

APOCALYPTIC VISIONS IN T.S. ELIOT'S *THE WASTELAND* AND *THE HOLLOW MEN*

Pallavi Srivastava

Research Scholar, Department of English, Bundelkh and Degree College, Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh, India

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ABSTRACT

Eliot is considered a Christian poet and his poetry are believed to be a religious one. His poetry saw a linear development of his religious maturity over the years, which can be found out only by reading it with deep insight. The starting phase of his religious poetry can be considered where his disillusionment with the modern ways of the world had started. 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', 'The Waste Land' and 'The Hollow men' belong to the phase when Eliot was living in a constant confusion to follow the ways of the world or to find peace by finding out his own path of salvation. Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism brought extreme transformation in his religious belief as well as to his poetry, while the first phase was marked with gloomy outlook; the next was marked with a spiritual slant. Eliot depicted the spiritual journey of the soul in the most beautiful and complex ways in his poems, although this ended with overwhelming spirituality, it started with his depiction of spiritual barrenness. His major poetical work 'The Waste Land' has tones of desolation and humanity is shown at the brink of extinction. This paper explores Eliot's vision of Apocalypse and tries to find the optimistic vein he had in his poetry.

KEYWORDS: *Apocalypse, Prophetic Vision, Religion, Salvation, and Spirituality*

INTRODUCTION

Eliot's apocalyptic vision is about Christian revelation, the divine truth where Jesus Christ promised his followers 'Heaven' at the end of this world. According to the Holy Bible, Jesus promised in the Gospel of John, Ch-14 -*Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. (V-1-3, KJV Bible)*¹

The divine truth has been emphasized by Eliot while creating the disastrous atmosphere in his poems. The poems display fear and horror at highest and all is done through influencing reader's emotion and feelings, and, all this makes his vision prophetic. The catastrophic gravity leaves only a few chances for hope to dawn again and rather than giving a promise for futurity, his vision and efforts were to shake off the sloth of immortality and spiritual dearth and make a realization how deep humanity is inside this muck.

The apocalypse visible in Eliot's writings is quite different from other apocalyptic writings as the atmosphere of his poems contributes more than the content itself. The style of writing makes them exceptional apocalyptic writings although the fragmentary nature of his poems makes readers confused about their vision. The picture presented to them is unable to project something comprehensible; instead, it gives readers feelings of desolation, lack of spirituality, happiness

and a positive spirit. Eliot has used a background of prophetic literature of The Bible to prepare this image which he has presented in the poem. He has conceptualized a world which has failed its Creator and is being tormented in return not by God but by their own inabilities to decide what they want in return. Their condition makes them pathetic and to worsen the condition they do not have anywhere to go for consolation.

The Waste Land and *The Hollow Men* are the two poems which bring out his intentions of depicting the dark world successfully. *The Waste Land* is narrated by sightless Tiresias, whatever he describes is so fragmented that listeners are unable to take out the meaning, but the poet has intentionally combined the images to bring out the vision which reaches its peak by the time poem ends. The poem is apocalyptic as it makes us feel that much has been ruined although, there is nothing, in particular, to put a finger on only, a bunch of characteristics which make it specifically his poetry of desolation. C.M. Kearns comments-

... it is hardly necessary to point to the themes Eliot's work shares with the biblical texts here: the impending abolition or at least purgation of life as we know it, the immediacy and irrevocability of death and final judgment, and the strong emphasis on a moment of truth or vision, a moment "here and now" in which choice and commitment are demanded. There are common stylistic devices as well: a heightened use of figurative language, a sense of esoteric meanings hovering just behind the text, and above all a kind of apostrophe or address to the reader, a demand that we respond either yes or no to the perspectives and actions for which the revelation calls.(Kearns, 1992, p.125)²

Eliot has achieved the atmosphere he wanted to create with the help of his writing style. The kind of tension he has created in his poems contributes to heighten the sense of urgency and restlessness. The most horrible apocalyptic scene constructed by him in *The Waste Land* is-

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
 And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
 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;
 I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (Eliot, 1969, lines-19-30)³

The stanza has words like- 'Son of man', 'Red rock', 'the shadow' and 'the dead tree'- all these bear Biblical tones, they carry in them the prophesy of the Lord-"an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers

of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.” (KJV Bible, Isa.32:2)⁴

The tone in this stanza is so intense it creates terror in the hearts of readers. ‘Son of man’ which means ‘man’ only has been addressed and informed that his existence on this earth in these unruly circumstances is somehow a result of his own *Karma* and his unfaithfulness with the Lord will leave him unsupported by Him. The world here looks barren and devoid of any hope. Cornelia Cook describes the scenario-

