



## Indian Spiritual Tradition as the Shaping Force of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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### ABSTRACT

This study seeks to analyse the Indian spiritual tradition as the shaping force of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. It aims at throwing light on the Indian spiritual tradition which is great and grand, unique and unparalleled, precious and profound. It is by far the oldest and established spiritual tradition, which envisages a great heritage of values and vivacity. The greatness of the Indian spiritual speculations allured the great modern poet, playwright and critic T. S. Eliot whose discreet use of these values in his poetry in general and *The Waste Land* in particular made a way for him to get the world's most coveted award the Nobel Prize. The Indian spiritual thoughts are inundated with enduring values and timeless appeal, which has carved a niche in Eliot's mind. Its universal appeal has the ability to allure all categories of people starting from the illiterate to the elite, from the peasant to the perfectionist, from the writer to the religious preacher with a profound sense of high moral character and ethical living. The soil of Eliot's poetic fervor has been properly prepared with the manure and fertilizer of the Indian religious thought which provides a balanced nutrition to the seedling of *The Waste Land*. In his poetry, traces of reference are found in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita, Buddhist literature and Patanjali's Yoga-Sutras which are scattered everywhere in his works. Eliot's interest in Indian thought got an outlet through the influence of his teachers like Irving Babbitt at Howard, whose "system of thought was based upon the study of the Pali manuscripts, the earliest authentic Buddhist documents." Eliot studied ancient Hindu literature and scriptures for two years under the guidance of Charles Layman. His knowledge of the Indian spiritual thought got an ample place in the fifth section of *The Waste Land* "What the thunder said" which projects his vision of the human condition and the predicament of man in the contemporary world wherein he has overtly used the three Sanskrit sutras *Datta*, *Dayadhvam* and *Damyata* as a solution on the Vedic principles. The journey of the protagonist from the first to the final section shows that the solution rests in the philosophical restraint of the East (Mahmood, S 2018). The poem ends with the Sanskrit mantra: *Shantih, Shantih, Shantih*. Deterioration of human and spiritual values in the modern man has made the world a waste land. In the course of gyral movement, man has been thrown away from his orbit distancing himself from the spiritual path. In such a critical juncture, the Indian spiritual thought as advocated by Eliot in *The Waste Land* can act as the only panacea to save the wastelanders from the modern ills.

Key words: Spiritual, Sanskrit, Vedic, waste land, panacea, modern ills

### 1 Introduction

This paper makes a study of the great Indian spiritual values as the shaping force of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The Indian spiritual tradition is by far the oldest and the best having a great heritage of values and vivacity. It has the superb and supreme power of enchanting the heart of the rich and the poor, the privileged and the unprivileged, the intellectual and the illiterate, the peasant and the perfectionist, the writer and the religious preacher, the rural and the urban alike. The greatness of the Indian spiritual speculations allured the great modern poet, playwright and critic T. S. Eliot whose discreet use of these values in his poem *The Waste Land* won him the Nobel Prize for literature. The soil of Eliot's poetic fervor has been properly prepared with the manure and fertilizer of the Indian religious thought which provides a balanced nutrition to the seedling of *The Waste Land*. The Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Buddhist literature and Patanjali's Yoga-Sutras are taken as the principal sources which are found scattered everywhere in his works.

The influence of his teachers like Irving Babbitt at Howard whose "system of thought was based upon the study of the Pali manuscripts, the earliest authentic Buddhist documents" cast a deep spell on Eliot who studied ancient Hindu literature and scriptures for two years under the guidance of Charles Layman. This knowledge of the Indian spiritual thought provided him immense opportunities to enrich the fifth section "What the thunder said" of *The Waste Land* with spiritual Sanskrit words as found in the aforementioned Indian spiritual sources. *The Waste Land* which projects his vision of human condition and predicament in the contemporary world has been replete with the three Sanskrit sutras *Datta*, *Dayadhvam* and *Damyata* as a solution on the Vedic principles. He believes that decline of human and spiritual values in the modern man has made the world a waste land. In the

course of spiral movement, man has been precipitated from the orbit the spiritual path distancing himself from the Creator. The Indian spiritual values as advocated by Eliot in *The Waste Land* can act as the only panacea to save the wastelanders from the modern ills in such a crisis. The journey of the protagonist from the first to the final section shows that the solution rests in the philosophical restraint of the East (Mahmood, S 2018). The poem ends with the Sanskrit mantra: *Shantih, Shantih, Shantih*.

