



## T. S. Eliot: Contemplation through Indian Theology

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the influence of Indian religious philosophy in T.S. Eliot's poetics. Right from his Harvard years, Eliot's main struggle with respect to religion is how God can be perceived in a concrete way and what is/ are the way(s) towards such apprehension. The heterogeneity of thought and ideas of the Harvard philosophers during his study years stimulate his crisis opening up different questions such as interrelation between body and soul, whether God is figurative or a speculation, fact or illusion, whether absolute submission is possible, etc. However it appears that Eliot becomes successful in drifting away such a conflicting and troublesome situation in due course of time resulting the accumulation of a contemplative state. Interestingly, in his attempt at acquiring such spiritual grace through Christianity, there is a considerable amount of influence of Indian theological concepts. While Eliot had shown an interest in Indian philosophy right from his Harvard years, his later works reflect an obdurate affirmation of religious faith. It is contended in this paper that Eliot draws upon Indian philosophy and theology to consolidate his faith in Christianity.

**Key words:** Anglo-Catholicism, contemplation, faith, metaphysics, spiritual crisis.

After a long drawn struggle with spiritual crisis, T. S. Eliot, during later part of his career accumulates a position that calls for a sanctification and self awareness regarding religious belief. Keeping aside his sense of doubt and perverseness, during that time, Eliot seems to be more affiliated towards a kind of faith and starts accepting religion pertinaciously as a means of utmost gratification. His acceptance and submission to the call of spiritual





transcendental world is however not an outcome of a short spanned thought. The lingering sense of dubiousness starts long years back; before the time of his conversion to the Anglo Catholic church. It is simultaneously reflected in his poetic and literary principles of that period.

While searching for faith, Eliot fails to dissolve in the scientific, rationalistic explorations which were fashionable among most of the western philosophers. Finding no way in the contemporary western philosophers Eliot drifts towards the oriental philosophy to drive away his long drawn spiritual crisis. In his Harvard years, under the influence of his teachers Lanman, Babbitt and so on Eliot becomes much inclined towards eastern theology in both intellectual and spiritual sense. He is convinced that the mysticism of the east can be a tangible solution to his long drawn religious crises which remains unresolved in the occidental philosophy of religion. In other words, Eliot draws upon Indian religious scriptures especially *The Bhagawad Gita*, *Upanisads* and the *Yoga Sutra of Patanjali* in his quest for faith. In *After Strange Gods* Eliot writes:

Two years spent in the study of Sanskrit under Charles Lanman, and a year in the mazes of Patanjali's metaphysics under the guidance of James Woods, left me in a state of enlightened mystification. 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 erase from my mind all the categories and kinds of distinction common to European philosophers from the time of the Greeks.(43-44)

However, Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism notwithstanding, his study of religion such as Buddhism or Hinduism cannot be dismissed out of hand. If nothing, it at least helped to frame his own concept of religion and Christianity along with intellectual quest for religion and theology at Harvard. Even after accepting submission to the faith of the Anglican Church as the ultimate solution to his long drawn spiritual crisis, Eliot does not give up concentrating on different religious and theological issues. It appears that Eliot, in due course of time is not interested in looking at religion only as a means of apotheosis but rather as a force that enlightens one by showing a controlled and positive way of leading life. For Eliot, utmost





devotion to religion yields only to faith. Critics like Russell Elliott Murphy in his book *Critical Companion to T.S.Eliot* comments:

...for Eliot religion serves a single impulse, the religious impulse, which is itself inspired by the individual's awareness that there is some purpose to existence that cannot be satisfied or explained by purely social means.(78)

Again in the essay *The Function of Criticism* Eliot expresses that the very idea of religion is 'the inner control'. Thus for him the control that a religious faith yields not only influences the behavior of an individual but also his inner feelings, the soul. While meditating on religion from this specific angle, Eliot's confrontation with Christianity has become more and more intense. He starts operating upon religion as an institution from an intellectual point of view. In other words Eliot's affinity with the Anglo Catholic church cannot be kept only under the circumference of the theological and emotional world of Christianity. Whereas it also works as a simultaneous way of looking at religion as a part of his conscious will.

