



Unheard Agonies of the Unsung Females in *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

T. S. Eliot's iconic masterpiece 'The Waste Land' has endured the test of time exploring a rich tapestry of complex issues with profound depth. Amidst its intricate narrative, numerous unsung female figures surface, injecting vital energy into the overarching story. From Madame Sosostris to the Hyacinth girl, the woman in 'The Game of Chess' to the delicate 'Lil wife,' and Cleopatra to Philomel, even a partially feminine embodiment of Tiresias—the landscape of 'The Waste Land' is marked by these diverse women, intensifying the emotional landscape of desolation, frustration, mechanical sexual life, perversion, and various other modern maladies. Amid a diseased and decaying backdrop, these women navigate their existence, adapting to the unforgiving realities of the wasteland. Strikingly, their identities have become entwined with the hyper-urbanized world as if they were common commodities.

*This paper undertakes an exploration of these intricately interwoven female characters within the thematic tapestry of *The Waste Land*. These themes not only transform notions of gender and sexuality but also delve into mythology, history, legends, religion, and the intricate human condition forged in the aftermath of World War I. The paper aims to demonstrate how these unsung females become the ultimate victims of modern malaise and strive to adapt to the corruptive influences of the modern wasteland.*

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Objectives

The research aims to conduct a thorough analysis of the female characters in *The Waste Land*, scrutinizing their vulnerability and adaptability to contemporary social challenges. Additionally, the study seeks to delve deeply into the plight of women within the text, unraveling their navigation through a diseased modern world. Furthermore, it aims to investigate the potentiality of the unsung women, focusing on their reflection and interaction with modern afflictions. Lastly, the research provides illumination by interpreting the mythological and historical references intricately woven into the narratives.

- Conduct a comprehensive in-depth analysis of female characters in *The Waste Land*, examining their vulnerability and adaptability in facing contemporary social challenges.
- Investigate the potentiality of the female characters, emphasizing their reflection and interaction with modern afflictions.
- Examine mythological and historical references intricately woven into the narratives, providing illumination and interpretation.
- Compare the myriad female characters woven into the fabric of *The Waste Land* with the challenging women of today's modern, ailing world.
- Assist in advancing scholarly research on the female characters in *The Waste Land*.

Literature Review

T. S. Eliot's Women; The Unsung Female Voices of *The Waste Land*: In the culture page of *The Guardian*, an article has been published by Jude Rogers as an observer. This article evaluates the female characters in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* from different angles. This article opines that Eliot's personal, family, and social relationships with women greatly influenced the female characters in *The Waste Land*, but, these women were not sketched fully. This paper seeks female characters drawn from diversified sources that need much attention. Eliot portrays the female voice as the struggle against the ruined communication that characterizes the modern world.

Women Figures in *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot: Prezi.com argues that Eliot portrays women grappling with boredom, a lack of ambition, and frustration in love. This analysis underscores the notion that, according to Eliot, love—traditionally considered the wellspring of life—ultimately leads to demise in a desolate world. Eliot serves as a cautionary voice to contemporary secular individuals, urging them in the pursuit of salvation amidst the prevailing lavishness.

Historicizing the Feminine; Treatment of Women in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: Akash Borchetia from Tezpur University, India wrote *The Waste Land* features a range of women characters—earthly and divine, ordinary and extraordinary, ancient and modern. It illustrates how women across classes, social positions, times, and abilities, have endured marginalization and subjugation within a patriarchal order since prehistoric times.

Image of Woman in Eliot's *The Waste Land*: Sahar Abdul-Ameer Al-Husseini, University of Al-Qadisiyah, January 2008 contends that Eliot employs female characters to illustrate the allure of death as a central theme. Eliot portrays women suffering from boredom, lack of ambition, and love-induced frustration. He underscores the idea that love, traditionally seen as life's holy resource, ultimately leads to death in this desolate world. He sheds light on the hollowness of contemporary love and the existential meaninglessness of life.

