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Spiritual Moorings in the Plays of T.S. Eliot and the Gita

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ABSTRACT

The very concept of comparing a living, breathing human being with an unanimated material is far from satisfactory. As a work of art cannot be created in a vacuum, similarly the emotions, experiences and beliefs of a poet do necessarily influence his work. As T.S. Eliot was immensely influenced by The Gita, the shadow of Lord Krishna seems hovering around some of his protagonists. Eliot commented that The Gita is the next greatest philosophical work which influenced him after The Divine Comedy and his works stand as living testimony of influence of The Gita. His protagonists come very close to Indian saints-sacrificing themselves either at the altar of truth or in search of truth. Eliot's mysticism not only beautifies his works but also makes him immortal in the realm of literature.

Keywords: Philosophical, Testimony, Mysticism, Influence, Illusion, Immense, Immortal.

T.S. Eliot's theory of artistic creation highlights the distinctive connection between an artist and their work. He asserts that a poet's mind should function as a catalytic agent in the creative process—an essential element that facilitates the transformation yet remains unaffected throughout. Despite its widespread acceptance, this theory is not entirely practical. Just as art cannot emerge in isolation, a poet's emotions, experiences, and beliefs inevitably shape their work. Eliot himself was profoundly influenced by The Bhagavad Gita, and traces of Lord Krishna's philosophy can be seen in some of his protagonists.

Eliot openly acknowledged that after The Divine Comedy, The Gita was the most significant philosophical text to shape his thinking, and his works serve as evidence of this impact. This also explains why he chose to study Oriental philosophy and Sanskrit as part of his graduate coursework at Harvard University. His fascination deepened through his studies under Charles Rockwell and F.C. Bradley, who guided him in understanding the profound depths of Eastern thought. While numerous scholars such as Kristian Smidt, Louis L. Martz, Helen Gardner, and Damayanti Ghosh have explored the influence of Oriental philosophy on Eliot, their focus has largely been on his well-known works like Four Quartets and Murder in the Cathedral. This paper aims to examine the spiritual dimensions of The Gita as reflected in some of Eliot's lesser-known works, particularly The Family Reunion and The Cocktail Party.

Though Eliot expressed that he did not 'wish' to "penetrate into the heart of the mystery of Indian philosophy." yet as he is interested in Indian philosophy, it continued to influence his unconscious mind, and later he himself had to admit that it left him in a state of "enlightened mystification." A deep penetration into his plays evinces that the underlying philosophies behind the themes of The Family Reunion and The Cocktail Party are: disinterested action and self-less love, the themes expressed by Lord Krishna in The Gita. Eliot's works read like spiritual odyssey of the 20th century man who has lost his spiritual moorings. He tries to understand the labyrinth of life. Man is shocked to find that he is no longer the master of his destiny and there are forces which threaten to wither away his life and all its joys and hopes. As Erich Fromm points out:

In the 19th century the problem is that the man is dead. The danger of the past was that men became slaves. The danger of the future is that men may become robots, "who" will destroy their world and themselves because they cannot stand...a meaningless life.

The Family Reunion revolves around the Monchensey family Harry, the chief protagonist, is the eldest son of the family and her widowed mother Amy, a dominating lady, is very possessive about him. She wants him to live according to her desires. Harry, therefore, takes reactionary approach and gets married to a girl with whom he never lived happily and who "wanted to keep him to herself to satisfy her vanity. That's why she dragged him/To all Europe and half round the world, to expensive hotels and undesirable society, which she could choose herself." (290)

This unsuccessful and unplanned marriage causes stress and panic in his life and his wife's mysterious death increases problems. For Harry, it is not freedom but change from Amy's "self- projected world of egoism" to the undesired societies, his transfer from one prison to another. The play focuses on the necessity for ending a state of dependence between mother and child "which has been so intense and prolonged as to prevent the child from establishing an identity of his own."

Karmano hayapi bodhavyam bodhavyamch vikarman

Akarmshch bodhavyam ghna karmano gati

(One has to understand what action is, and likewise one has to understand what is wrong action and one has to understand about inaction. And to understand is the way of work.)

It's only positive influence is that it intensifies his quest for salvation-salvation which was inherent in his detachment. Harry, being the eldest son, was dearest to Amy and was compared favourably with Arthur and John by his aunts and uncles. Among all these distant relatives who are apparently very sweet and loving, all are engrossed in their own world of make-believe-standing and waiting at Wishwood like "guilty conspirators devoid of all trust and faith." (304) Harry provides an analogy for the position of Arjuna surrounded by his own relatives who were standing in the war-field in the guise of enemies. Like Lord Krishna, Agatha dispels the illusion of Harry by persuading him to break all the relations based on love and self-interest. Harry's reluctance to shed off the illusion and to break up his ties with his family has very close resemblance with Arjuna's desire to avoid the battle due to infatuation. He is compelled by all these people to inherit the property.

