Identity, Nonhuman Sentience, and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 1

Month: December

Year: 2024

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 18.11.2024

Accepted: 19.12.2024

Published: 20.12.2024

Citation:
Bhattacharjee, Tanmoy. "Identity, Nonhuman Sentience, and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 13, no. S1, 2024, pp. 65-70.

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v13iS1-Dec.8522

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Abstract
Ecocritical disciplines have already established that the nonhuman around neither requires human patronage nor the so-called anthropocentric civilizing tools to assert its sovereignty and non-contingent character. Much prior to any such discursive finding, T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land testified to it through poetic and philosophical exploration. Germane to our present analysis will be what William Cronon postulates in his article "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting back to the Wrong Nature": "[It is] crucial for us to recognize and honor nonhuman nature as a world we did not create, a world with its own independent, nonhuman reasons for being as it is" (69). Since in the contemporary ecocritical parlance, anti-anthropocene is a valid modality of cognition, this paper seeks to examine the nuanced underpinnings of nonhuman sentience and identity with reference to T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land. In fact, the more one explores the interests of the nonhuman, the more unpredictable the human values become. Eliot's figures (both human and nonhuman) make complete sense only if one necessarily reckons the "waste and void" (Jain 110) of the wasteland as a vast reservoir of nonhuman sentience.

Keywords: Anti-anthropocene, Nonhuman, Temporal-spatial, Personal Possession, Identity

Introduction

City happens to be an obsessive image in T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land and the corresponding urban images consolidate in appeal, more specifically, in the third section of this masterpiece. At line 259, the poet writes the word 'city' two consecutive times ("O City city") as if to convey an insight achieved in a moment of epiphany. The city may have given him a claustrophobic air of boredom and tiredness; it may have familiarized him with "a welcome of indifference", "the lowest of the dead", "one final patronising kiss" or "one half-formed thought" (Jain 52); the city's river may have brought to him the nauseating "Oil and tar": "The river sweats / Oil and tar / The barges drift / With the turning tide" (53). However, no single thought that he articulates here is ungrounded or free from futuristic connotations. These vignettes of forebodings in 1922 culminate in a pithy frown about "the exhaustion of natural resources" in 1939 and the caution that "material progress is a progress for which succeeding generations may have to pay dearly" (Kermode 290). Of all Eliot's works, it is *The Waste Land* that first saw the conspicuous brewing of these concerns.

Nevertheless, the poet's search for symmetry in the asymmetry, spontaneity in the automation, music in the "whining" around has often taken him close to the river waters, whence the "music crept by me [the poet] upon the waters" (line 257). However, this has only dented his expectations and upset his desires. An instrument like "mandoline" (line 261) has yielded a pitiful and oxymoronic "pleasant whining", followed by "a clatter and a chatter from within". This discordant clatter and chatter,

for Eliot, have become one brooding hallmark for urban existence. When in the third section, the poetic persona yearningly calls out, "I too awaited the expected guest" and when, instead of the one coveted, the repulsively "carbuncular" figure fetches up, the whole air reeks of desultoriness. A curious groping through "stairs unlit" (line 248) continues along the mainstay of the poem, punctuated oftentimes by the lament of the Wagner's Rhine maidens in "Weialalaleia/ Wallalaleilala". Along with some "drifting logs" in the nearby river, the familiar London nooks like the "Greenwich reach" or the "Isle of Dogs" are abuzz with these despondent cries. They are musical compositions, no doubt, but they dwell on a sense of overall loss, moral denudation and spiritual bankruptcy. This moral loss is more a neglect and negligence about the nonhuman correspondences around than anything else.

Identity in Human-Nonhuman Interface

The literary principle of "objective correlative" (Hayward 102) is Eliot's own innovation. If a whole generation of people are choosing to gloss over the potential warnings the nonhuman is evoking, the situation around is precarious, indeed! The Waste Land vouches it loudly although in the perspective of the lately concluded First World War, the extant body of criticism has presented the poem in a relatively conventional light. That the living conditions for all beings - human or not - are fast worsening and that the environment is fast debilitating are a somewhat recent finding. Hence, when critic Robert Pogue Harrison says thatthe worsening climate condition may well be a fitting objective correlative for *The Waste Land*, there really come up a host of questions about the narrative's interface with the nonhuman sentience: " ... we might now say that a poem like Eliot's *The Waste Land* is in some ways a harbinger of the greenhouse effect. Or better, we can say that the greenhouse effect, or desertification of habitat in general, is the true "objective correlative" of the poem" (149).

