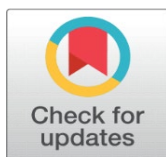
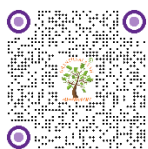


RE-READING T. S. ELIOT'S THE WASTE LAND THROUGH INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS: UPANISHADIC THOUGHT AND THE QUEST FOR SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at a critical re-reading of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) with the intent of analyzing the philosophical theories which underlie it in the context of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), specifically the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and other dharmic systems. Eastern thought has been recognized as Eliot's preoccupation in the scholarship that already exists, but most studies have considered his reliance on Indian materials as ornamental or exoticist. This review suggests that, far from being ornamental, the Upanishadic residue of *The Waste Land* is essential: that the poem's philosophical construction, its epistemological fears, its soteriological hopes are all in some way determined by Indian philosophy. The present paper focuses on the contributions of recent scholars working on comparative philosophy, postcolonialism and the framework of the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) in introducing concepts such as brahman-Atman identity, maya, doctrine of detachment (*vairagya*) and theory of consciousness in the Mandukya Upanishad that facilitate the understanding of the structure and meaning of the poem.

Keywords: T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, Indian Knowledge Systems, Upanishads, Comparative Philosophy, Modernism, Spiritual Renewal, Decolonial Reading, Mandukya Upanishad, Cross, Cultural Hermeneutics

1. INTRODUCTION

Considered one of the most widely studied poems in the English literary canon, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) has been extensively analyzed. Since its publication, the poem has been read with almost all the critical frameworks of the twentieth-century: the New Criticism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism to name a few. In spite of the vast number of poems that have been subjected to critical analysis, there is one aspect of the poem that is not so well studied in terms of Indian philosophical thought, and that is the way the poem relates to it. Eliot's footnote to line 433-quoting the Bhagavad Gita

and the Upanishads-has been read almost as a gesture of scholarship and not of philosophy.

Indian Knowledge Systems is a collection of philosophies, spiritualities, science and aesthetics developed on the Indian subcontinent over a course of thousands of years. The emphasis of the present study is laid mostly on the Upanishadic tradition which is the Vedantic philosophy of the nature of reality (Brahman), the self (Atman), and their relationship. The Upanishads, along with the Bhagavad Gita and the Brahma Sutras (Prasthanatrayi), are the starting points of Hindu philosophy and provide a complex epistemological and ontological framework with far reaching consequences for literary interpretation.

In the wake of recent academic and policy developments, the importance of IKS to the study of *The Waste Land* has taken new momentum. The National Education Policy (NEP 2020) has highlighted the need to bring IKS into the mainstream education in higher education institutes systematically and to revive the indigenous knowledge traditions, which have been pushed to the margins by colonial and post colonial education systems. This policy framework sets up an institutional framework for the type of interdisciplinary reading that is suggested in this paper.

This paper is organized as an analytical descriptive review, which synthesizes the relevant scholarship on Eliot's encounter with Eastern thought and offers new interpretations of the encounter within the context of IKS. It explores the philosophical dimension of the Upanishadic allusions in *The Waste Land*, addresses its various structural and thematic echoes of Vedantic thought, and places these readings into the context of current discussions in the field of decolonization, cross-cultural hermeneutics and the politics of literary appropriation.

2. ELIOT AND INDIAN PHILOSOPHY: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Eliot's interest in Indian thought dates back to his dissertation work at Harvard University where he learned Sanskrit and Pali from Charles Rockwell Lanman. His doctoral thesis on the philosophy of F. H. Bradley demonstrates his knowledge of the Indian philosophical ideas, especially the concept that lies at the heart of Advaita Vedanta: that of appearance and reality. The influences on Eliot's intellectual development at Harvard were taking place at a time when Indian philosophy was beginning to be accessible to western scholars by way of translations, including his by Dr Paul Deussen, Max Muller and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan.

The impact of Indian thought on Eliot's early work has been well demonstrated by a number of scholars. Grover [Smith \(1974\)](#) traced Eliot's reading in Sanskrit literature and was able to show the Buddhist and Hindu ideas in poems from 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' to Four Quartets. Meena [Alexander \(1987\)](#) suggested that the use of Indian material in Eliot was a negotiation between orientalist appropriation and a real philosophical engagement.

