

Carnality: The Root Cause of Spiritual Sterility *(A study of T.S Eliot's Poetry up to The Waste Land)*

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To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning

(T. S Eliot: The Waste Land)

T.S Eliot envisioned the modern world as a waste land, in which neither the land or nor the people could conceive. In "The Waste Land", various characters are sexually frustrated or dysfunctional, unable to cope with either reproduction or non reproductivity: the Fisher King represents damaged sexuality, Tiersias represents confused sexuality and the women chattering in "A Game Of Chess" represents an out of control sexuality. His early poetry up to "The Waste Land" deals directly with love, sex and homosexuality as with moral and spiritual sterility. Eliot holds sex responsible for moral and spiritual chaos. Sex for pleasure, as perceived by a modern man, is a stupendous folly. It can destroy the creativity of sex, which is the fountain head of life. The Bhagavad Gita extols sex as God, calls it a desire in human beings, unopposed to Dharma.

Ramsukhdas, an Indian yogi, in his Sadhak Sanjeevani writes that sex is laudable if it is free from attachment and pleasure. Attached to physical pleasures, it leads man to affliction, sin and degradation and generates frustrations, neurosis and failure of conjugal amity. These carnal and sensual desires with all horrors and

consequences, are prevalent in all major protagonists of his poetry.

The main protagonists of Eliot's early poems Sweeney, Prufrock, The Lady, Gerontion, Mr. Apollimax, Aunt Helen, Cousin Nancy all typify one or the other aspect of the gross and decaying urban society burning with carnal contemplations and temptations. All are important because they represent the corrupt, self-seeking, rotten and debilitated society. Eliot emphasizes their gross sensuality and animality using appropriate imagery. In "Sweeney Among The Nightingales" Sweeney is 'Apeneck Sweeney', he gets 'zebra stripes along the jaw', and swells to 'maculate giraffe', Rachel has 'murderous paws' and Prufrock imagines himself to be a spider, 'pinned and wriggling on the wall'. The sickness of goat (the symbol of sexual virility) that coughs and the old woman in "Gerontion" who merely-keeps the kitchen, makes tea /sneezes at evening, pocking the peevish gutter', unaware of the poor condition of the old man who feels that he is a 'dull head among windy spaces', reinforce symbolically cultural impotence.

Eliot's response to sensuality is apparently governed by his belief in Original Sin and the Fallen State of Man, reinforced by his mother's Puritan admonitions to loose the spirit from its mesh/from the poor, 'vesture of the flesh' as also by his readings and

absorption of Buddhist lore, writes Lyndall Gordon in *Eliot's Early Years*. The poet seems to consider among the sins of the body what the Buddha described as the 'thirst or craving for sensual delight, seeking gratification of the passion'. Consequently almost all the protagonists of Eliot's early poetry, who symbolize poet's alter ego, possess an insight into the working of desire. No wonder his Prufrock can discern, as did the Buddha, how the wrong appetencies born of the unconscious blind impulses beget 'wrong perceptions'. Lust beclouds a man's heart when confused with woman's beauty and the mind is dazed. Both Prufrock and Gerontion like Eliot, seem to be only too poignantly cognizant of the Buddhist thought that man struggles pitifully, matching his puny strength against the huge impersonal forces of this cosmic process, age after age, aeon after aeon over measures of time beyond thought, swept along by currents of passion in a void that he peoples with the phantoms of desire: "Do I dare/Disturb the Universe?", asks Prufrock and Gerontion wonders: "What will the spider do/Suspend its operations, Will the weevil/Delay?"

Lust in Eliot's poetry is perceived as detrimental to one's moral and spiritual health. The protagonists of Eliot's first volume Prufrock and others *Observations* - 1917 are all either laughed at or rejected in love. Hence seem to be bodies deserted by soul. Prufrock's inability to make love to women is due to his indecisiveness, shyness, self-consciousness and fear of rejection. "The Boston Evening Transcript" feeds the sexual appetites of the denizens of the waste land and leaves them spiritually sterile. Aunt Helen and Cousin Nancy for the same reason are "seen slowly sinking in the West, but without the roseate glow". Eliot's Aunt

Helen "controlled the world with fussy exactitude", Cousin Nancy is "damned" because she rides "---- hounds/over the cow pasture" and dances "all modern dances" and Mr. Apollinax's deceitful laughter "laughed like an irresponsible foetus", as a "compendium of his personality", "Gaping at the lady in the swing", is in no way healthy. Even the woman protagonist of "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" with torn and stained border of her dress, suggests her involvement in some sordid sexual encounter.

"Gerontion", a well-known poem of *Second Volume Poems* -1920 carries strong overtones of sexuality and 'your' in the passage: "I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch. How should I use them for your closure contact?" may be a former mistress of Gerontion and "I am, an old man in a dry month" reflects his sexual sterility, his loss of passion, physical capacity and inability to establish contact with women. Artificial devices like medicines, ointments, perfumes, aromatic herbs etc. to restore sexual vigour and potency, could help him no more. Even literary reminiscences referred in the poem to generate an environment necessary to excite, proved in vain. Elizabeth Drew comments:-with communication or human sense of community, a nightmare world of isolation and instability, of restless nervous and intellectual activity, emotional stagnation and spiritual drought encompass the whole universe.

