

A Feminist Study of T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland': Critical Conclusions on Patriarchal Mind-set



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ABSTRACT

Feminism as a mode of study highlights gender as a subject of analysis and acts as a platform to demand *equality, rights* and *justice*. Feminism raises stern brow to the assumptions of pre-determined gender roles by the patriarchal society; where the women is trained to fit that role. Although much of this prejudiced approach has a lot to do with the society's social burdening of the women; yet there prevail strong bias which mark these differences under the assumptions of biological differences. The establishment of subject-other relationship between the biological counterparts has merely been a by-product of social stigmas; enforced upon the women by men. At any level, whether arbitrary or coherent, it had just been assumed that these differences constitute the entirety of the women's embodiment. This marking leads to subjection of women, where her access is limited and restricted; whereas her male counterpart enjoys a greater sense of freedom. The feminist literary and cultural theory draws a link between the representation of women in art; and the real, material conditions in which they live. The purpose of a study on "***A Feminist Study of T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland': Critical Conclusions on Patriarchal Mind-set***" is to bring forth a kind of reading where the poet knowingly or unknowingly exhibits or accepts the patriarchal mind-set showing men as *superior* and the women as *inferior*. The representation of female characters in '*The Wasteland*' is limited when compared to the larger context in which the poem is composed yet unconsciously the poet offers an insight into the feminist circle of study. T.S. Eliot cannot be charged with the offence of being unjust to his female characters by un-dignifying their identity because his females are just '*types*' rather than '*individuals*'.

KEYWORDS : Subject-Other relationship, power relations, extent of patriarchy, gender inequalities.

A Feminist Study of T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland': Critical Conclusions on Patriarchal Mind-set

Feminism is an area of study which highlights gender as a subject of analysis and acts as a platform to demand *equality, rights* and *justice*. Feminism assumes that gender roles are pre-determined by the patriarchal society and the women is trained to fit into that role. This pre-determination of roles are social in nature, but are marked under biological differences between men and women. This marking leads to subjection of women, where her access is limited and restricted; whereas her male counterpart enjoys a greater sense of freedom. This establishes a *Subject-Other* relationship the society where *man* is the *Subject* and the *woman* the *Other* (Nayar, 88). The feminist literary theory and cultural theory draws a link between the representation of women in art; and the real, material conditions in which they live.

'*The Wasteland*' too through its women characters represents women as weak docile, innocent, seductive, irrational, sexual object, a procreating device who has fewer financial and political rights and is abused. The purpose of a feminist study is to bring forth a kind of reading where the poet knowingly or unknowingly exhibits or accepts the patriarchal mind-set showing men as *superior* and the women as *inferior*. The representation of female characters in '*The Wasteland*' is limited when compared to the larger context in which the poem is composed yet, unconsciously; the poet had offered an insight into the feminist circle of study. T.S. Eliot cannot be charged with the offence of being unjust to his female characters by un-dignifying their identity because his females are just '*types*' rather than '*individuals*'. In the poem, they aid to portray the iconic representations of lower, middle and upper classes respectively. Hence, the female characters in the poem could be seen as representatives of women community of those days contemporary society. A study of the women characters as the poet portrays them would do the following tasks: (a) *Examine representation of women.* (b) *Examine power relations to show the extent of patriarchy.* (c) *Recognise the role of language in making what is social about women and had been constructed.*

i) Marie

Marie is the first female character portrayed in the first section '*The Burial of the Death*'. Though a minor character in conversation with Tiresias, yet she could be studied for feminist study. Marie is portrayed as a young girl under the care of her cousin, the arch-duke. When both of them go for sledging, Marie gets frightened and the archduke asks her to hold on tight. This is evident in the poetic verse '*My cousin's, he took me out on a sled, And I was frightened. He said, Marie, Marie, hold on tight*'. The poet sub-consciously represents her as weak and shows the control of power in the patriarchal hands. Noteworthy here is the fact that even language played a crucial role to mark this male-female relationship. The poet named the female character as Marie and the male character bore no name; rather a political and social position of being the arch-duke, inspite the fact that they both were cousins and were young. In the next line, it is observed that Marie felt free in the mountains. The poet's fragmented sentence if completed could read as '*Marie felt free from all sorts of regulations of life*'. Unconsciously the poet observes her as a biological *Other* sex and constructs a social order around her. It might be this constructed social order from which she felt free in the mountains.

