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## Cross-Cultural Understanding of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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### Abstract

T.S. Eliot's magnum opus, "The Waste Land," is a long modernist poem written during the early 20th century. This classical work captures the disillusionment and fragmentation of post-World War I society, exploring themes of despair, cultural decay, and the possibility of renewal amid chaos. It is a mosaic of images that depicts man's journey from birth to death and the next life in a rhythmic tone. It is structured like musical phrases that do not convey a direct message but artistically evoke a unified experience of feeling and attitudes within the reader. Eliot has focused on the spiritual and moral degradation of the modern world and represented the solution to this alienation, despair, and meaninglessness of life through the wisdom of Indian philosophy. This poem seems not only a lamentation of Western decay but also a cross-cultural literary synthesis, where Indian philosophy provides a metaphysical resolution to the modern existential crisis. In his notes, T.S. Eliot has acknowledged his indebtedness to Buddhism and Hinduism, which constitute Indian philosophy and shape the poem's structure and meaning. This paper aims to analyse the poem and how each section corresponds with various Indian Philosophical concepts. The Burial of the Dead represents Maya (illusion) and Sansara (the cycle of birth and death), A Game of Chess illustrates Kama (desire) and Buddhist view of attachment, The Fire Sermon reveals the truth of this materialistic world (Buddha's Sermon) Death by water conveys the doctrine of Karma and finally The Thunder Said shows Moksha (liberation).

**Key words:** Disillusionment, Indian philosophy, Buddhism, Hinduism, existential crisis.

T.S. Eliot's epic 'The Waste Land' used multiple languages, Latin, Greek, Italian, German, French, Sanskrit and English in this poem and also represents the melting point of different kind of culture and religion and many approached which targets the only one point, what is the point of living in this world. Understanding this poem is challenging not only due to its multilingualism, allusiveness, complex themes, fragmented structure, and various interpretations but also for its writing period when the world was shaken by the First World War. This poem can be analysed very well based on the references provided by Eliot himself. He accepts, "No poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation, is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists." (Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919). It is written in five parts and opens with a captivated title, part one, "The Burial of the Dead," a section dense with imagery of desolation, spiritual drought, and existential confusion. Miss Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* have provided Eliot the mythological background to recreate this modern epic.

There is no heroic figure in this epic poem. In Greek mythology, Tiresias was a blind prophet who hit a pair of copulating snakes, and deities infuriated and were punished and lived a life with fluid gender identity for a few years as a woman and then switched to a man. Once Jupiter and his wife Juno argue about sexual pleasure. Juno said the man enjoys more, and Jupiter said the woman. Then Tiresias was asked because of his experience of both, and he said, 'woman'. And immediately Juno cursed him to be blind, but Jupiter, pitying him, blessed him, 'you will be able to see the past and future. This Tiresias legend is the centre of this grand poem and Eliot shows here what Tiresias (Narad, celestial sage and cosmic messenger) sees as the content of this poem. All the grand narratives that once offered purpose and moral

direction have become obsolete to modern people and their world is marked by loss of faith, absence of faith and crisis of spiritual identity.

This poetic landscape represents the Indian philosophical concept of Maya, particularly as articulated in the Advaita Vedanta systematized by Adi Sankaracharya in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Rebirth is a sign of maya, which represents the circle of life and death. In nature, seed is protected by the earth and happily sleeping and itself forgotten completely that it has life, but April renews life in those seeds disturbing its peace. Eliot has not dealt with spring as a positive full of life and renewing the things, but he represents spring, the month of April, as cruel because before spring, it was winter where the seed of spring was in rest. The advent of spring (rebirth) created disturbance and forces the seed, which was lying in the lap of the earth peacefully, to grow again to produce a flower, then seed again, die in autumn, and again bloom in April. Therefore, rebirth is a painful act and a trap of the cycle of life and death. April has the same function that makes the seed ignorant and forgetful of its real state.

