

RE-VISITING MODERNISM: *THE WASTE LAND* AND DISABILITY

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As one of the most influential poems of the twentieth century, T. S Eliot's *The Waste Land* has been subjected to various critical examinations from innumerable theoretical perspectives. However, the pervasive role of disability in this text is yet to be fully recognized. While the phenomenon of medicalization of body and mind is apparent in this poem; and the introduction of Tiresias as a blind non binary prophet obligates one encounter with a form of physical disability or deviation as well, other experiences of embodiment of disability or impairment are often overshadowed by the symbolic interpretations of them as literary devices. An alternative approach to this poem presents us with a range of disabled or impaired subjects within its premise. The young man 'carbuncular', who 'grope his way' in and out of the typist's room; the typist, whose brain allows only one 'half formed thought' to pass; the woman with 'the bad nerves'; her companion who 'never speaks; Lilly who 'looks so antique' at only 31 year old are some such presentations. This paper attempts to offer a more nuanced reading of the presence of disability in this text and explore the complex identity position they occupy in it.

As many disability studies scholars have pointed out, there are two dominant perspectives of disability: the medical model and the social model. The medical model, as explained by Gail Ellis, presents disability pathologically, it focuses on a person's impairment and understands disability as a deficiency or a deviation from 'normal' and thereby connotes it negatively and positions the source of that negativity within the person concerned. The social model, on the other hand, understands disability in terms of mere difference just like the difference in gender race or sexual orientation. If these differences prove to be incapacitating for an individual, that is primarily a result of the environment in which the person resides. When the environment is not inclusive in nature and does not accommodate differences in its structure, differences become disability. For example, even something as simple as a different hand orientation can become a 'disability' as left handed people might face inconveniences, even if minor ones, in a right handed world. On the other hand a visual challenge may not be a disability for someone in a class room set up if the room is equipped with audio book system. While the medical model is often criticized for being ableist and restrictive, an entirely social approach is also criticized for minimizing the real challenges and experiences of people with disabilities, and for minimizing the potential for individuals to consider disability an aspect of their identity. Other than these two

models another perspective of disability is important for our discussion and that is the moral model of disability. This approach connects disability to morality. It can either deify disability or demonize it by connecting it to different forms of supernatural interventions or at least extraordinary human feat and moral depravity respectively. Literature is not outside the domain of these models. And has almost always reinforced the concept of normal and deviation in its own way. So these approaches are important in an evaluation of literary representations of disability because they influence the creation and reception of that literature. For example disability as a symbol for something greater or as a reflection of transgression of some kind or even as a form of punishment for some misconduct are some of the most commonly seen tropes of disability in literature.

Theorists Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell write that disabled characters act as a “crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight” (49). According to Snyder and Mitchell in *Narrative Prosthesis*, people with disabilities have frequently been at the foreground of representation in a literary text. It mainly serves two purposes in literary narratives as a ‘stock feature of characterization’ or as a ‘metaphorical device’ or both. For example, in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, the protagonist’s disfigured foot and eventual blindness metaphorize disability as destiny. Lady Macbeth’s parasomnia provides the crucial structure within which Macbeth’s over all catastrophic chain of incidents operates. Sometimes disability is used to mark characters as “unique,” however, very few of these works actually attempt to develop complex perspectives about disability itself. On the contrary, it is, more often than not, an ableist attempt to produce disability as a counter-image to ‘able-bodiedness’ and generate otherness. Lennard Davis writes about literature that, “the very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her” (11). Therefore, investigating normalcy in literary texts allows one to use a disability studies approach when reading almost any work. *The Waste Land* is no exception. The fact that it is difficult for an ordinary reader to identify with the characters in the poem whose minds are nothing but a collection of incoherent images, establishes the mood of immense deviation from ‘normal’ right from the beginning of the text. The text focuses on ‘un’ real cities and alienated individuals. The fragmentary structure of *The Waste land* along with its fractured images and incoherent characters consistently denies the reader the comfort of a ‘normal’ mode of narration and story line. But that does not lead to a departure from the tradition of a normative structure in a text. In fact, the deviations of the characters render immense representational power to generate ‘otherness’ in the text. The pervasive disability of different kinds in almost all the characters in the text is indicative of the shallow and spiritually bankrupt modern society. The most prominent of these disabilities is associated to cognitive or issues like intellectual impairment or speech and social communication impairment. Until the last section of the poem where Eliot shifts his focus to imagery and metaphor for the purpose of conveying the theme of alienation, it is the unsuspecting random figures with their utter inability to connect or communicate, that have consistently brought out the theme of brokenness and isolation of modern life. People going around their daily business are fragmented and reduced to mere ‘eyes and backs’ or hands and hairs and are robbed of their humanity as they lack the fundamental human ability to think and perceive. Even when their hairs ‘glowed into words’ they themselves would still be ‘savagely

