

The Bhagvada Gita & T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets

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Abstract – The problem with religion is its subjectivity; it is a matter of faith. Hence, one finds it easier to oppose a creed to which one does not ascribe any significance. Nevertheless, political positions are also, in the end, “creeds” that one chooses to embrace. Literary works, as manifestations of a society, portray the political and religious aspects of the social realm in which they were produced.

Our perception of an independent material world of objects, persons, and processes is grounded in a pervasive error. We take the unreal for the real and the real for unreal. This is borne out by the famous analogy of the snake and the rope. We often mistake a coil of rope for a snake in the dark; but, on closer examination, we discover it to be only a coil of rope. Our everyday world of appearances may be likened to a snake, and it seems very real to us; we are in the darkness of ignorance caught in the web of illusion. When we are illumined, According to Hinduism, the root of the never-ending suffering that human beings experience in the world of constant flux is craving. In Hinduism, the words of Krishna reveal the same idea: “All is clouded by desire; as the fire by smoke, as a mirror by dust, as an unborn baby by its covering. / Wisdom is clouded by desire, the ever-present enemy of the wise, / desire in its innumerable forms, which like a fire cannot find satisfaction”. T. S. Eliot, the prolific poet and literary critic, penned a work that created a great controversy among literary critics, the Four Quartets. For some, it is Eliot's masterpiece; for others, the work serves as proof that religious influence becomes counterproductive when explicitly manifested in a work of art. Despite the undercurrent against religion in the last century, religion is, and has always been, a manifestation of the highest ideals of the human beings and, therefore, to ignore its influence is futile. Even though there are people for whom religion ruins a work of art, one has to remember that religion, as a social manifestation, is as impossible to overlook as political concepts. Interestingly, while some critics eagerly banish works that include religious concepts, few people object to the genre known as political literature.

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It is well known that Eliot had a profound interest in religion, an interest that only increased after his conversion to Anglicanism. Eliot also expanded his religious interest to other systems of faith, concretely Buddhism and Hinduism. He also studied widely influential religious authors, such as Dante and Milton. While Eliot disliked the latter, he always praised the former, as one of his letters shows: “I admit that I had several motives in saying what little I said, in passing, about Milton. First I find him, *on the whole*, antipathetic. Dante seems to me so immeasurably greater in every way, even in control of language, that I am often irritated by Milton's admirers” (L1 426). Eliot seemed to favor Dante not only because of Dante's mastery as a writer, but also because he regarded him as a true spiritual leader.

This interest in religion and significant religious authors was the key that opened the door to Spanish mysticism for Eliot and led him to the works of Saint John of the Cross. In 1913, while Eliot taught philosophy for undergraduate students at Emerson Hall, he kept studying the Spanish mystics and developed a growing interest for Saint John's *Dark Night of the Soul*. In his on-line article entitled “The Influence of John of the Cross in the United States: A Preliminary Study,”

Steven Payne discusses Saint John's influence in Eliot's works: Since Eliot first discovered John's works while at Harvard, was still interested enough to cite them as a ‘devotional monument’ in ‘Lancelot Andrewes’ (1926) and to quote them ironically in an epigraph to Sweeney Agonistes (1926-7), as well as to review an abridged version of John's works in 1934, it is more than probable that he continued reading John in depth and with understanding.

T. S. Eliot considered ‘Four Quartets’ his masterpiece. Besides Dante, Shakespeare, The Bible and other Christian mystics, Eliot was also greatly influenced by the Indian Philosophy and mysticism--- mostly by The Bhagavad Gita, which is universally acknowledged as one of the world's literary and spiritual masterpieces. His thorough knowledge of The Bhagavad Gita is clearly evidenced by his statement that, “the next great philosophical poem to the Divine Comedy with my experience”. ‘The Four Quartets’ is the most perfect piece of poetry ever written in Eliot's whole literary career, which presents the best of Eliot in both form and thought. It is a collection of four poems---Burnt Norton, East Coker, Dry Salvages and Little Gidding---which represent the separate elements of thought and time, eternity,

