

From Allusions to Illusions: A Critical Study of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* with Special Reference to the Indelible Influence of Indian Thought on Eliot

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Abstract: The fact that a plethora of allusions drawn from the Indian philosophy found their way into T.S. Eliot's seminal work *The Waste Land* speaks volumes about the indelible imprint the Indian philosophy had had on the critically acclaimed poet. The text is not only peppered with Sanskrit phrases such as "Shanti Shanti" but also sees Eliot alluding to the three cardinal virtues of Damyata (Restraint), Datta (Charity) and Dayadhvam (Compassion). Although many literary critics, including David Naugle, E.L. Mayo, PS Sastri and G. Nageswara Rao, have previously pointed out the Vedic and Buddhist references in the said poem, the exact extent of Eliot's Indian connection continues to elude us to date. The present paper aims to sift through the comments of the critics mentioned above and re-examine the poem by reading it through the lens of Orientalism. The researcher will also probe into the downside of confining the work at hand to the cloistered walls of Indian wisdom alone, thereby reiterating the universal outlook that the poem exhibits even in contemporary times.

Keywords: Wasteland, Buddhism, Universalism, Indian Philosophy, Vedic Thought

Introduction

While famous poet W.B. Yeats gleaned an apocalyptic vision of the turmoil that was to follow in the aftermath of the First World War and let out a resonating lament in his poem *The Second Coming*, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world", Yeats' contemporary modernist poet- T.S. Eliot found solace in the warm cocoon of age-old Hindu wisdom and philosophy. The multitude of allusions drawn from Indian philosophy and

the usage of Sanskrit phrases in one of his most critically acclaimed poems, *The Waste Land*, stand testimony to the fact that Eliot turned towards the philosophical and religious sentiments of the East to escape the imminent catastrophe of spiritual aridity which he foresaw would befall the West. The poem, thus, renders itself fit for an in-depth study of the extent of faith Eliot reposed in the Hindu philosophy and way of life, especially when it came to solving the predicament that the post-war Western countries found themselves in.

The celebrated poem entirely evidently bore conspicuous impressions of Eliot's Indian scholarship, which he received under the guidance of erudite Sanskrit scholar Professor Charles Rockwell Lanman at Harvard University. Another factor which added to the profound influence of Sanskrit on Eliot's poetic compositions is that Eliot's PhD supervisor Josiah Royce, too, got acquainted with Sanskrit owing to Professor Lanman. The deep interest that Eliot developed in the study of Indian scriptures went a notch higher because of his mentors, George Santayana and Irving Babbitt, who, too, left a lasting impact on the poet's mind. In his essay *Remembering Eliot*, critically acclaimed poet, essayist and novelist Stephen Spender hinted at the degree of interest Eliot developed in Buddhism while writing *The Waste Land* when he noted that, "I once heard him (Eliot) say that at the time of the poem he seriously considered becoming a Buddhist...A Buddhist is as immanent as a Christian in *The Waste Land*" (194).

Such is the extent of allusions to Buddhism, Sanskrit phrases and Hinduism in *The Waste Land* that several renowned literary critics such as David Naugle, E.L. Mayo, PS Sastri and G. Nageswara Rao undertook in-depth studies to point out the Vedic and Buddhist references in the said poem. Another literary critic who merits attention in this regard is writer and critic John Peale Bishop, who called the poem "a Hindu puzzle" because he found the work replete with multiple references to Indian literature (Rainey 33). EL Mayo notes in his work *The Influence of Ancient Hindu Thought on Walt Whitman and T. S. Eliot*, that Eliot was

greatly influenced by Babbitt, whose "system of thought was based upon the study of the Pali manuscripts, the earliest authentic Buddhist document" (173). Interestingly, Eliot himself went on record to admit the profound influence of Indian thought, Hinduism and Buddhism on him in one of his notable works, *Christianity and Culture*, when he said, "Long ago I studied the ancient Indian languages, and while I was chiefly interested at that time in Philosophy, I read a little poetry too: and I know that my poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility" (190-191). In another work, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Eliot acknowledged the deep-rooted influence of Buddhist ideology on himself yet again when he stated, "Some of the early Buddhist scriptures affected me as parts of the *Old Testament* do" (91).

