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A PRACTICAL DISCOURSE ON CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL THOUGHTS OF
'MARXIST CRITICISM' AND 'ECO-CRITICISM' IN T.S. ELIOT'S "THE WASTELAND"

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ABSTRACT

The Wasteland being a work of twentieth century opens limitless opportunities for contemporary critical evaluation. The exposition of social and political genres such as *Eco-Criticism* and *Marxist Criticism* add new dimensions to the study of *The Wasteland*. Unconsciously the poet has covertly dealt with various social and political issues which encompassed the society of those days which have remained undeciphered and unknown to the present state of human knowledge.

Eco-criticism focuses on the link between literature and nature and looks into the bio-social context of *unrestrained capitalism*, *excessive exploitation of nature* and worrying shapes of *environmental hazards*. It seeks links between literary studies and environmental activism, between human and social sciences and environmental discourse. Application of this practical criticism on *The Wasteland* has shown how a *'literary text'* has contributed into the *'construction'* of nature and the politics of development. *Marxist criticism* as an ideology makes a distinction between the *overt* and *covert* contents of a literary work and then relates the subject matter to basic *Marxist* themes. Studying *The Wasteland* under Marxist studies has not only highlighted the distinction between *aristocracy/common man*, *progression of capitalism* and the *nature of literary genre*; but has also helped to understand the social structure of those times.

KEY WORDS: *Ecological Consciousness; Eco-Criticism; Marxist Criticism*

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1. ECO-CRITICISM

Eco-criticism originated in a bio-social context of *unrestrained capitalism*, *excessive exploitation of nature* and worrying shapes of *environmental hazards*. It sees how a *'literary text'* contributes into the *'construction'* of nature and the politics of development (Nayar, 241). *Eco-criticism* focuses on the link between literature and nature. *Raymond Williams* in his *'The Country and the City'*(1973) elegantly argued how English Literature contributed to specific notions of nature (Nayar, 242). Thus, *eco-criticism* believes that literary, visual and other representations of nature have very much to do with an age's views and treatment of nature. Further, it seeks links between literary studies and environmental activism, between human and social sciences and environmental discourse. It emphasises on a practice of reading that pays attention to the

following genres, Eco demonism, Material Eco-feminism, Spirituality, Literary Ecology and Apocalypticism. Thus, eco-criticism looks closely at the human culture-nature interaction in the 'literary texts'. It assumes that human culture and nature are mutually influential.

T.S. Eliot's *'The Wasteland'* is one such literary text which embodies in it an *ecological consciousness*. The title of the poem *'The Wasteland'* itself carries in it the very canon of eco-critical studies. Human culture and nature are integrated and thus inseparable. The poet was aware of this notion and therefore he found a metaphor and a parable in nature to highlight the human degradation of the contemporary world. The title gains support as *loss of spirituality* and *decadence of nature* both results in human downfall. It was this striking similarity between *spirituality* and *nature* which might have motivated the poet to choose the title of the poem as *'The Wasteland'*. The century in which the poem came into publication was notoriously known for possibly two things: a) *Excessive loss of spirituality due to capitalism*, and b) *Excessive exploitation of nature by industrialisation*. Beyond any doubt, the poet might have observed this drab-affair between industrialisation and capitalism to disharmonise spiritual-nature relationship. It was this *'loss of real'* over *'gain of artificial'* which would have sub-consciously prompted him to compose *'The Wasteland'* dedicated to mankind.

The first section *'The Burial of the Dead'* gives enormous description of nature-human relationship. The opening lines forecast degradation of nature (April) through its loss of breeding capacity and degradation of human existence through its loss of spirituality. The apocalypse of nature provides a warning for human decadence. The question of clutching roots and branches growing out of stony rubbish highlights poet's view that both humans and non-humans have intrinsic values. These intrinsic values grow when nurtured with appropriateness. The poet expands his notion and further declares that *'And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, And the dry stone no sound of water'*. This inter-connectivity of human culture and nature has to be built upon values. These values need not merely be a rational-intellectual one, but one which accommodates sensibility too. *'The Wasteland'* witnesses this *'loss of sensibility'* over *'gain of sensuality'* which degrades the contemporary century.

