

Review Article

Indian Ethos in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot

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OVERVIEW

The hoary Indian wisdom has attracted many intellectuals in the West. With the growth of Indology in England and Germany, Europe turned to the East. During the mid-nineteenth century, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman had begun publishing poems, essays and books containing oriental colourings. In those days, Harvard had become a famous centre for oriental studies. T.S. Eliot among others, studied there from 1906 to 1914. In those days, he came in contact with his learned Gurus like Charles R. Lanman and James H. Woods, who themselves were busy in reading and anthologizing books related to Hinduism. T.S. Eliot presented the credentials of a wide range of poetic sensibility by incorporating in his poetry not only the best of European culture and American mind but also of Indian thought and tradition.

In the true spirit of a universal and philosophical poet, he drew upon certain Indian sources and ideas to put them to a creative use when he came to composing his own poetry. The Indian impact upon Eliot's work is due to his study of oriental philosophy. As a serious scholar of Philosophy at Harvard, T.S. Eliot applied himself to the study of Sanskrit and Pali for two years. He had fascination for the profound wisdom of ancient India. Eliot admits that his:

...own poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility and it is now certain that he flatly... refused to draw any absolute line between East and West, between Europe and Asia.¹

In his poetry, references abound to show that he had knowledge of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavadgita and Patanjali's Yoga-Sutras. He was well versed in Buddhistic lore and literature too. His poem *The Wasteland* is both vedic in origin and Upanishadic in content.

Eliot seems to have been attracted by the Indian concept of 'Fatalism'. K. Smidt speaks of "fatalism in Hindu belief",²

which is the doctrine that all things happen in the human world according to pre-arranged fate, necessity or inexorable decree. In India it goes by different names – Kismet, Nasib, Bhagya. In the poem "Rhapsody on a Windy Night", he writes:

Every street lamp that I pass

Beats like a fatalistic drum,³

In the poem, a young man is passing through the streets in search of pleasure at twelve o'clock in the night. It appears that the street lamps are swayed by the wind and they produce some kind of sound. The 'beating of the lamp' like the fatalistic drum is highly metaphysical because in ancient times, the beating of the drums was the sign of declaration of war or a man's death. The very light of the street lamp which is an everyday phenomenon has been given a fatalistic significance.

Metempsychosis is an essentially Hindu doctrine occasionally employed by Eliot in his poetic corpus. K. Smidt rightly thinks that "one of the basic features of oriental religions is belief in metempsychosis."⁴ The Gita says that the human soul is "eternal, omnipresent, immovable, constant and everlasting".⁵ According to it, "the soul discards the worn out bodies and enters into the new ones".⁶ This doctrine, however, does not appear very closely on the surface of Eliot's poetry, though there are obvious traces of it in it. Thus, in *Four Quartets*, the travellers who start on a journey are not the same when they arrive at their destination. They are desired to meditate during their journey upon Krishna's teachings to Arjuna concerning reincarnation:

On whatever sphere of being the mind of man may be intent at the time of death, to that he goes... having been used to ponder on it.⁷

Their transformation will actually be a part of their spiritual

progress in the journey of life. Yoga also fascinated Eliot immensely. The great Hindu mystic, Patanjali also finds berth in Eliot's poetry. Yoga-Sutras, had truly left the poet in a state of enlightened mystification. The end of all yoga is liberation (moksha) which implies the annihilation of the individual and the ultimate immersion into the divine soul. The self mortifications and austerities of Patanjali's Yoga provided Eliot with "not only the answer to a religious need, but also the matter for a poetry of contemplation which should be both intense and dramatic".⁸ The practice of Yoga necessitates the absention from movement, both physical and mental Patanjali's Eight fold path assists the practitioner to achieve this salutary objective.

The eight dimensions of the path are absention (yama), observance (niyama), Posture (asana), breath control (Pranayama), sense withdrawal (pratyahara), concentration (dhyana), contemplation (dharana), and profound meditation (Samadhi). These eight fold path are necessary to achieve the objective. The following lines from the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", appears to be pointing to this:

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of My days and ways?
And how should I presume?⁹

The 'formulated phrase' for the practitioner of yoga is Aum, and the 'sprawling on a pin' and the 'wriggling on the wall' are the austerities enjoined by Patanjali.

