“Each in his prison thinking of the key”: a compoetical study of the Indian connection to The Waste Land

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ABSTRACT
A close reading of T.S. Eliot’s high modern poem The Waste Land (1922) reflects the influence of the ancient Indian philosophy and mythical structures on the mind that created the masterpiece. References may be found in the poem to the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagvad Gita, Patanjali’s Yoga Sūtras, early Buddhist texts and episodes from Mahabharata. This should not surprise any reader of Eliot who is aware of his deep interest in Asian philosophies – especially Chinese, Japanese and Indian – during his studies at Harvard, and the influence that teachers like Irving Babbit, Charles Lanman, James Woods – each one expertized in one or the other branch of Indian philosophy – left on him. The very texture of the fabric of The Waste Land is conceptualized as an amalgamation of Indian and Western culture. Prof. G. Nageswara Rao in his famous article “The Upanishad in the Waste Land” states that two out of the five section-headings of the poem are borrowed from Indian sources. This paper is essentially a study in compoetics i.e. comparative, compound poetics, making space for possibilities of alternative critical / theoretical approaches to co-exist besides the ones established by the canon. In its quest for this, the paper tries to examine (i) how an alternative archetypal source of the poem can be found in Indian mythology. (ii) what does Eliot have to borrow from the Vedic/ Upanishadic philosophy and Patanjali’s Yoga Sūtras while rendering his vision of the Western civilization in the poem, and (iii) how relevant are these borrowings a century later.

Keywords: Yoga Sūtras, Rishyashringa Myth, Shanti, Upanishads, Compoetics.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Waste Land, first published in The Criterion in October 1922, exactly a century before this paper was conceptualized, underwent a long process of composition, not ‘borrowing’ but ‘stealing’ (as Ezra Pound would say) from multiple sources. ‘The horror! The horror!’ – thus ends the earlier epigraph of Eliot’s initial draft of The Waste Land submitted to Pound in 1921. The epigraphical passage, taken from Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1899), was rejected by Eliot’s ‘il miglior fabbro’ on account of it not being “weighty” (Davidson, 2005) enough for an epigraph and swapped; but, was found the most “appropriate” and “elucidative” (Davidson, 2005) by Eliot himself. In that case, if Eliot’s earlier version is to be believed, The Waste Land is a poem about horror – horrors emerging out of various factors. A
comparison of the earlier epigraph with the final also confirms that the poem is about desire, temptation, the resultant horrible circumstances, comprising “crying whispers” (Davidson, 2005), death-in-life surrender and the desire to escape the living death.

If the number of languages used by a poet are to be taken as a parameter to decide his universality, Eliot has used six foreign languages and alluded to more than thirty-five foreign authors in *The Waste Land*. Among these, “the essential meaning of the poem”, for Pound, “is reducible to four Sanskrit words” (Kenner, 1965) – *Datta, Dayadhvam, Dayadhvam, Shanti* – which immediately establishes a *prima facie* connection, if not the centrality, of Indian thought while writing and interpreting the poem. That the poem spans from ‘April is the cruellest month’ to ‘Shantih’ itself reveals the range of Eliot’s erudition and at the same time his consciousness of the past – not only of a tradition but traditions. Biographical studies have made it clear that Eliot had already interestingly read Indian philosophy and scriptures by the time he started drafting *The Waste Land*. This paper tries to examine (i) how an alternative archetypal source of the poem can be found in Indian mythology. (ii) what does Eliot have to borrow from the Vedic/Upanishad philosophy and Patanjali’s Yoga Sūtras while rendering his vision of the Western civilization in the poem, and (iii) how relevant are these borrowings a century later.

**2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This paper is essentially a study in compoetics i.e. comparative, compound poetics. Compoetics strives for making space for possibilities of alternative critical / theoretical approaches to co-exist besides the ones established by the canon. In place of water-tight compartmentalized categories like Western poetics or Eastern poetics, 'compoetics' is a liberating and accommodating category. Similar to Comparative Literature, it is not a form of poetics, but rather an approach, a framework and a methodology of approaching literature. It studies a literary text from multi-dimensional approaches, validating native critical approaches that may add to the meaning of the text and enrich its interpretation.