The Waste Land is a product of Eliot's personal and cultural crisis. The poem's mood of spiritual despair is owed to the legacy of World War One, the failure of his first marriage, and his own mental illness. In this context, Eliot looked to Indian philosophy as a means to comprehend and express the crisis of meaning enacted in the poem. This mood is set in the first lines of 'The Burial of the Dead':

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers. (ll. 1-7)

The inversion of the usual meaning of spring as a time of renewal reveals a consciousness stuck in avidya (ignorance): the awareness in which the ultimate reality is enfolded in the forms of temporal being. Spring rain is a stirring up of the 'dull roots' that lie dormant in spiritual ignorance, symbolizing the Atman (true self).

3. THE UPANISHADIC FRAMEWORK OF THE WASTE LAND

The clearest mention of the Upanishads in *The Waste Land* is in the last part of the poem 'What the Thunder Said' which alludes to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad's description of the command of Prajapati:

Datta: what have we given?
My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only, we existed
Which is not to be found in our obituaries
Or in the memories draped by the beneficent spider
Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor
In our empty rooms
Dayadhvam: 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 rumours
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus
Damyata: 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 (ll. 409-432)

This last moral statement of the poem, which has been widely commented, draws the poem to a moral conclusion. But most of the readings have focused on the moral teachings of the passage without attempting to consider it as a part of the philosophical system of the Upanishads. If one reads the three commands through IKS, one will discover that they are related to the three elements of sadhana (spiritual practice) in Vedantic philosophy: dana (generosity), daya (compassion) and dama (self-restraint).

The speech of the thunder in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (5.2.1-3) is not just a moral allegory, but an epistemological instruction. The threefold command is made up of three human tendencies that need to be subdued on the path to self-knowledge-grasping (Datta), isolation (Dayadhvam), and excess (Damyata). By using this passage at the end of *The Waste Land*, Eliot makes it sound as if his poem's struggle for spiritual rebirth is not a exclusively a crisis of faith of the Western

nations, but rather a quest for conditions of self-knowledge that are central to the Upanishadic tradition.

While Eliot did not refer to it directly, an important philosophical thread is woven into the poem from the Mandukya Upanishad. The Mandukya gives an outline of four states of consciousness: waking (jagrat), dreaming (svapna), deep sleep (sushupti), and the transcendent fourth state (turiya), which is the human mind's natural state, to understand the poem's fragmented narrative movement. The poem is a tour through the states of consciousness, from waking nightmare in the 'Unreal City' to transcendent vision of peace in 'Shantih' at its end.

3.1. MAYA AND THE LANDSCAPE OF SPIRITUAL DESOLATION

This idea of maya, the one generally rendered as 'illusion', though more accurately as the 'illusory world', is present throughout *The Waste Land* at all its levels. This theme is set up in the opening description of the landscape:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. (ll. 19-24)

The 'stony rubbish' and 'heap of broken images' are the world in which the conditions of maya are prevalent, that is, the world in which the ultimate reality is veiled by appearances of temporal existence. All of this—the Fisher King in his barren land, the typist in his mechanical encounter, the people who flow over London Bridge—these are the images of living life in ignorance of the Atman, which is the same as the Brahman.

The theme is continued in the 'Unreal City' passage:
Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine. (ll. 60-68)

London in the state of spiritual desolation is the 'Unreal City,' a world that is maya, a city of the dead, that walk without being aware of what they are. The people who 'flowed over London Bridge' are not the same as those in Limbo, but are rather those in the Upanishadic sense who are caught up in the cycle of samsara, go through life without any awareness of their own divinity.

3.2. BRAHMAN, ATMAN, AND THE QUEST FOR SELF-KNOWLEDGE

The central teaching of the Upanishads is that "Atman is Brahman" (Atman = Brahman, the individual self = the universal reality) which underlies the spiritual

quest of *The Waste Land*. *Tat tvam asi* ('That thou art') is the assertion of the individual self as the universal reality made in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (6.8.7). This teaching permeates *The Waste Land*, especially the handling of the character of Tiresias.

Eliot's note to the poem calls Tiresias 'the most important personage in the poem, animating what might otherwise be described as 'the whole of the poem.' Tiresias represents the Upanishadic wisdom that Atman, the true self, is beyond the dualities of gender, body and empirical identity. Although his vision was external he was an inner seer, and there is a vision, or *divya drishti*, which is the hallmark of the realized soul, as described in the Upanishads.

