



Eliot's Delving into the Oriental Wisdom: A Cross-Cultural Study

Nasser Maleki^{1,*}; Mostafa Mirzaei²

¹Razi University, English Department, Kermanshah, Iran
 Assistant Professor.

²Bushehr University of Medical Sciences, Bushehr, Iran

*Corresponding author.

Address: Razi University, English Department, Kermanshah, Iran

Email: maleki_n5@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The last century has witnessed an upsurge in literature triggered by the cross-cultural study of literary texts. This unprecedented event has transformed the various literary texts and genres that are being deconstructed to suit the changing times. T.S.Eliot has not been spared by the universalized world order. Eliot's works are concerned with wisdom, the one which overlaps religion and is true for all men, at all times. By quoting from other sources, Eliot creates the deeper sense which forces the reader muse more effectively over the vital question of life and human destiny. In his poems, *The Waste Land*, and *Four Quarters*, and some of his plays, Eliot has withdrawn significant ideas from the Indian Scriptures, especially from the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the Zoroastrian Classics. He was thus influenced by the Indian philosophy; the trenchantly told in the mentioned texts helped him arrive at a unified sense of life. By drawing upon the sources of the ancient wisdom of the East, Eliot tells in telling terms that modern desolation and self-damnation can only be fought at the level of deeper subjectivity. This paper attempts to discover Eliot's response to the amazing corners of the oriental wisdom which does not seem to have received a significant attention by the researchers.

Key words: Eliot; Wisdom; Religion; Culture; Buddhism; Hinduism

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INTRODUCTION

If art is able to create a sense of aestheticism and apperception in an audience while nipping his perceptual awareness, it has extrapolated its role in an adequate manner. Eliot has demonstrated this role quite well. With a perspective sense of the past, present and, we can boldly say, the future and a high stress on the importance of intellectual order to achieve at a dipper vision of life accompanied with an inborn craft of poetic composition, Eliot was receptive and responsive to French, Italian and the Orients for imparting communicative strength to his poetry and prose. His art carry a personal evocation, and are at the same time, impersonal and universal in spirit. Since Eliot had an abiding interest not only in Western philosophy, but also in the ancient lore of the Far East, he could draw symbols and images from far and wide; and thereby, greatly strengthen the communicative potential of his art in a cross-cultural sense.

Right from the beginning of his artistic career, Eliot made apperceptive efforts not only in relation to the style of his language and diction, but also from the thematic standpoint. Apart from his extensive study of the Western philosophy, as part of his doctoral research work: Experience in the Philosophy and Wisdom of F.H.Bradley, which was duly published, Eliot also made an indepth study of Indian philosophy. His study of philosophy, culture as well as the literature of the Orients enabled him to compose poetry and prose in terms of a broad vision. His ideas as Shusterman depicts include a process which,

Begins with the early scientific realism and positivistic objectivism that was inspired by the revolt against the Hegelian idealist tradition represented by Bradley, but then turns to a

growing awareness of the hermeneutic, historicist, cultural and pragmatic character of human understanding. This kind of pragmatism Eliot most wanted to revive for modern life was not the philosophy of Pierce, James, and Dewey, but the classical idea of practical wisdom, a form of cross-cultural knowledge which cannot be reduced to any articulated system, doctrine, or formula(1994, p.31-34).

He assiduously trained himself emotionally and intellectually to understand different cultures and religion in a discriminating manner. In Eliot's artistic vocations, one can find a sense of direction and growing vision, for he relies more on the conscious effort of intelligence than any kind of ecstasy. For this reason, Eliot had developed into a deeply philosophical artist. Conscious of the poet's responsibility in imparting a sense of direction, he laid emphasis on producing healthy literature, for if any imaginative work of art, Eliot (1951, p.388) adds, "lacks explicit philosophical, wisdom and liturgical standards it would have undesirable consequences—similarly, literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite cultural and theological standpoint". It implies a close relationship between different cultures and literature. This does not mean that literature should be divested of its imaginative stuff. On the other hand, in literary judgment whether it is from the sphere of criticism or from a work of literature, one just cannot do away with social or cultural values, Eliot (1951, p.396) observes, "Our culture and society imposes our ethics, our judgment and criticism of ourselves, and our behavior towards our fellow men". It does show Eliot's sense of responsibility in composing his poems and dramas in such a manner as to heighten social-cultural awareness among readers who in the present century are lost in a welter of confusion arising out of the clash of ideologies and vested interests pitted against one another. With this perspective in mind, the present study is an attempt to foreground the traces of the oriental wisdom in the selected works of Eliot. The article ends, conclusively, by briefly speculating on the reasons for the above phenomenon. Eliot's sense of cross-cultural struggle and complexity can be explored through analysis of his poems and other prose writings, and the extracts cited in each part serve mainly to contextualize and support such type of cross intertextuality.

