

## The Pain and The Panacea: Reading 'The Wasteland' In The Light Of श्रीमद् भगवद्गीता

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One of the yardsticks to estimate the worth of a work is its timelessness or relevance to the present. Many works in the field of all literatures- in English, Sanskrit, Gujarati or Hindi, have become milestones and benchmarking because of their quality to please and teach everybody, everywhere and every time- the quality of being sublime. T.S.Eliot's 'The Waste Land', published in 1922 and regarded as a highly condensed epic of the Modern age, is also one such sublime work which has left a perennial effect in the field of literature and has carved a unique niche in its own aesthetic way. The poem is symbolic of a proverb 'every cloud has a silver line'. The poem talks about the chaos of the then Modern English society. In it, we can see that materialism pervades throughout the poem and as a natural corollary of it, April, the month of Spring and rejuvenation, is referred to as the cruellest month.<sup>1</sup> The poem poses many serious issues which are of significant human concerns. Very finely the inclination of the modern Wastelanders towards inaction is indicated by the beginning line. From the very outset, Eliot talks about the degenerated psychology of the modern man in which he constantly avoids any action which, according to The Bhagawad Gita, is not possible. As Lord Krishna says, it is impossible for any human being to remain actionless; for inaction is also a kind of action or Karma. In the third chapter of The Bhagawad Gita, entitled 'Karmayoga', in the fifth shloka, Lord Krishna says,

न हि कश्चित्क्षणमपि जातु तिष्ठत्यकर्मकृतः ।  
कार्यते ह्यवशः कर्म सर्वः प्रकृतिजैर्गुणः ॥<sup>2</sup>

Remember, 'The Waste Land' is a classic example of the philosophies of the Bible, the Quran, the Upanishadas, the Vedas, the Bhagawad Gita and so on. This is wherein Eliot, specifically in Indian Upanishadas, finds the way out of degeneration and dilapidation. In the final part of the poem, entitled as 'What The Thunder Said', Eliot records the words culled from the Upanishadic Myth- Da, Da, Da<sup>3</sup>- and indicates towards the ray of hope that 'दत्त', 'दयध्वं' and 'दम्यत' (for which three 'Da' stand), that is 'to give', 'to sympathize or have compassion' and 'self-control or self-discipline' respectively, is the only way to regeneration and thereafter salvation. Lord Krishna, in the 11<sup>th</sup> Shloka of the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of The Bhagawad Gita, says,

अथैतदप्याशक्तोऽसौ कर्तुमध्योगमाश्रीतः ।  
सर्वकर्मफलत्यागं ततः कुरु यतात्मवान् ॥<sup>4</sup>

But this modern generation does not have faith in the mighty words of God; instead, they are eager to immerse their idols –that is to say, their existence in the water as the wastelanders do with the vegetation and fertility Gods like Orisis- symbolizing the death of faith in God. These burials of Orisis, Atis and Adonis serve the purpose of Objective Correlative and very allegorically, Eliot juxtaposes the past with the present. Myths and symbols are perhaps the richest part of 'The Wasteland'. The myth of Fisher King is nothing but the story of the modern man who has brought about doom to his personal kingdom by his own outrageous and reckless deeds resulting into decay and spiritual sterility. The message that comes out from this myth is that sexual perversion leads to spiritual death and the Paradise can be regained only through penance, suffering and self-purification.

Another very important mythical figure in the poem is that of Tiresias- a Thebian soothsayer and bi-sexual. He is the enlightened ghost of the age, watching the depressing spectacle of modern humanity which has fallen from the ancient heights and forgotten the old values and sanctities. As per the Karmic principle of The Bhagawad Gita, he is a saint who is a detached spectator of sordid cares, languid pursuits, boredom and sheer vacuity of which larger section of the humanity in the modern wasteland has become a prey. Tiresias suffers the pangs of curse and from the world around, he gets setbacks; yet, he remains very stoic to what befalls. This is what is expected from a composed person in the face of problems. This figure purports the attributes of a true devotee as enumerated in the 18<sup>th</sup> shloka of the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of The Bhagawad Gita in which Lord Krishna says,

समः शत्रौ च मित्रे च तथा मानवमानयोः ।  
शीतोष्णसुखदुःखेषु समःसंगविवर्जितः ॥<sup>5</sup>

