



# The Resonance of Indian Philosophy in the Western “*The Waste Land*”

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The ancient Indian philosophy has, undoubtedly, influenced many intellectuals of the West. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, William Butler Yeats and Thomas Stearns Eliot were greatly influenced by the Indian scriptures. T. S. Eliot's masterpiece, "The Waste Land" (1922), is the most prominent example of the influence of the Indian philosophy on the Western Literature.

“The Waste Land” is an exemplary Modernist poem and a seminal work of the Twentieth-century English Literature. Since its publication in 1922, the epic poem has enjoyed tremendous critical acclaim and won several literary awards. In 1948, T. S. Eliot was honoured with the Nobel Prize in Literature for his “outstanding pioneer contribution to present-day poetry”. Sharma (2014) observes, “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”. Eliot’s literary output has a universal appeal due to his objective treatment of human sensibilities and predicament.

T. S. Eliot’s magnum opus, “The Waste Land”, is a long poem of four hundred and four lines, divided into five sections:

1. The Burial of the Dead
2. A Game of Chess
3. The Fire Sermon
4. Death by Water
5. What the Thunder Said

In his poem, “The Waste Land”, Eliot depicts the desolate and devastated land after the World War One, punctuated by materialistic chaos, moral catastrophe, human calamity and spiritual sterility. Fusing the famous legend of the Holy Grail and the Fisher King with the glimpses of the contemporary British society, the poem is marked by shifting voices, locations and time periods. Sharma (2014) summarises the whole poem as follows:

The first section, "The Burial of the Dead", introduces the diverse themes of disillusionment and despair. The second, "A Game of Chess", employs alternating narrations, in which several characters address those themes experientially. "The Fire Sermon", the third section, offers a philosophical meditation in relation to the imagery of death and views of self-denial in juxtaposition. The fourth section, "Death by Water" includes a brief lyrical petition, and the the fifth section, "What the Thunder Said", concludes with an image of judgement.

An important milestone in the history of English poetry, “The Waste Land”, is replete with allusions to more than thirty writers ranging from Vigil, Ovid, Dante to Shakespeare, Milton and Spenser. Besides these literary references, there are several cultural allusions too. The Indian thought and mysticism, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, resonate remarkably in this literary landmark. Eliot celebrates Indian philosophy as a solution to human plight or a way to regeneration of Life. The elements of Indian Aesthetics are reflected in almost all the sections; however, “The Fire Sermon” and “What the Thunder Said” are two sections in which the Indian philosophy finds an explicit expression.

Since his childhood, T.S. Eliot was inclined towards Buddhism. He deeply revered and cherished Sir Edwin Arnold’s long epic poem on Gautam Buddha’s life, entitled “*The Light of Asia*”. He was immensely fascinated by Indian philosophy during his college years. When he reached Harvard, the University had become a famous centre for Oriental Studies. He studied the Indic Course in 1911 and started studying Sanskrit, Pali, Hinduism and Buddhism as a part of a course of Ideology at Harvard. He studied the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, *Pantajali* and *Pali*. In his essay, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, Eliot declares, “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” (as cited in Sharma, 2014).

“The Waste Land” is a clear testimony to Eliot’s deep understanding of and high esteem for Indian philosophy. Das (2021) writes, “Eliot’s orientation in Indian Spirituality gets distinctly revealed as he takes

the titles of this section from the Upanishad” (p. 101). Rao rightly remarks, “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” (as cited in Sharma, 2014, p. 84).

The first section, “The Burial of the Dead” affirms the belief in the re-birth after death. The idea of the section called, “The Fire Sermon” is based on a sermon called, “The Fire Sermon”, delivered by Gautama Buddha in which he insists on liberation from materialism and worldly passions through 'Detachment.' Das (2021) comments, “The Fire Sermon is the third discourse delivered by Lord Buddha. Several months after his Awakening, Buddha delivers this sermon to an audience of thousand fire-worshipping monks, employing the metaphor of fire”.

In the last section, “What the Thunder Said”, Eliot writes

*Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves*

*Waited for rain, while the black clouds*

*Gathered far distant, over Himavant.*

*The jungle crouched, humped in silence.*

*Then spoke the thunder*

DA

*Datta: what have we given?*

.....

DA

*Dayadhvam: I have heard the key*

.....

DA

*Damyata: The boat responded*

Eliot has employed the pure Sanskrit words *Ganga* and *Himavant* because of the spiritual, mythological and religious association of the *Ganga* with the *Himavant*. The *Ganga* is sunken because it reflects the debased and miserable condition of civilization, while the black clouds visible over the *Himavant* are the harbingers of rain which will restore and refurnish fertility to the dead and decadent soil and, thereby, pave the path for spiritual rejuvenation and moral upliftment. The voice of the thunder is projected in ‘Da.’

Dhedhi (2020) affirms, “Eliot alluded to the syllable *Da* in the sound of the rumbling thunder.

The meaning of these three *Da* are respectively: give, sympathise and control. Eliot uses *Da* as a solution to spiritual degeneration of mankind. The poem concludes on an optimistic note with the words “*Shantih shantih shantih*”. “The poem ends with the Indian aesthetics of *Santa rasa* (peace) a formal ending to an Upanishad, *Shantih shantih shantih*,” asserts Chowalta (2017). The poem is, certainly, a passionate plea for peace education. Ramanujam (2018) elucidates, ‘The Waste Land’ reiterates the three cardinal virtues of *Damyatha* (Restraint), *Datta* (Charity) and *Dayadhyam* (Compassion) and the state of mind that follows obedience to the commands as indicated by the blessing *Shanti, Shanti, Shanti*- the peace that passes understanding”. Thus, T. S. Eliot upholds the message of Gautama Buddha and the Upanishads as a panacea for all the human suffering in the post-world war era.

“The Waste Land” is, indeed, deep rooted in Indian Philosophy, Hinduism and Buddhism. Through his legendary literary landmark, T. S. Eliot clearly conveys the message that the solution to all the spiritual sterility of the West resides with Indian philosophy and mysticism.

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