The reader is impelled to compose meanings assignable to familiar words in the poem and to find a message in the Babel of words from all times and places and languages which is the poem's finale. Nor do we foresee any end, and certainly not a triumph in a poem which collapses historical movement in a vision where past and present mix and repeat, where characters and civilizations, like the waste land trees, seem rather to wither than to grow. 'What will happen' is a question that informs every aspect of the poem, and lingers, unanswered, beyond the poem's end. (Cook, 1996, p.74)⁵

The overtone of the poem is desolate and does not provide an optimistic image. In *The Waste Land* rain comes in Section V of ‘What the Thunder Said’ with clouds thundering but it never rains. The Ganga is also sunken and the Thames is polluted with the illicit activities there. Eliot has not shown water as the tool of regeneration and vitality only; it somehow brings destruction as well. The Phoenician Sailor dies due to drowning in the sea in “The Death by Water”.

The next poem with same apocalyptic tone is *The Hollow Men*. *The Hollow Men* is considered an extension of *The Waste Land* as the atmosphere; imagery and imagination prove to be similar to his most important work *The Waste Land*. *The Hollow Men* opens with an epigraph, ‘A penny for the old Guy’. Every year effigies of Guy Fawkes are burnt on 5 November by English men. Guy Fawkes conspired to blow British Parliament in 1605 by designing ‘The Gunpowder Plot’ but he could not accomplish his plan as it was discovered, and he was executed. To celebrate this day by burning the effigies stuffed with fireworks kids collect money by asking- ‘A penny for the old Guy’. The poem has imagery where ‘Hollow Men’ are compared to the effigies which are stuffed with straws but are spiritually hollow like modern men.

Eliot has created an atmosphere which makes the living beings scared out of their souls. The surreal quality of the poem makes it a strange mix of horror and fear. The hollow men are experiencing the things which scare them from the core of their heart but at the same time, they find no hope of salvation for themselves. Their own deeds during their lives have brought them to a place which only aggravates their troubles. Their sins have overpowered their present situation and they are clueless of their own destiny. Everett A. Gillis states-

If the hollow men should engage in a formal worship service, it is implied, a childish chant would be the most logical choice for their ritual since they have no more apprehension of the meaning of spiritual reality than do young children, who likewise have no experiential knowledge of good or evil. The distortion of the mulberry bush into a prickly pear is both in keeping with the desert landscape and with the prevalent warping of religious values in the poem as a whole: it represents an appropriate altar for hollow men. (Gillis, 1961, p.474)⁶

Eliot has very well found a parallel between Hollow men and effigies of Guy De Fawkes. The conversation Modern men have with others are meaningless and their heads are filled with straws. The Hollow Men have their heads filled with straw which shows that it is devoid of grey matter. Their decision sans goodness of intention and objective leads them towards a dismal future and destiny. Their reluctance in confronting the judgment day when they

say- Not that final meeting/In the twilight kingdom. (37-38) shows that they know their future is doomed. The realization of the sins they have committed has been revealed by themselves as they are unable to even pray. First, they pray in forbidden ways by worshipping “idols” and finally they try to pray in proper Christian ways but, they find themselves unable to do so as they keep forgetting the prayers. It depicts two aspects: first, they never prayed during their lifetime and second even if they worshipped God they never did it with their heart or soul; they did it just with their mouths. In the poem when hollow men want redemption they try to get fertile again as they have turned barren due to their sins and to get their fertility back they perform “the ring dance’. Many scholars have discussed Eliot’s use of Ring dance as a metaphor depicting fertility rite. This fertility rite is performed in a circle. These lines describe it on many levels- “...he probably intended the passage to recall the ancient fertility rite of the ring dance and at the same time to comment ironically on the sterility of modern civilization which has lost much of its religion.”(Stanford, 1955, p.133).⁷ While five o’clock is the time of Christ’s resurrection, the rhyme is a parody of a children’s rhyme which means shallow men are trying to have a spiritual rebirth but their ways are nothing more than childish. The hollow men have come out of the circle of life and now they are stuck in nowhere.

Both the poems feature humanity which is under the boredom of life and they make little efforts to break this chain of inactiveness and fall prey of sinner’s life and repent later after death on judgment day. Now the hollow men know that they can neither reach “god’s other kingdom” which is “heaven” nor in “death’s other kingdom” which is ‘hell’. Here Eliot’s comparison of hollow men with Guy Fawkes’ effigies shows that a sacrifice of these men can redeem humans from their fate of being in a lurch. Their slothfulness in not making a decision has left them somewhere which can be called a no man’s land-

In a field

Behaving as the wind behaves

No nearer-

Not that final meeting

In the twilight kingdom (34-38)

Hollow men are not ready to be there for judgment day. Their behavior and character on earth never approved what they were supposed to do and they have full knowledge of that and they are scared of God’s judgment for them.

