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Reading T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a Cross-Civilisational Dialogue

Sreejit Datta

Assistant Professor, Rishihood University, Sonipat, Haryana, India

Abstract: A process of gradual loss of tradition within the Western civilisation was precipitated by the First World War. The war's experience and the subsequent withering of the old values gave rise to a new trend in literature and the arts of the early twentieth century, which has been termed Modernism, of which T.S. Eliot's poetry is emblematic. According to a section of critics and cultural theorists, this trend prepared the ground for the postmodernist outlook. Whether or not such a claim is tenable, the text of Eliot's most well-known work, *The Waste Land*, seems to be actively looking for (or, at any rate, representing certain voices that are actively looking for) alternative value systems found in Non-Western civilisations, notably in the Indic civilisation. This paper will examine, using comparative and hermeneutic methods, whether the intertextuality between *The Waste Land* and the Hindu scripture *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* can be read not merely as a cross-cultural transaction in the literary form—a paradigm that has been employed in recent decades to interpret similar literary and cultural phenomena—but primarily as a cross-civilisational dialogue through the lyric mode. The paper will also offer an exposition on how 'cross-civilisational dialogue' may be understood and interpreted based on the critical reception of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and other works by Indian poet-critics like Bishnu Dey and V.K. Gokak. In doing so, the paper will attempt an enquiry into the ontology of categories like "culture," "civilisation," "Indic," and "Hellenic," and more so that future attempts that adopt a similar hermeneutic approach may stand on firmer grounds.

Keywords: Eliot studies, Hermeneutic, Comparative, Lyric mode, Upaniṣhad, Civilisation, Indic, Hellenic, Western, Modernism, Postmodernism

Eliot, a steadfast believer in the enduring value and capacity of the European/Western civilisation as a force for good, has left several indications in his writings (of both the creative and the critical kinds) that he sometimes pondered the question of a possibility of holding a cross-civilisational dialogue. Even if this has not been a constant preoccupation of the poet of *The Waste Land* and *The Dry Salvages*, he certainly brings up the "problem confronting the builder of bridges" (Eliot 193) through imageries, symbols, suggestions, and as sub-themes in the poetry and essays that he wrote during his literary career. In this regard, the question that naturally occurs in the mind of the curious reader can perhaps be framed as follows: what were the pre-conditions and the actual dynamics of such dialogue across civilisations, firstly, as conceived in Eliot's thought and as reflected in his writings, and secondly, but no less importantly, in the reception of Eliot's poetic and critical works by other poets and critics belonging to not only a different literary and cultural tradition but an altogether different civilisation, with which the Western civilisation could engage in a serious dialogue, through the works of individual poets, critics, artists, thinkers, and creative minds in general?

This brings us to the reception of Eliot's poetic and critical works by Bishnu Dey—who donned many hats as a critic, comparativist, professor of literary studies, and, most importantly, a Bengali poet par excellence. The oeuvre of the poet of *The Waste Land* was greatly admired by this versatile twentieth-century Bengali poet, who saw himself as a "progressive artist", and early on in his critical engagement with Eliot's works, he admitted, "how difficult it is for a foreigner to write in brief on the poet who, at the age of nineteen, wrote that strangely mature love-song of the prude Alfred J. Prufrock and whose consistent development has led to the four most important English poems of the century from *Burnt Norton* to *Little Gidding*" (Dey 82). Before moving on to outlining what he perceived as the shortfalls of Eliot's civilisational vision as reflected in his critical works, Dey admirably

concedes that, "Eliot has shown the most complete and vicissitudinous development in contemporary English poetry" (Dey 82).

Offering a comprehensive critical assessment of Eliot's work, something which will prove crucial in our reading of *The Waste Land* as an instance of cross-civilisational dialogue between Europe and Asia (and India in particular), Dey identifies the following points as the most important features of Eliot's work:

- "[T]he quality of pain" or "the note of romantic agony which moves his readers so deeply and lends to his images the magic of symbols." (82)
- Addressing, "in magnificent verse," the conflict—a "maladjustment of opposites"—of values and ideals (and the lack thereof), as well as the conflict between ideas and realities, themes that were constantly playing out within the individual self and in the Modern societies of Eliot's contemporary Europe. (83)

In the following paragraphs, let us elaborate on these essential features or hallmarks of Eliot's poetic and critical corpus, as perceived by Bishnu Dey.

Dey locates the source of what he has dubbed a "romantic agony" perceptible in "the last romantic" Eliot's poetry, in the characteristic conflict between received values, ideals, and ideas. The stark lived realities of a war-ravaged European/Western civilisation, which literally lay in ruins during Eliot's life and times as a result of the two World Wars and their catastrophic impact on the economic, psychological, and spiritual lives of the European peoples. In Dey's words, the outcome of this was a "maladjustment of opposites", a trait which was "not personal but typical of the age and of the society itself" (Dey 83). The successful capturing in English verse of this failure of the "Modern Society", i.e., post-war Europe, to bring any semblance of a meaningful harmony between "the opposites" gives Eliot's works their special and lasting significance in the assessment of Bishnu Dey. "The Opposites",

mentioned by Dey in this context, indicate the apparently unbridgeable duality between pre-war Europe's civilisational values and ideals and post-war traumatised Europe's material and psychological realities on the other.