Tasmannarha vayam hantum dhartarash-ransvabandhavan Svajanam hi katham hatva sukhinah syama madhava

In the case of Harry as well as Arjuna, these emotional moorings lie at the root of the malady. Harry's realization of his family's past brings his salvation while the knowledge of immortality of soul and process of reincarnation leads Arjuna to disinterested action and emancipation. Lord Krishna preaches Arjuna

dehi nityamavadhyo yam dehe sarvasya bhārata Tasmatsrvani bhutani na twam socitumarhasi (ch. 1, no. 30)

(This soul dwelling in the bodies of all can never be slain; therefore, you should not mourn for anyone.)

If Krishna was spiritual mentor of Arjuna, Harry found solace in the words of Agatha who not only revealed his family guilt but also told him the way to redemption. As Hardings says, "the compassionate understanding of mistaken parents that reveals it- self as part of Harry's growth when he has detached himself from his mother," leads him to emancipation.

Agatha told him that he was conceived in unlove as his parents did not love each other and they were merely a man and a woman who were living together. Also, his father was guilty of fornication, adultery and murder as he wanted to kill his pregnant wife and Agatha was a witness to it. A child conceived in lust is bound to carry a meaningless existence. This concept has been borrowed from Lord Krishna's preaching in Gita While discriminating between persons of divine nature and demoniac disposition, he states it as one of the reasons of demoniac nature of people: "Men possessing a demoniac disposition say that this world is without any foundation, absolutely unreal and godien brought forth by nuptial union of the male and female and hence conceived in lust." (ch.6, no. 8) Agatha admonishes Harry.

You have a long journey. You have nothing to stay for Think of it as like a children's treasure hunt. Here you have found a clue, hidden in obvious place Delay, and it is lost. Love compels cruelty To those who do not understand Love. (337)

These lines embody Krishna's theory of disinterested action and self-less love. Freedom from past is freedom from karma, which in turn leads to emancipation of soul from delusion. Agatha is guardian, friend and philosopher to Harry and so was Krishna to Arjuna. Agatha has a special fascination for Harry and even before his birth, she felt that he should have been her son. She understands his cravings, his problems and mental dilemmas even though he talks in terms of abstractions. He has full faith in Agatha and her guardianship as it is she who since his childhood has solved the mysteries for him:

I think I see what you mean,

Dimly as you once explained the sobbing in the chimney

The evil in the dark closet, which they said was not there

Which they explained away, but you explained them

Or at least, made me cease to be afraid of them. (296)

Harry banks upon Agatha at the time of need and Krishna provides ready solution for all the problems of Arjuna. Krishna's role of a charioteer in the battle of Mahabharata indicates that he used to guide Arjuna as well as he is saviour and companion to him. Boldly he persuades Arjuna to fight stating "If you re fuse to fight this righteous war, then shirking your duty and losing your reputation you will incur sin" (ch.2, no 33) Similarly, Agatha sends Harry on the path of expiation after convincing him that he has to expiate for the sins committed by his father.

You are consciousness of your unhappy family, its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame.

Agatha explains to him the futility of selfish relationship of mortal human beings incorporating the illusory nature of world (Maya) and thus stresses the need to dispel his illusions after attaining freedom from past and future. She is fully conscious of the fact that after acquiring such freedom, he would get rid of his sense of guilt.

"Relief from what happened/Is also relief from that unfulfilled craving/Flattered in sleep and deceived in waking." These words of Agatha may easily be equated with the Indian concept of Maya or illusion. According to Brahmanism and Monism, the only truth is God or the supreme entity, rest of the world is an illusion or Maya:

Maya Maya karyam Sarvam Mahadadi deha paryantam Asadadam anatmatam kvam viddhi Maru maricika kalpam.

The entire world is an illusion (Maya), therefore it deceives man while he is fully awake as it keeps him engrossed in various futile works—all works related with body, senses, mind and self—have been stated as *Anatma* or manifestation of illusion. Eliot was consciously or unconsciously under the influence of the Advaita philosophy while writing this play.