The Portrayal of Women in T. S. Eliot's Poems with Special Reference to the Themes of Oppression, Satire, and Myth: Dr. Rashmi Thakur and Abhyuday Singh Thakur in their research mention that these women in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* are a symbol of a paralysed society where enslaved entities are struggling to raise their voice. Eliot depicts the female voice as a tussle between the modern and mythological world.

The Unfortunate Inferiority of Women in The Work of T. S. Eliot: Prof. Kifaru gives a detailed analysis of the women characters who appear to him inferior to the male characters. He mentions Eliot's sincere yet blunt portrayal of the treatment of suffering women inspires his audience to feel not only repulsion but also shame in the civilized world.

Sexual Politics in *The Waste Land*: Eliot's Treatment of Women and Their Bodies in *A Game of Chess* and *The Fire Sermon*: Julie Elaine Goodspeed-Chadwick of Ball State University (USA) has undertaken research and asserts that T. S. Eliot perhaps had some knowledge of trauma and could realistically represent the rape of women in his work. What is more important than Eliot's traumatic experiences is an understanding of how rape, the epitome of sexual trauma, is figured in Eliot's work.

Methodology

The research methodology involves a detailed literary analysis of the primary source of *The Waste Land* focusing on verses concerning female characters. It incorporates secondary sources such as scholarly articles, books, web pages, blogs, and critical essays to provide diverse interpretations. The paper is structured after a comprehensive review of existing scholarly literature on T S Eliot's *The Waste Land* and applies feminist literary criticism to understand the representation of women. The research also draws parallels between challenges faced by women in the poem and contemporary issues emphasizing the relevance of select deprived unsung women in today's context.

Introduction

When a society is wasted out, full of rot and angry shouts, its women too lose their right way and are bound to go astray. *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot stands as one of the most enigmatic poems of the 20th century, known for its complex structure, rich symbolism, diverse disjointed persons, and profound exploration of the disillusionment and fragmentation in the aftermath of World War I. Amidst its intricate layers, one recurring subject is women of diversified nature. Eliot's depiction of these figures encapsulates the social upheaval and spiritual desolation of the era. The women's assembly as painted in *The Waste Land* is immense; each of whom is prone to modern maladies like their male partners. These women, often portrayed as damaged and disoriented, serve as poignant symbols of the broader cultural crisis. They are the adaptive representatives of the wasteland having no guilty conscience on their acts and deeds. In *The Waste Land*, we are inclusively introduced to a galaxy of female characters. Some women characters include a priestess, a princess, a fortune-teller, an upper-class lady, a lower-middle-class girl, a typist girl as well as the girls of river Thames. They too merge into the corruptive environment of *The Waste Land*. Through a close analysis of their

portrayal, Eliot's exploration of gender roles, identity, and personality crisis is focused on acute intensity.

Analysis and Interpretation

Feminists, like H el ene Cixous, would argue that it is not only inappropriate but also impossible for men to write about women's experiences. Woman must write herself; must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies (CIXOUS, H el ene: *The Laugh of the Medusa*, p. 1454.) *The Waste Land* preoccupies its attention on women, the discriminatory relationship in the middle of men. Eliot depends on two unmistakable classes of ladies to loan their voices to his *The Waste Land*. The primary category rises out of mythic starting points: the ladies in this classification incorporate characters from the established Greek and Roman myths, especially Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. This gathering of Classic myths highlights the uneven relationship between the middle of men and ladies and additionally, in the middle of divine beings and mortals. The second classification of ladies in Eliot's poem is the contemporary ladies of post-World War Europe. These characters possess a space of authenticity inside the poem; their stories are everyday tales and even paltry. The representations of women inside these two separate classes share the same thought of maladies with men—frustration, alienation, perversion, desolation, and many more social issues.

