Clinical Study of the Female Characters
In The Wasteland: A Study in Thematic Perspective

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T. S. Eliot is one of the greatest modern English poets. Probably, the 20th century literature has never witnessed such a versatile genius. Eliot is well aware of his own age. He is the pathologist of his age in a very typical manner, who attempts to diagnose the strange diseases of the contemporary modern society. He exposes deep-rooted elements of the society pitilessly. He has given variety of themes in his poetry, which is one of the features of modern poetry. Eliot is a modern poet chiefly because he has evolved a new method of poetic communication and in this way increased the power of expression in poetry. The use of conversational rhythms and imagery drawn from urban life, the use of symbols, the use of implications, the use of myths as objective correlative are some of the ways in which he communicates his sense of modern predicament. T. S. Eliot is a modern poet because of difficulty and obscurity of his poetry. His poetry abounds in allusions, references, quotations and scenes, which perplex the readers. Eliot believed that modern life is complex and only complex technique can adequately and appropriately convey the complexity of life. Eliot sees life in its naked realism. This realism in diction, versification and in subject matter is a marked feature of his poetry. Eliot is a modern poet because of the dramatic quality, which he has imparted to his poetry. In his language and metrical devices he is modern poet. He experimented with as many as 44 meters. Eliot’s amazing genius encompasses in the use of words and rhythms and his extraordinary style of writing.

The Wasteland is an important landmark in the history of English poetry. It was first published in 1922. The epigraph of the poem comes from the ‘Satyrican’, a satire of the poet Retrenius. The theme of the poem lies in the epigraph of sibyl,

“Once I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her, ‘Sibyl, what do you want? She answered, ‘I want to die.” ¹

The poem encompasses the multi-dimensional themes. The dominating theme is the death-in-life. Another theme is the disillusionment of the post-war European generation
and sterility of the modern life. All the five sections of the poem portray different sorts of thematic sketches.

The disintegration of the modern civilization is due to several causes, which are mentioned by Eliot in this poem. The various ancient myths are catalyzed to reinforce the idea of regeneration through suffering and death. And the myths that form the mythical background to the poem are devised from Jessi Weston’s book – “From Rituals to Romance” and James Frazer’s famous book *The Golden Bough*.

The poem examines the spiritual degeneration of the modern wasteland explores its causes, and finally suggests a way of salvation. The poet believes that man’s solution is possible if each individual looks after his own self-purification.

The Wasteland is a poem that is organized around new modes of characterization. The empty men and women who inhabit the twilight kingdom of Eliot’s Wasteland are vividly portrayed, specially the woman characters. It is through these characters that Eliot gives us the picture of arid waste of our modern civilization. These characters contribute a lot to the theme and technique of the poem. In the poem, Eliot uses all types of characters standing for their typical thoughts, sensibilities and symbols.

The poem is divided into five sections. The very first section is “The Burial of the Dead”. The section is a statement about the modern man and his civilization. It has been stated that life in the contemporary world is life in death. It is a living death for man has lost faith in spiritual values. Love has degenerated into lust, sex has lost its proper function and gamble is another hurdle in the way of spiritual progress. All these ideas are expressed through certain women characters. The first character is Tiresias. He is the protagonist of the poem. He is bi-sexual. Tiresias, according to Eliot, although a mere spectator and not indeed a ‘Character’ is yet the most important personage in the poem. What Tiresias sees in fact, is the substance of the poem. He is blind but has the gift of prophecy and immortality. Tiresias is of both past and present. He has seen all and fore suffered all. He is the voice of sensitive humanity, providing whatever unity the poem may be discovered to have. It is he who expresses through his comments the spiritual vacuity, the triviality, the monotony, and aimlessness of the contemporary civilization.

Another woman character is a German Princess, Countess Tarie Larisch. She is talking to one of the inhabitants of the wasteland. She recalls a moment of her childhood in the mountain. The princess remembers only a cousin with whom she went:

“In the mountains, there you feel free.”

[I. The Burial of the Dead, Line No. 17]
And with whom probably she had sex-relations. She does not remember her parents or her brothers or sisters. She has no connection with family, community and nation. She is a globe-tattler, symbolizing the rootlessness of the modern man and the fact that life is lived entire on the physical plane.

The idea, suggested through this woman character, is that the modern humanity, like the German Princess, lives entirely on the physical plane and is entirely forgetful of religious and moral values.

Then comes the two guilty love stories, of Tristan and Isolde\(^4\) and of Hyacinth\(^5\) Girl. These were love relations outside marriage and society does not accept this type of love. Thus, there is a tragic end to this kind of love. In the first love story of Tristan and Isolde, Tristan is waiting for her beloved Isolde while lying on the seashores. But there is no sign of the arrival of the ship. Hence the sea appears empty to the lover because their love was not pure. The second story of the guilty love is that of Hyacinth girl and her lover. The Hyacinth girl is a beautiful lady of the present age who has now been forgotten by love, because their love was lusty. Hence instead of bringing a sense of fulfillment, it brings a sense of boredom and futility. The idea suggested by these two guilty love stories is that in the modern age love has degenerated into lust. Sex occupies prominent place in the modern life.

