



Shantih shantih shantih : T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and South Asian Perceptions

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Abstract

One of the most important literary figures of the twentieth century, T. S. Eliot, lived in a time marked by not just two terrible and dreadful world wars but also by fast mechanization, industrialization, urbanization, and, certainly, mass consumerism. Eliot was a dedicated student of philosophy who showed a particularly keen interest in the Eastern belief system. This study will attempt to examine T. S. Eliot's epoch-making poem 'The Waste Land' and its connection with South Asian culture and ideology. In order to understand the crises of post-war modern European civilization, reflected in the poem as spiritual decline, treachery, deception, and skepticism, Eliot drew upon certain sources that could counter the wisdom of the West. Eliot along with his poetic vision as well as sensibility manifests in the Bhagwad Gita, Upanishads, Vedas, Patanjali's Sutras, Buddhism, and so forth. East, for Eliot, is a glimmer of hope for a world afflicted by its own spiritual problems. The influence of South Asian perception can be identified throughout the poem. The paper will attempt to foreground that the cultural integration of the East and the West has been addressed in a secular spirit rather than being in conflict.

Keywords

World wars, Philosophy, Aesthetics, Spiritual problems, Cultural integration

Introduction

Religion, philosophy, and poetry are undoubtedly quite different from one another in conception and may have different goals, yet in actuality they often intersect. For instance, poetry may express strong emotions in a singular way while also having undertones of both religion and philosophy. Additionally, poetry, religion, and philosophy all arise from their strong and in-depth levels with specific powerful sensations that develop into intricate visions with cosmic importance. Therefore, by using the sharp senses that underlie T. S. Eliot's poetry, we may go further into the works of a philosophical poet. We may see how profoundly the deep-rooted philosophies influenced Eliot's worldview and learn more about his grasp of the human condition by examining these findings with those of the Upanishads.

Thomas Sterns Eliot (26 September 1888- 4 January 1965), a central figure in English language modernist poetry, is one of the many thinkers in the Western world who has been drawn towards the traditional and old wisdom of South Asian philosophy. One of the key figures of the twentieth century, Eliot lived in a period etched by not just two horrible and devastating world wars but also by technological advancements, industrial developments, growing urbanizations, and undoubtedly, mass consumption. The study examines the deterioration of modern-day civilization and several other facets, encompassing lifestyle, thinking, and religion, as well as every part of existence. It aims to demonstrate how human beings have been ethically and spiritually damaged by following meaningless practices, material gain, desire, dominance, and temptation. In reality, the poem *The Waste Land* provides an account of an insightful and deeply emotional portrait of the spiritual condition of modern man. Through the poem, Eliot focuses on the utter sterility and morbidity of modern times. He reflects on the loss of conscience and wisdom of modern wastelanders, their affectionless relationships, distress, and sexual perversion.

He not only highlights the degenerative aspects of modern civilisation but also finds the path to salvation through his deep knowledge of philosophy and spirituality.

It is now well acknowledged that T. S. Eliot drew inspiration from Indian philosophy for both his poetry and drama. It is significant to explore how Eliot uses Indian philosophy explicitly in both his poetry and drama. In *The Waste Land*, the third section, titled 'The

Fire Sermon’, Eliot explicitly refers to the Buddha’s Fire Sermon and purposefully unites St. Augustine and the Buddha as an essence of the poem; he also makes an indication towards the thunder of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad in the poem’s concluding section. Eliot in *Burnt Norton* makes a pointed reference to the lotus, a representation of the supreme reality in Hinduism as well as in Buddhism. In the third poem of *The Dry Salvages*, he evokes Krishna’s lessons; at the climax of *The Cocktail Party*, he further encompasses a seemingly exact transcription of a passage from the Gita (Chapter 8, verse 5); and in Act II of *The Dry Salvages*, he retells Sir Harcourt-Reilly’s words from the Buddha’s last sermon – ‘Work out your salvation with diligence’. Due to the context in which they appear, such apparent links cannot be viewed just as a facade or disregarded as bizarre; rather, they must be viewed as essential components of supreme entirety. Furthermore, they powerfully imply how Eliot uses South Asian philosophical ideas and symbols in his works.

According to T. S. Eliot, Western civilisation had major drawbacks. He never considered Western philosophy to be the most superior one. Oriental texts, in the past, were regarded as inferior in comparison to the Western text by early scholars. Eliot, however, opposed the binary division between the Occident and the Orient. His understanding of South Asian philosophy, anthropology, and Sanskrit texts indicates that he stood apart from the colonial/imperial conceptions. During his graduation from Harvard, Eliot spent a period of time studying Yoga Sutras with a leading scholar, James Haughton Woods. According to the Sutras, Yoga is the practice of putting an end to ‘the fluctuations of the mind-stuff’ (Patañjali 8) and this offers the potential for optimism and calmness in Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*.

In addition to being evident in the poem’s form, style, and tone as well as in Eliot’s annotations, Patanjali Yoga Sutra’s classical philosophy serves as the foundation for the poem’s depiction of a devotional path. Even though the poem is about fragmentation and degeneration, it can still make sense.

