

Relocating Literature: Rereading “The Waste Land” from a Sri-Lankan Post-war Perspective

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Abstract: T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” is a poem written in response to the post-war conditions of Europe after the First World War. Even though the poem does not overtly appeal to the First World War, and a very few references are made on the First World War, an underlying reading of the poem proves that “The Waste Land” does have the First World war in its background. What Eliot sees as the waste of modern civilization i.e., the spiritual dryness, fruitless sex, illicit sexual affairs, sexual laxity, hopelessness, and psychological and cultural deterioration cannot be restrained only to the westerners of the twentieth century. It has resonance with all the post-war communities and especially to those in the Northern part of Sri Lanka who had experienced a ferocious war for three decades. What this paper proposes is to relocate “The Waste Land” in post-war Sri Lanka. In clear terms this paper perceives the post war conditions of Sri Lanka from Eliot’s point of view, according to his “The Waste Land”. The comparative analysis adopting the qualitative methodology proves that the psychological deterioration that comes along with the war remains irreparable for a long time as observed by Winston Churchill “injuries were wrought to the structure of human society which a century will not efface” [4]. The paper also looks forward to create awareness to the present plight in Sri Lanka, the spiritual cultural and psychological deterioration, which Sri Lankans face including moral degradation.

Keywords: Deterioration, Eliot’s Waste Land, post-war, Relocating, Resonance.

I. BACKGROUND

The world-wars that devastated almost all the nations directly or indirectly brought to light the hidden animal instinct of humanity. The desolate despair that was prevalent all over the world during the first half of the twentieth century was vividly captured by many literary writers. T.S. Eliot was one among them, and he is considered to be the pre-eminent man of letters. Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was one of the pioneers among the first modern poets. These poets belonged to and wrote for a generation whose view of life was radically altered by the First World War, which has undermined many people’s faith in the system that had once ordered human existence. No other poet had captured so vibrantly than Eliot, what the war had brought alongside with the material disaster is the irreparable damage to the inner self. Eliot’s immediate “Waste Land” is the world, as he saw it, after the First World War. The “waste” is not, however, that of War’s devastation and bloodshed, but the emotional and spiritual sterility of the Western man. Eliot does not regard this as a single moment in history, particular to the west in the twentieth-century, but the poem is organized to present an inclusive, comparative vision, a perspective of history, that is parallel to all post war society.

War is nothing new to Sri Lanka. For more than three decades the people experienced the ferocity and brutality of a civil war in Sri Lanka. The war has ended, but what the war brought with it—loss of self-dignity, abasement, indignity, psychological disorder, and ignominy—remain irreparable. The victims of the war have lost their hope and are engulfed by despair. They live in a world marked by emotional and spiritual emptiness. There is no “life” in their existence. “The Waste Land”, written in the early part of the twentieth century, has resonance with the post-war experiences of the people of Northern Sri Lanka. Reading the poem reminds us of the present historical moment experienced by the communities ravaged by the war in Sri Lanka. This paper tries to explore this theme.

II. OBJECTIVES

The objective of this research is to compare “The Waste Land” with the post-war conditions of Sri Lanka and to prove even the geo, political cultural issues differ; the aftermath is the same to any post-war community. It is crucial for any post-war community to encounter an era full of despair and immorality. Still what awaits a post-war community is the rejuvenation and the desire to put everything in order. This is what this paper attempts to prove taking the comparison of “The Waste Land” with the post-war conditions as a model.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

Adopting the qualitative methodology this paper attempts to explore the parallels between T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and the post-war conditions of Northern Sri-Lanka. Even though this plight is the same for any post-war community, this research narrows down its scope to Northern Sri Lanka; a small part of this island, considering the difficulties in data collection. For collecting materials on “The Waste Land” the research depended on secondary data collection, in which the researcher gathered books and materials on “The Waste Land” and T.S. Eliot. Of course the researcher learned a lot about T.S. Eliot and his work “The Waste Land” from these materials. Materials on the social history of post-first world war Europe were gained from some valuable books. From these books the researcher came to know about the psychology of a community that encountered a cruel, turbulent, and anarchic war. Having understood all these things the researcher started to collect data regarding post-war Sri Lanka. It was not easy to collect enough materials on postwar Sri Lanka. Since we have victims of war who had witnessed and experienced the terrible war with their own eyes, the researcher met them and got primary data from them. In order to materialize this idea and to get a fair knowledge about the post-war conditions of Sri Lanka the researcher met Dr. Sivayogan, a well known psychiatrist who is in charge of the psychiatric unit of Jaffna Teaching Hospital and the counsellors who are working there in the psychiatric unit. The psychiatrist permitted the researcher to meet some of the war victims, to get their first hand experience of war. Further, the researcher met Rev. Fr. Damien, who is a counsellor, dealing with the war victims. Apart from this, both the psychiatrist and the counsellor suggested some valuable books about postwar Sri Lanka. Moreover, to ensure the parallels between “The Waste Land” and the conditions of post-war Sri Lanka factually the research collected some news from some local Newspapers like that of Uthayan and Sudarolzi and analysed them along with “The Waste Land” and proved that what Eliot perceives in “The Waste Land” has resonance with all post-war communities.