The speakers of the poem—from the hyacinth girl to the Fisher King to the voice of the thunder's commands—all seek self-knowledge in one form or another, in the Upanishadic manner. By way of the famous opening of 'The Burial of the Dead' – 'April is the cruellest month' – it could be said that the spiritual awakening requires a death of the empirical self, as recognized by the Upanishads. The speakers of the poem are afraid of the dissolution of the self which is required by the Upanishadic path.

The theme of spiritual sterility found in *The Waste Land* is akin to the Upanishadic understanding that *avidya* (ignorance) is the cause of human suffering. What lies on *The Waste Land* is not just a postwar scene—which it could have been—but a symbol of consciousness blind to its own identity with Brahman, caught in the confusion of *avidya*. The drought that bedevils the Fisher King's land is the drought of self-knowledge:

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road is above in the mountains which are of rock
Without water. (ll. 331-334)

So the search for rain, the search for water, the search for new growth is a search for the recognition (*prajna*) that the Upanishads call the ultimate aim of spiritual practice.

4. VAIRAGYA (DETACHMENT) AND THE ETHICS OF THE WASTE LAND

Vairagya, or detachment, plays an important role in the Upanishadic teachings and Eliot's moral outlook in *The Waste Land*. Critique of desire is the central theme of the poem, where sexual contact is described as mechanical and devoid of love, and spiritually insignificant, in line with the Upanishadic knowledge that attachment to sense objects is the biggest hurdle to self-knowledge. The typist's experience with the 'young man carbuncular' is not just a caricature of contemporary sexual ethics, but a depiction of the life of desire that the Upanishads see as the root of all suffering.

The time is now propitious, as she guesses,
The meal is ended, and she is bored and tired,
Endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,

And makes a welcome of indifference. (ll. 235-242)

The typist's 'indifference' is not the spiritual indifference (vairagya) that is taught in the Upanishads, but its corruption, a 'mechanical, unfeeling acquiescence'. The poem juxtaposes these falsely detached ones with the truly detached ones that are commanded by 'Damyata' (Control) of the thunder.

But Eliot's attitude to detachment is always ambiguous. The poem is not a call to denial or to give up on desire but rather examines the challenges of a detached look that the Upanishads call for. The voices in *The Waste Land* are ensnared in desire, which prevents them from realizing what is needed to break free from the wheel of suffering; the vairagya. The predicament is directly addressed by the thunder's command 'Damyata' where mastery over desire is the way to spiritual renewal. Yet, the ending of the poem, with its disjointed voices and broken images indicate that the mastery is not achieved, but only a possibility.

5. THE PROBLEM OF APPROPRIATION: ORIENTALISM AND IKS

The discussion of cultural appropriation is a constant presence for anyone reading *The Waste Land* as part of an IKS. Eliot was a Western poet writing in a style that draws on European orientalism, and his incorporation of Indian philosophical resources cannot be separated from his engagement with Indian culture in the context of colonial power relations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Edward Said's concepts of orientalism will prove useful in exploring Eliot's political dealings with the thought of India.

But the implementation of Said's framework without critical scrutiny in Eliot's context may lead to the misunderstanding of the complexity of Eliot's engagement with Indian philosophy as a mere story of colonial appropriation. Eliot's engagement with Indian thought was more complex than the orientalist conception, as have been pointed out by several scholars. While his study of Sanskrit and his philosophical discussions with Vedantic ideas indicate a way of engaging other than appropriation and authenticity, Indian materials are always woven into the texture of his poetry.

However, the concept of IKS makes the appropriation problem more complicated. Indian Knowledge Systems are not static, or rigidly conceived or consistently found in any single place but are a tradition alive with its own internal controversies, exchanges and innovations. The Upanishads were composed in a setting of dialogue amongst various schools of philosophy, and the tradition of Vedantic interpretation has always been free for new readings and applications. So viewed, Eliot's engagement with the Upanishads is not a colonial appropriation but an active involvement in the continuing philosophical dialogue that is the Upanishadic tradition.

