

“CRITIQUING THE EMPOWERMENT OF DIS/ABLE PROPHET TIRESIAS IN T. S ELIOT’S *THE WASTE LAND*”

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Abstract:

The rise of disability theory during last decades provoked a reconsideration of the general focus of interpreting literary texts. The interdisciplinary aspects as the questions of sex and gender, modern perversions, postmodern inter-textuality make the poem *The Waste Land* a rewarding source of interpretations. This poem is a depot of several interpretations. The hierarchical values, the infinite quest for the lost faith of accepted values revolves around like a labyrinth in this poem. The poem is full of fragments. Significantly, these fragmented burdens are taken and carried away by the dis/able protagonist Tiresias. This legendary mythical character functions as narrator of the poem. This study will attempt to critique this powerful mythical character as the notable capture of the existence of disability and ability in one. His dis/ability is co-constructed and reliant to one another which at the same time resists and conforms the stereotypical representations of the people with disabilities. “This split term- marked by the slashed’/’- acknowledges the ways in which disability and ablism are produced and reproduced in relation to one another.” (Goodley 126) This article will also acknowledge how the figure of Tiresias registers all the repressive construction of ideological burdens in the marginalization politics. Though he has got the empowerment of the prophetic insight, the imposed gender identity and physical limitations posit him as ‘other’ amongst the ableist people of the Waste Land. He has surpassed all the forms of marginalization being blind, aged, alienated, passive, bi-sexual in nature. His queer representation of sexual and semiotic difference makes him subversively potential under the rhetoric of cultural power. This study will investigate how Tiresias has become the reification of the marginalized condition of all bodily differences in the realm of hegemonic binaries of the social powers.

Key Words: Dis/ability, Tiresias, ableism, other, empowerment, abjection

In T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) ‘Tiresias’ as the spokesman of this poem is the major focus of this study who is paradoxically placed in the center of the poem with a shaky and worried condition. Tiresias embodies all the suffering related to bodily differences. “As a voicing or performance of the female, feminine, and effeminized, the Tiresian figure provides a means-problematic though it must be –by which to posit an alliance of gay, lesbian, and feminist literary-political projects through invocations of the feminine as a site of resistance to the heteronormative, figured as anxious and heterosexual masculinity” (Madden

28) The strangely hybrid and ambiguously gendered body of Tiresias personifies the anxieties about the nature of both sexual and artistic identities in our society. The heterogeneous identity of Tiresias negotiates between the way of becoming 'other' and destabilizing the fact of 'othering' by his ability to foresee which qualifies him as dis/able. But still this contradictory representation of this famous mythological being raises question when he has 'fore suffered' rather than 'foreseen' the rest.

The meaning making voice and vision of Tiresias creates textual and sexual ambiguities. The complex marginal representation of Tiresias makes the character unique. The metamorphosis he has gone through from one marginalized condition to another makes him vulnerable and 'other' of the 'other'. His blindness, age, and gender difference scrutinizes his potentiality of the prophetic power to foresee as a marginalized persona. Neither male nor female, neither life nor death, neither a subject nor an object places him in an 'abject' condition. "We might notice that Tiresias himself has become a shape-shifter in these various invocations. Martin Duberman, as we have seen, seems to regard him as a transsexual while Larry Rivers calls him a "hermaphrodite. Jan Clausen, who feels like Tiresias, raises the question of "bisexual identity" and 'bisexual desires, only to set them aside as terms that seem to reify and restrict rather than to open up the complex possibilities of individual response" (Garber 159) Tiresias shows up in multiple forms at the same time evoking and avoiding the bisexual nature. This abject condition of Tiresias questions boundaries of 'self' and 'other'. He becomes more than the 'body' which inherently disturbs the conventional identity and cultural concepts. "Abjection" is often used to describe the state of often-marginalized groups, such as women, people of minority religious faiths, poor and disabled people. Among the most popular interpretations of abjection is Julia Kristeva's work *Powers of Horror* where she describes how the subjective horror (abjection) is confronted by (both mentally and as a body), a breakdown in the distinction between what is 'self' and what is 'other'. "The abject –constantly question about solidity and impel to start afresh." (Kristeva5)The concept of abjection is best described as the process by which one separates one's sense of self from that which immediately threatens one's sense of life. From this perspective, Tiresias as an abject self prevents the absolute realization of existence, completing the course of biological, social, physical, and spiritual cycles.

