

## MODERNISM IN RETROACTIVITY; ITERABILITY IN *THE WASTE LAND*

### ASIF GULZAR BHAT

Research Scholar, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh 202002.

Email: aasifglzr@gmail.com

### SYED MUNTAZA HUSSAIN

Research Scholar, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh 202002.

Email: smuntaza@gmail.com

### JUNAID RASHID LONE

Research Scholar, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh 202002.

Email: junaidrashidlone6287@gmail.com

### Abstract

The introduction of hermeneutics and deconstruction as models of linguistic analysis has led to an increase in the re-examination and reinterpretation of classical texts. Iterability, as an analytical tool, has been frequently employed by postmodern scholars. According to Derrida, Iterability is the ability of a text to communicate even when the addressee or the source of the message is absent. The intrinsic ability of the text allows it to transcend its original context and extend its influence beyond its intended audience. Derrida argues that this trait is only feasible when we take into account all the citations of linguistic elements of the text, which forge new meanings when placed in a new context. This paper focuses on T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), which exhibits to have a different stylistic approach. While reading, one finds difficulty in getting meaning out of it. It seems that the 'Pseudo-statements' have been derived from the tradition of literature throughout the world. Rereading the poem with Iterability as an analytical tool could aid in deciphering different meanings. The Iterability of the text, therefore, enables it to 'be' and make communication possible. The text uses different aspects to communicate even when a proper addressee is absent. This paper aims to analyse how the language, the scenes, the characters, and the allusions to different religions and philosophies are taken out of their proper context and used in a new style. They create retroactive meanings, make communication possible, and embody the perfect conditions of the time in which the poem was written.

**Keywords:** Iterability, Pseudo-Statements, Tradition, Context.

### INTRODUCTION

Derrida gave his concept of Iterability while offering a reading to J. L. Austin in his essay "*Signature Event Context* (1982). He deconstructs the "Speech Act Theory" by Austin, which emphasises that intentionality and literal meaning secure the meanings of any given word.

Derrida has argued that neither of them is sufficient to generate meaning. What is also essential is "Iterability", which he defined as the possibility of repetition. He has argued that a word can be repeated and must be open to being repeated to be appropriately meaningful. However, Derrida says that repetition can never be the same because the necessity of utterance changes, and the contexts for using the words to be meaningful also change. The iterable aspect of the word or text enables them to maintain communication even when the addressee or the addresser is absent. According to Derrida, Iterability "structures the mark of writing itself no matter what particular type of

writing is involved...A writing that is not structurally readable-iterable-beyond the death of the addressee would not be writing" (Signature Event and Context). He further states, "For writing to be a writing it must continue to "act" and to be readable even when what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, be it because of a temporary absence, because he is dead or, more generally, because he has not employed his absolutely actual and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his desire to say what he means, in order to sustain what seems to be written in his name".

T. S. Eliot's "*The Waste Land*" (1922) is considered one of the most important poems of the modern period. He incorporates allusions from different literary, musical, historical, and popular cultures in a disorienting manner to evoke different effects— alienation, fear, terror, futility, sexual disruption, memory and desire, etc.—in the reader. "Eliot sought to transcend time and space by bringing to *The Waste Land* scores of literary, cultural, and artistic allusions from a variety of sources, including the Upanishads, Greek mythology, the Bible, Chaucer, Dante, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Leonardo Da Vinci. Ironically, within this menagerie of literary homages, Eliot has created a vast emptiness, a world of pain, suffering, desolation and despair, as if to suggest that even in the presence of all the greatest artistic and cultural achievements of mankind, we must understand that life is transitory and material things ephemeral" (LeCarner). "His celebrated poem, *The Waste Land* (1922), presents a dark and gloomy picture of human sufferings in the twentieth century. The poem is a study of a civilization doomed by its own sterility (Coote 26). It refers to the spiritual and intellectual decadence of the contemporary world. The poem is an important landmark in the history of English literature and exposes the disillusionment caused by the First World War. To cite Harold Bloom, *The Waste Land* can be read as "a testament to the disillusionment of a generation, an exposition of the manifest despair and spiritual bankruptcy of the years after World War I" (40) (Mahmud). Moreover, the poem is a dramatic monologue that often changes its time, places and speakers to make it look disarrayed.