### 1.1 Aim of the study

This paper aims at throwing light on the Indian spiritual thought which is great and grand, unique and unparalleled, precious and profound. It is by far the oldest and established spiritual tradition which envisages a great heritage of values and vivacity. The Indian spiritual thoughts are inundated with enduring values and timeless appeal, which have carved a niche in the great occidental poet, playwright and critic like T.S. Eliot who conceived of these ideas as the supreme and superb panacea for the modern ills.

### 1.2 The Indian spiritual tradition

Indian spiritual tradition is by far the oldest established culture which possesses a great heritage of values and vivacities. Spiritualism is the order and custom which make life and a universe possible, and thus the behaviours appropriate to the maintenance of that order. It embraces every type of righteous conduct, covering every aspect of life, both religious and secular, that is essential for the sustenance and welfare of the individual, society and creation. It emphasizes the need to perform one's duty with sincerity.

### 1.3 Intrinsic values of Indian spiritual tradition

The concepts of *Dharma*, as expounded in the *Vedas*, are based on an intrinsic higher order. They are not only confined to human pursuits but also include the nature in totality. Everything that exists on the earth and the solar system, indeed the entire universe is governed and sustained by the laws of *Dharma*. Thus, the laws in empirical science would also be a part of *Dharma*. There are differences between how the laws of *Dharma* apply to the universe as compared to the human beings on earth.

### 1.4 Dharma as selfless action

This comes out in teachings of *Karma Yoga* in the *Bhagavad Gita*. It states that one has the ability to choose actions, but the individual does not govern the results of these actions. There is emphasis given to selfless action that is not influenced by one's likes and dislikes and without concern for the outcome. The outcome is then accepted as *Prasada* (gift from God), whether it is desirable or undesirable. This allows the individual to focus on action completely without allowing his mind to be affected by anxiety and exhilaration invariably associated with its consequences. This also allows actualization of one's full potential.

### 1.5 Dharma as universal moral principles

Compassion and empathy form an important part of *Dharma*. It comes out in various principles. Positive values and attitudes like absence of conceit and hypocrisy, speaking the truth, harmlessness, accommodation, straightforwardness and compassion for all beings need be followed. If these laws were transgressed, the one who is responsible for this would be penalized without any logical scrutiny. Therefore, *Dharma* involves faith in intrinsic intelligence of creation and that the world is not as inert as it apparently appears to be. It leads to the purification of mind and a purified mind can ask fundamental questions of life and is capable of discovering the basis of creation in Vedic philosophy. This discovery is of enormous significance as it brings with it a deep sense of fulfillment that is difficult to be expressed in words.

*The Waste Land* has five parts such as 'The Burial of the Dead', 'A Game of Chess', 'The Fire Sermon', 'Death by Water' and 'What the Thunder Said'. In 'The Burial of the Dead', the speaker says how spring is an awful time of the year, stirring up memories of bygone days and unfulfilled desires. Then the poem shifts into specific childhood memories of a woman named Marie. This is followed by a description of tangled, dead leaves and land that is not suitable for growing stuff. Suddenly, a clairvoyant named Madame Sosostris who reads the human fortune is introduced. In 'A Game of Chess', the scene opens with the mother-in-law busy playing chess while the daughter-in-law is raped. The hanging image of the change of *Philomel*, a woman from the Greek myth, who was raped by *King Tereus* and then changed into a nightingale was kept hanging from the wall of a lavish woman's room. The section finishes with a scene of two women chatting and drinking late at night. 'The Fire Sermon' speaks of *Tiresias*, a blind prophet from myth who was turned into a woman for seven years and has gathered bisexual experiences. In 'Death by Water', a dead sailor named Phlebas decays at the bottom of the ocean. The final part 'What the Thunder Said' takes us to a rocky landscape with no water. There are two people walking, and one notices in his peripheral vision that a third person is with them. When he looks over, this person disappears. In a dramatic moment, thunder cracks over the scene, and its noise seems to say three words in Sanskrit: *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, and *Damyata*, which command to 'Give', 'Sympathize,' and 'Control'. This is followed by a repetition of the word *Shantih*, which means the peace that encompasses all understanding.