The Epigraph: The Replacement of the Classical Women for the Contemporary Exhausted Women

The woman appeared first in the very beginning of the poem, in the epigraph of *The Waste Land* is Sybil. The poem is preceded by a Latin and Ancient Greek epigraph from chapter 48 of *The Satyricon of Petronius*. Petronius's *Satyricon* is a Latin work of fiction both in verse and prose. This is a tumultuous combination that symbolises, at least, those who know of the text that *The Waste Land* may also be tumultuous in style and structure. The epigraph reads:

‘Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis
vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent:

Σίβυλλα τί θέλεις; respondebat illa: ἀποθανεῖν θέλω.’ (Ovid. *Metamorphosis*. Book 14: The Sibyl of Cumae)

The Latin reads roughly translated in English

“I have seen with my own eyes, Sibyl hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her “What do you want?”, she replied, “I want to die.” [Petronius, Gaius, *The Satyricon*. 2006]

The Cumaean Sibyl wished for eternal life and forgot to ask for eternal youth, and therefore, as time passed, she was unable to die, and simply withered away, caught in a jar, almost like a gilded bird. This incident of Sibyl condenses essentially a spiritual withering, in a metaphorical sense. Without youth and beauty, there appears no reason to live, and so she is caught in eternal suffering because of her great vanity. Vanity and the superfluous nature of beauty are themes that run throughout the poem, particularly in the first three parts of the poem. Eliot was repulsed by the obsession with beauty and vanity of women and so sought to move away from this, wherever possible. As Sibyl withered into old age, and she desires for death and expressed echoes of sadness throughout the poem.

Tiresias: The Mythological Transgender Experiencing both Male and Female Sexes

Tiresias, a mythological figure, embodies the complexities of gender fluidity and transgender experiences within the LGBTQIA++ spectrum, traversing both male and female sexes, offering a nuanced perspective on the diverse nature of human identity. Tiresias holds a pivotal role in *The Waste Land* serving as an objective observer, bridging classical and modern worlds. Eliot introduces Tiresias in the first person, highlighting his mythological transgender state that enables a unique understanding of both sexes. The throbbing humanity mentioned by Eliot symbolises Tiresias’ connection to the modern human condition, emphasising the mechanicalness of the alienated ‘human engine’ and reinventing it with a human touch. Eliot introduces Tiresias using the first person: “I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives...” (294). Just as his mythological transgender state allows him to relate to both sexes accurately, Women must write a woman. And man, man (Ibid. p. 1455). Eliot shows that he is also able to bridge both the classical and modern worlds. As Reeves notes, “The first [throbbing] stresses the mechanicalness of the alienated ‘human engine’ which exists in terms of its parts... while the second reinvents the human engine with ‘throbbing’ humanity” (69).

In this way, Tiresias is connected to the modern human condition. North agrees with this analysis writing that ‘Eliot suggests a link between the reduced conditions of the modern worker and the mythical hermaphrodite who includes all experience’ (99). The significance of this is that it brings the degradation of the worker to epic proportions; Eliot is showing that this reduction is of great importance in the poem. The transgendered role of Tiresias also serves to reinforce the theme of emasculation present throughout *The Waste Land*. Tiresias, being emasculated, symbolizes the emasculation experienced by the modern man in the poem. Eliot suggests a link between the reduced conditions of the modern worker and the mythical hermaphrodite, emphasizing the thematic thread of emasculation throughout *The Waste Land*.

Tiresias, presented as the union of the sexes, becomes the most crucial figure in the poem. Eliot condenses the plural of both men and women into a singular representation in Tiresias, making him the substance of the poem. By merging archetypal male and female attributes into the gender-neutral Tiresias, Eliot effectively addresses the complex notions of gender, sexuality, and desire present in *The Waste Land*.

In Eliot’s steps to reduce certain ideas from his poem, he ‘merged the archetypal male and female, the self-castrating Fisher King and the masturbating belladonna, in the figure of double-sexed Tiresias’ (Sicker 11). *The Waste Land* deals with the ‘notions of gender and sexuality and particularly the expression of desire’ (Zavrl 2) and the best way to solve is to have a person who is gender-neutral. Tiresias plays a critical role as the lens through which the reader perceives the myriad female characters in the extensive tapestry of *The Waste Land* including figures such as Marie, the Hyacinth Girl, Madame Sosostris, Belladonna, Typist Girl, Lil, Thames Daughters, and many more.