By incorporating pseudo-statements from the 'tradition' of the world, especially Europe and India, those pseudo-statements can communicate to us and make us understand the contexts, intentions, and meanings. The iterability of the words help the poem become an "organic whole," and these pseudo-statements sometimes have different meanings and intentions when used in a new context. Starting from the dedication of the poem, Eliot uses the words "FOR EZRA POUND/IL MIGLIOR FABBRO". Here, Eliot calls Ezra Pound the 'batter craftsman', an allusion to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Dante meets a poet in hell, and he calls him a better craftsman. The words can offer the same context here in the poem so that the reader can anticipate the tone and setting of the poem. Hellish in nature, Eliot's Wasteland is a journey of Tiresias playing the roles of different Characters of different ages and places in the present world. He sometimes becomes the 'implied speaker' as well as the 'implied reader' of the poem. Eliot states about Tiresias in the poem, "And I Tiresias have foresuffered all". For Eliot, as well as for the poem, Tiresias is an important element that holds the poem in an organic whole. The iterable aspect of the myth of Tiresias, who was cursed to be male and female, provides Eliot with a new

context and meaning. He becomes a mouthpiece for Eliot to narrate from both male and female perspectives. “Eliot comments, Tiresias, although a mere spectator and indeed a character is the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Tiresias has the experience of life both as a man and as a woman. Tiresias belongs to the past and to the present. He is link between the wasteland of king Oedipus caused by his incest and the waste land of modern of modern civilization. He can comment on the modern wasteland through his prophetic vision” (Farzana).

The poem starts with an acquisition of the signified of the spring season —especially April, which signifies a month of showers for Chaucer. This season is also considered a symbol of romance, rebirth, and regeneration. “It presents Eliot’s view of modern sterility on the widest scale. The idea of sterility is expressed through the painful imagery of spring. Even though April is usually regarded as a symbol of spring and regeneration, and winter as a symbol of decay and death, in the modern waste land, April is not kindest but “the cruellest month” (Mahmud). For Eliot, it has become the cruellest month, saying, “April is the cruellest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/ Memory and desire, stirring/ Dull roots with spring rain”, taking it as the symbol of rebirth and comparing it with the beginning of 20th century which had already shown its intents. It becomes clear and meaningful in its new context. In the context of April during the early 1900s up until 1922, significant and tragic events unfolded; in April 1906, an earthquake occurred in San Francisco which killed 3000 people; in April 1912, Titanic drowned in which 1517 people lost their lives, and most importantly in April 1916, the Battle of the Somme, a major conflict of World War I commenced in which one million people died. Drawing his reference from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, which is considered to be the first book written in the English language and in which April is eulogised for its symbolic significance at the start of the poem, Eliot carries this literary tradition forward, blending it with the contemporary sensibilities of his own era. He uses the words “breeding, lilacs, desire, spring rain” to attribute to spring the enduring characteristics it has possessed throughout history but juxtaposes them with “dead land, memory, dull roots”. The pseudo-statement appears effective, as it can be repeated and understood in this new context due to its iterable nature. Its original speaker, Chaucer, is absent, but it communicates in itself through a new context, signifying the war-torn conditions of the modern world.

T.S. Eliot addresses the problem of identity crises, as he himself was a proponent of the “tradition”, where a person's identity is insignificant, but that of tradition holds significance. (*Tradition and Individual Talent* 1919). *The Waste Land* shows that European tradition is neglected as a collective shared tradition, and people prefer being from a specific region rather than embracing a broader European identity. “Eliot is one of those twentieth-century writers who witnessed the socio-political turmoil and transformation of post-war England” (Mahmud). “To many of T. S. Eliot’s contemporaries, the whole poem was written in the accent of its times – an unmistakably twentieth-century, indeed post-war poem which records the collapse in the values of Western civilization” (David Moody). This concept can be analysed from the portrayal of Marie, who acquaints herself to an unknown listener (who resembles the speaker) by saying, “Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt Deutsch” which means that I am not a Russian, I am from Lithuania a

