

Madame Sosostris and Her Tribe: A Study of the Women in *The Waste*

Land

Manpreet Kaur Kang

Professor, Department of English, University School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University

Srishti Sharma

PhD Fellow, Department of English, University School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, New Delhi

Abstract: *The Waste Land*, one of the seminal texts of the Modernist impulse, had a significant impact on readers and writers when it was published in 1922 and on the generations that followed. The poem concerns the post-war social and cultural breakdown presented through sterile and infertile human relationships. This breakdown of communication and relationships is portrayed through mythical and real female characters. The disintegration of modern civilisation and the resultant loss of faith in spirituality, love and relationships is portrayed through the women, characters like Sibyl, Marie Larisch, the hyacinth, girl, Madame Sosostris, Belladonna, Philomela, Lil, the nymphs, Actaeon, and Diana, a typist girl, three daughters of Thames and Queen Elizabeth I. The women in *The Waste Land* dominate the narrative, and there are divergent views about their depiction. While some have criticised Eliot for his misogynistic treatment of women, others have hailed him as a feminist who has highlighted the plight of these female subjects as victims of failed western civilisations. This paper takes a re-look at *The Waste Land* from the lens of contemporary feminist debates to study the women in the poem whom Eliot has used to portray the agony, horror, and decay of the modern world.

Keywords: Contemporary Feminist Debates, *The Waste Land*, Female, Representation

He thought her beautiful, believed her impeccably
wise; dreamed of her, wrote poems to her, which, ignoring the
subject, she corrected in red ink.

—Virginia Woolf

History is and has always been his-story, his story about men, women and beasts. Women took to ink in the early 1900s, and since then, they have been trying to correct “his-story.” However, can ink make all the difference? In contemporary times ink alone is not sufficient. Multiple mediums of communication and entertainment have emerged, from few-second reels on YouTube and Instagram to Films, Series and Radio—all narratives require the female voice to provide a legitimate source to understand the female, her identity, subjectivity and lived experiences. “We need women at all levels, including the top, to change the dynamic, reshape the conversation, to make sure women's voices are heard and heeded, not overlooked and ignored” (Sandberg).

The Waste Land is a narrative poem and contains dozens of narrations, descriptions and dialogues. There is no consistent speaker in the poem. Voice is the most excellent tool and can also be seen in use in *The Wasteland* by T. S. Eliot amidst the chaos in an attempt to emphasise and explore the mind, the man and the modern world. Eliot has been a champion of “Tradition” and the “Ideal-Order” both of which have been markers to ensure that the production of works of art is curated to fall under the umbrella labelled the “Great Tradition” and these are all men’s text or text written by men. The flaw of this *Great Tradition* is that the women’s voice is missing. Women are seen, understood and represented through the lens of male subjectivity.

Similar to Ted Hughes’ description of *The Waste Land* as “a drama for voices,” “an assemblage of human cries,” “exactly as in a musical composition, and only waiting for us to hear them”, I too feel that Eliot has mastered the use of voice in the poem. One finds a

multitude of voices—from agitated anxious ones to calm and critical; authoritative, pensive, brooding, humble, chatty, personal, impersonal, voices addressing the reader in many different languages like German, Sanskrit, French, Latin, Italian and Greek; voices which represent both high and low art; voices of famous characters from other literatures and history etc. But among this polyphonic variety what is fascinatingly missing is the voice of a/any woman. Thus the poem fails to provide the artistic landscape that can raise issues of subjugation and marginalization; defend women rights, sexualization of female gender, lack of justice etc.