The repressed, the unstable and differential relations of Tiresias to the social and cultural structures disavow his identification as a prophet. His ability to foresee becomes at risk because of the marginalized and confused excrescences and expressions. The female soul within a male body refers the androgenic sense of being in the wasteland. "The transgression with-in to the Feminine is not about becoming a woman in an identitarian sense but, rather, about entering into a Feminine dimension of experience that refuses binaries between outside and inside, self and other, male and female and so on." (Cavanagh 34) In the myth, Tiresias turns into a woman and enters into what another experiences of difference. It is an established

fact that aged, disable, Trans people are subject to erasure, discrimination, and are denied access to the world of normalcy.

Tiresias fails to be an absolute, another, the self, and an object. His fragmented self in variety of human relations to culture and tradition turns him as a mere observer, actor, and avatar of failure, impotent, self-loathing. "Although his body bears the testimony of his past, Tiresias is not androgynous, but alternatively male and female" (Pondon 429) Tiresias gives different readings, performances of gender. The instability of self-shaped the modern practices. He is uncertain about the final goal of salvation. Like his oscillation between two sexes, he is swinging the two opposite poles of hope and despair. According to F.R Leavis "*The Waste Land* 'exhibits no progression and ends where it began" (Rainey 120) In his "Notes on '*The Waste Land*,'" Eliot identifies the Greek prophet Tiresias, who appears in Book III, as "the most important personage [...] uniting all the rest," due to the prophet's awareness of "the substance of the poem" (Eliot 39). Eliot's suggestion of Tiresias as the poem's most important personage grants him a status of the "protagonist". Tiresias's empowerment as disable person takes this character to the new height. Eliot writes that 'what Tiresias sees is the substance of the poem' and that the poem's diverse personage 'meets in Tiresias'. The character of Tiresias is the repository of the beginning of a new era and the end of an old one.

The poem opens with the silent dismay of Tiresias who observes the coming of April. He starts continually with the speculative and pessimistic mood for his inability to speak or perceive for his mental paralysis. "The vocal aloofness of a Tiresias and speak in the tones of monotonous fatalism as he moved through the poem at graveyard pace." (quoted in Swigg 38) The stress of re-experiencing of the human world by this bi-sexual, blind prophet:

"I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs

Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest

(228-9)

The overt appearance of Tiresias is found in "The Fire Sermon" before that the voice of Tiresias which so strongly appeared in the first section of the poem disappears in "The Burial of the Dead". The characters like the insomniac Marie, the fortune teller, Madam Sosostriis, and the unnamed Joker who madly teases Stetson about his blooming corpse, Tiresias disappears into their speeches. "At the heart of the poem is a shell-shocked, transgendered intelligence, Tiresias, who cannot speak of his war experience except through mad routines of estranging impersonation, who cannot recognize his lover or his world without projecting onto them the desolation of the trench-system's wasteland" (Davis & Jenkins 418) From one conversation to another, dialogue to dialogues, in music of Philomela,

Tiresias dissolves with the pain. From this perspectives, Tiresias could function logically as subject and object, seer and seen. His confusing bi-sexual nature represents his identity by erasing the ordinary boundaries between active and passive, subject and object. He is also seen merged with the experiences of the typist girl, the human engine:

“When the human engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting,
I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives...”
(216-218)