action, inaction, attachment and detachment, for a philosophical solution to the immediate problems of both emotion and intellect. A Hindu thought, as expressed in the Bhagavad Gita, becomes the central theme of the poem as Eliot's need of finding solace through Vedic metaphysics. George Williamson informs that the basic idea contained in the Four Quartets is seen "analogous in both Christian and Hindu thought, in St. John of the Cross, or the Bhagavad Gita" (Williamson, 1970). In fact, the Bhagavad Gita has largely been followed in both its form and content in the 'Four Quartets'. The Gita, which presents the very essence of Vedanta, recommends total surrender to God as the means to win his grace. Lord Krishna advises Arjuna to follow the path of total self-surrender for winning his grace if he finds the path of knowledge and action difficult, as repeatedly bestows the hope of his grace on one who seeks refuge in him with all his being: Sarva-dharman parityajya Mam akam saranam vraja Aham tvam sarva papebhya Moksaisyami ma sucah (Bhagavad Gita, XVIII, 66) (Give up then thy earthly duties, surrender thyself to Me only. Do not be anxious; I will absolve thee from all thy sin.) And, Tam eva saranam gaccha Sarva-bhavana bhārata Tat-peasadat param santim Sthanam prapsyasi sasvatam (Bhagavad Gita, XVIII, 62) (With all thy strength, fly unto Him and surrender thyself, and by His grace shalt thou attain Supreme Peace and reach the Eternal Home.) These words strike a significance parallelism with the words of Jesus: "Come unto me, I will give you rest." Obviously, Eliot's repeated emphasis on humanity and prayer in the 'Four Quartets' is common to both Christianity and Hinduism, and the efficaciousness of human effort is to be found as much in the form of total surrender and devotion to God as in that of perfect knowledge and detached action (Srivastava, 1977). The text of the 'Four Quartets' is spread over into four sections, that is the Burnt Norton, the East Coker, the Dry Salvages and the Little Gidding. The Bhagavad Gita consists of four yogas, such as, the Dhyanyoga, the Jnanayoga, the Karmayoga and the Bhaktiyoga channelizing the knowledge of self-perfection, and also the release of the soul to its ultimate goal. The all four yogas, disseminating the theories of right action, meditation, wisdom and devotion, have been followed by Eliot in the four chapters of the 'Four Quartets', in a perfect bond for the search of the Ultimate Truth, moksa,--redemption and an inter-linked approach to salvation (Dangwal, 1999). Eliot's anxiety of a lost identity, awe, anger and dullness created the atmosphere to write the 'Four Quartets'. Particularly, Lord Krishna's gospel of the action and inaction theory of the Bhagavad Gita revives courage in Eliot to counter act his own passive inactivity. Lord Krishna sermonizes Arjuna to dispel his passive inactivity as: Karmanyevadhikaraste Ma phalesu kadachana ma karma phala hetur bhū ma te sango'stv akarmani (The Bhagavad-Gita, II, 47) (To work alone you have the right but never claim its results. Let not the results of action be your motive. Nor be attached to inaction) Expecting a result from the action you have done is the first hurdle in the way to moksa, so that the human being remains in perennial suffering. The karma theory aims at awakening Arjuna from his slumber of dullness