In *The Waste Land* seed symbolizes inactive potential, unawakened consciousness, or the soul which is entangled in this mortal world. For getting the nirvana human (seed), has to undergo a spiritual journey that is the evolution of self. In winter, seed lies buried quietly and peacefully. But this peace is not enlightenment, it is a calm born out of ignorance. (avidya). This seed is trapped in *tamas*- darkness, unconsciousness, and inactivity. All these are the enemies of the state of 'Nirvana'. For attaining Nirvana, knowing the self is the very first state. The seed has to know its strength that it contains a forest, and for this, it has to crack the shell (ego) and come out of it to play its role as a growing plant, then bearing flowers and fruits. For its growth seed needs sunlight, water, and soil; the same seed needs wisdom (janana), discipline (tapasya), and a stable mind (dhyana). Now the seed has no

longer desires to dissolve into element( earth, water, fire, air, and space) just as the soul dissolves into pure being (Sat-Chit-Ananda) and becomes free from the cycle of life and death.

Maya is not simply a deception of the senses; it is a cosmic principle that generates duality and veils the eternal reality of Brahman. As the seed buried in the soil sees darkness as normal, inaction as peace, and the shell as self. The essence of all Vedas and Sankhye lies in this line, 'मायैवसृज्यतेविश्वम्' 'Māyā eva sṛjyate viśvam'. (The universe is created by Maya), underscoring the idea that all worldly phenomena are mere appearances, not the ultimate truth. Eliot's subversion of spring as a time of renewal in the lines.

"April is the cruellest month, breeding /  
Lilacs out of the dead land..."  
(Eliot,1922,line1-4)

It suggests a profound discomfort with regeneration, reflecting the Vedantic idea that rebirth is not a blessing but a continuation of suffering. According to Indian philosophy, rebirth is a result of bondage to desire and ignorance (Avidya) and is the product of Maya. The Bhagavad Gita (7.14) explains the powerful grip of illusion:

"दैवीहोषागुणमयीमममायादुरत्यया"  
(Ramsukhdas, 2010-2011,P.498 )

"Daivī hy eṣā guṇamayī mama māyā  
duratayā"

'This divine illusion of Mine, composed of  
the three gunas, is difficult to overcome'.

Everything in this world is a mixture or representation of the three gunas 'Sattva', 'Rajas', and 'Tamas'. The ultimate goal of this life is to rise from Tamas to Rajas, and from Rajas to Sattva, and finally to transcend all three guns and attain Moksha.

Eliot's spring is not a promise of life, but a return to painful consciousness—a symbol of spiritual entrapment rather than liberation. The

cruelty of spring arises from its reminder of life's illusions, its forced confrontation with emotions buried during the symbolic "winter," echoing how Maya keeps the soul entangled in cyclical existence (Samsara).

The poem's spiritual disorientation is noted in this poem,"What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?" (Eliot,1922,line 19-20)

It highlights the absence of grounding in any eternal reality, another central aspect of Maya. In Vedantic metaphysics, Maya projects Nama-Rupa (name and form), creating illusions of substance where none exist. Eliot's landscape is one of fragmentation, where memory, culture, and language have lost their coherence. He showed the Vedantic vision of a world, seen through the distorted lens of illusion.

"I will show you fear in a handful of dust."  
(Eliot,1922,line30)

We are made up of five elements, and in the end, we have to mix with them. It represents the idea that dust has life, and if we try to hold it in our hands, we cannot. It is continuously moving and this movement creates fear in us when we think death is near and we have passed our life without attaining the idea goal of life. This dust represents death and the passage of time, which is out of human control.

Life is about connecting, but now we have only broken images. Trees are dead, rivers are dry, and crickets are no longer producing a pleasant sound, which reflects rain. Here is only dryness, no sound of water, only a shadow under the red rock is present. This idea is taken from "Ecclesiastes 125, from the ESV translation of the Bible." All these images individually evoke a certain kind of emotion, that is, despair. There is no shelter due to dead trees, no relief to the cricket due to the absence of water, dried rivers, and no rain; only dryness is visible. It epitomizes the existential anxiety born from identification with the body and mortality, a

direct outcome of Maya. This recalls the Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad's observation:

"यत्र द्वैतमिव भवति, तदितर इतरं जिघ्रति"  
 (Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, II.4.14, Gita Press, 2015)

"Yatra dvaitam iva bhavati, tat itara-  
 itaram jighrati."

'Where there is duality, one smells  
 another, sees another, fears another'.

It suggests that fear is born of dualistic perception, a Maya-induced state where the self sees itself as separate and perishable. The dust becomes a synecdoche for mortality, temporality, and illusion, offering no hope of spiritual transcendence.

