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www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: A Perspective on Indian Thoughts

Dr. Rajani Sharma

Assistant Professor in English

Dept. of Humanities and Applied Sciences

THDC Institute of Hydropower Engineering and Technology

(A Constituent Institute of Uttarakhand Technical University)

Abstract:

In this paper an attempt has been made to trace the utterances of Indian thoughts in Eliot's famous poem *The Waste Land* to judge how far oriental wisdom transforms Eliot's poetic vision and sensibility to provide it a universal undertone running parallel with the wisdom of Europe. In order to analyze the impact of Indian thoughts on Eliot's mind, a rigorous speculation of formative grounds of Oriental Study Center at Harvard and Eliot's connection with such mentors like Irving Babbitt, George Santayana, Charles Rockwell Lanman, and James Haughton have been taken into account. After analyzing the formation of Eliot's Indian sensibility with its Christian intent at its core, each part of the poem has been studied in order to understand how meticulously Eliot portrays the tragic impasse of modern humanity due to spiritual draught and how at each stage Indian thoughts, specifically Buddhism, and Hinduism with its Vedic and Upanishadic lore stand as yardstick to restore spiritualism by centralizing the moral vision of European Waste Landers which they decentralized by engrossing themselves in mechanical routine of life.

Keyword: Waste Land, Upanishad, Objective-correlative, poetic sensibility, spiritualism, Universalism, Cosmopolitanism, Buddhism, Upanishads, and classicism, Asceticism.

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, an important landmark in the history of English poetry, first appeared in 'the Dial' and after winning that Magazine's Poetry Award, was finally published in book form in 1922. After its publication, it found a resounding and reverberating success in the world literature because of its universal theme and thought content. Eliot's universalism is the result of his cosmopolitan intellectualism and poetic sensibility which transcends all sorts of barriers ranging from caste, creed, religion and spatial variance. In the *Preface to Four Lancelot Andrews* (1928), he proclaimed himself to be "classist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion." This proclamation is circuitous conscientiously, religiously encompassing the essence of the wisdom of the globe emerging from West and East respectively and making something new out of the alchemical process of poetic creation. Hence, it is plausible to determine abundance of influences on Eliot's mind and his writings: Indian, Christian, Bradleyean: "Eliot presented the credentials of a wide-ranging poetic sensibility by incorporating in his writings not only the 'best' of European culture but also of Indian thought" (qtd. in Naugle 1)

The poet's mind is a complex mechanism to absorb and to recreate 'something new and strange. As regards T.S. Eliot, he was an avid believer in constant study throughout his life, hence the range and variety of his interest was quite amazing. The exploration of different sources and influences on the works of Eliot because of their multifarious layers of suggestions and implications has emerged as a well established and settled routine because his works are the

replica of his ardent and erudite scholarship. *The Waste Land*, the most influential and deemed over poem of Eliot is not an exception rather bears the impressions of his scholarship. This poem within the space of its four hundred and thirty three lines has quotations, imitations and allusions derived from more than thirty writers ranging from Vigil, Ovid, Dante to Shakespeare, Milton and Spenser etc. Moreover, this is organized round the mythical material drawn from Jessie Weston's and James Frazer's books of anthropology: "Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance* To another work of anthropology I am indebted . . . I mean *The Golden Bough* . . ." (Eliot, *Selected Poems* 68).

Apart from these books, the Indian thoughts especially Hinduism and Buddhism exercised a conspicuous and impressionable influence on Eliot's mind when he was working upon *The Waste Land* cannot be overlooked. The ancient wisdom of India had attracted attention of many intellectuals of western countries. In the mid-nineteenth century Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman were greatly influenced by Indian scriptures and they were composing poetry tinted with Indian aura. Hence "[t]here was a deep desire to have first hand acquaintance with Indian thoughts" (Sastri 248). In 1884 Lanman was the first to bring forth his *Sanskrit Reader* and thus he initiated Harvard Oriental Series. Thus, he scattered the seeds of Indian thoughts in the soil of Europe:

Already enough pioneering work in this direction had been done by European scholars; and then enlightened students of Culture did not close their minds to the winds blowing from India. This was the currents of ideas in which at the turn of the century many Americans found themselves. Possibly the activities of Swami Vivekananda too had a powerful influence in moulding this atmosphere. (Sastri 248)