and inactivity, which Eliot best imitates as a thought imbibing relief of his own attachment, and also inactive self, when Eliot conveys: But perhaps neither gain nor loss, For us, there is only the trying, The rest is not our business. (East Coker, V) From these lines, it seems that Eliot has followed a gospel told by the Lord even better than Arjuna in a most human and the psychological world (Dangwal, 1999). The lines, "And do not think of the fruit of action" (The Dry Salvage), also impart the whole discourse of the Bhagavad Gita in to the main framework of the poem. Burnt Norton The influence of the Bhagavad Gita is seen from the beginning lines of the Burnt Norton, the first section of the 'Four Quartets': 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. (Burnt Norton I) These lines demonstrate Eliot's grasp of time, its spiritual significance, and its philosophically exasperating nature which the poet contemplates in the line: "time is eternally present," an assertion that lends to time both relative and absolute properties while combining its various, fluctuating forms---the past forever disappearing, the future forever being born, and the present forever being renewed into a single moment. Pointedly juxtaposing time and eternity, Eliot calls attention to the close relationship between them. By merging past, present, and future, he creates the eternal present, absolute and relative, never changing and always fleeting, captured in time like the lovers on Keats' urn for future unborn generations (Fairchild, 1999). These lines find a relation to Lord Krishna's revelation of the idea of 'timelessness' to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. He speaks: Na to evaham jatu nasam tvam neme janadhipah Na caiva na bhavisyamah sarva vayam atah param. (The Bhagavad Gita, II, 12) (In Fact. there was never a time when I was not or when you or these kings were not. Nor is it a fact that hereafter we shall all cease to be.) And again, Sarganam adir antas ca madhyam caivaham arjuna Adhyatma vidya vidyanam vadah pravadatam aham. (The Bhagavad Gita,X, 32) (Oh Arjuna, I am the beginning and the middle and the end of all creations. Of science, I am the science of all the soul, or metaphysics; in disputant, I am the right type of reasoning.) There is another stanza of analogous concept, which describes the influence of Gita in the poem: Not that only, but the co-existence Or say that the end precedes the beginning And the end and the beginning were always there Before the beginning and after the end, And all is always now. (Burnt Norton, V) As Lord Krishna confirms his conviction that 'time is timeless' and so it can be free of all past, present and future, Eliot follows the same in its full content, affirming that there is neither past nor future, but only present. It has been conceptualized that the universe is in a continual flux of change, limited in its simple form of happening. The 'Still Point' appearing in the 'Four Quartets' has a great concern to Eliot's philosophical as well as literary expressions. Eliot has interpreted 'still point' as a stage between death and rebirth. It has been presented as a stage capable of the real mode of salvation. Eliot writes: At the still point of the turning world Neither flesh nor fleshless;

Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is. (Burnt Norton, II) Here, the image of 'neither flesh, nor fleshless' and 'neither from nor towards' describes the state of self-realization, a state for the mode of salvation. As McCarthy (1952) regards, the still point is "both temporary and eternal, in time and out of time", and points out "the state of spiritual peace and release from desire, action and suffering." The image of the dance echoes the cosmic dance of Lord Shiva, a state free from 'the practical desires'. East Coker The second chapter of the 'Four Quartets', the East Coker, which represents the element 'earth', is a philosophical presentation of the Vedic cycle of births and deaths. The expressions, "In the beginning is my end" followed by "In my end is my beginning" explain a system of births and deaths as described in the Bhagavad Gita. Death renews life and a life reborn is bound to die. Death is the metaphysical reality that alone makes birth possible. Lord Krishna tells that the mortal body is like the clothes which are thrown away for exchanging the new: Vasamsi jirnaniyatha vihaya Navani grhnati nara parani Tatha sarirani vihaya jirnany Anyani samyati navani dehi. (The Bhagavad-Gita, II, 22) (Just as a person gives up worn out clothes and puts on the other new ones, even so does the embodied self give up decrepit bodies and enter other new ones.) The same way, Eliot represents in the third section of 'the East Coker' that ultimate destination of a being is to 'go into the dark': I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre, The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed. (East Coker, III) Dry Salvages The most direct reference to the Bhagavad Gita occurs in the opening lines of the third section of 'The Dry Salvages', where the poet says: I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant- Among other things - or one way of putting the same thing. This reference to Lord Krishna reinforces the idea of timeless reality, i.e., "time, the destroyer is time, the preserver". This section is built on a contrast between the 'river of life' and the 'sea of life'. Here, the river symbolizes the journey of the jeeva (living creature) flowing from birth to death. The river and the sea denote the allegory of life-cycle, "the drop of water lifted as a vapor from the sea, consigned as rain upon the Himalayas, and carried again seaward by the Ganges". Eliot writes in the Dry Salvages, "The river is within us, the sea is all about us". Here the river symbolizes change and the sea symbolizes the permanence. The sea symbol in which the life-river of an individual shall submerge, finds origin of the Dry Salvages in the Bhagavad Gita, in the lines: Apuryamanam acala-pratistham Samudram apah pravisanti yadvat tadvat kama yam pravisanti sarva Sa santim apnoti na kama-kami "He attains peace into whom all sense---objects enter even as 'rivers' enter an 'ocean' which is unaffected though being ever filled, and not one who is desirous of enjoyments". (The Bhagavad Gita, II, 70) Even Arjuna uses these symbols to describe the ceaseless flow of temporal reality into the all-devouring mouth of endless eternity at the time of devise vision revealed to him by Lord Krishna: Yatha nadinam bahava 'mbu-vegah Samudram evabhimukta dravanti Tatha tavani nara-loka-vira Visanti vakrani

