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Ramlal Agarwal

Indian Interpretation of "The Waste Land"

It is a hundred years of "The Waste Land", and though the poem is inundated with critical commentary, research, and explanation, it still remains a puzzle for most of its readers.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to understand it from an Indian perspective, avoiding the scholarly route of digging for allusions and its tools, craft, and tearing analyses, and interpreting its metaphors in keeping with their context and easy-to-grasp their meaning and enjoy the poem.

"The Waste Land" starts with a chiaroscuro of the past and the present state of civilization and ends with apocalyptic thunder and rain. The pattern conveys that, though our past was full of romance and splendor, our present is beset with boredom, ennui, and inaction, and the only way to find redemption from it as echoed by the thunder, is to give, to sympathize, and to control.

The first section of "The Waste Land" starts with Marie's memories of her childhood. She remembers visiting her cousins in the mountains and going out sledding with them. It was summer over Starnbergersee, with a shower of rain. They stopped in the colonnade and then went into the Hofgarten, drank coffee, and talked for an hour. When she was on a sled, she felt frightened.

*"He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight.*

She also remembered staying at the archduke's, reading much of the night, and going south in the winter.

The memories of happy camaraderie and affectionate relationships are firmly embedded in her mind and are in sharp contrast with the present circumstances in which a man behaves like an automaton, watching his shadow striding behind him in the morning and his shadow rising to meet him in the evening. It is a frightening situation, and she wants them to come to her so that she can show them what it is.

Getting back to her reveries of the past, she remembers the hyacinths her boyfriend gave her. He was back from the Hyacinth garden, his arms full and his hair wet, and light and silence mesmerized her. However, the present is ridden with anxiety and worries about the future, so people turn to phony soothsayers and fortune-tellers who read cards. The pack of cards carries images of heroes of the past; some of them are in the pack and some are missing. They are lifeless and ineffective, but Madam Sossotris makes the most of them. The city in which she lives is covered by fog and smog, tarred with soot and smoke, where an unmindful crowd flows over London Bridge in the midst of death and sighs, each man looking down at his feet, remembering wars fought and soldiers killed and buried. The section ends with men being dubbed hypocrites for a double talk with each other.

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In the second section, the poet resorts to his earlier pattern and recalls the magnificence and splendor of earlier times- say, Cleopatra. She sat in a burnished chair on glowing marble; the glass of her court carried pictures of cupid and gambolling lovers, and a seven-branched candelabra hung from the ceiling. The whole atmosphere was charged with synthetic perfumes. Above the antique mantle displayed the changed Philomel singing in her inviolable voice. Now, in contrast, we see a woman sitting in her parlor with crude forms of artwork, waiting for a call from her lover, suffocating with boredom, and fearful of her sinful life. When her lover calls, they become engaged in inane conversation and listen to the dirty sound of "jug, jug."

In the third section, "The **Fire** Sermon," the poet describes desolation, rotting ugliness, and death. He describes the scene after the party is over. The people have left, leaving a lot of litter on the seashore, which the sea swallows, but the life in death continues to hiss, and one hears the hooting of cars, hurtling trams, and sex-starved women waiting for their lovers. He describes a sailor who deals in currents and, after his day's work, calls on a woman, relieves himself, and walks away. The woman submits to him as a matter of routine, and after it is all over, she washes, powders her face, and plays a gramophone record. The poet cries :

*"O Lord Thou pluckest me out"
when confronted with the sharp contrast between
"In inexplicable splendor of Ionian white and gold"
and
"The river sweats
Oil and tar
The barges drift
With the turning tide"*

The fourth section, "Death by Water," continues with the disintegration of the body of Philabus, the drowned Phoenician sailor.

The fifth section, "What the Thunder Said," carries forward the story of the cracking state of civilization and people thirsting for water, with death walking beside them.

*"But red sullen faces sneer and snarl from doors of mad-cracked houses,"
and civilization is falling apart in
"Towers, Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, London."
Amid the dance of death, a miracle happens.
"In a flash, a lightning
Then a damp gust
Bringing rain."
The sound of thunder reverberated with the sound of DA.
DA DATTA: give
DA-DAYADHVAM: sympathize
DA-DAMYATA: control.*

suggesting the cardinal principles of creative life. The ending of the poem with the thrice repeated Sanskrit word "Shanti" is for the poet himself to cool down from the red-hot emotional upheaval.