The diversity of *The Waste Land* may be inferred from a wide range of resources used in its composition, including the usage of six languages, widely recognised songs, and thirty-five authors, and one of the languages employed in it is Sanskrit (Diwedi 32). The Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad-Gita, and the two main Hindu epics, the

Ramayana and Mahabharata, are all written in Sanskrit, which serves as the foundation of Indian philosophy and culture. The philosophy of Hinduism and Buddhism represents one of the fundamental sources among the other influences that helped in the creation of the masterpiece. As we all know *The Waste Land* is divided into five respected sections – ‘The Burial of the Dead’, ‘A Game of Chess’, ‘The Fire Sermon’, ‘Death by Water’, and ‘What the Thunder Said’. The two from these five sections have a direct connection with the doctrines of Lord Buddha, which is the philosophy of Buddhism, and the principles from the Upanishads, the fundamental component of Hinduism.

The Indian belief in the concept of soul transmigration is illustrated in the opening section of the poem, ‘The Burial of the Dead’. Rebirth occurs after death. Though the title is taken from *The Book of Common Prayer*, it refers to the burial of the fertility gods alluded to by Weston and Frazer (Thomas 238). The first section’s title alludes to what is known as ‘Dhavani’ in Indian aesthetics. Two different types of death—one physical and the other spiritual—are what the poet seeks to present. Even while a person is living, spiritual death can still happen. The poem’s apparent purpose is to teach the unknown. The poem starts with the letter ‘A’, the initial letter of the English alphabet. The poem’s first letter is crucial to one’s life lesson as well. However, the people who stay in the ‘wasteland’ do not recognise the sacredness of this letter. The poem *The Waste Land* starts with the following lines:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers. (Lines 220-221)

Easter which generally falls in the month of April commemorates Jesus Christ’s resurrection. Even in the myths of vegetation myths, spring drew potency to the Fisher King as well as fertility in his land. In the poem, April is known to be the cruellest month because the resurrection and the stirring of life are determined by fear and anxiety. It is ironic that ‘winter kept us warm’. Also, Lilacs, which are a symbol of fertility as per

primitive myth, are brought in an ironical sense to point out that in the modern world, ruined due to wars and consumerism, bloom 'out of the dead land'. Eliot uses the subtle imagistic objective-correlative of deadly winter and regenerating spring with its drop of water, only to indicate the spiritual void that can be transformed by the understanding of Oriental scriptures as well as Buddhist philosophy. The philosophy suggests that human being ought to seek his salvation or 'Nirvana' by atoning for the sins he has committed in his lifetime.

In his notes, Eliot stated that the title has been derived from Miss Jessie Weston's treatise *From Ritual to Romance* where she depicts the cults of vegetation and fertility as well as the importance of the Grail Legend to bring back life to the barren land by the atonement of the sins of Oedipus of Thebes, subsequently recognized as Fisher King in the last section of the poem wherein a quest for the Holy Grail is to be executed. The desolate land of spiritual disorder where human beings are living will become a land of vegetation and fertility when water is sprinkled on it. Therefore, the wastelanders should begin their search for the spiritual droplets of water that symbolises the belief in the presence of the almighty God. This perception of Eliot suggests that he made a wise choice in using the title of his poem to contradict Western/modern epistemology to foreground a remedy for the issue of spiritual barrenness. The poem's title might be linked to a significant Buddhist scripture, *Dharmapada* wherein Goutam Buddha advises people to cultivate Bodhi Trees in their souls by being spiritually conscious of themselves –

In any case, we should find it illuminating to read a Thai Buddhist monk's translation of Dhammapada under the title 'Growing the Bodhi Tree in the Garden of the Heart ...'. The question now is how to grow the seeds of this tree in the heart of every one of us – which is analogous to the re-enactment of crucifixion in the life of every Christian. The land is wasted and the seeds have no chance to grow without the water. There are verses in the Dhammapada that say they should be irrigated well with the waters of compassion and richly manured by meditation. (Narasimhaiah 97-98)

This implies that realising oneself and learning about the Supreme power are achieved via meditation and atonement. So, human beings ought to strive for his redemption by seeking enlightenment.

In the second section of 'A Game of Chess', Eliot illustrates the terrible situation that modern humanity finds itself in because it lacks even the most fundamental understanding of profound values. They have become so engaged in animistic principles that they have lost sight of their humanity. A crucial component of life is sexuality as 'man's fate originates in sex', yet now, rather than emerging as an approach for reproduction, it has become an object of intrigue. The most sacred institution, marriage, has been degraded to the same stage as drug addiction as well as has become a pure excuse to indulge in sensual and carnal pleasures without any regard for obligations to one's family. They see existence as nothing more than 'a game of chess' on this planet. Family life and marital life function mechanically. Surekha Dangwal in *Hinduism in T. S. Eliot's Writing*, regarding this topic, states, 'The man is not ready to bear responsibility, and woman, not ready to bear children. If the attitude, like the waste-landers, keeps on growing, the world is supposed to come to a standstill some day' (20-21). In the poem the episode between Albert and Lil highlights the emptiness of marital relationships –