abhivijvalanti (The Bhagvad Gita, XI, 28) (Just as many currents of water from rivers flowing rapidly verily enter the ocean; similarly all these kings of the world are entering your fiery mouths from all directions.) Evidently, the reference to Lord Krishna in the Dry Salvages reinforces the idea of the timeless reality both as eternal preserver and as destroyer. It also refers to the recurrent idea of the simultaneity of time or the unity of all time in eternity. Lord Krishna's sermons ultimately precipitate in the text of the 'Four Quartets' in entirety of its thought-process. The Lord's lines: Jneyah sa nitya-saayasi Ya na dvestina kanksati Nindvandvo hi mahabaho Sukham bandhat pramucyate (The Bhagavad Gita, V, 3) (He who neither dislikes nor desires should be known as a perpetual renouncer of action; for O mighty---armed one, one who is free from the dual throng is easily freed from bondage.) reflect in a recurrent idea in the concluding lines of the 'Dry Salvages': And right action is freedom From past and future also For most of us, this is the aim. (The Dry Salvages) Little Gidding Eliot's most profound poetic exploration of the Bhagavad Gita takes place in the 'Little Gidding', where the image of 'fire' becomes the dominant symbol. Here, the symbol 'fire' has been used in a strategic plan of Eliot's philosophy. Eliot writes: We only live, only suspire Consumed by either fire or fire (Little Gidding) According to the Hindu philosophy, 'fire' is a witness, a God to all kinds of rituals, including the birth, marriage, death, and the post-death ceremonies. Agni (Fire) is the purifying God, exempting the sins thereof. The Bhagavad-Gita speaks of two kinds of fire, i.e., the fire of desire, which consumes the human being, and the fire of knowledge, which elevates the human being to the super-sensible. Eliot advocated the knowledge of fire for the attainment of love of god. He writes: The only hope, or else desire Lies in the choice of pyre or pure To be redeemed from fire by fire (Little Gidding) The 'Four Quartets' is one of the most challenging works of T S Eliot, which consists of the possibilities of an impersonal theme attempted in view of his most personal experience. The Bhagavad-Gita has supplied him both the form and content; it has influenced Eliot's poetic technique in whole of the 'Four Quartets'. Eliot makes the best use of the sermons of Lord Krishna and their expressions in the quartets, making it a poetic equivalent of a symphony. Whether it is the concept of time or detachment or salvation, Eliot exterminated his romantic memories into a philosophical realization through the classical techniques imitated upon the sermons of the Bhagavad-Gita. Apart from the form and content, the Bhagavad-Gita has also provides a rare kind of source in finding philosophical solutions to the most psychological problems faced by the mankind. The use of oriental ideas, particularly from the Bhagavad-Gita, in Eliot's poetry raised a lot of controversy. Helen Gardner (1949) tells that the introduction of Lord Krishna in the Dry Salvages is "an error and destroys the poem's imaginative harmony". B Rajan believes that, "Eliot is never happy in the maze of Oriental metaphysics, and his wanderings this 'time' are uncomfortably sinuous". Harvey Gross described