At the end of the play, the protagonist Harry goes in an unknown direction to expiate as he is hopeful that this expiation will provide him emancipation and redemption. Arjuna, on the other hand, fights in the battle with disinterested action and attains victory in the *dharma*yuddh. The play has close affinities with the completion of Harry's quest for salvation or "spiritual illumination through exploration of his past as well as present explorations. Agatha expresses her happiness as Harry begins his journey to an unknown destination crossing the frontiers and breaking the chain of birth and death, which is nothing but the salvation or Nirvana of The *Bhagavad-Gita*. The theme of Eliot's play *The Cocktail Party* develops from the physical plain to the higher level or spiritual plane. It deals with somewhat intricate situations. Edward and Lavinia are husband and wife who do not love each other. Edward "needs to be loved to satisfy his ego, while Lavinia needs to love or pretend to love to satisfy her own needs. Another young pair is Peter Quilpe and Celia Coplestone. Peter, a film director, loves Celia but his love is merely based on his career-oriented approach. He thinks that she would become a great heroine if "she only get the chance. But Celia loves Edward—she is a divine soul in search of love—complete self-less love. She becomes horrified after the realization that she and Edward did not love each other but "made use of each other." She is heart-broken and accepts the futility of her own existence. With the help of a psychiatrist, Edward and Lavinia return to their routine life but for Celia the entire world becomes a delusion. And under this shadow of frustration, she tells Reilly. "I have no delusions/except that the world I live in seems all a delusion." (417) For her, the entire world becomes a delusion or 'Maya.' This concept of world or maya or illusion is very old and since time immemorial Hindi philosophy proclaims the transitory nature of world and it lays emphasis on the study of self or soul: *Brahm Satyam, Jagatmithya*. With the revelation of this fact, she at once reaches a higher plane, carrying the spiritual vision in her. She has an intense urge to search for the meaningful existence which categorizes her with the great Indian mystics or seekers of Truth and essence of human life. Sir Henry Harcourt Reilly, the psychiatrist, rescues her after becoming her guide, friend and philosopher. To him she reveals her heart, her desperation in love, her cravings, her hallucinations which were referred to her as symptom of malady she was undergoing. It may be compared with the perturbed and turbulent mental state of Arjuna, who after seeing the enemies in the battlefield refuses to fight, and lays bare his heart before Lord Krishna. Reilly, the spiritual guide of Celia tells her to choose her path out of the two—return to normal life or the life in which "Two people know that they do not understand each other. Breeding children whom they do not understand and who will never understand them." But she immediately rejects this idea as once she has been touched by grace and has achieved a vision of true life, she can no longer accept "compromise and humdrum existence" (418) Regarding the other option, Reilly tells her that its "destination cannot be described; /You will know very little until you get there./You will journey blind. But the way leads towards possession/or what you have sought for in the wrong place" (420)

By embarking on a journey towards an unknown destination, Celia assumes the role of a "pre-ordained martyr." Before her departure, Reilly blesses her with the words, "Go in peace, my daughter. Work out your salvation with diligence." This undefined destination symbolizes Krishna's philosophy of detached action, as expressed in the *Gita*: "Your right is to work only, but never to the fruit thereof." Reilly advises her to work diligently without being driven by the outcomes of her actions or developing an attachment to inaction (Chapter 2, Verse 47). Without questioning the purpose or consequences of her journey, Celia resolutely moves forward. Although trained in nursing, she chooses a different path, fully committing herself to the pursuit of salvation. Once she steps into this life, she renounces all desires for a conventional existence, shedding illusions and forsaking the allure of a promising and glamorous future. She ventures into the forest of Kinkanja at the peak of her youth and beauty, dedicating two years of her life to caring for natives afflicted by a devastating pestilence. Eventually, only traces of her body are discovered in the forest, suggesting that she had been crucified. However, in the Indian tradition of self-sacrifice for the greater good, her crucifixion serves merely as a superficial interpretation for readers and critics who might associate it with Christian symbolism.

The *Gita* firmly establishes the concept of free will. Reilly, having provided Celia with insights into the two possible paths—an ordinary life or a spiritual one—clearly outlines the risks associated with both choices. However, he neither influences nor pressures her decision; the choice remains entirely hers. Ultimately, Eliot's deep engagement with Oriental philosophy, particularly the teachings of The *Gita*, becomes evident through his works. A thorough examination of his plays reveals the profound impact of these philosophies. The *Gita* advocates the principles of detached action and selfless love, both of which form the foundation of *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party*. The dynamic between Krishna and Arjuna is reflected in the relationships of Agatha and Harry (Aunt-Son) in *The Family Reunion* and Reilly and Celia (Doctor-Patient) in *The Cocktail Party*. These relationships are built on mutual faith, unwavering trust, and deep affection.

Both plays revolve around a singular core philosophy—the doctrine of detached action, as conveyed by Lord Krishna in The *Gita*. While *The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party* do not explicitly borrow from The *Bhagavad Gita*, they contain passages that strongly resonate with its teachings. This influence underscores Eliot's profound understanding of Indian philosophy. His protagonists bear a striking resemblance to Indian sages, sacrificing themselves either in pursuit of truth or for the sake of upholding it. Within these two plays, the central characters remain engaged in an existential quest for meaning, perceiving the world as an illusion or Maya. Eliot's inherent mysticism not only enriches his literary creations but also immortalizes his legacy in the realm of literature.

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