In *What Krishna Meant: An Essay on T.S. Eliot*, Dey pays homage to the poet of *The Waste Land*, despite some fundamental disagreements he had with the latter's outlook in general, and in particular with the poet's abiding faith in European/Western civilisation as a force that can resolve, once and for all, the aforementioned conflicts between opposing values and realities. Dey's respectful homage to Eliot is mainly due to the fact that the latter not only lived through the experience of this conflict of maladjusted opposites, thereby constituting an example for later generations of poets, critics, and creative minds in general, but he also successfully captured that disheartening—at times traumatising—experience "in magnificent verse" (Dey 83). Dey pins the profound influence of Eliot on modern (and even postmodern) poets upon the former's acute awareness of the conflict of opposites in his society and the self and "the consequent attitude of objectivity". In Dey's critical assessment, the generations of poets that succeed T.S. Eliot "find in his poetry the quality of a releasing force" when they encounter Eliot's treatment of this sense of conflict throughout his poetic corpus (Dey 83).

Elsewhere Dey has interpreted Eliot's abiding faith in (and not merely a romantic idealisation and even idolisation of) the Western civilisation as "Europeanism" (27). For Eliot, Dey notes, this Western civilisation is best represented in and by:

1. the pre-Christian or "pagan" mythologies, the classical literature and the arts that germinated within that milieu, and
2. Christianity itself, and the medieval as well as pre-Modern classics of literature and the arts—those that were achieved within a Christian milieu and typically under the imposing presence of the Church at the backdrop of the general culture in Europe (prominent examples of such literary classics would

be: the Catholic Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* and the Puritan John Milton's *Paradise Lost*).

Eliot has drawn many symbols and images (not to mention the many quotations) that are ubiquitously found in his poetic corpus, mainly from these twofold sources. In fact, as Dey points out, Eliot has categorically mentioned in his two lectures on Virgil these twofold sources as "two stages" of the European/Western civilisation, the first of these being the "Classical period," which is most characteristically represented by Virgil, and the second being the "Christian period," of which Dante was the most typical representative (Dey 27). This shows us the contours of Western civilisation as imagined and represented in Eliot's thoughts and works.

Moreover, herein also lies the crux of Dey's criticism of Eliot's poetry and his aesthetics in general, something that gives us a measure of the worldview of Eliot, the pioneer of Modernism in English poetry, against the values and aesthetic sensibilities of another poet from another era and another living civilisation, and thus one belonging to another living literary tradition that is totally different from the European literary tradition. Dey accuses the poet of Prufrock of explaining away an entire literary-cultural-historical period—one that he calls the "post-Christian or Capitalist stage of West European civilisation"—as a mere complication in Economics (27). This stage or period, though a global phenomenon, belongs prominently (if not primarily) in the West on account of the fact that the material and socio-political conditions that gave rise to this period first manifested in Western European nations before they could spread elsewhere. It is another matter that Dey might have missed, or perhaps did not want to admit, that there is also the possibility that Eliot did not grant any lasting aesthetic and spiritual value at all to what the Post-Christian or Capitalistic age could offer to humanity in the form of literature and art.

However, even while levelling this accusation, Dey, perhaps a bit inadvertently, brings out the operative principle of Eliot's poetics and, indeed, his entire aesthetics—which is the conviction that "the world can be saved and harmony brought about" between conflicting realities that currently only exist in grotesquely maladjusted arrangements within the individual's self as well as the society at large" (Dey 27) by that which is most sublime in the Western civilisation—in the best that it has to offer to the modern/postmodern European individual and society and indeed the whole of humanity: viz., its poetry, its ancient mythologies, its grand religious art and architecture, and the highest peaks of its diverse, sometimes obscure, spiritual terrain.

Dey also describes Eliot as "the great poet of self-consciousness" and thus recognises self-consciousness as "the subject matter of his poetry" (83). On that account, he places Eliot in the same league as Kafka, Proust, Joyce, and Woolf, observing that what these writers have achieved in "easier" prose, Eliot has achieved in the domain of poetry, which is presumably a more complex genre. "In other words, according to Dey, Eliot has undertaken a daring journey into self-consciousness – the kind of journey that would be a lot more difficult to embark on through the lyric mode than through the narrative mode (i.e., in the modern genres of novel and short story)—

and successfully charted quite a bit of that blurred terrain using the medium of poetry. Dey also credits Eliot for demonstrating a sincere intent to find a sensible adjustment or resolution of the conflict-ridden self and society in post-war Europe (83).

Against this backdrop, let us take a close look at the Indian influence on Eliot's works and explore if that may constitute a dialogue of any kind across civilisational differences.

Firstly, there is the possibility of finding the "universality of meaning" in great works of art. Eliot's *The Waste Land* certainly falls in the category of great art, as the sheer amount of attention devoted to the poem, the scholarship and critical literature on it, as well as a general

cultural consensus about its greatness accumulated over a century would testify. Therefore, it would make sense if we look for the universality of meaning (across space and time, across cultures and civilisations of widely different varieties), of any kind, in what the poem conveys.

