

AFFECT OF ABJECTION IN T. S. ELIOT'S THE WASTE LAND

✉ Madhukar Sharma¹

Abstract

*This paper deals with affect of abjection pervasive in modern people enunciated in T.S. Eliot's magnum opus *The Waste Land* (1922). This poem primarily enacts the poet's disgust with growing modernity of his time particularly relating to the declining of religion and the rise of sexual immorality. This research paper argues that this unhappiness swells in the force of disgust on the part of the poet at the immoral, unfulfilling sexual indulgence appearing repetitively in the text. It tries to unfold this disgust in terms of what Julia Kristeva calls the power (affect) of abjection. The assumption is that Eliot communicates his abjection through the tool of irony, which makes the readers be intensely aware of disgust at the soulless, mechanical sexual acts.*

Introduction

While examining the relationship between disgust and abjection, Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horrors* provides one of the most influential models of abjection. She argues that, within abjection: "There looms...one of the violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (as quoted in Ahmed, 86). Here, the abject threatens, and the threat may come from without or within, as it works to threaten what is thinkable or possible in the first place. Sara Ahmed further goes on to ask, "But what makes something so threatening?" (86). Kristeva shows us that what threatens from the outside only threatens insofar as it is already within and says: "It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's "own and clean self", but scraped and transparent, invisible or taut, gave away before the dejection of its contents" (Kristeva 1982: 53). The thing bad for both body and heart is disgusting. So, abjection in John Lechte's opinion: is a dimension of human experience that is based in affect, rather than reason. It is a negative feeling, not a rational law. An individual's dislikes in food will have an abject basis. For

¹Lecturer of English (M. Phil. Scholar) Lumbini Banijya Campus Butwal, Rupandehi, Nepal
e-mail: Sharmamadhukar7@gmail.com

some, rancid butter induces the revulsion of abjection. Who one is can be partly defined by such dislikes (and corresponding likes). Such then is the psychoanalytical meaning of abjection.

What can be inferred from the above statement is that affect and abjection are interrelated to each other wherein abjection, a kind of disgust produces affect in an individual that is purely psychoanalytical.

Eliot expresses his disgust particularly at the sexual immorality in *The Waste Land* in almost all sections. According to Eliot, sex is an important aspect of life. It is an expression of love and a means of procreation. But in modern society, sex has been perverted from its proper function and is utilized for animal pleasure and monetary benefits. Easy sexual relation could be found among all sections of the modern society.

Soulless and Immoral Sex as a Prime Cause of Disgust

Eliot maintains that soulless and immoral sex devoid of true love and emotional attachment has been a main cause of frustration and depression among people of modern time. He talks about guilty love, sex in high and low level of society, sex exploitation in low society in order to dramatize his disgusting reactions against immoral sexual acts all through the text. Sex occupies a very prominent place in human life. At one time sex was considered as a means of human development. Unfortunately in modern time, sex has become an animal urge without any moral or social commitment. Eliot gives two examples of guilty love. The poet refers to the story of Tristan who had a guilty passion for Isolde in Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*.

I will show you fear in a handful of dust.
Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu
Mein Irish Kind,
Wo weilest du? (lines 30-34).

The song in the poem refers to Tristan, who morally wounded, awaits the arrival of his beloved. It sums up the despair and the grief of the guilty love. Similarly, the poet gives another example of the guilty love, the story of hyacinth girl:

“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, I was neither

Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence (Lines: 35-41).

The love of this young man is also a guilty love as he makes love to the girl secretly in the garden. This sort of love is not free from fear and anxiety. The feeling of the lover is summed up in the line, "I was neither living nor dead and I knew nothing" (L 39-40). So love offers neither joy nor relaxation in modern life.

Sex in High and Low Societies

Eliot gives examples of how sex in high and low society has been a matter of disgust for him. The examples are given in the second section of the poem called "A Game of Chess".

"And we shall play a game of chess,
Pressing lidless eyes and
Waiting for a knock upon the door (Lines: 136-138).

