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Indian Philosophy in Structuring *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

Indian philosophy is one of the diverse sources employed by T S Eliot in structuring *The Waste Land* (1922). Buddhism and Hinduism constitute the bedrock of Indian philosophy. In his Notes on *The Waste Land*, Eliot has acknowledged his indebtedness to these two sources. Out of five Sections comprising *The Waste Land*, two Sections (III & V) are directly based on Buddhism and Hinduism respectively. The title of the third Section, "The Fire Sermon", is derived from the famous Sermon delivered by Lord Buddha to the assembled priests at Sarnath (Varanasi) on the sufferings of human beings arising from the reckless pursuit of passion and sensuality. The last lines of this Section collocate the two representatives of Eastern and Western asceticism – Saint Augustine and Lord Buddha – to suggest a way out of 'burning' cauldron. The fifth Section of this long poem, "What the Thunder Said", takes us to the *Brihadaranyak Upanishad* (5.1-3) for a meaningful message to 'the erring humanity'. The Thunder peals thrice the same word – 'Da Da Da' ('Datta Dayadhvam Damyant'). The cryptic word carries the exhortations of Prajapati, the father-preceptor of gods, men and demons, to control, to give and to be compassionate in that order. The poem concludes with 'Shantih shantih shantih' which is the need of the present-day tension-ridden and war-torn world.

Keywords: Buddhism, Hinduism, structure, passion, peace, order.

It is difficult to imagine that one who pleaded for 'the unity of feeling and thought' so forcefully in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921) should be negligent to providing a proper structure or shape to his long poem *The Waste Land* (October 1922; first published in *The Criterion*). In that famous essay, T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) had coined the phrase "unification of sensibility" as distinct from "dissociation of

sensibility” (Eliot 288) to express ‘the unity of feeling and thought’ which is much required in poetry. Eliot had lauded Donne and Chapman for achieving this wonderful unity, but they had chided poets like Tennyson and Browning for their inability to ‘transform their thoughts into sensations’. Such a conscious poet-critic as Eliot could have hardly sidetracked the issue of structural unity when he came to composing *The Waste Land*. Critics like Conrad, Aiken and Hugh Kenner who doubt the unity of the poem regard it as “a set of diversities” (Smith, 48). But a noted critic like Grover Smith disagrees with them, and remarks as follows:

All art is in some measure heterogeneously composed, and certainly it is possible for a work to fall short of unifying itself. But, though the structure of *The Waste Land* presents the difficulty of the unconventional, what is not obvious, it is certainly visible in the poem... (48)

The heterogeneity of *The Waste Land* about which Grover Smith speaks above can be guessed from the various sources employed in the texture of this poem, – six languages, several popular songs and thirty-five authors, and Sanskrit being one of the languages used in it (Diwedi 32). Sanskrit is the bedrock of Indian philosophy and culture, and its rich tradition of religion and wisdom is reflected in the *Vedas*, *Puranas*, *Upanishads*, and *Bhagvad-Gita* as well as in the two great Hindu epics, the *Rāmāyan* and *Mahābhārata*. Of all the diverse sources that go into the making of *The Waste Land*, Indian philosophy, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, constitutes one of the essential sources, and this fact will form the focal point of my present paper.

Before I start analysing *The Waste Land* from the viewpoint of my topic, I would like to draw the attention of readers towards what Eliot says in this “Notes” on the poem about its ‘unity’ achieved through the omnipresence of Tiresias, the central character in it. In his “Notes”, T.S. Eliot informs us thus:

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a ‘character’, is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem. (Eliot, 1962, 82)

Thus, according to T.S. Eliot, Tiresias as a seer is one of the unifying forces of the poem. Eliot also acknowledges two more explicit sources that have clearly impacted the structural plan and design of *The Waste Land*, and these sources are Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge), and Sir James Fraser's book *The Golden Bough* on the vegetation myths (80).

Now, returning to the subject of this paper, I am to focus on the use of Indian philosophy in structuring *The Waste Land*. The poem, as we know, consists of five Sections in toto which are: 'The Burial of the Dead', 'A Game of Chess', 'The Fire Sermon', 'Death by Water', and 'What the Thunder Said'. Out of these five Sections, two are directly based on the teachings of Lord Buddha (i.e., Buddhism) or on the instructions of the *Upanishad* (*Brihadāranyak Upanishad*), an inalienable part of Hinduism.