the reference of Krishna in the 'Four Quartets' as "unilluminated metaphysics". Eliot "manages to reconcile Christianity and Hinduism without offending against either". Raymond Preston says that Eliot is "interested in Heraclitus and the Bhagavad-Gita insofar as they reveal to him different ways of putting the same thing". Whatever it may be, a close study of Eliot's poem reveals the although his Christian orthodoxy prevents him from accepting completely the cardinal truth of the efficaciousness of human effort for union with Brahman, as Kristian Smidt has suggested, Eliot's references to the idea of the Bhagavad-Gita are by no means halfhearted. Eliot's firsthand and thorough knowledge of the Bhagavad-Gita is clearly evidenced by his statement, "the next great philosophical poem to the Divine Comedy with my experience". Conclusion By 1942, Eliot was in an exile, a loneliness of selfhood. In spite of his loss and seclusion in personal life, he wanted to get satisfaction in life, which was not possible in his life style. The Bhagavad Gita entrusts him the better satisfaction with its metaphysical wisdom that any individual, wherever he may be, should depart to the divine abode, leaving his behavior, relations and all other attachments in this world. Eliot felt satisfied with the Vedic knowledge, particularly the Gita, which he read in his Harvard days. The Four Quartets is the result of Eliot's need of finding solace through Vedic metaphysics, where the knowledge expressed in the Bhagavad Gita became the central theme of the Four Quartets. The 'Four Quartets' is a unique example of Eliot's reconciling the human ills to a supersensible state of a self-satiating realization. Eliot reconciles his psychological ills of personal memory through the mode of resignation and renunciation, as told by Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita to Arjuna. The four successive parts of the 'Four Quartets' correspond to the four yogas thought by the Lord for attaining a perfect salvation from this temporal earth. 'The Burnt Norton', the first Quartet of the Four Quartets describes 'air' and relates to meditation, i.e., the Dhyanyoga. 'The East Coker' uses the element 'earth' describing action, i.e., the Karmayoga. 'The Dry Salvages' deals with the element 'water' describing wisdom, i.e., the Jnanyoga. And finally, 'The Little Giddings' presents 'fire' as its symbol describing the devotion, i.e., the Bhaktiyoga. Eliot accepted the views of Lord Krishna and believes that depending on the action of the human being, either his/her soul takes another shape or gets the permanent abode. Obviously, Eliot is as much concerned with the search for a unified vision of reality as he is with a synthesis of culture and thought, and his synthesis imparts to the Four Quartets a universality of vision which seems to be the chief aim of the poet. Lord Krishna---the Still Center---is evidently, central to the structure of the 'Four Quartets'.

Four Quartets can be interpreted as a map of consciousness preparing the "deluded" mind for the actualization of a unified consciousness. The Self is the unified consciousness which perceives everything but is not itself an object of perception. It is timeless, eternal, and unchanging.

Four Quartets is structured around the idea of change. Lord Krishna described His Nature thus: "Earth, water, fire, air, aether, mind, intellect and the thought of I (individuality) are My "Nature" in its eight-fold division and verily my lower Nature. But know too my other (higher) Nature that of the Soul, by which the world is sustained" (1939). Four Quartets centers around the four elements of Air (Burnt Norton), Earth, (East Coker), Water (Dry Salvages) and Fire (Little Gidding). The union of these four elements creates "life", a life that is often "filled with fancies," "empty of meaning: One can "descend lower, descend only/In to the world of perpetual solitude". Is there "an end to the drifting wreckage "to the" ... Soundless wailing, The silent withering of autumn flowers"? Can we even think "of a time that is ocean less. . . Or of a future that is not liable/Like the past, to have no destination". It is through contemplation that the mind can transcend this "lower nature" and reach the level of the "higher nature" where the "tire" and the "rose" are one. The Word, or Logos, is the organizing principle of the total scheme which is "reconciled among the stars".

In Four Quartets the task of understanding the whole pattern and finally arriving "At the still point of the turning world" is closely related to the poet's task of understanding, finding words for, and finally communicating his discovery. The proper creation of a poem is the religious duty of a poet. In "Little Gidding" Eliot elaborates:

Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us to purify the dialect of the tribe and urge the mind to after sight and foresight let me disclose the gifts reserved for age, to set a crown upon your lifetime's effort (1988).

In Indian aesthetics, at this moment of transcendence, the word becomes a mantra. Orientalists generally describe mantra as "prayer," as "mystic syllables" that are chanted during the performance of religious rituals.