The initial segment, ‘The Burial of the Dead’ fictionalises the decay of modern individuals within their desolate civilization where faith in moral and spiritual values has waned. Engulfed by pursuits like sex, gambling, and violence, these activities have drained their vitality. The poem suggests that revival is only attainable through a renewed embrace of spiritual values.

Within this section, we encounter Marie, a rootless woman often speculated to be Countess Marie Larisch von Moennich, whom Eliot purportedly encountered in

America. This autobiographical snippet explores the childhood of an aristocratic woman, revealing her memories of sledding. Claiming German, not Russian, heritage, Marie, a niece and confidante of the Austrian Empress Elizabeth, reflects on her barren present existence. The narrative intertwines reflections on seasons with Marie's observations on her current state, emphasizing her rootless nature devoid of familial ties and moral consciousness, allowing her to wander without constraints. All are tired of the excessive urbanization; and feel no comfort, as goes the narrative:

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, (Lines 22-25)

In the next stanza, we are taken to another completely different setting, where it seems to be quite barren, dried, and deserted. There is, no water, however, the speaker adds,

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. (Lines 28-30)

Then, the episode of *The Hyacinth Girl* is introduced with intensive detail. The perspective changes once again with dialogue in which someone describes being given hyacinths

You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
They called me the hyacinth girl.
Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
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, (Lines 36-40)

The encounter with the hyacinth girl unveils a man trapped in emotional paralysis. Despite harbouring romantic feelings for her, he hesitates to confess. The line 'Your arms full, and your hair wet' [Line 39] alludes to sexuality and renewal, yet the speaker appears unprepared for the responsibilities of a good husband and father. The anticipated

consummation in the Hyacinth Garden falls short revealing the male's impotence and leading to a crisis and subversion of desire.

Gabrielle McIntire, a critic, notes that desire acknowledges its own failure even in the moment of its expression; the moment of desire becomes strange and estranged from the subject. The lover's response turns inward, away from the 'hyacinth girl,' towards desolation reminiscent of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. This episode paints a picture of love in decline intensified by the reference to Wagner's opera, a tale of unattainable love. Tristan waits by the desolate sea for Isolde's healing in the episode of *Tristan and Isolde*. Arriving too late, he succumbs to desperation, highlighting the message: the wasteland thrives only when the sexes are in harmony. Unity is crucial for ensuring the health and fertility of both men and women. The fertility of the wasteland is attainable only through the harmonious collaboration of the sexes.

Another significant woman roaming around the diverse tapestry of 'The Burial of the Dead' in *The Waste Land* is Madame Sosostris, a famous clairvoyant. According to North (2001), Eliot's Madam Sosostris is named after a character from Aldous Huxley's novel *Crome Yellow*. Madame Sosostris's figure is a reference to Miss Jessie Weston's book. A Tarot deck of cards has four suits; cup, lance, sword, and dish – the life symbol found in the Holy Grail story. The Tarot cards were originally used to determine the events of the highest importance to a person.

The clairvoyant, as portrayed by T. S. Eliot is considered 'the wisest woman in Europe' because the world is a tattered wasteland where everyone is in search of answers—a fortuneteller provides false security with her seemingly absolute understanding of destiny, and everyone is desperate enough to believe her. She actually doesn't know much about fortune telling even though she is reading the fortune of the protagonist. She doesn't know the protagonist's real fortune. She finds that his card is the Phoenician Sailor, and she warns him against death by water, not realizing that the other inhabitants of the modern wasteland is that the way into life may be by death itself. The drowned Phoenician sailor is a type of fertility god whose image was thrown into the sea annually as a symbol of the death of summer.

We get the reference of another character, Belladonna who too got astray in the corrupting influence of the wasteland.

Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
The lady of situations. (Lines: 49-50)

Belladonna, translating to ‘beautiful lady’ in Italian, is a reference to the Virgin Mary in this context. Interestingly, one of the tarot cards features ‘Belladonna’ (line 49), a term carrying contradictory meanings as beauty and virginity, and cosmetics and poison. Taking a closer look at the figure of Belladonna, readers can recognize her as another example of Eliot’s portrayal of beautiful yet dangerous women—simultaneously victims and victimizers, both the abused and abusers, susceptible to seduction and the source of it. There are more characters like her in the narrative. It’s important to note that Belladonna is also an ancient poisonous plant, fitting seamlessly into the thematic landscape.

In simpler terms, Eliot connects the image of a beautiful woman with the spiritual beauty of Christ’s Mother. This isn’t a fleeting beauty but one with a celebrated history, as Eliot indicates by referencing Leonardo da Vinci’s painting, *The Madonna of the Rocks*. Consistent with his style, Eliot in this early portrayal establishes a direct link between the Virgin Mary’s classical beauty and her moral beauty.

The Women in Part Two; *The Game of Chess*: Lady of Situations, Lil Wife, The Lady of the Rocks, and Other Barmaids

Lady of Situations, Upper-class Fashionable Lady: *A Game of Chess* opens with a detailed depiction of a lavishly adorned room where a woman is seated on a ‘Chair’ resembling a throne. The initial line of *A Game of Chess* alludes to a line from Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*: ‘The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne ...’ (Lines 77–78)

The first scene unfolds in the drawing room of a fashionable lady known as the Lady of Situations, an expert in sexual intrigues. Her drawing room is opulent and exudes an air of sensuality. The artworks including paintings recount tales of ancient love and rape. The narrative of Philomel, the violated girl transformed into a nightingale, serves as a symbol of purification through suffering. However, in contemporary times, love has

devolved into lust leaving little room for hope of regeneration.

“The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
‘Jug Jug’ to dirty ears.” (Lines 98-102)

Yet, this woman is desperately waiting for somebody, most probably a man whose ‘footsteps shuffled on the stairs’ (107). The Lady of Situation is waiting for her lover who arrives after some time. She complains of headaches which is representative of the nervous breakdown of a modern woman. After some petty conversation, the lady wishes to run out into the streets. Her empty, aimless routine represents the barren life of a modern woman. She has to follow the dull routine, a hot water bath in the morning, a game of chess in the club in the afternoon, and then rest. One is reminded of the aimless running of rats among the dead bones. Yet, her loneliness is a reference to modern isolation and disillusionment, and her following the dull routine repeatedly refers to the robotic life of modern women. The lady of the situation is interpreted in a different light. ‘That such masculine identification with women, such imaginary femininity in the male writer, is itself historically determined is clear enough.’ (Huysen 45)

The Low Living of Lil Wife: The second scene shifts to a tavern where two ladies talk about sex matters. In the second setting of the poem, we see at least two people conversing and we know for sure that one of them is a woman. It is a sexist approach that the poetic persona is a female because they are gossiping about another woman. Lil’s husband, Albert has come back from the army after four years. He wants an active sex life. *The Lady of the Rocks* advises Lil to look young and pretty to retain the love of her husband, otherwise, there are many other girls who will give company to her husband. She is so traditional and so irrational that she asks Lil ‘What you get married for if you don’t want children?’ (164). She is such a shallow character. She matches all the gender roles imposed on women and expects everyone else to accept them as she does. She thinks that even if Albert cheated on his wife, he has a right to do it. She puts all the blame on Lil even for her abortion which was about to result in Lil’s death. Most probably those women in the bar are the working women who have had the chance of

working because all able men are in the army during the First World War. This situation suggests the suppression of women in men's presence.

The relationship between Lil and her husband is characterized by sexuality without fertility—a relationship that 'has been bankrupted by the demands placed upon the wife to serve as décor, as procreation machine, and as domestic servant' (Gunnink 3). In this subjugated position, Lil loses the freedom to govern the sexual use of her body and becomes a vivid embodiment of the results of male oppression in the modern world.

