



# PSYCHOLOGICAL DISINTEGRATION AND SPIRITUAL JOURNEY IN T. S. ELIOT'S *THE WASTELAND*

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**Abstract:** Twentieth century age witnessed disintegration in ethical, philosophical and religious values in the life of the West. The problems of alienation, fragmentation and anxiety infused the sense of lack of direction and disbelief in the existing values which were aggravated by the deadly World War. T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) as a creator of modern sensibility employs his intellectual bent of mind to give objective expression to the chaos and loss of identity in modern life. He is the watershed of modern literary movement especially in poetry. He employs fragmentation in his poetry to demonstrate the disintegration of the modern European society. He is not pessimistic in showing this, rather he puts across a road map to wriggle out of the painful psychological condition. The present paper traces the process that begins with psychological fragmentation of modern Europe which ends in hope of spiritual renewal and reintegration.

**Index Words:** : Fragmentation, alienation, anxiety, disbelief, reintegration, modern sensibility

Psychological fragmentation leads to breakdown of norms of thought, unhealthy behavioral responses and failure of social relationships. It occurs when thoughts, emotions, memories and behaviors fail to integrate harmoniously. This can lead to feelings of disconnection and conflict. Under such situation, one is unable to actualize the proper human connection. Anxiety, self- alienation, disjointed thoughts and unusual behaviors, are the indicators of psychological fragmentation. The human world for a psychologically fragmented man is not the structure of meaningful relationships in which a person can live. This was the main problem in the west after the First World War. The impact of war is beyond imagination. Its psychological effect was immense, caused pain and trauma to the modern European people who were the victims of the barbarism of the World War First. Erickson defines individual trauma as, “ a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal forces that one cannot react to it efficiently” (153). This statement aptly applies to the war-torn society of Europe as telescoped by Eliot in his early poetry.

*The Waste Land* presents the fragmented consciousness of the alienated human mind after the horrors of the First World War. The poet mirrors the humanity’s damaged psyche by his superb craftsmanship of collaging fragments of dialogue, images and ideas. Through verse, he endeavors to picture the fragile psychological state of humanity in the modern era which was fractured, alienated and chaotic. He unravels, like a Freudian psychoanalyst, the subconscious forces and floods by creating a crowd and commune of characters that speak

for themselves. His poetry is diverse in its modernity. He believed that a great poet is the representative of his age. This pronouncement aptly applies to his own poetry. He mirrors the mind of the Europe throughout *The Wasteland*. He didn't write about cuckoos, rainbows and daffodils but his poetry reflects the complexity and intricacy of modern life. Through the techniques of symbolism, allusiveness and implication and objective correlative, the poetry of Eliot mirrors the fractured psyche of modern society which inhabits the unreal cities. The modern city with all its dreadful images characterizes the atmosphere of death, hypocrisy and corruption. The daily life of the urban people is haunted by the painful existence. The 'unreal cities' came into being at the cost of traditional values. It has deprived modern man off the bliss of peaceful meaningful life, besides victimizing them with condemnable, unconventional modes of life. Eliot illustrates such a gloomy picture of unreal cities throughout his poetry more particularly in *the Wasteland*.

Eliot's poetry is rife with characters who suffer from the psychological breakdown. The poet portrays the modern man who is cut off from the psyche and whose body has become an automatic machine. The disintegration and alienation is so deep that the outer world seems to consist not of people but 'heap of broken images' and of disconnected bits of people with faces, hands, voices, eyes, arms, perfume, and dresses. The poem presents the situation of the modern man with his disordered state of mind. The cinematic pattern is used, in which the poet makes use of various myths, rapid succession of images and other elements to show the psychological breakdown of modern civilization. This technique allows the poet to transcend the time and place, he moves freely from past to the present and then to future overlapping the apparent time divisions through the stream of consciousness. Through Tiresias, we are taken to the various facets of modern life with its decaying and disintegrating forces, including the disintegrated psyche of the modernist man. By the interplay of different voices the poem gives us peep into one's paralytic consciousness. In this regard, O' Dwyer observes:

The symbol of "The Waste Land" evokes the sense of alienation, fragmentation, and isolation which Eliot perceives in the particularities of a post-war Europe, but it simultaneously attempts to give expression to emotional experiences which are universally identifiable even if not easily acknowledged. The multiplicity of voices clamoring through this barren landscape conveys the fractured variety of the modernist self, and these disparate personalities, in their isolating differences and subtle similarities, merge to express the multi-layered enigma of the modern consciousness (330)