What Eliot tries to confront is an accepted world of faith where utmost spiritual gratification can be attained. He knows that it can be done only with a spiritually disciplined mind. Such ideas are subsequently reflected in the later creative works of Eliot, especially in *The Four Quartets*. Deviating from the typical tendency of involving in a world within the text passing through a vacillated view, Eliot here finally reaches upon a feeling of affirming the real spirit of Christianity. As a result, the poem becomes less indirect in meaning and expression and technically less sensitive with an intense focus on the principle of poetic organization. In other words it starts operating upon a sense of meditative form and thereby paves the way for acquiring the divine meaning of the sense of being. Here Eliot's attempt is to dissolve in a world of meditation alienating from this earthly world. However, his desire for that world of spirituality is the Christian world. But one of the ways that he executes in attaining blissfulness in Christianity is Indian theology which he derives from various Indian theological sources such as *Yoga Sutra*, *The Gita*, *Upanisads* and so on. Thus Eliot contextualizes the Indian concept of metaphysics as a means of self-realization, to attain faith in Christianity.

Eliot's conformity with Buddhism cannot be separated from his quest for a contemplative world. It appears that apart from the Harvard philosophers Eliot's fascination for Buddhism





was stimulated by Bertrand Russell. Russell, many a time, while defending the existence of God and the validity of the religious mystic world speaks in favour of Buddhism. Buddhism extols that God is a formless entity and for the sake of religious conformity there is no need of having a concrete manifestation of God. Again it also denies the existence of soul. According to Buddha, cycle in life is a continuous process. Rebirth is not transmigration rather it is causation of the next life by the present. As the present state of consciousness inherits its character from the past, the past in a way continues in the present through its effects. Memory thus becomes explicable even without a soul. Buddha always comments upon some profound truth which reasoning cannot grasp. His silence regarding all metaphysical questions about non empirical things can be interpreted that he believed in a transcendental experience and reality the truth about which cannot be described. This echoes to some extent Eliot's urge for accepting religion as something that cannot be unmasked by applying logic. Most importantly, from Buddhism Eliot learns the idea of renunciation and meditation that he fails to find in western theology.

It may be mentioned here that Eliot's reading of the *Bhagawad Gita* was a part of his early search for answers to philosophical and religious problems. As a means of renunciation of the earthly world of *Maya*, *The Gita* recommends continuous chanting of God's prayer. Eliot too accepts that only through continuous prayer one can lead to renunciation and for him poetic meditation can help in communicating with the divine. Because Eliot's perception in his later period is that words in poetry have no longer remained only as an expression of poetic thought but a solemn source of interconnection between the devotee and the supreme being. His failure to find adequate words and his inability to avoid impression of feelings remind his acute consciousness of the search for the poetic decorum that suits exactly as prayer to God. In Indian theology, words are considered to be *Brahma*, the divine power. In the section v of *Burnt Norton*, while referring to his inability to accumulate meditative verse Eliot utters:

Words strain,

Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,

Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,



Decay under imprecision, will not stay in place,

Will not stay still.

Here consequently, the poet's recommendation of words is not merely the ordinary collocation of poetic verse but the meditative one which he fails to attain after a long drawn spiritual struggle. While in his attempt at reconciliation with the divine, the poet is distracted by some earthly worries as a result of which his prayer (words) never attains the desired goal. It 'cracks', 'breaks' because of earthly interference. It is fully a derivative of Indian mystical concept that while attaining God, a person is hindered by earthly troubles of 'Maya'. According to Radhakrishnan, religion according to Hindu tradition is not the mere affirmation of propositions. It is not simply an exercise of intelligence. It is the response of the whole man. It claims total allegiance. It appears that Eliot finds a solution to his inability to connect with the divine through Indian religious doctrines such as recommended by Radhakrishnan and tries to affiliate to such conviction regarding religion apparently in Christian context. It leads Eliot to have a solution to his crisis showing the way to transcendentalism. The changed attitude of the poet is seen in *Little Gidding* where he utters:

You are here to kneel

Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more

Than a order of words, the conscious occupation

Of the praying mind,...