Despite previous scholarly studies on the poem, the exact extent of Eliot's Indian connection has continued to elude us to date. Hence, it becomes all the more critical to shift through the critics' comments, as mentioned earlier and re-examine the poem by reading it through Edward Said's *Orientalist* approach. At the same time, however, caution must be exercised by both critics and readers to refrain from confining the work at hand to the cloistered walls of Indian wisdom alone. This is so because the poem's enormous global fame is proof enough that although it is heavily peppered with references to Hinduism and Buddhism exhibits a universal outlook even in contemporary times. The statement above receives credence by perusing the observations of famous literary critic David Naugle, who famously noted that "Eliot presented the credentials of a wide-ranging poetic sensibility by incorporating in his writings not only the 'best' of European culture but also of Indian thought" (1).

In order to present the best of Indian thought, the text sees Eliot borrowing from the ancient wisdom contained in the most revered scriptures amongst Hindus, such as *The Upanishads*, *The Bhagavad Gita* and *The Sarnath Sermon* by Lord Buddha. Resultantly, the

poem is not only peppered with Sanskrit phrases such as "Shantih Shantih Shantih" but also sees Eliot alluding to the three cardinal virtues of *Damyata* (Restraint), *Datta* (Charity) and *Dayadhvam* (Compassion), which are all drawn from ancient Hindu scriptures. An observation made by literary critic G. Nageswara Rao in his work *The Upanishad in the Waste Land* deserves special attention here, in that it examines the very structure of the poem by envisaging parallels between the five cantos and the five elements of earth as per the belief held by Hindus, especially in context to the knowledge contained in *The Upanishads*. Rao notes, "Two out of the five section headings of the poems are borrowed from Indian sources. One may interpret the poem in terms of five elements which constitute life on the earth according to Hinduism" (84). Of these five cantos, the present paper will focus mainly on two sections profoundly rooted in Buddhist and Vedic philosophy: "The Fire Sermon" and "What the Thunder Said." These sections are precisely where the text can be analysed through the lens of Orientalism, as, driven by the pressing need to usher a wave of spiritual restoration in the post-war world, which was otherwise swiftly heading towards moral annihilation, Eliot turned towards the oriental wisdom of Indian thought contained in the ancient Vedic scriptures.

As pointed out previously, Eliot's knowledge of Oriental mysticism stemmed from the erudition he received at Harvard University. Subsequently, he found the application of European mysticism borrowed from Hindu scriptures such as *The Bhagavad Gita*, *The Upanishads* and Buddhist philosophy as a panacea to cure the West of its moral and spiritual degeneration. Many people also hold the view that Eliot wrote the poem to cope with his crumbling marriage with his wife, Vivienne and turned to Oriental mysticism in order to find a cure for his acute suffering.

The extent of the indelible imprint European traditions had had on Eliot can be deciphered from his comment culled out from his work *After Strange Gods*, "The only hope of really

penetrating the heart of the mystery into the Indian philosophy would lie in forgetting there to think and feel as an American or a European" (43-44). True to his claim, Eliot did succeed in thinking like an Indian philosopher in the third section of *The Waste Land* titled "The Fire Sermon", wherein he alludes to Adittapariyaya Sutta, a sacred book of Buddhism where Lord Buddha's Fire Sermon directed people to renounce all their materialistic temptations. The insistence on renunciation emphasises the theme of illusion versus reality, alluding to the idea of non-dualism propounded by Hinduism and *The Upanishads*. Kristian Smidt's take on Eliot's Indian perspective, especially concerning his inclination towards Buddhist philosophy as evinced in "The Fire Sermon" section of the poem, merits attention here, "The poet's interest in the Buddha, was of long standing" (91). *The Fire Sermon* thus shows Eliot's inclination towards Hindu asceticism and Buddhist conceptions of Nirvana, as Surekha Dangwal notes in her work *Hinduism in T.S. Eliot's Writings* that "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. Both the references of Gautam Buddha and St. Augustine refer that the wisdom of East and West coexist to show the path of salvation (Nirvana) through asceticism" (33). Dangwal poignantly encapsulated the crux of Eliot's writings in the previous work, where she notes, "Eliot's poetic vision, indeed, is the result of the masterful blending of American Pragmatism, British Imperialism and Oriental Spiritualism" (9).

Correspondingly, "What the Thunder Said" sees Eliot dwelling on the notion of the three DA's (*Damyata, Datta and Dayadhvam*) drawn from Hinduism, particularly from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. The tale is rooted in the mythological narrative of Prajapati sharing his pearls of wisdom with his three disciples/sons to lead a truly fulfilling life. The three cardinal virtues which Prajapati asks his disciples to follow are written in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* from which Eliot drew inspiration. Eliot thus extrapolated the

teachings of the learned Prajapati to his disciples into a sermon meant for the entire modern humanity to guide them on how to lead a meaningful life by earnestly practising charity, restraint and compassion.

