



Voice of the East in Eliot and Oppenheimer

Dr. Uma Maheswari Viswanathan & Sangeetha. K

Abstract

This paper presents the influence of the mystic East in providing answers to some of the daunting ethical questions that haunted Westerners during the era of world wars. TS Eliot and Oppenheimer who admits the influence of Waste Land on him are taken for the study. Bhagavad Gita the emblematic Sanskrit text that appears in the epic Mahabharata, Vedas, and Upanishads has influenced poets and philosophers like Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Eliot, etc. as well as scientists like Oppenheimer, Heisenberg, Schrodinger, Tesla, etc. The references to Sanskrit texts cannot be taken as mere decorations or indulgence in exoticism; the messages are organically incorporated into their words, actions, and whole lives. In 'The Waste Land', the Upanishad is quoted explicitly while the theme of the Bhagavad Gita is used implicitly in the juxtaposition of life and death and treatment of sensual pleasures and means to control senses. Karmayoga or doing one's duty in a detached manner gave strength to Oppenheimer who directed the project of building the Atomic Bomb which he knew would be used on the enemies. The message of Lord Krishna in Gita gave him the notion of duty/dharma and renunciation of the fruits of his action gave him the thrust to make a weapon of mass destruction.

Dr. Uma Maheswari Viswanathan

Assistant Professor

B.S. Abdur Rahman Crescent

Institute of Science and Technology

Chennai, India

e-mail : maheswaridgp@gmail.com

Sangeetha. K

Research scholar

B.S. Abdur Rahman Crescent

Institute of Science and Technology

Chennai, India

e-mail : sangeetha_eng_july2022@crscent.education.in

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Introduction

The modern period characterized by numerous scientific theories, inventions, philosophies, art movements, and music has been influenced by Eastern philosophy,

be it Hinduism, Buddhism, or Taoism. On one side Darwin's Theory of Evolution and Einstein's Theory of Relativity brought traces of disbelief in scriptures in the human mind and on the other side the horrors of the two world wars painted the creative minds of the era with pessimism and desperation. The novel concepts of human identity, experience, time, reality, and existence needed a new perspective, ideology, and belief system for better understanding. At this juncture, global travel facilitated intellectual exchange between the East and the West enabling the seekers to find solutions in the voices of the East. The intersection of the Western mind and the Eastern philosophy helped the creative minds to add new dimensions to their work for better understanding.

Creative minds of the West is an inclusive term for scientists, philosophers, poets, and artists. The scientists who had thought faith and science were mutually exclusive were startled to find that the Hindu religion has science behind it. The translations of Hindu texts like Bhagavad Gita by Wilkins of Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 and Upanishads by Max Mueller in 1879 created a wave of enthusiasm among the scientists and writers of the age and many started learning Sanskrit to read the texts in original. Danish scientist Niels Bohr said, 'I go into the Upanishads to ask questions' (Prothero 144). He also found inspiration in Chinese philosophy. Schrodinger, Werner Heisenberg, and Tesla were impressed by Vedantic concepts. Carl Sagan (215) said about Hinduism. 'It is the only religion in which time scales correspond to those of modern scientific cosmology.' Some of the scientists had direct interaction with Hindu saints and philosophers. Heisenberg met Tagore in 1929, Tesla met Swami Vivekananda in 1896 and Einstein met Tagore at least four times in Europe.

Tagore also fascinated poets like W.B. Yeats who included the translation of Gitanjali in the anthology of The Oxford Book of Modern Verses. Emerson, T. S. Eliot, Charles Morgan, Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Christopher Isherwood, Mayers, and Somerset Maugham were also drawn towards India. This paper discusses how Eliot and Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb, found meaning, purpose, and solutions to the modern-day strife in the voice of the East.

T. S. Eliot

Eliot was the pioneer who penetrated into the mines of mystical notions of India and presented them in his extraordinary poem *The Waste Land* (Das 96). A heap of broken

images dominates the poem symbolizing, social disorder, ecological degradation, ethical collapse, and spiritual desolation. The poet has woven a cosmopolitan fabric portraying wasteland with allusions to various cultures, myths, and faiths like the Bible, the Book of Prayer, the Upanishad, and Buddha's Fire Sermon. The poem is scattered with phrases from languages such as German, French, Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit. The poem also incorporates different geographical locales.