When Eliot reached Harvard, it became a famous centre for Oriental studies. He found himself to be blessed with such erudite mentors as Josiah Royce, George Santayana, Irving Babbitt, Charles Rockwell Lanman and James Haughton Woods. It was Babbitt and George Santayana who inspired him to develop an interest in Indian Scriptures and Philosophy. Eliot earned his master's degree in 1910 and at that time Charles Rockwell Lanman and James Haughton would teach Sanskrit in Harvard University. Consequently, he got himself enrolled for Lanman's Indic Course in 1911 and started studying Sanskrit, Pali, Hinduism and Buddhism as a part of a course of Ideology at Harvard. E.L. Mayo reflects how Eliot was greatly influenced by Babbitt whose "system of thought was based upon the study of the *Pali* manuscripts, the earliest authentic Buddhist document" (173). Moreover, Eliot was inclined towards Buddhism since his childhood days and was so deeply lured by Buddhism that at one time he seriously thought of becoming a Buddhist. He preserved a warm affection for Sir Edwin Arnold's long epical poem on Gautam Buddha's life titled *The Light of Asia*. He studied the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, *Pantajali* and *Pali*. He does not hesitate to remark, "Long ago I studied the ancient Indian languages, and while I was chiefly interested at that time in Philosophy, I read a little poetry too, and I know that my poetry shows the influence of Indian thought." (Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* 248)

The Waste Land can be considered to be an evocation of the tension and anxiety in the poet's mind when he observed the degradation of modern western civilization caught in the grip of lust, greed and anger during post world war period. He diagnosed that the modern humanity is spiritually dead and this phase of spiritual miasma would lead to its total annihilation. When

Eliot composed this poem, the degradation of west reached its deplorable tragic *impasset*. How can a sensitive and sensible intellectual like Eliot could approve of this spiritual aridity? Because of his Unitarian approach and moral bent of mind, he envisioned and in turn advocated that spiritualism was the only way to release modern humanity from the desert of spiritual miasma. Eliot knew that if he simply confined himself to west only, this predicament cannot be resolved. Hence, in order to endorse his verdict, he galloped all around the globe and tried to extract the wisdom of the whole world to give an antidote for this disease. This partially explains his inclination towards Indian religion and metaphysics.

Eliot believes in parallelism and contrast technique as a significant literary device for poetic purpose in order to lay bare the problem with its suggestive solutions lying hidden therein; hence, with this end in view, he has adopted mythical method as suggested by Jessie Weston and James Frazer, however he opines that these would not suffice for the regeneration of modern humanity. Being a true and committed advocate of spiritualism, he tries to philosophize his vision of spiritual restoration in this barren land of modern humanity by turning to Oriental wisdom and validates his belief in Indian thoughts:

The problem, as undertaken in the poem, has been tried to be resolved in a universal solution, taking material from among different sources world-wide. He has analyzed the philosophies, and also the scriptures at large, and has synthesized his findings on different sources for a solution which could be acceptable to everyone, without stakes of either religion or boundary. Vedic philosophy, as part of Hinduism, has been contributed as an annihilating solution to the problem of both animalism and restraint. (Dangwal 20)

This does not seem derogatory if the very texture of the fabric of *The Waste Land* is conceptualized as an amalgamation of Indian and Western culture.¹ G. Nageswara Rao in his famous article “The Upanishad in the Waste Land” does not hesitate to remark that “two out of the five section headings of the poems are borrowed from Indian sources. One may interpret the poem in terms of five elements which constitute life on the earth according to Hinduism.”(84)

Eliot’s poetic vision is not arid but is based to perceive humanity in its wholeness in which man is an integral part of the system of creation, but what he sees is nothing but a panorama of desolation and sterility in which he has become sexually and spiritually impotent. In his vision, he conceptualizes man not to be judged in isolation, that is, a mere composition of flesh and bones who physically exists in this world of imperfections as spiritually dead, but wants him to be aware of his spiritually awakened existence in this cosmos with microcosmic essence of Almighty. According to him, man is man because he has metaphysical awareness. He must always try to cultivate spiritual awareness by centralizing morality in his life which is the gift of Almighty bestowed upon him, but without this centralization of spiritual and moral vision, he is nothing but a dead fragment without the flow of blood in his vein and soul which throbs as his conscience. At the very outset of the poem in part one “The Burial of the Dead,” Eliot has evocatively referred to the living death of modern humanity but at the same time evokes the prospect of spiritual rejuvenation with the drop of rainwater:

April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain. (1-4)

Through this subtle imagistic objective-correlative of dead winter and rejuvenating spring with its drop of water, Eliot refers to spiritual vacuum and draught which can be replaced by the knowledge of Oriental scriptures and that of Buddha that man should work out for his salvation *Nirvana* through expiation of the sins committed by him in the past.

