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ECHOES OF THE EAST IN T.S. ELIOT'S *THE WASTE LAND* (1922)

"The East has more to teach the West than the West conceives."

-W. Somerset Maugham

The time-honored and hoary perspicacity of ancient India has put together scores of intellectuals in the West, among whom; Thomas Stearns Eliot (26 September 1888- 4 January 1965) is barely credible and high-flying. Like W. Somerset Maugham, T.S. Eliot also believed in, "The East has more to teach the West than the West conceives." Eliot had indubitably a high concept of that art which had a propensity to be timeless, everlasting and philosophical, and not that art which was bound to the temporal.

T. S. Eliot was one of the significant literary figures in twentieth century- an age that not

only witnessed two horrendous and appalling World War, but also experienced rapid changes in social fabric, courtesy brisk mechanization, industrialization, urbanization and of course mass consumption. Eliot was an ardent student of philosophy and took exceptional and special interest in Indian and Hindu philosophy. In a true fortitude and spirit of a universal and philosophical poet, Eliot drew upon certain Indian sources and ideas such as *The Bhagwad Gita*, *The Vedas*, *The Upanishads*, *Patanjali's Yoga Sutra* and *Buddhism* to put them in order to an ingenious, creative and artistic use when he came to composing his own poetry.

T. S. Eliot, the Nobel Laureate of 1948, is plausibly the only modern English poet who has brought his gargantuan and mammoth learning to put up with his poetry for his work as a trail-blazing pioneer of modern poetry. A variety of fields of study mark his thriving and unbeaten culmination of a long time campaign towards the book of modern man- as we may call his literary works. All the way through the poet's life-long spiritual quest, he got hold of a peculiar sensibility, which he tried to convey in the 'right language'. Eliot insisted on the technique most to give perfection to his subject. Eliot was, without any shred of doubt, an integral poet who had been rummaging around for a form of poetry as well as for a form of life.

It is palpable that his poems depict corroded, decayed and disintegrated modern European metropolis in general and squalor and filthy conditions of London in particular. However, his preoccupation with a modus operandi to suit his focus imparts a peculiar taste to his poetry. The most essential formative period of Eliot's personality is at Harvard. The insightful and sensitive Harvardian was well-skilled to have a saner attitude towards life in the course of his study of Eastern philosophy and Western philosophy. Eliot was very much guided by the Oriental religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism etc. to sooth by a long way his beleaguered and careworn soul. He became much attracted towards Sanskrit and Pali languages. Eliot's poetry is allusive and echoic in nature. The sensitive and discerning reader never lets pass the oriental thoughts, ideas and symbols there. His poetry abounds in an assortment of distinct symbols. Some of these symbols are characteristically Indian in their origin and application. The Indian What's more, the *Rig Veda*, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Patanjali's Yoga Sutra*, influenced him and above all, Buddhism left ineradicable and deep-seated impression on his mind.

The Waste Land, the tour de force of Eliot's first phase unequivocally shows the impact of Buddhism and Hindu Upanishadic myths. For the study, both primary and secondary sources are taken into account. *The Waste Land* is a poem of the human condition. This epic poem is the

endeavour of a philosophical poet to scrutinize and examine the life we live and have been living, linking the undying and timeless to the temporal. This epoch-making poem deals with the spiritual distemper and sexual perversity of urban life, which makes it so bleak, unappealing and disheartening. The idea or theme of the poem is the spiritual paralysis of the urbane, sophisticated and cultured man. Moreover, the theme is life-in-death, the decay and death of the modern waste landers. Religion and love are the main source of man's good life. Spiritual development has been corrupted. Now, sexual degradation and vulgarization of sex have become the order of the day. Mechanical routine has made his life sterile, austere and meaningless. There are five sections in this modern epic namely; "The Burial of the Dead", "A Game of Chess", "The Fire Sermon", "Death by Water" and "What the Thunder Said". Aside from certain Indian myths and rituals that have been probed and explored herein for an understanding of the poem, "The Fire Sermon", and "What the Thunder Said" have been interpreted from the Indian perspective. Tiresias is the narrator of the poem. He is a type of all-knowing universal person who hails from the past as well as from the present. He may be compared with Narad Muni of the Indian tradition. When we analyze the poem, it is found that getting dismayed and disgusted with the existing state of affairs and circumstances in the West, Eliot fell back on the East for religious or spiritual succor and on the Upanishadic message for setting his busted and out of order lands in order. Likewise, Rabindranath Tagore, a renowned Indian poet, says that the door of the West is now unbolt not only to give but also to take and synthesize with one's own culture for perfect outcome. The treasures of antique and very old Indian literature mesmerize a galaxy of scholars such as Bertrand Russell, Max Muller, Charles Wilkins, Anatole France, to name a few.