Interestingly, higher sensibility like love is attributed to flowers (nature) and women (human culture) as is evident in *'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago They called me the hyacinth girl..... Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not speak, and my eyes failed'*. In doing so, the human race believes that intrinsic values could grow when subjected with appropriateness. In that sense, love could grow in this contemporary wasteland when it receives an appropriate treatment by nature and women both. Conversely, it could be argued that exploitation of nature and women wouldn't allow love to grow. From the point of view of eco-feminism, the hyacinth girl's lover stood championing the cause of *'loss of love'*. His gift of hyacinth flowers to his beloved could be seen as a trap for her exploitation. His sensuality saw *'Your arms full, and your hair wet'* and his sensibility (by looking into the girl's eyes) revealed him his rejection by the hyacinth girl. It then could be argued that baser values like lust are attributed to men and higher sensibility like love is designated to women.

The section *'The Fire Sermon'* begins with an echo of *'Prothalamion'* by Spenser. Here, the poet sharply builds upon the contrast of existence of nature and its prominence in human life from older myths upto the contemporary times. An important strand of eco-critic studies is observance of spirituality in nature. Eco-criticism retrieves older myths and religious beliefs to argue that pre-modern cultures have always treated nature with reverence. In Spenser's *'Prothalamion'*, the river is a high seat of nature. The nymphs prepare wreath for the wedding, swans loiter on the water and in their company Spenser wished the duo-couples *Lady Catherine-Henry Gilford* and *Lady Elizabeth-William Peter* to live in harmony with nature. Spenser associates all the activities with river to reveal and emphasise that all human and non-human lives were harmonised with nature and embedded in nature. It could also be treated as a parable to illustrate *'ecological balance'*. But in *'The Wasteland'* Eliot's Thames and its banks receive a different treatment all together. The exploitation of nature is evident in the lines *'The nymphs are departed The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed'*. The river is disrespected by the exploitation of nature. Nymphs, swans and various flowers are no longer found. The harmony between human and non-human had been disturbed. The river bank is no longer a

high seat of nature. It bears testimony of empty bottles, sandwich papers, cardboard boxes and cigarette-ends. Collectively, all these contribute towards nature's degradation. This modern parable of nature degradation is linked to human decadence of present century in *'The Wasteland'*. Earlier nature was thought to be an *inheritance*, but later, according to Marxist ecologists, with the effect of capital mechanisms nature was seen as a *commodity* (Nayar, 247).

'Sweet Thames run softly till I end my song' is alluded both by Spenser and T.S. Eliot. But there is a difference in the nature of the recitation of the song. Spenser sings the song to proclaim the higher sensibility of human culture-nature relationship of the earlier era, whereas T.S. Eliot sings it as an elegy towards the fall of nature and human culture. Eliot's apocalyptic tone of nature's spoils symbolically prophesies a similar fate for human spirituality. The withering of river Thames and its banks echo a disaster which probably would result to a further loss of spirituality in the contemporary society. Further the poet says that *'The river sweats Oil and tar'* but prior the same river witnessed a higher sensibility of love with the boating expeditions of Queen Elizabeth and Earl of Leicester when the barges would sail upon the river and red sails would puff up by the blowing winds as is evident by the poetic verses *'Elizabeth and Leicester Beating oars'*. But in the present century, the poet hears the lamenting songs of the three *Thames' daughters*. They sang the lamenting chorus of the *Rhine daughters* in Wagner's opera, *'The Trilight of the Golds'* (The Three Rhinemaidens, Act III Lines 292-306). The pollution of the river in the contemporary century finds a voice in the violation of the three Thames daughters. From *eco-feminist* point of view, the pollution of nature and violation of three Thames' daughters reveal a co-relation. The exploitation of nature was reflected in the gender oppression by the patriarchal society (Nayar, 249-250). It implicitly told that both nature and women were to be exploited by men. The poet sub-consciously exhibits a similar co-relation of exploitation between nature and women. The apocalypticism of nature by means of river pollution is symbolically linked to the exploitation of the Thames' daughters. By doing so, the reason for the loss of spirituality and the coming of further disasters in *'The Wasteland'* is prophesied in an under-tone by the poet.