Though in his notes, Eliot already predisposed that the title has been derived from Miss Jessie Weston's treatise *From Ritual to Romance* in which she has focused on fertility and vegetation cults and the significance of Grail Legend to restore fertility to the barren land through the expiation of the sins of Oedipus of Thebes who in turn is identified as Fisher King in the last segment of the poem for which a journey in search of Holy Grail is to be undertaken. Man resides in the barren land of spiritual chaos, but this barren land will turn out to be a land of vegetation and fertility with the sprinkling of water. So man has to start his expedition in search of water which stands for faith in the existence of God. This verdict of Eliot implies that Eliot has judiciously chosen the title *The Waste Land* in order to juxtapose modern and western knowledge so as to recommend the solution for the problem of spiritual draught. From Indian perspective, the sense with which Eliot entitles this poem can be traced to an important Buddhist text, *Dhammapada* in which Gautam Buddha suggests humanity to grow *Bodhi Tree* in his heart by becoming spiritually aware of his existence:

In any case we should find it illuminating to read a Thai Buddhist monk's translation of *Dhammapada* under the title '*Growing the Bodhi Tree in the garden of the Heart . . .*' The question now is how to grow the seeds of this tree in the heart of everyone of us – which is analogous to the re-enactment of crucifixion in the life of every Christian. The land is wasted and the seeds have no chance to grow without the water. There are verses in the *Dhammapada* which say they should be irrigated well with the waters of compassion and richly manured by meditation. (Narasimhaiah 97-98)

This suggests that through meditation and expiation, the awareness of the real self and the knowledge of the Absolute *Brahma*. Hence, man should work for his salvation by becoming enlightened.

In part second "A Game of Chess," Eliot depicts the deplorable predicament of modern humanity devoid of the basic realization of deeper values of things. They are so much engrossed in animalism that they have forgotten that they are human beings. Sex is a vital principle of life as "man's fate originates in sex," but now instead of becoming a mode of procreation it has become a matter of intrigue, a matter of moves and counter moves between man and woman. Marriage, the holiest institution, has been reduced to a level of drug addiction and a sheer license to satisfy sensual and carnal desires without any family commitments and responsibilities. For them, life on this earth is nothing but 'a game of chess.' The domestic and married life is running on mechanical level. Dr. Surekha Dnagwal reflects on this issue, "The man is not ready to bear responsibility, and woman, not ready to bear children. If the attitude, like the waste-landers, keeps on growing, the world is supposed to come to a standstill some day" (20-21). The episode of Albert and Lil reveals the hollowness of married life:

I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,
 It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.
 (She's had five already, and nearly dead of young George.)
 The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the same.
 You are a proper fool, I said.
 Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said.
 What you get married for if you don't want children? (160-66)

This reference also suggests the reckless sensual pursuit, lack of commitment and responsibility in matrimony. However, these lines, specially, the last one, provide solution to the problem if read in Indian context. In India, marriage is a *sanmskar*, a bond of love and commitment between husband and wife and child begetting, again, is considered a *sanmskar* (ritual). Wife is to bear son (*putra*) for her husband to expiate for his family and a savior for his father when he suffers in old age. After taking pills, Lil, the woman, has not only violated the sanctity of marriage but also disrupted the very process of procreation. What Eliot suggests in this poem is that sex plays a vital role in human life and if man and woman want to have birth control, they should follow the path of *Sanyam*.