In this connection, we recall V.K. Gokak's remark on the poem, wherein he observes:

Eliot's *Waste Land* [sic] is not just the voice of a lost generation. It is the picture of a period of aridity in the life of an individual as well as in the culture of a continent. The idealisation of an object or theme thus means the apprehension and delineation of its most essential features, eliminating all accidental qualities. The isolation of and concentration on essential traits results in a certain universality of meaning. (3)

Gokak's use of the phrase "the culture of a continent" gains a special significance when we read it within the framework of a civilisation, which essentially consists in the acknowledgement of a common inheritance of tradition claimed by that portion of humanity which is contained within a vast geographical entity for a sustained period of time, and a certain commonality of thought or inclination of the best or representative minds of that cultural-geographical complex. Interestingly, Gokak connects the image of aridity from his reading of *The Waste Land* with "the life of an individual as well as...the culture of a continent" (3). This simultaneous connecting of a specific trait, which is a poetic theme in its own right, with the individual life and the continent's culture, and the recognition of "universality of meaning" in the poetic representation of that trait/theme by an Indian critic, who was equally well-versed in the literary traditions and innovations of his own civilisation as well as of the European/Western civilisation, is a concrete example of what we have called "cross-civilisational dialogue", and not merely the apparent presence of *Upanishadic* references in the form of (partial) quotes, paraphrases, stories, symbols, and concepts in *The Waste Land*.

However, one must admit that it is indeed tempting to think of these intertextual references in the poem as an instance of a dialogue attempted, if not actually held, between representative voices of two civilisations (a representative text, or if we are allowed a further leap of reasonable imagination, between the voices of the *Upanishadic* Rishis and the creator of *The Waste Land*). This is especially so in the case of a poet who was only too aware of a crisis that had spread across civilisations in his lifetime and thus had bound those civilisations by the thread of shared destiny—of the lines from Eliot's "The Dry Salvages": "When there is the distress of nations and perplexity/ Whether on the shores of Asia or in the Edgware Road" (Eliot 199).

Furthermore, wasn't Eliot equally a believer in the possibility of building bridges across overwhelming differences of space, time, and cultures, as much as he was a believer in his own 'inherited' tradition and spiritually enthused civilisational culture? Why else would he bother to wonder what a "brown god" or a dark godlike Sri Krishna meant ("I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant" in *The Dry Salvages*) (Eliot 197), and imbued with the colours of his own "life of the individual as well as the culture of a continent" the timeless utterance of the charioteer of the greatest warrior of *Mahabharata*: "And do not think of the fruit of action./Fare forward." (Eliot 198) In the same work (*The Dry Salvages*), Eliot mentions the immensely suggestive "problem confronting the builder of bridges" (193) before offering a poetic hermeneutic of one of the central messages of the *Bhagavad Gita*. This text-to-text (and not mere intertextual) correspondence and poet-to-poet encounter (and not mere influence nor reception) also consist of a cross-civilisational dialogue of one kind.

This personalised hermeneutic, this phenomenological survey of another civilisation's representative text in the poet's own understanding, which is not merely a personal understanding, but one that is imbued with the manner of absorbing or understanding ideas and objects that are characteristic of an entire continent, of a whole civilisation, with its widely

differing experiences through time and climatic-spatial conditions, is what we find achieved in a superlative manner in the final stanzas of *The Waste Land: V. What the Thunder Said*. Here the three attributes *Datta* (the quality of giving that is characteristic of the asura), *Dayadhvam* (the quality of compassion that is characteristic of humanity), and *Dāmyata* (the quality of self-control, characteristic of the god or the godlike), forming a psychology-based framework that the poet borrows from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, innovatively interprets, and offers as a tentative resolution of the chaotic confusion and indeed conflict of a civilisation's values and ideals, are mediated through those as mentioned above hermeneutic, which is at the same time deeply personal (i.e. bears the mark of the individual creative artist's genius or *pratibhā*) and characteristically (European/Western) civilisational. The poet first interprets the quality of giving, the first of the three attributes, when it reaches its zenith—when the giving involves the complete sacrifice of the self to something that inspires one's awe ("the awful daring of a moment's surrender") (Eliot 70), something that remains obscure and unacknowledged in a European cultural milieu in general and in the British culture in particular. Secondly, the poet refers to the quality of compassion, which is simultaneously interpreted as a source of strength and a source of weakness that can even bring one's downfall, a duality characteristic of the human being, by invoking the fragile protagonist of a Western classic, viz., Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. Finally, the poet takes up the quality of self-control for his interpretation; he evokes a clear image of a calm sea and a heart that beats "obedient/ To controlling hands." Thus, it can be understood how Eliot has forged a bridge across civilisational texts in particular and civilisations in general, between the past and the present from different cultural locations, and has demonstrated a marvellous mode of holding dialogues across not just literary traditions, but across civilisations.

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