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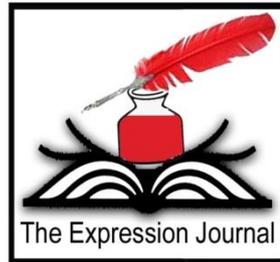
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THE INFLUENCE OF INDIAN TRADITION IN THE SELECTED POEMS OF T.S. ELIOT

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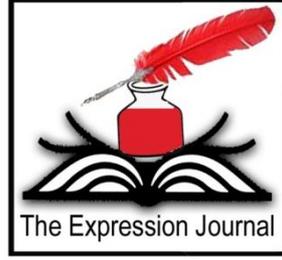
Abstract

This study seeks the influence of the Oriental knowledge system in the poetry of T.S Eliot. The religious scriptures of the east from *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* to Patanjali's *Yoga-Sutra* to the Buddhist sermons were studied and organically inculcated by Eliot as allusive references in his poems like *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets* and 'To The Indians Who Died in Africa'. However, little research has been done so far to locate these references within the poetry of Eliot. This paper seeks to derive the semblance between the Oriental and Occidental knowledge system, and strengthen C.M Kearns' efforts of rendering the Indian tradition in his 1987 book *T.S Eliot and Indic Traditions*. The qualitative research employed to prepare this paper studies in detail the ontological questions over the theological scriptures, to effectively understand the eternal questions about life, time, death and after-life.

Keywords

Oriental, Poetry, T.S Eliot, Religious Scriptures, Occidental,
Indian Tradition, Time, Death, After-Life.

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This paper is written to study the influence of Indic tradition in selected poems of T. S. Eliot (1888 - 1965), with special reference to *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets* and 'To the Indians Who Died in Africa'. We are well aware of the fact that Eliot studied Sanskrit and Pali from Prof. Charles Rockwell Lanman at Harvard University. C.M Kearns mentions in his book *T.S. Eliot and Indic Traditions* (1987), that from Harvard catalogue we infer Eliot's study on Sanskrit include courses in *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, Hertel's *Panchatantra* and Patanjali's *Yoga-Sutra*. While, his study of Pali include the study of *Jatakas*, Buddhaghosa's study on *Anguttara Nikaya*, Anesaki's lectures on Mahayana Buddhism and even selected portions of *Lotus-Sutra* or *Saddharma-pundarika*. Now, we shall try and locate the influence of these texts in Eliot's poetry.

The idea of time (Sanskrit '*kala*'), in Hindu tradition has three components - *srishti*, *sthiti* and *laya*. It is cyclical, eternal, and forms the nucleus of human consciousness. This consciousness forms the basis of memory acquired in the past lives, the memory which has condensed material desires responsible for procreation. In Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), we come across a poetical representation of this idea:

April is the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain. (I. The Burial of the Dead)

This link between memory and desire is found in Patanjali's *Yoga-Sutra*, where we get to learn that *samskara* or the memories acquired from the past lives can stir up our consciousness if infected by desire, "virāma-pratyaya-abhyāsa-pūrvaḥ saṃskāra-śeṣo-'nyaḥ" (*Yoga-Sutra*: Sutra 1.18). Irving Babbitt's (1865-1933) "Buddha and the Occident" introduced Eliot to *Dhammapada* and he was also familiar with Hermann Oldenberg's *The Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*. These ideas developed in Eliot a Buddhist vision, and it has influenced him to compose the third section of *The Waste Land*:

Burning burning burning burning O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord Thou pluckest burning.

(III. The Fire Sermon)

In order to realise what is it that is burning, we must refer to *Ādittapariyāya Sutta*, or Buddha's 'Fire Sermon', a discourse from the Pali canon which depicts fire as the pain incurred

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by the self through materialistic pleasures and also the process of purification which will aid in overcoming this pain:

sabbarh, bhikkhave, adittam. kinca, bhikkhave, sabbaññi adittam?
cakkhu adittam, mpa aditta, cakkhuvinnāna adittam, cakkhu-samphasso aditto.
yampidam cakkhusamphassapaccaya uppajjati vedayitam sukham va dukkham
va adukkhamasukkham va tampi adittam. kena adittam? ragaggina, dosaggina,
mohaggina adittam, jātiya jaraya ... upayasehi adittam ti.