Compoetics acknowledges and values the presence of other poetical traditions, and regards them as worthy subjects of study and acquisition of knowledge. Comparative Poetics introduces the concept of modesty by suggesting that no shastra (a treatise or doctrine) is fully comprehensive on its own. Literary-critical theories essentially emerge out of lived experience and lived relaity. If the meaning of a text is decided by a theory that is far-fetched from the lived experience of an interpretive community, it would lead to some sort of alienation. Instead, if distinct poetics work together to enhance the meaning of the text, such a way of textual interpretation would act as vehicle of cross-cultural communication.
This study involves theoretical frameworks from comparative literature and compoetics such as placing, influence and reception to find mutual illumination across traditions and cultures, keeping *The Waste Land* as a text in center.

3 METHODOLOGY

The present study is a qualitative research that employs the methodology of close reading and textual analysis. The research examines how *The Waste Land*, a seminal text in the Western literary canon, a hundred years denser of interpretations now, can be inalienably linked to Indian culture, philosophy and spirituality. The study focuses on various Indian texts, knowledge traditions and their masters that shaped Eliot’s sensibility while writing the poem. At times, the paper also employs elements of comparative study of literatures to show how various Indian interpretive communities can make sense of the cultural and spiritual experiences inherent in the text.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 TEXTS, TEACHERS AND TRADITION/S

According to Cleo Kearns (1987), Eliot’s earliest exposure to Indic thought came from Sir Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* (1879)* –* a poem based on Buddha’s life. “Eliot read it with pleasure in his boyhood. It set a tone for his later, more extreme study of Indic texts and traditions, a tone of respect, admiration and even a kind of curious intimacy.” (Kearns, 1987) In 1911, when he enrolled at the Harvard Philosophy Department for his undergraduate studies, Eliot’s first teacher Irving Babbit (who was also the most influential one according to critics) introduced him to a more sophisticated understanding of Indian philosophy, especially Buddhism. Babbit would often put “Confucius behind Aristotle and Buddha behind Christ.” (Kearns, 1987) In his first year at Harvard, along with Western philosophy, Eliot studied elective courses on Indic Philology and Elementary Sanskrit under Prof. Charles Lanman – the editor of Harvard Oriental Series. The following year, he studied Pali under Prof. Lanman, and also enrolled for an advanced course on Philosophical Sanskrit with Prof. James Woods, wherein he studied Patanjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* which left him “in a state of enlightened mystification” (Kearns, 1987) In the third year, he gave seminars on logic, ethics and metaphysics, and learnt Buddhist philosophy (especially *Mahayana* Buddhism) of China and

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* Sir Edwin Arnold was the Principal of Deccan College, Pune, in the 1850s. He has written on a comparative study of the Eastern and Western philosophies, and has authored expository works on the *Bhagwad Gīta*, *Hitopdeśa*, *Gītagovindam*, etc. *The Light of Asia* is a poem on the life and teachings of Buddha.
Japan under Prof. Masaharu Anesaki – a visiting faculty at Harvard. His Ph.D. thesis on Bradleyan
metaphysics (a topic that Eliot had later said he found interesting because of its affinities with Indian
philosophy) was supervised by Josiah Royce, who himself studied Sanskrit under Lanman.

During these courses, he was required to read thoroughly portions from the Vedas and Upanishads,
Yoga Sūtras, Panchatantra, Ramayana and Mahabharata, etc. in Sanskrit, and Jātaka tales and Nikāyas in
Pali. According to the investigation made by Kearns, Eliot owned a copy of Deussen’s The System of
Vedanta and The Philosophy of Upanishads; for his classes he used a copy of The Twenty-eight
Upanishads edited by Laxman and Phansikar in 1906, in which Lanman had marked eleven important
passages including those from the Brihadāranyaka found in Section-V of The Waste Land. (The copy has
been preserved in King’s College Library with Eliot’s pencil-notes.)

Why this account is important is because the texts he studied during these years are all texts written
in different styles and containing different perspectives or epistemological frameworks. They certainly
cast an influence on the mind that was preparing to write Prufrock and then The Waste Land – a ‘collage’
of different styles, voices and semantic-philosophical problems.

