

Traversing *The Waste Land* with T. S. Eliot and Bishnu Dey

Neela Sarkar

Associate Professor, New Alipore College

Bulu Mukhopadhyay

The Head of the Department of English, New Alipore College

Abstract: This year marks the centenary of the publication of *The Waste Land*, a poem which would almost by itself change the manner in which poetry would henceforth be written. Although Eliot himself described it as “just a piece of rhythmical grumbling” and a “personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life,” it encapsulated the crisis in western culture post World War I. *The Waste Land* made use of allusions, quotations, a variety of verse forms, and a collage of poetic fragments, among other techniques, to convey an experience which was quickly recognised as the commentary of the times. These would also become the maker of modernist poetry.

In Bengal, a group of young poets were experimenting with new poetic idioms. *The Waste Land* was an eye-opener for this generation. A brilliant Bishnu Dey, a member of this group, evokes Eliot in his bleak portrayal of urban reality, use of concrete incongruous imagery, allusions to western music and classics, and the use of interior monologue, among others. This paper shall attempt to examine how Dey both uses *The Waste Land* and transmutes it.

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For many readers, T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) is synonymous with modernism. Everything about his poetry bespeaks high modernism: its use of myth to make sense of modern experience; its collage-like juxtaposition of different voices, traditions, and discourses; and its focus on form as the carrier of meaning. His critical prose set the aesthetic standards for the *New Criticism* and his journal *Criterion* was one of the primary arbiters of taste throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Eliot's wide-ranging but relatively small corpus of work – “The Love Song of J. Alfred

"Prufrock" (1915), the seminal *The Waste Land* (1922), and the later *Four Quartets* (1943), which Eliot considered his masterpiece—has made him the primary figure of modernist poetry both for his peers and for subsequent generations.

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born on September 26, 1888, in St. Louis, Missouri, to a wealthy Unitarian family with roots in Massachusetts. Eliot studied first at Smith Academy from 1898 to 1905 and then at Harvard College from 1906 to 1909. Eliot learned Greek, Latin, French, and German, developing philological skills and understanding varying philosophical traditions. At Harvard, Eliot became interested in French symbolist poetry, especially in the poetry of Rimbaud, Verlaine, and Laforgue. These poets would prove influential for Ezra Pound as well.

In 1911, Eliot enrolled as a doctoral student at Harvard, deeply immersed in Buddhism and learning Sanskrit. Having studied in Germany and at Oxford, Eliot settled in England after the outbreak of the First World War, working as a teacher and, famously, as a banker. He soon became a leading figure in the London artistic scene along with Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and others became a British subject in 1927 and converted to Anglicanism around the same time.

Eliot's first genuinely mature piece of verse, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," written chiefly when Eliot was only twenty-two, was pioneering in its use of interior monologue, in its fragmented structure, and in its startling figurative language ("Let us go then, you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherised upon a table"). It amazed Ezra Pound, three years Eliot's senior, by its modernity, which Eliot had achieved without direct contact with avant-garde movements. Pound, who met Eliot during the second month of the war, arranged to have "Prufrock" published in *Poetry* in June of 1915. With the publication of the volume *Prufrock and Other Observations* by *The Egoist Press* in 1917, Eliot was heralded as the most important of modern poets. He also became the most influential critical voice of the movement, arguing, for example, that, in modern civilisation,

"the poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning" (Selected Essays 289).

In 1922, *The Waste Land* was published, as was James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The 434-line poem helped mark 1922 as a magical year in high modernism. Allusive, musical, and formally and linguistically complex, *The Waste Land* diagnosed the chaos of modernity and provided an example of how art could impose some order on this experience. It expressed a widespread feeling of exhaustion and cultural crisis in the aftermath of the First World War. Like *Ulysses*, it mimicked the different voices of urban life to create a bewildering and complex polyphony. Like Joyce's novel, it used recursive patterning and mythic parallels to provide some semblance of organic harmony. This year marks the 100th year of the publication of *The Waste Land*, and Literature Departments worldwide are celebrating this occasion which had ensured that poetry would become a vigorous, intellectual pursuit deserving of the highest critical engagement on the part of the reader. The dust from *The Waste Land* has blown far and wide and settled on pages of literature in distant lands. Since its publication in 1922, scholars have tried to find meaning and trace its resonances in other literary works. Karl Shapiro commented shortly after its publication that it was made the "sacred cow of modern poetry and the object of more pious literary nonsense than any other modern work save *the cantos* of Pound" (Shapiro 58). Young poets and writers worldwide were suddenly galvanised into poetic creativity by this innovation in poetic idiom and tried to imitate, learn and incorporate this complex poetic style in their creations.