Additionally, Eliot's use of symbols such as tarot cards, fortune telling, and fragments of cultural memory serves as a commentary on the human craving for meaning in a disordered world. However, these efforts are also shown to be misguided, rooted in superficiality rather than spiritual insight. They are not offering clear prophecy but deepen the sense of uncertainty and ambiguity. The poet's characters are entrapped in external forms, much like those who, in Vedantic philosophy, mistake Nama-Rupa for truth. The Shvetashvatara Upaniṣad (4.10) warns:

"मायां तु प्रकृतिं विद्यान्मायिनं तु महेश्वरम्" (Gita Press, 2001)

"Māyām tu prakṛtim vidyān, māyinaṁ tu  
 Maheśvaram"

'Know Maya as Prakriti, and the wielder  
 of Maya as the Supreme Lord'.

The above line indicates that the true path to liberation lies in recognizing the illusory nature of the world and seeking unity with the divine reality beyond forms.

The entire section can also be read as a symbolic burial not just of physical life but of spiritual knowledge (Jnana). The rituals and cultural residues depicted are hollow and

echoing the Vedantic lament for the soul lost in illusion, where the Atman forgets its divine origin. It considers unreal the real and the transient the eternal. Eliot's portrayal of the modern condition as rootless, sterile, and fearful is thus deeply connected with the idea that human suffering stems from being trapped in Maya.

In conclusion, "The Burial of the Dead" serves as a poetic allegory of human consciousness submerged in illusion. When viewed through the lens of Indian philosophy, particularly Advaita Vedanta, Eliot's desolate landscape emerges not merely as a post-war malaise but also as a metaphysical condition—a soul buried under the weight of Maya. The poem becomes a spiritual elegy for humanity's loss of transcendental vision, echoing the Vedantic truth that only by piercing the veil of illusion one can attain liberation (Moksha).

A Game of Chess and the Indian Philosophical Concept of Kāma and Avidyā

In "A Game of Chess", the second section of *The Waste Land*, Eliot shifts from the barren, mythic landscape of "The Burial of the Dead" to a more intimate philosophical setting—yet this space is no less fragmented or spiritually void. The scene is drenched in ornate richness, yet its abundance is superficial, masking the emptiness beneath. This contradiction reflects the Indian philosophical concept of Kāma — sensory desire or gratification, which in Vedanta and Sankhya philosophy is understood as a primary cause of human suffering and spiritual ignorance. The room described in the opening is filled with sensory overload:

"The chair she sat in, like a burnished  
 throne,

Glowed on the marble, where the glass

Held up by standards wrought with  
 fruited vines

From which a golden Cupid on peeped  
 out" (Eliot, 1922, line 77-80)



This room represents a modern luxury room full of artistic creations and glass, stones, and many more valuable things. There was a painting in this room that was about the change of Philomel into a bird. The voice of Philomela Nightingale filled the desert with an inviolable voice that cannot be destroyed. Philomel tried to tell the whole world her story, but the world had become depth to her song and could not understand the song and its meaning. This song becomes a dirty sound to their ears, but still she cries by saying "jugjug to dirty ears". Insensitive people of the modern world, because we stopped reading stories of the past and understanding our past, that's why we have become indifferent to the song, and carry different perspectives. All the mythologies have lost their value, grandeur, and relevance. Characters in those paintings are leaning out trying to communicate to the people who are in the room, but they (those who are present in that room) are incapable of understanding them.

The woman, present in the room is trying to communicate but the man (in the room) is quiet. He does not know how to communicate with her, and the woman forces him to speak, "Are you alive or not? Is there nothing in your head?". They are not connected and have nothing to share. Communication has become meaningless, and life has also become aimless. These images of luxury and sensuality represent the seductive power of Kāma, the pursuit of pleasure and desire. While Kāma is one of the four Purusharthas (goals of life) in Indian thought, when pursued without balance and spiritual discernment, it becomes binding rather than liberating. In the Bhagavad Gita (3.39), Krishna declares,

"आवृत्तज्ञानमेतेनज्ञानिनोनित्यवैरिणा।

कामरूपेणकौन्तेयदुर्निर्विण्णेष्वारणम्॥"  
(Ramsukhdas, 2010-2011,p.236)

"Āvṛtaṁ jñānam etena jñānino nitya-vairiṇā

kāma-rūpeṇa kaunteya duṣpūreṇa analena ca"

'This knowledge is enveloped by desire, the eternal enemy of the wise, which is insatiable and burns like fire'.

