

***The Waste Land* as a Palimpsest of the Pandemic**

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Abstract: The value of a work of art or literature is its endurance over time. T.S. Eliot's epic poem *The Waste Land* (1922) no doubt mirrored various themes unique to its day. However, the mystique of the work lies in its baffling allusions and twists of subject matter. This aporia enables us to enter the text at will, destabilise it, dismantle it, and 'rearrange' the images to articulate a different narrative in time and space. In so doing, this inquiry tries to wrest the text from its European moorings and instead argues that it is the Ur-narrative of the COVID-19 pandemic. The poem's structure and its division into five parts may be read as different phases of the pandemic. 'Burial of the Dead' could refer to the burial of the dead during COVID; 'A Game of Chess' may be seen as the many indoor games we played during lockdown or quarantine; 'The Fire Sermon' dwells on the symbol of fire as purgation during the pandemic; 'Death by Water' is a reflection on age and youth; 'What the Thunder Said' is India's message to the world not only in time of COVID but in all circumstances.

Keywords: Aporia, Death, Pandemic T.S. Eliot, Waste Land

Introduction

Traditional approaches to Eliot draw attention to the fact that the work was written in the aftermath of World War I (1914-1918). However, if the Great War was the pretext and the inspiration for *The Waste Land*, could the work not also be Janus faced and looking forward to encompassing the wasteland caused by COVID a century later? As metaphors slide, it is possible to mine the text for interesting parallels to our present scenario.

As we commemorate the hundred years of *the Waste Land*, we must also take cognizance of the influenza pandemic of 1918-1919, which occurred a hundred years ago.

Both Eliot and Vivienne were stricken by it. *The Waste Land* was written in the aftermath of this experience. The disjointedness in the poem may be seen as an expression of the disorientation, fever and sleeplessness Eliot was going through. Following the death of his father and aunt, Eliot had a nervous breakdown in 1921.

Eliot looks towards myths of spring and renewal in *The Waste Land* to provide healing and solace to a fractured world. In a post-COVID world, the text continues to perform the same function – since the concerns are timeless.

As one teases out the allusions in *The Waste Land*, one is privy to the vast storehouse of knowledge Eliot was heir to and which he uses eclectically. The work is couched in fragments from opera, medieval English verse, the Bible, and card games. This offers valuable insights into his poetic practice.

The number of people it has laid waste to is significant in the pandemic. This wasteland of the last two years has seen 2 million deaths worldwide, per figures in 2020 alone. (Guterres) It is, therefore, appropriate that in today's 21st-century wasteland, Eliot begins with the sombre section on 'The Burial of the Dead.'

I. The Burial of the Dead

I had not thought death had undone so many.

– T.S. Eliot

The 'Order of the Burial of the Dead' is the name given to the burial service of the church of England. Eliot reaches into orthodox liturgy to frame his epic poem. He chooses a funeral rite to express best 'the nihilism of his generation' (Spurr). Yet, in the context of COVID, the connotation can be very different.

The irony is that during COVID, the rite of the burial of the dead is more fondly remembered since, at the height of COVID, even this rite was denied to infected persons. When the virus felled Padma Shri Bhai Nirmal Singh Khalsa in Verka in 2020, locals objected

to his body being buried within the city of Amritsar and locked the gates to the burial site. He was finally buried under a tree at Shukarchuk outside the city in the glare of a car's headlights (Mendonca).

In Goa, maestro Santiago Lusardi Girelli (41) left us during COVID last year. Due to the COVID restrictions, he did not have a proper burial. After some prayers at the outer door of the Archbishop's House, the body was sent away in a mortuary van.

Though COVID's entry into the world was officially seen on 31 December 2019, it was in April 2020 that India in particular, faced the brunt of the virus with the lockdown. In that sense, April was the cruellest month with fear over the city. On 30 April 2021, India recorded 4 lac infections in a single day, with 3464 deaths reported on that day.

In the opening lines of 'The Burial of the Dead,' Eliot skips from one season to the next. That is how the world weathered COVID, whether it was winter, summer or rain.

Eliot taps into the unease of the people. He will show us "fear in a handful of dust" (30). There was fear everywhere. No one knew who would be the next victim. Donne's Meditation IV is invoked to help us ponder that we live and die in the body at the end. Indeed, the fickleness was brought out most painfully during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, senior citizens were the most brutal hit. (Ecclesiastes 12), which Eliot refers to, is a catalogue of the aridity of old age. It is a grim scenario where 'man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets' (Eccles 12:5). Eliot cites this verse from the Bible to provide the context for "And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief" (23). Indeed, the senior citizens had to go from pillar to post to be admitted to a hospital. When that was not forthcoming, they lay down and died. "I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing" (39-40). Even Madame Sosostris suffers from cold – the ailment most dreaded during COVID times.

