visit an experienced physician for help and cure. Here T. S. Eliot as a philosophical poet and sensitive human being certainly plays the role of a great physician who prescribes a panacea in the form of good, elevating spiritual thoughts.

Spiritual Degeneration in *The Waste Land*

The study observes the spiritual bankruptcy in the post-war European society. The people in this period are spiritually dead and live a life of being thoroughly selfish, materialistic and excessively prone to sensual pleasures; many of them live a life full of apathy and boredom. Emotional sterility and spiritual barrenness can be easily seen in the life of the inhabitants of the wasteland but, to the most shocking, they don't like to be roused from their spiritual slump. The value system of this generation is quite different from the traditional one. Such monotony comes in their life from their low faith level in spirituality as they have distanced themselves from God. They don't look back to their old values based on spiritual knowledge and wisdom. They don't want to be disturbed from the dull routine of their life. Eliot writes in the very opening line of his poem:

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain. (L1-4)

Eliot holds that April is the most tormenting month for the wastelanders. Why does he hold such opinion for them? Let's explore. Actually April is the most refreshing time as it is the second month of the spring season in Europe. During this month the spring rain invigorates the dull roots of lilacs and other vegetation and cleans the atmosphere and gives life to plants and all living creatures on the earth. Likewise, this month refreshes the mind and vitalizes the soul of people. The month April is used as a symbol of rebirth- regeneration of mankind and spiritual awakening but, to the denizens of the wasteland, this month is a very terrible time as they don't want to wake up from the deep slumber of materialism and sensual pleasures. During this period they are reminded of their glorious spiritual past and so their heart demands noble spiritual food whereas their mind habitually inclines for worldly and sensual pleasures. The memory what they had been and their present irresistible desires get mixed up that result in making them uneasy and restless and hence April becomes the most painful period for the materialists of the wasteland.

During the post-war period, the whole Europe faces spiritual degeneracy. According to Eliot the materialist looks upon spiritual pursuits as futile and does not believe in the independent existence of soul, God, Heaven or Hell. The materialist thoroughly rejects the spiritual life and totally devotes himself to satisfy the physical and financial needs. The poet hints the superficial existence of the materialist's life.

He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience (Southam, 1969: L 328-30)

Tiresias, the spokesman of Eliot feels nostalgic about Jesus. He is disappointed to find him no more in physical form. Here Christ is mentioned as a representative of Christianity. Eliot further adds that the people who were living with the true Christian faith and values are diminishing gradually. The poet is expressing his deep grief for the people of his contemporary society.

Gross Materialism and Inordinate Desires

The spiritual degeneracy in post war generation is reflected through the excessive lust for wealth and other worldly pleasures. The people of this generation are thoroughly materialistic. To their eyes, money is everything. They worship money like God. Good character and other moral values find no place in their life. They think that 'eat, drink and be merry' is the sole purpose of life and so they reject all notions of spirituality. Even these days men have become either too miser or too greedy. They follow religion as an act of maintaining formality. Most of them are fake worshippers of God. John Newton regards: "Misers, who can be content with the mere form of religion, will hoard all they can save- in order to gratify their avarice! Others will spend all they can spare- to gratify their vanity, or their worldly appetites!" Eliot, in very pensive mood, writes:

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water. (L 331-334)

As its consequence, Eliot observes the absolute dearth of the water of brotherly love, kindness and compassion in society. He notices only rocks of materialism prevailing everywhere. Besides rocks, this land is marked with the sandy roads. The phrase 'sandy road' is symbolic of 'a severe spiritual and emotional drought'. He further comments on those materialistic persons who are working restlessly to meet their innumerable selfish desires. He says that such people live very low and hollow life full of tension and turmoil and totally devoid of great human values like love, cordiality, virtue, devotion, discipline, generosity and kindness. They have become self- centred and think only for their own well- beings. Eliot rightly mentions:

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. (L 61-65)

The spokesperson of Eliot recalls the moment when he was standing on the London Bridge and watching the view of the city and also the people crossing the Bridge for their businesses. Here Eliot has used the phrase 'Unreal City' for the artificial and materialistic city of London which is buried under the brown fog even at the time of dawn in the winter season. 'Brown fog' hints towards the smoky, polluted atmosphere of the city due to the direct effects of running numerous vehicles for carrying passengers who start working from the very morning for their material gains. The poet wants to tell that modern men have limitless desires and necessities and in order to meet them, they have to work from the very beginning of the day. Tiresias further says that he had never thought that their spiritual death has undone so many people. Actually, modern men have become too much materialistic and are totally engrossed in worldly affairs and activities. The doctrine of materialism has frozen their human souls just as the winter freezes the human body. While crossing the London Bridge many people exhale short and unusual sighs and each person has his eyes fixed before his feet. Each person is lost in the thoughts of his own well-being. Here Eliot suggests that modern people are unreal human beings of unreal city. They are spiritually dead and morally degraded devoid of sense of charity, compassion and selfless Christian love. Their worldly desires are too many, perhaps limitless. The fourth section of the poem titled 'Death by Water' also mentions:

Gentile or Jew
O you turn the wheel and look to windward,
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you. (L 319-321)

