

## What Are The Roots That Clutch, What Branches Grow: Reading Echoes of *The Waste Land* in The Works of Bishnu De and Agha Shahid Ali

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the works of two Indian poets, Bishnu De and Agha Shahid Ali, in conjunction with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. With a hundred years under its wing, the poem has inspired a generation of poets, writers, and critics. This paper argues how *The Waste Land* influences the poetry of Bishnu De, a pioneering figure in Bengali Modernism. Focusing on Bishnu's work from the 1930s, it is argued how he borrows specific visuals, metaphors and concepts from *The Waste Land*. Further, keeping Agha Shahid Ali's 1997 collection of poetry, *The Country Without a Post Office*, in focus, the attempt is to show how *The Waste Land* has influenced the literary and social tradition which Ali skilfully evokes in writing about Kashmir throughout the volume. His multi-disciplinarian use of allusions and references is seen as a direct product of *The Waste Land's* influence. Through these two case studies, I aspire to implicate *The Waste Land's* inspiration in shaping these two poets' poetic methods, form and techniques. The extended aim of the paper is to establish how *The Waste Land*. However, an inherently formative Western piece of Literature built upon inherently Western concepts serves as a crucial literary influence upon works of numerous writers from across the globe, and in this case, from the East. This way, the poem truly succeeds in transcending its spatiotemporal borders.

**Keywords:** Indian Literature, Indian Writing in English, Bengali Literature, Modernism, Intertextuality, Immigrant Literature, and Indian Poetry

"And as for *The Waste Land*," remarks Edmund Wilson, nine years after the poem's appearance, "it enchanted and devastated a whole generation" (Wilson 113-4). Wilson here

definitively refers to Western Civilisation as a collective whole as it was left devastated and delineated in the wake of the First World War. Within *The Waste Land*, published less than a decade after the War's end, Eliot holds up the intellectual, social and moral starvation that the West was facing through a microcosmic view of a war-torn London. Taking into account the variety of insights that numerous critics have pointed out over and over again, all through the hundred years of the poem's existence, Wilson's claim that it 'enchants' a 'whole generation' rings true.

Alternatively, this paper argues that *The Waste Land* does not remain restricted to enchanting and devastating the Western World alone. In this particular instance, I look at the poetic corpus of Bishnu De, a Bengali Modernist Poet writing during the decade of 1930s, and Kashmiri immigrant poet Agha Shahid Ali's late 20th-century collection of poems, *A Country Without a Post Office*. Despite being separated temporarily and spatially from each other, as well as from Eliot's *The Waste Land*, both these poets are heavily influenced by the poem's avant-garde poetic style and method.

### **Eliotian Wasteland in Bishnu De's Kolkata**

With the advent of authors such as Nissim Ezekiel, Amrita Pritam, Khushwant Singh and the like, Indian Literature and Indian Literature in English achieved a new tone, a new mood, and a new sensation. It began to enter the period of Modernism. To alleviate the situation further was the establishment of the Progressive Writers Association, prelude to the advent of the Progressive Writers Movement, often considered to be the very first literary movement in India.

On scrutinising matters further, the literary scene in Bengal had much concurrence with what was prevailing in the nation. When one takes into consideration the decade of the 1930s, a particular group of Bengali poets emerged—they are often spoken of and referred to together because of the very distinct Modernist essence that they brought within Bengali verse

for the first time. In the works of Bishnu De, Amiyo Chakrabarty, Sudhindranath Dutt, Buddhadeva Basu and Jibananda Das, one finds a withdrawal from the blind, spanning note of Romanticism that characterised the poetry of Tagore. While the poetry of Mohitlal Majumdar and Jyotindranath Sengupta—stalwarts of Bengali poetry ruling the earlier decades of the 20th century exhibit the expansive influence of Donne, Swinburne and Rosetti, the new poets of Bengali modernism bring in a wave of different ethos in their work. Their work, in turn, bears traces of influence from the Symbolist movement, the Imagist Movement, as well as the Yeatsian view of inertia and the Eliotian stress of mechanical drudgery. Such, a shift within the reactive psyche of the Modern Day Bengali poet, is promptly captured by the following statement that Jibananda Das himself makes:

"The practice of Rabindranath's poetry became unsuccessful to give solace to the mind of Bengali poets. At least, a few important Bengali poets tried to step aside and avoid Rabindranath and welcomed the positive or negative vision of Mallarme, Paul Verlaine, Rosseur, Yeats or Eliot." (Das 24)

In particular, Bishnu De's poetry illustrates this difference. In fact, when analysing his poetry, one finds strong Eliotian resonance in his method and his conception of the modern landscape. In this respect, and to aid the paper's primary focus, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, in particular, serves as a primary source of inspiration in the formulation of most of his earlier poetry.