This paper deals only with Vedic and Upanishadic references in the poem along with the references to Buddha. At Harvard, Eliot was drawn to great scholars like Josiah Royce, George Santayana, Irving Babbitt, Charles Rockwell Lanman, and James Haughton Woods. Captivated by Indian philosophy and scriptures, Eliot started learning Sanskrit and Pali in 1911. Both Hinduism and Buddhism left an indelible impression on him and his works.

Buddhist reference can be found in the third section of *The Waste Land* which is titled The Fire Sermon invoking the famous sermon of Buddha who said:

‘All things are on fire / They are on fire of infatuation; with birth, old age, death, sorrow lamentation, misery, grief and despair’ (Warren 352)

The burning passion born out of desire is the root cause of all misery according to Buddhism. The only way to extinguish the fire is to stop feeding desire and desisting from sensual pleasures. There is another fire in Hinduism, the fire of tapas which burns away lust and greed, thus purifying the soul which then enjoys pure bliss. The dual nature of fire – burning and purifying resulting in pain and bliss respectively – is indicated by Eliot in this poem. The reference to the Fire Sermon has been taken from *Adittapriyay Sutta*. Similarly, there are verses in the Dhammapada that say that the wasteland should be irrigated well with the waters of compassion and richly manured by meditation for seeds to grow (Narasimhaiah 97-98).

The Upanishad character *Drasta* is replaced by Tiresius, the protagonist of the poem. Both bear a lot of similarities in form and purpose. Tiresius is blind, bisexual, and prophetic and he perceives the entire panorama of desolation in a spatial setting; whereas *Drasta* in Upanishads sees everything in a spiritual setting.

Though the poem *The Waste Land* is a heap of broken images, Eliot ends the poem optimistically as he knows where the solution lies. The physical sterility can be

countered effectively only by spiritual awakening. The image of water and the sound of thunder bring hope to the dry land and barren hearts. The voice in Upanishad reverberates with the sound of thunder. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* is alluded to in the last section of the poem. As the thunder roars Brahma Prajapati's voice is heard. According to *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* Brahma said DA to his three distinguished types of progeny – *devas* or celestial beings, *manushyas* or human beings, and *asuras* or demons – when they sought advice from him. All three interpreted DA as necessary for them as they knew the flaws in their nature. *Devas* are seekers of pleasure, hence they interpreted DA as *Damyata* (restrain). Human beings are miserly in nature, hence they interpreted DA as *Datta* (give). *Asuras* are cruel in nature, hence they interpreted DA as *Dayadhvam* (sympathise). The three types of progeny do not refer to three different creations but as people possessing three *gunas* or characteristic features. Hinduism is both macrocosmic and microcosmic. *Devas*, *Manushyas*, and *asuras* don't live in different planes or worlds. Human beings can be *devas*, *manushyas*, or *asuras* depending on which characteristic feature dominates their nature. Hence the three pieces of advice are common to the entire mankind. 'Sympathy' is the first feature. When one realizes that all are the children of one God, one sympathizes with others; one does not want to harm others. 'Give' is the acquired feature born out of sympathy. When one sympathizes with others, one wants to mitigate their suffering by giving whatever one has. In order to acquire this feature, restraint needs to be cultivated. Unless one restrains oneself either physically or financially one cannot give others. Again 'giving' is not charity done patronizingly. It ought to be a spontaneous gesture of reaching out to one's brethren; in other words, it is mankind's prime duty. According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, doing one's duty without an eye on reward is called *karma yoga* by Lord Krishna. Once mankind achieves this state, the voyage on the ocean of life will be smooth and happy. The thunder in the poem forebodes rain drenching the dry land, quenching the thirst, and reviving nature as well as mankind.

According to Eliot, these three cardinal virtues of restraining, giving, and compassion are essential to escape the apocalyptic vision presented earlier in the poem. Finally, the poem ends with the word *Shantih* repeated thrice. *Shantih* means peace and the word is purposefully repeated thrice to give a sense of invocation. Though there are direct references to the Upanishads in *The Waste Land*, the virtues mentioned in the poem are universal and can be found in all religions and philosophies.