Buddhism also exercised a firm hold on the poet. Eliot, and the latter regarded the Buddha as an ideal representative of the Eastern asceticism. In one place, Eliot observed that "some of the early Buddhist scriptures affected me as parts of the old Testament do".¹⁰ The very title of the third section of The Wasteland is directly drawn from Buddhism. When this poem was being written Eliot seriously thought of becoming a Buddhist. The Buddhist doctrine of death-wish and Nirvana; that is the state of existence in which man is totally freed from all sense-perceptions and worldly desires attracted the poet most. A glimpse of the effective application of the doctrine of Nirvana may be have in "Gerontion" where in poet states:

I have lost my passion; why should I need to keep it?
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:

How should I use them for your closer contact?¹¹

Gerontion being an old man has lost his sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch which reminds us of Buddhistic doctrine of Nirvana in which man is totally freed from all sense perceptions and worldly desires. Similarly the protagonist of Ash Wednesday wished to be exempted from the endless cycle of birth and death and secure place in oblivion:

Because I do not hope to turn again

Because I do not hope

Because I do not hope to turn

Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope

I no longer strive to strive towards such things...¹²

The protagonist of the poem no longer desires to turn back to the things of the world. He does not hope to derive any benefit from what the world offers him. He does not wish to acquire the transitory glory of life. He wishes to construct something spiritually.

Eliot got interested in Buddhism and Hinduism right from his early Harvard days when he was pursuing the study of Philosophy so assiduously because these religions of India were so highly philosophical, ethical, and spiritual in their leanings.

T.S. Eliot has employed Indian symbols in his poetry like the lotus, the wheel, the darkness, the light or sunshine. The Lotus is a symbol of purity, fertility and birth. The mud out of which it grows stands for the womb and the water around it for the maternal procreative vitality. The symbol of the Lotus is generally used to indicate productivity, both in its limited and cosmic senses. Mr. Howarth rightly holds that the Lotus is one of the Hindu images "which have been naturalized in the western imagination and languages".¹³ The Gita tells us that the Lotus is an object of purity:

He who acts offering all actions to God, and shaking off detachment remains untouched by sin, as the lotus leaf by water.¹⁴

T.S Eliot has employed this symbol in the first movement of "Burnt Norton":

Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,

And the pool was filled with out of sunlight,

And the lotus rose, quietly, quietly...¹⁵

Here, in the poem lotus is shown as floating on the surface of the dry pool. Eliot has employed various Indian symbols in his poems.

In the entire arena of the World Literature, no other philosophical epic has drawn the attention of the readers, irrespective of clan and creed, time and place as the Bhagavadgita; it is because the mankind in its totality had derived from it that content that shows them the right path. Whenever man finds himself in a state of indecision and spiritual bewilderment in determining the right course of action; the Bhagavadgita inspires a man to follow the path of right and disinterested action with knowledge of a desireless devotion to the Almighty. For Eliot, the Gita was by far the most important Indic text he read and the one that most deeply and extensively informed his poetry. In The Criterion Eliot praises Arjuna's balance of mind:

That balance of mind which a few highly civilized individuals, such as Arjuna the hero of the Bhagavadgita, can maintain in action.¹⁶

The Gita aims at providing the valuable instructions like right and disinterested action and detachment. The poems and plays of T.S. Eliot in their pattern of ideas exhibit the basic concepts of the Bhagavadgita. His poem "To The Indians who Died in Africa" refers to the Hindu concept of Karma (action) as propounded in the Bhagavadgita which was so dear to the poet that he called it "the next greatest philosophical poem to the Divine comedy with in my experience".¹⁷ The poem under review appeared in the commemorative volume entitled Queens Mary's Book for India which is addressed to Indians who laid down their lives while fighting far away from their motherland during the second world war. In these Indians Eliot discovered an excellent objective correlative of 'selfless action' performed in the spirit of dispassion and detachment. The content of this poem is quite identical to that of the Gita and in both the burden is on doing one's duty without any desire for 'the fruit of action'. The selfless action according to the Gita is the highest and easiest kind of Yoga:

And do not think of the fruit of action.¹⁸

The desire of getting 'the fruit of action' binds the soul to the body, whereas the duty done in perfect detachment liberates it for good and the end of Yoga is liberation from the human bondage. Four Quartets is a series of four poems that appeared from time to time. These poems are named after different proper places. The most explicit note of Hinduism strikes us in "The Dry Salvages". In the second movement of the poem occurs:

Time the destroyer is time the preserver.¹⁹

It verily recounts the Hindu concept of time in relation to

timelessness. T.S. Eliot has shown an inclination to Indian Literature and poetry, to Indian asceticism and metaphysics and to Indian thought and religion. T.S. Eliot himself has confessed that his poetry "shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility"²⁰ which is reflected in his works.

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