A game of chess is played to hide the seduction of a young girl by a noble man. Sex in low society is also performed in more or less same manner. This kind of sex is depicted in the second scene laid in a tavern. Here is a story of Lil who is conversing with another lady about her husband who has been in the army for four years. The woman (Lil) is nervous and afraid because she has lost her charm. The lady warns Lil if she does not give a good time (sex-indulgence) to her husband; there are other women who will be glad to be so. The lady comments, "He [Lil's husband] been in the army four years, he wants a good time, and if you don't give him, there's others will" (lines: 148-149). Lil replies that she is not quite attractive physically though she is thirty one because she has given birth to many children and has taken a lot of medicine without her desire.

I can't help it, she [Lil] said, pulling a long face,
It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.
(She's had five already and nearly died of young George.)
The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the same
(Lines: (158-61).

Sex has become a purely physical kind of entertainment and has lost its moral and social purpose. Sex perversities both in high and low life, have become a matter of mechanical routine. The last scene of "Fire Sermon" shows some sexual violation experienced by three daughters of Thames. The first daughter was born at High bury which is full of trams and dusty trees. She visits Richmond

and Kew, which are the picnic spots on the bank of the river. At Richmond, she is criminally assaulted by a man while she is lying on her back on the floor of a small boat. The second daughter of the Thames is also ravished at Moor-gate. After the act, the man feels repent and weeps but the girl has no regrets. The third daughter of the Thames is also ravished on the Margate sands. She doesn't remember anything. She compares herself to the broken finger nails of the dirty hands which are useless. The following lines respectively talk about how these three daughters of the Thames River are sexually exploited:

Trams and dusty trees.
Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew
Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees
Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe (Lines: 292-295).
My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart
Under my feet. After the event
He wept. He promised „a new start.
I made no comment. What should I resent? (Lines: 296-299)
On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
My people humble people who expect
Nothing (Lines: 300-305).

Irony as a Gothic Mode Of Intensifying Mechanical Sex

Eliot has used irony in combination with the subdued gothic mode which shocks the readers into an affect of abjection at the unpleasant sex. In *The Waste Land*, irony is expressed in elements or themes and the elements or themes are related to the defining characteristics of modernism. It happens that irony itself is one of the defining features of modernism. Eliot expresses this bitter irony in the very first lines of *The Waste Land*:

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desires, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers (Lines: 1-7).

For the waste-landers, April is the cruelest month which brings birth to flowers from the land. These flowers imply re-birth which requires some effort on their part. The waste-landers do not wish to put any spiritual effort and as such April is unwelcome to them. April mixes memory with desire, the memory of death of fertility god along with the desire of re-birth. April brings with it the life-giving rain which is disliked by the waste-landers. They, however, like winter, which is a symbol of spiritual death. It keeps them warm and looking for excitement and joy of life. Though winter feeds a little, it is the season for the joys of the flesh.

Eliot's irony is inherent in the structure of the poem *The Waste Land*. The parallelism between the past and the present are brought out either by contrast or by comparison. When the world of the past is placed side by side with the present, the difference between the two becomes obvious. For example, in the past, fairies walked on the banks of river Thames; today prostitutes and call-girls wander on the bank in search of sex. The fairies washed their feet in the river water. But nowadays Mrs. Porter and her daughter wash their feet in soda-water. "They wash their feet in soda water" (L. 201). Similarly, sexual purity was greatly valued in the past. It was followed by the death-wish and suicide of the victim. Today sexual indulgence is a matter of routine and something no one bothers about. Eliot refers to habitual sex of the typist girl:

Hardly aware of her departed lover;
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over.
When lovely woman stoops to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone,
She smoothens her hair with automatic hand,
And puts a record on the gramophone (lines: 250-256).

