"Literature Fills The Silences Of History"
Explaining The Miseries Of War Through An Analysis Of T.S. Eliot’s The Wasteland

Ali Abdullah Saaed Al Fuady
Assistant Lecturer, Department of English, College of Arts, Al-Qadisiyah University, Iraq. E-mail: ali.alfuady@qu.edu.iq, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6109-4376

Abstract

World War I was one of the deadliest conflicts in the history of mankind. It was a substantial turning point in the political, cultural, economic, and social climate of the world. The war and its instantaneous repercussions sparked several other revolutions around the world. The history of the world wars has been presented to the world through different ways throughout the years, but the historical documentation which was the written form of the WWI history was an archive documented by those who volunteered. These historical accounts, focusing greatly on numerical findings do not give much importance to the miserable aftermath that the common man had to suffer. Historical documentations of wars, being mostly objective in nature, usually suppress the problems of the common people including their struggles reducing their miseries to numbers and statistics. Down the ages, it is only through united struggles that the common lot have improved their conditions of existences which have been received by a blind eye. Unfortunately, these tribulations and struggles are again suppressed in historical documentations. The ideological conflicts which are concealed in history along with the sufferings of the common people get reflected in and through art. Art and its forms have always been the most justifiable means of communication suffering, violence and discrimination, and Literature, being the beautiful written form of Art, has been a very significant tool employed for conveying such details missed by history books. Many writers, over the centuries have attempted to paint the dark pictures of war and discrimination through their writings, and T. S. Eliot is one of them. T.S Eliot’s, The Waste Land is a perfect example of an artistic documentation of the history of post world war I Europe, as well as the cultural history of the West and East in general. This paper is an attempt to examine T.S Eliot’s The Waste Land, to trace the blemishes of war and its consequences on the modern man. This paper also attempts to prove how
Literature fills the silences of history. The poem fixes the cultural setting of post I world war Europe in the map of cultural history of West and East, especially the anthropological factors.

Keywords

Literature, History, War, Silence, Suffering.

Literature Review

Several number of studies are written on History and T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land having different approaches to different poems. However, this paper is mainly concerned with the previous studies that are essentially relevant to the topic on the theoretical level (History....) in relation to Eliot’s poetry. Ideas and perspectives of writers like Anna Federova and Nidhi Tiwari were researched for this study including interpretations given by T. S. Eliot himself as a reference to the poem. Other writers such as Rani, V. Beulah and Harold Bloom were used as reference.

Research Methodology

This study employs the Linguistic analysis and critical discourse analysis to analyzing Eliot’s The Waste Land in relation to the past and the present. The historical analysis method is employed in tackling the issues of the past and its historical perspectives. The need all three methods, here, emerges out of the need for showing how inseparable both the literary and historical perspectives are leading to the necessity of co-existence.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to one of T.S. Eliot's longest poem The Waste Land.

Introduction

Historical accounts mention the war and developments in scientific and industrial fields, but does not mention the consequences of these on the lives of the common person. The Waste Land is a dramatic poem that portrays the regeneration of the modern civilization, its fall, fragmentation and tragedy. It takes the reader on a journey through the different levels of devastation of the modern civilization, a barren waste land where people lack spiritual, emotional and intellectual fertility. It throws light upon “Boredom” as a modern-day disease caused by the political and industrial developments in Europe.
According to the political agenda of the cultural materialist approach, only through the past, one can change the present and the future and this is what Eliot suggests in his poem. He suggests that only the retrieval of the lost values, faith and traditions of the past, one can change the future. Many critics, through their approaches discussed history, but only Karl Marx, the Marxist philosopher said that only through history, the future can be changed, change is the essence; history is not a mere description of the past and it can help change society to the better and a change can be made for a better future. This is the specific political agenda of the Orthodox Marxist approach and cultural materialist approach which argue that cultural politics has to be an important component of the overall Marxist agenda. Through language and literature, culture is reflected as evolved in the materiality of the collective existence in society. Unlike certain other critical approaches, the cultural materialist approach carries hope for the future with an optimistic political purpose; the intervention in the historical process by cultural politics. Cultural materialism believes in the instrument of closure given to the privileged collective existence and this is what we find in The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot. The Waste Land, for example, records the early 20th century post-war European civilizations in vivid terms. The poem strongly reveals those fragmented lives of persons who suffered the consequences of the first world war through metaphors and fictitious characters. The poem also addresses the dangers of "Boredom" in the decaying modern civilization. Modern person has become spiritually, emotionally and intellectually sterile according to Eliot’s presentation in the poem, and this degeneration is caused also by the materiality of the modern civilization. These effects of war and scientific developments can be and are effectively captured in art, here in T.S Eliot’s The Waste land.