Eliot addresses the materialists as Christians or Jews and says that they are turning the steering wheel of the ships (of their bodies) in the ocean of worldly activities and anxiously wait for the favourable wind in the form of suitable condition for amassing more and more wealth. Eliot suggests that the ocean of worldly desires

is so vast that no one can cross it. People can enjoy peace of mind, proper rest and happiness in their life only by limiting their desires and necessities. Spirituality may prove to be the best companion in minimizing the worldly ambitions and even in attaining salvation. Eliot gives the example of Phlebas, an imaginary name of a Phoenician Merchant sailor who was tall and handsome like other modern men, ignored the cry of sea- gulls (voice of the soul) and also disregarded the deep sea of life and remained engrossed only in thoughts of material gains and losses. And finally he died in the midway without fulfilling his all desires and ambitions. Here Eliot warns modern men giving the example of Phlebas and advises them to be spiritual and listen to the voice of their soul.

Sexual Perversion and Moral Depravity

During post war period modern man becomes immensely engrossed in sensual and sexual pleasures. The study observes sexual perversion including the vulgarization and commercialization of sex in the poem. "Perversion is a form of human behaviour which deviates from what is considered to be orthodox or normal. Although the term *perversion* can refer to a variety of forms of deviation, it is most often used to describe sexual behaviours that are considered particularly abnormal, repulsive or obsessive." (Wikipedia) Modern man is fully devoted to the demands of the body and not of the spirit; therefore, his life and path reaches its own dead-end, as he sees no sympathy from God, the most superior power. Eliot holds the act view that the sex- is the source of life and vitality only in two conditions: first, when it is exercised for the sake of procreation and second, when it is done for the expression of love. But, on the other hand, when it is exercised for the sake of momentary pleasures or some commercial purposes, it becomes a source of spiritual degeneration and moral corruption. In other words, when flesh is given more importance than spirit, the idea certainly results in spiritual decay and death. Charles Gore rightly remarks:

The world in which we live today, can only be described as chaotic in the matter of religious beliefs. (Tilak, 2010: 20)

During the post war time, not only sex has been commercialized, there also prevails abnormal sex-practices of various kinds. In the poem Mr. Euginidies is homosexual and Hotel Metropole is a hot-bed of homosexuality. The image of the deserted Thames, which in the summer was a favorite picnic spot for the nymphs and their rich friends. Further, the conversation of the ladies in some London pub also brings out the sordid nature of sex relationship in the contemporary wasteland. The songs of three Thames daughters also show that they have been sexually exploited, but they are unable to do anything in protest; they are too poor and too apathetic to make any efforts to mend the situation. Such relation shows emotional sterility of the age. Thus, all Europe is burning with the fire of sex. "Fires of love and other passions that destroy people and prevent their regeneration" (Abram, 1993). In the third part titled 'The Fire Sermon' of the poem, Eliot writes:

To Carthage then I came
Burning burning burning burning
O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord Thou pluckest
Burning. (L307-311)

Tiresias is utterly shocked to overhear the lewd confessions of the three Thames-daughters. He recollects a line from St. Augustine's confessions: 'To Carthage then I came'. Eliot implies that the lascivious people of the waste land are burning in the fire of sexuality. He prays to God to pluck him out of the unholy fire of sexuality which is burning everywhere. Eliot suggests that when sex-act is separated from love, marriage and procreation, it becomes beastly or animal copulation and such perversion of sex results in spiritual degeneracy.

Emotional Sterility and Boredom of Life

In post war Europe love degenerates into lust and even abnormal and unnatural sex which result in the disintegration of modern civilization. The modern civilization is spiritually barren, lascivious, dry and boring. No real love, no fertility and no life is seen anywhere. "Sexual love in the wasteland is a failure of spirit and loss of passion in the world" (Gunne, 1985). Emotional sterility is visible everywhere in the poem. Tiresias hears a

German song, presumably sung by a lover to his beloved- "Frisch weht der Wind/Der-Heimat zu/Mein Irish Kind,/Wo weilest du?" (L31-34) (The wind blows fresh to the homeland. O my Irish girl, where do you linger?) The lover feels disillusioned and desolate when his beloved has not shown any warmth of love at his gift. Her cheerless impression badly shatters his romantic dreams.

The study also observes the failure of sex to the modern denizens. Sex has lost its spiritual significance and has become a mere source of physical entertainments which has ultimately reduced to the level of dull routine. Actually, the too much involvement in sexual pursuits makes the people's life extremely boring and irritated. Their lives seem to be meaningless and futile. The second section of the poem titled 'A Game of Chase' suggests that 'sex has become a matter of moves and countermoves, a source of momentary pleasure, a sordid game of seduction and exploitation of the innocent.' There is the other story of modern woman named Mrs. Equitone who is surrounded by all luxuries and comforts but has got greatly bored and fed up with mechanical routine of her life and as a result of it, she becomes extremely neurotic and hysterical. Her love, too, suffers from mental vacuity and is totally confused about her life. Out of her extreme monotony, she irritably asks her lover:

"What shall I do now? What shall I do?
I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
With my hair down, so. What shall we do?
Tomorrow
What shall ever do?" (L131-134)

Low Faith in God and Religion

Modern men of the waste land have very low faith in God and religion. Their low faith level leads them to lose their vigour and vitality of life. They have lost their passion in the participation in any work and lack warmth of love as well. In the modern desolate land, the people are spiritually dead and morally depraved- alive from outside and dead from inside. As a result, we observe spiritual and emotional sterility in their life. Cleanth Brooks calls such position of modern men life-in-death - a life of complete inactivity, listless and apathy. That's why the wastelanders welcome the winter season and dislike the spring season. April is the cruelest month for them as it reminds them of stirring of life whereas they dislike to be roused from the deep slumber of cold and passive life. It is also evident from the interior monologue of Tiresias:

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. (L 20-24)

Eliot addresses a modern man as a son of man or the man of the world. He is of the view that the materialist rejects the spiritual life and totally devotes himself to satisfy his physical and financial needs. He is deeply sunk in the worldly affairs and his existence as a human being is being eaten into by worldly cares and anxieties. His spiritual degeneracy is up to such a level that he cannot feel or guess that there is in his body the soul that shines as the sun in the country of his physical body and which is the sole cause of life. His materialistic doctrine does not allow him to think that the soul has the independent existence apart from matter. For him the Christian church or the temple has only 'a heap of broken images' and nothing else. Eliot warns him that the dead tree of materialism can give him no shelter of spiritual peace in distress nor can nature give him any comforts in low spirits as the singing cricket gives no entertainment and the sound of water provides no relief or hope. Eliot means to say that spiritual degeneracy leads to stark materialism, emotional sterility, boring and mechanical life, artificial and dry life away from nature and immoral ways of life including sexual perversion and unnatural sex.

Ultimate Remedy

Eliot hints that spirituality makes our life meaningful and valuable. A spiritual person enjoys peace of mind and true happiness. Such person is also very dutiful and proves to be highly productive for his society as well. On the other hand, materialistic life is utterly superficial and narrow to all intents and purposes. People living such life are often troubled by worldly cares and worries which eat into their beings like rats. Thus, they lead a very meaningless and fruitless life on this planet. Eliot recommends a panacea to the sufferings of the modern materialistic man. He advises him to seek shelter of spirituality which can provide solace in the moments of distress and danger. Eliot shows the way:

There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you. (L25-29)

The poet advises the materialist to come under the spiritual shelter of 'red rock' symbolizing spirituality (here Christianity) to enjoy the peace of mind and true happiness far above physical pleasures and worldly comforts. He further comments that the shadow of the materialism which is full of lust, greed and selfishness start chasing him in the morning and enter his beings in the rising form in the evening. His desires get multiplied till the end of the day. He will be free from such worldly desires only when he will find his shelter under the shadow of spirituality. Addressing to the materialistic man of the waste land, Eliot provides the solution to their problems.

I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (L30)

Eliot assures the modern man when he comes under the shadow of spirituality, he will show him the fear of death. This fear of death will work as the spiritual light which will show him that his physical body will perish soon and reduce to mere a handful of dust. He will question his present condition and stop chasing his innumerable dreams and desires, and will soon start living a life full of satisfaction, peace and rest. It will also lead him to think that his anxiety for his future safety and security is only an empty fear.

Towards Salvation

The poem concludes with the immortal lines which will pave the way for salvation.
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih shantih shantih (L 432-433)

Eliot firmly holds that three principles- *Datta* (give), *Dayadhvam* (be compassionate) and *Damyata* (self-control) will not only save modern man from the misery of materialism and fire of sexuality but also pave the way to enjoy the eternal bliss and attain *Moksha* (salvation) living in this very human body. Man endowed with the ornaments of such principles may also prove to be a great asset for his society and nation. Thus, Eliot prescribes the ultimate remedy to cure the diseases of modern man and tries to save the decaying civilization.

Conclusion

To sum up, this research study has discovered spiritual degeneration in post-war European society. Such degeneration is reflected through various crises- gross materialism, sensualism, sexual perverse, faithlessness, emotional sterility, adultery, hypocrisy and selfishness. Eliot has great concerns for the predicaments of the denizens of the wasteland. He firmly believes that only spiritual replenishment can restore the human civilization. The elevating spiritual thoughts have the tremendous capacity to purify the wit and wisdom of the people and make them free from sin, corruption, hostility and also from the madness of sensual and materialistic pleasures and lead to a peaceful and blissful life. The essence of Christian conception of sin, atonement, redemption and resurrection is also visible in Eliot's humanistic approach. The situation of the present day world is not better than the post-war period, but the worse can it be and hence the poet's recommendation for taking the shelter of spirituality is more useful also for the current generation. Eliot gives a strong warning to the people

of his contemporary society saying if the people do not repent for their sin and mend their ways, nobody can save them from destruction. Contrary to it, if the people take the shelter of God and religion, they will live a blissful life in this very mundane world and hold a most graceful position in the transcendental world as well. Thus, Eliot shows the way of salvation to a modern man of the decaying culture. Observing a great hope for mankind in the poem, Bullough also comments:

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)

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