But the first thing that catches our attention is the title of the poem. The title indicates that modern man is living in 'The Waste Land', a parched land, a sterile land. For removing the sterility and barrenness of the land, water is badly needed. Water, in the *Rig Veda* and the *Dhammapada*, stands for metaphysical quest, and the barrenness of the land can't be removed without spiritual search and metaphysical pursuits. Composed in the backdrop of the horrors of World War I, *The Waste Land* delivers a message to modern men/women to liberate them from the lustful living and to pursue the metaphysical way of life.

The *Rig Veda* as well as the Grail legend has a reference to the Waste Land. The seven rivers (or *saptasindhus*) in the Punjab are lying looked up. Ahi or Vritrasur is very powerful and has locked up the rivers. The gods are in a great panic, and they approach the sage Dadhichi¹ and urge him to give his unbreakable backbone which, because of his enviable asceticism, has the strength of a *vajrāyudh* (i.e., a club of concrete), so that they might strike Ahi or Vritrasur to get the waters released. The king of gods, Indra, used the *vajra* and succeeded in freeing the much-needed waters.

The *Dhammapada* might have given a clue to T.S. Eliot to choose the title of *The Waste Land*. A Thai Buddhist monk's translation² of the *Dhammapada* under the title "Growing the Bodhi Tree in the Garden

of the Heart” rearranges the text in ten sections with a Prologue which is called *The Waste Land*. It is likely that the translator gives the title to the Prologue with an eye on Eliot’s poem *However*, even Eliot might have picked up the title of the poem getting hints from the *Dhammapada*. Since his school-days, Eliot was deeply impressed with Buddhism. He kept with him a copy of *The Light of Asia* by Sir Edwin Arnold. In his essay, “What is Minor Poetry?” Eliot has remarked, “I must have had a latent sympathy for the subject-matter, for I read it through with gusto, and more than once” (Eliot, 1969, 42). And’ the subject-matter of *The Light of Asia* is the life and teachings of Lord Buddha. At the time of writing *The Waste Land*, as the distinguished English poet Stephen Spender avers, T.S. Eliot was in a firm grip of Buddhism. Spender remembers Eliot as under:

Incidentally, if Eliot’s own views are to be considered, I once heard him say to the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral that at the time when he was writing *The Waste Land*, he seriously considered becoming a Buddhist. (Spender 60)

From Spender’s above statement it is clear that Eliot was inescapably caught by the asceticism of Buddhism, and that ‘a Buddhist is as immanent as a Christian’ in the structure of *The Waste Land*.

Out of a total of five Sections forming *The Waste Land*, two Sections (III and V), as hinted earlier, are based on Indian sources. Now, the third Section showing Eliot’s indebtedness to Buddhism invites immediate attention. The title is obviously derived from the famous Sermon delivered by Lord Buddha to the assembled priests on the sufferings of human beings arising from the reckless pursuit of lust and sensuality. According to T.S. Eliot, the Buddha’s ‘Fire Sermon’ (which corresponds in importance to the Sermon on the Mount) from which these words are taken, will be found translated in the late Henry Clarke Warren’s *Buddhism in Translation* (Harvard Oriental Series). Mr. Warren was one of the great pioneers of Buddhist studies in the Occident (Eliot, 1963, 82).

Thus, Eliot puts the Fire Sermon at par with the Sermon on the Mount (in Christianity). The text of the Fire Sermon as Lord Buddha tells the assembled priests, partly runs as follows:

All things, O priests, are on fire. And what, O priests, are all these things which are on fire? The eye, O priests, is on fire; forms are on fire; eye-consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the eye are on fire; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye, that also is on fire.