An Analysis of The Waste Land from A Historical Perspective

History has always been silent about the many sufferings of human beings. Events like the French revolution and the world wars keep happening as history repeats itself, and they keep causing considerable changes. Lives of millions of ordinary persons change due to such events, but their individual sufferings are not recorded by history. Not even the names of many of these persons are known. Hundreds of people were killed at warfronts, but there has been no acknowledgement of what happened to those who were left behind to suffer the spiritual “Boredom”. So many gaps left by history are filled by literature though the artistic documentation of history.

After Dante, the Italian poet who spoke about boredom “ennui” Eliot discussed the dangers of “Boredom” as well, comparing it to a deadly disease that is spreading in the modern waste land. “Boredom” is one of the many negative effects war had left in the lives of modern persons. In the first section of the poem; “The Burial of the Dead”, the first lines refer to this deadly disease of “Boredom”.
“April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land”
…L1-2(sec1)

The section starts with a description of April as a “Cruel” month. April is the month of spring and birth of new life and activity, but to the bored citizens of the modern wasteland, April is the “cruelest” month. As they are so bored, spring in no longer interesting. Even the roots of plants are described as “dull”, a non-human thing is given a negative human attribute showing that the root of plants are also struck by boredom. Winters season, to the bored waste-landers is a very good period as it keeps them warm and away from any activity or work. This shows the boredom of modern persons living as pieces of vegetable. In the same section, the meeting of the Hyacinth lovers present “death in life” and boredom. Modern man is so bored that he can sit and give hyacinths to a girl, but nothing will happen between them. Modern man is dead in life; the body exists, but the soul is dead.

Eliot also refers to Dante’s, “Divine Comedy”. to serve his purpose in exposing the decayed modern society. An image taken from Dante’s “Inferno”(hell), shows crowds of people walking in a ring in hell. There are the people who suffered “boredom” in life, this is the punishment for “meaningless existence”.

“I see crowds of people,
Walking around in a ring”
...L56 (S 1)

“Modern life, is life in hell”. According to Eliot and to him, all the citizens of the modern waste land are physically alive, but they are emotionally dead, that is why all these crowds of people are walking meaninglessly looking at their feet as they have no important role in life.

In the second section of “A game of chess”, boredom in the life of high society people is presented through women who is talking meaningless words. This lady represents the emptiness of the life of high-class persons who are so bored with their routines that they have no idea to “kill” time. They have no idea of the significance of their lives. The routine of high-class modern man is summed up in an artificial “hot bath” then a ride in a “closed car” if it rains and then a “game of chess”.

Furthermore, in the third section of “The fire sermon”, Eliot shows us the modern man fishing in a polluted canal behind the industries. Fishing in a lifeless polluted canal reflects boredom and nihilism of modern man. In addition to “Boredom”, modern persons also suffered from loss of faith and values.
The Waste Land is also a call to modern persons back into the world of faith and God. Because of the war and destruction, people lost faith in God and that made the world more chaotic and degenerated. When there is a war, such as the first world war, history only records the events of war and the statistics of deaths and human maiming. In other words, history will only deal with numbers. The magnitude of suffering and its effects on the day-to-day human life and living conditions are very often left to the understanding and imagination of the readers. The Waste Land, on the other hand, is a literary documentation of the effects of the first world war on the European society in tandem with the effects of the modern industrial society with its negative influence of science and the resultant loss of faith in religion. Eliot gives a description of the faithless modern civilization as a wasteland in the first section itself. Trees are leafless and they give no shelter from the heat of the sun. This is the sad situation because faith is lost from the hearts of the modern people. Eliot calls modern man to come back under the shadows of faith.