Another woman is Madame Sosostris, the famous foreteller in the poem. This famous fortuneteller was considered to be the wisest woman in Europe. She uses the Tarot cards to tell the fortune of her clients whereas in ancient Egypt these cards were used to forecast the rise and fall of the river Nile. Under the law, fortune telling is a criminal offense and undesirable business. Therefore, she practices her shoddy fortune telling in an atmosphere of fear of the police as she says to one of her clients:

“**One must be so careful these days**”.

[I. The Burial of the Dead, Line 17]

Her role is that she introduces through her cards, the characters and themes, which are developed later – Belladonna, the lady of the sex intrigues, Phoenician sailor, the one-eyed merchant, hanged man etc. thus, she serves as a sink among different sections of the poem. The idea is that with the entrance of Madame Sosostries and her ‘Evicted pack of cards’ all are introduced into the variation of the same life-in-death theme. Her voice is muffled and instinct. The poet says that gambling is another hurdle in the way of spiritual progress. Then there is an implied character Mrs. Equetone whose horoscope Madame Sosostris has brought.

The second section, “**A Game of Chess**”, represents two women symbols of spiritual degradation and sexual impotence. In this section the poet indicates the failure of sex
relationship in the modern world. Sex has become a purely physical kind of entertainment and has lost its moral and social purpose. Sex pervades both in high and low classes of the society. The society has become a matter of mechanical routine. Eliot portrays two types of women – the rich lady, Belladonna, who is bored with her urban wasteland and lower middle class woman Lil, who has lost her charm because of over sex.

In the first scene of this section the lady suffered to is the lady of Rocks, the lady of situations, Belladonna. There is a description of her drawing room in terms of visual, auditory, olfactory imageries. She is waiting for her love. After sometime her lover comes. She tells him to stay with her:

“My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.”

[II. A Game of Chess, Line111]

This is the representative of nervous breakdown of a modern woman. She asks her lover to speak to her. She wants to know what he is thinking. The lover, however, gives a significant reply. He says –

“I think we are in rats’ alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.”

[II. A Game of Chess, Line 115-116]

This indicates the monotony of the routine civilized life. It emphasizes the futile monotony of tired nerves and spiritual blankness. As the wind blows there is a noise; the lady asks, “What is the wind doing?” it further emphasizes her nervousness and hectic excitement. The lady questions again: “Do you see nothing? Do you remember nothing?” The man answers mechanically. He quotes a line from *The Tempest*, “Those are pearls that were his eyes,” without understanding their significance. The nervousness of the lady finds a hysterical outburst in her desire to, “such out as I am, and walk the street.” She wants to break the narrow of routine to which she is tied. The question, “what shall we do tomorrow?” shows the empty and aimless life of a woman belonging to upper and affluent class. According to Kleanth Brooks, “The theme of life which is death is stated specially in the conversation between man and woman.” Woman’s voice with a tremulous tone expresses her predicament. The idea is that the violence done to Belladonna by her lover probably arises out of his inability to speak with her and communicate with her. Thus the failure of communication is the main problem in the modern family life. The theme of sterility is embodied in Belladonna. The lady of the Rocks seems to suffer from neurasthenia. Both are the victims of the boredom and thoughtlessness of modern life.
The second scene deals with the life at lower level. Here is the story of Lil, who is talking with another lady (Lae) about her husband. It is a friend of Lil, who tells some women assembled in a city pub. Lil’s husband Albert has been demoralized, and he would be returning home after a long time. He would, quite naturally, like to have a good time, but Lil has grown prematurely old, because she took bill to dissolve a pregnancy, and if she does not cease and improve her looks, Albert would certainly turn to other women. As the lady says to her:

“And if you don’t give it him, there’s others will.”

[II. A Game of Chess, Line 149]

Disintegration in domestic life occurs when sex is sought to be separated from procreation and it degenerates into a mere means of pleasure. When the ladies are conversing, the tavern keeper asks them to leave. He says:

“HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME!”

[II. A Game of Chess, Line 141,152,165,168&169]

But his call to hurry is not heeded, it shows that how happy are the people of wasteland in talking ill things. The language of these women is vulgar, colloquial and almost prosaic. Lil’s health is ruined with bills. She wants to abort because she already has five children. The idea is that marriage is meant for regulation and discipline of sex-instinct and not for excessive sex-relationship. The last line, “good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night”, reminds one of poor Ophelia’s last farewell in Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The suggestion is thus thrown out that Lil is not only old and ill, but perhaps she is on the verge of death. Another idea is that a woman must hold her man and keep him from running after other women. Obsession with sex is one of the main diseases of modern civilization. Another woman character in this section, which is merely implied, is Philomela. Philomela’s picture on the wall of the room reveals how she was raped, her tongue cut, and how finally she was transformed into the nightingale of golden voice. The idea behind Phelomela’s painting is that her beautiful song has been degraded to the rhythm of sexual contact, to please the filthy ears of modern man. She symbolizes the violence perpetrated on the innocent woman chastity and also the precariousness of woman’s moral existence.