And with what are there on fire? With the fire of passion, say I, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation; with birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair are they on fire. (Warren 352)

The text is surely longer than the extract quoted above, but the given extract throws sufficient light on the gist of the Fire Sermon. Eliot has amply succeeded here in giving universality to the theme of passion. Lord Buddha believes that passion or lust is the main cause of human suffering (*dukkha*). If man is free from passion/lust, he is “no more for this world”. (353)

In the concluding lines of Section III, the poet collocates the “two representatives of eastern and western asceticism” and hastens to tell us that the collocation is “not an accident” (Eliot, 1963, 82). These lines (given below) are highly valuable from India’s philosophical viewpoint:

To Carthage then I came
 Burning burning burning burning
 O Lord Thou pluckest me out
 O Lord Thou pluckest
 burning

(*The Waste Land*, Lines 307-311)

The obvious reference here is to Saint Augustine, who like Lord Buddha saw mankind ‘burning’ in the fire of passion and lust. St. Augustine, like the Buddha again, suggested that asceticism alone can pull mankind out of this ‘burning’. Both Lord Buddha and St. Augustine had the same kind of experience in regard to the ‘burning’ of the world in the fire of passion. In the third Book of *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, the great Christian saint has recorded his experience thus: “To Carthage I came, where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves”(36). The reader may mark that Eliot begins the poem with the title directly drawn from Buddhism, but he ends it with the experiences of the Christian saint in the city of Carthage. Cleanth Brooks aptly remarks in *Modern Poetry and the*

Tradition (1939) that “The wisdom of the East and the West comes to the same thing on this point” (157). Here it must be pointed out that without the inclusion of Buddhist preaching, *The Waste Land* would have, structurally speaking, lost much of its force and fire.

From “The Fire Sermon” we jump on to the fifth Section of *The Waste Land*, namely to “What the Thunder Said”. The third Section is full up with references to the *Upanishad*. The title is derived from the *Brihadāranyak Upanishad* (5.1-3). The Thunder peals three times: ‘Da Da Da’, the Sanskrit word proper hinting at the exhortations of Prajapati, the father-preceptor of gods, men and demons, to his threefold offspring in the *Brihadaranyak Upanishad* (5.1-3). The entire episode of the teacher-taught dialogue is recorded beautifully in the following translation of this *Upanishad*:

1. The threefold offspring of Prajapati, gods, men and demons, lived with their father Prajapati as students of sacred knowledge. Having completed their studentship, the gods said, ‘Please tell (instruct) us, sir’. To them then, he uttered the syllable *da* (and asked) ‘Have you understood?’ They (said), ‘We have understood, you said to’ us ‘*damyata*’, ‘control yourselves’. He said, ‘Yes, you have understood’.
2. Then the men said to him, ‘Please tell (instruct) us, sir’. To them he uttered the same syllable *da* (and asked) ‘Have you understood?’ They said, ‘We have understood, you said to us ‘*datta*’, ‘give’. He said, ‘Yes, you have understood’.
3. Then the demons said to him, ‘Please tell (instruct) us, sir’. To them he uttered the same syllable *da* and asked, ‘Have you understood?’ They said, ‘We have understood, you said to us ‘*dayadhvam*’, ‘be compassionate’. He said, ‘Yes, you have understood’. This very thing the heavenly voice of thunder repeats *da da da*, that is control yourselves, give, be compassionate. One should practise this same triad, self-control, giving and compassion. (Radhakrishnan 289-90)

The threefold message of the Thunder is, evidently, highly evocative and suggestive. It suggests that the practice of self-control, ‘giving’ to others at the time of need, and compassion by man “will preserve, promote and enhance the values of life” (291). Some

thinkers like Sankarāchārya are of the view that “there are no gods or demons other than men” (290), and hence all the three virtues enjoined by Prajapati and pealed by the Thunder are actually meant for man only for his spiritual elevation.

What is important here is the fact that T.S. Eliot has changed the order of the Upanishadic words to suit his purpose. In the *Brihadāranyak Upanishad*, the Thunder’s commands appear in the order: *Damyata*, *Datta* and *Dayadhvam*, but in structuring *The Waste Land* Eliot slightly changed the order and put it as *Datta*, *Dayadhvam* and *Damyata*. The Upanishadic order apparently gives importance to Self-Control in the development of the individual. The change is prompted by the poet’s desire to render the third element “the most emphatic” (Mayo 175).

Before we come to a discussion of *Da Da Da* and its relevance in the structure of *The Waste Land*, we have to consider a very significant poetic passage in it. The passage is:

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 (ll. 395-399)

This passage shows the poet’s sound knowledge of Indian culture and tradition. The words ‘Ganga’ and ‘Himavant’ clearly indicate it. The passage also paints the grim picture of rainlessness in the holy land of the Hindus, which can be equated with the situation obtaining in the Waste Land. Water or rain is a symbol of spiritual insurgence, while lack of water/rain signals spiritual crisis. Only a great spiritual power can rend open ‘the black clouds’ and make the rain possible.