DISCUSSION

In his poems, *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets*, *The Hollow Men* and some of his plays, Eliot has borrowed ample and significant ideas from the Persian and Indian scriptures, especially from the Zoroastrianism, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and the Buddhist classics. He has done so with appreciative insight and feeling that man's existence is not exhausted within the sphere of external stimuli alone. Man's life partakes of several dimensions, visible and invisible: physical and metaphysical; and it is the responsibility of a poet, as Eliot had discussed in his essay,

Tradition and the Individual Talent, to ignore neither the timeless elements of the past wisdom nor those derived from contemporary men of deep thought and feelings. It is in this background that one can fully appreciate Eliot's remarks about the necessity of getting enlightened, even from sources that are culturally remote to the people in Europe. Precisely, Eliot depicts "If it were not so, what profit could a European gain from *the Upanishads* or the Buddhist *Nikayas* or the sense of Orientalism? Only from intellectual curiosity or an interesting sensation like that of tasting some exotic oriental dish" (1990, p. 226).

Eliot, out of his deep-seated urges, responded to the teachings contained in the Persian and Indian book of scriptures. He considered the imbibing of wisdom important for enriching poetry, "The wisdom is an essential element in making the poetry; and it is necessary to apprehend it as poetry in order to profit by it as wisdom" (Ibid.p.222). It is the fine interfusion of poetic feelings with thoughts and wisdom that imparts verve, fantasy and gravity to poetry, as is conveyed at the end of 'The fire Sermon' in *The Waste Land*, the poet says:

The broken fingernails of dirty hands

.....
To Carthage then I came
Burning burning burning burning
O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord Thou pluckest
Burning (1987, p. 70).

The phrase 'O Lord Thou pluckest me out' and the title of later section, 'Death by water' can be interpreted in two ways, either they signify death by water without resurrection, or they symbolize the scarification of death which precedes rebirth. It is true that the word phlebas of the first line of section four is purged of his commercial interests and vanities when he suffers a sea change. Besides, the phrase 'O Lord Thou pluckest me out' meaning a brand plucked out of fire refers to a sense of purgation before death, this line alludes to Eliot's Zoroastrian beliefs and wisdom, and the cleanliness of fire, and water. Zoroastrian believed that, fire and water are thoroughly clean, and one would be purified if one passes through either fire or water, since they believed, when Zoroaster passed a sacramental river, the Heavenly spirit, Bahman, appeared before him to take him to the throne of God Ahura Mazda, and each person should protect the cleanliness of fire, water, and earth. Zoroastrian temples were actually made in order to purify Zoroastrian followers of every evil, and ugliness of the last day, and heavenly Revelation. In other lines of *The Waste Land*, Eliot says

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon-O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine á La tour abolie

These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile fit you (424-431).

This plus the others lines in the poem (145-48) of the 'purgatorio' of *The Waste Land* in which Amaut Daniel, the Provencal poet addresses Dante: "Now I pray you, by that which guides you to the summit of the stairway, be mindful in due time of my pain" (qtd. Dinsmore, 1903, p. 30). The purgation vision of refining fire-as distinct from the fires of lust-represents one of the hopeful fragments shored up by the seeker for regeneration and order. This idea in Eliot's notion can transparently be paralleled with Zoroastrian beliefs about fire, since they believe that fire is able to purify everything including all kinds of dirt, corruption, and ugliness. In addition to Eliot's twists to Zoroastrian beliefs, there are many references to Indian costs, religion and in general wisdom in most of his poems.

By comprehending and grasping the explanatory note to these lines, as provided by T.S. Eliot, one can better appreciate the profound meaning that he tries to project. It is related to the fury of the carnal fires that singe man's inner fibers. The import of the lines, referred to earlier, if read in conjunction with the sex-colored allusions to Wagner's Tristan and Isolde story in the first section of the poem, - 'The Burial of the Dead'; in Shakespeare's Cleopatra and Philomel story in 'A Game of Chess'; and Tiresia's comment on the amorous antics of the carbuncular clerk with an unnamed woman, gets immensely heightened and serves as a general commentary on the laxity of morals in modern age.