However, mantra is a power which lends itself impartially to any use. Mantra, in short, is a power (sakti), a power in the form of sound which can evoke the primordial reality behind the uttered sound. Eliot himself realized the significance of the incantatory element in poetry. Eliot once said that "all poets would like their work to be said or sung by the common people" (1980). He also said that he would prefer an audience that could neither read nor write. In Four Quartets each poem is structurally a poetic equivalent of a classical symphony, or quartet. The meaning of the poem arises as a whole when all the four poems are considered in relation to each other. When the mind dwells on its inner essence, then the absence of "thought" is silence. It is this auditory imagination that is needed to perceive the wisdom that is inherent in all of us.

This fragmented use of language finds a symbolic analogy in man's own disordered and chaotic thoughts as he follows, "The deception of the

thrush"... It is the poet who can rescue him from this delusion. But humankind cannot bear too much reality. The moment of illumination in the rose garden, the mystic glimpse of the lotus rising quietly out of the "heart of light", are rare and often unknown experiences in a world where lithe mind is conscious but conscious of nothing." To be restored our sickness must grow worse. "If to be warmed..then I must freeze! And quake in frigid purgatorial fires/of which the flame is roses and the smoke is briars"(1969).

This process of mental purgation is needed to realize any form of wisdom. A psychic and cultural renewal is possible through the power of sound in poetry. Eliot extended the mantra power to the language of poetry where meaning is communicated through the intricate nuances of rhythm, breath and sound. Listening attentively expands the mind, frees it from distractions and fancies, from " ... the dark cold and the empty desolation" to reach out to the Infinite. The mind is stilled, controlled and disciplined, For "We must be still and still moving/Into another intensity/For a further union, deeper communion" Similarly, shunyata is Eliot's strongest argument for the power of silence which sounds in poetry can evoke. Shunyata is the absence of subject-object relation. Silence is a necessary condition for wisdom. It is the inner freedom from the practical desire, The release from action and suffering, release from the inner And the outer compulsion. Yet surrounded by a grace of sense, a white light still and moving.

This faculty of the mind is not available to vision, only to experience. In "The Dry Salvages," a final solution is sought and " an approach to the meaning restores the experience/In a different form, beyond any meaning/We can assign to happiness". Indian mysticism endows the word with the power to awaken the consciousness to a realization of the Absolute. It holds material existence to be existence in time. The timeless is experienced only when the mind apprehends the Divine by transcending the limitations of the temporal.

For most of us there is only the unattended moment, the moment in and out of Time. The rest is realized through prayer, observance, discipline thought and action. It is to this intense meditative state that the Four Quartets leads. "Little Gidding" concludes with the evocative line, And all shall be well.. When the tongues of flame are in-folded Into the crowned knot of fire And the fire and the rose are one.

For every beginning is an end and every end a beginning. One has to be redeemed from the fire of "death" by the fire of redemption. Through this baptism of fire, the soul transcending the sacred and the profane shall reach that moment of timelessness where."The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew tree/Are of equal duration".

The philosophic resolution is made when the fragments fall into place it resolves itself into a unified harmonious whole. So also in the use of words, the moments of

illumination can be evoked in the mind of an ordinary man through the use of the right word by the poet. When every phrase and sentence is right, when every word is exact and precise without being vulgar or pedantic, then every phrase, and every sentence is an end and a beginning, and every poem is an epitaph.

Thus interpreted, Four Quartets is an analogue to the process of manana (contemplation) implicit in mantra.

In Four Quartets Eliot goes beyond Time and suggests the ultimate unification of all experience and reality.

Unless awareness penetrates into the very core of the mind and heart, and unless it alters in its quality by an inner change in the whole psyche, no "illumination" is possible. Poetry, therefore, "may make us from time to time a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves, and an evasion of the visible and sensible world".

It is the poet, consequently, who has to struggle to find the right word to stimulate knowledge of the Word.

To do so the poet has to painfully begin the process of learning all over again by breaking away from the conventional use of the word, "Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle/With words and meanings". Four Quartets is itself in the nature of a ritual, a psychological ritual of insight, loss, searching, praying, finally, ending in the rapture of a mystical awareness of the hidden laughter of children in the foliage". This, according to Eliot, is the highest point that poetry can reach, or will ever reach.

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