Eliot's another poem of this volume "Sweeney Erect" platforms an antithetical character Sweeney, who is capable in love making game but fails to satisfy women with whom he copulates. The title of the poem is deeply ironical as Sweeney is 'erect' neither sexually nor morally. May he be

erect scientifically 'erectus ', a creature which can stand erect on his feet. But here in "Sweeney Erect" the description of Sweeney's bed fellow goes beyond thought/description. Movement of hands and feet in a posture of orang-outang, thighs like a sickle, raising of legs and knees upward like jack-knives degrade sex to pure animality. Eliot's another poem "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" set Sweeney against the female counterparts. "The person in 'the Spanish cape'" and "Rachel ne'e Rabinovitch" outrage Sweeney in sexual assault. The nightingales here, are cheap prostitutes who seduce Sweeney and from whose clutches Sweeney manages to liberate. These nightingales are also birds that are connected in mythology and legends, with misfortune and betrayal. Apart from this Sweeney is shown in dilemma: with which woman should he start his sexual game. The woman wearing Spanish cape, over-powered with strong physical passion, rushes and attempts to sit on his knees. She does all in a fit of hysteria, while Sweeney remains silent all the time, "-still and gapes". Eliot further reinforces sexual symbolism: the water brings in oranges, bananas, figs and hot house grapes; all suggestive of the genital organs of both the sexes.

"Burbank with Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" opens new dimensions of perversions of men-women relationships. Burbank's entering Venice with a lot of knowledge, staying in a small hotel and his encounter with Princess Volupine and enamour of her voluptuous physical charms: "They were together and fell", suggest his fall. Princess Volupine, a bloodless consumptive, for whom life is meant to suck the last drop of pleasure, when finds Burbank - a man of aesthetic sensibility,

incapable of extinguishing her fire of passion, preys on Bleistein, with a cigar (a phallic symbol). Again unsatisfied by Bleistein, she extends her voluptuous physical gestures and designs to another commercial man who has made his fortune in fur trade, emphasize momentary urge of the flesh.

The sexual concerns assume a very different form in Eliot's "The Waste Land". Here love denatures into a passive sexual effect and ceases to be "an activity". It is neither "giving" nor "receiving", it has become a biological itch i.e. "a chemically produced tension in the body" as Freud calls it. Nicholson delves deep on this subject and comments: "As God put desires in man and woman to the end that world should be preserved by the union, so hath. He implanted in every part of existence the desire for another part." Contrary to Freud's view that "----- sexual impulses have contributed invaluablely to the highest cultural, artistic and social achievements of the human mind", sex in "The Waste Land" is a gateway to Hell.

The theme of sexuality in "The Waste Land" is more explicitly dealt with in the second and third sections of "A Game of Chess" and "The Fire Sermon." From one to the next a progression takes place: men and women are initially viewed as equals or if not, the women as superiors, in "A Game of Chess". Love is shown as a sort of competition between players of equal status, each with his or her sixteen pieces, though each adopting a distinct and opposing colour for these pieces. Deception is the essence of the game of chess which has been exclusively prohibited by scriptures. The title alludes to *Women Beware Women* and thus relates sex to the game of chess. The seduction of Bianca by the Duke while Livia,

the Duke's pimp keeps Bianca's mother -in-law engaged in a game of chess .Though other prominent players of this section – Bianca, Philomel , Miranda –all being seduced and sexually assaulted i.e. raped, are locked in love , yet the section also speaks of loveless sex, sex outside the bond of marriage i.e. extra -marital bond . The waste land is deserted because here people are luscious and lustful prone to faithless and loveless carnal ties. The Lady, most probably Belladonna in "A Game of Chess", cajoles the quester with persistence though experiences bouts of nervous break down:

My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad
.Stay with me.

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.

Belladonna, invariably, belongs to upper crust of society; women even from lower strata are equally vehemently vulnerable to the intimations of loveless sex. Eliot strengthens spiritual sterility embodied in Belladonna with the portrayal of Lil --who undergoes numberless abortions and continuously consumes anti-fertility pills to avoid pregnancy. Sex in the middle class is equally mechanical and loveless. The typist episode, the degraded song of the nightingales, allusions to Ariel's song of the Rhine daughters from Wagner's Ring and songs of the Thames --daughters smell carnal desires and sensuality and represent continuation of sex acts.

"The Fire Sermon", part third of "The Waste -Land" also explores the theme of sexual indulgence and consequent dissipation or

dissatisfaction when jaded lovers burn in the fire of lust. It conjures up a dreary picture of the ugliness of modern cities, the mechanization of modern life and the palling of human emotions. Eliot travels in time from Lord Buddha's 'fire sermon 'and St. Augustine's 'confessions' to the present day youthful passions and sensual appetites. Lord Buddha, in his original Fire Sermon reads:

All things, O priest, are on fire.

And What, O priest, are all these
things which are on fire?

The eye,

O priest is on fire; forms are on fire;

impressions received by the eye are on fire; and whatever sensation pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye , that also is on fire. And with what are these on fire. Consequently the whole world is on fire, burning 'with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation; with birth, old age and death, sorrow, lamentation and misery, grief and despair, are they on fire'.

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