true German. Marie may refer to Marie Louise Elizabeth Mende, the countess of Larisch whom Eliot met in his life, and her cousin could potentially be Archduke Rudolph, the Crown Prince of Austria. Making her an imaginary character from a real one and then the speaker of these lines; the iterability of the part has its meaning and context. It communicates that what matters is her Germanic heritage, and her deep affection for it is of utmost importance.” The German princess (I am not a Russian at all.... a pure German from Lithuania) is an embodiment of the root –less ness of European citizens” (Farzana). Farzana further writes, “The princess Marie asserts that she is not a Russian but a German. Her loss of nationality, points to the refugee problem after the First World War.” It can be the result of World War First, in which European countries fought each other (especially Russia and Germany fought each other) despite having the same ancestral roots and mainly the same religion, which is Christianity. The world war shattered ‘Europeanness’, leading people to prioritise their regional affiliations. This shift in allegiance resulted in the rise of ideologies such as Fascism and Nazism.

“The war had destroyed all that were traditionally good. The most dangerous effect was the loss of spirituality. People became disillusioned by the futility and impotence of the catastrophic war. The war had left many people in a state of destruction and disappointment. Millions of women lost their husbands, children lost their parents, and a sense of abandonment and loss encompassed the nation” (Mahmud). Eliot portrays a scene of a Hyacinth girl who craves love but is unable to communicate with her companion. She no longer feels the pleasure she once used to experience when he used to be with her. The scene could be interpreted as the depiction of Adam and Eve living in modern society. Talking about the archetype of Adam and Eve, Mitchell writes, “The works of poet T.S. Eliot translate the mythological legacy of this primal archetype into the language and setting of the 20th century as the symbolism of his poetry traces the archetypal journey of the fall from perfect unity to duality, the sterility of exile in decaying mortality, refinement through purgation” (01). Europe is presented in the scene as a lush garden adorned with vibrant hyacinth flowers and abundant rainfall before the fall of war. Besides, time plays a vital role in Eliot’s *Wasteland*: the memories of the past consistently bother the speaker and listener, and retrospection is frequently used in the poem—like in the first part, spring is depicted as mixing “memory” and “desire”, winter is thought as warm and cover “earth in forgetful snow”, Marie recalls her incident of childhood with her cousin, the listener is addressed in Biblical manner as “Son of Man” who do not “know” anything other than “broken images”. Time is also used in the hyacinth scene where the girls recall their meeting a year ago; she had been called hyacinth girl. Now, at present, she is not happy and is unable to feel anything or remember anything, and she is in an oblivious mood, as if she has been given an anaesthetic drug. This scene seems to communicate in a new context by taking Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and placing them in the context of the modern period before and after World War I. Eliot often employs Biblical imagery in the poem. Prior to the war, Adam and Eve’s lives appeared to be happy, reminiscent of their time before being expelled from the garden for consuming the prohibited fruit. The temporal interval of war has devastated their existence, serving as a metaphorical representation of consuming the fruit, subsequently leading to a dissolute, vacant, and austere life. The European hyacinth garden is then

referred to as "Op0ed' und leer das Meer", which translates to "desolate and empty is the sea".

Eliot repeats various words in the second chapter of the poem "The Game of Chess." While analysing these words and pseudo-statements from Derrida's concept of Iterability, this section has different meanings. The words that are repeated in the section are "nothing", "speak", "think", and "remember." The line that is repeated in the second section is, "Those are pearls that were his eyes." Moreover, Eliot continuously voices female speakers like Sybil, Marie, Madame Sosostri, Hyacinth girl, an unknown queen, and an unknown bar woman. Examining the word "nothing", the hyacinth girl says, "I knew nothing", while the queen, who resembles a prostitute, waiting for some unknown person with whom she can spend time, says, "Nothing again nothing/ "Do "You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember "Nothing?" While analysing these repetitions, the meaning changes. The hyacinth girl has a psychological problem; she has endured a hard time, and coming back from that, she is unable to know anything. Here, the word 'nothing' is related to memory, the good time. However, the queen changes the perspective of the word; its meaning gets altered, and the speaker questions the notion of "nothing" from a psychological or historical point of view and a visual perspective. The very "being" of "nothing" is questioned. Talking about the verse "Those are pearls that were his eyes", Madam Sosostri says it while looking at the card of the drowned Phoenician Sailor. She uses the word "look" after that, which supports or signifies the presence or about the present conditions of Europe. "Her character presents the vulgarity of contemporary Europe. She is a fake fortune teller, and the pictures she shows through the cards metaphorically imply the cultural disintegration and decay of values" (Garg 19). In the second chapter, the unknown queen uses the word "remember" to signify nostalgia or absence. Furthermore, the female narrators are consistent throughout the poem. Talking about the mythical women Sybil and Philomel, both are immortal in bird shapes, but both sing different stories, Sybil about her death and Philomel about her oppression. "T. S. Eliot has tried to show that women's life have been a life of agony, torture and pain which can be appeased by the exercise of the lessons of Upanishad- to give, to sympathize, and to control" (Farzana). However, there is a similar context running underneath in both stories; the tale of Philomel and "The Prophecy of Sibyl sets the tone for *The Waste Land* as a poem that harshly focuses on the numbness and absolute barrenness of the post-war European civilization. The Sibyl's affliction reflects what Eliot perceives as his own—Eliot lives in a society that has degraded and dried up but will not perish, and he is bound to live with memories of its previous glory. Like the Sibyl, the modern people have life but not the youthful Vigor and productivity" (Mahmud).