That Eliot's influence upon De is expansive should not appear as a surprising element. Being a student of, and consequently a professor of English Literature, it is inevitable for De to have, read and engaged extensively with Eliot's work. His fascination for Eliot runs clearly in the various essays that he composed, along with nearly 17 of Eliot's poems that he translated: 'Ash Wednesday' as 'Chadaker Gaan', 'The Virgin' as 'Devakimata', 'Eternal Dolour'" as 'Chirantan Mathur' and 'Exile' as 'Dwarakay Nirvasan Pala.'

In *The Waste Land*, De could situate a situational parallelism between Eliot's war-torn, disillusioned London of 1922 and the intellectual, moral stagnation that Bengal faced. This parallelism is fully explored and investigated in much of De's poetry that he wrote during the 1930s. In establishing the parallelism between these two radically extreme environs separated not only spatially and temporally but also culturally, he notes:

...we see in Eliot's poetry the poetic and conscious expressions of our doubts and uncertainties, the agony of the civilised mind due to the historic incompleteness of modern life; and the in-comprehensiveness of life itself. For this reason, his poetry... makes those alien wayfarers in troubled lands and self-searching poets of far-off countries obliged to him. (De 11)

Citing the transcendental universality in *The Waste Land* allows De to engage with the poem in a way where he understands the images of futility and stasis not in a restricted manner within the socio-political fabric of post-war western society alone but also in a way that enriches his understanding of the social circumstances of a colonised Bengal state. He borrows this transcendental reading in preparing specific imagery in his poetry.

In *The Waste Land*'s first section, Eliot asks: "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/Out of this stony rubbish?" (Eliot, lines 19-20). Harold Bloom remarks how, through the aridity of the images in these lines, "the poem will examine people's lives (branches) and the culture (stony rubbish) in which they live." (Bloom 26). This brings in a flurry of implications: in describing postwar London life if society is frequented with 'stony rubbish', then how can the very medium of life even clutch? If branches and culture thrive amidst such an arid environment, then what impasse has humankind come to, where it is starved of its very essence? Eliot presents all of these implications, and in the very next line answers the same: "Son of man/ You cannot say or guess..." (20-21) he gives a picture of Civilisation that is disillusioned and has lost its way - here there is no life, nor the resources

to survive. The distinct hopelessness of the situation is further elaborated by conjuring the image of a Desert:

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water. (Eliot, lines 22-24)

Bishnu De's poetry also exhibits a similar concoction of images:

What a cursed country is this, a barren  
Desert under the bitter sun beams  
In the consciousness also there is an uncertain  
Formless dedicated hate. (Rabindranath; Smriti Sattwa Bhaviswat )

And further:

In the privacy of my mind, I have a burnt field,  
Which is my own self  
And there I go on ploughing sowing. (Amio-to; Smriti Swatta Bhaviswat)

Bishnu De's wide employment of desert imagery, which he borrows from *The Waste Land*, is particularly interesting. To describe the decadent state of the Bengal colony in his poetry, De likens it to a desert, when the geography of Bengal does not have a single desert landscape. On the contrary, Bengal is the Land of Rivers. For De to use desert imagery in describing the very same place isn't only peculiar but also a potent bearer of *The Waste Land's* apparent influence upon it:

My heart is on a journey to the other side  
Of the Baitarani,  
There is no boatman and the eyes dazzle  
By sandy land stretching to the horizon (Cresidda; *Shrestha Kabita*)

It is not surprising that *The Waste Land*, out of Eliot's rich poetic oeuvre, holds the fiercest command over the psyche of these poets from Bengal. As Buddhadeva Basu, one of the renowned contemporaries of De, admits, Eliot's near-epic poem stood as an eye-opener for himself and his contemporaries just as it captured the torpor of London's post-war modern existence. It also actively illustrated the sense of languor that Bengal was caught in while providing these poets with "a poetic idiom for negotiating the zeitgeist" (Sarkar).