still'. Multiple allusion to the Greek myth of Philomela with her consistent attempt to connect to the world with her 'withered stump' is another case in point. Though she is trying to fill the desert with her 'inviolable voice', it is all 'jug jug to dirty ears'. Eliot's text, from the very beginning, marks and establishes itself as a treatise on the deviation from 'normal'. April, being the cruelest month, disrupts the normal seasonal cycle in the opening line itself. Deviation from the culturally acceptable norm of the binary gender identities in Tiresias is only one of many instances of deviations scattered throughout the poem. The Smyrna merchant inviting the narrator for luncheon, or the lady who looks 'so ancient' in her 30s are representatives of the decaying society. This deviation and decay is often understood in terms of mental and cognitive impairment and disability.

Mental disability is foundational to the creation of *The Waste Land*. So much so that scholars often treat the poem as a piece of hysterical discourse. In fact the discourse of high male modernism in the poem at times looks contradictory to the hysterical discourse because the early studies on hysteria considered it a feminine affliction. The disorienting effect of the lines "I can connect nothing with nothing" on Margate Sands, arguably comes straight from the poet's own fragmented psychological state. When Eliot was diagnosed with some form of nervous breakdown, or what would be most likely called depression today, he was recommended to rest and have a change. Taking a three-month leave he and his wife, Vivienne Haigh-Wood Eliot, visited a beach resort in Margate and stayed there for some time. While there, Eliot worked on the poem. At this point he referred to himself as a "neurasthenic". Neurosis and war trauma, among many others, form a major theme of the poem. Along with the fragmented consciousness and utter inability to communicate on part of the characters in the poem, the theme of mental disability is often dealt with with the concept of medicalization of human body and systematic dehumanization of the characters. Mute Philomela's inability to tell her story, the rich lady's nervous breakdown, the 'zombies' walking the streets of London, and the insomniac countess reading at night all refer to the various levels of disabilities serving as various ways of symbolising the decadence of the modern world. Eliot's poem combines the legend of the Holy Grail with Fisher King and the vignettes of modern British society for this purpose. The wound caused by his own aesthetic failure and the resultant disability of Fisher King lead to a barren world that can only be saved with the help of spirituality and faith. The moral and ethical failures of modern people have led to the modern waste land. Though it is difficult to separate the speaker of the poem from the characters and Eliot himself has hinted that the several characters in the poem can be understood as one and the same, focusing on some of the 'characters' separately will make things clearer.