This scene depicts Tiresias' helplessness, how he waits and throbs. Even Tiresias, despite the clarity of his vision, is confined within the thought processes of the sailor and typist, insofar as he has “fore suffered,” rather than foreseen, the “assaults” of the “young man carbuncular” and all other acts “[e]nacted on this same divan or bed” (Eliot 45.243, 239, 231, 244). “The construction of Tiresias as the figure “throbbing between” has important, albeit necessarily problematic, implications to the representational politics of sexuality and to the sexual politics of modernist representation” (Madden 28) Tiresias becomes one with the mechanized image of the taxi and both of them are ‘throbbing’, ‘waiting’. This ‘throbbing’ connotes the possible latent movement after this waiting. This waiting connotes another possibility of transformation and metamorphosis after the time passes. This taxi becomes the metaphor for Tiresias who becomes the metaphor for *The Waste Land* itself. Like the taxi, the poem is also ‘throbbing’ seems to be moving in place both exceeding and adhering to its closure. A traumatized higher consciousness of unstable speaker, Tiresias remains as undefined as the split identity of past and the eternity. Whatever Tiresias is observing is not prophecy but the reality with the burdens of awful truths. “Fore suffered” implies that Tiresias has in fact suffered—that is, experienced—all of time already. Yet the prefix “fore” includes that he is positioned before or in front of the suffering as a spectator. But Tiresias remains bound to his mortal body perpetually “waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting” (217) for its next metamorphosis.

This reduced condition of this mythical prophet who has experiences of all mocks his as the medium between past, present and eternity. However, Tiresias appears in “The Fire Sermon” with a transformed stately background but again sinks in the section “Death by Water” and drives the chant of “What the Thunder Said”. “This persistent voice, this would-be voice-over, which would stay above and outside, giving moral perspective, delivering judgments dour and convert, in effect falls inside, becoming itself frequently a subject of waste” (Bercovitch 121) Tiresias presence throughout the poem as spectator not as a character itself strikes the question of the voiceless marginalized, oppressed group of people with stories and potentialities. Tiresias as the ‘other’ of the ‘other’ here does get the room to express what is going through him. But his voice goes unheard as the critic of the society. Eliot himself mentioned that “all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in

Tiresias". "He is the enlightened ghost of the race watching the depressing spectacle of modern humanity which has fallen from the ancient heights and forgotten the old values and sanctities" (Rai 76)

The concrete experience of Tiresias about the heterogenous, impure conscious present makes him overburdened to execute the memories, rituals, morals of the past. He bears all the burdens of the lost, unfulfilled wasted love of the restless desires of Rudolph and Marie, Tristan and Isolde, Antony and Cleopatra, Tereus and Procne, Philomela, the couple at their game of chess, Lil and Albert, the typist and the rental Clark. His function as an observing eye to both to the crowd and outside, part and whole, freedom and necessity goes in vain when he fails to reconcile the individual and community. He has become a mere juxtaposition of part and whole with a fear of fragmentation and loneliness and a fear of featureless uniformity.

Tiresias for his bodily differences and complicated identity crisis becomes the "other" of the other. "Tiresias is reduced to being an aging transvestite, a "crazy old fruit" (Madden 257) Even his old age itself effeminizes the male body. Ageing is another sign of his vulnerability that takes him to another height of becoming 'other'. He even befalls into the prey of the perverse lust. Mr.Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant, unshaven, with his pockets full of dry merchandise offer Tiresias to lunch in vulgar French at the hotel Metropole in Brighton. "The issues, anxieties and strategies related to his transexuality provide 'poetic allegory of the displacement of homoerotic energies into homo-social cultural production" (Madden 27) Stark immorality and unnatural sexuality is shown by the ambiguous, implicit violet color of dusk which is neither bright nor dark as the ambivalence of the bi-sexual Tiresias. His gift of prophecy has become the curse because now he has to fore suffer all. The futility, frustration, boredom, he has observed among the human machines makes him a mere blind, mute, aged, hegemonic observer.

The gynecomastic Tiresias of Eliot is an emblematic figure of sexual and cultural differences. The undecided ability and mutability of sexual identification makes him remarkable. There are number of myths of Tiresias, among them the best known version of this story is found in Book III of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Tiresias appears in Greek mythology and plays an important role in Sophocles' *Antigone* and in *Oedipus the King* as seer. Tiresias also appears in Homer's *Odyssey*, in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, and in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, among other literary and dramatic works. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Tiresias must visit in the Underworld in order to discover what perils still lay before him as he continues his homeward voyage to Ithaka. There is a connection between "Sophocles' use of Tiresias, incidentally, can be found in the fact that Oedipus the king deals with a city that has become a wasteland because it is unwittingly harboring the killer of the previous king" (Murphy 460) Ovid's Tiresias is more universal and objective among all the mythological