“There is shadow under this red rock,
(come in under the shadow of this
Red rock)
L25-26 (S 1)

The “red” rock here refers to the blood of Christ that he shed for saving humanity. There is protection only under this red rock because only sacrifice can bring rebirth. Once again humanity is in danger of degeneration and sacrifice is needed to save it. As modern man has lost faith in God, identity is also lost and values and traditions have no importance. In the same section, there is a fortune teller. The reduction from going to prophets in the past, who prophesied the future, to going to fortune-tellers shows how desperate modern man has become.

At some points in the poem, the modern man is asked to hold on to the values. First, in the part where Marie Larisch is mentioned, she is asked to “hold on tight” and then Lil in the pub is told “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME”. Loss of faith is also reflected in the scene where Sweeney, the lustful man hears the children singing a holy hymn in the chapel and his desires are provoked instead of feeling religiously inspired. This symbolizes the perversion of values and moral decay because of loss of faith.

In the last section, Eliot presents the chapel as haunted, empty and deserted because people have no faith, because of the physical and spiritual destruction caused by war. The dryness of the land is no other than the spiritual dryness of modern persons and only the water of faith can give rebirth to this decayed land.
Early critical readings consider The Waste Land, the modernist origin that rejects the defects of modern life giving a picture of the glorious past in contrast to the sordid present. The Waste Land is seen as an artistic documentation of the history of modern civilization as mentioned earlier and it is considered as a “sigh for the vanished glorious past.” Throughout the poem, the speaker keeps presenting images of love reduced to lust which is a representation of the spiritual draught, sterility and the decayed condition of the modern civilization. He further compares it to a barren land that lacks vegetation and fertility. As faith is lost, values that are considered sacred are also reduced. A pure and sacred emotion like “Love” is reduced to “lust.” Thousands of women were violated during war and suffered after the war. Others became so mechanical that love carried no meaning at all. Some tragic scenes of love reduced to lust are also presented in The Waste Land.

In the section of “The Burial of the Dead”, Marie Larisch is reading at night, whereas night is the time for procreative activity. This scene shows lack of fertility/love. The second section discusses the rape of Philomel by her brother-in-law, the king who cuts her tongue after raping her, and states that this tragedy happens every day. Then we are shifted to another situation of the lower-class people of the modern civilization, Lil and her husband, Albert, who keeps demanding physical love but Lil is tired of giving birth to children and she does not want to do it. This scene presents how woman is used as a child-bearing machine (excess of fertility is also not good).

“The Fire Sermon”. Speaks about the reduction of love to lust and suggests that lust and mechanical sex can be conquered only by passing through fire. The title is taken from the sermon of Buddha where he stated that the whole world is burning in the fire of lust and the prayer of St. Augustine to God for saving him from the fire of lust. Two different attitudes are presented; praying to God and self control of the individual.

Scenes of lust are brought ironically by Eliot through presenting the nymphs of the Spenserian “Thomes river”, of the merry “Prothalamion” as prostitutes enjoying with the wealthy young men of the modern society. Thames itself is presented as polluted by industrial waste as humanity is polluted by loss of values. Another image from Andrew Marwell’s “To his coy Mistress” is reversed, from hearing “time’s chariot” to hearing the horns of the motor car that brings Sweeney, a lustful man to enjoy at a brothel house. The idea of washing feet with soda water was a holy ritual of the Hindu tradition for giving fertility, however, here, the woman in the brothel & her daughter wash their feet in order to prevent themselves from getting sex-related diseases.

Further more describing the image of a decayed modernity is a tragic scene of mechanical & animalistic sex of a typist girl and a young clerk. After work, the girl is assaulted by a co-worker whom she neither rejects nor accepts, but later she says, “I’m glad, it’s over”
after the man leaves. The man leaves after the mechanical act of sex giving her a goodnight kiss and she just combs her hair and listens to a record on the gramophone. It is a great reversal of the past when loss of chastity was considered to be worse than death, but here the worse level of tragedy is, that modern woman is not even aware of her loss.

Another case of sexual assault is of the three Thames’s daughters. One of them was sexually assaulted, but after her lover wept and promised a new start, she kept quiet & had nothing to “resent”. The other two were also violated, but people of lower society are used to such humiliation and violation as love has no sacred value. The section of “The fire Sermon” ends in “Burning” fire as Eliot believes that the degeneration of the modern world is due to perversion of sex and violation of woman.