As a poet, T.S. Eliot has deprecated the wayward Romantic attitude to life. His affirmation of the classical values reinforced and supported his quest for acquiring greater depth and understanding. DuPlessis believes:

Because *The Waste Land's* many citations, languages, voices and narrative vectors place readers into a disordered world filled with avatars of loss, the poem has long been seen as a symptom of the disease of alienation and despair that it diagnose (2007, p.116).

The palpable notion expressed in the above comment is an indirect inspiration of the poet which further reveals that Eliot's tendency toward affirming the global interchangeability is a must to every artist's consciousness and responsibilities. By pushing nature into the backstage, Eliot brings to the fore the spiritual plight of modern man in his major poetry and consequently, takes recourse to the prime sources of Indian heritage. It is a viable assessment of Eliot's city-poems, written while he was at Harvard University to say that he was in quest of something deeper: making his way towards an 'internalized or oriental quest', highlighting the issue Mayer observes:

Eliot's contribution to the type is to make the city rather than nature the landscape through which the quester journeys, in interaction with which he discovers his identity and destiny. The quest in *The Waste Land* is essentially that rehearsed in the city poems of 1911: The wasteland may be a belated addition that

dispense resonances and universalizes its imports (2000, p.70).

Given as he was to a personal sense of responsibility in carrying forward the human tradition, he found the timeless wisdom of ancient civilizations of great significance. Indian philosophy and religion exerted a considerable influence on Eliot. For rendering smooth the cleavage between thought and feeling affected by dissociation in sensibility, the unambiguous observations, trenchantly told in the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Buddhist texts*, helped him arrive at a unified view of life. Embroidering on the issue of wisdom Wainwright comments,

The overall structure of the theory is exemplarist. Moral properties are defined via reference to an exemplar of goodness. God is the ultimate exemplar, but there are many finitely good human exemplars. In this respect, the theory is similar to that of Aristotle who defines virtue as what would be determined by the person with phronesis, (practical wisdom (2005, p.282).

In his poems, specially, in *Four Quartets*, he has stressed upon the importance of prayer; prayer of every pulsing moment, possible only when a viable spirit of renunciation is developed. On this base did he found and compose the poem *Ash Wednesday*, in which the influence of Indian philosophy is largely perceptible. However, in the composition of *Four Quartets*, and specifically in poem III *The Dry Salvages*, the reference to Lord Krishna's advice to Arjuna is evident:

Here between the hither and the farther shore
While time is withdrawn, consider the future
And the past with an equal mind,
At the moment which is not of action or inaction
You can receive this; 'on whatever sphere of being
The mind of a man may be intent
At the time of death'- that is the one action
(And the time of death is every moment)
Which shall fructify in the lives of others:
And do not think of the fruit of action
Fare forward (Eliot, 1987, p.188).

In this part of the poem, the waste waters is the great symbol of birth, however, the river of the individual life is terribly uncontrollable. In the same token, the spirit of Lord Krishna's exhortation to Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra, comes out trenchantly well in the lines. Eliot has aptly tried to transfer the hidden notions of Krishna's message in such a way as to relate them cunningly to the modern man and the contemporary society. The significance of prayer has been linked to the chariot-wheel of the non-stopping moment-to-moment march of time, whereby, to a reflective sensibility, human existence gets invested with meaning; in consequence effecting the spiritualization of our secular life. Eliot is more explicit in the following passage, quoted below:

O voyagers ! seamen,
You who come to part, and you whose bodies
Will suffer the trial and judgment of the sea
Or whatever event, this is your real destination.
So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna

On the field of battle.
Not farewell,
But fare forward, voyagers. (Eliot, 1987, p.188).

It is very much clarified, out of the above extracts, that Eliot was undoubtedly influenced and inspired by the philosophy and oriental thoughts and wisdom. Put differently, Lord Krishna's exposition of the doctrine of action and inaction or time and eternity may be cited with advantage. By making a creative use of the wisdom of The Bhagavad Gita, Eliot, as poet, made his readers aware of the real issues involved at the juncture. That is, Eliot has ironically tried to interlink the contextual relation of the message of the lines with the Western upheavals at the time it was composed by him. It was a belief firmly held by Eliot that no poet could afford to remain isolated. On the occasion of receiving the Nobel Prize for literature, Eliot stressed the importance of poetry benefiting by being receptive to the poetry of other countries and in special the orients. Eliot himself observed:

... of the great influence that the poetry of one language can exert on another; we must remember the immense debts of every considerable poet to poets of languages other than his own; we may reflect that the poetry of every country and every language would decline and perish, were it not nourished by poetry in a foreign tongue? (1971, p.268).

