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Bodies of Water in a Barren Modernity": Hydrofeminism, Material Ecocriticism, and Fluid Ontology in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

Dr. Sourav Kumar Nag

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Onda Thana Mahavidyalaya, Bankura University, West Bengal, India

ABSTRACT

This essay offers a hydrofeminist reading of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), situating the poem within contemporary material ecocritical and posthuman feminist theory. Drawing on Astrida Neimanis's concept of hydrofeminism, Stacy Alaimo's trans - corporeality, Serenella Iovino's material narrativity, and new materialist thought, this study argues that Eliot's poem stages not simply spiritual desolation but a crisis of circulation—ecological, gendered, and epistemological. Water in *The Waste Land* emerges as both absence and excess, purification and contamination, dissolution and relational ontology. Through close readings of the Thames, the typist episode, Phlebas the Phoenician, Tiresias, and the apocalyptic drought of "What the Thunder Said," this paper demonstrates that Eliot's modernist fragmentation mirrors fluid ontology even as it dramatizes the breakdown of sustainable flow. Engaging over thirty-five critics—from Cleanth Brooks and F. R. Leavis to Bonnie Kime Scott, Maud Ellmann, Michael North, and Jahan Ramazani—this essay reframes *The Waste Land* as a proto-hydrofeminist text that anticipates contemporary ecological feminist thought. Rather than reading water solely as symbolic redemption or spiritual lack, this study positions it as material agent, gendered medium, and archive of violence. The poem's ultimate gesture toward rain does not restore transcendence but gestures toward fragile hydro-ethical interdependence.

KEYWORDS: *ecological apocalyptic drought feminist hydro-ethical.*

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I. Introduction: Rethinking Modernist Drought

Few modernist texts have been as thoroughly interpreted as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Critics have read it as spiritual allegory (Brooks), mythic structure (Weston; Frazer), cultural collapse (Leavis), religious quest (Gardner), urban fragmentation (Kenner), and transnational elegy (Ramazani). Yet despite its obsessive imagery of rivers, rain, drowning, dryness, and flood, water has rarely been treated as the poem's primary ontological concern.

This essay proposes that *The Waste Land* may be reinterpreted through hydrofeminism— a theoretical framework articulated most fully by Astrida Neimanis in *Bodies of Water* (2017). Hydrofeminism posits that all bodies are materially interconnected through planetary water systems. Water is not metaphor but substance; not backdrop but medium of shared embodiment. To think hydrofeministically is to acknowledge that boundaries between bodies are porous, and that ecological crisis is also corporeal crisis. Such a framework proves strikingly apt for Eliot's poem. The wasteland is not merely spiritually dry; it is materially dysfunctional. Rivers are polluted, rain is withheld, drowning destabilizes identity, and fertility is suspended. Modernity in Eliot's vision is not only alienated—it is hydrologically impaired.

This study integrates hydrofeminism with material ecocriticism (Iovino and Oppermann), trans-corporeality (Alaimo), dark ecology (Morton), feminist theory (Irigaray; Butler; Kristeva), and posthumanism (Latour). Through sustained close reading and expanded engagement with Eliot criticism, I argue that *The Waste Land* dramatizes a crisis of circulation—ecological, erotic, historical, and textual. Water becomes the poem's most dynamic

agent, exposing the entanglement of gendered violence, industrial contamination, and fractured subjectivity.

Hydrofeminism begins from a deceptively simple claim: we are bodies of water (Neimanis 1). The human body is composed largely of water; so too are the oceans, clouds, and rivers that sustain planetary life. This insight destabilizes Enlightenment individualism. If bodies are materially continuous with their environments, then modernity's fiction of autonomy collapses. Stacy Alaimo's theory of trans-corporeality deepens this position by insisting that "the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the flows of substances and the agencies of environments" (Alaimo 2). Environmental toxicity, therefore, is never external—it is internalized. This theoretical orientation resonates powerfully with Eliot's poem, in which bodies dissolve, rivers accumulate waste, and rain promises but rarely delivers regeneration. Rather than treating water symbolically—as purification, rebirth, or baptism—hydrofeminism invites us to read water as material process and relational ontology. Material ecocritics such as Serenella Iovino argue that matter itself possesses "storied agency" (Iovino and Oppermann 8). Rivers narrate. Drought testifies. Pollution archives violence. In *The Waste Land*, the Thames becomes precisely such a narrator—its contaminated flow registering the ethical failures of modern industrial civilization.

The poem opens:
"April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land" (Eliot 1–2).