The title of the third section of the poem "The Fire Sermon" is derived from the famous sermon of Lord Buddha to the assembled priests on the suffering and pains of modern humanity which arise from their reckless pursuit of passion and sensuality. Lord Buddha chants: "All things are on fire / They are on fire of infatuation; with birth, old age, death, sorrow lamentation, misery, grief and despair" (Warren 352). This view of human life lived purely on sensual plane is supported by Saint Augustine, a true representative of asceticism in Christianity. He confesses that in his youth he could not restrain himself from being tempted by sensual desires: ". . . to Carthage then I came, where a cauldron of unholy love song all about mine ears (Warren 352). St. Augustine had been far away from God for many years burning with the fire of passion, but when he expiates for his sins, "[b]urning burning burning burning / O Lord Thou pluckest me out / burning" (308-310). Like St. Augustine, Gautam Buddha too had to face the temptation of Maya, "Even Buddha was not free from the tempters. Maya sends his daughter to seduce Buddha in the last stage of his Enlightenment. But Buddha's constant vigilance saves him" (Narasimhaiah 108). Thus, in order to free oneself from the endless suffering of passion and desires of this *samsar*, one has to cultivate an aversion to these passions and lead a life of 'asceticism' which is a gateway to salvation. Dr. Surekha Dangwal's remark in this regard is worth quoting, "Desire is the root cause of man's sufferings, and the moment he gets rid of it, he attains perfect 'Nirvana.' . . . [And] the attainment of 'Nirvana,' as preached by the Lord, is the self-denial, which implies the rejection of all senses" (33). Both the references of Gautam Buddha and that of St. Augustine refer that the wisdom of east and west coexist to show the path of salvation (*Nirvana*) through asceticism. According to Hindu scriptures, there exists a superior fire of '*Tapa*,' which burns the flames of lust and human soul enjoys the bliss of purification '*Anand*.' Nageswara Rao suggests: "What is realized in the 'Fire Sermon' is exemplified also in 'Death by Water,' which presents the transformation of the gross self into enlightened being, the same change underlying the Hindu ceremony of twice born. The underlying idea is that a man

born out of woman knows this world and a man born out of himself knows the world beyond this world” (85). The waiting and suffering, the feeling of exhaustion and the expulsion of human ego before the spiritual enlightenment, *Tapa* before *Tapassidhi*, the experience of unbearable agony of Indian *Yogi* and that of Christian Saints are akin in their nature and results. The journey of the saints through the desert in search of water is the *Tapa* of a *Tappasavi*: “Drought throughout Eliot’s poetry is metaphor for despair, doubt and need for spiritual certainty. Just as water is taught by thirst, the need for a nourishing faith is taught by a restless state of doubt in which one can neither stand nor lie nor sit” (Rao 85).

The Waste Land is both *Vedic* in Origin and *Upanishadic* as regards its structural matrix. The poem ends with the chanting of *Shanthy* which Eliot drew from *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. This *Upanishad* comprises six chapters which are called *Aranyakas* and these are spoken in desert like condition and *Brihad* means great from its extent. As the *Upanishad*, *The Waste Land* delivers a message of salvation for modern humanity from their living death. The protagonist *Tiresius* who perceives the entire panorama of desolation is like *Drasta* in *Upanishads*, What *Tiresius* sees is the substance of the poem, so whatever *Drasta* sees is the content of the *Upanishads*. As two sexes meet in *Tiresius* so they exist in *Prazapati* too. Both *Tiresius* and *Drasta* view the entire panorama of desolation in their respective spatial settings:

Ganga was sunken and the limp leave
 Waited for rain, while the clouds
 Gathered far distant, over Himavant.
 The jungle crouched, humped in silence
 Then spoke the thunder. (395-399)

Eliot has employed pure Sanskrit word ‘*Ganga*’ because of its spiritual, mythological and religious association with *Himavant*. *Ganga* is the divine river called *Ganga Mata* by Hindus because of the consort of Lord *Shiva* with this on Earth. Instead of using *Mount Everest*, Eliot has deliberately used Sanskrit word for this holy mountain which is believed to be the abode of *Shiva* and *Parvathi*. “Both *Ganga* and *Himavant* have been described to tell the European the story of restraints and discipline, which would guide them the way to replenish their waste lands with the spiritual water” (39). Eliot describes *Ganga* ‘sunken’ because it suits the symbolic strain of the poem. *Ganga* is sunken because it reflects the debased and miserable condition of civilization, while the black cloud visible over the *Himavant* are the harbingers of rainfall to occur at any instant of time which will restore fertility the dead soil and thereby spiritual awareness will be restored to modern humanity. The voice of the thunder is projected in ‘*Da*.’

In the *Upanishad*, the message of the thunder is emblematic to figure out the cryptic mode of *Prazapati*’s teaching to his three kinds of disciples, namely, gods, men and demons. After completing their prescribed learning phase, the three disciples approach the father preceptor and ask him what virtues they should cultivate in themselves to lead a meaningful life. *Prazapati* utters syllable ‘*da*’ three times, with a different meaning for each of them: for gods ‘*da*’ means *Damyata* (Control yourself), for men *Datta* (Give in); for Demons, it signifies *Dayadhavam* (be compassionate). This symbolic event from *Upanishada* would turn into oasis unless *Prazapati*’s disciples practice them earnestly in their lives. In context of modern humanity, *Datta* signifies

