

## Exploring Indian Cultural Influences in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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### ABSTRACT

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) incorporates a wide array of references and allusions to Western and Eastern cultural traditions. Among these influences, Indian cultural elements, particularly those derived from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sanskrit literature, play a crucial role in shaping the thematic and spiritual dimensions of the poem. This article attempts to explore the influence of Indian culture on *The Waste Land*, focusing on the integration of Indian philosophy, spiritual concepts, and literary traditions, and how they contribute to the poem's critique of modernity characterised by fragmentation, spiritual and moral decadence and its quest for transcendental regeneration and redemption.

### INTRODUCTION

*The Waste Land*, published in 1922, is a seminal poem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The poem portrays the decadent modern world, characterized by spiritual barrenness, sexual perversion, boredom, futility and the loss of sense of belonging. The poem is highly concentrated and rich in imageries and symbolisms. In fact, the poem can be conveniently expanded into a voluminous novel. Different writers and critics have expressed their views on the universality and importance of *The Waste Land*. Ezra Pound describes it as "one of the most important 19 pages in English." (Gish 10) Conrad Aiken calls it "one of the most moving and original poems of our time." The poem incorporates varied cultures, traditions and religions ranging from that of the primitive pagan to that of the Christian, the Hindu and the Buddhist. It is less than 450 lines long, but because of its method of juxtaposing sharply different but relatable materials in a way analogous to cutting a film, -or to collage, the assemblage technique

practiced by cubist painters contemporary with Eliot such as Picasso or Braque, who fastened objects to canvases- it both includes a large amount of highly condensed information and forces it to suggest many unstated implications. (Tamplin 152)

Among the many cultural allusions and references that contributed to the shaping of this classic poem, the influence of Indian culture is unique, especially through its engagement with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sanskrit literature. Although the poem is largely concerned with the fragmentation and degeneration of the modern civilization, the presence of the elements of Indian culture and philosophy in it offer a spark of hope for spiritual renewal and regeneration. By exploring the Indian cultural influences in *The Waste Land*, this article examines how Eliot uses these elements to do a critical study of modernity's spiritual desolation and suggest a transcendental means of redemption.

Eliot's close encounter with Indian culture began during his academic years at Harvard University, where he studied Sanskrit and Indian philosophy. His reading of the texts like the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the teachings of the Buddha had a profound impact on his intellectual and artistic development. (Ackroyd 47)

The incorporation of these elements into *The Waste Land* is not merely for ornamental purpose but a deliberate attempt to integrate spiritual and philosophical wisdom from the East into the fabric of the poem. This article analyses the Indian cultural influences and their significance in the context of Eliot's criticism of Western civilization and his quest for spiritual meaning reflected in *The Waste Land*.

## ELIOT'S ENGAGEMENT WITH INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

Before probing into the specific Indian cultural elements in *The Waste Land*, it is essential to understand how Eliot's engagement with Indian philosophy and literature shaped his worldview and spiritual outlook.

### **The Influence of Sanskrit Studies**

Eliot's interest in Indian philosophy was engendered by his study of Sanskrit at Harvard, where he read the Upanishads and other sacred Hindu texts in their original language. His acquaintance with Sanskrit facilitated his access to these works, much better than that of any other Western intellectuals of

the time. His reading of the Upanishads, which explore the nature of the self, the universe, and the ultimate reality (Brahman), greatly influenced his poetry, especially in terms of his exploration of spiritual emptiness and the way for redemption.

### **Indian Spirituality and Modernism**

Indian spiritual concepts provided Eliot with a means to offset the existential crisis of modernity that he observed in the West. While modernism is often associated with general disillusionment and fragmentation, the Indian philosophies of samsara (the cycle of life, death, and rebirth) and moksha (liberation from the cycle of suffering) presented an alternative framework for understanding human existence and find transcendental solution to the problems it faces. These ideas are at the core of Eliot's work, influencing his portrayal of spiritual decay and search for renewal and regeneration in *The Waste Land*.

### **INDIAN CULTURAL REFERENCES IN *THE WASTE LAND***

*The Waste Land* is rich in its allusions to Indian culture, particularly to its religious and philosophical texts. It has explicit references to Indian culture in the form of Sanskrit terms, Hindu and Buddhist imagery, and spiritual teachings.

#### **The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad and the Chant of Peace**

The most prominent reference to Indian culture in *The Waste Land* appears in the closing lines of the poem, where Eliot quotes the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad:

“Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.  
Shantih shantih shantih.” (Eliot 75)

These words, translated as “Give. Sympathize. Control. Peace, peace, peace,” represents a call to be generosity, selflessness and spiritual discipline. The invocation of peace, “shantih,” which appears three times, proffers a means of overcoming the disillusionment and fragmentation that dominate the poem. The threefold repetition of “shantih” is particularly significant in its connection to the cyclical nature of existence in Indian philosophy, offering a spiritual resolution to the poem’s earlier chaos.

Datta (Give): This Sanskrit word is a call to generosity, suggesting the need for individuals to transcend their selfishness and engage in acts of selflessness and generous giving as a path toward spiritual renewal.