4.2 INFLUENCE OF YOGA SŪTRAS ON THE WASTE LAND: SELECT INSTANCES

Patanjali’s Yoga Sūtras contain what Eliot called an “extremely subtle psychology” and are
“something more than an arbitrary system of classification.” (Kearns, 1987) Jessica Cloud (2018, p. 3), in
her dissertation “T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land and Yoga Philosophy”, states:

> Among the many literary and philosophical sources of The Waste Land, the Yoga Sūtras have not
yet been fully acknowledged or explored... I do not argue that Eliot provides a full and adequate
understanding of yogic philosophy in the poem but rather that yogic philosophy informs the
structure of the poem. In The Waste Land one can see yogic philosophy in the form of a journey.
This journey gives shape to the poem which I argue begins with the recognition of suffering and
pain, and the obstacles to overcoming that pain... Taken together, the five sections of the poem
depict a yogic journey similar to that depicted in the Yoga Sūtras.

The first line of the poem is about mixing ‘memory’ and ‘desire’, ‘breeding’ flowers out of ‘dead
land’ and ‘stirring dull roots’ with ‘spring rain’. To mix memory with desire is to mix past with the future,
nostalgia with hopes/ambitions, the ‘seen’ with the ‘unseen’. Even an initial reader of the Yoga Sūtras
could relate these phrases with the formulaic exposition of the patterning of consciousness given in the
first chapter therein. Unlike the popular perception, yoga, for Patanjali is not merely some physical
exercises but a method of training the consciousness to calm down its ripples, deviations: Yogas chitta-
vritti- nirodhah (YS 1.2). James Woods (1914), Eliot’s teacher, translates this formula thus: “Yoga is the
restrictions of the fluctuations of mind-stuff.” (A recent translation by Hartranft uses the phrase ‘patterns
of consciousness’ for ‘fluctuations’). For Patanjali, ‘memory’ is one among the five types of ‘fluctuations’ that hinder the attainment of concentration. These fluctuations bring pleasure and pain and infatuation that are nothing but hindrances. “Desire is that which dwells upon pleasure; aversion is that which dwells upon pain.” (YS 2.7.8) Since memory retains past experiences without does not let them away (YS I.11), and desire always reinforces them, the cycle of pain and want of pleasure continues. From these “dull roots” grows the tree of *karma*. It is this latent-deposit of karma and the resultant bondage that makes April the cruelest month for many a character in the poem viz. Marie Larisch, Stetson, Phlebas, etc. Madame Sosostiris, who plays her wicked tarot cards (According to Weston’s *Ritual to Romance*, Tarot came from India to Europe via gypsies.), furthers the Karma concept by presenting her symbol of wheel. Kearns (1987, p. 202) explicates:

All of these figures indicate the ambiguity of unfulfilled and deeply repressed forms of memory and desire. Unless brought to the surface, these can only lead to “death by water” in the ocean of *samsara* or worldly experience – or to change the metaphor – fear in a handful of dust.

Similarly for Jessica Cloud (2018), phrases like “a heap of broken images” and “Unreal city” represent nothing but hindrances in the attainment of calm of mind. While “Burial of the Dead” takes place outside, “A Game of Chess” portrays an indoor scene. It appears to be a sort of meditation upon material objects and sexual relationships. The psychological instability of the woman “troubled, confused and drowned the sense in odours” For Patanjali, “And by the application of the organs to enjoyments, one cannot make one’s self free from the thirst… Surely one aiming at pleasure permeated by objects is sunk in the deep bog of pain.” (Woods, 1914)

Part-III of the poem introduces Tierasias – a much-discussed character in the poem, who according to Eliot, sees what is the substance of the poem. G. N. Rao finds the Indic counterpart of Tiresias in the concept of “*draśta*” (seer) found in Patanjali. The Seer as given in the *Yoga Sūtras* is an entity that merely observes the phenomenal world in a detached manner without indulgence or participation. According to Eliot’s (2006) own notes, Tiresias is “a mere spectator and not indeed a character”, that is to say, he sees but not knows or does. However, the connection of the detached yogic seer with Tiresias – a sufferer of death-in-life – is only a partial one according to many critics.