This verse encapsulates the spiritual danger presented in this section – desire clouds wisdom, resulting in fragmentation, anxiety, and emotional sterility.

The dialogue that unfolds between the woman and her companion becomes increasingly tense and meaningless. Their disconnection is emotional, sexual, and spiritual. The woman's agitation and the mechanical quality of their exchange – "What shall I do now? What shall I do?" (Eliot, 1922, line 131) Present statement demonstrates the existential aimlessness born from ignorance (Avidyā), a key Vedantic concept. The Katha Upanishad warns :

"अविद्यायामन्तरेवर्तमानाःस्वयंधीराःपण्डितमन्यमानाः।" 1.2.5 (Pandey, 2014, p 97).

"Avidyāyām antare vartamānāḥ svayaṁ dhīrāḥ paṇḍitaṁ manyamānāḥ"

'Living in the midst ignorance and thinking themselves wise and learned, the ignorant go round and round, deluded like the blind led by the blind'.

This cyclical wandering, rooted in ignorance and driven by unfulfilled desire, is the essence of Samsāra, the world of suffering and rebirth.

In the second half of the section, the focus shifts to a conversation in a pub, further amplifying this spiritual emptiness. The banal and broken language of Lil and her companions reflects the degeneration of relationships and the degradation of human connection. The refrain "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME" (Eliot, 1914) becomes a mock liturgical chant, an ironic echo of spiritual urgency in a spiritually bankrupt setting. It suggests not only the end of a conversation or a night out but also the

inevitable confrontation with time and mortality – a confrontation Lil and the others are unprepared for due to their entrapment in Kāma and Avidyā.

In this context, the section's title, "A Game of Chess," takes on philosophical significance. Like chess, life under the sway of Kāma is strategic, manipulative, and ultimately futile, a Maya-ridden illusion of control, devoid of genuine intimacy or liberation. The players are caught in a game where every move is determined by desire and ignorance, perpetuating their suffering. The ornate room becomes a metaphorical golden cage, where sensual richness conceals spiritual imprisonment.

Thus, from a Vedantic perspective, "A Game of Chess" dramatizes the human conditions as seen through the lens of Kāma, Avidyā, and Samsāra. The characters are trapped in illusion, pursuing pleasure without self-knowledge, lost in a world where speech becomes meaningless and connection impossible. Eliot's critique aligns with the philosophical warning that desire without wisdom leads not to fulfillment but to bondage. The path to liberation (Moksha) is not found in the game, but in stepping beyond it. The characters, mired in Maya, are tragically incapable of doing.

The Fire Sermon and the Indian Philosophical Concepts of Karma, Detachment, and Renunciation

Part III of *The Waste Land*, titled "The Fire Sermon", takes its name directly from the *Adittapariyaya Sutta* (The Fire Sermon) of the Buddha, where he declares that all sense faculties are burning with desire, hatred, and delusion. T.S. Eliot invokes this Buddhist discourse to frame a critique of sensual indulgence and spiritual exhaustion in the modern world. This section's alignment with the Indian philosophical tradition is particularly rich, as it draws upon the concepts of Karma, Vairāgya (detachment), and the urgent necessity

for renunciation. The landscape of the Thames and the sordid imagery of meaningless sexual encounters symbolize the karmic bondage of the human soul to its actions. Karma, in Indian philosophy, refers to the law of moral causation, where every action has consequences that bind the self to Samsāra (the cycle of birth and rebirth). The *Bhagavad Gita* (4.17) states:

"गहनाकर्मणोगतिः" (Ramsukhdas, 2010-2011, p.289)

"Gahanā karmaṇo gatiḥ"

'The path of action is profound and difficult to understand'.

Eliot's portrayal of the clerk's impersonal sexual encounter with the typist – where mechanical routine replaces emotional connection – illustrates action devoid of consciousness or dharma, leading to spiritual inertia and karmic entrapment. The typist, lying "spread out in the waiting room," becomes an image not of liberation but of passive submission to meaningless acts, echoing the *Gita's* caution against desire-driven action (काम्यकर्म) 'Kamyekarma'.

The phrase

"Burning burning burning burning"  
(Eliot, 1922, 308)

It repeats Buddha's fire sermon, which reflects the condition of Tanha (craving), the root of suffering in Buddhism. According to the *Adittapariyaya Sutta*,

"Everything is burning: the eye is burning, forms are burning, consciousness is burning... burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion."

