

Interconnectedness between *Vedanta* & Poetry of T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats' Poetry

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Abstract

This paper studies the impact of Eastern philosophy on the writings of both T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats. The research demonstrates interconnectedness between the Vedic philosophy and the western writers particularly the thoughts pervasive in the writings of Eliot and Yeats. Eliot engaged deeply with Eastern philosophy in ways which significantly influenced his worldview and his poetry. Eliot's PhD thesis was on the idealist metaphysics of F.H. Bradley, which he found appealing due to its affinities with Indian philosophical sensibilities. Eliot was influenced by both Hinduism and Buddhism, and especially by the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which he described as one of the greatest philosophical poems, and by the *Mādhyamika* or Middle Way Buddhist philosophy of Nāgārjuna. The references to Indian literature are particularly prominent in *The Waste Land*, several section titles of which they reference Indian imagery. For instance, 'The Fire Sermon' references the sermon of the same name delivered by the Buddha; 'Death by Water' engages with Indra's slaying of Vṛtra to release the waters in the *Rig Veda*; 'What the Thunder said' references the eponymous episode from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad*.

Key Words: Vedanta, Philosophy, Myth, Influence, Images

Introduction

The paper interprets the representation of the Indian myths in the Western literature. The presence of the Indian myth in the western poetry is huge and unavoidable. It is incarnated through a special reflection of the availability of Hindu images in the poetry of greatest western poets like Eliot, and Yeats. They foster their poetry with rich Oriental beautiful and decorative pictures. Four poems are going to be selected in this study, which are: Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Yeats's two pomes; "Supernatural Songs", and "Anashuya and Vijaya". These chosen poems stand for different ages and periods of Occidental poetry writers and writing career. Orient is and is the subject of inspiration and innovation for the Occidental writers in general and the poets in particular, as a result of all the secrets and treasures behold within its great heritage and very rich mystical and unsolved ambiguities of its' cultures.

To begin with Eliot whom in his poem "The Waste Land" incarnated East and its culture clearly through adopting Hindu and Buddhist images in his poetic masterpiece. Eliot thrives to manipulate different techniques to portrait the east in his poetry. He specifically used imagery, allusion and even sounds to add more effect to the dramatic scenes of the poem itself which he is writing. Such techniques are necessary to deepen the impact of the importance of the myth itself.

Discussion

The study covers Hindu philosophy based on *The Upanishads*, *The Bhagavad Gita* and *The Vedas*. They elaborate on how the Soul (*Atman*) can be united with the ultimate truth (Brahman) through

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contemplation and mediation, as well as the doctrine of Karma, which is regarded as the cumulative effects of a person's actions. *The Bhagavad Gita* is the central text of Hinduism, a philosophical dialog between God Krishna and the warrior Arjun. *The Gita* propagates selflessness, duty, devotion, and meditation, integrating numerous different threads of Hindu philosophy.

The Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and *Brahmasutra* are three sources of Vedanta philosophy. These are the three pillars on which Vedanta philosophy rests. *The Bhagavad Gita* is a small part of the Mahabharata, penned by a famous sage, Vyasa. *The Bhagavad Gita* places primary importance on duty. Each person has the duty to carry out and that has to have supremacy over everything else. In the performance of duty, one should not be attached to the results. The reward is inherent in the effort. The ultimate duty is upholding, righteousness and the destruction of evil. Truth is the heart and soul of righteousness and truth is God. The ultimate goal has to be communion with God, beyond pleasure and pain, gain and loss, and victory and defeat. This requires a unique state of mental equilibrium which can be accomplished by withdrawing one's focus from the world of senses to the depth of one's inner self. S. Radhakrishnan says, "The main spirit of Bhagavad-Gita is that of Upanishads; only there is a greater emphasis on the religious side" (445).

The word Vedanta means the body of knowledge which is found at the end of the *Vedas*. The philosophical knowledge is based on *Upanishads*. Therefore, the word Vedanta is synonymous with the word Upanishads which refers to the same body of knowledge. *The Upanishads* are the concluding portions of the Vedas. It is not that all *Upanishads* were composed as a separate portion of the Vedas. Rather they are the knowledge portions. The main reason that the Upanishads are called the end of the Veda is that they represent the central aim and meaning of the teaching of the Veda. The content of Upanishads is the wisdom of Vedanta.