Traditional readings interpret this inversion of spring's optimism as ironic spiritual despair (Brooks 136). Yet hydrofeminism reframes April's cruelty as failed ecological reciprocity. The land is "dead," unable to metabolize seasonal moisture. The cycle of regeneration is interrupted. Bonnie Kime Scott suggests that Eliot's landscapes encode "gendered absences" (Scott 84). Fertility here becomes traumatic rather than celebratory. If water signifies generativity, then its dysfunction signals suppressed feminine vitality. Luce Irigaray famously critiques Western metaphysics for privileging solidity over fluidity (Irigaray 111). Eliot's dead land exemplifies such rigidity—earth hardened against flow. April's cruelty is thus hydrological: growth emerges violently from sterility, rather than organically through balanced circulation.

Madame Sosostris, "the famous clairvoyante" (43), mediates watery prophecy through tarot cards, including the drowned Phoenician Sailor. Her feminized divination is mocked, destabilized by irony. Lawrence Rainey observes Eliot's oscillation between mythic seriousness and satirical triviality (Rainey 54). Yet from a hydrofeminist perspective, Madame Sosostris embodies suppressed fluid epistemology. She channels cyclical knowledge rooted in embodied intuition—precisely the forms of knowing marginalized in patriarchal modernity. Irigaray's fluid feminine disrupts rigid rationality. The drowned sailor's metamorphosis: "Those are pearls that were his eyes" (48) —reveals material transformation rather than annihilation. Flesh becomes mineral; body becomes oceanic archive. Maud Ellmann reads drowning in Eliot as both loss and metamorphosis (Ellmann 98). Hydrofeminism emphasizes the latter: dissolution as relational redistribution.

In "The Fire Sermon," the Thames is stripped of pastoral sanctity:
"The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends" (177–178).

The ironic negation exposes industrial contamination. Timothy Morton's "dark ecology" insists that ecological thought must confront pollution rather than fantasize purity (Morton 16). Eliot's river is hybrid assemblage—natural current interwoven with capitalist debris. Nancy Gish calls Eliot's rivers "repositories of memory" (Gish 201). Indeed, the Thames archives urban exploitation. Material ecocriticism allows us to see the river not as backdrop but as actor within Latour's networked modernity (Latour 72). It participates in shaping social relations. Gender intersects here: the polluted river parallels the exploited female body in the typist episode. Both are sites of extraction. Both register violence silently. The typist scene stages intimacy devoid of reciprocity: "The meal is ended, she is bored and tired" (236). Judith Butler's performativity illuminates the typist's scripted acquiescence (Butler 25). Her body functions as consumable surface rather than relational partner. There is no fluid exchange—only mechanical routine. Hydrofeminism reads this as erotic drought. Just as rivers are polluted and rainfall deferred, sexual encounter becomes desiccated. Craig Raine's urban alienation intersects here with ecological sterility (Raine 61). The woman's passivity mirrors the Thames's contamination. Both are absorbed into modernity's extractive circuits.

Eliot declares Tiresias the poem's "most important personage." Blind yet all-seeing, "throbbing between two lives" (218), Tiresias destabilizes binary gender. Bonnie Kime Scott identifies Tiresias as a "feminized consciousness within masculine authority" (Scott 102). Hydrofeminism deepens this reading: Tiresias

embodies liquidity of identity. Neimanis emphasizes that fluid bodies resist rigid categorization (Neimanis 5). Tiresias does not stand outside events; he flows through them. His dual embodiment anticipates posthuman relationality.

"Death by Water" provides one of the most concentrated aquatic meditations in *The Waste Land*: "Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead" (312). The brevity of the section intensifies its force. In a mere ten lines, Eliot compresses commerce, mortality, memory, and erasure into the image of a drowned trader. Phlebas, once defined by circulation—of goods, of capital, of maritime routes—now circulates differently. He forgets "the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell / And the profit and loss" (313–14). Profit and loss, the language of capitalism, dissolve alongside nationality and identity. The sea erodes capitalist subjecthood. What remains is not a moral lesson in the conventional sense but a material redistribution. The body becomes current.

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialization illuminates this dissolution (508). Phlebas is stripped of territorial anchors: nation, market, biography. The whirlpool becomes a figure of deterritorializing force, dismantling fixed subjecthood and returning it to flux. Identity, once stabilized by trade networks and imperial geographies, is undone by the very medium that enabled it. Harold Bloom frames Eliot's drowning imagery as apocalyptic purification, a ritual immersion that anticipates spiritual reckoning (Bloom 176). Yet such a reading risks reinstating transcendence where Eliot insists on materiality. Hydrofeminism offers an alternative lens. Rather than purification, we witness ontological redistribution. The body does not ascend; it diffuses. It joins planetary circulation—salt, mineral, current.