Eliot's modern city burns not with sacred fire, but with the fire of desires that consume and corrupt. In Indian metaphysics, such craving perpetuates Karma and thus Samsāra, as seen in the *Katha Upanishad*:

"नजायतेऽग्निं यते वाकदाचि-

त्रायं भूत्वा भविता वानभूयः।

अजोनित्यःशाश्वतोऽयंपुराणो

नहन्यतेहन्यमानेशरीरे॥” (Pandey,2014,p.49)

“Na jāyate mriyate vā kadācin

nāyaṁ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ.

Ajo nityaḥ śāśvato’yaṁ purāṇo

na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre.”

‘The intelligent Self is neither born, nor does it die... it is not killed when the body is killed’.

This reminder of the eternal Atman contrasts sharply with the characters in Eliot's poem, who live as if the body and its impulses are all that exist, forgetful of the soul and ignorant of the eternal.

The degradation of sex into a transactional and joyless act, devoid of sanctity, reflects the condition where Karma accumulates without awareness, without the purifying influence of Jnana (knowledge) or Vairāgya (detachment). The Gita (2.47) encourages action without attachment:

“कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्तेमाफलेषुकदाचन।” (Ramsu khdas,2010-2011,p.103)

“ Karmaṇy-evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadāchana”

‘You have a right to action alone, not to its fruits’.

This ideal of Nishkama Karma (selfless action) is absent from Eliot's world, where every act is either mindless or self-serving, thus reinforcing the cycle of spiritual degradation.

Even the natural world—the river Thames, once a symbol of cultural vitality—is corrupted:

"The river bears no empty bottles,  
 sandwich papers,

Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes,  
 cigarette ends

Or other testimony of summer nights."  
 (Eliot, 1922,177-79)

T.S. Eliot evokes a haunting stillness. Once the river was a silent witness to human presence and carried the stories of human life as empty bottles, sandwich papers, silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, and cigarette ends, which represent longing and pleasure, but now carries nothing. This nothingness is silence, not purity. It shows the numbness and spiritual hollowness of the world. This represents 'Shunyata' or emptiness. Eliot's river is not only physically barren but also spiritually dried up. Now this river turned cold and indifferent without a story. This river image represents the Indian philosophical vision of 'Nirvana'. This river, like a soul, has detached not through enlightenment but through fatigue, and flows without memory or direction. It is not the state of 'Nirvana' but a representation of empty, lifeless, and hopeless reality. This imagery suggests that the sacred has become desecrated by the accumulation of karmic pollution, both physical and moral.

"The Fire Sermon" functions as a poetic allegory of karma gone astray, detachment abandoned, and spiritual renunciation ignored. Eliot's adoption of the Buddha's sermon highlights the urgency of liberation from sensual desire and mechanical living, aligning deeply with Indian philosophical teachings. The section calls for inner stillness, detachment, and purification, even as its characters remain tragically locked in the very cravings they must transcend to be free.

Death by Water and the Indian Philosophical Concepts of Samsāra, Anitya, and Ahamkāra-laya

In Part IV of *The Waste Land*, "Death by Water," T.S. Eliot presents the drowned figure of Phlebas the Phoenician, who serves as a poetic meditation on death, impermanence, and the illusory nature of worldly identity. Though short, this section powerfully aligns with central ideas in Indian philosophy, particularly the transitoriness of worldly existence (Anitya), the inevitability of death and rebirth (Samsāra), and

the call for the dissolution of the ego (Ahamkāra) as a step toward liberation.

The opening lines: "Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,

Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell

And the profit and loss." (Eliot,312-14)

It indicates the erasure of worldly identity in the face of death. Phlebas, once driven by commerce and material pursuits, is now stripped of everything—even memory. This aligns with the Indian understanding of Samsāra, where worldly pursuits—*artha* (wealth), *kāma* (desire), and even egoic constructs—are considered impermanent and ultimately futile.