So, these lines clearly reveal the fact that sexual indulgence in modern time has been a mechanical routine which everybody has to undergo and therefore they don't take it very seriously. The three waste-lands-Biblical, King Fisher's, King Oedipus's—have points of similarity and points of dissimilarity with the modern waste land. The irony lies in the very method of recalling the past and the conditions of the world of today. Irony is also evident in the use of literary quotations and allusions from the works of Ovid, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Webster, Middleton and many French and German writers. They throw light on the spiritual barrenness and boredom of modern life through contrast with the life in those ages.

Gothic elements used in the poem have intensified the ironic value the poet deliberately seems to create. Eliot's gothic modes are expressed with the aim of creating fear and haunting terror, image

of death-emotional and spiritual death in the readers. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a dark and gloomy view of a modern experience. In accordance with the tenets of representing the fear seen in postmodernism, Eliot uses Gothic images to show the bleakness of the modern world in all of its terror. The concept of death in *The Waste Land* brings significance in its symbolic nature, not necessarily purely physical. Thus, there are dead men walking. Those within the cities have died a "symbolic death," refusing to move on towards an area of more spiritual significance. Eliot presents a world "where the dead men lost their bones" (L.115). They have died in a much more spiritually significant manner. Moreover, there is the element of haunting that is common within Gothic literature and is replayed in Eliot's image of the world's Metropolis death. Haunting plays important roles within postmodernism and in Eliot's work *The Waste Land*. He shows the dead men walking as haunting the earth. Research study suggests that "The terror of the Gothic therefore[...] functions as a deconstructive counter-narrative which presents the darker side of subjectivity, the ghosts of otherness that haunt our fragile selves," Eliot makes this image very clear. Empty bodies now haunt overcrowded cities in the modern metropolitan experience, "He who was living is now dead/ We were living are now dying/ With a little patience," (Lines: 327-330).

But still the modern people do not feel impelled to reverse the situation. It means that Eliot's use of abjection has not affected the people to change the world they are living in. In short, the affect of abjection has proved to be impotent. In other words, the rain doesn't fall; the land is still waste, useless. People have not been able to procreate since their life is totally mechanical. This means that there is pessimism everywhere among the people of modern era. However, the poet gives his own ideas, how the world and modern civilization can be saved from spiritual barrenness and death. The urban civilization is decaying. Suffering is the way of self-purification. Pain is necessary for reconstruction of the individual. Detachment of the soul is necessary for salvation. These thoughts, borrowed from three sources, have been collected by the poet to save himself from ruin. Perhaps, these very ideas will fit you, too. The three remedies are Datta (give), Dayadhavam (sympathize), and Damyata (control).

Conclusion

To be disgusted is after all to be affected by what one has rejected. As Silvan S. Tomkins suggests, in disgust: "Attention is most likely to be referred to the source, the object, rather than to the self or the face. This happens because the response intends to maximize the distance between the face and the object which disgusts the self. It is a literal pulling away from the abject"(128). Eliot vividly expresses how he has been affected by a thing or activity which he doesn't like. Poet's aim seems to evoke affect of disgust in the readers with respect to immoral sexual acts among the people of modern age. In order to do so, Eliot, talks about the sexual immorality which is totally devoid of

love—a purely mechanical love which contributes nothing to generation of the new world. This sort of love can be found in all kinds of societies. The title of the poem *The Waste Land* suggests the bareness of modern civilization. The sterility is caused by various factors but Eliot believes that sexual deviation gives significant rise to the problem. Sex has been perverted from its proper function and is utilized merely to gratify human lust. This condition has become a source of degeneration that leads to the erosion of moral values and become a hurdle in man's spiritual progress.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*. Routledge: Edinburg University Press, 2004. Print.
- Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land*. United States: Horace Liveright, 1922. Print.
- Hadinata, Purwarno. *Sexual Perversion in T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land*, Indonesia: Islamic University of North Sumatra, English Department, 3 May 2007. Web. 13 April. 2016
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Rondiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. Print.
- Lechte, John. *Key Contemporary Concepts: From Abjection to Zeno's Paradox*. London: SAGE publication, 2003. Print.
- Tomkins, Silvan S. *Exploring affect*, ed. Evirinia Perros, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Print.

