

## **Tradition in Mythology: T.S. Eliot's Poetry and his Tryst with the Indian Mythological Tradition**

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### **Abstract**

*The poems of Eliot and his ideals are inextricably inter-linked, especially when it comes to his understanding of the modern world and his proposition for the deliverance of humans from the eternal burning in their faithless existence. His insistence on the importance of tradition is seminal in order to have a bird's eye view of his realizations as reflected in his works. This concept, which he has explored in his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent", and the manner in which it has made its presence felt by his repeated retreat to various myths, along with the relation between myth, tradition and religion are attempted exploration in this paper for the purpose of providing an alternate view point as against the gamut of literature that study each of these aspects separately.*

**Keywords:** tradition, mythology, intertextuality, religion

The lattice of poetic creation in the modern world has come to be studied in great detail considering the difference in maneuvers that the modernist poets have applied to its form and content. The disjointed sentences and the plethora of meanings that these sentences draw from among the gamut of individual experiences are commendable. However, ventriloquism might be considered as one of the many characters of modern poetry. Of the numerous poets and critics who have tried their hand at imposing a form upon the seemingly formless mass of words that modernists have anointed under the umbrella of poetry, T.S. Eliot's name shines brightly in comparison, considering the wide referentiality that his theory possesses. The multiple voices that throng the poems of repute have not been delved into deeply in his major essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent.' He however, takes upon himself the herculean job of defining the manner of evaluation of poets and authors which should grant them immortality in the world of literature. He quite analytically maintains the logic of the effect of the great litterateurs of the past and their works, whose effect is imminent in the works of the present writers or the instance of inter-textuality that is generally considered as innocuous involvement of a previous text in the penning of a recent one. This practice of involuntary involvement of the knowledge from a previously existing text into the one that is

produced is of significant importance as Eliot doesn't condemn the action but rather lauds it acclaiming it to be of significant value as it charts the journey of the poetic consciousness from the past to the present, imbibing ancient wisdom in himself to facilitate a better understanding of the present:

... the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity. (Eliot TSW 28)

This therefore explains that the uniqueness that Eliot portrays in his work which smacks of a scholarship that borders on being pedantic bringing in allusions from not just mythology but an entire gamut of literature that passed before him. It is in this zeal that the revisionist myth making also finds its application in Eliot for the first time. The usage of the mythical being, Tiresias who had experienced life as a man as well as a woman becomes the prevalent motif at once. For not only does Eliot introduce mythology as one of the elements that is to guide his text appearing repeatedly in various forms from various cultures but at the same time providing what seems like a guiding principle considering the previously mentioned one. The conflict at that forms the crux of the Tiresias myth is essentially gendered in nature. It therefore follows that in the absence of a well guided gendered plot in action in the lattice of his work the incitement of the mythical muse falls short of the expectations that the readers might have of it. However, the aspect of the revisionist mythmaking does indeed come into play at this juncture for Eliot who paints the picture of a plagued modernity; the image of Tiresias becomes the principal image, the being with complete worldly knowledge. Thus when the notion of conflict as being the one predominant motif appears and disappears in the corpus of his expression, gender recedes to become what can be considered as merely one of the many conflicting states that drives the world apart. Tiresias' gendered identity takes a back seat to be overcome by the knowledge due to experience that he had gathered which becomes essential in unraveling the mysteries of the modern world in order to arrive at the desired solutions. He thus does not remain a misappropriated myth in *The Waste Land* but comes to become much more than what the repetitive alliance of his image with that of gender, providing an alternative to the previously widespread notion, while in the process introducing to his readers not just the tendency of "making it new" but also adding to it the germs of postmodernism by refuting the essentializing characteristics that used to constitute the notion of normative thinking at that point in time. The rampant usage of a variety of languages in this context suitably adds to the consideration of his scholastic exhibitionism. It is but imperative to think that any reader of

his text in all probability would not be acquainted with all the languages that he had used in his work. This, points to the utility of such a variety of languages by him. Rationality indicates a dual reasoning for such adamancy, if it can be so called considering the challenge the endeavour might have proven to a majority of readers. The fact that the sentences used were replete in meaning when used by him in any particular context need not be justified. In which case the common allegation that might arise against the literary genius is whether it was some perverse pleasure that he enjoyed in what appeared as punishing people for their limited knowledge. This would however cause a paradigmatic shift on being considered true and put the very base of Modernism on a foundation that would seem all for the capitalistic ability of having access to all amenities(considering knowledge of languages being one such that aided in the understanding of Eliot). However the second reason that might be considered to be more fitted to our understanding of him would be the knowledge base that he draws from. If literature is considered for the purpose of itself and not for the readership that it would invite Eliot's theory of tradition invading his literary enterprise becomes clear at once. His knowledge of different culture, languages and myths do have their desired impact in his mind in creating what he intended to. Therefore, his expression does not belie all the scholarship of previous literary creation that is now a part of the author and thus cannot be asked to quit. Much as it is wrong for the readers to be left agape when confronted with a remarkable number of alien words in front of them, in a similar manner it would be unjust for a poet who subscribes to the theory of tradition effecting individual talent to let go of his literary baggage for the sake of the readership his work might entail.