In the Bhagavad Gita (2.13), Krishna reminds Arjuna of the soul's journey through the cycles of change:

"देहिनोऽस्मिन्यथादेहेकौमारंयौवनंजरा।

तथादेहान्तरप्राप्तिर्धिरस्तत्रनमुह्यति॥"

(Ramsukhdas,2010-2011,p.57)

"Dehino'smin yathā dehe kaumāraṁ yauvanaṁ jarā,

tathā dehāntara-prāptir dhīras tatra na muhyati"

'Just as the boyhood, youth, and old age come to the embodied Soul in this body, in the same manner, is the attaining of another body; the wise man is not deluded at that'.

Phlebas' death is not an end but a transition. However, unlike the *sthita-prajña* (spiritually awakened person), Phlebas is not portrayed as having attained wisdom. He is still entangled in the forgetfulness of ego and material concerns of this mortal world, highlighting the blind turnings of Samsāra, the ceaseless cycle that repeats until wisdom or liberation (*Moksha*) is attained. The same ides is represented in the present poem, "A current under sea

Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell" (Eliot,315-16)

It evokes the relentless movement of existence, likened to the ebb and flow of karma and the recycling of the soul through various lifetimes. This oceanic imagery can be compared to the Mundaka Upanishad, which speaks of the journey of the soul:

"यथोर्णनाभिःसृजतेगृह्णतेच।" (Gita

Press,1997,p.42)

"Yathā urnānābhiḥ sṛjate gr̥hṇate ca"

'As a spider spins and withdraws its web, so does the Self project and withdraw the universe'.

The sea is not merely death; it is cosmic rhythm—the domain of dissolution and renewal. In this context, water becomes a symbol of Samsāric flux, not peace. Eliot's philosophical warning is accentuated in the lines:

"Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,

Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you." (Eliot,318-20)

This is a universal caution—regardless of identity, ethnicity, or belief system, all are bound by Anitya (impermanence). The Dhammapada (Verse 277) proclaims:

"सर्वेसङ्खाराअनिच्चा"

(Buddharakkhita,1985,verse 277)

"Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā"

'All conditioned things are impermanent'. By invoking a figure whose attributes were once celebrated—"handsome and tall" (Eliot,321) Eliot critiques the illusion of permanence, a direct echo of Indian and Buddhist views that all forms are transient, and attachment to them leads to suffering.

Furthermore, Phlebas' loss of self—forgetting even his name, identity, and



pursuits—mirrors the philosophical concept of Ahamkāra-laya, the dissolution of ego. In Vedānta, Ahamkāra (ego-self) is the false “I-maker,” the part of the mind that claims ownership over the body, actions, and experiences. Liberation (Moksha) requires letting go of Ahamkāra and realizing the Self (Atman) as non-different from Brahman. As stated in the Mandukya Upanishad :

“अद्वैतशान्तं शिवं अद्वैतचतुर्थमन्यन्ते स आत्मासविज्ञेयः” (Jain, 2001, p.52)

“Advaitam śāntam śivam advaitam caturtham manyante sa ātmā sa vijñeyah”

‘The Fourth state is one of non-duality, peace, bliss, and silence. That is the Self to be realized’.

Phlebas, however, does not consciously dissolve the ego in pursuit of truth; rather, he is swallowed by nature passively. His death becomes an unconscious parody of spiritual renunciation, suggesting that if ego is not consciously transcended, it is forcibly erased, without yielding liberation.

In essence, "Death by Water" is both a *memento mori* and a philosophical allegory: it emphasizes the ephemeral nature of identity, the inevitability of Samsāra, and the urgent need for spiritual awakening. The drowning is not only physical but also symbolic of the dissolution of worldly constructs. Yet without awareness or self-knowledge, it leads to nothingness, not transcendence.

What the Thunder Said and the Indian Philosophical Concepts of Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata, Tapasya, and Moksha

In Part V, "What the Thunder Said," T.S. Eliot brings the journey of *The Waste Land* to its spiritual climax. After navigating through barrenness, lust, karmic exhaustion, and death, this section opens with apocalyptic intensity, the cry “burning burning burning burning” transforms into a kind of inner anguish, resonant with the Upanishadic yearning for

renunciation and self-realization. Eliot has written repeatedly, burning, burning intentionally to reflect extreme mental and emotional torment and the anguish of the soul yearning for purification. In Yogic philosophy, 'burning' means 'tapas', which generates spiritual heat to burn avidya (ignorance), Kama (desire), and ahamkara (ego). In the Mundaka Upanishad (1.2.12), the seer declares:

“परेण नाकं निहितं गुहायां” (Mundaka Upanishad, p.50)

“Pareṇa nākaṁ nihitaṁ guhāyām”

‘Brahman is “beyond heaven, hidden in the cave of the heart’

But in Eliot’s world, this inner light is obscured by the fire of sensuality. The fire that should lead to purification (Agni as a Vedic symbol of transformation) has become a fire of consumption, leading not to moksha, but to spiritual exhaustion.

