

Intrusion of Environment in Prufrock's World
(An Ecocritical Study of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock")

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Our planet is on the verge of a severe environmental crisis. With the looming problems of climate change, overpopulation and energy conservation, life on Earth is becoming increasingly hazardous. Unless the environmental issues are addressed on priority, there is little hope for a bright and safe world for the coming generations. Ecologists and the newly-emerging creed of 'ecoists' are taking steps towards the redress and restitution of nature-centred world but they are few in number and do not solely hold the responsibility to play the saviour for the 7.2 billion (approximately) living souls on the planet. Each breathing human must wake up to the awareness of the enormity of the situation and should take adequate measures. Nature studies and nature-based studies are such a course taken by scholars in this direction. In many cases, nature writings have been resorted to. Even canonical works have been re-valued with eco-centric interpretations. Through this paper, I endeavour to bring out the role of nature in one of the celebrated works of T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Prufrock has always been viewed as the tragedy of a city man of the modern fragmented world of 20th century who is unable to express himself and is perpetually tormented by his desires. However, in addition to his emotional and spiritual hollowness, the poem also highlights the physical barrenness which surrounds the contemporary humankind. Nature, as one of the major characters in the poem, jolts the

reader to the consciousness of the deterioration in this non-human world and of his/her responsibility to check and repair it.

We must understand and accept that ecology is deeply related to our history, science, religion, anthropology, philosophy, art, psychology and literature. The relationship between nature and literature is two-fold – nature affects literature and literature also has the power to affect nature. 'Nature writings' discuss nature from every aspect – the power of nature, the changes in the ecological balance, pastoral splendour and its connection with spirituality. At the same time, there are works which are not primarily about nature but which contain representations of nature in one form or the other. Still, there are works in which these representations of nature are not obvious or have been neglected in the past. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" falls in the last category of literary works in which the part played by nature has been overlooked and, to a certain extent, undervalued.

At a glance, the poem appears to be a monologue where Prufrock is addressing people around him, most possibly women, and they also influence his thought process by their jibes and remarks. But Prufrock is not the only 'active' (if we may call him that) member of the group. There is something lurking in the background that is more active than him, rather, something which is the only dynamic element of the poem. There is an inconspicuous presence of a

persona that pervades the whole fabric of the poem and that is "nature". My paper attempts to evaluate the significance of physical environment in the waning life of Prufrock.

Prufrock, the epitome of passivity and despair, is undertaking a journey across the desolate streets of the city. He visits an ostentatious group at a high class party and ends his journey by taking a walk on the beach. Eliot, in order to illustrate the breakdown of modern life at every level in a world living in the lurking shadows of war, has fused together a number of techniques, like pastiche, stream of consciousness, collage and slide-show. Symbolism, surrealism and psychological facets are brought together with the intention of investigating the questions of existence and reality; questions which became pertinent in a world driven by hatred, individualism and violence. Under such circumstances, the song of Prufrock becomes a metaphor for a modern man's inner journey to either find his true self or to find an escape from the pretentious outer world. Therefore, it has been often debated that the poem is a dream sequence and the entire scenery (outdoor as well as indoor) is nothing more than the psychological landscape of Prufrock himself.

Nevertheless, the scenery, even if it is only the external manifestation of Prufrock's psychological state, has a palpable position in the song, the import of which cannot be ignored. At the very outset of his walk into town, Prufrock notices the "evening" that is "spread out against the sky" like "a patient etherised upon the table" (Eliot, "The Love Song" 2, 3). Commonly, evening has the connotation of peace, quietude and rest. It is the time of re-unions and loosening up. However, in the poem, 'rest' does not lead to contentment. It has an unhealthy impulse attached to it. It is the forced, quarantined

respite give to a patient. Moreover, the "restless" nights are spent in "cheap hotels" (6) and the "half-deserted" streets (4) wind like "a tedious argument/ Of insidious intent" (8-9). It is essential to note here that ecocritics do not consider 'nature' as synonymous to 'environment'. In fact, nature is the "environment before it was impacted by technology" (Dobie 243). Nature comprises the entire flora, fauna, water bodies, terrain and the living creatures along with the system that nurtures and nourishes them. It takes on the shape of environment due to human intervention. The intrusion of human beings in (and their meddling with) the natural world gives us environment which is but a semblance of nature. Now, when we look at the surroundings of Prufrock, there is nothing natural about it. It is marred with the ugly and inefaceable signs of technological advancement, loneliness, spiritual barrenness, consumerism and growing callousness. The poem commences with the idea that Prufrock and his contemporaries have left behind the natural world of vigour and health. They are living in an age of sickness, isolation and social compulsions.

Eliot grew up in the city of St. Louis, USA, which became the source of the urban imagery used in his early poems like "Rhapsody on a Windy Night", "Preludes" and even "Prufrock". In the previous centuries, it would have been impossible to envision the landscape Eliot portrays in his works. Industrial waste finds its way into once clear rivers, green leaves are coated with dust and the blue sky is filmed with smoke. In *The Rock*, a pageant play by Eliot, he mentions the rising popularity of chop-houses. In "Preludes", he describes the drabness of the cities and the dinginess of city life:

The winter evening settles down
with smell of steaks in passageways.
Six o'clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
And now a gusty shower wraps
the grimy scraps
of withered leaves about your feet
and newspapers from vacant lots;
the showers beat
on broken blinds and chimney-pots,
and at the corner of the street
a lonely cab-horse steams and
stamps. (1-12)

Furthermore, April becomes the "cruellest month" in Eliot's masterpiece, "The Waste Land" (1). The tree is "dead" (23) and the winter dawn is shrouded in "brown fog" (61). The "river's tent is broken" (173) and is spilt with "oil and tar" (267). The narrator is "fishing in the dull canal" (189) and "the sound of horns and motors" fills the atmosphere (197). These are a few instances from "The Waste Land" which truthfully present the crux of the piece that it is a poem about the breakdown of relationships, collapse of values, spiritual sterility and disintegration of eco-systems. Everything natural is replaced by gruesome artificiality. A similar situation is highlighted in another of Eliot's work, "The Hollow Men".