The poem is lacking the logical connections as the same is narrated as separate shots like in a picture movie, using cinematographic technique. Helen Gardner talking about *The Waste Land* said that "its connections are not connections of logic, but connections of feeling, often violent reactions of feeling" (19). The poet shows the fragmented modern civilization with the fragmented narrative psychologically and linguistically. The statement stands substantiated in the light of the remark made by Maud Bodkin who narrated that, "Since there is no story, no dramatic situation, to bind associations together, the words within the haunting rhythm must play their part unaided, holding attention while the forces of feeling and attendant imagery negotiate in the antechambers of the mind" (309). Tiresias is the link between readers and the text and represents whole of the poem. He is the symbol of human consciousness, which unifies the various threads of the poem. He takes us to the mental states of denizens of the waste land. The different voices of the poem blend together and make it difficult for the reader to separate one from the other. All the voices in the poem end in the 'objective voice' of Tiresias. The poet portrays the man-woman relationships, the relationship of Earl of Leicester and Queen Elizabeth, the clerk and the typist and others. The description of all the disconnected scenes are shown through the interior monologue which reveals the motives, desires and memories which are crossing and recrossing the mind of different characters. Eliot shows the disintegration not of collective modern mind alone but also of particular human types. Besides men, the poet, objectively delves deeper into female psyche and tries to his utmost to give a true unbiased objective correlative to their anxieties and alienation.

At the very outset, the poem incorporates the mythological symbol of Sibyl in the form of preface to present the psychological disintegration of the modern world. Sibyl in cage wanted to die as she answered when boys questioned her. It was a shriek of pain and anguish which revealed her mental trauma. This kind of anguish and pain runs through *The Wasteland*. The narrator wants to push the memories under freezing layers of snow, which symbolizes the cold sod of earth that covers memories in death. Eliot's evocation of April confusing

memory and desire symbolize the lack of integration among important segments of the total personality. The month of April demands action and realization of reality in the present context. However, the waste landers are not ready to take pains to get aroused from the unfulfilled desires and lusts and face the reality, as Eliot says it paradoxically at the very beginning of the poem:

April is the Cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, Making

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain (1-4).

From psychological point of view this stanza is of immense importance. The words and phrases used in it carry a deep psychological import which takes our attention to the repressed memories, desires lusts and different drives which are stored in our unconscious mind. O' Dwyer illustrates it more clearly thus:

It [April] demands a surrender of the illusory comforts of darkness and denial, and a confrontation with personal realities... It is cruel in that it forces a confrontation with experiences and memories which have been repressed and denied. ... However, without the integration, on a personal level, of past and present, memory and desire, root and branch, there is only 'A heap of broken images'... a disintegrated personality incapable of connection with self and others (331).

The lady, in "A Game of Chess" develops neurosis and hysteria. She takes recourse to illegal sex as a means of escaping the mental agony. She cannot even communicate properly. Human mind is the source of language, when its contents have lost integration, language too becomes disintegrated. This is what happens with the waste landers.. The woman wants a dialogue that would give her some soothing from wasteland existence. Her cry: "Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak (112). Such is the intensity of her inner mental stress that she shows ineffability to give expression to her pain. This precludes any possibility of creating a better life and regular human relationship. Typist and clerk 'encounter', starts and ends in a strange way. Typist's lack of contentment in sex speaks volumes about her negatively altered state of consciousness. The psychological split and disturbed state of modern man is expressed with intensification in a hysterical incident of a woman in "What The Thunder Said": she displays a strange and unusual behavior. The poet speaks of her in these words, "A woman drew her long black hair out tight / And fiddled whisper music on those strings" (377-78). She is on the verge of nervous breakdown. There seems to be hardly any way out from such a hellish life. Under such conditions when there was over whelmed gloom and hopelessness, Eliot ignited the light of hope and spirituality among the sufferers.