The third part of the poem describes the transformation of this land into a ‘dead land’. The spiritual death among these men has been depicted here. According to the Christian religion, it’s sinister to worship idols but these hollow men have erected “stone images”. These men try to cross the gates of this land and enter God’s kingdom but they are unable as they led a life which was wayward and immoral. Their spiritual life had been barren and they never cared for the afterlife while they were alive and now they are helpless.

The stars represent salvation or guiding force of God but even there these souls are hopeless as they keep fading away. There is no chance of their getting salvation. The Shadow- represents the lack of willingness to do the right things. The things that are quite natural to happen are unable as these fellows lack the willpower to finish them. Paul Fussell explains the meaning of the ‘Shadow’ in the poem-

"The Shadow" in the passage from "The Hollow Men" may be taken to mean, at its most obvious level, the inescapable presence of the dead emptiness and the insignificant disorderliness which Eliot sees as the essence of an age without religious faith; it is the shadow of the "death in life" of "The Waste Land"... The shadow is the nervous, Prufrockian uncertainty which universally, in an age which lacks the directing force of faith, subverts the balance of the mind during the brief period between the time an action is proposed and the time the intention ("motion") is manifested in rational decision or physical performance. By "motion," Eliot means, then, not "movement," but "intention" or "an inward prompting or impulse; a desire or inclination (to or towards). (Fussell, 1950, p.254-55) ⁸

The shadow which prevails almost everywhere and interrupts them whenever they try to pray shows their own doubt in the supremacy of God although they try to pray, 'thine is the kingdom' but the faith which is needed to finish it and to support their existence in the world is absent from their hearts. This shows how their mind is never focused and they get tempted by avarice and lust around them. They have immersed themselves in the sins so much that they are unable to pray even. They start to pray and have to stop abruptly in the middle. The incomplete mumblings depict their religious sterility because of which they are unable to finish their prayer.

The Waste Land and *The Hollow Men* both are poems where one keeps trying to have a vision of hope and critics and scholars have debated about them. To find hope in *The Waste Land* is not difficult because Eliot has not left the humanity in a lurch. By the last section, Eliot turns towards Eastern philosophy and reveals how it salvages modern cultural degradation. Here we have to focus on his approach to receive peace, although Elizabeth Drew considers *The Waste Land* as surrender to death but it is not-

Eliot's note on the conclusion is: 'Shantih'. Repeated as here, a formal ending to a Upanishads. The atmosphere is colored far more strongly by the image of destruction 'London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down,' and by the sense of attempting to shore up the ruins by repeating words of comfort and strengthening of the spirit which may help him. But they are in foreign tongues, not translated into his own inner experience and so become a part of himself. Give, Sympathise, Control, Peace, remain abstract ideas; none of them has been transfigured into a redeeming symbol. The surrender has been made, but it still seems an surrender to death, and a possibility of rebirth is still without substance or outline. (Drew, 1949, p.89-90) ⁹

This comment proves lopsided because the whole of the poem stands as a treatise which proves that culture has been defiled by ignoring what was already given by ancestors. The rituals of rebirth are not there to pronounce the end of regeneration they are there to remind the pattern which exists in this universe since time immemorial. Not only Europe but Asian myths are also there to rescue the humanity from this devious cycle of destruction, we only need to listen to the religious scriptures. They provide remedies for the serious conditions of today's world. The explanation was given by Eliot at the end of his notes to *The Waste Land*- "Shantih. Repeated as here, a formal ending to an Upanishad. 'The Peace which passeth understanding' isoureqivalent to this word."(Eliot, 1969, p.80) reveals that the hope for rebirth stands strong throughout the poem, it only gives reasons why it has become barren.

Both the poems are symbolical in style and they reveal poet's intention to warn the society that lack of religious fervor has made us hollow from the inside and has relegated the world to a wasteland. The moral uprightness and spirituality are the keys we need for the redemption of humanity. Eliot's vision of apocalypse is not overtly optimistic but it is a remedial one. Cornelia Cook's definition of apocalypse which Eliot envisioned explains it best-

Apocalyptic is not primarily about the end of the world, but about received the vision. The most significant characteristic of apocalyptic, then, is the divine revelation, the intervention in the normal course of historical experience (personal or national) which interprets that experience and foresees its outcome. ---The seer comes face to face (or ear to ear) with the divine figure (or his voice). The revelation conveyed to the seer is of privileged secrets; of a way forward, of the ultimate triumph of the Lord and of his people. The second feature is the eschatological motif. The revealed secrets look forward; they telescope time for the seer so the end of all things, or of a period in his people's history, is present to his knowledge now. The end is before us, and we no longer await, in our historical previousness, its unknown outcome. We wait rather to be worthy of it. The absent revelation, the unforeseeable end, gives *The Waste Land* its character. (Cook, 1955, p.74).¹⁰

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