that man should sacrifice himself for a noble cause which would be possible only in moments of great emotional excitement when human heart throbs with passion, and the step once taken cannot be retracted back after prudential consideration. In *Rigveda*, Mahrishi Dhadhichi sacrificed himself for such a noble cause. It so happened that *Sapt Sindhu*, the five rivers of Panjab were lying locked up. The gods themselves were in great crisis and in such a pathetic condition, utterly worried and harassed, they reached a mendicant sage Dhadhichi for his kind boon, his back bone which bore the strength of a club of diamond, '*Vajrayadaha*' because of his *tapa*, the club made of his boon could smite the restless clouds and made them yield rain. He did listen to the dictates of his heart for the sake of humanity. Indra, 'the god of gods,' wielded the *Vajra* and got success in freeing the divine water locked up by Ahi and Virtra (a demon) after slaying them. Such giving is the root cause of all revolutions and noble deeds: "The awful daring of a moment's surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract / By this, and this only, we have existed (403-405). The thunder spoke to them second time and repeated the syllable '*Da*' which means Dayadhvam that is to sympathize. God commanded modern people to come out their prison of self and enter imaginatively into the sorrow and suffering of others. The thunder peals for the third time, instructing the gods directly and human being indirectly to control themselves – *Damyata*. This time the message underlies the necessity of regulating the heart so far given over to 'blood' or impulsive living. The well disciplined heart makes the life going easy in the same way as the gay boat glides safely under the expert hands of a sailor. For the controlled heart, even the natural elements give way to; and the sea becomes calm and quiet:

Damyata: The boat responded

Gaily, to the hand expert with sail oar

The sea was calm, your heart would have responded

To controlling hands. (418-422)

By controlling his impulses and passions and leading a disciplined life, man can cultivate the awareness of the self and can live in harmony with the external laws.

The poem ends on a positive note with the triple use of the words "Shantih Shantih Shantih" (433). Mr. F.R. Leavis criticizes the poem in his *New Bearings in English Poetry*, "It exhibits no progression" and moves in circular motion. "The thunder brings no rain to revive the waste land and the poem ends where it begins" (103). But this criticism of Leavis seems to be blurring with the intent of Eliot who himself ignored the charge with regard to the virtues 'Give' 'Sympathise' and 'Control.' Conrad Aiken remark in this regard is worth quoting to understand Eliot's intent for incorporating *Shantih* and *Da* in the structure of them poem: "Why, again, Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata? Or Shantith? Do they not say a good deal less than 'Give'; Sympathize; Control or Peace'? Of course, but Mr. Eliot replies that he wants them not merely to mean those particular things, but also to mean them in a particular way, that is, to be remembered in connection with a Upanisad" (193). Moreover, Eliot has given 'action' image in the end with a sense as *The Gita* would have, "Shall I at least set my hands, in order?" (425). After the realization of the urgent need for 'Karma,' the protagonist (Tiresius and Prazapati) assumes the role of the Fisher King at a time when "London bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down" (426). It is to be noted here that according to Miss J. L. Weston, the Buddha is sometimes pictured in the attitude of Fisher man. In *Mahayana Scriptures*, the fisherman draws fish from

the *Samundra* to the light of salvation. The fish need to be set free and, for this, the fisherman – Budhha – is required. Furthermore, the word ‘Shantih’ at the end of the poem is significant from Indian point of view. “The word *Shantih* is purposefully repeated there to indicate peace resulting from a freedom from all disturbance from within (*adhyadmikam*), from above (*adi-daivikam*) and from around (*adi bhoutikam*)” (Rao 89). Dr. Surekha Dnagwal reflects on the significance and relevance of Shantih: “The Shantih – Chanting appears first time in Yajurveda (36:17). It is part of both ritual as well as religious activity in Vedic way of living. The words are not automatic, but Eliot wants the universe to be at peace, including peace for the waste landers, those who live in acute atmosphere of awe, fear, doubts and frustration” (31). To conclude, *The Waste Land* bears the mark of Indian wisdom to a considerable extent. However, to confine it to sheer Indianness will not be a true justification to this poem which bears universal outlook and Hindu, Vedic and Buddhist religious undertones constitute a part of the poet’s universal attitude.

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Notes:

1. For additional information and sources dealing with Oriental influence on Eliot’s mind, see G. Nageswara Rao’s famous article “A Famous Poet and Student of Sanskrit,” in *Literary Criterion* 8 (Winter 1947) and B.N. Chaturvedi’s “The Indian Background of Eliot’s Poetry.”