What is more, Eliot brought two contradictory and opposite things: the spiritually downbeat character of the contemporary world and the spiritually upbeat character of the past tradition into consciousness, and into altercation with one another. This is the statement of Stephen Spender about Eliot's effective and valuable dealing with the best part of the tradition while comparing him with two literary genius -Ezra Pound and William Butler Yeats. Eliot's profound veneration and regard to the Indian tradition is a momentous part of his assimilation. For sure, many even before Eliot fanatically felt this charm and incantation of the East. Hinduism is not something unfamiliar or alien to Eliot. Ever since the early part of the seventeenth century, the contact between India and the Western world has been yielding across-

the-board and effective results. On one occasion at Harvard, Eliot studied the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, which left him in a state of enlightened mystification. Eliot studied the ancient Indian languages like Sanskrit and Pali and so forth. Eliot assimilates in his poetry, with his catalytic mind, the acumen and expertise of the East, which expresses an insightful and astute significance and intensity to his verse that is hardly found ever elsewhere.

In *The Waste Land*, several direct citations and allusions from Indian literature serves an objective correlative of the emotions and ideas of his numinous experience. *The Waste Land* abides the pessimistic and murky note of Indian philosophy not to create a stunning and dazzling ivory tower world, but instead gives a picture of a modern and up-to-the-minute world with a mechanized, dehumanized, brutalized and dilapidated humanity. The inhabitants of this wasteland are rootless and godless people. Life for them is not more evocative and important than animal pleasure. In view of the fact that April is the "cruellest month", Belladonna is "the lady of situations", the virtue of the modern hyacinth girls is the loss of their virginity, the lovers meet in a rat's alley, the union of sexes is simply the use of abortive pills, so the whole world is manifestly burnt in the fire of lust. In such a state, the clairvoyant Tiresias too is an ineffectual and incompetent outsider. The poem deals with the spiritual distemper and sexual perversity of metropolitan life, which makes it so disgusting, unpalatable and depressing. The theme is the spiritual paralysis of the urbane and sophisticated man and life-in-death. The tragedy of the post-war generation is not peculiar to the twentieth century. It is to a certain extent true that every age has its sturdy and weedy points as well. The weak points referred to by the poet are loss of high values, sexual perversion, and business mentality etc. These things arise out of the deep-seated and basic failings and limitations of man. It is the foremost source of the tragedy at the heart of life in all ages. Eliot brings the universality of man's facilities to the surface by the comparison of the situations in the present and what went before. Sexual perversions were mediocre and run of the mill in ancient Carthage, in ancient India, in the Biblical Waste land and in the Elizabethan age. Similarly, the antidote for these ailments and diseases is also the equivalent renovation through afflictions, sufferings and the practice of the moral values in life. Eliot meets the criteria this human quandary and predicament with collocation of Lord Buddha and St. Augustine:

"To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning

O Lord Thou pluckest me out

O Lord Thou pluckest me burning.” (Line 307-310)

That is to say, when St. Augustine comes into Carthage, he comes across a cauldron of unholy loves there. Hence, he advised severity, burning and smoldering of passions as a remedy to this dissolution of the waste land. Similarly, when we turn to Buddhist philosophy, we come to know that Lord Buddha too describes the covetousness and lust of flesh a burning fire. The allusion Buddha’s Fire sermon has a close insinuation to the fire of lust with which the modern world is blistering and burning. In the poem, Eliot seems to plea for the individual reform, emancipation and redemption in order to achieve the final goal of life i.e. Salvation. This fire of lust or the barrenness of love and the physical and spiritual dearth can be satiated only by starkness, moral and ethical discipline, self-possession and control from within. According to Eliot, sex is an important aspect of life. It is considered as an expression of love and means of procreation. Gone are the days when sex was considered as a means of human development but no longer now. Unfortunately, sex has become an animal urge and pleasure without any moral or social commitment. Moreover, the 37th verse of the third chapter of *Shrimad Bhagvad Gita* is quite mentionable here, in which it is pointed out that,