A very important aspect of 'The Waste Land' is Eliot's implicative technique of communication. Distortion of values is brought out very poignantly, ironically and hence effectively at different junctures of the poem. Mrs. Porter washes her feet with soda water not to purify her spirit but to make her skin fairer to attract and catch more males. These wastelanders are quite indifferent to both sexual joy and chastity. Therefore perhaps, the girl of Goldsmith's 'Vicar of the Wakefield', after lechery, commits suicide after listening to a song "When a lovely lady stoops to folly..."; but the thick-skinned typist of modern wasteland does not do so. Instead, she "smoothes her hair with automatic hand."<sup>6</sup> Irony or paradox reaches the climax when we know that for that lady, sex is not a joy-yielding phenomenon but simply a routine process. Everything seems mechanical, nonsense and absurd. The dialogue that follows between the two copulators is remarkable:

I think we are in rats' alley  
Where dead men lost their bones.<sup>7</sup>

Fall to what extent! See, not only life, but death also is devoid of all significance for the contemporary wastelanders. They have lost their faith, love, hunger, hope everything. Lord Krishna, for the remedy of this, asks for renunciation of material pursuits and embarking of spiritual path and says in the 8<sup>th</sup> shloka of the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of The Bhagawad Gita:

मय्येव मन आधत्स्व मयि बुद्धि निवेशय ।  
निवसिष्यसि मय्येव अतः ऊर्ध्वं न संशयः ॥<sup>8</sup>

'Unite your mind and intellect with Me and then you will reside in Me' - See, the consolation and assurance the Almighty gives. The wastelanders are suffering due to their own Karma- deeds. They are patients suffering from the diseases like vacuity, ennui, purposelessness and joylessness. From the painful story of Philomela, the denizens of the wasteland need to understand a very simple 'cliché' that poised perseverance only can lead to welfare, grace and well-being. To me, the interpretation of the situational arrangement of the Shiva-Temple, in which we first bow down to Nandi, then Kashyap and then finally to Lord Shiva, is that through perseverance and poise only, we can attain the Divine Grace. Unfortunately, the wastelanders, busy indulging in orgies and all sorts of sensual pleasures, have time to go to church to show themselves being religious but don't have time for introspection. As a result, they are not able to understand the macro effects of the micro sentiments of the poor, needy and downtrodden; which is the greatest religion. In this regard, highlighting the need to develop the sense of humanity, an eminent Urdu poet Nida Fazli writes in one of his poems:

अपना गम लेके कहीं ओर जाया न जाए,  
घरमें बिखरी हुई चिज़ोंको सजाया जाए ।  
घर से मस्जिद है बहोत दूर चलो यूँ कर ले,  
किसी रोते हुए बच्चे को हँसाया जाए ॥<sup>9</sup>

These wastelanders are devoid of all sorts of good things. They do not have a 'Sweet-Water-Pot-in-a-Desert' quality. By this phrase, the researcher means they have nothing by which they can ameliorate and enrich somebody's life-in the sense of joy, enthusiasm, love, compassion and so on. Instead, they are all burning and scorching in a big cauldron of jealousy, dishonesty, corruption, hypocrisy and all sorts of vices. The chapter entitled as 'Fire Sermon' is suggestive of this thing in the poem.

'The Waste Land', in every sense, is a vivid picture of the wasteland where nothing is sensible or sensitive or sane. Eliot talks about the England of 1920s which clearly shows perversion and degeneration of all kinds. The poem can be called a social document which, in a way, lays bare the reasons of degeneration and at the same time, as a torchbearer, shows the path with optimistic approach to the regeneration out of the whirlpool of evils. Hence, the poem is rather an attempt to save the humanity which is on the 'Brink of Chaos' than just an account of 'Things Fall Apart'. In the mad rat-race of materialism, we Indians are well-nigh a century lagging behind the Wastelanders; but unfortunately on the same track. Let's conclude with the words with which the poem ends (or begins to hope for resurrection and rejuvenation):

शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥<sup>10</sup>

## References

- 1, <http://www.bartleby.com/201/1.html> Line-1
- 2, <http://www.sanskritweb.net/sansdocs/gita-big.pdf> p.20
- 3, <http://www.bartleby.com/201/1.html> Lines 401-18,432
- 4, <http://www.sanskritweb.net/sansdocs/gita-big.pdf> p.82
- 5, <http://www.sanskritweb.net/sansdocs/gita-big.pdf> p.83
- 6, <http://www.bartleby.com/201/1.html> Line-255
- 7, <http://www.bartleby.com/201/1.html> Lines 115-116
- 8, <http://www.sanskritweb.net/sansdocs/gita-big.pdf> p.82
- 9, <http://www.ajabgjab.com/2014/01/apna-gham-le-ke-kahin-aur-na-jaaya.html>
- 10, <http://www.bartleby.com/201/1.html> Line-433