ii) Hyacinth girl

The poet introduces the hyacinth girl another female character in '*The Burial of the Dead*'. She was given hyacinths by her lover. When both of them return from the garden her hands were full of hyacinth and her hair were wet as could be observed in the lines '*Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden Your arms full, and your hair wet*'. The lover realised that her beloved was not happy with the gift of hyacinths and hence felt desolated. Though a very brief characterisation, yet it could be studied from feminist point of view. Body adornments of any type and form exhibit a '*feminine mode*'. Adornment by flowers is not natural to women, rather it is an attribute imposed upon them by the patriarchal society (Nayar, 91). Here even virtues like love had been attributed to flowers. Hence, *hyacinth girl, flower* and *love* form a *triad*. By not showing a likeness for the lover's gift of hyacinths, the hyacinth girl

disturbs this triad of patriarchal society. With this disturbance, arises the problem of a pseudo male-ego. The lover brands her as a materialist as she does not show happiness towards the gift of hyacinth. With this she loses her virtues of being an ideal lover in the ideal patriarchal society and the same idea gets communicated to the readers as well. In the poem the hyacinth girl was not given the right to be her own subject and the owner of her choices and identity. She is unconsciously type-casted by the poet's patriarchal mind-set. Her choices and identity were thus determined by the pseudo-social norms produced by men.

iii) Madame Sosostris

Madame Sosostris is the third female character in the section '*The Burial of The Dead*'. The poet represents her as a famous clairvoyante and declares her being the wisest woman in Europe as could be observed in the lines '*Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante, Had a bad cold, nevertheless Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,*'. This statement about Madame Sosostris has a definite pun in it. A great deal of subject matter of the poem is showcased by her pack of tarot-cards. The tarot-cards which she kept bore the images of Belladonna, the man with three staves, the one-eyed merchant, the Hanged God (Attis or Jesus Christ) and the blank card. The *symbolism* in these images is further used by the poet in the later sections of the poem, but he discredits Madame Sosostris' importance. He does not dignify her as *Subject* but as the *Other* sex. She is ironically mocked upon and is shown *weak* as she feared the police which is evident in the lines '*One must be so careful these days*'. Unconsciously, the poet by his language and poetic expressions constructs a societal-norm around her which exhibits powerrelations to show the extent of male domination in the patriarchal society.

iv) Lady Mrs. Equitone

This character is introduced in the second section of the poem '*A Game of Chess*'. Her boudoir is described in the poem as '*The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne, Glowed on the marble, where the glass Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines From which a golden Cupidon peeped out Doubled the flames of seven-branched candelabra Reflecting light upon the table as The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it, From satin cases poured in rich*

profusion In vials of ivory and coloured glass Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes, Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air That freshened from the window’. The setting of her room with sensations of sweet-smelling perfumes and odours touched upon by various reflections of light, ornamented mirrors and candelabras, satin cases, laquearia, carved dolphins antiquities and a painting with the sylvan scene depicts a feminine mode of social observance. These linguistic expressions had represented feminine discourses of the patriarchal society. As **Judith Butlers** says “*Identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results*” (Nayar, 91). Hence the language used by the poet in the poem says something which the society and culture recognises as belonging to or characteristic of a woman. Further Lady Mrs. Equitone is possibly visited by her lover. He does not seem interested to speak to her and is engrossed in some thoughts as could be observed in ‘*Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak. What are you thinking of? What thinking? What? I never know what you are thinking. Think*’. Lady Mrs. Equitone keeps on asking him the reason for such behaviour. She finally gets frustrated and says that she never could understand what he thinks. The poet here emphasises upon the expression ‘*thinking*’. Later day feminists have argued about the projection of individuality between men and women. It is this projection which comes into question for the poet too. They argue that individuality is not simply about rationality alone but includes things like emotions too. The feminist theorist also objects that men have traditionally been projected as *rational* and *thinking*; whereas women have been projected as *irrational*, *emotional* and *non-thinking*. The same could be said for the poet who projects Lady Mrs. Equitone as emotional, irrational and non-thinking while her lover on the other end is projected as rational and thinking.