It is well-known that the ‘burning’ in “The Fire Sermon” is the fire of cleansing the spiritual self from the material world as said by Buddha, where we see the beginnings of the yogic ‘means of escape’ from the sufferings. The “Death by Water” section, the shortest one, has been hailed the most significant in the entire poem. Read through the frame of Patanjali, its significance increases because it is an “essential preparation for the peace and unity of Part V” (Kearns, 1987). For Cloud (2018), the fourth section is about the achievement of the final state of *kaivalya* – emancipation through isolation of pure awareness as given
by Patanjali. “it is a condition that when achieved, “all hindrances subside; all acts of the Self are spontaneous and free; absence of limitations which thwart one who wishes to attain the ultimate ideal of his own nature.” The ten lines about Phlebas, when read with the spiritual imagery of ‘burning’ at the back of one’s mind, indicate that he is now free from the worldly realms – he was once “handsome and tall”, thinking about “profit and loss” (Eliot, 2006) – all of these have become irrelevant to him. He has passed his “youth” of worldly pleasures and is now about to undergo the “transformative change” of spiritual awakening. “Phlebas’s death may be read, then, not as a merely natural or fated one but as sacrifice, the final sacrifice of the individual ego that must precede the full release of insight and liberation.” (Kearns, 1987) In this context, then, ‘Death’ caused by water is actually a new birth of the emancipated yogic self. In continuation, in the lines “He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying” (Eliot, 2006), ‘death’ stands for ‘a new life’ and paradoxically the “we” are not dying but rather moving towards awakening, a new birth of the emancipated spiritual self – the regermination of new life, that immediately sets the last part of the poem positively apart from the rest of them.

Now, to interpret the passages containing the Upanishadic triad Datta-Dayadhvam-Damyata: what the seeker is supposed to ‘give’ is “the awful daring of a moment’s surrender” (Eliot, 2006) i.e. surrendering one’s attachments, how is he supposed to ‘sympathise’? He must be utterly careful not to get in the ‘prison’ of attachment while ‘thinking of the key’ of mercy and compassion. It is then that our ‘life-boat’ responds gaily to “the hand expert with sail” i.e. the controlling hand – not that of God or any external authority but that of one’s own fully conscious Self. “The sea was calm” (Eliot, 2006) then, indicating the ripples of the consciousness fading away and peace hailing in. When the narrating persona in the poem, by the end of the poem, has undertaken this spiritual journey, he is in a state of absolute calm and peace of mind – ‘Shanti’. To recall the last sutra from Patanjali: “Freedom is at hand when the fundamental qualities of nature… are recognized as irrelevant to pure consciousness; it stands alone grounded in its very nature, the power of pure seeing. That is all.” (Woods, 1914, 4.34)

In this way, both “The Burial of the Dead” and “A Game of Chess,” sections explore the causes of suffering. The journey continues in “The Fire Sermon” section as it explores the concept of disgust and also the process of detachment fundamental to yoga. In the section “Death By Water”, the journey moves towards attainment of that state where all hindrances subside (the very goal of yoga for Patanjali). Finally, “What the Thunder Said”, written when Eliot was himself mentally stable under the treatment of Dr. Vittoz (in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1921) reflects equanimity, peace in everyday life and revival of the cultural-spiritual wasteland.
4.3 INTERPRETING SHANTI: THE TRANSCENDENTAL PEACE