It ends with the voice of the thunder, drawing directly from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (5.2)—one of the oldest and most revered texts in Indian philosophy. The Upanishadic parable of Da offers a remedy to the existential wasteland: Datta (give), Dayadhvam (sympathize), and Damyata (control). This section thus moves the poem toward liberation (Moksha) through self-awareness, compassion, and discipline.

1. The Spiritual Desolation and the Need for Tapasya (Austerity) The beginning of this section evokes drought, desolation, and inner sterility:

“Here is no water but only rock

Rock and no water and the sandy road...” (Eliot, 331-32)

This intense spiritual dryness recalls the practice of Tapasya—self-discipline and burning austerity—practiced by sages in Indian philosophy to transcend desire, duality, and ego. The landscape of *The Waste Land* reflects not just ecological drought but a metaphysical

yearning for purification. According to the Katha Upanishad (1.2.23):

"नायमात्माप्रवचनेनलभ्योनमेधयानबहुनाश्रुतेन।  
 यमेवैषवृणुतेतेनलभ्यःतस्यैषआत्माविवृणुतेतनूंस्वाम्॥" (Pandey and Mishra, n.d., p.p. 73-74)  
 "Nāyam ātmā pravacanena labhyaḥ na medhayā na bahunā śrutena।  
 Yam evaiṣa vṛṇute tena labhyaḥ tasyaiṣa ātmā vivṛṇute tanūṁ svām ॥"

'The Self cannot be attained by intellect or learning, but only by the one whom the self chooses'.

This idea of spiritual awakening through suffering and surrender is embodied in Eliot's pilgrims, who suffer through a journey without a map or meaning, much like the soul seeking its source in the Upanishads.

## 2. The Voice of Thunder - The Upanishadic Revelation

As the thunder breaks, it brings with it the voice of divine instruction, echoing Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 5.2, where the creator Prajāpati speaks to the gods, humans, and demons. Each hears only one syllable – Da – but interprets it differently based on their nature: "The Thunder spoke: DA.

Datta. What have we given?

My friend, blood shaking my heart

The awful daring of a moment's surrender..." (Eliot, 400-03)

Datta (Give) – It calls for self-surrender, a fundamental concept in both Vedanta and Bhakti traditions. True giving is not material alone but the renunciation of ego and possessiveness. The Bhagavad Gita (17.20) defines Sattvic Dana (pure giving):

"दत्तव्यं इति यद्दानं दीयते अनुपकारिणे।  
 देशकाले च पात्रे च तद्दानं सात्त्विकं स्मृतम्॥" (Ramsukhdas, 2010-2011, p.1063)

"Dattavyam iti yad dānam diyate anupakāriṇe |

deśe kāle ca pātre ca, tad dānam sātṭvikam smṛtam ॥"

'That gift which is given with the feeling that it ought to be given, at the proper place and time, to a worthy person, without expectation of return, is considered Sattvic.'

In the poem, the "awful daring of a moment's surrender" suggests the first movement toward spiritual transformation – a step away from selfishness toward transcendence.

"DA

Dayadhvam – I have heard the key

Turn in the door once and turn once only

We think of the key, each in his prison..." (Eliot, 410-13)

Dayadhvam (Sympathize) – This implies compassion and shared suffering, the recognition of the self in the other. The prison here is the Ahamkāra (ego), which isolates individuals in their mental constructs. Compassion breaks the ego-boundary and makes us familiar with reality. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad teaches that understanding others as oneself leads to liberation because both of us are part of God, who is omnipresent.

"आत्मावा अरे दृष्टव्यः श्रोतव्यः मन्तव्यः निदिध्यासितव्यः" (Gita Press, 2021, p.p. 546-47)

"Ātmā vā are draṣṭavyaḥ, śrotavyaḥ, mantavyaḥ, nididhyāsitavyaḥ."

'The Self must be seen, heard, thought upon, and meditated upon'.

This meditation reveals the unity of all beings – a realization that shatters the walls of isolation Eliot portrays.