“Kama aish Krodha aish, Rajogun samudbhavah,

Mahashane, mahapapma, vidyenmih varinam. ” (verse-37)

About the fire of lust, it is written in *Bhagvad Gita* that lust is the cheapest thing and the worst or the biggest enemy of a man. The main cause for almost every shameless and flagrant behavior is Kama or lust. In addition, Krodha or anger is spoken about but it is actually brought about by lust as well. This is because when Kama is unable to satisfy its desire and yen, it instantaneously takes the form of Krodha in that case. This Kama is born from rajasguna or the mode of passion. This signifies that when there is an increase of sattvaguna or the mode of politesse and goodness then Kama will definitely be diminished proportionately. It should apparently be understood that Kama and Krodha are redoubtable and fearsome opponents of man on the pathway of Moksha or salvation or libration from the cycle of birth and death.

Furthermore, according to the Buddhist Philosophy, a person can arrive at Buddhist’s Nirvana by conceiving a repugnance and revulsion for the lust of flesh. The fascination of Eliot with Buddhism was conceivably or probably escorted in him by his study of Irving Babbitt’s essay entitled “Buddha and the Occident” in which the essayist deals with the thought that the temper

of the Buddhist is more uncongenial and impersonal than that of the Christian. Eliot's veneration and regard for Buddhism was so enormous and immense that he settled on becoming a Buddhist at the time of writing this epic poem *The Waste Land*. What is more, the resonance of the archaic Aryan cult of nature through the *Rigveda* can plainly be heard in *The Waste Land*. In the modern waste land, therefore, no supernatural or mystical power or any deities steps forward for salvage or rescue. It gives the impression that *From Ritual to Romance* of Weston made numerous *Rigveda*'s hymns accessible and easy to get to the poet, relying on which Eliot also uses water to play the most momentous and considerable part in his poem. For Indian population, water is the key-element of nature cult and the flora rituals.

It is reverberated thus in the fourth section ('Death by Water') of the poem:

"A current under sea

Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell

He passed the stages of his age and youth

Entering the whirlpool." (L-315-318)

It, therefore, provides evidence how the poet looks up to and holds the highest regard of the essential Indian attitude and approach that the sense-lacerated soul cannot break away from the cycle of birth and rebirth until it subdues the strong pull of the senses through control and enlightenment. Moreover, this is the ultimate way to be unconstrained from the worldly and material bondage for the union with the Absolute or Supreme to get delight from perpetual or everlasting liberty.

Furthermore, when Eliot writes, "Ganga was sunken" (395), he turns from the Western civilization to the Eastern or Indian civilization. In the history of every nation or civilization, there comes a time of a spiritual crisis and mishap. Eliot uses many references in the last and final section ('What the Thunder Said') of the poem such as 'Ganga', 'Himavant' and 'DA DA DA', which give a sound echo of Indian Philosophy. Eliot refers to one of the Hindu *Upanishads*, where men, gods and demons prayed to the Creator in a period of qualm, doubt, confusion and uncertainty. God, the Creator reciprocated their prayer through a celestial and divine thunder, which articulated one word thrice- DA, DA, DA. Each group gave its own elucidation. Men said, "DA" (400) which stands for "Datta" i.e. 'to Give'. Demons said "DA" (410) which implies "Dayadhvam" i.e. 'to Sympathize'. Then after, gods said, "DA" (417) which signifies "Damyata" i.e. 'to Control'. According to the poet, all the three give an idea about the path of salvation for humanity, because man possesses all the three qualities i.e. human, demonic