In Bishnu De's famished landscape of Bengal, the viscosity of Love has also given way to mechanisation. Within a space where humans are sceptical of their existence, the inherent emotion of Love finds no occupation. De expresses how the figures in his poetry have become slaves to the routine of Love rather than truly feeling any stirring:

It is a habit Lily, only a habit  
That I come to your warm happy love-den. (Conditioned Reflex; *Shrestha Kabita*).

The utter mindlessness and sheer mechanical nature of urban existence are crucially highlighted further:

After this there are tea and cards  
Let us play the bridge or say flash,  
With excitement, smokes, slang and laugh,  
And then return to our flats  
To remember again the abdominal pain and cold and cough,  
Noise, congestion, smoke and chile burning tough. (*Janmashtami*)

Here, the deadening aspect of the futility of life is brought forth. The anonymous speaker juxtaposes a life of unhindered routine, broken only by the remembrance of 'abdominal pain and cold and cough'. Such a strain of perfunctory action along with a similar withdrawal of love is present in *The Waste Land* as well, as Eliot describes the half-hearted attempt at love making between the clerk and the typist:

The time is now propitious, as he guesses,  
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,

Endeavours to engage her in caresses  
Which still are unproved, if undesired.  
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;  
Exploring hands encounter no defence;  
His vanity requires no response,  
And makes a welcome of indifference.

...

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. (235-252)

Such drab and desiccated representation of society in Eliot's poetry finally culminates into a state of what De calls 'death in life or life in death' (De). Images of Hell abound in his poetry:

Not in dream, but this is written after  
My return from hell,  
...  
How thousands of life are crushed,  
By habits growing in geometrical progression,  
Thousands of my own self have seen it,  
Suffered from it; (Anwista; Smriti Swatta Bhaviswat)

The image of Death pervading the very foundation of life has a strong resemblance to *The Waste Land*, as Eliot writes:

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (61-65)

Hence, numerous threads of *The Waste Land's* influence appear upon the poetry of Bishnu De. It is extensively from *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, that Bishnu De borrows most of his

visuals and metaphors from while writing nearly a decade and a half after *The Waste Land's* publication.

### ***The Waste Land's* Tradition in Agha Shahid Ali**

Agha Shahid Ali was an Indian immigrant poet from Kashmir. Born in New Delhi to the family of Qizilbashi Agha family of Kashmir, he was the first Kashmiri poet to be writing in English. Although Ali immigrated to the U.S. in 1976, his poetry is reminiscent of his yearning and nostalgia for his homeland. His work brings forth his image as the Exiled Poet, longing to return to his home's comfort but unable to do so.

At least for the first decade of Ali's poetic career, Eliot's influence on his writing has been acutely visible. Having completed his graduation and postgraduation in English Literature and earned a Doctoral from Pennsylvania State University, Ali's exposure to Eliot's poetic oeuvre was wide and free. Ali's first poetry collection—*Bone-Sculptor*, was published in 1972 when he was twenty-three years of age. Constituting 14 poems, the volume not only signalled the potential of the young poet but also set the dominant tone of what the rest of his poetic works would soon resemble in the near future. The poems in this volume mainly deal with subjects of Love, loss, death, cultural dislocation and yearning for the past. The influence of Eliot on this volume is crucially evident. In one of the 1972 reviews of the volume, Sumi Sridharan notes how "[t]he weakness of Shahid's writing is the abstractness of some of the experience and the echoes from Eliot that mar even a good poem like "Bones". (qtd. from Katyal).

Akhil Katyal notes how:

Shahid overdosed on Shelley and Keats until he found Eliot, who was to be cited in his style and content for years afterwards. In his second collection, published while he was finishing his PhD on T.S. Eliot as an editor, he

recounted his Delhi classrooms at the Faculty of Arts, 'A PhD from Leeds / mentioned discipline, casually / brought the waste-land.' (Katyal)

Manan Kapoor, the author of the first comprehensive biography of Ali, notes how:

At this point, during his graduation, Shahid first read Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. In it, Eliot redefines the idea of tradition and stresses its importance in poetry before stating that poetry ought to be impersonal... Through Eliot, Shahid learnt how to incorporate poems' allusions to the works of other poets and realised the importance of sound in a poem...he understood, through Eliot's approach, that the artistic genius in poetry emerged only when it was impersonal. (Kapoor)

In his essay *Tradition and Individual Talent*, Eliot attempts to redefine 'tradition' and explains how authors can incorporate that 'tradition' into their work and further it in the process. For Eliot, 'tradition' is formed by the 'simultaneous order'. This order is constantly in flux and altered by every new work of art a poet creates. For a poet, Eliot writes, to be of great significance, they must embody "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer" (Eliot). He claims that "the most individual parts of [the poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously" (Eliot).