Women in *The Fire sermon*: The Typist Girl, Thames Daughter

The Typist girl and her routine robotic sex: In the poem, *The Fire Sermon*, there is another couple who has a sexual encounter but has no communication with each other. Both are described by their occupations and not their names. The young man carbuncular is 'a small agent's clerk' who can be argued as ironic because of the way he is dedicated to his job but seems to only live at the typist's house on certain occasions. In the evening, when the typist girl comes home from the office, she waits for her lover. He comes after dinner and enjoys with the girl. The girl is indifferent but feels relieved after the sex act. It is the kind of animal-like sex that modern young men and women have. The typist's fornication of a young man as carbuncular is nothing but 'a series of mechanical gestures and dull responses; she does not even appear to possess a real sexual appetite' (Sicker 10). The mechanical sex behavior between both sexes typifies a loveless world.

Sex on River, a Fusion of the Past and Present: Along with oil and tar there is sex on river Thames. In earlier days, Elizabeth and her lover had pleasure excursions on the river. Now the daughters of Thames give stories of their seduction. The three girls, the first from Richmond, the second from Moorgate, and the third from Margate Sands tell their stories of rape. Such people have nothing to complain as this is a common occurrence on the river and its banks. The girls who live on the banks of River Thames relate their sex experiences. The first daughter of the river Thames was born at Highbury which is full of trams and dusty trees. She visited Richmond and Kent which are picnic spots on the bank of the river. At Richmond, she was criminally assaulted by a man while she was lying on her back on the floor of a small boat. The second daughter of the

Thames was ravished at Moor-gate. After the act, the man felt repentant and wept. He promised to reform himself. The girl has no regrets. This is a part of her life. The third daughter of the Thames was ravished on the Margate sands. She does not remember anything. She compares herself to the broken fingernails of the dirty hands which are useless. Her parents are poor and expect nothing. A tune from Wagner's Opera can be heard on the riverbank.

Female Portrayals in *The Waste Land*: A Contemporary Reflection

The depiction of women in *The Waste Land* serves as a reflective surface capturing the challenges, complexities, discrimination, and societal expectations faced by women during Eliot's era. Upon entering the 21st century, a striking continuity emerges in the portrayal of women, echoing Eliot's observations. A meticulous examination of these representations offers a lens through which the enduring status and roles of women are vividly reflected.

The relevance of the female characters in *The Waste Land* is still evident in every moment and every places. Whether it's the haunting presence of Marie, the enigma of the Hyacinth Girl, the pulsating typist, the disheartening Lil, the corruptive Thames daughter, or the Lady of Situations, these figures find commonality in contemporary society. Eliot skillfully crafts a tapestry of female experiences marked by disillusionment, unmet desires, and a pervasive sense of desolation that still echoes in the voices of women in our postmodern wasteland.

The reverberations of Eliot's female characters persist in our present-day situations. They provide an avenue to delve deep into problems and seek solutions for gender identity concerns. A postmodern contemplation of these depictions of women encourages us to assess the attitude and progress made for them. Despite many advancements in women's rights and evolving gender norms in the 21st century, enduring challenges persist for women. A hundred years may have elapsed, but the oppression of women and the stifling of their voices continue to persist in a male-dominated world. Reflecting on and exploring the female portrayals in *The Waste Land*, enables a meaningful discourse on gender, and social expectations to form a new mindset needed for reconstructing gender roles in the ongoing quest for equality.

Conclusion

The Waste Land prominently features women, both contemporary and mythical, who typify the torturous state, the unheard agony of the diseased world. Against the backdrop of *The Waste Land*, a fractured social world unfolds, populated by subjugated women yearning to make their voices heard. T. S. Eliot skillfully captures the stifled echoes of these female voices, portraying them as a battleground against the breakdown of communication in the modern era. These unsung women contribute to the varied themes in the poem, enriching the tapestry of gender roles, sexuality, mythology, history, and the human condition of post-World War I. Through their stories, Eliot delves into the multifaceted challenges faced by women in a post-war society creating a vivid portrayal of their resilience shaping their existence within the desolate landscape of *The Waste Land*.

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