The pith of “The Fire Sermon” is that lust ruins up life. Lust is the source of all evil. The sterile burning of lust is brought out by different sex experiences in the contemporary wasteland. These are shown through the woman of the different classes of the society – the upper, middle and the lower classes.
The section opens with Tiresias surveying the Thames scene in the autumn. In the summer it had been the haunt of nameless ladies in search of momentary pleasure. But now they have fled indoors after sunning the beauty and purity of the Thames waters and leaving behind debris of their sexual adventures. Their lovers, who were the sons of the city directors, left no address. So it is not possible for these girls to follow them. The idea is that this modern humanity knows only physical and materialistic pleasure. The water is the source of purification and regeneration but the degenerate modern man does not realize this and so does not hesitate to defile the purity of the river. Mrs. Porter and her daughter further symbolize the degeneration. They wash their face in soda water not for their spiritual purification, but to make their flesh fairer to attract more males.

The element of depressiveness and sexual sterility of the modern western society is later connected with the typist girl and her affair with the estate clerk. In the evening, when it is time for offices to close, the typist girl rises from her seat and gets ready to leave the office. The poet also makes a pictorial description of her poverty – her food is kept in tin-pots, and her dried clothes are piled upon the divan, which is also her bed at night. Her lover, “The young man Carbuncular”, arrives, knows that the time is suitable, and so at once proceeds to make love. The girl is indifferent, she does not repulse his advances, but she shows no pleasure and no signs of welcome. But, this lack of response does not matter to the young man. Soon the act is over, and the lover departed with a final kiss. The typist girl touches her head and looks for a moment in the mirror. She is “hardly aware of the departed lover”. She says “well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over”. She walks in the room all alone and then:

“She smoothes her hair with automatic hand
And puts a record on the gramophone.”

[III. The Fire Sermon, Line 255-56]

The typist girl’s affair seems to have a lifeless, mechanical and animal like. There is no love and no pleasure and the typist is indifferent to what happens, and glad when it is all over. The scene now shifts to the song of the Thames – daughters. The three Thames daughters narrate their sex experiences. They moan over their loss of purity and virginity as a result of the brutality of man.

In the section four “Death By Water”, Eliot shows the significance of water as a means of purification and re-birth. But in the modern land of desolation it has lost its proper functions and has become a source of destruction. There is no woman character in this section, only a male character, Phlebas, the young and handsome sailor who was drowned, and having no chances of rebirth.
The last section, number five, “What the Thunder Said”, shows the way of spiritual rebirth. Reconstruction of man’s spirit is possible only through detachment and selflessness. The only female character in this section is a refugee. She tightens her long black hair so as to play on her hair as if they were the strings of the fiddle. Her music is sad. The melancholic image of the woman portrays the decay of Eastern Europe. She symbolizes the effect of first world war or the Russian Revolution which was responsible for the devastation of Europe and the uprooting of millions refugees.

In conclusion, we can say that the fundamental theme of the poem, “Death-in-Life”, “Spiritual Desolation”, is well expressed through the portrayal of almost all the female characters in the poem. These characters are able to blend past and present, which is the principal aim of the poet. For example, the typist girl represents the modern world and Elizabeth represents the world of spirituality that is of the past. It is only through these characters that the poem may be said to have unity. Tiresias thus provides whatever unity the poem may be discovered to have. Through these characters Eliot has presented contemporary spirit in its totality. Its anxiety, its despair, its neurosis, its boredom and mental vacuity have all been brought out. The Wasteland minus these characters would have been very monotonous as they add a lot to justify the fundamental theme of the poem.

REFERENCES

Note: Parenthetical references have been given for the textual citations, wherever they are quoted. The text of The Waste Land has been downloaded from the website www.bartleby.com

1. Retrenius, Sayricon, a satire with a moral element, written in 1st century B.C.
4. Tristan und Isolde (Tristan and Isolde, or Tristan and Isolda) is an opera, or music drama, in three acts by Richard Wagner. It was composed between 1856 and 1859 and premiered in Munich on 10 June 1865.
5. Hyacinth is a divine hero from Greek mythology. His cult at Amyclae, southwest of Sparta, where his tumulus was located. The literary myths serve to link him to local cults, and to identify him with Apollo.
6. The Tempest is a play by William Shakespeare, estimated to have been written in 1610–11, was initially published in the First Folio of 1623, one of Shakespeare’s late Romances.
7. Hamlet, is a tragedy by William Shakespeare, believed to have been written between 1599 and 1601.
8. I strongly feel that Horza (from Consider Phlebas) is Phlebas; and his fear of the Culture might be symbolized by a fear of drowning. The quote from Consider Phlebas is something to do with pride coming before a fall