Considering the fact that human 'historical sense' seems to be of chief significance to him in his essay regarding literary creation what exactly is encompassed in this term is to be sincerely examined in order to venture any further in pondering over his use of Indian myths in his works. It is a well known fact that T.S. Eliot's well-versedness in Indian Mythological literature such as the *Puranas* and *Upanishads* had an immense effect on his mind. But the manner of his understanding of the importance of these myths and the nature of them which he had managed to decipher in order to include them at crucial positions in his several works, especially in *The Waste Land* is yet to be understood well. The primary connection between the myths and the tradition that Eliot is concerned with seems to be the effect that the genre of myths has on the human mind. It is not baseless to evaluate the primacy of primal human knowledge that Eliot must be referring to when he in his previously mentioned essay points at the subconscious reproduction of previously created art in the process of a new creation:

The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together. (Eliot TSW 31)

This is what comprises the mind of the agile poet, in order to be drawn into the receptacle of timelessness, an appeal to invade the deepest sensibilities in men. If won't be utterly debatable therefore to claim that myths being the store of ancient wisdom derived

from thousands of years of human existence, it would invariably form one of the greatest devices of the human enrichment and correlation. The historical sense as derived from the myths have been discussed not just in relation to myths being the efficient upholder of the sense but also as the primary element ascertaining heteroglossia:

The voices in the poem are in fact a present expression of tradition, or we could say that the poem gives utterance to those voices that belong to tradition, which is really just another form of heteroglossia. (Crews 20)

The fact that heteroglossia can be seen at multiple levels of culture, language and context in the poems of Eliot might be considered once again as the veiled proof of the oncoming post modernism that facilitated meta narratives over grand narratives. Considering which, the huge mass of Eliot's poems become a harbinger of the prevalent heteroglossic tendencies that seem to be the only way to make sense of a world fractured into multiple differentialities. This on the other hand might lead to a vague attempt at understanding how the myths serve as a concomitant of the civilizations that abode the earth and therefore the better manner of expressing the knowledge derived from primitive human customs. Even then, the acceptance of myths as the alibis of the pre-existing nature of human existence is difficult to accept owing to their widespread association with fiction; to which Ajay kumar responds:

Myth is not a fairy tale, as some believe. It is reality in a seminal form. Intensive and extensive researches in anthropology conducted by Freud and Jung have explored deep symbolical meanings interwoven with the patterns of the ancient myths. Men of religious sensibility discover in myths those hidden powers which can enable the modern humanity to dissolve the spiritual dilemma. (Kumar 111)

It is for this reason that Eliot's concern with the myths extended not only to providing his poems with the much needed aura of supernatural gloom and gothic appeal but at the same time they attempted at being symbolic of all that he might have had in his mind to offer to his readers. In this process of questioning as well as answering all the elements that constituted the ethos that tainted the modern world, casting it into an abyss of oblivion much like the deserted church in his 'Death by water'. The images that Eliot works with in this poem are a classic manifestation of the multiple strands of thinking that ran parallel in his mind. It goes without saying that Wordsworth's "emotions recollected in tranquility" had become passé for a long time by them; so much so that Eliot's pen works its way in establishing a separate cult of poetry that seemed to open up immense scope not just for the act of writing one's thoughts although no longer in symmetry but also presenting on paper thoughts that seemed to be created on the pen itself refuting the very tenet of recollection. Therefore, it goes without saying the struggle for the perfect expression now comes at sketching well the strand of thought that had been effectively produced to encapsulate the conflict (in this case). Therefore, the images of Oriental religion that were very much a part of Eliot's cumulative knowledge appears significantly from 'Death by water' causing much

inconvenience whose intention seemed to have an ownership of Eliot in the dimension of thoughts as well. 'Death by Water' and the images used therein had been the subjects of much contention in gauging the apathy Eliot was showing to the religion of his forefathers. Not only have the zealots questioned his intention at the symbolic representation of what seemed a diminishing faith on the Western Gods and an inclination towards the heathen but Eliot also had to face his share of ire at writing for an western audience and daring (albeit temporarily) at what seemed like pledging allegiance to the bigots. No doubt this train of thought had been well augmented by what Eliot had to say:

A good half of the effort of understanding what the Indian philosophers were after – and their subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like school boys – lay in trying to ease from my mind all the categories and kinds of distinction common to European philosophy from the time of Greeks. (Kumar 109-110)

On closer examination of the understanding of this great poet that his critics over the ages have to offer, he seemed like more of a rebel in search of a solution for human kind's abasement, only that his means was poetics rather than politics:

T.S. Eliot believes that people can regain spiritual vitality which has been sapped by the growth of rationalism, provided they develop the primitive mode of feeling and thinking. That is, the key to spiritual salvation. He therefore enjoins upon the reader to follow the three fold path of salvation indicated by Prajapati in the Brihad-aranyaka Upanishad. (Kumar 112)

On considering the two of his works that abound in Indian mythological allusions Eliot's poem 'Preludes' come to form the context. Even though *The Waste Land* is a complete enterprise in itself, taking into account 'Preludes' definitely gives us a glimpse into the Eliot who had not been very cryptic that far. Prelude being the poem where extra textuality seems to be at its minimum it forms the ground work of the context that prodded the artist to frame his art in borrowed attire. The picture Eliot presents here is significant primarily because of the image of the mundane realities of the industrial modernism that suffocates the flowering of any greenery without the production of a bloodthirsty mutant variety, "His soul stretched across the skies" might as well have been a glimpse into the same "patient etherized upon a table" ('Lovesong of J Alfred Prufrock') whose gender has gone for a toss as the lines of natural disintegration has shattered at the chaos caused by the industrial emissions; and the patient has become the pimp who after been similarly stretched to the appeasement of another, lay upon her back waiting.

It is finally at the end of 'death by water' where the anointment by water as according to the rituals of Christianity might have gained allusion, the drowning have been the drowning in the mechanical rituals that fail to provide any respite by the advent of the homocentric universe that Eliot craves at clutching at the roots that lay beneath the heap of stony rubble (hoping these would be the roots to survive by as well) and what seemed the vacant thunder arose to be the thunder that actually delivered the sermons. It is worth



mentioning that the master craftsman has well immersed his words in what seems like a bundle of contradictions where no particular theory can gain predominance; therefore it has been the subject of multiple debates over the years. However, the one that pervades logic might be the evasion from institutionalized Christianity which is definitely made clearer, for not only are images of desolation of the embodiments of faith abound but also the fact that the primitive myths are seen to be the guiding elements eschewed throughout the corpus of his text. The myth of the fisher king and that of Tiresias have been significantly drawn upon, notwithstanding the fact that the myth of the Fisher king is related to Christianity it demarcates an era when institutionalized religion had not come to impose its rigors on men and Tiresias on the other hand refers to the Greek myths that had been prevalent in what might be considered the pre-lapsarian era of establishment of Christianity.

The thunderous applause at the ignorant ruins of the western world is incited in what seems like the triumvirate solution of the heathenic Gods “DA” repeated at three significant junctures is crucial in realizing the complete corpus of the evocation. The triple ‘Da’ sound symptomatic of “Datta” the ability to give, “Dayadhvam” the ability to have mercy and “Damyata”, the ability to control have enthralled the western audience since the time of their usage in the most unexpected manner in *The waste land*. The solution of Lord Prajapati to his children; the gods, humans and demons bring unto its fold the entire corpus of human civilization. However, the predominant question that arises in the minds of the western audience, is well explained by Aiken who says:

Why, again, Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata? Or Shantih? Do they not say a good deal less for us than ‘Give: sympathize: control’ or peace? Of course; but Mr. Eliot replies that he wants them not merely to mean those particular things, but also to mean them in a particular way—that is, to be remembered in connection with a Upanishad. (Atkin 193)

The lack of consideration that is shown by Eliot towards what the mono-dimensional and therefore stunted understanding of the western audience is what drives us further into a better understanding of his view point. It follows that the subject of Eliot’s allegiance to any individual body of religious mythology has suffered immense explication handling the issue from multiple dimensions; however, the one evading certitude that seems to be vividly portrayed in the entire gamut of his works under consideration is his will to provide deliverance from the modern lack of faith. The best possible manner in which his ideal was to be accomplished had to arrive holding the hands of tradition. No doubt Eliot’s insistence on tradition had kept scholars busy with the exception that it had always been considered with respect to his poems in general and not his world view. When the timeless quality of literature is so evidently to be determined holding hands of “tradition”, then dependence on the tradition of mythology before the emergence of the variety of religions might be considered his well defined path of enlightenment.