and angelic. Eliot calls these three things like the three resounding and clear-cut imperatives, which are obligatory and indispensable for the fortitude of humankind. In the Indian scripture, we have the story of pious and devout soul or Prajapati whom gods and demons requested for the knowledge of the path of salvation. God becomes visible to them in the form of Thunder and voiced a mystic and shaman mantra thrice that was “DA” which was the key of spiritual re-birth. The mantra or hymn has three implications; give, sympathize and control. Another story in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* alludes to the syllable ‘da’, an preliminary syllable of sage Dadhicha’s name. It is an attention-grabbing and remarkable story of altruism and philanthropy. Some time ago, the land was wasted by the dearth with the drying up of Saptasindhu by the iniquitous and evil monster Vritta. Men, gods and fiend plead the sage Dadhicha to salvage them. Having zilch to give for the purpose, the sage offers his own backbone, accordingly the Vajrayudha is made of it and Vritta is slain by Lord Indra. In that way, Indra releases the streams from their detention. Water is similarly essential from the fact that if fire purifies by burning, water effects the similar decontamination by cleansing. Likewise, plunging in river in order to sanitize oneself is proverbial in Indian rituals. In the concluding section of *The Waste Land* that is “What the Thunder Said”, Eliot’s gratefulness to Indian tradition and ritual is unequivocal. It is the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the enormous forest of knowledge that serves the purpose of the poet to aspire for resurrection and revitalization of the disaster-prone and hopeless mankind. May be the poet learnt that the *Upanishad* promises a freedom which is above the tumult and bedlam of mortal and material existence. It can make people blissful and cheerful perennially under every condition, even after passing away. His citation here is from the fifth chapter of the above-mentioned *Upanishad*. It is said that three classes of Prajapati’s sons—the gods, men and demons lived a life of continence. In a time of misgiving and confusion, all of them went to their father and first gods requested to instruct. In the tranquility of the teacher, the pupils heard the sound ‘Da’ in the air.

“Have you understood? asked Prajapati.

We have. You tell us: Control yourselves, for you are naturally unruly. The gods said.

Yes, you have understood rightly. Said Prajapati.”

After this suggestion for practicing Damyata, Prajapati spoken the same “Da” to his other disciples men and devils too and they interpreted according to their own lapses as Dutta i.e. to give, and Dayadhvam i.e. to sympathize respectively. Thus, men learn from their father to cast off their avaricious and covetous nature by distributing their possession to the best of their valor;

and the demons learn to have kindheartedness and compassion, as they are malicious and spiteful. Nevertheless, it is men who share all these downsides and negative aspects. Hence, they should learn all these instructions. The accuracies of the poet's incorporating this upanishadic myth is thus acknowledged by C.D. Narasimhaiah that It comes at the concluding point of the poem inevitably since the poet's vision of deliverance from *The Waste Land*. Moreover, he also ascribed that the situations in the Upanishadic source as well as Eliot's poem are some or the other way analogous though not impossible to tell apart.

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot uses the symbol of wheel to put forward the cycle of birth and death. While on one hand, the wheel symbolizes righteousness in Buddhism and on the other the epitome of the *Gita*. Thus, the ideas of detachment, desirelessness, self-discipline and purifying austerities of the *Gita* and Patanjali's Yoga are of great resemblance with Christianity. Patanjali's instructions to men tends Eliot to an incongruous inquiry into modern man's act of giving, Which is quite apparent in some lines of the last section, "What the Thunder Said"-

"What have you given?

My friend, blood shaking my heart

The awful daring of a moment's surrender." (401-403)

The people of the waste land are put up with anguish, misery, melancholy and malfunction owing to the fact that they do not know what else to offer or give than sexual surrendering; they have no idea how to sympathize with others being incarcerated in their own prisons; nor do they put into practice the discipline of self-control that makes stronger the fiber of their souls. Though it is limited to a moment's surrender to improper gratification, yet its veiled repercussion is also a better giving, a affirmative, upbeat and total commitment of an elevated order.

The concluding section "What the Thunder Said" of the poem includes the essence of Eliot's thought. The rebirth of civilization is feasible only through faith. Eliot concludes that a change or reform of the world should commence first with the individual. The poet gives his own ideas how the modern civilization and dying generation can be retrieved from spiritual bleakness and death. Eliot opines that pain is necessary for restoration of the individual. What is more, detachment of the soul is mandatory for salvation. Eliot finally brings to an end with "Shantih Shantih Shantih" (433), a phrase pronounced by Indian priests to close a prayer or religious

ceremony. It is uttered to invite perpetual and eternal peace for humanity. The concluding lines of the poem are strongly associated with the concluding lines of the *Upanishad*:

“Nachiketa learned from the King of Death

The whole discipline of meditation.

Freed from all separateness, he attained

Immortality in Brahmin. So blessed

May we all be realizing the Self!

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti.” (265)

What is to say that peace is not all about accepting death. It is in being acquainted with that life and death are ephemeral and the eternal self can never depart. It is the foremost and central message of *The Waste Land* that all people inevitably suffer, but their affliction and anguish can end.

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