In fact, this image of "desertification" has long resonated with Eliot as a perfect anthropocene image. In the hauntingly urban settings of "cracks", "reforms", "bursts" and "falling towers", the shadow and darkness of the human-centric existence have best manifested themselves:

Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only
What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal. (Jain 57)

The epithet 'unreal'[1] is a significant tool using which Eliot conjoins the opening part ("The Burial of the Dead") of the poem with the concluding one ("What the Thunder said"). "Under the brown fog of a winter dawn", an unnamed city appears to be unreal and when, in the concluding section, the same urban landscape re-figures in the all-too-familiar contexts of "Jerusalem Athens Alexandria Vienna London", it is equally bafflingly unreal. The big and grand names are unreal or, in other words, devoid of identity. The identity is fissured, as it were, in an anthropocene. If, at any place or by any means, the components of identity are at all to be approached, they are to be approached in a more-than-human setting—"over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth". The sense of "stumbling" has already come along as the predominant mood of the preceding stanza. The nature of identity of the "third who walks" is a stumbling block; the zeal of the question "who is that on the other side of you?" accentuates exponentially; so does the obfuscation over the gender-identity ("whether a man or a woman"). This apparent feverishness over human identity is taking the poet to the swarming pool of hooded people amid "the murmur of maternal lamentation".

1 Quite significantly, Eliot has used the word 'unreal' only twice in the poem.

The individual and the collective are often overlapping with each other, thus subjecting the principles of identity-formation to multiple questions. It may be said that *The Waste Land* is basically passing through a subterranean urge—an urge for losing the narrowly individual self into the collective yearning of the multitude. The collective yearning of "those hooded hordes", however, has no distinguishing or definitive hallmark. The simple reason is that the anthropocene cannot claim to have attained the ability of figuring out what the environment summarily is. Nevertheless, the humankind has been committing the blunder of classifying, categorizing and demystifying the environment both within its seeming plurality and seeming finitude. The attempt has borne no fruits, however. That anthropocene benchmarks are far too short for approximating the identity of the environment is something which Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) is vouching forth in a Bengali novel of hers, *The Life and Death of Poet Bandyaghati Gnayi*[2] as early as 1967. Put simply, once an old man in the novel dared enter the womb of a pitch-black forestland called Nidaya and, as he came out of it, he was heard soliloquizing that it was just impossible for the humanity to try to gauge the depth and profundity of the forest with the known human tools or the famed deus-ex-machina: "Take my words - the Bongas of the Santhals, our *Bashuli, Dharmathakur, Rankini*[3], *Durga* - they all are mere measuring tools. We're merely gauging darkness with them" (15).

The opening part of "The Waste Land", just like the truth-seeking journeyman of Mahasweta Devi's novel, promises to explore life in general as "a little life with dried tubers". As with an unprecedented chime, the memory gets indissolubly mingled with desire, the process of exploring the identity starts—identity in an anthropocene, to be more precise. The "dead land", the "forgetful snow", the "breeding lilacs", the summer's "surprise", the "dull roots" and the hope-raising high "mountains"—they all cumulatively conjure a huge yet vivid stretch of wilderness. The identity of humankind is as inextricably bound with the nonhuman realities around as the poet to his environment. No artwork, as Eliot himself elucidates in the essay "The Modern Mind", is a "disembodied element"; rather, all sorts of artistic creation, as Eliot pertinently quotes from the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky's (1879-1940) *Literature and Revolution*, are profoundly tied to their environment. In the essay, Trotsky has been alluded to this way. He [Trotsky] observes:

> 'Artistic creation is always a complicated turning inside out of old forms, under the influence of new stimuli which originate outside of art. In this large sense of the word, art is a handmaiden. It is not a disembodied element feeding on itself, but a function of social man indissolubly tied to his life and environment.' (Eliot: *The Use of Poetry* 136)

Possibly in search of these still-not-identified fragments of identity, some human voices are pervading the opening part of "The Burial of the Dead"; their nostalgic cries ("And when we were children") happen to be creeping and cascading across the length and breadth of this "dead land" and the impressions are gravitating towards a particular human value - the value of belief. It is with this unshakeable belief that Marie, upon being invited to "hold on tight" is really and truly holding on tight. From the breeding ground of "lilacs" the loving duo are now optimistically settled "in the mountains", where one confides to the other, " ... there you feel free".