In the fourth part of the poem, Eliot again allusions to Ovid, who wrote around the time of Christ (43 B.C.E. to 17-18 C.E.) and is most famous for his collection of mythology in poetic verse, *The Metamorphoses*. Eliot points us to the story of Philomela as it is recounted in *Metamorphoses*, referring specifically to the myth of the "Rape of Philomela". Comparing this myth with the scene involving Sweeney and Mrs. Potters, Eliot could be alluding to Pornography or Prostitution. Eliot used the words of Philomela "So rudely forc'd Tereu", and visualised the life of Sweeney and her daughter by showing them

bathing their feet in soda water to make themselves clean; all these elements reinforce the idea of sex as something horrible and violent. The repetition of the words *twit, twit, twit, jug, jug* and relating them with forced intercourse, Eliot Pornographised or visualised the pain of women and the pleasure of men in these lines. "In this part of the poem, the author reveals the association of women to sex slavery. The author appears to empathize with women who were seen as mere sex objects during the repressive generation of the Victorian Era. There were also explicit representations of loveless sexual intercourses that somehow present the painful reality that during those times, some women were just regarded as sex objects of men" (Farzana). The women who could have been enjoying the pleasant water of the Thames, instead, are bathing in the soda water to make themselves clean and look attractive. Eliot not only delineates the present condition of modern women through pub scene, or typist woman, or sweeny but by referring to the name of her daughter and the careless children playing under the dome, Eliot may be forecasting the future of these women and children, but it looks normal for both the sexes throughout the poem. "Sex has turned into a matter of interest and has become a trifling source of enjoyment and lost its spiritual significance. Among the wealthy and cultured, it has become debased and neurotic; among the lower classes, it is a matter of abortions and promiscuity" (Mahmud). They do not feel for each other, and they depart after finishing the intercourse. "The indeterminacy of sexual positioning in *The Waste Land* may indicate, among other things, "the love that dare not speak its name": constantly deferring any coming out, the poem, in Creech's terms, "performs the rhetorical operation of not daring" (Merrill Cole). Eliot's work not only depicts the portrayal of prostitution and pornography involving both genders, using a combination of myth and reality but also emphasises the significance of lesbian sexual encounters as a crucial element in the wasteland. "In *The Waste Land*, Eliot's consideration to homosexual issues was clearly depicted in the explicit desire of the character, Mr. Eugenides to have a homosexual affair with the poet" (Farzana). This aspect is emphasised in the dialogue between the unshaven man and the unidentified speaker, possibly Tiresias, where the former requests a rendezvous at locations renowned for facilitating homosexual encounters during that era. "Tiresias, who experiences sex with men as a woman and sex with women as a man, occludes homosexuality by transgendered heterosexuality" (Cole). The only difference that Eliot shows between the two different pornographic scenes is that the lesbian scene is implicitly shown, whereas the prostitution is shown explicitly Eliot's portrayal of the two pornographic scenes differs in terms of their level of explicitness. While the lesbian scene is implicitly depicted, the prostitution scene is shown explicitly. This discrepancy may be attributed to the lack of acceptance towards homosexuality during that time period. "Eliot, unlike several poets from his generation, was never afraid to present such sensitive and crucial issues on gender. During the decade when this work was published, the society was not yet that tolerant on homosexual issues" (Farzana).