From the philosophical standpoint, Vedanta is non-dualistic, and from the religious standpoint, it is monotheistic. The Vedanta philosophy affirms the essential non-duality of God, Soul and universe, the apparent distinctions being created by names and forms which, from the standpoint of ultimate reality, do not exist. The Vedanta accepts all religions as true and considers various deities of different faiths as diverse manifestations of the one God.

According to Vedanta, religion is experience and not mere acceptance of certain time-honored dogmas or creeds. To know God is to become like God. People may quote scripture, engage in rituals, perform social service, or pray with regularity, but unless there is the realization of the Divine spirit in the hearts, they are still phenomenal beings, victims of the separate existence. Through the experience of God, one's doubts disappear and the "knots of the heart are cut asunder". By riding himself of the desires clinging to his heart, a mortal becomes immortal in this very body. That the attainment of immortality is not the prerogative of a chosen few but the birthright of all is the conviction of every follower of Vedanta.

Vedanta asserts that Truth is universal and all humankind and all existence are one. It teaches the unity of Godhead, or ultimate Reality, and accepts every faith as a valid means for its own followers to realize the Truth. The four cardinal principles of Vedanta may be summed up as follows: the non-duality of the Godhead, the divinity of the Soul, the unity of existence and the harmony of religions. On these four Principles the faith of the Vedantist is based.

The essential teachings of Vedanta, as stated by Swami Vivekananda is, "The human soul is eternal and immortal, perfect and infinite, and death means only a change of center from one body to another . . . The soul will go on evolving up or reverting back from birth and death to death" (46).

George Allen and Unwin assert, "The Brahma-sutra is an aphoristic summary of the teaching of Upanishads . ." (112). *Brahma Sutras* is in the form cryptic Vedantic aphorisms. They are also called Vedanta Sutras, Sariraka Sutras, Uttaramimamsa Sutras or Bhikshu Sutras. The cryptic way in which the aphorisms of the Vedanta Sutras presented leaves the door open for a multitude of interpretations. This led to a proliferation of Vedanta sub-schools. Generally people tend to identify Vedanta with the writings of Sri Shankara. However, this is not logical. All the philosophers who have written commentaries on Upanishads, Brahmasutras and the Bhagavadgita are the Acharyas of the Vedanta.

Eliot in "The Waste Land" describes shore as an impotent, dry, lifeless, sterile and infertile place. These images stand for the western civilization deterioration, devastation and decay. The poet intends to repeat words to create an echoing image in his poem "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down". The sounds of falling down of the London Bridge are horrible and are mixed with the angry sound of god "da! da! da!" till reaching to the last line where "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata./ Shantih shantih shantih" are repeated again. This ending is a parallel to Sanskrit and the Bible through "Give. Be compassionate. Self-control". / "The peace which passeth understanding". In Philippians: 4:7, Lord says: "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus". This means that in God mercy only human can find condolence and relief.

Similarly, Yeats is interested in mysticism and eastern myths as well. His poetry is richly carrying, especially in *Supernatural Songs*, *Crossways*, and other poems, with Hindu's and Buddhist's mythical images and symbols in order to portray vividly his poetic insight and richness. Yeats succeeds in manipulating various kinds of archetypes by means of transforming the unconscious world of dreams and visions into conscious world of myths, symbols, images and metaphors in his poetry.

Yeats used Hinduism philosophical images in "Supernatural Songs". This lyrical poem contains a comparison between an early Irish Christian hero called "Ribh" and "Meru" as ancient India sages. Meru alludes to Hindu's sacred Himalayan Mountain. Ribh expresses audacious views about religion and sex (David Holdeman 107). Yeats describes his hero as a tragic one as Eliot did. Ribh represented the Western civilization who decided to escape into East in order to be spiritually wealthy. Yeats discovered that civilizations are intermingled and could not relinquish human's spiritual quest as he saw them deteriorating and devastating. It seems they failed to hinder man's irresistible willingness for sex and physical pleasures which curb human from unity with God and deprive him of heaven as a gift of eternity. The poet categorizes two kinds of civilizations; Eastern civilization is spiritual while the Western one is seen as materialistic.

