



The Bearings of Indian Aesthetics in Locating the East in T. S. Eliot's Poem: The Waste Land

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Abstract

Of all the directions *The East* occupies a prominent place. The location of the East is reflected in T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* not as a scholarly discipline but as a ray of hope for the spiritually tormented humanity. The bearings of Indian aesthetics can be traced in all the sections of the poem in terms of the allusions taken by the poet from hoary wisdom of India. However, the conflation of the East and West has not been conflicted but resolved in a secular spirit. The present age is identified as an age of information and technology but we cannot deny the fact that it is also an age of Karuna and Bhaya (pathos and horror). The waste land presents the spiritual breakdown of the contemporary world. The poet feels the problem of the modern humanity with a deep insight. He wishes for an ideal society governed by a cosmic spirit. The good governance cannot be restored by a utopian culture but by the experience of humanity as a good human being. The cosmic spirit is the man himself for he combines in himself all the properties angelic, demonic and human. Eliot's search is to discover again what has already been discovered and lost with the passage of time. He wants to recover this loss and adapt it to the contemporary needs of the world. The poet foresees the devil represented by the falling standards in human conduct spitting on the scriptures. But at the end he does not allow this to happen and upholds the message of Lord Buddha and St. Augustine to bring the order in the present day society. The message is contained in triple 'DA' and 'Shantih' in the last section "What The Thunder Said".

The East dispels the darkness. The East dispels the despair and doubts. It lights the lamp of hope and humanity. T.S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land* points towards the East for the spiritual regeneration of the modern man. The poet looks at the decaying, degrading and disintegrating society around him. Metaphorically speaking *The Waste Land* has many connotations. It refers to the waste region of the self and a state of being which is physically, emotionally and spiritually sterile. In fact the poem depicts the disintegration of the western society. However, the depiction of the western society does not limit the universal appeal of the poem in any sense. The poem succeeds in breaking

the barriers and is equally applicable to every societies and communities of the modern world. The Waste Land is a revelation of the modern man's spiritual plight in terms of loss of myth-consciousness and distortion of human values. The poem is not only about the spiritual dryness, barrenness and hollowness but also a mode of expression as an oriental hope for the salvation. T. S. Eliot was sensitive enough to sense the decaying humanity of the western civilization. When he sensed and experienced the London Bridge falling down, he at once, turns to the East for restoration of the order and values.

T. S. Eliot was not in favour of a particular culture and tradition. He did not consider the non-European text inferior to European text in any way. The poet did not promote the binary opposition between the occident and the orient. His knowledge of anthropology and *Sanskrit* literature reveals that he was far away from the colonial construction of the subject. He did not believe in cultural and imperial hegemony. Colonialism was hardly an ideological construct for him. In his book "Colonialism / Post colonialism", AniaLoomba writes, "Anthropological studies rested upon the assumption that non- European peoples were backward, primitive, quaint, sometimes even noble but always different from the products of Western civilization(Loomba: 46). The scholarly discipline called Orientalism was not an ongoing debate for the poet as the Far East and the Near East. This discipline was created alongside the European penetration into the East. In particular he developed the aesthetic taste for Indian literature as manifested in Epics and *Upanishads*. The elements and bearings of the Indian aesthetics are reflected in the poem almost in all the sections. The poem is divided into five sections: 'The Burial of the Dead', 'A Game of Chess', 'The Fire Sermon', 'Death by Water' and 'What the Thunder Said'.

The first section 'The Burial of the Dead' depicts the Indian belief in the philosophy of transmigration of the soul. After death there is a re-birth. There is a suggested meaning in the title of the first section what in Indian aesthetics is called *Dhavani*. The poet intends to give two kinds of death, one physical and other spiritual. The spiritual death may occur even when a person is alive. The goal of the poem seems to educate the educated. The poem begins with the letter 'A,' the first alphabet of English. The letter with which the poem begins plays an important role in the education of one's life. This is the first letter taught to every child in the school. The sound of the letter 'A' is common in other languages also. But the wastelanders do not understand the secular sanctity of this letter and that is why April is the cruellest month for them. There is a paradox (*Virodhabhas*) in the line 'winter kept us warm'. *Dhavani*(the suggested meaning) is also apparent as the winter is characterized by passivity and hibernation. The wastelanders of the modern world prefer inaction to action. The knowledge of *Karamyoga* is hardly known to them. In this section,*Dhavani*(the implied meaning) is explicit in number of images:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow

Out of this stony rubbish?

