

5

T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' and Romanticised Technology – A Study of Modern Discourse Network

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"It's over forty years since 'The Waste Land' appeared and what once seemed to be a baffling poem is so no longer"

R.J Owens (1963,'Caribbean Quarterly')

Abstract

T.S. Eliot, the 1948 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, is one of the avant-garde modernist writers, who is highly distinguished as a poet, literary critic, dramatist, and editor and publisher. His *The Waste Land* is one of the most famous and influential poems of the century. While the origins of "The Waste Land" are in part private, the voices seeping through it are universal. Although Eliot later denied that he had larger universal problems in mind, but, nevertheless, in "The Waste Land" he diagnosed the slow corrosion of his generation and indeed of Western civilisation in the 20th century. Technology plays an important role in degradation and corrosion of society as depicted by Eliot. The process of slowly corroding the foundations of society by technology when linked back to the concept of "Modern Discourse Network" by Kittler restates the poem as highly relevant even today.

Keywords: Discourse, Technology, subverted notions, modernity

Introduction

Published in 1922, T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' is the perfect example of *avant-garde* modern literature" (Owens, 1963, p.3) which entered into the established order of literary works and permanently caused a shift in the perspectives. The poem, penned down when the world grappled with the aftermath of the First World War, harbours the

'feeling of dissatisfaction and a sense of strong sickening by the grim reality' as its core.

Back then in 1922, a few readers immediately recognised its greatness, but the larger reading public, baffled by its fragmentation, its polyglottal allusions, and its stream of consciousness, merging of identities and consciousness, reacted with hostility. Today the poem is the only work which is routinely taught as an integral part of curriculum all over the world. The poem, although it continues to baffle and madden students, is perceived not only as a part of modernist masterpieces about disintegration of European Culture after First World War but also as the 'greatest poetic vision of the 20th century contemporary politics, psychological and ecological conditions continue to reveal its 'prescient authority' (Schein, 2022)

The Waste Land and Technology

'The Waste Land' assimilates an astounding variety of topics, fits together a multitude of images, and encompasses a multitude of languages and cultures. But a prominent theme that Eliot treats in detail in the poem is the role of technology and industrialisation in the degradation and subsequent collapse of Western civilisation. The paper focuses on the technological dependence and prediction of future by 'The Waste Land' and to resituate it as a literary canon within the Modern (Post War) Discourse network of the period.

Friedrich Kittler's 'Discourse Networks 1800/1900' (originally published in 1985 under the title *Aufschreissysteme*1800/1900) defines *discourse network* as follows: "It's the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data. Technologies like that of book printing and the institutions coupled to it, such as literature and the university, thus constituted a historically very powerful formation" (Kittler.1900 p. 369) He pointed out that in the current 'discourse network', one should also take into consideration data storage, calculation in technological media and transmission. A 'discourse network' can therefore be rightfully annotated as a signification and a kind of unconsciousness.

An amalgamation of the concept of 'discourse network' with Michael Foucault's theory of 'archive' (which has been widely

appreciated for its application to print material) pinpoints how the fundamental structure of the poem works on the notion that technology has contributed to the modern era fragmentation of society. The hardware of technology according to Kittler conjugates abstract meanings and notions to ‘very real’ tangible bodies of power, institutions, media, and humans. In a ‘Discourse Network’ the concept of sound plays a critical role.

The hardware and information discourse also works as a ‘selective filter’, it filters out some information as “noise” and lets others pass through as “substantial” or “vital”. Moreover, a cruel twist lies in the fact that all the “substantial” information can never transcend boundaries of Geography and culture. Some “vital” information is allowed to pass through these boundaries while the rest of it is locked away in storehouses of institutions.

Critic Juan A. Suárez in her seminal study argues that Eliot almost mimics a sound recorder in ‘The Waste Land’. A parallel of Eliot’s poem to sound agglomeration art in the modern era by various experimental artists who joined together radio broadcasts and recordings reveals how the poem sprouts from swift zapping through an unconscious pre-recorded literary archive in which each work hums at different heights. ‘The Waste Land’s’ structure derives itself from proponents of ‘modern discourse network’ – machines. The technology in the poem questions the already established foundations of society and the ‘vital’ tunes of the high and the low are recorded in a mush where one note can’t be separated from another. As Suárez notes, “Once the channels are open, they carry any and all sounds...”. The voice of Duke is juxtaposed and equated to the frequency of the working-class. This highlights the slow erosion of the supposedly permanent social institutions by technology. The haunting lack of a traceable pattern in the images in the poem mirrors the fragmentation of social customs and rituals after the war.