For instance, the character of Sybil in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* is vastly different from Eliot's depiction of the same. Ovid presents a woman who has grasped the importance of her voice. As a seer, the *Sybil of Cumae* is seen relying on her voice to share her prophecies; her voice acts as a gateway to the authority (Abrams 2147). Even as she faces utter decay, she declares that she will still be recognized by her voice (Ovid XIV: 227). Sybil's action of raising her voice over her body underpins the importance of the voice by suggesting that a person without a voice is merely a body without an identity. Additionally, the voice represents the power to define and maintain an identity, a skill that is especially valuable in the chaotic modern world. While Eliot's portrayal ensnares all female figures in the cage of male domination, they are oppressed and without a voice of their own. Sybil in the poem is the *Cumaeen Sibyl* and she greets the readers with her terrible *apothanein thelo*—*I want to die*. Eliot opens his epigraph with this quote taken from the *Satyricon of Petronius*, simultaneously laying emphasis on the negativity, loss, and weak side of Sybil. She is the doorkeeper of Hades—additionally a doorkeeper welcoming the readers to hell—images of suffering, fear, chaos, nothingness, disassociation all greet the reader in the epigraph itself:

"Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi
in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Σιβυλλα
τι θελεις; respondebat illa: αποθανειν θελω."

For Ezra Pound

il miglior fabbro. (Eliot 1-4)

“Men often ask me, 'Why are your female characters so paranoid?' It's not paranoia. It's recognition of their situation” (Atwood). But what after recognition? It's the struggle, the story and the space to recognize the struggle and value the story. And this will put a stop to the prevalent thought— “We still think of a powerful man as a born leader and a powerful woman as an anomaly” (Atwood). Considering that *The Waste Land* was hailed as the precursor to the modernist movement, which challenged old structures and norms, one expects that old gender constructs, too, would be defied and challenged. More importantly, in his works, the representation of women would counter stereotypical representations prevalent during that time, where women and their stories are recognized. Nevertheless, while reading the poem, one can observe that the women in *The Waste Land*, living in an age of spiritual bankruptcy, have been straitjacketed in a typically patriarchal mould, shown as trivial, faithless, lustful, sterile and hysterical. Additionally, the large part of the poem is about social and cultural breakdown; represented via ruined communication and infertile human relationships. Eliot gives the particular impression of loss, sadness, depression and breakdown through women subjects. What is fascinating to note is that most of the characters in the narrative are women, but they are limited characters. Eliot comes across a failed modernist with respect to feminism; for his female characters are explored only through their relationships with men. Women as individuals are not seen. The relationships are also broken and brutal and to some extent parallel with the relationship men have with the society which mirrors the social crisis and anxiety ridden twentieth century.

While women are considered synonymous to creators who have a connection with the spiritual world, in the world of *The Waste Land*, women have a relationship with the broken world of communication and relationships (portrayed primarily through women characters,

both mythical and real.) “Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Woolf) and Eliot too has used them as tools for the same. The disintegration of modern civilisation and the resultant loss of faith in spirituality, love and relationships is portrayed through the women characters like Sibyl, Marie Larisch, the hyacinth girl, Madame Sosostris, Belladonna, Philomela, Lil, the nymphs, Actaeon and Diana, the typist, the three Thames’ daughters and Queen Elizabeth.

“The Burial of the Dead”

This section too is a modified dramatic monologue similar to that of the poem “Prufrock.” There are four frantic speakers in this section speaking urgently and are stopped abruptly. This causes confusion and creates an obfuscating situation for the reader who may end up assuming that there is a single character speaking. Additionally, the reader is left feeling inadequate and trapped, unable to find a narrative easy to follow. Moreover, the narrative is burdened with varied depressing themes. The burden to convey these themes fall upon the female characters. Focusing on the gendered portrayal, one finds that the female is burdened with bringing life into existence, burdened with its upbringing, burdened with the blame if anything goes wrong. In real life, the act of carrying these burdens has two resultant situations—some victorious and happy, others sad and full of grief, spread in a balance throughout the life of the individual women. Unfortunately, in Eliot’s version the grave and the grim is all encompassing.

The barren state of human existence is the motif with which this section begins. This issue is human-centric not female-centric. The gendered character of bareness has been addressed by many contemporary critics. Infertility and inability to conceive can be due to either gender and many anatomical issues. But since time immemorial the stigmatisation of barrenness is perpetuated through the patriarchal understanding of individual characters. Barrenness is considered shameful and the barren woman is a person carrying past sins.

Propagating these ideas in the name of 'Tradition,' displays a lack of 'Talent' and is a mockery of the term 'modernism.'