Though the poet presented the psychological breakdown of the modern collective mind, he was not hopeless of its cure. He believed religion fit and infallible guide to help man to the right direction. Religion is the only means that can restore the modern man's psychological equilibrium. According to Brooker and Bentley, "The very word "religion" comes from roots meaning rebinding, retying, transcending brokenness and regaining a primal condition of harmony"(211). The poet does not only highlight the symptoms of the disease but also spared no pains in laying down the route to provide healing and solace to the modern man whose psychological quietude was in shambles. He articulated a mechanism of shaping the messy and disordered world and its various facets. He deemed Christianity and Hinduism fit to address the personal and general issues of human beings in an age which was wallowing in multi-faceted fragmentation. In order to bring psychological poise to the broken European culture, he moves even beyond Christianity and carves out an esoteric path to give order to the shapeless temporal world. As an intellectual saint, he revealed to the fragmented modern world that the anguish and nothingness can be transcended by moving to a place of spiritual

serenity, which gives a man place to stand in the world. He was undoubtedly the saint of twentieth century who successfully preaches dogmatic religion. He uses the poetry as a medium of religious reformation and believes that religion has got power to enrich the poetry. That is why he integrates poetry and religion to address the problems of mankind in general and the times of his people in particular. He believes that poetry and religion stand together. He writes that poetry and belief are inseparable from each other:

I cannot see that poetry can ever be separated from something which I should called belief, and to which I cannot see any reason for refusing to the name of belief, unless we are to reshuffle names together. It should hardly be needful to say that it will not inevitably be orthodox Christian belief, although that possibility can be entertained, since Christianity will probably continue to modify itself, as in the past into something that can be believed in.(qtd. In Bergonzi 133)

The journey of Knight Parsifal and his followers to Chapel Perilous in “What the Thunder Said” is a symbolic inward journey which demands the dissolution of individual ego boundaries to reach the state of divine transcendence. The realization of spiritual consciousness can be attributed to the symbolic journey of the knight who suffers many hardships to reach Chapel Perilous. The knight Parsifal’s consciousness changes in the course of this hectic journey, it reaches to the high level of consciousness. This altered state of consciousness is a state of bliss where man can think of union with the ultimate reality. This state of consciousness raises a man from the plane of material world and shows him the road to the higher world where his soul through the phases of evolution can prepare itself for spiritual journey, which is its ultimate longing.

Hindu scriptures are so much replete with wisdom and guidance that it was taught and learnt at Harvard. In *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, he said that, "Long ago I studied the ancient Indian languages, and while I was chiefly interested at that time in Philosophy, I read a little poetry too, and I know that my poetry shows the influence of Indian thought". (248)

At the end of the poem, The poet refers to the crisis in India when river of Ganges, the holy river, where the water level was low and the land turned hot and dry:

Ganga was sunken and the limp leave

Waited for rain, while the clouds

Gathered far distant, over Himavant.

The jungle crouched, humped in silence

Then spoke the thunder. (395-399)

During the terrible famine when all were anxiously waiting for rain and finally, men, gods and demons came together to seek for guidance and they approached Prajapati god. They prayed to him and the god answered their prayer through a divine thunder which uttered one word thrice Da. Da. Da. but it was interpreted by each group in its way while for men "Da" means "Datta" to Give" demons said Da which means "Dayadhvam" "to sympathize" and for gods "Da" means "Damyata" i.e. 'control. Human beings have the qualities of demons as well as well as gods, demonstrates the way to salvation..." The Upanashadic triad is a means to achieve love and humility which are necessary for the spiritual and experience. In *The Waste Land*, the repetition of a single word, “Shantih Shantih Shantih” (433) is peace, a bridge which can connect one to the eternal realm.

Therefore, the poem stands as the spiritual pilgrimage of the narrator whose fragmented psyche is restored to its healthy state. The radiant lights of spirituality radiate inner wasteland of the modern men who suffered the pangs and excruciating pain of psychological disintegration. According to Eliot, the last line is a “formal ending to an Upanishad” (qtd. In Dwivedi 82) “Shantih” (433) means “peace that passeth understanding”. It is a place where the poet wants to reach. It is a desirable condition for the poet, where he can have spiritual solace and peace. Spirituality helps achieve a sense of unity and psychological integrity. The psychological desert of *The Waste Land* ends by thinking of the possibility of a new life. Religion in its spirit enables the modern man to

reach a transcendental experience and achieve inward peace and coherence. It is the force which can heal the individual's pains. The "Burial of the Dead," the narrator describes the scene where there are only "a heap of broken images" (22). Similarly, at the end of the poem, the speaker says, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (431). From the beginning to the end of his reflections, the poetic persona is aware of the fragmented images that he sees in the land. "What the Thunder Said" represents a moment of spiritual experience that leads towards the self-reintegration and unity of disintegrated mind. The poem thus acts as a catalyst for psychological unity. It gives a hope of new beginning. The winter of gloom and painful existence has been superseded by spring of hopefulness and dawn of spirituality. Trumpet of spirituality is blown in a way endorsing Shelley's poetic adage that after winter spring can never be far behind.

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