A thorough analysis of the content reveals how the ‘gramophone’ has a haunting ghost-like presence in a substantial part of the poem; it represents a demonstrative and frozen-in-time moment of degradation of human society. The subverted invocation to decay in the passage “under the brown fog of a winter noon...” in

which the alien like Narrator receives a rather strange invitation which reads "Asked me in a demotic French, to luncheon at Cannon Street hotel" and the suggestively sexual encounter between the 'typist' and the "small house agent clerk" happens all in grey and in a horrid city. But one common characteristic of all these ghastly occurrences is the cunning and omnipresent presence of technology, popular culture producing lifeless factories and a looming fear of death.

A stark contrast between pastoral and modern life (where technology is the new Duke) can be highlighted through a parallel analysis of the images dealt with in the initial and the subsequent sections of the poem. In "The Burial of the Dead" section Eliot situates and paints images of a comparatively meaningful and peaceful life before the war. He speaks of the conventional upper class with contempt. Those classes before the war spent time at the "Archduke's, my cousin's ..." and had dreamy lives in which they "read, much of the night, and go south in the winter". They search for the meaning of life in the quack "Madame Sosostri's" cards and among the mythological world crafted by classical music. Eliot juxtaposed their lives with the lives of the wretches in the mechanised and modernised world. The women at the pub in "A Game of Chess" and the typist in "The Fire Sermon." are his representatives of the modern world.

The residents of the modern world are contrasted with the rich strata of society who enjoyed their vacations in the dreamy mountains, whereas the typist is "named metonymically for the machine she tends, so merged with it, is the fact, that she is called the 'typist' even when she's at home". Her dehumanizing, mechanical work initially formed a part of her identity but now it is her entire identity. The typist is symbolically a person or figure who has been dehumanised by mechanisation via technology in the modern world. Her mundane and monotonous existence serves as a "commentary on the extent to which the Industrial Revolution has corroded the sense of purpose and fulfillment of human life and existence".

"The Fire Sermon" section of 'The Waste Land' speaks volumes about the degrading effects of mechanisation. For example, in the lines preceding the introduction of 'Tiresias':

“At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting....”

Here, Eliot harbours a direct parasitic relation between the modern worker and the machinery. The human component manifests itself into the mechanised and absurd “human engine,” and gradually reduces to the point where the typist is compared to a mere “throbbing taxi.”

A never-ending continuous circle of labour is undertaken by the industrial labourers and office workers, which in turn snatches away their individuality and, as Eliot argues, “their human nature too”. North points that “the figure of metonymy is used polemically to depict a metonymised society where the individuals are both at the same time dismembered and standardised” (North, 1991). By employing this method, Eliot characterizes the “automatism and machine conditioning” of the new modern life as a major parasitic factor for the downfall of the modern human and society. Keeping in line with this thought and theme ‘Tiresias’ is subsequently introduced in the next few lines, the pessimistic view of modern society is further fostered and nurtured through Eliot’s cunning observations.

The initial footnotes by the poet identified ‘Tiresias’ as the central figure in “The Waste Land”, he introduced Tiresias using the first person, which emphasizes the importance of the character further:

“I Tiresias, though blind,
throbbing between two lives ...”

The repetition of the word throbbing in subsequent lines link the ‘Tiresias’ to “the human engine” and is like a mythological genderless state which allows ‘Tiresias’ to find significance with both sexes.

Eliot portrays how he, as an artist and poet, can construct a bridge between both the classical and modern world. As Reeves notes, “the first (throbbing) stresses the mechanicalness of the alienated ‘human engine’ which exists in terms of its parts ...while the second reinvents the human engine with ‘throbbing’ humanity”.

Therefore, keeping in mind, the correlation illuminated by Reeves 'Tiresias' is intimately connected to the modern human condition.