In the following stanza Eliot writes, "Fresh blows the wind to the homeland; my Irish sweetheart, where are you?" (Eliot 405). A lady answers the call and informs that a year ago, her lover gave her hyacinths and since then she is called the "hyacinth girl" (Eliot 405). Her identity is not of an individual but of a dependent. Furthermore, when she cannot see him, she becomes speechless. The reader finds her in a blank and empty state. The poem describes her as "Oed' und leer das Meer" meaning "Desolate and empty is the sea."

In the following stanza:

Madame Sosotris, famous clairvoyante,
Had a bad cold, nevertheless
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
The lady of situations. (Eliot 46-53)

We find Madame Sosotris the famous clairvoyant and her tarot cards. Eliot uses the images to showcase the decline of the Western Society. For instance, she is known to own an evil deck of tarot cards. While entertaining a merchant client she draws a card of the drowned Phoenician Sailor; here Eliot attempts to convey that no matter how knowledgeable humankind may get, like the Phoenician Sailors, they are all still doomed. She draws another one out and says here is Belladonna, the beautiful lady of rocks and situation; here Eliot with his assembly of images brings together Christian Faith with poison. It is a weird combination which is startling and signals ill fate. Madame Sosotris continues and pulls out

a card of a man with three staffs (symbolizing famine and drought), a wheel of fortune (medieval motif of life and death and its cyclical nature), a one-eyed merchant (a fake made-up card, representing fraud, flaky and unreliable people of *The Waste Land*), and a blank card which represents the burden of the past which the merchant carries. All of the symbols and images convey a disastrous and decaying society which is doomed.

Gender is a social and cultural categorization of masculinity and femininity. Gender presentations in works of art are the end product of the cultural process of defining social and sexual identity. Pictorial art, various images, accounts in literature, as means of expression and idea presentation are mediums with which transformation and stylization of identity occurs. Sensitivity and cautious effort is required on the part of the author/artist in depicting gendered issues, since works of art reflect this cultural process in its formation and continuity. Pictorial symbols such as fertility and motherhood carry a symbolic and conceptual context with cultural meaning and if used as mediums to convey other messages can result in conveying convoluted, patriarchal, complex notions that can hinder identity formation. Eliot's use of female figures to convey doom, death and decay is one of the prime examples of such a hindrance. Madame Sosotris and her tribe of women in *The Waste Land* have all failed to convey their personal or private opinions and have been rendered to being personified vehicles for Eliot's ideas and understanding of the post-war 20th century.

Similarly, Griselda Pollock's *What's Wrong with Images of Women?* raises similar issues. The book speaks about the neglect around the issue of women's images and stereotypes. She also highlights the fact that "representations are not merely reflections of reality, whether 'true' or distorted, but are rather the product of an active process of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping, of making things mean—of what came to be termed a 'signifying practice.'"

“The Game of Chess”

The second section “A Game of Chess” is in two parts/stories. The poet in both the stories uses women characters as vehicles to carry forward the theme and motif of impure, hollow, vain, emotionally devoid modernized love. He has depicted how in modern times love demands, looks, how love is not selfless anymore and more importantly how love has become like a game of chess, a cerebral game in which one wants to dominate the other.

History can tell how hysteria and women have been friends for centuries and how the first wave feminism had to battle such biased diagnoses to restore female sensibilities and issues surrounding their mental health. The first part of this section is written mostly in unrhymed iambic pentameter lines, or blank verse. As the section progresses, irregularity in length and metre and a sense of disintegration, of things falling apart continuously increases. This occurs in simultaneity to the female character and her paranoid thoughts. There is a visible return to slight sanity when irregularity in metre is improved in the last four lines of the first half rhyme.

The first story of this section reflects upon the meaningless relationship between two lovers who are not attracted to each other anymore. In the description Eliot paints for his reader the lady, who is compared with Shakespeare’s Queen Cleopatra and is seen sitting on a chair which is “like a burnished throne.” The poet specifically brings attention to the glitzy objects—her throne reflecting on the marble, lights reflecting on the table, the jewellery glittering from the satin cases to comment on how glittery appearances matter more to the modern people more than substance. Eliot also comments on the make-up and cosmetics of the lady. He finds the perfumes and powders owned by the lady disturbing and strangely enough they cause troubling, confusing and overwhelming sensations. They also disturb the fresh air coming through the window, therefore labelling them as unnatural. The forest-scene painting hanging above the antique fireplace is of great significance too. The painting

illustrates the metamorphosis of “Philomela” into a nightingale, who was raped by a barbaric king. This allusion exhibits the pathetic condition of women and male dominance in society. Philomela the nightingale, fills the desert with her unbreakable voice but nobody hears her. This helps Eliot to show how modern people have lost their humanity and how they are unable to hear women crying in pain.