(*Ādittapariyāya Sutta*: The Fire Sermon, SN 35.28)

Buddha says that all is burning, monks are burning, objects are burning, eyes are burning, and everything which is pleasant or unpleasant is burning. In order to attain *Nibbana*, we must attain a pacified state of mind, extinguishing the fire of pain, hatred, jealousy, desire. The idea of *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, *Damyata* in Part V of *The Waste Land*, is taken from *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, where Prajapati the creator instructs to 'be self-controlled, be charitable, be compassionate':

tad etad evaiṣā daivī vāg anuvadati stanayitnuḥda-da, da, iti, damyata, datta, dayadhvam
iti. tad etat trayam śikṣet, damam, dānam, dayām iti. (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, V, 2, SN
3)

The poem even ends with *shantih, shantih, shantih*, like the Upanishads. We can be amazed by Eliot's mastery to weave the philosophy of the Orient in his poems, but we must also realise that ideas cannot be segregated as East or West. They are universally true in their attempt to preserve the cardinal virtues of man. However, in *Four Quartets*, Eliot conceives time as a continuous entity:

Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future, And time future contained in time past. If all
time is eternally present

All time is unredeemable. (I. Burnt Norton)

In *Atharva Veda*, we learn the supremacy of time, its role as the creator, keeper and
destructor of all objects:

From Kāla sprang the Waters, sprang the regions, Brahma, Holy Fire.

The Sun ascends by Kāla, and in Kāla sinks again to rest. By Kāla freshly blows the wind,
mighty through Kāla is the

Earth: on Kāla rests the mighty Sky. (*Atharva Veda*, XIX, 54)

However, the third quartet, 'Dry Salvages' replicate the message of *Srimad Bhagavad*

Gita:

And do not think of the fruit of action. Fare forward.

O voyagers, O seamen,

You who came to port, and you whose bodies Will suffer the trial and judgement of the
sea, Or whatever event, this is your real destination.' So Krishna, as when he admonished
Arjuna

On the field of battle.

Not fare well,

But fare forward, voyagers.

(III. The Dry Salvages)

Krishna's message to Arjuna in *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* is that, we do not hold any right in the
fruit of our action, come what may glory or defeat, we must focus on the *karma* oration:

karman्य-evādhikāras te mā phaleṣhu kadāchana

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mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stvakarmaṇi

(*Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, II, 47)

On studying Eliot, we not only find the reference of his lines in Indian religious texts, but he transcends the mind of his readers from the material realm to the spiritual:

Let those who go home tell the same story of you: Of action with a common purpose,
action

None the less fruitful if neither you nor I know, until the judgment after death, What is
the fruit of action.

(‘To the Indians Who Died in Africa’)

Srimad Bhagavad Gita has repeatedly instructed to practice ‘*nishkama karma*’:

sukha-duḥkhe same kṛitvā lābhālābhau jayājayau

tato yuddhāya yujyasva naivam pāpam avāpsyasi

(*Srimad Bhagavad Gita* II, 38)

The influence of *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* in Eliot is havoc. Again, in ‘The Dry Salvages’ Eliot argues that a man after his death will become that which he was thinking of while dying:

The mind of a man may be intent

At the time of death"—that is the one action (And the time of death is every moment)

Which shall fructify in the lives of others: And do not think of the fruit of action.

Fare forward.

(III. The Dry Salvages)

Similarly, in *Aksharabrahmayoga*, of *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, Arjun says that we attain in the next birth that which we were conscious of during death of the previous birth:

yaṁ yaṁ vāpi smaran bhāvaṁtyajaty ante kalevaram

taṁ tam evaiti kaunteyasādā tad-bhāva-bhāvitaḥ

(*Srimad Bhagavad Gita*. VIII, 6)

These are some of the instances which I could place before you, to argue my case that T. S. Eliot was heavily influenced by the Indic tradition. On reading Eliot’s poetry, we come across his consciousness of time, memory, methods to overcome desire, his search for freedom and other Oriental aspects. We have seen how Ashoka took to his *Dhamma*, after the bloodbath in Kalinga war, similarly during and after the First World War, there was a search for peace and tranquility across the globe. Perhaps, it is this inquisitiveness which influenced the modern writers to look back at the East.

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