IV. DISCUSSION AND COMPARISON

As the title of the research paper indicates this paper attempts to compare T.S.Eliot's "The Waste Land" with the post-war conditions of Northern Sri-Lanka. The research analyses in this section the parallels that can be drawn between T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the post-war conditions of Northern Sri-Lanka. In his "Vanni Narratives", Somasundaram states:

"Generally there was consensus that family and community life had suffered due to deaths, separations, and deprivations. Relationships, trust, cohesion, beliefs, and ethical values had declined, some said deteriorated, destroyed. Instead there was an increase in misunderstandings, conflict, selfishness, suspicions, anger, bitterness, loss of interest, state of detestation, sorrow, alcoholism and sexual laxity" [4].

The emptiness and nakedness of a death like existence is very vividly captured by the epigraph of "The Waste Land". The great Sibyl hung up for show in a cage epitomizes the idea of degeneration and deterioration which informs "The Waste Land", just as the horror of her fate epitomizes its chief emotion, the dread of a life, that is no life, a life-in-death. When asked by the little boys, "what do you want?" Sibyl replies, "I want to die". This same kind of attitude is prevalent in war victims, especially in old people. In a personal interview with a war victim, who had lost her two sons in war revealed the same kind of attitude. She said, "Why should I live? I should have died with them. What is there for me in life anymore?". Like Sibyl, she sees life as something painful and cruel that she cannot escape from. This state of mind is recorded in Somasundaram's "Vanni Narratives" as well. A sixty year old woman having lost eight family members out of ten says 'Do we need a life like this? I could have died with them. Why did I come here? Have I to go on living? ...' [4].

'Whoever floundered through this morass full of shrieking and dying . . . had passed the last frontier of life, and henceforth bore deep within him the leaden memory of a place that lies between life and death' [7]. Those who surpassed the narrow frontier between virtue and vice loose all their moral values and meaning and lead a death like existence, as "death had undone" their lives. They seem as if they were more dead than living. This very idea is expressed by Eliot in "The Waste Land":

*"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."* [1]

In the day-to-day life, those living in the North meet many war victims whose families had been affected by death. They almost lead a life like hell, full of despair and hopelessness as described by Eliot with the citation to Dante's *Inferno* and Baudelaire's *The Flower's of Evil*. When a human being suddenly realizes that 'he has nothing to lose except his so ridiculously naked life' [3] he will not hesitate to do anything, even the utmost worse things in life. As a result of this appalling reversal of hitherto cherished and valued moral codes, sexual perversion, moral corruption, and mental and

physical illness all become pervasive. The idea of hell being slowly loosen before the eyes of the victims is recorded in the horrors of Mullivaikal section in “Vanni Narratives” [4].

When these people return to normal life, they have no values to cling to, and start leading a life that is full of vulgarity and immorality as depicted in “The Waste Land”. Startling similarities can be pinpointed between Eliot’s modern Thames and the famous beaches in the northern part of Sri Lanka like that of Casuarina and Charty. Eliot describes the modern Thames as:

*“The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.
And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors;
Departed, have left no addresses.”* [1]

Eliot clearly brings to the fore the idea of sex in the early twentieth century Europe after the first World War that is devoid of love and real purpose. All these illicit sexual intercourses are made for the momentary pleasure and those who indulge in a sexual relationship have no idea of maintaining their relationship. They just meet near the bank of river Thames, enjoy themselves and depart. This same kind of attitude is vividly captured in Uthayan, one of the daily news papers of the North: ‘Cultural degradation in Mannar: requests to put an end’ [5]. Under this heading, the unscrupulous behaviour of youth in the beaches of Mannar is harshly criticized. The news further ensures that those who are engaged in these activities are from nearby resettled villages. Eliot’s Mrs. Porter can be paralleled with the ongoing prostitution of post-war Northern Sri Lanka, especially in the war torn areas. Again Uthayan newspaper captures this social evil as: ‘Twelve youths arrested after complaints on amoral behaviour: police raids hotel in Jaffna’ [5].

Eliot’s nightingale, throughout the poem functions as a metaphor for sexual violation and tells the sad tale of the violation of the chastity of Philomel by her barbarous brother in-law. Her tongue was plucked off by him to prohibit her from speaking and later she was changed as a nightingale and kept on singing her sad predicament:

*“The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
“Jug Jug” to dirty ears.”* [1]

The metamorphosis from a woman to that of a bird is somewhat diminishing in status. Likewise the corrupted beauties of post-war northern Sri Lanka too could not speak out what had happened to them openly like tongue less Philomel as revealing the sexual assault is a taboo as well as a disgrace for them. Like Philomel these women too are declining in status in one way or other. Most of them are psychologically deteriorating as they are suppressing their inner thought. This very view is accepted by some of the counsellors in Jaffna.

Social values and social wealth were lost during the war, and once loosened from the restrictions, people make it their habit to step over the values, using the war as an excuse, and the aggressions that follows cannot be stopped. 'Once civilization was weakened beyond a critical point there might be no limit to the subsequent eruption of aggression' [2].