Although the purpose, the aim and ambition of the poem is unique, important and reasonable but the way it is carried forward is problematic. As Gerard Genette in his *Narrative Discourse* states, “it is not about the tale, it is about how the tale is told” (Genette 28). Eliot choosing female characters to convey the artificial love, vanity and deterioration of love is not ideal. Laura Mulvey too reflects upon the ideological and the ideal. She writes about the importance of cultural texts, and how they impact us as individuals. According to her, they constitute the spaces where we seek to understand and give meaning to our identities. It is through them that we attempt to construct our sense of a gendered self. The images and representations which are the bearers of ideology are also those through which, by processes of identification, we construct our own identities as human subjects. Women as central subjects to the concept of betrayed love, love and vanity, unattached/unresponsive love propagate the stereotypes associated with women.

The second story communicates the emotional sterility of the modern world. This section importantly shows the inability to communicate or connect, to be empathetic and kind at all levels. The story has a collage of different images—death is discussed in different arrangements like abortion and the repeated sentence “Hurry up its time” (Eliot). The highly labyrinthine, erudite, and allusive style of the poem is noteworthy.

“The Fire Sermon”

In this section, Eliot tries to reveal the modern world’s loveless relationships and meaningless sex with the example of the liaison between Elizabeth and Leicester. Eliot’s depiction of

Elizabeth and Spenser aims at depicting that romance is dead. Eliot's queen seems impervious towards her lover's proclamations and declarations. Similar to other little narratives, this story too comes to an abrupt end with a few lines from St. Augustine's *Confessions* and a vague reference to the Buddha's Fire Sermon ("burning"). Referring to St Augustine's prayers to Jesus, asking him to save him from 'lust' and to take him away from this 'burning.' *The Waste Land* conveys the lack of culture/class in this modern world and the descent into vulgarity which distances people from one another.

Female leadership has always been questioned and a woman in power is always targeted. Elizabeth's reign was also hotly debated. Prominent theologian John Knox had written an angry polemic entitled *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstruous Regiment of Women*, where he found Queen Elizabeth's rule—'repugneth to nature,' and when compared to men—'foolishe, madde and phrenetike.' Eliot too targets her love life and her much celebrated love affair and projects it as monotonous and repulsive. Irrespective of all the allegations the queen faced throughout her time on the throne, the period of Elizabeth's reign is now referred to as a 'Golden Age', and in direct defiance of Knox's polemic, Elizabeth became the prime example for the world and proved that women can cope, and indeed thrive, in power.

Images of power are so often represented as male even today and it is very difficult for women to define power in their own terms. Elizabeth fought many stereotypes and many real time wars during her reign. Recategorising and reassigning a powerful female icon without much sensitivity is detrimental to the image of women in history. Eliot gives a misguided impression of a historic figure which is indeed problematic.

“Death by Water”

In this section the poet apprises the readers of the aim of life; he also hints towards *karma* and *Upanishadic* teachings. The section has multiple connections--for instance, it reminds one of

T. S. Eliot's French poem "*Dans le Restaurant,*" and it links Madame Sosostris's tarot card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor, and the warning of Madame Sosostris for her customer to fear death from water.

"The warning lady" as a gendered construct exists due to the social attributions towards speakers of different sexes. Additionally, females are considered the weaker sex, easily scared and always in need of assistance. They are considered to be cautious and not adventurous. They have shrill voices in which they seek help or complain. Breaking away from such gendered constructs should be the aim and purpose of all artists/authors.