The modern society is utterly disorganized and uprooted. It is littered with the wrecks of old ideals and values. The cultural and the spiritual values are now the withered stumps of time or ' the heap of broken images' The images of 'dead land' ' dull roots' ' dried tubers' 'clutching roots' 'dry stone no

sound of water' 'dead tree giving no shelter' all are suggestive and connotes barrenness and dissolution. Nothing spiritual grows on this land.

The poet introduces us to another aspect of the spiritual degeneration symbolized by Madam Sosostris and her tarot pack of cards. She is the modern clairvoyant who is under the constant fear of police. Her knowledge of the mysteries and divine power is superficial and spurious. The database of the horoscope is debased and does not confirm to the reason and logic. In modern world the voice of the divine has fallen in the hands of fraud. There is a commercialization of the supreme power and the work has been taken over by the corporate in the name of God. Further the syllabification of the name Sosostris suggests the whimpering cry of the people who fall in their trap. The first three letters 'SOS' in her name have associations for the safety cover in an emergency like situation as "Save our Souls". The vowel 'O' denotes the zero value further suggesting the devaluation of the norms, standards and lack of professional commitment. The recurring images of 'circle', 'ring' and the use of the word 'nothing' in the next section symbolize the hollowness of the modern man. He is entangled in the skein of materialism. There is unrighteousness everywhere. The modern man is after *Arthaat* the cost of *Dharma*. As a result he is excluded from the divine scheme of *Moksha*.

The figures represented in the cards are also symbolic. The figures measure the unrighteousness of the action for material pursuits both by fair and foul means. There is picture of the woman as 'the lady of rocks' and 'the lady of situations'. Here the intended meaning is that the woman in the modern world does not seem to be in her feminine best. In another card there is a figure of a 'one eyed merchant'. It suggests the commercialization of supernatural powers. In India such people are respectfully called *babas*. They claim that they are not one or two eyed but third eyed. In fact it is not the third eye but a blurred eye. In one of the cards there is a depiction of a man with three staves. The Indian equivalent to the image of three staves is the *Trishul* of God Shiva. The city represented in this section is 'unreal' because it is cut off from the nature. The crowd moving over the London Bridge is spiritually tormented. The people in the present world find themselves alone in a crowd and crowded when all alone. The image of 'short and infrequent' sighs evokes the concepts of *Dhavni* here. The interrelationship of the vague sounds suggests the mental stress and strain in the contemporary world. The crowd moving over the London Bridge consists of clerks, cashiers, agents, managers, salesmen, saleswomen and other businessmen. Now there is a pun in the next line, 'with a dead sound on the final stroke of nine'. In Indian aesthetics it is *ShleshAlankar* (figure of speech). The people in the crowd begin their work at 9 o' clock in the morning. It is noteworthy that the crucifixion of Christ took place at the ninth hour of the day. But this hour means nothing to them. Regarding this ambiguity V. Rai says that "When we put the two things together we arrive at the conclusion that the time when business begins, Christ dies" (Rai: 120).