J. Robert Oppenheimer

Oppenheimer is hailed as the father of atomic bomb. He was extremely intelligent and could learn difficult languages like Sanskrit and Dutch in a few months. He could assimilate all theories and was fascinated by quantum physics when he was in Europe. He was revered in America and when the Manhattan Project was initiated Oppenheimer was chosen to lead the team of thousands of people including the best physicists, engineers, and army personnel in view of his intelligence, leadership ability among equals and superiors, subject expertise, personal knowledge of the German scientists involved in the creation of Nazi bomb and hard work.

Oppenheimer in his early years was associated with Felix Adler's Society for Ethical Culture which focused on human welfare as its basic tenet; not transcendental aspects of religion. As a young man in the 1920's Oppenheimer was conspicuously ambitious (Figueira 19) with a sense of the social burden of doing something that would be beneficent to the world; however it threw an immobilizing burden on Oppenheimer (Bird and Sherwin 101).

Then Oppenheimer began to study Sanskrit with Arthur W. Ryder at Berkeley and found it marvelous (Smith and Weiner 165). He started attending Ryder's Thursday evening readings of the Gita and the ethics of the Gita prepared him for his future endeavours that shaped the destiny of the entire mankind. The verses on *Karma Yoga* also called the path of selfless service in Chapter 3 of the Bhagavad Gita offered an acceptable notion of action to the troubled mind of Oppenheimer involved in the making of the atomic bomb.

Verse 1: Arjuna said: If Thou thinkest that knowledge is superior to action, why then, O Kesava, doest Thou ask me to engage in this terrible action (war)?

Verse 4: (Lord said) Man does not reach actionlessness by not performing actions; nor does he attain perfection by mere renunciation.

Verse 7: But whoever, controlling the senses by the mind, O Arjuna, engages himself in Karma Yoga with organs of action, without attachment, he excels. (Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 3)

Gita's notion of action with detachment and renunciation of the fruits of action served as a viable alternative to Adler's insistence on constant self-analysis and self-evaluation (Figueira 21). It also brought an element of spiritualism in Oppenheimer's life replacing secularism taught in childhood. He realizes that a *Karma yogi* is a stoic but without a tragic sense of life. The words of the Lord in the Gita gave him equilibrium in thought and emotions. It added a spiritual dimension to the notion of duty towards the motherland. Above all the ideas suited his sense of self-exceptionalism and rejected the burden of personal responsibility of making a bomb of mass destruction.

The teachings of Gita guided him in managing the lab at Los Alamos and agreeing to the use of the bomb for military purposes. In one of the speeches to the Association of Los Alamos scientists, he said that it was their duty as scientists to build the bomb (Smith and Weiner 317). When Szilard wanted him to submit a petition requesting not to drop the bomb over a city, he refused to do so and told his fellow physicist Edward Teller, 'Our fate was in the hands of the best, the most conscientious men of our nation, and they had information which we did not possess' (Brown 13-14). He later said, 'I did my job which was the job I was supposed to do. I was not in a policymaking position at Los Alamos' (USAEC 236).

It would be a great injustice to Oppenheimer to say that he used the principle of *karma yoga* to do what he wanted to do without feelings of guilt or self-criticism. He imbibed the essence of Gita and understood what the Lord said that he was the creator as well as destroyer, the mighty Time.

The Supreme Lord said: I am mighty Time, the source of destruction that comes forth to annihilate the worlds. Even without your participation, the warriors arrayed in the opposing army shall cease to exist. (Bhagavad Gita: Chapter 11, Verse 32)

Oppenheimer was not unaware of the consequences of the use of the atomic bomb. In an NBC 1965 documentary, 'The Decision to Drop the Bomb,' (Banco 143) he recounts his memory of moments after the blast:

We knew the world would not be the same... I remember the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita: 'Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.'

He understood he was only a tool in the grand design of destiny and he was pleased that he did his duty perfectly. That is why he could also accept his status after losing

his security clearance without any complaints as he knew his limited role in the grand cosmic design.

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