Eliot’s notes, stating that ‘Peace which passeth all understanding’ is “a feeble translation of the content” of the thrice-occurring word ‘Shantih’ in the conclusion of the poem, provides room for further probe. The word ‘Shanti’, usually translated as ‘peace’ or ‘silence’, has range of meanings like ‘tranquillity’, ‘equanimity’, ‘absence of passion’, ‘absence of sexual passion’, and more according to Sanskrit lexicon, which may not be unknown to Eliot. Apart from this, the Sanskrit lexicon also gives other meanings of the word which could add to the interpretation of the ending of the poem:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
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<tr>
<td>To become tired, finish, to stop</td>
<td>The poet has exhausted himself of describing the horror of war, and possibly wants to stop at the given point, since he can go on no longer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be satisfied or contented</td>
<td>Contrary to the above-mentioned sense, the poet is content with the description of human degeneration he has made thus far, and ends on a note of hope.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impotence</td>
<td>The poet repeatedly emphasizes the cultural-spiritual degeneration of the contemporary civilization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curing the symptoms of disease</td>
<td>The poet has possibly given a catharsis to the psychological state he suffered from when he started writing the poem in 1921, and finds himself in a better state of mind. Eliot was already recovering under Dr. Vittoz’s treatment in Switzerland while writing the poem.</td>
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As per popular observation, Eliot has conspicuously abstained from adding the Sanskrit valediction ‘Om’ before the three-timed ‘Shanti’ – a part of the Upanishadic tradition otherwise. However, it appears that the poet, the realist that he was, deemed the ambience of the country too unfit to pronounce any allusion to benediction or auspiciousness. Secondly, the addition of ‘Om’ would raise the entire articulation to the pedestal of a mantra as per the qualifications prescribed in the Sanskrit tradition. Eliot is perhaps too aware that the poem is far from being mantric poetry. He is certain that he is not making it a benediction but an appeal. The appeal is for spiritual completeness of a circle – at personal and civilizational level.

Nevertheless, what is definitely prayed and desired for is peace. The three-timed repetition has a reason and a purpose: In the Sankhya system of Indian philosophy that Eliot had studied, there are three levels of dukha (pain, fear, misery, etc.) mentioned. Sankhyakarika, the founding text of the philosophy enumerates the three types as:

1. those belonging to the physical or Adhi-Bhautika realm: obstacles coming from external world, such as from wild animals, people, natural calamities etc.;
2. those caused by supernatural agencies or Adhi-Daivika realm: can be source of obstacles coming from extra-sensory world of spirits, ghosts, deities, and demigods, those that are beyond the reach of logic;

3. those belonging to the Adhyaatmika realm: obstacles arising out of one’s own body and mind, such as pain, diseases, laziness, and absent-mindedness.

Eliot’s prayer for the civilization/s is the removal of all the three spheres of sufferings. ‘Kshanti’ (from Sanskrit kṣānti) or khanti in Pāli (Buddhism) means ‘patience’, ‘forbearance’ and ‘forgiveness’ which echo the spirit of Datta, Damyata and Dayadhvam of the Upanishads. In the Yoga system of philosophy of Patanjali, this Shanti is a characteristic feature of the final state of samadhi.

Most importantly, ‘Shanti’ connotatively refers to freedom from epistemic violence. Eliot, a believer in confluence of cultures, religions and philosophy, is against any kind of epistemic vehemence, that would ultimately lead to wars. If this meaning of Shanti be taken, it reflects Eliot’s deep understanding of literature as an instrument of sahitya i.e. ‘togetherness’ etymologically in Sanskrit.

4.4 THE LEGEND OF RISHYASHRINGA: AN ALTERNATIVE (?) MYTHICAL SOURCE

In his own notes to The Waste Land, Eliot famously states that Jessie Weston’s From Ritual to Romance (1920) could explain the difficulties of the poem more soundly than his notes. In the preface to her work, Ms. Weston expresses her indebtedness to Prof. von Schroeder, the famous German Indologist, myth-scientist and a translator of the Bhagvad Gita, whose references have been “of the greatest assistance” to her. Incidentally, in 1911, the year when Eliot enrolled for Indian philosophical studies, Ms. Weston met Prof. Schroeder and discussed the Fishing myths, Grail legend, etc., that form the crux of her work and the basis of The Waste Land.