Eliot actually extrapolates that leaning upon the art, wisdom and philosophical exchange of ideas of other peoples, the content and scope of literature is greatly enriched, and consequently, it gets universalized. It is on the basis of this hypothesis that Eliot was receptive to the Persian, Hindu scriptures and Buddhist canonical literature. Eliot, in his literary sensibility, had come to avow the peculiar influence exercised by the *Bhagavad Gita* on him. Lord Krishna had exhorted Arjuna to remain steadfast in his resolve to do a particular act once he had finally committed to it. In the same manner, Eliot did not deviate from his stand in turning the *Criterion* to a journal *Engage* favoring the viewpoint of the progressives, and then he wrote:

That balance of mind which a few highly civilized individuals such as Arjuna, the hero of the Bhagavad Gita, can maintain in action, is difficult for most of us even as observers, and as I say, is not encouraged by the greater part of the press(qtd. In Kearns, 1987, p.241).

Commenting on the greatness of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Eliot remarks that "above all other remarks, it was the next greatest philosophical poem to the *Divine Comedy* within his experience" (1951, p.258). During the 1930s, Eliot recalled the time-eternal wisdom contained in the oriental tendency of the Bhagavad Gita while one can say that the equilibrium of the mentality of the few high classed, like Arjuna, the hero of the Bhagavad Gita, might hold during combat, is greatly difficult for many of us as viewer, is not encouraged by the greater part of the press(Ibid, 221).

However, the occasion was a political pressure put on him to allow the criterion to turn into a journal engage.

Propaganda and partisanship did not appeal him; rather he draws much from Lord Krishna's advice to Arjun:

To action alone has thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be thy motive, neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction. Freed in Yoga, do thy work with an even mind to succeed and failure(Ibid, p.49).

Similarly, in The Day Salvages (III poem of the Four Quartets) Eliot turns a very inspiring account of Krishna's advice to Arjuna:

Here between the hither and the farther shore
While time is withdrawn, consider the future
And the past with an equal stand.
At the moment which is not of action or inaction
You can receive this: 'on whatever sphere of being
The mind of man maybe intent
At the time of death'. -that is the one action
(And the time death is every moment)
Which shall fructify in the lives of others;
Fare forward(Eliot,p.241).

Life is essentially a voyage in terms of his own thinking, shaped and developed by the timeless wisdom of the West and the East. This is what he expressed in his verse. Since one's existence is subject to diverse forces and pressures, it is a form of battle-field in which the strategies of withdrawal and action, detachment and involvement, the sense of the past and future have to be deployed to one's life from one stage to another till the final hour of death. In the midst of senseless changes, it is the serenity of mind that helps man to carry forward the undying inherited tradition through the present to the future. Not merely the earthly glory, but the divinity of man illuminated by the philosophical speculation about man's existence. The four poems Burnt Norton, East Coker, The Dry Salvages, and Little Gidding that constitute the total body of the Four Quartets is the reflections of the poet's mind in his oriental maturity. Eliot does not have any particular preference for one relation or the other. He is concerned with the true spirit of an intertextual monism which links cultures and religions in one body. The factor of universality in culture and wisdom has a decisive way in saving man from a chaotic life.

Just as Eliot was influenced by critics like Laforgue and Baudelaire in shaping the edges of his ideology and sensibilities, so also he took into consideration the ways in which Buddhist scriptures erased the concept of substantiality of human soul. Akin to the Buddhist approach, Eliot also shows the fallacy of maintaining an identity in the midst of ceaseless changes:

You are not the same people who left that station
.....
You are not those who saw the harbor
Receding or those who will disembark (Eliot, 1987, p.188).

Here a reference may also be made to Sir Henry Harcourt Reilly's advice to Celia in Eliot's play *The Cocktail Party*, "Go in peace, my daughter. Work out your salvation with diligence" (p. 420). It is similar to