During the early 1930s, a literary movement had begun in Bengal against the influence of Rabindranath Tagore. Just as early as the 20th-century English poetic movement was to denounce the influence of Georgian and Victorian literature, so too the current crop of young writers and poets sought to move out from under the tall shadow of Tagore. The 20th-century

poetic movement revolted against the Romantic literary style, intending to combine poetic and colloquial diction with materialistic, realistic subject matter.

This was the aim of the poets in Bengal in the early 1930s, who heralded the Modern age in Bengali poetry. This movement was a revolt against what they felt was dead form and preparation for renewal. The poets who spearheaded this movement in Modern Bengali poetry were Buddhadeb Bose, Sudhindranath Dutta, Bishnu Dey, Jibanananda Das, and Amiya Chakraborty. The Poetic merit of these poets is reflected in the magazine's pages named "Kallol", which means a "rippling current". It was a journal begun in 1923 by Gokul Chandra Nag and Dinesh Chandra Das to encourage the work of these young poets, many of whom found the inspiration for their new poetic movement from the creator of *The Waste Land*. This paper shall attempt to study the influences of *The Waste Land* on the poetry of Bishnu Dey, a young Bengali Poet beginning his poetic career in the Bengal of the 1930s.

Bishnu Dey was born in 1909 in Kolkata. In those days, Kolkata was the capital of British India, a thriving, bustling, impersonal city not yet ravaged by the partition of India. Bishnu Dey hailed from an urban, prosperous and educated family. Even today, there is a street in central Calcutta in his grandfather's name. He started school at the age of 10 years, in 1919. He studied at Mitra Institution and Sanskrit Collegiate school and was impressed by the views of Rabindranath Tagore on the colonial system of education, and he wanted to leave school. He, however, did manage to become a professor of English.

During his adolescence, he was deeply disturbed by the ongoing contemporary socio-political struggle aimed at freeing the country from the shackles of colonial rule. The ongoing political agitation left an indelible imprint on his mind, and many years later, he would write "Consciousness till Death", a poem in his Collection of Poems, "Tragic Joy of History" (translated by Bulu Mukhopadhyay)

"Waste Land all around, not luxurious Western but empty and primitive

A prey to the dinner of foreign and native through three centuries
Death of Hollow men play musical tones
As I move on, I see perversion and exploitation
Famished, suffocated, thirsty road ends in wilderness saved from forestation.
Many people, men, women and children, eat as if it were a great feast in
pebbles and molecular waste
They are served by Death alone.
Look out to find no difference between relative and stranger
As I sit on cactus bush, filling my hands with consciousness till Death."

The above extract shows the influence of Eliot in its desert setting, startling and stark imagery, and consciousness of a world on the brink of annihilation, a Waste Land.

By 1930, Bishnu Dey had already read *The Sacred Wood and other Poems* (1925) by T. S. Eliot. In his early career stages, Dey was deeply influenced by T. S. Eliot's idea of tradition and the historical sense. Bishnu Dey's concept of *traditionalism* meant affirming one's own heritage, and this tradition should include, for example, the Vedas, Rabindranath, and even folk literature. The search for tradition should not be confined to one's language or country. It should extend to include other nations and cultures if there is a connection. His literary horizon included works of literature from England, France, China, Russia and America. It included painting, music, dance and drama. It included *The Upanishads*, Greek mythology, Tagore and fairy tales. It included the symbol of Arjuna, Hamlet, Artemis, and Urvashi. He drew inspiration from Dante and the moderns and even took Chaucer's *Cressida* and Shakespeare's *Ophelia* as objective correlatives. He was convinced that even the contemporary existing traditions of poetry anticipated future development, and a new poem was actually a tradition in its formative stage. Like Eliot, Bishnu Dey moved across realms and pages of antiquity,

finding myths and characters to suit his poetic purpose, e.g. he uses the characters of *Ophelia* and Chaucer's *Cressida* as objective correlatives of faithless love in the modern world.