I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,
It's the pills I took, to bring it off, she said.
(She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)
The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the same.
You are a proper fool, I said.
Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said,
What you get married for if you don't want children? (Line 226)

These lines allude to the careless desire as well as an absence of pure attachment and obligations in marriage. However, if interpreted with an Indian perspective, these statements particularly the final line, offer a resolution to the issue. Marriage, in India, is seen as a ritual or 'sanskara', a connection of affection, respect, and commitment between two individuals, and parenting is also regarded as 'sanskara'. Lil, the lady, has broken the marriage's sacredness and interfered with reproduction itself after using medications. Eliot in his work indicates that sex is essential to a person's existence and that, for birth control, people ought to follow 'sanyam'.

The third section of the poem 'The Fire Sermon' takes its name from the Fire Sermon that Gautam Buddha delivered to persuade his Buddhist disciples from the destructive and

harmful effects that the fires of lust, temptation, obsession, and hate had on the human soul. While Buddhism as a religion originated in India, King Ashoka, the Mauryan king of the third century BC, was instrumental in its expansion to Sri Lanka, Burma, Malayasia, Tibet, Thailand, China, and Indonesia in South Asia. In these nations, the teachings of the Buddha are still remembered, revered, and practiced. This perception of man's existence is foregrounded by Saint Augustine, a true ascetic of Christianity. He acknowledges that when he was younger, he struggled to resist the temptation of physical impulses. Buddha preaches – 'All things are on fire / They are on fire of infatuation; with birth, old age, death, sorrow lamentation, misery, grief, and despair' (Warren 352). Therefore, in order to develop an aversion to these emotions and practices, the life of 'asceticism', a path of redemption should be practiced. This is required to liberate themselves from the never-ending misery of passion and temptation. It is worth citing Dr. Surekha Dangwal's statement in this regard: 'Desire is the root cause of man's sufferings, and the moment he gets rid of it, he attains perfect 'Nirvana'... [and] the attainment of 'Nirvana,' as preached by the Lord, is the self-denial, which implies the rejection of all senses' (33). Together Gautam Buddha and St. Augustine's references indicate that the knowledge of East and West coexists to illustrate the route of redemption or 'Nirvana'. Hindu texts claim that there is a higher fire called 'Tapa' that exists and that it consumes the fires of desire while the human soul experiences the ecstasy of cleansing known as 'Anand'.

In *The Waste Land* 'Death by Water' is a revised version of the last section of a French poem called 'Dans le Restaurant' written by Eliot. This part of the poem indicates the relation of water with mortality and the state of death by drowning. It has a connection with the drowned god of fertility cults, a reference to the shipwreck in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The Bengali community of India follows the same ritual on the final day of the Durga Pooja Festival wherein they immerse the decorative idol of goddess Durga in the water. In Maharashtra, the same practice is seen on Ganesh Chaturthi.

Eliot conceived that the final part of the poem titled 'What the Thunder Said' was not only the finest section but also this particular part justified the whole poem. In the *Upanishads* the message of the thunder, as referred to in the poem is metaphorical, deciphering Prazapati's teaching style to his three different types of disciples – gods, mankind, and demons. The three disciples approach the father preceptor and explain

what they have learned during the time allotted for study. After completing their reading, the three disciplines approach the father's preceptor and question him about the virtues they ought to bring in themselves to have a meaningful existence. Prajapati says the syllable 'da' three times, with different meanings for each of them; for gods 'da' means Damyata (Control yourself), for men Datta (Give in); for Demons, it signifies Dayadhavam (be compassionate). The poem finally ends on an optimistic note with the triple use of the words 'Shantih shantih shantih', foregrounding peace and tranquility in this meaningless world.

We live in a world where atomic power is considered to be supreme and fear has become constant. Eliot understood the fact that peace, instead of war and hatred, is much needed in this situation. The poem was composed against the backdrop of the atrocities of World War. This kind of thought is even put out by academics such as F.R. Leavis, '... the poem ends where it began' (Leavis 103). A state of order and stability was desperately required to set the entire humanity on a secure path. The last words of the poem refer to the first section of the poem that depicts the curse of 'dead land' – 'Shantih' provides the only calmness and hope, according to the poet, to escape from the 'cruellest' spatiotemporal existence. Manju Jain depicts, 'Eliot's use of 'Shantih' implies that he had to look beyond the European tradition to find a word of adequate depth and resonance' (194). The last line, which bestows tranquility and order, functions as the beacon light of the East to the entire human existence. Eliot's understanding of the South Asian philosophy and its implication through his masterpiece serves as a panacea for every ailment plaguing the modern world. Eliot's ability to discern and evoke the timeless and universal reality of mankind, beyond the artificial divisions between the East and the West, is actually what gives his work an eternal elegance and a profound power. The poem's universal overview indicates to a greater vision and hope.

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