

T.S.Eliot's The Waste Land : an eco-critical study

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Abstract:

The poem *The Waste Land* was published in the year 1922. On the background of the poem worked such issues as the devastating first World War and the decay of faith of the world in humanity and in religion. Science was reigning high in the thought process of the western world. But science which is a boon can be a bane in accordance with its application. The missiles, the poisonous gases and the bombs, which are indeed the products of science, worked only as instruments of destruction. But this destruction not only affected the human world or the soldiers of the enemy camp; but disrupted the ecological balance. The issues of environmental hazards resulting from pollution of air, land, sound & water are addressed in the poem by Eliot. He has shown not only the pollution of the environment and the eccentric behaviour of Nature; but also presented the ways to cut down the pollution level and help the environment to regain the ecological balance. The waste land that happened due to the pollution in the components of nature can be a fertile land, only if and when, human beings will learn the proper use of the forces and elements of nature. The three Vaidic utterances 'Datta', 'Dayadhavam' and 'Damyata' which mean 'to give', 'to sympathise' and 'self-control' are used as the medium through which the destruction of the environment can be repaired. And the waste land can be made a fertile land.

Keywords: eco-criticism, water pollution, air pollution, the three "Da"s

In the tradition of literary criticism one of the newest practices is eco-criticism. In the closing decade of the 20th century particularly in 1970 when the WLA i.e. Western Literature Association took interest in the literature of the American West the idea of eco-criticism came into existence. Peter Barry in his book Beginning Theory defines the term eco-criticism as the "study of the relationship between literature and physical environment" by taking recourse to the definition given by Cheryll Glotfelty, the founder of this theory in the U.S.A [1]. But one must remember that the idea of presenting the bond of man and physical environment in literature is nothing new. For nature is presented "in the first and last book of the Bible" i.e. the Genesis and the Revelation [2] to the age of Chaucer through the Romantics to the Victorian and that of the Modern. The newness of this theory is its critical method which was not there before while analysing any text.

Each age has certain socio political changes that affect man's relationship with nature. The lush greenery of nature which was celebrated in the works of the Religious poetry or the Alliterative poems or the Romances in the Middle English Period or the Chaucerian and the Spenserian poetry went certain changes when the economic base of England shift from agriculture to industry in the late 18th and early 19th century. The description of industrial England with its black soot and smoke can be traced in the poems of William Blake especially in his collection of poems namely "Chimney Sweeper" and "Holy Thursday" included in Songs of Experience. He presents the defilement of natural purity in such lines-

"It is a land of poverty!
And their sun does never shine
And their fields are bleak and bare.
And their ways are filled with thorns
It is eternal winter there"

We can perfectly notice here the approach of the poet in describing the landscape of England. The unusual behaviour of nature due to the lack of purity can be highlighted through these lines. The progress of civilization and the destruction of nature increases proportionately in the Victorian age. Now if we analyse one among the famous Victorian novelists Charles Dickens' industrial novel Hard Times we will get a glimpse of the pollution that affected the water bodies and air to a greater extent. In the chapter named 'Coketown' Dickens writes-

"It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it..It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye..."

Now by presenting these instances I want to point out the gradual degradation of the purity of nature and its resources as well as the fact that in the literary history of English literature the writers had paid attention to the pollution of environment and tried to debar man from poisoning nature that will ultimately affect man. T.S.Eliot when came in the arena of literary field he was scared of the misuse of science as a medium of destroying civilization. In the poem "The Waste Land" the poet has made a future driven assumption about the changes that might occur in human civilization as a result of corrupting natural resources through water pollution ,air pollution and misuse of science making this earth a waste land in the literal sense.

Water which is the main source of life got polluted due to industrial revolution , bad sanitary system and population expansion. To make a land fertile and productive water is one among the necessary elements. The absence of water will make it dry and arid leading it to the position of a waste land. Therefore the issue of water is a recurrent idea in the entire

poetic scheme of “The Waste Land”. During the second decade of the 19th century the water bodies of England were mostly polluted. A study says :

At the beginning of the 19th century less than 1 million lived in London, but by 1850s the capital’s population had doubled and by the end of 19th century 6.5 million lived. This rapid population growth placed a tremendous strain on London public services, in particular its fresh water supply, waste disposal and sewage system.[3]

In the 1858, London experienced the Great Stink when the river Thames became a giant sewer overflowing with human waste along with dead animals, stinking food, toxic raw materials from factories. The reference of London as the ‘unreal city’ in the first section of the poem, can be a result of the drastic change of London and that of Thames of Spenser’s time with which the poet could not find any similarity. The poet says “I had not thought death had undone so many.” In 1849 the outbreak of cholera increased the death toll to 2000 people per week[4]. The man made pollution of natural resource caused such a heart rendering image of destruction that the poet was compelled to make people aware about it. In the third section of the poem the poet makes a mention of bio-degradable and non bio-degradable pollutants like “empty bottles, sandwich papers, silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends or other testimony of summer nights.” The poet mentions the filthy and unhygienic atmosphere as a result of stinking corpse left unattended “on the low damp ground”. In this context I want to mention that the oldest federal environmental law in the U.S.A. was The River and Harbours Appropriation Act of 1899[5]. This act prohibited dumping of waste materials in the navigable water or tributaries without permit. The poet says that –

“The river sweats/Oil and tar”.