The Hindu and Buddhist images, symbols and myths are present in *Supernatural Songs*. The poet wants to quench his desire for eastern spirituality as western culture failed in that matter through a pilgrimage to east at Meru Mountain in Himalaya. Everest is considered the highest mountain in earth and a sacred one as well. It is located in the northeastern part of Himalayan Mountains (Conner 123459). Its name comes to mean the "abode of snow" besides regarding Meru Mountain as the "most sacred" (Conner 86). The three peaks of Meru Mountains are visited by pilgrimages on feet. They believe that Mount Meru is resident by "Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva". In addition to that, Mountain Meru "symbolizes a place where the spirits liberated from the cycle of living live in meditation." (Conner 122). This holy Hindu's Mountain which is covered with snow, the symbol of purity and peace, is also seen golden when sun rises and reflects in its peak. This image magnifies the holiness of this holy mountain which is encompassed or enclitic by golden shapes of the sun rays during its rise.

In the Orphic theogony the conception of the universe as the upper and lower halves of a vast egg, which were heaven and earth, recalls the Vedic beliefs of India which visualized the Divine One as residing in a primordial egg split into two parts, the lower, silver half being the earth and the upper, golden half resembling the gilded domes of Buddhist and Christian sanctuaries, being the heavens. At the same time that this conception of a golden half egg is so prevalent in the late antique period, the egg itself is an emblem of resurrection and the belief in the universe as two halves of an egg have been taken over into the Cult of the Dioskouri, where the ovoid shape, as symbolizing heaven and earth, is identified with their helmet-like piloi (231).

The first poem of the Supernatural Songs begins at darkness "BECAUSE you have found me in the pitch-dark night" (Yeats, 299), while the last one seems to complete the circle to end before the dawn, "That day brings round the night, that before dawn / His glory and his monuments are gone. (Yeats' Supernatural Songs, XII. Meru 304)". This philosophical and natural poem stands for Yeats' disowning from the occidental values and religion to convert into oriental Indian beliefs. West is depicted by the excessive interest in the physical pleasures and pervert actions unlike East, which is the source for the deep search of spirituality till arriving to unity with gods and heavenly powers. This made westerners including Yeats turn into India to seek deeply in its magical methods and the wide thoughts of the Hindu and Buddhists teachings, in order to satisfy his eager and unlimited wishes of discovering recent ways to reach his real self with unity with nature and God.

The nature of life in modern world and the human predicament of life in such a modern world form the theme of Eliot's major poems. There are various social, political, religious as well as personal reasons that have affected Eliot's intellectual mind. Eliot is fully aware of the society and culture around him but he transcends all cultural, philosophical and religious boundaries of places, situations, and even time to get a coherent view of the fragmentary human existence among a defragmented, disoriented and confused lot of people. 'The obsession with the; Self' is a typical human trait' (Dr, Nidhi Tiwari-beyond self (Atman): Revisiting T.S. Eliot's Poetry through Buddhist Kaleidoscope' 25). The modern world is inhabited with men trying to develop and satisfy the 'Self'. Eliot gradually understands that it is the selfish nature of human beings to acquire and attain, to satisfy one's 'self' that seems to be the root cause of the alienation of man from each other, from his culture and tradition as well as from his do cause disharmony, disbelief, and disagreement between people.

At the core of Hinduism is the idea that the goal of man's religious quest lies on identifying his self or 'atman' with the supreme source of all things in the universe i.e. 'Brahma'. Towards the end of *The Waste Land*, when the quester seems disappointed because his journey to the Perilous Chapel in search of the Holy Grail remains inconclusive, he suddenly sees a flash of lighting. This lighting appears to be the symbol of enlightenment that can only be achieved when an individual had shed all his relations with the worldly affairs and had started identifying his self with the Supreme. There are these broader usages of the eastern religious philosophy and Sanskrit, especially in the last section of "The Waste Land", 'The What the Thunder Said'. In this section, Eliot refers to 'Ganga' the Sanskrit name for the river in place of the anglicized names 'Ganges'.