The bearings of Indian aesthetics are further revealed in the next section 'A Game of Chess'. There is *Dhavni* in the title itself which suggests some plotting. A game connotes 'pun' or 'shelsha'. It also represents *Vira Rasa* (heroic). The *Rasa* and *Bhava* are the two key-terms in Indian aesthetics. Etymologically speaking *Rasa* means 'sap' 'juice' 'taste' 'supreme joy' and aesthetic enjoyment. These *Rasa* and *Bhava* are also present in *The Waste Land*. These can be experienced objectively as well as subjectively in the poem. Some critics regard them as the subjective experience of the reader

or spectator thus raising it to transcendental and spiritual level. The *Rasa* and *Bhavaare* discernible at the very outset in the description of the lady's bed room. The lady described in the opening section is aristocratic and her room is pictured with so many pictures. The *Sringar Rasa* is evoked in the reference to 'synthetic perfumes' powdered or liquid and through the depiction of artificial jewellery. The picture of the 'golden Cupid' depicts the erotic *Rasa* and here the *Sathaybhava* is *Rati*. There is a picture of Phelomela carved over the fire- place. The fire symbolizes the fire of passion. Through the image of the fire, Eliot prepares us for the next section of the poem 'The Fire Sermon'. The visual communication of the picture tells us how she was raped, her tongue cut and finally transformed into nightingale of golden voice. But the golden voice of the nightingale does not carry any meaning to the people of the Waste Land. It simply falls into dirty ears. They fail to understand the moral message in her story- transformation and purification through suffering. The suffering always tests our might for tolerance. T. S. Eliot seems to turn to the East to recover this loss of myth consciousness. The fire plays an important role in Hindu mythology. It helps the living to live and dying to die. The story of nightingale reminds us of Iqbal's patriotic song:

*"Sarejahan se achha Hindustan Hamara
Ham bulbuleinhaiiski ye gulsitanhamara".*

The voice of the nightingale here does not fall into dirty ears. The nightingale also stirs the romantic emotions but the lover of the lady is devoid of love. The lady asks him to talk to her but he does not respond to her questions. The verbal communication does not take place between the two. He is a typical lover who knows nothing, sees nothing and remembers nothing. What he remembers is only a line from Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*:

Those are the pearls that were his eyes.

But at the same time in the next line he describes it as a Shakespearean rag 'OOOO that Shakespearean rag'. The four vowels 'O' denotes zero. The obliquity of the sentence is that the lover does not understand its spiritual significance. It is merely a rag for him, a line without any meaning.

In this section the account of Lil and her husband also presents the same pattern of self-gratifying behaviour. Lil is in the habit of taking pills. She has almost poisoned herself with abortive pills. By taking these pills the woman has not only violated the sanctity of the marriage but also prevented the very process of procreation. The vital source of life has merely been reduced to the level of drug addiction in the modern world:

I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,

Its then pills I took, to bring it off, she said----

The perversity is not only present in the higher strata of the society but the lower strata are also neck deep. It is illustrated when the scene of the glamour and splendor shifts to a pub. Here we get the glimpse of life at lower level of the society. The people present in the pub are all drunkards and boozed on. The owner of the pub keeps them reminding:

HURRY UP PLEASE IT IS TIME

HURRY UP PLEASE IT IS TIME

When they make their exit they bid ‘Goodnight’ and ‘Ta Ta’ to each other. Here we get *Hasya Rasa* (Laughter) as in a boozed state of mind their voice falters to say ‘Goonight Bill, Goonight Lou, Goonight May’.

The third section ‘The Fire Sermon’ is alluded to Lord Buddha’s famous sermon. In his sermon he teaches the lesson that we should keep away from the fire of passion. This section opens with the site of the river Thames in London. The water of the river is polluted as a result of many commercial activities. This pollution corresponds to the pollution in the human mind. Man in the modern world has become mechanical in head, hand and heart. The poet laments the loss of love in the society where the sexual appetite has been let loose. The holy places have become the tourist destination where men and women are meeting and mating and then departing without leaving any address. The poet evokes the *Karuna* (pity) for here on the modern bank of the river there is no confluence (*Sangam*) of the pure hearts. We are reminded of Raj Kapoor’s famous song in which the lover represents the Lord Krishna and the girl Radha. The romantic lover asks the girl to have the *Sangam* of pure hearts represented by the holy river Ganga and Jamuna:

Tere man ki Ganga, mere man ki Jamunaka

Bol Radhabolsangamhogakenahin

The poet laments the loss of true love as modern girls are entertained by ‘loitering heirs of the city directors’. The water is the source of purification but the denizens of the Waste Land do not hesitate to defile the purity of the river. The poet arouses the emotions of pity and says:

I sat down and wept-----

Sweet Thames, run swiftly till I end my song;

Sweet Thames, run swiftly, for I speak not loud or long.