In a lockdown, the silent streets made the city look unreal (60), devoid of character with not even zombies around. It is a moment when we confront our own corporeality. It takes Eliot all the effort to recreate this vista. For this, he has to summon up his previous poems for the objective correlative to his many descriptions. One such is 'The Death of Saint Narcissus' (1912), where he looks at the shadow metaphysically (25-29). It is from his spiritual journey that Eliot arrives at a trope to frame the wasteland.

The allusion in the opening line (line 1) to the prologue to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* could well be taken from the migrant tales as they trudged back on foot to their homelands after the unannounced lockdown. The pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* do not know each other, but they help each other just like the migrants. Some of the migrants did not make it home.

Eliot inverts the gaiety of spring expressed in Chaucer, and though the parallelism is evident, the sentiments are the opposite. Similarly, Eliot recalls 'The Old Vicarage: Grantchester' (1912) by Rupert Brooke to provide a universe of plenitude, which he sharply contrasted in *The Waste Land* a decade later.

The use of Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* (1865) is a metaphor for how loved ones were separated during the pandemic. There is the overwhelming drive of *Tristan and Isolde* towards Thanatos which is also seen in James Thompson. Interestingly, Eliot chose this opera. During COVID, the waters of the sea separated many from being with their loved ones in their last moments. COVID restrictions did not allow them to enter the country. It seemed like Tristan who waited for Isolde as he lay dying.

Madame Sosostris recalls the many fortune tellers and clairvoyants who had to resort to online sessions during the pandemic. (Elliott) People were terrified about the future. They were looking for hope and reassurance. The tarot cards are a chilling reminder that one does not know who will be struck by COVID next. The various images on the tarot cards could

also be interpreted as redemptive. Like Ariel in Shakespeare's *Tempest* (1611), we can look forward to "a sea change" that is "rich and strange" (Pierce).

When death is sudden and in huge numbers, many are spiritually unprepared. In *The Inferno*, Dante sees a long stream of people and is surprised that death has claimed so many. These are believed to be spirits who could not discern between good and evil in life and cared only for themselves (Southam).

Eliot enquires about the corpse in the garden (71). In ancient fertility rites, images of Gods were buried in the fields to enable regeneration. During COVID, with everything in lockdown, nature got a reprieve. Pollution levels went down, and the earth began to breathe once more. The hiatus was necessary to heal the planet.

II. A Game of Chess

The pandemic was all about waiting and watching. It was a game of chess with death. As the virus spread, vaccines were developed. As the virus mutated, more powerful vaccines and doses were the day's order.

People were forced to spend time indoors. The carom boards came out; the chess boards were the rage, and card games held people in thrall. People looked across balconies and played music to soothe their nerves. One could dip into literature and the classics. There was so much time on our hands during the lockdown.

What comes across in this section is the pirouette within closed spaces which the lockdown succeeded in doing. People were trapped in their own homes with nothing to see except the same people day in and day out. The breakdown of communication is emphasised in the heightened nerves: "Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak" (112). The absurdism echoes Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

We did not have the luxury of grieving. There were so many dying. The sleeping dead had to be dug up from their graves to make place for new corpses. In many cases, the loved

ones were not informed. In many cases, people lost the bones of their loved ones. “I think we are in a rats’ alle /Where the dead men lost their bones” (115-16).

Faced with house arrest, one turned desperately to establishing a routine to make sense of life. ‘What shall I do now? What shall I do?’ and later, “The hot water at ten./And if it rains, a closed car at four./And we shall play a game of chess” (131, 135-7). Yet even this innocuous pastime is not endured without dread. The players press ‘lidless eyes . . . waiting for a knock upon the door’ (138). The knock could mean bad news or officials sent to seal off the apartment to prevent infection from spreading.

There are many examples of unrequited love, viz. *Antony and Cleopatra*; *Hamlet* and *Ophelia*; *Dido* and *Aeneas*. The raping of Philomela and the seduction of Bianca point to the excesses of the pandemic when the women were made even more vulnerable (Sen).

Moreover, there is always the insistence of time, ‘Hurry up please, it is time’ (153). One does not know how much time we have left. So much so that the ‘good night’ seems to be the final goodnight (172).

III. The Fire Sermon

The section starts with ruination. “The river’s tent is broken” (174). There is putrefaction everywhere: “A rat crept softly through the vegetation/Dragging its slimy belly on the bank” (187-88).

Later we are faced with “White bodies naked on the low damp ground/And bones cast in a low dry garret./Rattled by a rat’s foot” (193). During the pandemic, dead bodies were everywhere. Hospitals were overfull with them. The human body had to suffer the ignominy of being trussed and tossed carelessly on the floor for disposal. Smoke from mass funeral pyres snaked into the sky. There was no one to claim the bodies coursing down the Ganga River.