In Section III of *Four Quartes*, Eliot surmises, "I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant"- a query that directly alludes to Eliot's chief philosophical source, *the Bhagavad- Gita*. Eliot examines the emptiness of past and future and the fallacy of sequential time, which he compresses into such images as "the future is a faded song", and flowers, "pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never been opened". In the world of change, time cannot be arrested; it keeps slipping into

something else-the future into the present, the present onto the past, the past into the remote past, and the remote past into the forgetfulness.

An Indian influence continues throughout Yeats's life with periodic ebb and flow, and reaching its strongest manifestation in his final decade in his friendship and work with Shree Purohit Swami. Yeats was to return to a consideration of forms of consciousness in the 1930s in his introductions to *The Holy Mountain* and 'The Mandukya Upanishad', and generally Yeats became increasingly familiar with both the Vedantic and Yogic systems through his association with the Swami, working with him on the Vedic Upanishads, and writing introductions to Purohit's other works, including his autobiography, that of his guru and his translation of Patañjali's Aphorisms of Yoga. The series of introductions which he wrote to the Swami's work and to their joint work, show a deep engagement with the material and it is difficult to tell how far Yeats' work in formulating the Principles enriched his understanding of the Upanishads or Patañjali, and how much his study of ancient Indian philosophy has contributed to his understanding of the Principles.

It is significant that Yeats has explored Indian philosophy far more fully in the intervening period. The Principles come to the fore during sleep and after death, and in seeking to explore them, Yeats seems to have found *the Upanishads* a particular help, not least because of the link that they make between sleep and the after-life. He draws on Vedic thought about the nature of different states of consciousness, and introducing 'The Soul in Judgment', refers to '[c]ertain Upanishads' which propose three states of consciousness or soul. He is vague about which *Upanishads* he is drawing on because his direct source was A. Berriedale Keith's digest on 'The Four States of the Soul' in *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads* as the wording of his quotations indicates. His quotations largely derive from one of the oldest, the Brihadâranyaka Upanishad, where the teacher, having established that the Self or 'soul (âtman), indeed, is [a person's] light', proposes the conditions of a person as 'the condition of being in this world and the condition of being in the other world' with 'an intermediate third condition, namely that of sleep' from which the soul sees both the other conditions.

The intellectual correspondence between some prose works of Eliot and Yeats and religious scriptures such as Vedas, *the Upanishads* and *the Gita* is an addressed area but yet an unexplored territory in the contemporary comparative literature. In order to address the current chaos and predicament of humankind, it is necessary to gain religious insight to help humankind get rid of fear, conflict, and selfishness. This study is directed to examine the intellectual correspondence between Eliot and Yeats' thoughts and Vedic thoughts to see how Eastern philosophy has affected the writings of both Western poets Eliot and Yeats. They establish an original relationship with some of the thoughts in relation to the Absolute, human self and soul, illusion, action (*karma*) as philosophized in *the Vedas*, and *the Gita*.

Conclusion

The Vedic literature is the oldest of any literature in the world in terms of age, richness in terms of content, and knowledge in terms of its depth dedicated to all human beings irrespective of caste, creed, color and religious belief. However, its originality, knowledge, and usefulness for entire humanity have not been made properly known to all. Eliot and Yeats are the Western thinkers to have examined non-western spiritual tradition such as Hinduism, which draws from the Vedas. As being influenced from the Eastern philosophy, they have argued for a non-dogmatic and more universalistic perspective of life and the world. They speak against the modern life that is sterile and desperate and stand by the non-western trend of leading life that relies on the human conscience and morality. The idea has already had home in the Vedic literature.

Poetry of Eliot and Yeats has become popular in the Western literature, as they are considered to be generating new ideas and propounding new philosophy. They have been influenced by the ideas and philosophy of the Vedas. However, there has been no proper study on the pervasion of the Vedic philosophy in the writings of Eliot and Yeats. Their writings have been influenced by the philosophy of *the Upanishads*. There are many references, illustrations and ideas in their writings drawn from *the Bhagavad Gita*. In the absence of comparative study of their poems and *the Gita*, the former appears to be bearing completely new ideas. *The Gita's* impact on writings of Eliot and Yeats is potentially rich to be studied.

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