It takes us to the two great ship mishaps [6] happened between 1907-1911, one in the U.S.A. (Lakeview Guster was the ship that spilled 1230000 tonnes oil near Kern county) and the other one in the United Kingdom (Thomas W. Lawson was the ship that spilled 7400 tonnes of oil near Isle of Sicily), destroying the purity of marine ecology. All these activities of man that are both man made and accidental hampers the aquatic ecology. Eliot through his estimation of the previous years on or before 1922 wants to warn man to be prepared to accept his ‘Death by Water’ in future. Now we, living in the year 2018, only a few years behind the centenary year of the composition of this poem, can well understand the truth behind the cautionary prediction of T.S. Eliot. The prediction which may be influenced by the warning of the Glacier Nation Park set in the year 1910 for 150 glaciers had decreased to the number of 30 due to global warming which is a certain outcome of industrial development and reckless use of science. All these started with the industrial development of England. The poet wants to highlight the fact that if man does not take care of the environment the end might be death by water. Either there will be “no water only rock” or the sea level will rise anywhere between 4 and 35 inches by the end of the century as claimed by Intergovernmental

Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) ,2001[7].The rise in water will engulf the coastal areas causing death in a great quantity is the warning of this organisation which echoes very much the warning of the future seer poet.

If industrial development and the desperado use of science along with the modern weapons affect aquatic ecology ,it is quite certain that the quality biosphere will certainly be affected by it. The prominent pollutants of industry are smoke and ash. A study conducted by Roger Fouquet who published his article “Long run trends in energy-related external costs” in September,2011; [8] presenting before us the data that consumption of coal increased from 20 million tonnes in 1820 to 160 million tonnes in 1900[9].The polluted air is sketched in Bleak House written by Charles Dickens. He says the air had-

“flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes”.

The poet says that he can see the ‘unreal city’

“Under the brown fog of a winter dawn”.

This fog did not disperse till noon. For it could be noticed in “the winter noon” in the unreal city as well.The major air pollution ,in the history of England ,is known as The Great Smog, happened in 1952 during Eliot’s life time[2] .It used to cast the smoggy atmosphere now and then before 1952 encircling the entire area in ‘frosty silence’.

Now the pollution of water bodies and air will tell upon environment as well as upon human beings certainly. The eccentric behaviour of natural happenings can be ascribed to the environmental pollution. “Summer can surprise us.../With a shower of rain”. “The sound of horns and motors “ shall make “the human engine “ throbbing like a taxi. The greed of the lustful king changed Procne into Philomel; in the same manner the material greed of man will turn nature into a desert that will go on -

“Burning burning burning burning”

without any water in the mountain or in the lands. In the book “Ecocriticism”, Greg Garrad [2]talks about pollution by making a reference to Rachel Carson’s book “Silent Spring”(1962) where he mentioned

“On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins , catbirds, doves, jays...was now no sound ; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh” [1]

To give us the idea how the absence of birds from the pastoral setting is an indication of environmental pollution.

Here comes the preventive measure Eliot has designed for saving the purity of nature and by doing that try to save human beings from the ultimate doom. The three “Da”s – ‘Datta’. ‘Dayadhvam’. ‘Damyata’.- are the keys of saving our environment. By using the word ‘

'Datta' Eliot wants to ask humanity to give nature its purity if not completely, as far as possible. Treat it with respect so that it can retain its flora and fauna and the vibrant ecologies. The greatest gift that we can give our mother earth is green forests. To get our earth and its essential resources in its primordial condition we must inculcate the virtue of 'Dayadhavam' i.e. to feel pity. This pity is neither exclusively for nature, nor only for the objects of nature that we in this modern age corrupt or destroy incessantly, but for ourselves too. For we too are a part of this nature and will cease to exist if the biodiversity gets hampered for our greed and reckless use of science or the products of science that continue to increase global warming, which is the headache of the entire world in this 21st century. 'Damyata' or the 'self control' is the most powerful medium to curb environmental pollution of every type. Our environmentalists advise to check our habits so that we can save water to avoid drought which will prevent death in the absence of water as well as if we stop dumping waste, both industrial and domestic, in the navigable water bodies, it will stop death by an access of water. Self control will certainly reduce air pollution or noise pollution or any other kinds of pollution. At the cost of personal luxury and greed if one practises these three "Da"s the ecology and humanity will get back its vitality for sure. In the poem the poet's concern for the environmental pollution, the topsy-turvy behaviour of nature as a result of these pollutions ends at the note of optimism to restore back the old Nature. It is a document of not only the pollution of land, which the word in the title literary mean, but that of environmental pollution that had started at the outset of the industrial age and continuing till this contemporary period making our earth a waste land metaphorically. Until and unless we practise these three "Da"s the waste land cannot be a fertile land.

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