Further, there are many victims who could not come out from their nightmarish memories. They are haunted by their horrendous memories and what they hear is 'a cold blast' [1] and 'the rattle of the bones' [1] at their back.

*"But at my back in a cold blast I hear
The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear."* [1]

In our society there are uncountable individuals who had witnessed the "cold blast" of the artillery shells and bombs "at their back". The rattle of bones that most of the war affected disturbed minds hear are that their loved ones for whom they could not perform any last rites, whom they had abandoned even without a decent burial.

Moreover, the piling up of broken images and the presence of a barren landscape provide a kind of desperation and hopelessness in "The Waste Land".

*"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....
And I will show you fear in a handful of dust."* [1]

The broken images that haunt the victims of war are the shattered bodies of their loved ones and the barren and broken landscape. "Handful of dust" that evokes fear in "The Waste Land" is associated to the creation and death of man. According to the Christian tradition handful of dust depicts the mortality of man; thus it represents the death and burial of man. In Christian funeral services the priest utters the following to remind the rest of the crowd about their mortality to which they are bound: "For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return". In "Vanni Narratives" this similar attribute is very clearly elaborated where some of the survivors record the fear in a handful of dust. The remorse that they feel for not giving a proper burial for their loved ones is so great that they feel mental depression and agony.

"Fifty one year old Siva ... revealed that the images of his two children dying in front of him and leaving their bodies in the bunker without even carrying out their funeral rites keep recurring in his mind preventing his sleep ... He is severely depressed ..." [4].

In another instance, "Vanni Narratives" records:

"One widow described how she and her children had left her husband who had been shattered by a shell but still alive and struggling on the road, to escape themselves. She is haunted by this memory ..." [4].

Even though Eliot speaks about the lost generation and the poem is full of despair, terror and the landscape is arid and parched; it is in the last part of the poem *What the thunder said* the life giving rain pours down. With a reference to the Fisher King, Eliot speaks about the reconstruction and

rejuvenation that awaits a war-torn community. The legend of Fisher King springs from an old Celtic belief in which the fertility of the land depended on the potency and virility of the king. The king was in essence espoused to his lands. The king's life or spirit is so sympathetically bound up with the prosperity of the whole country that if he fell ill or grew senile, the cattle would sicken or cease to multiply, the crops would rot in the fields, and men would perish of widespread disease. The woes of the land are the direct result of the sickness or the maiming of the Fisher King. When his power wanes, the country is laid waste and the soil is rendered sterile. If prosperity be regained, the illness or wound of Fisher King should be healed.

*"I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?" [1]*

With the image of fishing, the atmosphere of relaxation and serenity comes in. He/she is sitting to fish with the arid land behind him/her. The restlessness and the negative experiences are at the back, still there is an urge as well as an inclination to set everything in order. "The "I", who sits in the symbolic act of fishing seeking salvation, regeneration, and eternity with the Waste Land behind him, wonders how far he can order his affairs. There is a note of subdued hope or at least of determination in these lines. The "atleast" suggests a reasonable minimum of achievement."

This same kind of interest to rebuild is evident in the war victims of northern Sri Lanka. A strong desire for rejuvenation is very vividly captured in the last portion of "Vanni Narratives":

"Now with the resettlement process, motivation to rebuild their lives and livelihood was strong. There was a sense ... that their situation was improving and there was hope for the future ... there were some positive stories of resilience and post-traumatic growth. A senior government officer and writer said that they had gone through great hardship, but that they now only needed to get back their infrastructure, resources, occupational opportunities and jobs to rebuild and restart their lives" [4].

And it is in this juncture Eliot quotes from the *Upanishads* the words of Prajapathy "Da" in three fold ponderous messages: "Datta" which means give, "Dayadhvam" that means sympathise, and "damyata" that is control yourself, as a panacea to heal the symbolic wound of the Fisher King of any post-war society. The symbolic wound can be anything. It could be a physical, spiritual or psychological wound. These are the three aspects that Eliot advocates for a society that has passed through turbulence and horror. These principles of giving, sympathising, and control too can set our lands in order and the 'shanthi' that Eliot invokes could be a reality to a traumatized society.

V. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

What this research finds out is that a community that encountered a turbulent war is entitled to face a moral threat. They are destined to pass through a period in which all their norms and values are shambled down and inevitably they face cultural as well as spiritual deterioration and degradation. It does not mean that war is the only reason for all these defects. But what the research found out is that war had intensified their cause as observed by a critic "once civilization was weakened beyond a critical point there might be no limit to the subsequent eruption of aggression" [2]. Once the limitation between vice and virtue is overthrown and the animal instinct

takes the upper hand, “once restraint upon their natural aggressiveness was removed, men might reappear as savage beasts to whom the thought of sparing their own kind is alien” [2]. This paves way to the violence that was prevalent in the attitude of the men. This same condition is also found out through this research in both T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” as well as in the post-war conditions of Sri Lanka. Yet the benediction that comes in the latter part of the poem signifies three principles by which peace and regeneration can be regained. Thus the research ultimately proves that what Eliot perceives in his “The Waste Land” has resonance with the post-war conditions of Sri Lanka.

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