v) *Lil and May*

Lil and May are the next female characters along with other lesser female characters in the section ‘*A Game of Chess*’. In the conversation between the ladies in the bar it is made known that Lil is reduced to the status of *sexually-marginalised* person whereas her husband enjoys the status of *sexual-autonomy*. This is evident from the poetic verses ‘*Now Albert’s coming back, make yourself a bit smart.....He said, I swear, I can’t bear to look at you.....*

he wants a good time, And if you don't give it him, there's others will'. Feminists have argued that patriarchal society *attributed* particular values to a woman's body, and drastically the woman assimilated and subdued to these values. From the viewpoint of liberal humanist, individual is the seat of free will and has an '*agency*' which is the power to alter its own course of life (Nayar, 100-101). The poet's projection of Lil's individuality is evident in the poetic lines which say '*She's had five already, and nearly died of young George Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is*'. She is type-casted in the mould of a mother of six children with ugly looks who pathetically might receive negligent attitude by her husband as she has no charms to captivate her husband's appreciation. Lil's requirement of a new set of teeth supports the patriarchal viewpoint of body-adornments. The poet sub-consciously favours the view of dominant male society who see women as befitting the role of stereotyped mothers and faithful wives. *Shulamith Firestone* in '*The Dialectic of Sex*' (1970) (Nayar, 99) argues that women could be truly free only if she and her body were freed of reproduction. The feminine suffering of Lil could be tested on the touchstone of *Shulamith Firestone's* argument. If Lil is freed of reproduction, she might not face this crisis in her life. This feminine suffering does more harm to Lil as she is projected as a *failure* in her domestic as well as marital life. On contrast, Lil's husband, Albert, the war-returned soldier emerges triumphant in his social sphere too. May warns Lil that if she did not take care of her looks, Albert would be enticed upon by some other women. Thus, Albert represented the *powerful* and *superior* '*Subject*' and Lil the *weak* and *inferior* '*Other*'.

vi) Philomela

With the sylvan scene in Lady Mrs. Equitone's room, the poet alludes to the story of Philomela from a Greek myth. According to the myth, Philomela was the sister of Procne who was forcefully ravished by king Tereus. He further cuts-off her tongue too. Later, when Procne avenged her sister's death, all three were turned into birds by the gods; Procne into a swallow, Philomela into a nightingale and Tereus into a hawk. Since then the nightingale cries, '*Tereu Tereu*' the name of her violator (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*: Book VI). In this legend by Ovid, Philomela is doubly maltreated by king Tereus. But the legend offers punishment for Philomela as

well. Even in the nature of punishment, Philomela faces injustice. The sub-conscious patriarchal mind-set of *Ovid* metamorphosed Philomela into a weak and unarmed nightingale; whereas the barbarous king's metamorphoses into a hawk keep the authority of power vested with king Tereus. To heighten the might of king Tereus, the nightingale ever since then cries '*TereuTereu*', the name of its violator. The legend is used by the poet on yet another occasion in the poem and it offers linguistic mode to exhibit patriarchal chauvinism; where language is used as an instrument to support the sordid issue of male domination and superiority.