It is to be discerned that changes in environment are related to socio-economic as well as cultural changes. Urbanization, industrial stress and population explosion bring about changes in the environment giving rise to contamination of air, water and food products. This leads to stress of different kinds on human health, including tensions in psychological and behavioural

well being. It cannot, therefore, be denied that "ecology relates to the behavioural relevance of the moral environment and the adaptive nature of behavior" (Sahoo, Mishra and Pinta 73).

So, when Prufrock reaches the salon tea-party, he experiences the company of "yellow fog" with feline attributes:

The *yellow* fog that rubs its back
upon the window-panes

The *yellow* smoke that rubs its
muzzle on the window-panes

Licked its tongue into the corners of
the evening,

Lingered upon the pools that stand
in *drains*,

Let fall upon its back the soot that
falls from *chimneys*,

Slipped by the terrace, made a
sudden leap,

And seeing that it was *soft October*
night,

Curled once about the house, and fell
asleep. (Eliot, "The Love Song" 15-22)

The "soft October night" is afflicted with smoke and haze of a polluted modern city. Prufrock lives in an era where everything, every object is enveloped by pollution. The pastoral idyllic scenery is replaced by smoky and dense cities. Traffic, urbanization, increase in waste material and industrialization have resulted in a physical environment contaminated with toxic gases. Clear fog has no business in the murky cities of twentieth century. The fog is "yellow". It is sly as well as lazy, just like a cat. The surroundings are neither beautiful nor natural. There are "drains" and "chimneys" all around.

Middle aged Prufrock has been a witness to many similar “evenings, mornings, afternoons” (50). A number of questions have been ‘lifted and dropped’ on his “plate” (30) resulting in “hundred indecisions” and “hundred visions and revisions” (32-33) His timidity and hesitancy have reduced his life to a cigarette butt: “To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?” (60) Nevertheless, he questions, “Do I dare/ Disturb the universe?” (45-46) He may not be able to change the laws of universe like disease, decline and death but still the universe has been disturbed; all that was natural has been disrupted by the ways of humankind. Arms are “braceleted” (63) and hair is growing “thin” (41). No nightingale sings in the “embalmed darkness” (Keats 43). Instead, some artificial music is played in a “farther room” or the clinking of “porcelain” cups is frequently heard (Eliot, “The Love Song” 53, 89). There are no sweet-smelling flowers. Instead, the air is heavily laden with “perfume” (65). Even the worm is not free. It is found “pinned and wriggling on the wall” (57). Right from a worm to a human, no one is free from the bondage of the new material world. Prufrock cannot decide for himself, is unable to connect with others and does not have the courage to act. He is, and every other human being is, like the worm forever pinned to the wall, squirming under the pressures of society.

The loss of natural beauty is mimetic of the dreary and hideous life of twentieth century people. D. H. Lawrence strikingly describes the repulsiveness that had become characteristic of the industrial world: “Ugly surroundings, ugly ideals, ugly religion, ugly hope, ugly love, ugly clothes, ugly furniture, ugly houses, ugly relationship . . .” (qtd. in Klingopulos 14).

The last ten lines of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” mark a shift from landscape to seascape. As Prufrock takes a walk on the beach in his “white flannel trousers”, he can hear the song of the mermaids (123). The seascape, in contrast to the landscape, has retained its natural features. The “white hair of the waves” are blown back (127) and the sea-girls are “wreathed with seaweed red and brown” (130) in the “chambers of the sea” (129). Also, it is only here that Prufrock dares to eat a “peach” (122). By the end of the poem, Prufrock relocates from the land of tea and toast to the natural environs of fruits and weeds. However, this location of natural splendour is perhaps only a dream. Prufrock anticipates that the human voices may “wake” him and others like him (131). The reality is grim and it will eventually cast its shadow on the natural state.

Environmental, social, economic and cultural elements are inter-related and inter-dependant. Failure of one would affect the other. In the early twentieth century, power struggle had entered the area of inter-personal relationships as well. The nations were fighting for supremacy and monopoly. Due to scientific advancements, connectivity improved but connections became severed. On one hand, breakage in human bonds blocks all roads leading to communion with God. Fragmented communication, insincerity, emotional/spiritual/physical sterility, frustrations, increasing fret and fever are major side effects of technological thumping. To accommodate the growing millions, Mother Earth is forced to make sacrifices. The whole ecosystem falls into an imbalance.

On the other side, when humans intrude into the territory of nature, nature retorts in a very harsh manner. Human beings are reduced to a “pair of ragged claws/

scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (Eliot, "The Love Song" 73-74). Prufrock also "malingers" when it is time to work or act or even talk (77). Prufrock is unable to express his love for the lady. The cross-wiring of the modern world has slashed the tongues, making them incapable of effective communication. Whatever little communication happens, it is incoherent. Prufrock and his fellow beings are sold to indolence. They lack a purpose, a meaning in their lives. They are penalised for relentless violation of laws of nature. Therefore, their words have no meanings; in fact their story is also fragmented in nature. In "Ecology as Semiotics: Outlines of a Contextualist Paradigm for Human Ecology", Alf Hornborg fittingly concludes that "destruction of meaning and destruction of ecosystems are two aspects of the same process" (53).

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