Drowning here is neither simple redemption nor punitive judgment. It is exposure of relational ontology. The sea reveals that subjecthood has always been porous, always already entangled with ecological and economic systems. Phlebas's age—"a fortnight dead"— emphasizes process over event. Death is not instantaneous closure but gradual unmaking. The sea "picked his bones in whispers" (315). Whisper suggests subtle erosion rather than cataclysm. Material transformation replaces eschatological drama.

The rain that concludes the poem is equally tentative. It is not the triumphant deluge of restoration but a fragile gesture. Gayatri Spivak warns against romantic ecological closure, the temptation to imagine nature as redemptive totality (Spivak 287). Eliot avoids such closure. "Shantih shantih shantih" does not proclaim restored paradise; it intimates fragile peace, a peace that remains aspirational rather than guaranteed. Rain gestures toward hydro-ethical interdependence—toward recognition that survival depends on shared vulnerability—without promising salvation. The wasteland may receive water, but water does not erase history.

Modernist fragmentation has long been interpreted as rupture, a symptom of civilizational breakdown (Lewis 66). The poem's disjunctions—shifting speakers, abrupt citations, multilingual fragments—seem to dramatize psychic and cultural fracture. Yet hydrofeminism allows us to reimagine fragmentation not as shattered glass but as tidal structure. Water does not fragment by breaking; it fragments by dividing into currents, eddies, and waves that remain part of a larger body. The poem's shifting voices resemble such currents converging and diverging. Each speaker enters, recedes, resurfaces. The text becomes estuarial—a meeting place of flows.

Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic chora—associated with rhythm, bodily drives, and pre-symbolic pulsation—echoes beneath Eliot's polyphony (Kristeva 28). The poem's cadences, refrains, and sonic patterns generate a rhythmic undercurrent that exceeds rational coherence.

Rather than shattered unity, we find fluid multiplicity. Meaning moves like water: sometimes pooled, sometimes rushing, sometimes evaporating into allusion. Helen Gardner argues for an underlying structural coherence in *The Waste Land* (Gardner 15). Hydrological coherence offers one way of understanding this structure. Motifs of dryness and moisture, drought and inundation, recur in cyclical patterns—ebb and flow rather than linear progression. The poem is not a broken monument but a tidal system. Such a reading does not ignore the poem's tensions. Lyndall Gordon notes Eliot's fraught representations of women, whose voices often appear fragmented or ventriloquized (Gordon 214). Anthony Julius critiques the troubling cultural politics embedded in Eliot's allusive practice (Julius 98). Hydrofeminism does not smooth over these difficulties. Instead, it situates them within broader networks of exploitation and extraction. Water, after all, has been both conduit and instrument of empire. Maritime routes enabled colonial expansion; rivers were mapped, dammed, and commodified. The same fluidity that dissolves identity also facilitated global systems of domination.

Michael North's analysis of racialized modernity underscores how modernist experimentation emerges within imperial circuits (North 83). Jahan Ramazani's account of transnational mourning reveals how elegy travels across borders, carrying grief shaped by war

and diaspora (Ramazani 44). Water circulates globally; so does empire. Phlebas the Phoenician is not an isolated casualty but emblematic of a planetary condition. The wasteland is not merely European. It is planetary, structured by flows of capital, labor, and violence that traverse oceans. In this sense, hydrofeminism reframes the poem's crisis. Rather than viewing modernity solely as fragmentation of meaning, we perceive it as intensification of circulation—of commodities, bodies, texts. Eliot's aquatic imagery exposes the instability beneath these circulations. Water refuses fixity. It undermines borders even as it enables trade. The drowned merchant becomes figure for modern subjectivity: produced by global exchange, undone by elemental flux.

"Death by Water" thus functions as microcosm of the poem's larger hydro-logic. It compresses the themes of erosion, redistribution, and relationality that ripple throughout the text. The rain at the close does not restore unity but acknowledges interdependence. "Shantih" resonates less as triumph than as whispered hope—a fragile equilibrium within ongoing flux. If the wasteland is planetary, so too is the possibility of hydro-ethical awareness. Not redemption, but recognition: that we are, like Phlebas, always already in circulation.

The Waste Land dramatizes more than spiritual despair. It stages hydrological dysfunction—polluted rivers, withheld rain, drowned bodies, erotic dryness. Through hydrofeminist theory, water emerges as material agent and ethical index. Rain arrives but does not redeem. Circulation resumes, tentatively. Peace is whispered, not proclaimed. If we are, as Neimanis insists, bodies of water, then Eliot's wasteland confronts us with a stark recognition: modernity's crisis is a crisis of flow. The poem does not offer restoration but relational awareness—a hydro-ethical awakening.

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