Even, T.S. Eliot could not be forgiven for the guilt of supporting patriarchal domination. Whether consciously or not, but the poet supports the cause of male chauvinism. Otherwise, there seems no second reason for the poet's inclusion of the sylvan scene in Lady Mrs. Equitone's room as a symbolism for his poem.

vii) Mrs. Porter and her daughter

The duo-female characters appear in the section '*The Fire Sermon*'. The poem depicts both the female characters as women of loose morals visited by Mrs. Sweeney. This is evident from the poetic lines '*The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring. O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter And on her daughter They wash their feet in soda water*'. Explicitly, the poet makes no single disparaging remark about their morality. But the poetic expression of their washing feet in soda water is objectified typically as an act of sensuality. Feminists have objected and argued against several kinds of objectification of the women's body. The women's body has never been treated as her own subject. Her body is seen to establish a direct co-relation to her sexuality, desires and identity by the societal norms which themselves are produced by men (Nayar, 103-104). The women therefore become the object of study, control, discipline and haze, wherein *virtues* and *vices* are attributed to her body. Considering, if the act of washing feet with soda water was performed by Mr. Sweeney, how it would have revealed a flaw in his character. In that case, it could have revealed his extravagance and a luxurious way of living or maybe even his easy-going attitude towards life; but definitely under no circumstances it would have represented his sexual urges, desires or even his identity.

Whatever flaw is designated to Mr. Sweeney's character is mild in nature. But when the same act of washing feet in soda water is performed by Mrs. Porter and her daughter, it explicitly becomes a co-efficient of their baser desires and carnal feelings.

viii) *The typist girl*

The typist girl is another female character in the section '*The Fire Sermon*'. Since the 1990s, a new wave of feminism is on the rise. Feminists have called it *materialist feminism*. It could be argued that women's oppression could be attributed to both *patriarchy* and *capitalism*. It implies that *gender-inequalities* are also determined by the *class-affiliations* in a male-dominated societal structure. Historically and traditionally, the people in power in capitalism have been men. It then could be said, that if capitalism depends on the exploitation of labour, then exploitation of women also needs to be explored.

The poet's description of the typist girl could be studied from *material feminist* point of view (Nayar, 93). She is shown by the poet as a girl who works as a typist as is evident in the lines '*brings the sailor home from sea The typist home at tea-time*'. This is something unusual about her considering the position of women during those days. Initially, it appeared that the poet tries to elevate the role and identity of women in the existing patriarchal society. But in the next few lines we come across, a small house agent's clerk, possibly her lover, visiting her. Undoubtedly, this small agent's clerk belongs to a low rank of society, but the poet defends his capitalist position saying that he was an upstart and was assured of his success as a Bradford billionaire as is evident in the lines '*A small house-agent's clerk, with one bold stare, One of the low on whom assurance sits As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire*'. Hereupon, the poet could be charged with the arguments of material feminist. The capitalist class, patriarchy and power relations all three in combination attributed towards the typist girl's exploitation. The poet's argument of the man's assurance for his success as a Bradford millionaire slams the typist girl's economic position and lets down her financial independence and success. His violation of the typist girl's body is an uncouth and a savage attempt to establish his *socio-economic* supremacy over her as could be observed in the lines '*Endeavours to engage her in caresses Whisch still*

are unreprieved, if undesired. Flushed and decided, he assaults at once; Exploring hands encounter no defence His vanity requires no response And makes a welcome of indifference'. Moreover, the fact that his vanity required no response from the girl asserted on the *gender-inequalities* in the patriarchal society. Thus, the poet has sub-consciously accounted class-affiliations for the exploitation of labour as well as exploitation of women.

Undoubtedly, T.S. Eliot's prime objective of composing '*The Wasteland*' was to bring to the readers the existing horrors of World War I and the devastating repercussions thereof. The poem heavily conveys the idea of *loss of spiritual* over *gain of material* and the futility of human life. For Eliot '*The Wasteland*' was one such place which reflected his spiritually lost place.

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