### 1.6 Indian spiritual tradition in this poem

*The Waste Land* is beset with ideas pertaining to the Indian spiritual tradition. The fifth section of the poem, 'What the thunder said' is taken from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad where Eliot's concern is clearly vedic. What the Thunder said the most complex of all the five sections projects Eliot's vision of the human condition and the predicament of man in the contemporary world. It also aims at a solution on Vedic principles. Three words in Sanskrit: *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, and *Damyata*, which command to 'Give', 'Sympathize,' and 'Control'. This is followed by a repetition of the word *Shantih* at the end of the poem, which means the peace that encompasses all understanding. Modern man should learn to give, sympathize, and control, then perhaps the Western culture can be attenuated and find *shantih* i.e. eternal peace. The relationships between philosophy and poetry; between thought and feeling, remained one of Eliot's lifelong concerns. Eliot developed a deep interest in philosophy which played a very significant role in the formation of his sensibility. Manju Jain points out: Eliot chose to give up the prospect of an academic career in philosophy for poetry, preferring to remain as a man of letters in England rather than return to America to become a professor of philosophy. Eliot renounced philosophy for poetry although his philosophical interests were never wholly divorced from his literary concerns and creative endeavours. *The wasteland* exhibits a sterile world of spiritual and moral degeneration, in which one does not know how to make the spirits work. The land in the poem is Christian but the

Indian thought works as an infusion of regenerative waters. The poem begins on the banks of the Thames and ends on the banks of river Ganga. The wasteland shows ample influence of the Rig Veda. The poem opens with a description of Nature, the allusions to Indian rituals, are the whole foundation to the poem. Water occupies an important place in *The Wasteland*. The allusion to water in the section 'Death by Water' has an overtone of the Hymns of the Rig Veda. Eliot was so greatly influenced by Buddhist philosophy that he decided to entitle the third section of the poem as 'The Fire Sermon'. In his Sermon, Lord Buddha preaches: "all things are on fire", the eyes are on fire, forms are on fire, eye consciousness is on fire, and whatever sensation originated in the impressions received by the eyes is on fire. The idea of 'life in death' or 'death in life' is the influence of the Eastern philosophy on Eliot. The first line of the poem, "April is the cruelest month" serves as a reminder of the wasteland which is dead. His presentation of life-in-death reminds of the concept of Maya. Maya is the illusion that leads people to believe that the world is made up of things separate and distinct and blinds them to the reality that life is in fact an unfired whole. Indian philosophy teaches that it is the ignorance of this unity which is the root of all human misery and suffering. The concluding line *Shantih, Shantih, Shantih* of the poem makes Eliot's Vedic reference more explicit. Eliot wants the world to know that the chanting of Shantih thrice is both neutral as well as a religious activity in the Vedic way of life.

### 1.7 Findings

The finding of this study shows that the Indian spiritual values are great and grand, unique and unparalleled, precious and profound. The Indian spiritual tradition envisages a great heritage of values and vivacity. It is inundated with enduring values and timeless appeal, which have even carved a niche in the great occidental poet, playwright and critic like T.S. Eliot who conceived of these ideas as the supreme and superb panacea for the modern ills.

### 1.8 Conclusion

Man has a supreme place in the Great Chain of Beings. His derailment from the track must make him land him on wasteland. He should adhere to the the greatest Indian spiritual values upheld in the *The Vedic* principles which have influenced the Indian psyche for many centuries. These principles have underpinned the socio-cultural-religious framework for the development of individual and social moral principles. The Indian glorious past, her rich scriptures and understanding their essence can bring about the necessary balance for everyone. This would not only benefit the Indian society but also the world at large.

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