The reference to Krishna's dialogue with Arjun in *Four Quartets* has been treated from a variety of angles opening multifarious scope in understanding the essence of Eliot's understanding. The eternal debate continues about whether activity is to be preferred against inactivity and what is meant by the act of "fare forward travelers" found in 'Dry Salvages', apart from these considerations the concept that had gained further prominence is that dealing with synthesis. It is true that:

The three varieties of ways of life that Eliot mentions in the third section of "Little Gidding" also echo ideas of the Bhagvad Gita. First in the way of attachment to self and to things and to persons" and the second is that of detachment "From self and from things and from persons" and the third is of indifference which resembles the others as death resembles life." These are described in the Gita respectively as paths of attachment (Rag), detachment (Vairag), and indifference (upekkha), the last being a path of inaction – of abstention from all movement as Patanjali's Yogasutra and the Bhagvad Gita describe it. (Srivastava IBGM78)

And among the various critics who are not accepting of Eliot's venture in the domains of religions other than Christianity mention should be made of Helen Gardner. She does not approve of Eliot's reference of Krishna primarily because "There is an unbridgeable gap between a religion that despairs of the material world and a religion that is built upon faith in an event by which the material world was not condemned but saved." (Gardner 70) On the other hand it would be untruthful to say that attempts at synthesizing the varied dimensions of referencing provided by Eliot had been attempted at. Russel T. Fowler says:

In the words of Aldous Huxley, in the Hindu religion " Krishna is an incarnation of the Divine Ground" is Brahman, or, in the terms of Mahayana Buddhism, "Mind or the pure light of the void." It is that which is beyond conception, the undivided "one" – a "being" similar to the God that is the light within the darkness" of St. John of the Cross (Fowler 409)

Therefore on having resolved the equation of supposed selective treatment of Eliot of the various mythological metaphors he had drawn from a wide gamut of sources, it is but clear that attention should be paid on what is intended to be proven rather than the manner by which the end is to be accomplished. The reference to Lord Krishna in 'Dry Salvages' is interesting as the notion of time is interestingly dealt with. The image of Krishna serves as the pivot, the dwelling of the eternal, around which the motion of the ever churning time is seen continuing to demarcate the rise and fall of the human conditions. This demarcation of the gyre of time as can be understood in the form of human measurable time has been sufficiently explained by Srivastava in a lattice that brings about the unification of two religions in contention:

In both Hinduism and Christianity incarnation is a point of entry of the divine and the transcendent into the human life of evil; thus the event by which the material world is saved is common to both religions. Eliot describes it in *Quartets* as “The point of intersection of the timeless/ With time,” and “the hint half guessed,/the gift half understood;” as it is “Here the impossible union/ Of spheres of existence is actual.”(Srivastava IBGFQ 44)

The nature of understanding of Eliot had differed significantly over the ages but what remains to be understood even on gaining what might appear a complete understanding of Eliot is the connotations of his symbolism, The “brown God” and the images of the rivers and the surrounding seas in *Dry salvages* might actually be an indication of the beacon the title promises to provide. The notion of the ‘Jeevatma’ joining the ‘Parmatma’ is in adherence to religious concepts whereas Eliot’s notion might be attempting to resuscitate the idea of the possibility of deliverance from the painful worldly existence not in embracing eternal obliteration but at arriving at the juncture of immortality in the kingdom of light. His call to his fellow sailors preparing to join the ocean goes thus “O voyagers, O seamen,/You who come to port, and you whose bodies/ Will suffer the trial and judgement 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.” The clarion call is for them to battle on in life and in order to seek whatever amount of peace they might afford he takes his symbolism to the primitive knowledge of Prajapati in teaching its sons the power of a considerate life style. For the “burning” to stop and for the lord to have mercy the path of the ardent religions have to be quit in order to gain the wisdom of sustenance, a wisdom shared in common by all religions at multiple levels. Therefore, in answering the claims of Aiken, Eliot’s “Shantih” is replete in symbolism and farther away from the concept of the easily imposed “peace” of the westerners. The “Shantih” in its archaic phonemic arrangement stretches from the point of a stressed syllable and end at another, encompassing in the process, the ordeals of the human to construct a restricted living on the path shown by lord Prajapati as expressed by Ajay Kumar, encompassed by the triple ideals of “data”, ‘dayadhvam’ and “damyata” and culminating in the respiteful deliverance from the ills of a universe that has spurned its Gods.

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