The root cause of the distortion and devaluation of human values is the fire of passion in which the modern world is burning. The application of the Indian aesthetics to these emotions is *Vyabhichari-bhavas*. Regarding the use of these emotions K. Krishnamurthy writes that “When the emotions are to be referred to at the aesthetic level often they are termed rasa- bhavas or rasadis(Devy: 326-27). The bhavas that are discernible in this section of the poem may be *mada*(arrogance) *alasya* (lassitude) *dainya* (wretchedness) *vrida* and *vyadhi*(despair and sickness). The poet deliberately alludes St. Augustine and Lord Buddha as the representative of Eastern and Western asceticism.

Water, the elixir of life is polluted and has lost power to put off the fire of passion. This is again depicted in section IV where Phoenician sailor drowns in water and his drowning is not followed by re-birth. The recurring use of the drowning images in the poem obliquely reveals that the water purifies the body, mind and soul. In Indian context drowning means the holy dip. The implication of the title ‘Death by Water’ is that one must die to be born again. This is only possible if the modern humanity reveres the teachings of the religion promoting only one ‘ism’ that is humanism. The holy book, *Bhagvadgita* also stresses the humanistic view present in all religions of the world:

Whatever be the colour of the cow,

The milk is always white,

Whatever be the religion of mankind,

Its essence has to be humanism(Radhakrishnan: 102)

After the detailed survey of the contemporary western civilization in terms of falling towers, falling bridge, the unreal city of Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna and London, Eliot now turns to East. In section V ‘What the Thunder Said’ a ray of hope is exhibited. The title of this section has reference to the Indian legend of the thunder in *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. *Upanishad* literally means touching at the feet of the teacher. It suggests the reverence to *Guru*. *Guru* literally means one who dispels darkness of ignorance. Eliot considers the East as *Guru* who takes one from darkness to light. The East is indicated by the cock crowing sitting on the top of the chapel Perilous where the Holy Grail is kept. The cock crowing indicates the end of *Tamas* (darkness) and the beginning of *Sattwa*. In Indian mythology the image of cock has many associations. The cock heralds the day. The image of cock also has phallic overtones suggesting the propagation of the human race. It is also a bird of sacrifice and magic. It drives away disease, demons and other evil spirits. The location of the East is further indicated by the black clouds that gather over the *Himalayas* and the people anxiously waiting for the rain. They prayed to *Prajapati* (creator) and he spoke to them through thundering in the sky. The thunder speaks the three syllables DA, DA, DA. Da is a Sanskrit word. The triple DA stands for *Dutta, Dayadhvam and Damyata* (all Sanskrit words) meaning Give, Control and Sympathise.

In the last section, the protagonist, the poet himself sits fishing or searching for the spiritual solace. He turns his back to the arid plains. What T. S. Eliot wants to suggest here is that as the social structure is breaking down, we as the member of the civil society will have to take the initiative to accept and respect the East as spiritual *Guru*. The poem ends with the Indian aesthetics of *Santa rasa* (peace) a formal ending to an *Upanishad*, “*ShantihShantihShantih*”. The poem educates us at the end for peace education. In the present world where the atomic power rules the roost we are always under the shadow of terror (*Bhaya*). We should prepare the people for peace. When the triple ‘*Shantih*’ is perfectly established in the world there will be no manmade crises, calamities and catastrophe. The concluding line bestowing peace serves as the beacon light of the East to the whole world. T. S. Eliot upholds the message of Lord Buddha and *Upanishad* as a panacea for all ills the contemporary world is suffering from.

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