The educated Urban Middle Class of Bengal, educated in western thought and philosophy, had no trouble understanding the revolutionary thoughts in Science, Philosophy, Psychology, Politics, and Sociology, which had transformed Europe post World War 1. Bishnu Dey translated many of T. S. Eliot's poems since the early 1930s. *He began with translating The Journey of the Magi (1932)*, followed by *Song of Simeon, Hollow Men, Marina, Coriolan, Burnt Norton, Ash Wednesday*, and *Love Song by J Alfred Prufrock*, during the two decades of the 20th century. He felt that Eliot widened and deepened his vision of literature. Bishnu Dey saw a situational parallel between *The Waste Land* and the socio-economic condition of Bengal at that time. He saw society as an artificial structure, worn out and practically useless. Men were hollow and stuffed. While Eliot saw Europe as spiritually sterile, Bishnu Dey saw Bengal struggling with intellectual stagnation and ennui. The ordinary people were excluded. Cutting from the common people's vital life-giving forces, the towns and cities had turned into dry deserts. Like Eliot, Bishnu Dey not only presents the darkness of a world like an arid desert but also dreams of creating a new world:

"Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water...."
(What the Thunder Said)
We can compare it with
"Curly, sandy piece of land in moonlight
Was bride chamber never made here?"

A mirage, I call in distant
horizon...."

(Horse-rider, Bishnu Dey, translated by Bulu Mukhopadhyay)

Sean Lucy writes: Eliot has helped to introduce or to reintroduce in an invigorated form four important poetic modes, a) the method of symbolism, b) the method of myth and c) the method of realism, which works by direct reporting combined with acute sensibility and finally d) the method of parallel and contrast, which works by simultaneous evocation and juxtaposition of moods and situations which are at once like and unlike in order to sharpen effects by ironic comparison." We find most of these features in the poetry of Bishnu Dey.

Bishnu Dey translated many of Eliot's poems since the early 1930s. He followed T. S. Eliot's imagery, sometimes also adapting Christian or Western images to Indian counterparts; he used his images in some translations by using images from Indian epics. Inspired by T. S. Eliot, Bishnu Dey used archaic and traditional images in a uniquely modern context, often creating new imagery with them. The economy in vocabulary, the combination of colloquial verbs with classic nouns, the generous use of satire, and arguments and presentation of disturbing images were some of the influences of T. S. Eliot.

Janmashtami is one of the most important religious festivals of the Hindus, the celebration of the birth of the revered Lord Krishna in Hindu mythology. In the poem *Janmashtami* (1936), Bishnu Dey uses it as an image to convey something different:

"I know, I know, Madam, there were many admirers at your feet
I know I am unlucky
Please sit down, they are not listening now, says the poor one
Maybe I will bloom, too, says this poor one
At the meaningful pressure of your hands, one word from your coloured lips
At one drop of water from the silly cloud

Like a Cactus Grandiflora
None of them are listening, please come again,
And I tell you secretly, a little bit of ok, ok you only smile
(Blush on Roma's face hides the darkness of the tiresome work day)
Alaka, who can be unhappy without you?
(Suresh comes every evening)
You are right, colour of your saree intoxicates me
Large peg.
Have you read Lenin's letter?
Remarkable
Interesting
Tell me, you won't think it a song of madness?
I whisper to you, Alaka,
My dreams of day and night float in the laughter of your eyes
Sleepless
For five years
Like Stalin
Is that Lily's tennis partner Khasru Baig? (Translation by Bulu
Mukhopadhyay)

Far from being a poem about Lord Krishna, it describes a spiritual wasteland. The city of Calcutta is the backdrop. Here people go about their business mechanically. Love is a matter of dead habit, and sexual favours are exchanged as a matter of routine. The poem is in the form of an interior monologue; the style is colloquial, and the characters are non-committal. The lines are of unequal length, conveying unease and difficulty in establishing communication. After the World War, people had nothing to depend upon; love, religion,

everything that holds people together, had lost its significance. Allusions are arbitrary and incoherent. as in the use of "Lenin," "Stalin"," Large peg", "Remarkable", "Interesting," "Cactus Grandiflora". As in Eliot's poems, here also we find the character of "Lily":

"She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover:
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass
'Well now that's done; and I'm glad it's over.
When a lovely woman stoops to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone,
She smooths her hair with an automatic hand,
And puts a record on the gramophone. (The Fire Sermon 69)

The woman here is also bored and lonely, often mentioned as Lily., as Lil in Eliot's poems. Love is meaningless and is almost like a chore to be finished. "Well now that's done, I'm glad it's over. Thus, we notice echoes of *The Waste Land* and Eliot throughout Bishnu Dey's body of work. And just as Eliot ultimately found meaning in the Anglican Church, Bishnu Dey transitioned from modernism to the progressive humanism of Marxist socialism. In his poem the *Horse Rider*, he envisions the impending revolution. In this verse, the horseman functions as the objective correlative of social revolution.

"My heart is overflowing with the light air.
Hey, all-conquering, a burning horseman of a remote realm." (GhorSayar)

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