

# Midas touch

**SUCHITA MALIK**

Teaching T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" to post-graduate students can be a cathartic experience for any teacher of literature in modern times. The reasons may not be very far to seek. It may just have been a piece of "rhythmical grumbling" or "the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life" for T.S. Eliot despite the critics' desperate attempts to prove it otherwise; yet the poetic masterpiece is an undoubted critique of our so-called social and cultural facade. It may have been relevant initially as a First-World-War aftermath cry, where the poet hollers and howls about the loss of tradition and values, yet it is no less relevant or true in today's scenario where nothing seems to go right or has any prospects to go right anyway.

Ours is the world where money-God

reigns supreme and subversion of values is the order of the day. While our age-old cherished traditions and values gather dust in history-books — nee recycled-bins — our 21st century information-technology savvy social system totters forward, totally oblivious of the umbilical cord that ties it to our heritage rather delicately. It is a system where chaos rules the roost, and the precious lives "are measured out with coffee spoons". Be it the social system or the political or the bureaucratic, the waste regions of the self are never far to seek.

Deepa, my friend and colleague in the adjoining college, and I have a strange habit of sharing such thoughts over our long conversations over the phone. We share a strange telepathy and often come out with unusual literary but appropriate cliches and allusions. Incidentally, our husbands too, though belonging to dif-

ferent cadres, share a subtle bureaucratic rapport, groomed as they are by the very same icy steel frame of the government. Therefore, it is not very surprising that our talk often takes a detour from the "pep-talk" about weather, kids and the "Oh! so dull and boring college" to a more interesting, gossipy and very much "in" talk about corridors of power replete with juicy gossip and scandals galore.

On one such gossip-session, the conversation veered round to the evergreen subject of transfers and postings in bureaucratic circles. Coming like a bolt from the blue, these transfers and postings always generate a lot of interest among colleagues as well as some heart-burning and bitterness too. A colleague of my husband, in the midst of some controversy, got shifted from a "plum" posting to a so-called "sidelined" slot, hitherto reserved for the offending black-lis-

ters alone. Deepa happened to make a casual remark that the officer concerned might have asked for the "forbidden fruit" himself. I countered her argument by saying that the "fruits of labour" might as well be elusive in this forbidden and not so hot a seat as this. "Precisely! that's what I mean, dear. Rather, it may prove to be the other way round, you know," said she, almost nonchalantly. "How come, ya...ar! what will he get out of this stony rubbish," I again quoted T.S. Eliot. "You don't know, Suchita... some people just have that famous Midas' Touch and then, of course, this Kaliyug!" she roared with that mischievous laughter of hers.

"Yes, of course!" was all I could mutter and feigned a laugh, thinking all the time about T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" where the postings too, have come to acquire that legendary Midas' Touch.