It is Eliot's understanding of tradition that appears in *The Waste Land*. Eliot incorporates a wide blend of allusions in his poetry; through the inclusion of metaphors, epitaphs, notes and end-notes, Eliot makes *The Waste Land* an admirable polyphony of voices which allude to Dante, Kyd, the Greek myth of the Holy Grail, to Ovid, among other great works of art. Agha Shahid Ali's collection *The Country Without a Post Office*, which forms the focus of this paper, embodies a similar vision of the 'tradition' that Eliot speaks of and uses in *The Waste Land*. Rarely blended so extensively by an Indian poet writing in English before, Ali became one of the very first poets within the Indian tradition to borrow from Eliot his wide

perception of the "mind of Europe" (Eliot) and uses it in his own poetic oeuvre. *The Waste Land* becomes crucial in exercising this influence.

*The Country Without a Post Office*, published in 1997, is a volume of poetry that extensively and exclusively deals with Ali's homeland of Kashmir. Highly political in nature, the volume seeks to highlight the rapid succession of uprisings that have gripped and continues to torment Kashmir to this date. Kashmir has been the hotbed of political upheavals since the independence of India. Due to turbulent nation-building decisions surrounding the state, geopolitical conflicts with Pakistan, and gradually rising right-wing *Hindutva* fundamentalism, Kashmir has been the recipient of continued turmoil. Besides, with the support of Pakistan and other Muslim-dominated countries, the rising Islamic fundamentalism in Kashmir has captured the valley in an array of political violence. This eclectic state of unrest finds a voice in Ali's collection.

The nightmarish vision of Kashmir in Ali's poetry closely resembles Eliot's modern-day London's Wasteland. In the excerpt below, the influence of *The Waste Land* is evident in the use of images: a vision of dreariness pervades the lines; a sense of isolation, as well as alienation, is rampant as the narrator walks amidst a landscape of bloody trails, abandoned city, or what he calls the 'massacred town':

In my dream I'm always  
in a massacred town,  
...  
I'm alone, walking among the atrocities,  
guillotines blood-scorched,  
gods stabbed at their altars,  
dry wells piled up with bones,  
a curfew on ghosts ("A Wrong Turn")

In *The Country Without a Post Office*, Ali concocts together a wide blend of literary, geographical and mythical allusions. This assemblage of a wide scholarship is an ode to Eliot's

own diversified usage of the same in *The Waste Land*; at the same time, they primarily serve the purpose of linking Kashmir with other sites of violence, real as well as fictional. Kashmir in Ali's poetry no longer remains confined within the temporal-spatial geographic map of India but is extracted and given a universal appeal. For instance, in his collection, Ali alludes to the Sarajevo crisis thrice and likens Sarajevo to Srinagar:

Say farewell, say farewell to the city  
(O Sarajevo! O Srinagar!),  
the Alexandria that is forever leaving. ("The City of Daughters")

And again:

'I've just come—with videos—from Sarajevo.'  
...  
close-ups in slow motion: from bombed sites  
to the dissolve of mosques in colonnades. ("Correspondent")

Sarajevo, the capital city of Bosnia, 1914 witnessed the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife by a Young Bosnian activist—Gavrilo Princip. The event is often considered to have catapulted the beginning of the First World War. Following the assassination, Sarajevo became the hotbed for anti-Serb demonstrations, riotings and pogroms. In his collection, Ali likens Kashmiri politics to that of Sarajevo.