Impressionism and the Revolt against Personal Possession

Even in this closeness of embrace, they cannot altogether defy the accompanying nonhuman entities around. "The stony rubbish" poses as an ineluctable component of the landscape and, to their utmost disbelief, they perceive life in that apparent deathliness of the stone: "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?" (Jain 43). They notice the accompanying stretch of wilderness so intimately that they identify the colour of the rock as "red". This is really a moment of reckoning both for

2 For the convenience of understanding, I have translated the original Bengali title of the novel Kavi Bandyaghati Gnayir Jiban O Mrityu into English. For all other non-English texts, all the English renderings, if not mentioned otherwise, are mine.

3 These are various demi-gods worshipped especially regionally in various nooks of Bengal.

the trysting couple and the entire poem as well. Against the ever-shifting shadows of this rocky wilderness, they intend to come to terms with the various phases of their identity:

There is shadow under this red rock,
Come in under the shadow of this red rock,
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you; (44)

To understand this variety and heterogeneity about the "shadow at morning" and the "shadow at evening", it is imperative that we look back to the philosophy behind the art-movement called Impressionism. If we, for example, take a close look at the works of artists such as Claude Monet (1840-1926), Edouard Manet (1832-1883), Edgar Degas (1834-1917) and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901), we see that they are basically interested in landscape painting. For them, the basic pattern remains that they will work on the same object on the same spot but only the times will be changing. By dispensing with the pre-existing method of mixing the various colours of various degrees, they have introduced the amazing practice of using the canvas itself as the palette. With quick strokes of paintbrush, technically known as the alla prima process, they juxtapose the primary colours in such a manner that it gives way to the effectiveness of the secondary colours. The times change; the shades change and, correspondingly enough, what strikingly changes is the landscape. In the Impressionist parlance, the change is what the artist primarily wants to capture in his hasty brushstrokes.

Let us now consider, just as probably our poet Eliot is considering, why the Impressionist school is so devotedly considering the theme of change in their artworks. The very sketchy answer would be that, given the tremendous force of transition all around—cultural, societal, and political—the artist is trying to grapple with the question of his identity in the paintings on the surrounding environment. The emphatic interplay of light and shade is but a means of articulating what he deep down feels about his own self vis-à-vis his immediate environmental praxis. It goes without saying that by renouncing the dull fixity of any one particular temporal-spatial reality, the Impressionists have revolted against the notion of personal possession. The notion of personal possession does characterize the anthropocene and this mad pursuit of possession-ism very much impedes one's effort of understanding one's own self in the broader context of one's more-than-human environment. Once again, to recall Eliot's own words about the English essayist Joseph Addison (1672-1719) will be the fittest allusion, here. With marked effusiveness, Eliot is drawing our attention to what Addison tells us about "a greater satisfaction" in connection with the humankind's exploring "the prospect of fields and meadows". Addison observes that:

> 'A man of a polite imagination is let into a great many pleasures that the vulgar are not capable of receiving. He can converse with a picture, and find an agreeable companion in a statue. He meets with a secret refreshment in a description, and often finds a greater satisfaction in the prospect of fields and meadows, than another does in the possession.' (Eliot: *The Use of Poetry* 60)

This whole obsessiveness about shadows, as though in a painting, eventually turns out to be the anthropocene's weltanschauung for the post-anthropocentric, more particularly the vast wilderness consisting of the "dead trees" without shelter, the "cricket" without relief, the "dry stones" without the "sound of water" and a coterie of entities "neither living nor dead". This wilderness may be an essentially accompanying reality for the various characters of *The Waste Land* but this wilderness invariably reminds us that the entire creation - both the human and the nonhuman - is only in a state of becoming and not being. The great optimism soon fizzles from the seemingly placid mountain-tops and the very willingness for understanding the various moments of identity in an anthropocene dwindles the most pathetically:

Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit
There is not even silence in the mountains
But dry sterile thunder without rain
There is not even solitude in the mountains. (Jain 56)