6. STRUCTURAL RESONANCES: THE POEM AS SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

The five movements and the movement from desolation to a fragile vision of renewal in *The Waste Land* has been recognised as a reflection of a spiritual quest for a long time. This structure, when examined in the context of IKS, shows certain parallels with the Upanishadic structure of spiritual development. The poem depicts the journey from the death-in-life of 'The Burial of the Dead' to the purgatorial fire of 'The Fire Sermon' to the visionary landscape of 'What the Thunder Said,' with each stage of the journey corresponding to the three stages: Ignorance (avidya), Inquiry

(vicara), and Realization (jnana) of the Upanishadic path. The poem's well-known difficulty is its fragmentation, its allusiveness, its ability to defy linear narrative: this can be seen as a formal representation of the Upanishadic teaching that ultimate reality transcends conventional language and logic. The Upanishads make use of a variety of literary devices – dialogue, paradox, negation (neti neti) and affirmation (sattva siddhika), – to refer beyond conceptualization. Eliot's poetic method, which features the use of juxtaposition of fragments, the overlaying of voices, and the exclusion of narrative closure, comes across as a modern version of the Upanishadic technique of pointing beyond language with language.

The final mantra “Shantih shantih shantih” at the end of *The Waste Land* is the directest Indian spiritual practice that the poem engages in:

Shantih Shantih Shantih (l. 433)

The triple repetition of ‘Shantih’ is based on the Vedic principle of invoking peace three times, which can be interpreted as the three planes of life (physical, mental and spiritual) or the three types of afflictions (adhibhautika, adhidaivika and adhyatmika). Eliot's translation-“The Peace which passeth understanding’-is a deliberate Christianization of the Sanskrit mantra, an interweaving of Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, suggestive of the poem's wider philosophical enterprise. However, the preservation of the Sanskrit original, even if in transliteration, demands the inextractable nature of the Indian tradition from its appropriation by the West.

7. CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARSHIP AND IKS FRAMEWORK

In recent years there has been growing scholarship that emphasizes the need for the reading of modernist texts from non-western frameworks. The NEP 2020's focus on IKS has also enabled the institutionalization of this work, making Indian philosophical traditions not only culturally interesting but also as systems of knowledge. The contribution of scholars like Anjali [Nerlekar \(2018\)](#) who have studied the connections between Indian modernism and the global transnational modernism, and of Vinay [Dharwadker \(2019\)](#) who has discussed the philosophical concerns over the cultural crossovers of literature, are important contexts for the reading suggested in this paper. Their work presents evidence to prove that the dialogue between Western modernism and Indian thought was not a unidirectional appropriative process, but a complex interaction that brought about a transformation in both traditions. Finally, the study of comparative philosophy has helped to enrich the scholarship on Eliot's encounter with Indian thought. Philosophers like J.N. [Mohanty \(2021\)](#) and Arindam [Chakrabarti \(2022\)](#) have established that the Upanishadic tradition is philosophically sound and pertinent to the current discussions in epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of mind. They have laid the groundwork philosophically for the type of literary reading suggested in this paper.

There are also new possibilities for using IKS in the field of cognitive literature studies, where the social and cognitive process of reading is increasingly the focus. The Upanishadic theory of consciousness that has outlined the various states of consciousness and the realization of a transcendent state of consciousness (turiya) is akin to the present day theories of cognitive science on the nature of consciousness and self. The interdisciplinary overlap implies that Eliot's poetry in *The Waste Land* has anticipatory knowledge of concepts that only cognitive science is starting to articulate in empirical terms.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper suggested that the interaction with Indian Knowledge Systems, in this case the Upanishadic tradition, is much more serious and nuanced than has been acknowledged by the scholarship to date. The philosophical philosophy of Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the Vedantic tradition generally influence the structure, themes, ethics and final movement towards spiritual renewal of the poem. An analysis of the poem using IKS provides a perspective on the meaning that has been overshadowed by Eliot studies dominated by Western critical approaches. The Upanishadic doctrines of Brahman-Atman identity, maya, vairagya and the examination of consciousness offer a unified philosophical perspective to the exploration of the poem for spiritual renewal. All of the poem's elements are related to the Upanishadic diagnosis of the human condition and the prescription for spiritual liberation: the fragmentation, the critique of desire, the depiction of spiritual sterility, and the fragility of the movement toward peace. Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata is no esoteric embellishment of a Western poem, but the philosophical lock key to the poem's moral and spiritual insight. The decolonial reading outlined in this paper also carries over into the wider issues of the modernist period and of incorporating IKS into literary studies. This paper helps to move in the direction of decolonializing literary criticism, as well as towards different methodologies of interpretation that can be based on the rich array of human philosophical traditions, including those found in the Indian framework. The Upanishads, read through *The Waste Land*, not a Western poem with Indian references, but a philosophical text in another language which constitutes a whole realm of exploration into the universal human quest for self-knowledge and spiritual renewal.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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