"What the Thunder Said"

In this section we find a woman using her hair to produce sound. She pulls her long black hair tight and plays ominous music like a fiddle on those hair strings. The sound awakens the bats. They are unusual bats with the faces of babies whistling at dusk, beating their wings and crawl on a burnt wall:

A woman drew her long black hair out tight
And fiddled whisper music on those strings
And bats with baby faces in the violet light
Whistled, and beat their wings
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
And upside down in air were towers
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells. (Eliot 434-441)

Additionally, in the following stanza in this section:

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
Waited for rain, while the black clouds
Gathered far distant, over Himavant. (Eliot 454-456)

The poet focuses on the eastern part of the world and discusses the holy river Ganga in India. When the rain comes and the Ganges overflows, it symbolises the progeny of the east while the west has lost its fertility and has become the real *wasteland*.

Conclusion

The Waste Land, with its multi-layered complexity, is a seminal text which offers a harsh critique of modern society. It surpasses Bakhtin's division of work of art as monologic/dialogic who wrote that "The poet "must assume a complete single-personed hegemony over his own language, he must assume equal responsibility for each one of its aspects and subordinate them to his own, and only his own, intentions" ("Discourse in the Novel" 297).

The use of voice in this polyphonic, dialogic narrative poem is significant for understanding the many easter eggs Eliot left for his readers to decipher in the form of allusions, symbols, motifs or history. The female figures do not have any voice in the text but they do create noise; either with their hair or with their ominous cards; either with their identity crisis or with their toxic dependence; either with their unemotional and dissatisfied sexual act or with their vanity; either with their helplessness or with their limitedness. The text fails to offer them a space to explore and to speak.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Abrams, M. H. "T.S. Eliot." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 6th ed. Vol. 2. W.W. Norton, 1993. 2136-182. Print.
- Bartky, Sandra Lee. *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Benjamin, Jessica. *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*. Pantheon Books, 1988. Print.

- Booth, A. Eliot's "Dans le Restaurant". *Reading The Waste Land from the Bottom Up*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137482846_41
- Branham, R. Bracht. "Discourse in a Novel." *Inventing the Novel: Bakhtin and Petronius Face to Face*, Classics in Theory Series, Oxford, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198841265.003.0005>, accessed 20 May. 2022.
- Eliot, T.S. *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*. Harcourt Brace, 1963. Print.
- Eliot, T. S. Tradition and Individual Talent. *Egoist*, in two parts, September and November 1919. <https://tseliot.com/essays/tradition-and-the-individual-talent>. Accessed on 20 May 2022.
- Ellmann, Maud. "The Poetics of Impersonality: T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound." *The Waste Land: Essays, Articles, Reviews*. Ed. Nick Selby. Columbia UP, 1999. Print.
- Ensslin, Astrid. "Women In Wasteland: Gendered Deserts in T.S. Eliot and Shelley Jackson." *Journal of Gender Studies*. 14 (2005): 205-216. Print.
- Gordon, Lyndall. *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998. Print.
- Genette Gérard and Jane E Lewin. *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. Cornell UP, 1988.
- Pollock, Griselda. "What's Wrong with Images of Women?" Screen education, 1977.
- Knox, John. *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstruous Regiment of Women*. Geneva, 1558. System number: 000374263 General Reference Collection C.12.b.18. General Reference Collection G.11827, British Library. https://explore.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/dlDisplay.do?vid=BLVU1&afterPDS=true&institution=BL&docId=BLL01000374263. Accessed on 21 May 2022.
- Laflen, A. Introduction What's (Still) Wrong with Images of Women? *Confronting Visuality in Multi-Ethnic Women's Writing*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137413048_1. Accessed on 20 May 2022.
- Ovid. *Metamorphosis*. Penguin Classics, 2004.
- Pondrom, Cyrena. "T. S. Eliot: The Performativity of Gender in The Waste Land." *Modernism/modernity* 12.3. 2005, pp 425-41. *Project MUSE*. The Johns Hopkins UP, Sept. 2005. Web. 14 Feb. 2013.

Sandberg, Sheryl. Quotes. Vrainyquotes. <https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/sheryl-sandberg-quotes>. Accessed on 20 May 2022.

Woolf, Virginia. Quotes. Goodreads.

https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6765.Virginia_Woolf. Accessed on 18 May 2022.