Dayadhvam (Sympathize): This term emphasizes compassion and empathy, urging individuals to understand and share in the suffering of others, a concept that resonates with both Hindu and Buddhist teachings.

Damyata (Control): This term denotes self-restraint and discipline, which are essential qualities of both Hindu and Buddhist strict self-denying practices, which lay emphasis on overcoming worldly attachments and desires to achieve salvation and spiritual freedom. (Moody 102)

The repetition of “shantih” at the end of the poem presents the hope for peace and spiritual harmony that offers a solution to the existential crisis that appears in the preceding sections of poem.

### **The Influence of the Bhagavad Gita**

The Bhagavad Gita, which is a fundamental text of Hindu philosophy, exerts a great influence on Eliot's work. The Gita's doctrines concerning the nature of duty (dharma), detachment, and the pursuit of knowledge resonate throughout the poem. One of the key themes in *The Waste Land* is the idea of spiritual decadence and the need for its regeneration. The Gita's emphasis on discharging one's duty without regard to the results aligns with Eliot's conviction that action is necessary in the face of spiritual and existential crises.

In the poem, Eliot juxtaposes spiritual inaction and apathy with that of the need for a redemptive action guided by spiritual wisdom. The Gita's call for detachment from worldly desires, as a means of transcending suffering, offers a way forward for the figures in Eliot's poem.

The poem's narrative is highly fragmented and its characters are lethargic and indecisive with no clear spiritual vision. The Gita calls for detachment from worldly pleasures to overcome suffering and hardship of the physical world. Eliot effectively applies this Hindu philosophy in this seminal poem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Buddha and the Fire Sermon**

The section of The Waste Land titled “The Fire Sermon” alludes to the Buddha's Fire Sermon, in which the Buddha teaches that the world

is consumed by fire, representing the suffering caused by desire and attachment. In this section of the poem, Eliot portrays the sensual excesses of modern life, where desire and the pursuit of pleasure are all-consuming forces that lead to spiritual degradation.

The Buddha's teachings, which emphasize the need for cessation of desire as a means to attain enlightenment, provide a powerful counterbalance to the poem's portrayal of the chaos and confusion of modern existence. Eliot's depiction of spiritual disillusionment in *The Waste Land* mirrors the Buddhist view of suffering caused by attachment and desire. By invoking the Buddha's Fire Sermon, Eliot suggests that liberation from suffering is possible through the renunciation of these desires.

#### INDIAN CULTURAL SYMBOLISM: THE GANGES AND THE THUNDER

In the fifth section of the poem "What the Thunder Said" the following three lines refer to the river Ganga:

Ganga is sunken, and the limp leaves  
Waited for rain, while the black clouds  
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.

(Eliot. *The Complete Poems and Plays* 74)

Here Ganga is in a situation of drought and the leaves are thirstily waiting for the rain symbolising spiritual drought and desolation. Eliot's reference to the Ganges, one of the most sacred rivers in Hinduism, is another example of Indian cultural influence in the poem. The Ganges symbolizes purification and renewal in Hindu tradition, offering a means of spiritual cleansing. In *The Waste Land*, the river's reference symbolizes the potential for regeneration, albeit one that is currently inaccessible in the spiritually barren world Eliot describes.

Furthermore, the thunderclap in the same section can be interpreted as a divine call for spiritual revival. The thunder's call—"Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata"—is a divine command for humanity to practice self-discipline, compassion, and generosity in order to overcome the existential void.

#### THEMATIC SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIAN CULTURAL INFLUENCES

The integration of Indian cultural elements in *The Waste Land* is not only for aesthetic or literary purpose but serves a more profound thematic

purpose. Through his engagement with Indian philosophy, Eliot confronts the spiritual crises of modernity and suggests a path forward through spiritual renewal.

### **Critique of Modernity**

The *Waste Land* critiques the spiritual barrenness and disillusionment of modern Western society. The Indian cultural elements in the poem offer hope for spiritual renewal and transcendental solution to the problems befalling the modern civilization. While the West is portrayed as mired in materialism, individualism, and moral decay, Indian spiritual and philosophy offer the possibility of spiritual regeneration through self-discipline, detachment, and compassion.

### **The Quest for Redemption**

The poem's concluding invocation of the Indian mantra for peace emphasises the theme of redemption. The Indian cultural elements in the poem suggest hope for spiritual renewal and redemption, but it can be achieved only through a deep engagement with ancient wisdom and a commitment to inner transformation. This vision of spiritual renewal is in sharp contrast with the moral and spiritual desolation that pervades much of the poem.

## **CONCLUSION**

The incorporation of Indian cultural elements in the form of references to the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Buddha, and other key aspects of Indian philosophy in *The Waste Land* offer hope for spiritual renewal and regeneration. Through these, Eliot crafts a complex and nuanced exploration of spiritual desolation and the possibility of redemption. These influences not only add to the thematic complexity of the poem but also reflect Eliot's own intellectual journey toward spiritual understanding. Eliot provides a global vision of human suffering, transcendence, and spiritual renewal, highlighting the universality of the human condition and the potential for regeneration through spiritual discipline and wisdom.

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