In the fifth part of the poem, Eliot alludes to the Indian mythology of Buddhism, and the section also represents a weakened Europe, "a world that has declined or disregarded the spiritual life. In the [section], Eliot depicts the excruciating burden of modern city life, its lack of objective and direction, its lack of beliefs and values, reflecting the breakdown of values, total disarray and near collapse of the European civilization" (Mahmud). Here,

Eliot proposes a solution to the challenges of the modern world by renunciation the material self, sympathising with the world, and by exercising self-control. The iterability of this allusion could be that Eliot completely alludes to his own concept of tradition and impersonality with that of Buddhism. "The idea that life is fleeting and filled with suffering is at the core of Buddhist thought..." (LeCarner). Self-sacrifice and self-control are essential in Buddhism, and can only be achieved by liberating ourselves from the constraints we have imposed upon ourselves.

These constraints include regionalism, the commodification of sex as a means of personal gratification rather than embracing it as a symbol of recreation (as expressed in the poem "By this, and this only, we have existed"), the oppression of women, the erosion of faith, and the presence of wars. "The poem functions as a didactic, artistic representation of the Buddhist doctrine of *samsāra*, an idea that views the world as transitory, overcome with lustful desires, and forever bound to a cycle of life, death, and rebirth. From this perspective, we can see Eliot's understanding of the original Buddhist text" (LeCarner). "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down", and "Hieronymo's mad againe" are the visual stimuli Eliot has employed to arouse the consequences of abandoning tradition and embracing individualism and regionalism. Eliot repeats the words, Datta.

Dayadhvam. Damyata. And Shantih Shanith Shantih in at the end of the poem. Shanith is a concept in Buddhism that involves embracing the entirety of the world with tranquillity and comprehension, acknowledging its various diversities, and residing in harmony with this truth and serenity. "It shows that the transcendence of life and death does not mean immortality or the union with God in mystical experience. Immortality does not cease the endless suffering that goes along with life, which is exactly what Eliot warns us by introducing the fate of Sybil in the epigraph, who is forever ageing but can never die. Real transcendence, for Eliot, means to face the diverse fragments of human experience with one universal perspective, which is beyond any form of subjective judgment" (Chutian Xiao).

Xiao also writes, "...The spiritual experience in the poem cannot be wholly claimed by any single religion; however, the persistent scepticism makes the poem congenial with Buddhism." "appears to be Eliot's final assertion that through peace and harmony, eventually, humankind will be able to restore their vitality" (Mahmad). Eliot has proposed that a remedy for the desolate state of the modern world is not solely rooted in science and technology but rather in a belief system that encompasses not only Christianity or any specific religion but also a universal faith in humanity and a blend of traditional values.

## CONCLUSION

T.S. Eliot skillfully employs pseudo-statements from various writers, traditions, arts, and religions to effectively depict the desolate state of the contemporary world. By applying Derrida's concept of iterability, we can analyse the various contexts in which these allusions are used. Over time, these allusions have acquired additional meanings in addition to their original ones.

## **Conflict of Interest Disclosure**

In accordance with the principles of transparency and academic integrity, we hereby disclose any possible conflict of interest concerning my involvement in the research and writing of this paper. Firstly, we would like to clarify that we have no financial or personal stake in any organisations, companies, or individuals that could influence the findings or conclusions presented in this research paper. However, it is essential to mention that we have previously conducted research in the literary field on other topics of investigation. While this prior experience may provide us with valuable insight and expertise in the subject matter, it is essential to acknowledge the potential for bias or a preference towards certain methodologies, theories, or perspectives.

Additionally, we undertake numerous academic responsibilities, such as teaching, studying, mentoring and consulting in literary areas. Although these activities enhance our understanding and knowledge, they may also contribute to an unintentional bias in favour of certain interpretations or outcomes.

We assure you that we will strive to conduct this research with the utmost diligence, impartiality, and commitment to scientific principles. We will make every effort to evaluate the available evidence critically, consider opposing viewpoints, and provide an unbiased analysis within the scope of this paper. It is the responsibility of the readers and reviewers to independently evaluate the research, methodology, and findings presented herein. Should any concerns arise regarding my potential conflict of interest or the integrity of the research, we encourage open dialogue and feedback for further discussion and clarification. Thank you for your attention to this matter and for acknowledging the importance of transparency in scientific inquiry.

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