The most important of these characters is the character of Tiresias. Eliot, in his note to the poem has stated that Tiresias is the most important personage in the poem because it is he who unites all the fragmented pieces of narratives in the text and more importantly because the very substance of the poem is based on what he 'sees'. This assertion by the poet acquires even greater significance because of Tiresias's obvious lack of vision. The blind prophet Tiresias has 'seen it all' without actually seeing it. He is the spokesperson of the poem. He is at the centre of the poem and Eliot mentions that while all the women are one woman in the text it is in Tiresias that both sexes meet. That makes Tiresias the repository of all the oxymoronic ideas that the text deals with. But he is not a 'character' in the strict sense of the term. While Tiresias forms the self of the text, his metamorphosis and marginalization makes him the 'other' of the text as well. In

fact he is placed in an 'abject' condition here. By making Tiresias, the very embodiment of disability, as the central voice of the poem Eliot has actually disrupted the normative self in modern society. His hybridity personifies the anxieties of sexual identities in the social system. His voice and vision bring forth the barrenness of a post-war world in which human sexuality has been perverted from its normal course and the natural world too has become infertile. As the seer and connector of all, he acquires the status of a protagonist. But even then he is more of a spectator in the poem rather than being a character. His self is fragmented and, as a gynecomastic prophet, he constantly oscillates not only between two genders but also between two extremes of sight and sightlessness. He keeps appearing and disappearing through out the poem. Tiresias's empowerment as a prophet and protagonist is seriously questioned by his marginalised position and his lack of agency and his inabilities as a disabled person. He only fore 'suffered' the things happening around him while carrying the fragments of the world with him. He is a mixture of disability and ability in one. His abilities and disabilities are interdependent phenomena. The original myth of Tiresias also refers to the similar vein of thought. The story of Tiresias who had been turned into a woman as a punishment for striking a copulating snake couple and who had again been punished with blindness for offending the goddess Hera is no less significant here. Both the stories relate disability with depravity and reinforces the notion that disability is a penalty for some wrong doing. On the other hand it is this disability that brings in his extra ability of seeing past, present and future through his blindness. Thus it not only problematises the relation between disability and ableism in the poem, but also points at the moral and spiritual downfall of modern society and its intellectual impairment in a causal relationship with each other.

Eliot, in his poem, has talked about the downfall of modern humans in terms of their inability to understand the basics of human existence, inability to think, perceive and express. And this inability is termed as automatism and machine conditioning of human beings. And it is this automatism that is, in most cases, represented as a disability. The emotionally and cognitively challenged people are either 'throbbing' like human engines or 'flowing' like the dirty river all around the polluted city. The character of the typist is clearly shown as an emotionally and intellectually challenged person who apparently does everything through out the day but does them like a machine. The dehumanisation process is brought forth by using her disability as a prop. Her inability to think is expressed in a range of things starting from her unkept house to her unemotional love making with the clerk. In all of these she is portrayed as a person in an almost vegetative state, who is 'hardly aware' of the things around her. She does not really have a full conscious mind in there. So when the clerk makes advancements she neither welcomes nor refuses. Even when he leaves she does not know what to feel and just 'smoothes her hair with automatic hand' and starts doing other things. Here the disintegration of human existence and moral depravity of human beings are expressed through the tropes of intellectual and psychological disability. The same thing is applicable to the clerk with addition to another aspect of it. The concept that disability is aesthetically displeasing is prominently visible in the description of the clerk who is not only as much emotionally challenged as the typist but also a 'curbanular' person. The looks of this human engine is less than pleasing and he is clearly a person with a repulsive appearance. The disorganization and collapse of society and degradation of human dignity is expressed through the disability of the characters here and that disability is also apparent on their faces and behaviour. So the process of

demonising disability is almost complete here. It is achieved by connecting disability with moral depravity and over all failure of human race in post war era and then by representing disability through the idea of disfigurement and unpleasantness in these characters.

A century after its first publication, Eliot's poem still defies easy categorization or comprehension. However, a focused analysis and study of the representation of disabled characters in the poem affirms a strong presence of moral connotation in it. The speaker wishing for the feelings and emotions to remain dull and cold, covered in snow, instead of having to confront them in cruel Spring, makes disability a refuge for the broken and isolated generation of the post war world. In doing so, these hibernated characters are reduced to only their disability; disability that is either worshiped or demonised in the text; disability that forms both the self and other of the text and brings forth the sense of internal distance and disconnect- which finally paints a picture of a deeply nihilistic self and world.

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