We now take up the meaning of *Da Da Da*. Before Eliot uses the threefold message of the Thunder, he paints the situation of utter drought prevailing in the Waste Land. In the context of the grim drought, the poet recalls the message of the Thunder. The first *Da* pealed by the Thunder means ‘giving oneself away’ at a time of emotional crisis – ‘blood shaking my heart’. There are moments in a man’s life when hesitation or prudence is out of place and willy-nilly he has to surrender to the dictates of his clamouring heart:

The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only, we have existed.

(ll. 403-405)

This kind of 'giving' is, as George Williamson puts it, "a surrender to passion, not to love" (Williamson 151). It is not to be found in 'obituaries', 'memories' or 'wills', as Eliot clarifies in the lines to follow. Commenting on 'giving', Prof. V. Rai makes the following observations:

This 'giving' to the insistent demand of the great occasions has contributed the real life of humanity; it has been behind all revolutions, all adventures of body and mind; it has sent martyrs singing to the flames and patriots to the gallows and has given even to Satan 'courage never to submit or yield' even though the field has been lost. (Rai 134-35)

Passion is perhaps the root-cause of all existence; sex is the source of all creation. Sir James Frazer is of the view that "runder races in other parts of the world have consciously employed the intercourse of the sexes as a means to ensure the fruitfulness of the earth" (Frazer 179). But the sexual relationship was also associated with "many a serious peril", and hence some primitive tribes resorted to "abstinence" and "asceticism" (182-83).

The second command of the Thunder follows immediately after the first one – *Da* (i.e., *Dayadhvam*, Be compassionate). Compassion is a commendable virtue that shares the concern of others. But the modern man has become totally selfish and egotistic:

each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison

The modern man is leading a life of imprisonment or self-exile, like Count Ugolino in Dante's *Inferno*. Living in self-exile, modern man does not share the woes and buffets of others. He walks in his dark cell like 'a broken Coriolanus', the helpless, hapless Roman soldier.

The Thunder peals for the Third time – *Da* (i.e., *Damyata*, Control yourself). This time the message underlines the need of regulating the heart which was so long given over to 'blood' or impulsive living.

To the controlled heart even the natural elements, like the sea, give way:

The boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
Gaily, When invited, being obedient
To controlling hands. (ll. 418-422)

Obviously, here the poet emphasises the controlling of impulses or passions. This passage has been called a “great short passage” full of meaning (The Times Literary Supplement, 1960, p.760).

The protagonist of the poem now realises the true ideal of life and sets about putting his lands in order: “Shall I at least set my lands in order” (l. 425). Clearly, the protagonist at this point is the Fisher King, who is depicted as a fisherman now in action. The great curse of the inhabitants of the Waste Land is inaction (*akarmanyatā*). According to Jessie L. Weston, the Buddha is sometimes portrayed as a fisherman in the Mahayana scriptures: “... the Fisherman who draws fish from the ocean of Samsār to the light of Salvation” (Weston 126). The Fisherman has to set his land – ‘the arid plain’ – free from its aridity. The surroundings are none-too-happy: the Unreal City around, the London Bridge falling down, and Hieronymo appearing in Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* having gone mad again. Against such a backdrop, fragmentary quotations from various sources, especially languages, are shored to represent the broken culture of the West. Ultimately, T.S. Eliot is left with no option but to turn to the East for redemption of man from the sterility of the Waste Land:

Datta, Dayadhvam Damyata
Shantih shantih shantih
(ll. 432-433)

We have already examined the literal and symbolic connotations of *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, *Damyata*, but the last line of the poem – *Shantih shantih shantih* – calls for comments.