2. MARXIST CRITICISM

Marxism as an ideology makes a distinction between the *overt* and *covert* contents of a literary work and then relates the subject matter to basic *Marxist* themes such as distinction between *aristocracy/common man, progression of capitalism* and the *nature of literary genre*. *'The Wasteland'* as a modern poem provides ample opportunity for a *Marxist* study. Just as *tragedy* spoke for the *monarchy*, the *ballad* spoke for *rural-folk*, likewise, the *novels* spoke for the *middle classes*.

T.S. Eliot composed *'The Wasteland'* in the twentieth century after World War I. The century witnessed unprecedented growth of capitalism. The society was classified into two classes; the first which dominated the means of production, and second which served as means of production. The society was gradually divided into *haves* and *have-nots*. A handful of dominant class, typically ruled over a mass of dominated class. The kind of literature which could have appealed a larger number readership was the one where numerical strength was more. Historically, poetry has always been linked to the educated masses. A traditional poetry would never appeal the masses; therefore Eliot constructed a type of poetry in *'The Wasteland'*, which wasn't meant just for a few rather it appealed to many. The structure of *'The Wasteland'* is in the likeness of prose. The themes chosen though unrealistic could easily be identified by the *weak class*. The symbolisms of *brown fog on a winter noon, crowds of people walking, dead tree, broken images, oil and tar, the barman, the ugly-looking wife (Lil), the war-returned soldier (Albert), rat creeping through the vegetation, Mrs. Porter and her daughter, the typist girl, the small house agent's clerk*, etc. appeal to the *weaker class* as they were the ones who dealt with these common vocabulary almost every day. Such themes and events could easily be understood by the dominant class as they lived by these symbols every day. Another remarkable feature of the poetry is its broken narrative. Even the dialogues between the characters are fragmented pieces. The broken narratives and fragmented dialogues appealed to the *weak class*. Words like *'broken'* and *'shattered'* were an everyday vocabulary for them. In their day-to-day life, likenesses of these words were experienced by them in the form of *broken house, shattered hopes*, etc. Similarly, the way the dominated class might converse with each other would not be a polished form of conversation. They would deliver utterances

which would be unstructured and fragmented, whereas dominant class would utter a complex, highly structured and civilised vocabulary class.

Likewise, the poem could also be linked to yet another *Marxist* tenet which says that aristocracy builds around itself a *private-secondary world*, where each of the members of aristocratic class became *self-kings* and excluded themselves from the community. In the first section *'The Burial of the Dead'* the story of Marie and archduke (Marie's cousin) is narrated. A close reading of the text makes it clear that even Marie belonged to an aristocratic class. Firstly, we get a glimpse of a private world around her when we observe that the archduke took only Marie on a sled. Noteworthy here is the fact that there were others too with Marie to visit the archduke as could be observed in the line *'And when we were children, staying at the archduke's, My cousin's, he took me out on a sled'*. Secondly, Marie's reading much of the time at night excludes her from those others mentioned which aids to build for herself a private-secondary world evident in the line *'I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter'*. In the second section *'A Game of Chess'* the poet gives a rich description of Lady Mrs. Equitone's room which is observed in the poetic verses *'The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne, Glowed on the marble, where the glass Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines From which a golden Cupidon peeped out Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra Reflecting light upon the table as The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it, From satin cases poured in rich profusion In vials of ivory and coloured glass Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes, Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air That freshened from the window'*. Undoubtedly, this was her private room. The rich decorations, vibrant lights and rich perfumes in her room speak of a background which loudly declares that she belongs to an aristocratic class. Lady Mrs. Equitone's room in this case becomes her private-secondary world. In sharp contrast to this the poet describes the typist girl's room in the third section *'The Fire Sermon'*. Her stove, drying combinations, stockings, slippers and camisoles represent her upbringing from a very ordinary class of society which is evident in the poetic lines *'The typist home at tea-time, clears her breakfast, lights Her stove, and lays out food in tins. Out of the window perilously spread Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays, On the divan are piled (at night her bed) Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays'*. This decorum of the room is certainly very different from Lady Mrs. Equitone's private-room. In the poem, we find both Lady Mrs. Equitone and the typist girl being visited by their lovers. Except a short interaction nothing else happens between Lady Mrs. Equitone and her lover as could be observed in the lines *'My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me. Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak..... What is that noise? The wind under the door. And we shall play a game of chess, Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.'* Interestingly, on contrast no interaction happens between the typist girl and her lover and they indulged themselves in sex as is evident in the lines *'Endeavours to engage her in caresses Which still are unreproved, if undesired. Flushed and decided, he assaults at once; Exploring hands encounter no defence; His vanity requires no response, And makes a welcome of indifference'*. Though sub-consciously yet for the readers, the poet maintains the private-secondary world of Lady Mrs. Equitone and also her chastity. But an intrusion is made in the *'private'* world of the typist girl and reduces the status of her world as *'public'* and herself as a *'whore'* where an intrusion from outside was possible anytime and everytime. Her being a whore has sub-consciously been textualised by the poet when her action of performing sex with her lover is condemned as mechanical in nature which is evident in lines *'Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass: Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over. She smooths her hair with automatic hand, And puts a record on the gramophone'*. The poet does not just stop here but takes a step forward to finally comment *'When lovely women stoop to folly'*.