In the second chapter of Ritual to Romance, Ms. Weston observing the nature of Grail legends across cultures, remarks that the common feature of these legends is “the insistence upon sickness and disability of the ruler of the land, the Fisher King. Regarded first as the direct cause of wasting the land, the task of the Quester becomes that of healing the King.” (12) Infirmitiy, wounds, sickness, old age etc. of the King “reacts disastrously on his kingdom… either depriving it of vegetation or exposing it to ravages of war.” (19) This immediately brings to the readers’ mind the image of the Fisher King in the poem, pleading to at least set his lands in order. The Fisher King’s arid plains in the poem, bearing no water but only rock, need rains and fertility. Lesser people know about a similar story – that of Rishyashringa (literally meaning ‘dear-horned’) recurring in different versions Ramayana, Mahabharata and Buddhist Jataka tales – a story which Ms. Weston had read in Prof. Schroeder’s work and has been placed in the third chapter of Ritual to Romance titled “The Freeing of Waters”, stating: “What, however,
is of more immediate interest for our purpose is the fact that the Rishyashringa story does, in effect, possess certain curious points on contact with the Grail tradition.” (19) Rishyashringa is a young ascetic brought up by his father Vibhandaka in an isolated forest, unaware of any human except the father-son, and had never seen a woman. Meanwhile, there is a drought in the neighboring kingdom of Rompada who had insulted a brahmin. Since no brahmin is ready to perform fire-sacrifices for Rompada, Indra, the rain-deity, freezes rain-waters over his kingdom unless a perfectly chaste man comes to the place. Afraid of Vibhandaka’s rage, the king sends a few courtesans to Rishyashringa in his absence, who take Rishyashringa along saying that they were hermits. As soon as Rishyashringa visits the kingdom, there are abundant rains, and he marries the king’s daughter after which all ends well. Ms. Weston compares Rishyashringa to the Grail heroes, his chastity with their woodland youth and the Fisher King with Rompada. For Prof. C. D. Verma (2010, p. 151):

the myth of Rishyashringa is a prototype of the Grail legend as it is incorporated in The Waste Land. It contains all the features of the Fisher King myth and the Grail Knight Perceval. The common element in both the myths is the affirmation of life and rejuvenation of the vegetation-gods symbolized by freeing of waters by Rishyashringa and Perceval in the Indian myth and the Grail legend respectively.

In connection with release of rains for the revival of waste land – both physical and spiritual, Ms. Weston also refers to the Rigvedic encounters of Indra and Vrittra – the heroic god of rain and imprisoner of river-waters, representing good and evil metaphorically. A number of hymns by the Vedic seers are found to have written on the slaying of Vrittra by Indra. Eliot’s conception of a poet is essentially that of a seer. Kearns and other critics have considered The Waste Land as a prayer composed Eliot, who could see through the future of Western civilization, to the rain-god to destroy the inherent evils of the contemporary modern society and bring ‘Shanti’ – spiritual peace.

5 CONCLUSION

Every great work of literature transcends spatio-temporal boundaries, as does The Waste Land. Moreover, great works of literature have multiple windows and keys to open the doors on interpretation. Eliot indeed provides keys in the poem for a variety of interpretive communities of various geo-cultural and social situation. The fact that Eliot was a great synthesizer of ideas and cultures is undeniable. Out of the many sources of this poem, the Yoga Sūtras remain lesser known. However, a deeper reading of both Patanjali and Eliot would ascertain the influence of Patanjali had on Eliot’s critical concepts and Waste Land’s poetic structure and technique, from which a few select instances have been presented in the pages gone by.
Detachment is the only way to liberation: teach *The Waste Land* as well as the myth of Rishyashringa and Patanjali’s *Yogasutras* – the two out of many Indian influences on the poem. Rishyashringa stands for *Logos* through *Eros* unlike the troubled characters in the poem – ancient and modern – which is the very cause of their suffering as well as the suffering of modern man. Archetypal reading of the Rishyashringa’s myth (several thousand years old), the European Grail tradition (almost a thousand year old) and the echoes of these in *The Waste Land* suggest that *datta-dayadhvam-damyata* – sacrificing personal benefits for universal welfare (as Rishyashringa or Perceval sacrificed his chastity for the kingdom) and restraining oneself while savoring on the sensory-material pleasures/privileges in order to save for the less-privileged are the ways to ultimate spiritual peace as propounded by Patanjali in the ancient times and envisioned by Eliot for the modern society.
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