In his work, *Hindu Law and Custom as to Gifts*, Eliot's Professor of Sanskrit at Harvard University, Charles Rockwell Lanman, noted that "The voice of God repeats, the thunder, when it rolls 'Da Da Da' that is *damyata*, *datta* and *dayadhvam*. Therefore these three must be learned, self-control, giving, compassion" (Grenander and Rao). Thus, according to Lanman, 'The teaching of the Vedas, the Brahman's noblest duty, is a "giving of the Sacred word. The water, once poured out, can never be regathered and taken back. In *the Waste Land*, this idea becomes the awful daring of a moment's surrender/which an age of prudence can never retract" (Grenander and Rao).

Thus, not only does the essence of Indian thought pervade the poem's entire spirit, but it also encompasses the text's structure and how Eliot opens and closes his work. Although the conclusion of the poem with a triple incantation of "Shantih Shantih Shantih" seems pretty innocuously done, the repetition of the Sanskrit phrase holds a special significance. Famous literary critic G. Nageswara Rao decoded it in his work *The Upanishad in The Waste Land* when he remarked, "Word Shantih is purposely repeated thrice to indicate the absolute three-dimensional peace resulting from freedom from all disturbance, From within, from above and from around" (Rao 89). Indubitably then, not only does the Sanskrit phrase refer to the practice followed by Brahmin priests of uttering the word towards the conclusion of a Hindu prayer ceremony but also alludes to it metamorphoses the poem to a sort of incantation or prayer in its own right to reverse the excessive spiritual and moral degeneration of the West which has been robbed of its moral compass in the aftermath of the gory World Wars, to the extent that "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" with no hope of redemption whatsoever but for a return to Indian scriptures and ancient oriental mysticism.

It is interesting to note, however, that although Eliot borrowed heavily from Indian wisdom, the poem retains qualities of universal appeal since he ensured that the work bears the mark of universal appeal by blending Oriental sensibilities with Western philosophy. Eliot achieved this remarkable feat by extrapolating the oriental metaphysics to problems of modernity in the West. He also borrowed extensively from other sources of knowledge to bring forth the perfect blending of "American Pragmatism coupled with British Imperialism and Oriental Spiritualism (read Indian thought)" without letting one overshadow the other, which in turn grants the poem its universal appeal. Much in consonance with the view stated in the preceding sentence, poet and literary critic Conrad Aiken cautioned scholars and literary critics against their overwhelming attempts to enclose the poem within the cloistered walls of Indian wisdom by remarking that the mere fact that Eliot incorporated Indian phraseology in his work does not take away the poem's universal outlook. Aiken substantiates the said claim by highlighting that the intent of Eliot behind quoting from Indian thought was not to restrict it within the meaning of ancient Eastern traditions but to draw a connection with Upanishads and other scriptures, amongst other sources of knowledge.

Aiken thus questioned rhetorically, "Why, again, Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata? Or Shantih? Do they not say a good deal less than 'Give'; Sympathise, Control or Peace'? Of course, Mr Eliot replies that he wants them not merely to mean those particular things, but also to mean them in a particular way, that is, to be remembered in connection with an *Upanishad*" (193). Thus, even the poem's concluding lines are replete with references to the Vedic philosophy, which holds the view that the ultimate goal of life is the attainment of salvation. Hence, when the poet chants the Sanskrit word "Shantih, Shantih, Shantih," it reverberates with Hindu mythology and re-emphasises Eliot's view that while the Western world is inching closer towards spiritual and moral degeneration, understanding the Eastern traditions and Hindu religion is one of the ways to attain ultimate salvation and world peace.

To conclude, the present study's findings indicate that Indian thought undeniably left an indelible imprint on Eliot's mind. It is essential to acknowledge the fact, however, that echoes of the Hindu philosophy found in *The Waste Land* do not in any way snatch its universal resonance. The excessive borrowing from Hindu scriptures and Vedic philosophy became an effective mechanism for Eliot to stultify the problems the modern Western world faced without compromising the global outlook the poem exhibits. It is owing to the timeless, universal appeal that the poem has that even a hundred years after its publication, it continues to be labelled as a watershed in English literature and a path-breaking work which merits in-depth scholarly study even in contemporary times.

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