The "stony" places, therefore, no longer serve as the source of blissful solitude; the "living" hopes are dying a premature death near the "dead mountain mouth"; the "red" rock and the "red sullen faces" are now indistinguishable. The foregrounding of the human into the nonhuman and the vice versa have, by this time, turned a full circle. Even in this seeming recognition of the post-anthropocene as the one ineluctable truth of life, the approximation towards what we understand as our identity is not complete. The stony places are now the harbinger of great, inescapable agony ("after the agony in stony places") and naturally we cannot help questioning ourselves whether we can ever internalize our identity in the truest spirit of the term. Perhaps not. The crisis and bafflement of this sort is ubiquitous[4] and even if we see that the rocky wilderness is actually acting out as a protective spirit for humankind, we are building around us a glasshouse of romance. In a different context, Mahasweta Devi has trenchantly attacked and shattered this romantic effusion about nature as an all-forgiving, all-guarding, all-protecting mother-figure. Bikhia's dropping down "a little stone" into the gorges of the fall in Devi's celebrated *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay,* and *Pirtha* (1989) exposes the unmitigated "agony in stony places" in a sharper and a more excruciating[5] manner:

> Bikhia and Puran wait. Yes, a dark cavern in front. Perhaps it goes down to the hill base. As if the dark waits with its skirts forever spread. Give me, give me what you must keep secret, I will guard it with care [...] Yet there may be a priceless truth worthy of being guarded in secret, that you cannot let anyone know, give it to me, I am that ageless timeless darkness of time, when the earth was under water, there was no light anywhere, darkness was everywhere and the creator was in thought, how to create the earth and the living world. I am waiting since then, I keep everything in my lap, nothing is lost.
>
> Bikhia drops down a little stone. (Devi: *Imaginary Maps* 177)

Devi's novel tells us that Bikhia's stone gets lost into the depths of the tumultuous waters. The hope does not die, however. With clouds rumbling, a heavy rain sets in upon the stony wilderness where the Bikhias live. We may think that this prodigal outpouring is a massive respite for the cave-dwelling community but we are again thinking the wrong way. The prodigal rain even after long rainless days is no balm for the agonizing people, who think that by defiling the earth, water and soil of nature, they have actually defiled themselves. No amount of rainfall can now exonerate them from their nemesis. Alongside, if we care for the words of warning in "The Burial of the Dead" such as "Fear death by water", we do realize that the apparent life-

4 The crisis and bafflement come, though in a different context, in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599-1601) and the question of identity is the only quintessential question that drives him so exceedingly impatient. The irony is that although Hamlet reposes faith in the judgments of the Providence, he, at the same time, eulogizes indiscretion as one indispensable quality and a priceless faculty:

> Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
> When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will ...' (Shakespeare 394)

5 Environments, according to contemporary anthropologist Eduardo Kohn, are getting "ever more complex" as we, in the anthropocene, are committing the fallacy of ascribing human forms, human meanings, human contexts and human perspectives to the nonhuman around:

Humans do not just impose from on the tropical forest; the forest proliferates it. One can think of co-evolution as a reciprocal proliferation of regularities or habits among interacting species.... The tropical forest amplifies form in myriad directions thanks to the ways in which its many kinds of selves interrelate. Over evolutionary time organisms come to represent with increasing specificity environments made ever more complex through the ways in which other organisms come to more exhaustively represent their surroundings. (Kohn 182)

sustaining identity of water does not make any sense, at least insofar Eliot's The Waste Land is concerned. In the fourth section of the poem, "Death by Water", we see how it is not just the death of a corporeal frame that the poet is depicting in lurid details but it is way more than what we see:

A current under sea
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
He passed the stages of his age and youth
Entering the whirlpool (Jain 55)

Conclusion

"Entering the whirlpool", one might argue, is a conscious choice of the poet to approximate the meaning of life. In the essay "The Metaphysical Poets", Eliot writes, "The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate, if necessary, language into his meaning" (Enright and Chickera 309). Hence, it all boils down to one basic point: the components of identity regardless of the human or the nonhuman are in a constant flux, a constant "whirlpool". Hence, Eliotian "waste and void" as a nonhuman sentience inculcate in us this extremely valuable sense that life in all its forms - both human and nonhuman - is, at bottom, incomplete. So is our identity.

In Eliot's poetic idiom, this incompleteness is just an avenue for affirmation of something not yet affirmed. If this sense of incompleteness precipitates the critical act of postponing judgement about anthropocentric world-order out of respect for a more complete understanding of the nonhuman sentience, it is precious. It is, then, healthy! The Waste Land, in that sense, is a beacon for re-lighting our dying hopes, as the poet in some other context upholds: "And we must extinguish the candle, put out the light / and relight it" (Jain 118).

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