North agrees with the analysis of Reeves, and further expands onto it: "Eliot suggests a link between the reduced conditions of the modern worker and the mythical hermaphrodite who includes all experience" (North, 1991). The significance of the above proposition lies in the fact that it equates the humiliation of the worker to a momentous proportion and this humiliation is further of critical importance to the poem. The transgendered biological status of Tiresias serves as a bold highlighter of the theme of emasculation worked upon throughout "The Waste Land". As soon as Tiresias was emasculated, he was one with the modern worker, and eventually the modern worker was also subjected to the horrifying emasculation. In this way, Eliot shows that the "human engine" has corroded and emasculated humans.

Tiresias on other hand plays the important role of acting like a lens through which the reader can easily observe and ponder about "the typist". The typist's highly automatic and mechanical way of life, is a poignant example within the poem about the loss of purpose in modern life. The unnamed typist is also an archetype which Eliot employs to draw a presentation of all women within the industrialised society. As North notes, "The typist is horrifying both because she is reduced by the conditions of labour to a mere part and since she is infinitely multiple". Eliot provides minimal details regarding the typist and cunningly generalizes her in order to highlight the degradation of all women in modern era. Eliot further lays great focus on the differences between the typist's life and the traditional way of living by noting that she "lays out food in tins". And the clerk at the identical time, exemplifies the fashionable labour 'man' in an exceedingly similar fashion because the typist exemplifies the fashionable proletariat 'woman'

Eliot portrays the clerk as "one of the lowest" and Tiresias too mentions how he has "walked among the bottom of the dead". North employs this instance to ascertain a relationship between 'Tiresias' and the 'clerk', but the connection is surprisingly bilateral. The clerk is additionally at the same time linked to the "lowest of the dead," which additionally reinforces that modernity has hollowed the soul

of humanity. Additionally, the typist's indifferent attitude towards sex further focuses upon direction and fulfilment within the lifetime of Homo sapiens that Eliot focuses on. As Perry notes, "The typist is automatic in her job and in her love-making," (Perry, 2022) this accentuates the concept that modern humans are reduced to a form of "living machines". By employing the tool of generalisation, Eliot demonstrates effectively that the scene between the typist and the clerk isn't something out of Dante's "Divine Comedy" but these incidents occur daily monotonously within the modern city.

'Tiresias' on the other hand serves the important function of acting as a lens through which the reader observes "the typist". "The typist's" highly automatic and mechanical way of life, serves as a notable example in the poem about the loss of meaning from modern life. The unnamed typist is an archetype and Eliot employs this archetype to draw a portrait of all women in the industrialised society. As North notes, "The typist is horrifying both because she is reduced by the conditions of labour to a mere part and because she is infinitely multiple".

Eliot, by providing as few details regarding the typist as possible, generalizes her to show the degradation of all women. Eliot further emphasizes on the differences between the typist's life and the traditional way of living by noting that she "lays out food in tins". The clerk at the same time, exemplifies the modern working class 'man' in a similar fashion as the typist exemplifies the modern working class 'women'

Eliot identifies the clerk as "one of the low". Later, 'Tiresias' too mentions how he has "walked among the lowest of the dead". North uses this example to establish a relationship between 'Tiresias' and the 'clerk', but the connection is bilateral. The clerk is also at the same time linked to the "lowest of the dead," which further reinforces that modernity has eaten into the condition of humanity. Moreover, the typist's indifferent attitude towards sex further emphasizes the lack of purpose and fulfilment in the life of modern man that Eliot focuses on. As Smith notes, "The typist is automatic in her job and in her love-making," this accentuates the idea that modern humans have been reduced to a kind of "living machine". By employing the tool of generalisation, Eliot demonstrates effectively that the confrontation

between the typist and the clerk is not something out of Dante's *Divine Comedy* but these incidents occur every day monotonously in the modern city.

That particular episode from the poem occupies the center stage amidst the multitude of similar occurrences that occurred in the aftermath of the First World War is the presence of 'Tiresias' (a character from classic Greek literature and mythology who is a blind prophet) which serves as a major unifying figure in the poem. Having lived his life as both a man and a woman, 'Tiresias' is able to relate on a spiritual level to both the clerk and the typist in this scene. This scene is not, as Suárez remarks, "one more vignette of present-day decadence". Tiresias, who has "sat by Thebes below the wall", forms a link between the modern and classical world. This "building is a timeless myth in a modern setting". The encounter gets its meaning by its linkage with the chaotic present and simultaneously with the traditions of the past. This led to the creation of a pattern, which emerges from the disorder of the poem. Moreover, the mythological context of Tiresias' presence established that "The Waste Land" is not a perpetual and everlasting state; it has not always existed, and will not always exist.