versions about Tiresias. Tiresias is asked to settle a wager between Jove and Juno concerning whether men or women have the greater pleasure in sex, since he knows well the “two extremes of Venus’ subtle arts” Born a man, Tiresias was changed into a woman after striking two “love joined serpents”, he was restored after seven autumns by striking them again during their act of love. Deciding on the part of love, Tiresias is blinded by the vengeful Juno but compensated by love with the gift of prophecy. After his blinding, Tiresias becomes the omnipresent and legendary wise man of Greek epic and drama. Wherever there is a crisis of gender, a crossroads in human sexuality, Tiresias is on the scene” (Garber 165) To Juno, Tiresias was an outsider and her anger is justified because the pleasures of sex is being debated and determined by two men. Tiresias becomes an uncanny figure who “shifts sex, experiences *jouissance* across difference, and elicits the rancor of the gods’ (Rodowick 67)

As a conscience of humanity, he is banished and disowned by the thoughtless men and women. In the wasteland, he is shown weeping, saying “By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept...” (182) He shows his inability to prick the bubbles of the illusions, joys, hopes and fears of the depleted spirituality of the modern world. “For his presence throughout the poem it would have become a phantasmagoria, a nightmare a medley of scenes and meaningless snatches of talk almost overwhelming in its confused impression” (Rai 76) As a symbol of the past still surviving in the present, Tiresias has so many ideological burden. But as an old man with “wrinkled female breast” (228) Tiresias has fore suffered all that is being enacted on the ugly stage of the contemporary world.

T. S Eliot empowers this marginalized character by making him the foundation of the equality between men and women. He remarks the relevance of Tiresias to poem as “the most important personage, uniting all the rest” who is the victims of his own self-sufficiency and society’s expectations. Eliot suppresses the metamorphic implications of Tiresias by describing Tiresias as “the two sexes meet in Tiresias.” Eliot’s “meet” implies a joining of the two sexes “in Tiresias,” which suggests an androgynous body in which the sexes are stably merged. Eliot’s note privileges Tiresias’s capacity as prophet.

Early New Critical readings influentially championed the first perspective; in 1932 F. R. Leavis asserts that Eliot’s note about Tiresias “provides the clue” to the poem’s project to “focus an inclusive human consciousness,” while in 1937 Cleanth Brooks argues that the poem functions as a “unified whole” emerging from a central “protagonist.” (Quoted in Sorum 162) But the unidentified, unparticular selection of voices takes the questions of gender to an abstract experience that makes the whole narrative as unstable as Tiresias as the modern human condition. “Tiresias deconstructs, then, the form of the poem, in part by de-

forming the supposedly organizing, or formalizing, role accorded to him by Eliot's note. (Scully 167)

The empowerment of Tiresias in his prophetic role seems critically questioned again and again because of his marginalized, voiceless, blind physical difference. His disabilities as a disabled persona blur his potentiality of prophetic power. But still, he surpasses all marginalization, if prophecy could be counted as an imaginative ability to read the signs of the times through the lens provided by other times. Tiresias' prophecy is obviously not a matter of fortune-telling as with the commercial humdrum of Madame Sosostris. Tiresias through his experiences revealed the shocking truth to everyone. He has become the mis-en-scene of the Modern London a new version of Thebe which recapitulated Carthage, the ancient city of Phoenician mercantile power thrice destroyed by Rome but reborn as a center of fleshly temptation in the time of St. Augustine. In a series of fallen civilizations named in the poem's final part 'Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, London are blended in his vision that caused him fore-suffered. The wisest, truthful, unifying Greek mythological prophet of restoring the community demands the reader to see what he sees. Though he is silent, but the evolution of this persona in the poem *The Waste Land* provides justification for the poem's organization as an essential narrative and thus coherent.

Tiresias is not an accidental spectator so obviously he has some important task to do. Tiresias' interest in modern sexuality is not due to excessive voyeurism, but is grounded in his assertively epitome of his knowledge. He is centered as an only character who has the extraordinary abilities to alternate the messages of the modern world. But Tiresias does not take the attempt to induce change. Rather, he himself seems muddled among the experiences of him from past to the eternity. His aging long life becomes his curse.