COVID also saw widespread abuse of human rights. Anti-CAA agitations spiralled into violence among communities. In one case, a daughter waited for her father's foot—that was all that was left—after a mob in Delhi murdered him. Even that was impossible, as she was told she could claim the foot only after COVID had abated (Mendonca).

In the pandemic, it was easy to be Tiresias. 'And I, Tiresias, have foresuffered all.../I who have sat by Thebes below the wall/And walked among the lowest of the dead' (243, 245-6). Looking back, one recalls how one's life has been torn asunder due to COVID. One can only speculate about the future. Like Thebes, the land is blighted by the virus. It waits to be redeemed by atonement. Some resort to prayer and incantation, others to propitiate strange gods, and still others to bow down before nature praying for deliverance.

It is indeed the 'Twilight of the Gods' i.e. the *Gotterdammerung* of Wagner's opera. It is the end of the world. The Rhine maidens, Woglinde, Wellgunde, and Flosshilde lament the loss of their gold, as a result of which the waters are impure. It is their signature "Weialala leia, wallala leialala" (277-8) from the opera (III: i), which Eliot imports into *The Waste Land*. The lisping utterance of loss evokes more than words can, for they return to a time before language was formed. The loss of gold is the loss of value in a COVID-stricken world. The universe desperately tried to heal itself by restoring some semblance of order.

The Israelites pining to return from their exile in Babylon is like the migrants and many others who were stranded in all parts of the world with no possibility of returning to their homeland as the borders were sealed due to the pandemic.

All of us strove to keep up the fig leaf of normalcy. We went through our routines, "The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights / her stove, and lays out food in tins" (222-3). Sex too is perfunctory during COVID. There is always the threat of infection. 'Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass: / "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over"' (252).

IV. Death by Water

Death by water recalls the bodies flowing on the river like those on the Ganges when COVID was at its peak. The opening suggests bodies rotting from the pandemic. “Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,/forgot the cry of gulls and the sea swell/And the profit and loss” (311-13). Images of decomposed bodies drifting down the Ganga come to mind. (Pandey) The scale of the tragedy was unimaginable. People had nowhere to bury the bodies, or services to cremate them. So the bodies wound up in the river near the UP-Bihar border near Ballia. Everything else pales in comparison. Life lost its meaning seeing the human tragedy all around. All that could be done was to recall memories of the one who was felled: “Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you” (321). The nihilism is profound.

V. What the Thunder Said

Eliot summarises the pall of the gloom of the pandemic:

After the agony in stony places
the shouting and the crying
Prison and palace and reverberation . . .
He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience. (324-26, 328-30)

COVID spared no one. Neither the person in the prison nor the one in the palace was exempt. All the loved ones could do was watch from a distance, utterly helpless as a part of their soul was wrenched away into an abyss of no return.

The second verse is replete with images of aridity: “Here is no water but only rock” (331). Thunder is sterile and bereft of rain (342). “Words after speech reach into the silence,” wrote Eliot. *The Waste Land* comes to a magisterial close with “*Shantih, shantih, shantih*” (433). This acceptance, this quietude, is ushered in through an awareness of the cosmic

balance—the ‘*Om*’ which subsumes all. Give, sympathize, control is the *mantra* to uplift civilization in crisis. In the context of COVID, countless people gave what they had to help the needy. One even airlifted his workers to their hometown in Bihar from Delhi when train routes were severed. Sympathy and empathy were not in short supply; control was demanded.

The Ganga is chosen ironically for the site of this regeneration — an indication of how far we have travelled these 100 years. Yet “In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing / over the tumbled graves. . . Dry bones can harm no one” (387).

Nothing is what it seems. Eliot leaves us with the unsettling images of hell depicted by Hieronymus Bosch. For many, COVID was hell. The ones who went away, never to return, perhaps had no time to put their affairs in order. The Biblical allusion is to King Hezekiah whom God warns to settle his affairs. (Is. 38.1) God relents and gives him 15 years more to live. Only a few were that lucky.

Conclusion

T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is a metaphor for our time. Emerging from COVID-19, we see how the work is a palimpsest for the pandemic. Each section is intricately constructed to encompass the diverse experiences of the pandemic. In doing so, Eliot takes us through several artistic expressions which we are heir as well. Opera, the Bible, painting and music are some, to name a few. This paper has attempted to deconstruct the text and provide it with fresh meaning.

It has tried to decipher the metatext of the work. By shifting the dominant narrative of *The Waste Land* to see it as a palimpsest of the pandemic, this paper uses the same allusions to connote something entirely different. Doing this reiterates the endurance and timelessness of a classic 100 years later.

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