"DA

Damyata. The boat responded

Gaily, to the hand expert with the sail and oar." (Eliot,417-19)

Damyata (Control) – This final instruction relates to self-mastery (control) over the senses and mind. In Yoga and Vedanta, the path to liberation requires disciplining the self, not through repression but through harmonization of the inner and outer worlds. The Bhagavad Gita (6.5) states:

"उद्धरेदात्मनात्मानं नात्मानमवसादयेत्।

आत्मैव ह्यात्मनो बभूवुरात्मैव रिपुरात्मनः॥"  
 (Ramsukhdas,2010-2011,p.396)

"Uddhared ātmanātmānam nātmanam avasādayet।

Ātmaiva hy ātmano bandhur ātmaiva ripur ātmanah॥"

'The self alone is the friend of the self, and the self alone is the enemy of the self. One uplifts oneself by oneself; let not the self degrade itself. For the self alone is the friend of the self, and the self alone is the enemy of the self'.

The image of the boat suggests a well-governed life, where inner discipline enables one to navigate the turbulent sea of Samsāra with grace.

"Shantih Shantih Shantih" (Eliot,433)

This is the Vedic benediction often used at the end of Upanishadic texts. It is not just peace, but transcendental peace beyond speech, mind, and suffering. The Isha Upanishad ends with a similar invocation of peace, one that follows the realization of the Self and the unity of existence. The repetition of Shantih three times – according to traditional interpretation – offers peace to the body, mind, and spirit, or peace from the threefold afflictions:

- Adhyatmika (internal, mental/emotional)
- Adhibhautika (external, environmental)
- Adhidaivika (cosmic, fate or divine will)

This closing is not only related to the resolution of worldly conflict, but also reflects the inner liberation – a moksha born of knowledge, compassion, and self-mastery.

"What the Thunder Said" represents the culmination of the poem's deep roots in the foundational principles of Indian philosophical discourse. Eliot charts a path from chaos to clarity. From Tapasya through drought, to the Upanishadic utterance of Da, and the echoes of Datta, Dayadhvam, and Damyata offer a spiritual corrective to the soul in crisis. With the final chant of Shantih. Eliot gestures toward a transcendental stillness and the peace that dawns when wisdom is not merely known, but lived, the silence after the storm, the Self beyond name and form, beyond Maya, beyond Samsāra.

## Conclusion

*The Waste Land* and the Eternal Relevance of Indian Philosophy

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a modernist elegy of fragmentation which can be understood appropriately in the light of Indian philosophy. It transforms one into a spiritual being, making him/her aware of Maya to Moksha. Each section is aligned with core Indic concepts – Maya, Samsāra, Anitya, Ahamkāra, Tapasya, and the Upanishadic viewpoint of Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata – reveals not only Eliot's engagement with Eastern wisdom but also a pathway out of despair and into transcendental awareness.

In a time marked by ecological collapse, mental health crises, cultural dislocation, and spiritual void, Eliot's invocation of Indian philosophical frameworks becomes relevant in the contemporary world. The sense of Maya – the illusory pursuit of material identity and the estrangement from nature and self – is more pronounced in our hyper-connected yet spiritually disjointed global age. People enjoy no peace, but restlessness has become a part of their lives. Eliot's poetic plea – translating the thunder's syllables into action – offers not

abstract doctrine, but lived wisdom. Datta reminds us to give time, presence, and care in an increasingly transactional world. Dayadhvam urges us toward radical empathy, beyond algorithmic sociality. Damyata becomes the call for mindful restraint in a world addicted to excess and Shantih—the peace that surpasses all understanding—is perhaps the most urgent need of our time.

Thus, *The Waste Land* does not end in despair. It ends, like the Upanishads, in silence. Not the silence of nothingness, but the luminous stillness that follows self-realization and finally towards Moksha. In its fragmented form, Eliot's poem becomes a mosaic of perennial truths, reminding us that spiritual clarity, self-knowledge, and ecological balance are not relics of the past but urgent paths toward healing the present. By reawakening these ancient voices—through Sanskrit verse, Vedantic echoes, and Upanishadic insight—we do not merely interpret Eliot; we invite him into a living conversation with today's most pressing human questions, about nothingness and the hollowness of life. In doing so, *The Waste Land* becomes not just a poem of ruin and past but a scripture of renewal of fragmentation, lamentation.

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