The significance of Tiresias is complex and varied. Historically, as this study has already mentioned that he is connected with the story of king Oedipus of Thebes, which is clearly and demonstrable the classical legend of a waste land, with striking resemblance to the drought infested, sin – ridden kingdom of the medieval Fisher King. Tiresias discouraged Oedipus to pursue the truth. Tiresias is never wrong. The ability to see beyond what is visible must have some power that makes him extraordinary but he remains alienated among all rather getting appreciation for his power. This extra essence of his life makes everything difficult. Tiresias becomes incomprehensible to meltdown in any form in any society.

The expression and repression of desires between decent and indecent, acceptable or unacceptable makes the whole poem what/how Tiresias is growing and going through. Spender says "The individual is symptomatic of the state of civilization as whole" (quoted in Zavrl 74) Carol Christ observes that "among the most striking characteristics of Eliot's poetry is a way in which it fragments not just female bodies but all bodies, and frequently in a way that makes gender ambiguous." (ibid) As Christ continues that the last section Eliot uses so

many religious, natural images. He alludes to human situation in more abstract and gender free manner by avoiding the categories of body and gender, represses sexual difference. This last section of the poem also nullifies the significance of Tiresias' presence as seer as an androgyny. He is repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life. The androgynous Tiresias is the witness of the culture in decline. He attests the demise of Europe as text and the institutions, implicitly the church and the hierarchies that it maintains.

The cyclical view of life, cultural pessimism, the epistemological dominant gender and sexual issues in the narration of Tiresias creates a different discourse of the ideologies the poem has produced. The over determined figure of the modernist Tiresias experiences both genders incarnates ambivalence, experience and tawdry pathos. A. David Moody draws attention to the fact that we do not see what Tiresias sees; instead, we see him seeing, and "[h]is seeing, without love, passion or pathos, is the dead heart of *The Waste Land*: what the poet must pass beyond or perish" (92). (quoted in Zavrl 75)

Tiresias mirrors the failures of self recognition but he has the access to the unconscious, repressed self. His in discriminatory figure becomes more discriminatory which surpasses all level of marginalization. "The conceptualization of bisexuality in terms of dispositions, feminine and masculine which have heterosexual aims as their intentional correlates, says Judith Butler, "suggests that for Freud bisexuality is the coincidence of two heterosexual desires within a single psyche" (quoted in Garber 161) From this perspective Tiresias is the perfect emblem of the bisexual.

Outside the space and time, Tiresias becomes the medium of perception, Tiresias is splitting apart to connect the past and present. The confused aimless guides for reader will lead the reader to the same inconceivable forces which forced him to walk perpetually "among the lowest of the dead" (246) He has become the signifier of turmoil of the dissolution of order and tradition, the perversion of moral and social values, the loss of sanity and catastrophic psychological collapses.

Tiresias unifies the experiences of the modern subject, understanding both the male and female and embodying the mechanized nature of modern psychology is always subject to desires that seem both transactional and out of its control. Tiresias is presented as a consciousness that, in its unique ability to understand multiple perspectives, reveals a "real" world coming into being. In this way, the version of subjectivity that we get through Tiresias involves a vision of the self as versatile and polyphonous, having "fore suffered all" (243). "Though the subject of Tiresias acts as a filter and a localizer of experiences by creating kind of unification, but it is only possible through "collation, and not integration and reconciliation." (Sorum173) These reiterations foreground Tiresias's physical blindness and prophetic sight, as well as his dual gender determination. Tiresias's ability to see and to know seems uncompromised, and he therefore provides *The Waste Land* with what appears a sense

of coherence underlying or imposing order on the disorder of the text. The text's movements also seem to reinforce Tiresias's presence as an ordering figure: from Tiresias's first to his second appearance, his activity changes from seeing to perceiving. (Scully 169) As the poem demands what Tiresias sees is what we see, what Tiresias perceives as an empowered marginalized organism is what society should perceive to comprehend the complexities regarding discriminations. Tiresias will be coming again and again in the sceneto remind how this modern waste land is waiting and throbbing to move ahead.

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