In the section *'The Fire Sermon'* the poet describes the boating expeditions of Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Leicester. The rich decoration of the boat and the richness of Thames provides them a private-secondary world as is evident in the lines *'Elizabeth and Leicester Beating oars The stern was formed A gilded shell Red and gold The brisk swell Rippled both shores South-west wind Carried downstream The peal of bells White towers'*. Interesting to note is the fact that while Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Leicester are engaged in their boating expedition neither in sight is present a singular person nor is a singular boat. This aided to create a private-secondary world around them. In a similar sense, a sharp contrast could be observed between

Mr. Sweeney and Mr. Eugenides in the section *'The Fire Sermon'*. Though a Smyrna merchant, yet Mr. Eugenides' demotic French conversation with Tiresias gives enough proof for his belonging to an un-aristocratic class. His proposal to Tiresias could be found in the lines *'Asked me in demotic French To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel Followed by a week-end at the Metropole'*. This shows his perversion towards sexuality. It also did not construct a private-secondary world as the Metropole Hotel was a favorite hot-spot for homo-sexuals. On contrary, Mr. Sweeney visits Mrs. Porter and her daughter as could be observed in the lines *'The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring. O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter And on her daughter They wash their feet in soda water'*. Both the women wash their feet in soda water. The sounds of horns and motors create a private-secondary world around Mr. Sweeney. The act of Mr. Sweeney's sexual perversion is glamourised and made private by the women's act of washing their feet with soda water. Undoubtedly it bore sexual implications, but an attempt is made to show that the two whores weren't public at all in their dealings. Their perversion was exclusively for Mr. Sweeney alone. By privatising the two women the poet succeeds to build a private-secondary world around Mr. Sweeney.

The chapter reveals multitudes of indeterminate meanings by a close-reading of the text. The interdisciplinary study reveals various new interpretations unknown to the human knowledge in its present state. The nature-culture relationship, the duo exploitation of nature -women and nature's role to redeem the modern man out of *The Wasteland'* have been the new findings in the study of the text under the realm of *'Eco-Criticism'*. The conflict of social and political struggle between the haves and have-nots and the growing influence of capitalism as against the supposed natural law of socialism have been closely studied in *'Marxist Criticism'*.

Overall, the growing influences of various events and happenings in the twentieth century found space in *'The Wasteland'*. The poet was aware for the inclusion of most of these in his poem, but there also were many which lay deep in the poet's sub-conscious and very secretly found its space in the poem. Undoubtedly, the poet was not consciously aware of the fact that the hidden personages in his sub-conscious were forcibly able to make their way into the text. The practice of close reading of the text aided to highlight the various *social* and *political* genres of twentieth century which contributed towards a study of new dimensions in *'The Wasteland'*.

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