Lord Buddha's exhortation, given on his death-bed to his followers. Another example of Eliot's penetration into the oriental wisdom can be witnessed in Colby Simpson a new clerk to Sir Claude Mulhammer in Eliot's another celebrity entitled *The Confidential Clerk*. Initially, Sir Claude thinks that Colby is his illegitimate son; but he turns out to be the son of a disappointed musician. However, at the end, Colby Simpson turns out to be the real son of Sir Claude's son. Eliot, like Sophocles' Oedipus Rex allows Colby Simpson and the other characters to discover their true identity. When the fog hovering over Colby's parentage is cleared, by saying, "But now I know who was my father / I must follow my father – so that I know may come to know him". (Eliot, 1987, p.516), he affirms his destiny. He seeks goodbye from Sir Claude with the intention of taking up a job as an Organist with a small parish church. In this context, it is not farfetched to interpret Eliot's thinking – influenced as he was by *the Bhagavad Gita* – giving a religion – cultural dimension to Colby's decision. Lord Krishna, as depicted by Kearns made Arjuna remember his calling or destiny when he said, "Better is one's own law though imperfectly carried out than the law of another carried out perfectly" (1987, p.53). In opting for a job of an organist, in preference to that of a confidential clerk with Sir Claude, Colby faces an uncertain future financially, yet it is more than satisfying for him, for it would pave the way for an integrated life. This is essentially an approach which was also depicted by Arjuna in *the Bhagavad Gita*.

Eliot took into account the different aspects of oriental wisdom even in his poetry. The title of the fifth section in *The Waste Land* is 'What the Thunder Said', which Eliot has derived from *the Upanishads*; it conveys the idea that the "Lord speaks through the thunder" (1985, p.1617). In this section of *The Waste Land*, there are repeated references to the Indian lore. In the excerpt quoted below, Eliot adds depth to the message by drawing upon the Indian wisdom:

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
Waited for rain, while the black clouds
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.
The jungle crouched, humped in silence.
Then spoke the thunder.
DA
Datta what have we given? (1987, p.74).

The word 'Datta', taken from Sanskrit is intentionally used by the poet to give an oriental vibration to the message of the poem. The word 'Datta', which means 'to give', reminds readers of the validity of life. The voice of Thunder, being the voice of God, emphasizes the virtue of 'Giving'. Analytically, it means that Eliot reflects upon the modern practice of using ironic bend of mind because it leads to acquisitive materialism. Similarly, the use of the Sanskrit words DA Dayadhvam which gives a moral taste to the following lines:

I have heard the key

Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall, aethereal rumors
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus (p. 74).

The notion of lines ascribes great importance to the spiritual significance of 'Sympathy' (an English equivalent of Dayadhvam). Explicitly Dayadhvam (sympathy) has a chastening effect on even the 'ruined' Coriolanus. Similarly, the arid wasteland of men and women can be revived through the element of human sympathy. The third borrowing in this poetic continuity is that of 'DA Damyata'. The meaning of the Sanskrit word 'Damyata' is 'Control yourself'. Here, the message is of universal significance. The lines of Eliot that are prefaced by 'Damyata' are given below:

The boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
To controlling hands. (p. 74).

The emphasis is on importance of 'self-control'; and if one compares the human body to a boat, one can understand how existence can become more peaceful through self discipline, with the body moving calmly under the control of a disciplined mind; through self-discipline one can lead an existence quite detached from the passing shadows of misfortune and allurements and thereby avail the beatific moments of a calm and serene grandeur. The fifth section of *The Waste Land*, 'What the Thunder Said' is concluded significantly enough with the incantatory Sanskrit words: "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata/Shantih shantih shantih" (Eliot, 1987, p.75). In making intelligent use of the key words found in the *Brihadaranayaka Upanishad* (5.I.A.), Eliot enriches immensely the poetic argument in *The Waste Land*. (Eliot, 1987, p.80).

CONCLUSION

By all account, Eliot was greatly influenced by the Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. His vocations are sprinkled by references to the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*; while Buddhism remained a continual influence on his mind prone to reflection and detachment. Eliot held that aloofness of the mind is a great achievement in itself in all situations of human existence. Without it nothing worthwhile is possible.

Eliot's interest in the great philosophical tradition of orients arose out of his desire to interpret contemporary reality from the standpoint of the strengthened intellect; by virtue of this assiduous effort, he was able to introduce the elements of momentary illumination in his poetry inspite of the contrary pulls of the dismal reality, from which Eliot could detach himself owing to his sound scholarly grounding in the classical literature and philosophy

of the ancient world. By relying upon the literary and philosophical exchange of ideas of other peoples, the content and scope of literature greatly enriched, and per se, it gets universalized. In this sense, Eliot crystallized his understanding in this manner; and out of his strenuous deliberations in the sphere of a heterogeneous disciplines and structures within the compass of humanities tried, through the composition of poetry, to crystallize for himself moments of integration as great poets and saints have avouched. And by drawing upon orientalism, Eliot concerns human's destiny in the same way of Zarathustra which were clarified by raising Eliot's examples in his poems, such as the Waste Land, Four Quarters, Ash Wednesday, The Hollow Men, and Love Song of J.A. Prufrock.

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