Further, allusions are also made to warzones in Chechnya and Armenia as these sites are juxtaposed against the ruins of the Kashmiri landscape:

A woman combs—at noon—the ruins for her daughter.  
Chechnya is gone  
....  
Like salt in water,  
what else besides God disappears at the altar?  
O Kashmir, Armenia once vanished. ("Villanelle")

The prologue to the collection, *The Blessed Word: A Prologue*, is especially interesting. In it, Ali combines socio-literary reference, along with a historical one, while trying to convey to the reader the current state of the plight that Kashmir is caught in. The epigraph to the prologue

contains a line by Russian poet Osip Mandelstam: "We shall meet again in Petersburg" (Ali). In this poem, Mandelstam tries to recall and recreate Petersburg after the secret political purge in the city that came to be known as *the Leningrad Affair*. *The Leningrad Affair*, under the leadership of Stalin, resulted in the accusation, execution, and sudden disappearances of thousands of officials, alleged communist conspiracy and treason. Mandelstam's poem tries to recreate this very city of Petersburg amidst the bloody and terror-stricken plight of the citizens under murderous political control.

Petersburg in Mandelstam's poem is an imaginary space imbued with nostalgia; as Ali evokes the poem in the epitaph to his collection, he draws a direct implication between Osip's terrorised Petersburg and his own bloodied Kashmir, along with an intrinsic desire to recreate and evoke an image of peaceful and quiet Kashmir, far removed from its current atrocities.

The poem simultaneously evokes the historical figure of Habba Khatun—a 16th-century Kashmiri poet—who sang elegies for her husband, Yusuf Shah Chak while the Mughal King Akbar exiled him. With this allusion, Ali goes back in time and recalls a Kashmir from centuries back in narrating the tragedy of Habba Khatun while immediately shifting his focus to the Kashmir of the modern-day once again. The temporal shifts inside the poem enable Ali to view the tragedy of Kashmir through the lens of Habba Khatun by establishing smooth conjunction between the two timelines. Ali talks of Habba's lingering grief; "she went among the people with her sorrow. Her grief, alive to this day," *The Blessed Word: A Prologue* (Ali).

Ali also quotes Yelena Bonner, a human rights activist from Russia, in one of the epigraphs to his collection: "No idea, even an idea as close to many Russians as the indivisibility of Russia, can justify a war against a whole people" (Ali). This political intertextuality again brings out the prophetic mould that Ali assumes in his volume in trying to condemn ethnic and religious fundamentalism.

Such wide-spanning instances of political, historical, and mythical integration in Ali's work are heavily reminiscent of the numerous allusions that *The Waste Land* versifies. Eliot incorporates the larger quest narrative of the Holy Grail by combining it with the mythical allusion to the wasteland of Fisher King. Various mediaeval texts take up the running narrative of Arthurian Knights questing for the Holy Grail, the quest symbolising spiritual enlightenment. In many such narratives, the knights come across the kingdom of Fisher King, which is described in bitter aridity, condemned to barrenness; the blighted condition of the land's ruler - Fisher King - was crushed to be sterile, and his sterility permeated his land and subjects. Eliot borrows this literary reference from the King and the Grail. He uses it as a running metaphor to supplement the narrators in *The Waste Land* with a quest to traverse the barrenness of Post-War London in search of intellectual and moral satisfaction.

Dense with literary allusions, Eliot's poem refers to Satyricon of Petronius in its complicated Latin epigraph; to Dante's Purgatory right at the end; it is complete with scholarly testimonials to Shakespearean heroes and heroines, Edmund Spenser, Andrew Marvell, among others. Ali's collection parallels such diversity and evidently looks at *The Waste Land* in colouring the creative acumen behind the ideation of such a method of composition.

Ali assesses the 'tradition' that Eliot speaks of (and himself assesses in *The Waste Land*), but it is not the western canon that Ali turns to. A note of distinct Indianness is pervasive in his poetry: "I can use the Indian landscape and the subcontinent's myths and legends and history from within, and I can do so for the first time in what might seem like a new idiom, a new language— subcontinental English" (Ali).

Through this particular breed of English and poetic method, Ali deviates from Eliot's mannerisms, creating a corpus of work that is individual. He does not blindly imitate Eliot but borrows his method in creating an experimental indigenous blend.

To conclude, Eliot's *The Waste Land* remains a seminal modernist masterpiece. Despite being a heavily Westernised text in terms of composition and implications, it has continued to influence authors across time and geography. For Bishnu De and Agha Shahid Ali - two Indian poets writing in two different languages across two different socio-cultural moments — it is *The Waste Land* that unifies their heterogeneity of vision and miscellany of the poetic method while also simultaneously serving as a literary influence upon both of them.

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