All these figures, the lustful Sweeney, Mr Engenides who is looking for a homosexual relationship at the hotel, the young clerk, all represent the reduced value of love to lust in modern society. The victims are helpless like Philomel, the typist and others whose loss are not even pitied.

One of the effects of the 1st world war on modern man is also the mechanical and animalistic existence of the modern persons. Industrial and scientific developments made man mechanical, lacking feelings and animalistic, lacking humanity. Artificiality of modern life is shown in many parts of the poem like the “little Life” in dried tubes”, the “synthetic” perfumes of high society, the “unreal city” of London, the animalistic sexual desires and the mechanical “crowds” of people walking over London bridge with “brown fog” covering the purity of the sky of the industrial city.

The Waste Land, being the reflection of the post war generation, brings in a large number of women and men characters who embody different emotions. The female characters are shown as tragic figures like, Marie Larisch, Madame Sosostris, Lil in the pub, the daughters of Thames, the typist girl and Philomel. The male characters too are tragic and decayed like Tiriesius, the protagonist of the poem, the phonecian sailor, Sweeney, Lil’s husband Albert, and the unjust king who raped Philomel.

The poem presents a strong contrast between the desert of the waste land, where the protagonist starts the journey and the freshness of the sea, where the protagonist ends his tale. The journey from the barren waste land towards the sea in the end takes the reader through several different levels of degeneration. From the image of fishing in a polluted, fishless canal and a sea full of life, the emptiness of the artificial, royal chamber of Cleopatra and the crowdedness of London bridge at the mechanical struck of nine in the morning, all suggest the chaotic life reflected in the life of those whom history had left out to wither. In five sections, the poem presents the miseries and degradation of modern societies through
different myths, literatures, art forms and symbols. Different levels of existence, from vegetable-existence to animalistic and mechanical-existence are shown and a “maternal” lamentation, mourning the death of the old order and hierarchy in the society. Although moving through so much pessimism, the poem ends with a note of optimism, as earlier mentioned, the past here is used to change the future and Eliot gives a note of hope and a promise of a new tomorrow, better and more alive than that witnessed today.

Conclusion

As an artistic document of history, The Wasteland sheds light upon the great damage done to those unknown masses who are neglected in history. Being a social document too, it also sheds light on the people belonging to different classes in society. Refugees moved all over Europe in search of a good life, but it only made things worse. According to Eliot, people lacked traditions of the past as they were all masses from different levels and parts of the society, without any one culture or tradition and modern civilization, already fragmented, was falling into smaller pieces.

Eliot’s idea of saving the modern man from this fall is to bring him back to faith and to the past traditions. His idea of a new rebirth is only through sacrifice and suffering as Christ had done before, to save humanity. Once again humanity is under threat and Eliot appeals to people to go back to the values and tradition. The last section of the poem sums up Eliot’s thoughts. He sheds light upon the Indian myth when people were suffering from draught, they prayed to God for help who answered in three words through a thunder, “Datta”, “Dayadhvam”, “Damyata”, these three words, according to Eliot are the values that can save modern civilization from the spiritual draught. “Datta” means to “give”, “Dayadhvam” means to “sympathize” and “Damyata”, to “control” and discipline the self.

The Wasteland also expresses the spiritual disease of the age “boredom”, as mentioned earlier. Eliot gives a clear image of the chaotic wasteland of the modern materialistic world. He gives a contrast between the glorious past through the employment of myths, and the sordidness of the present human civilization. Eliot refers to the past in order to show the similarities of the problems in both times and how the past can be used to change the future, which is also the political agenda of the cultural materialism theory. The decay of the modern world is due to many developments in the fields of science, technology, commerce and industrial process. All these demolished faith in the hearts of the modern people, which led to the great fall in modern civilization. Man, although being so small in the entire universe can cause its destruction as well as save it.

Through a long journey in the different parts of The Wasteland, Eliot brings the modern man to a new hope, that the future can be saved. The mythical side apart, the poem primarily
presents the fragmented social fabric of the post First World War Europe. Through the past future can be made better and this is the message Eliot wants to communicate through his The Waste Land.

References


Biodata

Ali Abdullah is an Assistant lecturer at the Department of English, College of Arts University of Al Qadisiyah. He has published numerous papers in literature, in international
journals; some of which are indexed in Scopus. He taught English language for none departmental students for more than 4 years.