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T.S. Eliot’s Concept of Time and History in *The Wasteland*

“You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember nothing?” (Eliot 122-123)

*The Wasteland*, deals with examining the history of civilization. It is a modernist poem. The poem is the expression of the lives of people. Eliot witnessed the social turmoil of the aftermath of war and he was greatly affected by the modernism, which is highly expressed in his works. Eliot illustrated the deteriorating physical conditions of Europe using the poetic language to give sense of the spiritual alienation, despair and discontent. The poem in Pound’s words is “the speech of a nation thru the mouth of one man”. (Rustom, 63) The first title of the poem was, *He Do the Police in Different Voices* taken from Charles Dickens novel, *Our Mutual Friend* where a young boy used to read newspaper to police in different languages. The poem is full of chaos of multiple voices and places. This chaos reflects the confusion in the life and minds of people. The poem was written in Post World War I period, which was considered as cataclysmic upheavals in western thought. The past, present and future in this chaotic wasteland is simultaneous; it lacks purpose, order or form. Among the multiple voices in *The Wasteland*, with the voice of Tiresias, voice from different places such as London, Baudelaire’s Paris, Russia, Jerusalem, and Athens and the time of Elizabethan period, Dante, Cleopatra and Buddha were also heard.

Eliot deals with time that rules his own philosophy of life. He contrasts splendor of the past with the corruptness of the present. He experiments with the idea of human mind and stream of consciousness. Eliot’s conception of time includes two streams, which intersect at significant moments. The time temporal is phenomenal physical world where time changes continuously and the Timeless is the nominal world where time is eternal. In Tiresias’s vision, time is not chronological but psychological, timeless having indefinite durations. Tiresias, provides continuity in the poem by unifying past, present and future. He understands that in death, there is salvation and after death comes rebirth forming a continuous cycle of eternal return which manifests the duration of time. In Wasteland, man is hopeless, time-ridden and unconscious of the events happening, their present is not what they expected and that is why they try to connect their present with past as past is beautiful and hopeful. Europe’s past was beautiful which is now corrupted due to war. ‘Cosmic Homelessness’ is projected throughout wasteland of both time and place. Man is isolated solitary being in *The Wasteland*; people are seen as walking figures on earth with no affection.

The truth of the poem surpasses time and place, i.e., it exists at all time and all places or in no time and no place. On the peripheral of the poem, there is duration in time but its essence lies in timelessness. The chanting of “Shantih…Shantih…Shantih” (Eliot 433) at the end of the poem reflect that ‘peace’ can only come as the time passes but it’s continuity shows that time cannot be redeemed, that lack the will to confront time indicating the trauma of the wasteland.. On the literal level, poem complete twelve hour period in single day, in the lines ending with, “winter evening(Eliot 190)… winter noon(Eliot 198)…evening hour(Eliot 220)” but metaphorically it shows the cosmic direction of that day. Past and present coexists in continuity of “now” in Wasteland by making meaningful use of historical references that give meaning to the present.

Eliot’s essay on “Tradition and the Individual Talent” he gives the literal meaning of tradition is in his historical sense. Eliot used history as an element for the perception of time. This involves not only the pastness of past but also its presence and leads the poet to write the literature of his own generation. Eliot explains history in ‘existential historicism’ that means that history doesn’t exist as a sequence of events that occurred in the past but it is the work of historian to interpret the past. Eliot believed that the ‘sense of temporal and timeless together’ are fundamental to ‘historical sense’ where this sense recognizes the past as ‘other’ of the present. Eliot is aware of this distinction between living dead and dead past to reinstate his view of tradition as historical phenomena. Eliot plays with mythical and historical references, in “The Burial of the Dead”, April is considered as a month of birth and rejuvenation, is rather cast as the “cruelest month” (Eliot 5), contrary to what Geoffrey Chaucer mentions in *The Canterbury Tales* where April is associated with spring and bloom. The allusion to the Roman oracle about Sibyl in the beginning of poem indicates Eliot’s fondness for irony, contradiction and paradox.

Eliot incorporates the idea of wheel. It is a fundamental design of nature. Wheel is wheel of time having endless cycle like seasons, day/night, planet orbit around sun in cyclic design and the circulation of blood in human body. Wheel is considered that governs our fate. Madame Sosostrous bringing up of blank card is symbol of burden, the burden of consciousness. Blank card represents the meaninglessness to world. Even the fortune-teller is unable to tell. In Dante’s Inferno, the image of hell is right in front of fortune-teller, the question arises if death is ultimate then what do we yearn for? London is presented as sort of hell crowded with people. Time becomes the symbol of inevitable death. Bar tender’s repeated insistence, “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME” (Eliot 169), jeopardizes the inevitability of death for the characters presented at the bar. Wasteland in the midst of chaos, fragments and broken images, is seen longing for wholeness and order in time.

Eliot makes historical reference to the disillusionment of the Fisher king, whose kingdom was once fertile has now turned into wasteland. His kingdom resembles Europe. Rebecca Beasley calls *The Waste Land* bearing the marks of war on it. Eliot showed Europe in its true nature. He showed the spiritual disillusionment by depicting the image of war effected society and physically desolated landscape of wasteland. The barren, lifeless images evoke the post-war London is described in “The Burial of the Dead”. He explored the ideology of the people’s mind into his poem to indicate the modernist philosophy. He is speaking from modern individualistic point of view to show the condition of Europe as a whole. History is fragmented and the man perceives society as equally fragmented and eventually meaningless. *The Wasteland* like Europe has lost its knowledge of good and evil due to the religious convictions, which keep them away from being alive to being eternally dead.

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