Western scholars like Elizabeth Drew have generally failed to understand the full implication of the word *Shantih*. Elizabeth Drew thinks that “it is impossible to feel peace in the concluding passage. It

is a formal ending only” (Drew 116). F.R. Leavis considers the employment of Sanskrit words as merely ‘ironic’. He says further:

The Sanskrit lends an appropriate portentousness intimating that this is the sum of wisdom according to a great tradition, and that what we have here is a radical scrutiny into the profit of life. (Leavis 102)

Eliot’s note on the word *Shantih* does not reveal its real value in human life. He says that it is “a formal ending to an Upanishad” and that its Christian equivalent is “The Peace which passeth understanding” (Eliot, 1962, 86) *Shantih shantih shantih* is not only a formal ending to an Upanishad but an integral part of the Vedas. The *Yajurveda* (36.17) offers the full text of the *Shantih mantra* – “*Aum dyauh shantih antariksham shantih prithvi shantih apah shantih ousadhayah shantih ... Aum shantih shantih shantih*” (*The Yajurveda* 333-34). In fact, this *mantra* is recited on all auspicious occasions for the Hindus such as marriage, occupation of a new house, offering of prayers in morning and evening. It is also recited at the time of the burial of the dead (note the title of Section I of *The Waste Land*). The poem under review begins with an elaborate description of the ritual/burial of the dead (Section I), moves through a depiction of the ruined domestic life (Section II) and a portrayal of the sterile life in terms of society and civilisation (Section III), revives the hope of rebirth/redemption of man (Section IV), and ends with the vision of peace and order (Section V). It is wrong to think, as F.R. Leavis does, that the poem begins with chaos and ends in chaos. It rather begins in chaos and disorder and ends in peace and order. For restoring peace and order, T.S. Eliot seeks refuge in the hoary wisdom of India, in the great cultural tradition of the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*.

Prof. V.A. Shahane maintains that the structure of *The Waste Land* is “circular rather than linear” (16). He remarks:

The poem’s shape continually connects past and present, life and death. The journeys or quests undertaken by the characters in *The Waste Land* do not grow in linear directions; in fact no real end is in sight. There is no hope of reaching a destination at all, no expectation of fruitful arrival or reunion. (16-17)

Prof. Shahane’s arguments are only partly tenable, and it is suggested that the emphasis should shift from ‘fruitful arrival or reunion’ to ‘perceptive vision or rebirth’ (my own coinage). Prof. Shahane is, however, near the truth when he states that Eliot directs

his technical devices to “the prime necessity of exploring the basic theme and articulating his vision of a waste land” (20). The basic theme is the quest of the Fisher King, as in the Grail legends, for rain to remove the barrenness of the Waste Land and the vision is inspired by spiritual insights of the *Upanishad*.

Even a scholar like F.R. Leavis advances the same kind of theory – that the structure of *The Waste Land* is cyclic rather than linear – “... the poem ends where it began” (Leavis 103). The poem was written, as we know, in the background of the horrors of World War I. To put the world on the right track, an atmosphere of peace and order was much needed. For the poet, it became inescapable and he resorted to Indian philosophy, the only hope for breaking the spell of rainlessness. Hence the fifth Section of the poem unavoidably uses the wisdom of the *Upanishad* to show to mankind that this is the only way out. Structurally, Sanskrit and its sound philosophy is in place to strengthen the shape of the poem; it constitutes a part of the poet’s global vision.

To conclude, the above discussion convinces us that the poet has deliberately made Indian philosophy an essential ingredient in structuring *The Waste Land*. Ezra Pound, who scrutinised the Facsimile edition of *The Waste Land* wrote a letter to T.S. Eliot in December 1921 like this: “One test is whether anything would be lacking if the last three words were omitted,” to which Eliot replied in January 1922 thus: “Criticisms accepted, so far as understood, with thanks” (qtd. in Cox and Arnold 22-23). It is evident that Eliot did not carry out the suggestion of Pound and retained the last three words. It demonstrates Eliot’s favourable attitude towards Indian philosophy pleading for universal peace and order. Those Sanskrit words are needed even from the structural viewpoint; they in fact, fit in there.

Notes

1. Mark the first two letters ‘Da’ in Dadhichi which recur in the final section of the poem, as though the great sage represents all the three virtues enjoined in the voice of the thunder.
2. This translation was done by Bhikku Khantpalo and it was meant for free distribution by the Buddhist Association of Thailand, 1966.

--- I read all about this translation from Prof. C.D. Narasimhaiah's article "Notes towards an Indian Response to T.S. Eliot's Poetry", *Indian Response to American Literature*. New Delhi: USEFI, 1967, pp. 113-137.

Also, I read Prof. Narasimhaiah's article "An Indian Footnote to T.S. Eliot Scholarship on *The Waste Land*," *The Literary Criterion*, X, NO. 2 (Summer 1972), pp. 75-91.

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