On the surface of it all, if one looks closely, there is a small streak of meaning amidst the chaos of "The Waste Land", the poem is composed of several examples of locating a position in the middle of the polar extremes, such as 'Tiresias', positioning between the male and female genders. Here, Eliot gives the first sign that it might be possible to find a meaning in contemporary life. He also juxtaposed several key passages of the poem in a space which lies in the middle of the spectrum of night and day, for example the scene of the typist's occurs at the "violet hour". Eliot uses the concept of time to link this scene to the decline of the "unreal city". The description of the "unreal city" is repeated throughout the poem, and by labelling the modern city as "unreal," Eliot successfully differentiates between a modern yet degraded human condition and a true experience of human existence. A final and strong worded mention of the "unreal city" indicates that it is falling, Elliot writes:

"Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers ...
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria ...

Vienna, London ...
Unreal”

The “violet air” and the “violet light” in the scene situate the events somewhere in the middle of the night and day. It is linked to the arrival of ‘Tiresias’ earlier in the poem. In this way, Eliot skillfully paints the startling images of human squalor in “The Fire Sermon” to function as the turning point in the poem. Suárez remarks that “the gramophone’s sound closes the poem’s bleak, necromantic first half. The poem begins the intimations of rebirth and redemption”. If it is advocated that the images of “The Fire Sermon” portray a pessimistic view of the modern world, then Eliot does offer hopeful and small hints that the situation can improve by multitudes, and that meaning can be found all over again in life. Through the poem, Eliot bridges the gap formed between the depressing view of the present and an optimistic view of the future.

Conclusion

While it is true that Eliot paints a bleak picture of human life in the modern world, at the same time he also indicates that meaning can be found in life through its intricate intermingling with mythology. Indeed, the mythological framework woven by Eliot gives a great deal of meaning to the poem’s striking theme of the purposelessness of modern human life. In addition to the perspective provided by ‘Tiresias’; the grim sexual encounter of the typist with the clerk is foreshadowed by the rape of Philomel in “A Game of Chess.” At the end of the poem, the Fisher King remarks, “Shall I at last set my lands in order?” Eliot maintains his position somewhere in between a muted and depressed view of the present and hopes for a rebirth of civilisation. And the answer to this question is left ambiguous by Eliot. Just as the Fisher King may one day hopefully reclaim his lands, Eliot offers a glimmering sign of hope that humanity may recover from ‘The Waste Land’.

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6

The Thematic and the Structural Semblances: A Study of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*

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Abstract

T.S. Eliot, the world-famous modern poet, has written *The Waste Land* (1922), one of the seminal works in the history of English literature. In this poem, he has portrayed a horrible vision of chaos and disorder seen after the First World War in Europe. He finds the outcome is deadly and macabre. Society has lost its harmony and coherence. Along with the impact of war on the socio-psychological sphere, the poet is also concerned about the spiritual vacuity, making the situation far more pathetic. People have detached themselves from divinity. They become hopeless and helpless. Eliot recommends only faith in God can restore the situation from this severe damage. Arun Kolatkar, a much-known face in the sphere of Indian English Literature, has written *Jejuri*, a wonderful collection of poetry on the pilgrimage site of Khandoba in Pune. But this poem is not written in praise of the deity. Instead, this entire religious establishment is treated very sceptically. With farce and satire, the poet investigates varieties disputes and controversies, very much discernible in the divine domain of Jejuri. Spirituality is found absolutely deplorable. It is also one kind of crisis detected by Kolatkar. Thus, despite the geo-psychological and socio-political differences, *The Waste Land* and *Jejuri* are found to share a common idea. Both the poems deal with spiritual sterility, a matter of concern for the entire world.

Keywords: Spiritual Sterility, Doubt, Distrust, Skepticism, Disbelief, Denial.