Thus here the poet is not in a perplexed state as seen in the earlier context where his main problem was inability to connect with the divine. Everything seems to be fragmentary leading to failure in his attempts. But here the poet is in a position to admit that he has attained the way to the divine. Here the words have been rendered to spiritual chanting as it is a product of the 'praying mind'.

Many a times in the poem, Eliot speaks of desireless action. For instance in the section iii of *East Coker*, he utters:



I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope

For hope would be hope for the wrong things

Such communication with the soul reminds the poet's awareness that the action determines the future consequence of man's life. The desire for 'wait' without 'hope' and his emphasis only on 'trying' indicates the influence of *Karma Yoga* of *The Gita* where Krishna teaches Arjuna about desireless action. Again in the third section of *East Coker*, Eliot contextualizes the condition of Arjuna in *The Kurukshetra* war and his expression of utter helplessness before *Krishna* in the modern world of the merchants, bankers, statesmen, rulers etc. and he tries to establish that both the sections suffer from the same problem i.e. the problem of 'loosing the motive of action'.

Eliot used to borrow some images that have direct connection with Indian theological teachings such as the image of the stairs, the boat, voyagers and so on. Eliot frequently uses the image of the ladder or the stairs to show the protagonist climbing up or descend. These images of stairs remind us of the Indian *Upanisadic* philosophy. In Indian Yogic concept, the way to reach 'the ultimate' has a stair type structure where different *Yogs* perform as specific stair such as *dhanyo Yog*, *Jyano Yog bhakti Yog* etc. To perform *Astango Yoga*, one has to come across different stages of *Yoga* which ultimately leads one to the acquisition of real meaning of life that is *Muksha* (release). One can keep all his anxieties away by means of *Siddhi*. In section iv of *Burnt Norton* Eliot speaks of such type of stairs as a means of attaining the transcendental world. Again in *Aranyaka Upanishad* the symbol of sea or the ocean has been used to signify the eternal state of being or oneness. Eliot subsequently uses this symbol of sea in *Little Gidding* and renders the people in the world as 'voyagers' and 'sea man' to remind the fact of *Aranyaka Upanishad*.

Eliot's desire for entering into that transcendental world has a fine conformity with the aphorism of *Patanjali's Yoga Sutra*. According to *Patanjali*, nature consists of three prime elements – *Prakash*( light), *Kriya* and *Isthiti* representing three *Gunas* or qualities mainly *Sattva Guna*(illumination), *Raja Guna*( activity) and *Tamo Guna*( inertia). Throughout the poem *Four Quartets* Eliot is in constant search for light which can be interpreted in terms of







the poet's search for *prokash*, one of the elements of nature representing *Sattva guna* of Patanjali.

Yoga sutra propagates the principle that the mind of a man is always overwhelmed with earthly thoughts which is called *maya*. It is universal and the great saints try to overcome such bindings of *maya* by controlling the mind through penance, meditation leading the mind and body to a level of ecstasy. In Yoga sutra it is termed as *Sampurna Anand*. Patanjali believes that meditation can imbibe one with the spirit of *Oprakit Anand* through the *Oprakit Indriyos* paving the way for *Kayalya*, a form of divine power that enables one to identify and understand his own self. Such understanding of the self enables one to submerge *the atma* with *Paramatma*(divine soul) and according to him this is the ultimate stage of salvation.

In *Four Quartets* Eliot is in constant search for that world of contemplation. The indulgence of the persona's journey in different metro trains, his voyages etc. are the reminder of Eliot's acute consciousness of the transcendental world and his desire to submerge in it. However in such context, Eliot's instrument is not any religious chanting typically used by saints or mystics but poetry. In other words Eliot tries to intensify poetry to that level of transcendentalism where it can be equivalent to the religious chanting of the saints confronting a sense of sanctification and religious conformity.

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