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**The Twice-Born Soul: The Study of the Self  
Some Impact of Indian Thought on T. S. Eliot**

**Poornavalli Mathiapparanam, M.A., M.Phil.**

# **The Twice-Born Soul: The Study of the Self Some Impact of Indian Thought on T. S. Eliot**

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T. S. Eliot

## **Lifetime of T. S. Eliot and India**

The lifetime of T. S. Eliot, 1888-1960, is a crucial period in the history of India. India as a modern nation started evolving itself in so many directions, among them the spread and interpretation of Indian (Hindu) spiritualism to western nations and closer contact with non-Hindu religions, especially with Christianity, are important aspects.

This contact has also resulted in the emergence of certain offshoots, similar in approach to Vedic monism, such as Unitarianism. Vivekananda's spirited address to the Parliament of Religions in 1893, arrival of Gandhi from South Africa as an apostle of non-violence, growing knowledge of English and Christian ethics, struggle for independence from foreign yoke, emergence of India as a single modern political unit, the sufferings brought upon it by the Partition, and conscious adoption of policies of equality and equanimity to all religious groups within India and socio-economic movements of various groups, and so on characterize the emergence and growth of India in this period.

## **Spiritual Interests**

Although preoccupied with socio-economic issues, Indians were seeking their spiritual roots through various movements during the lifetime of Eliot. Reading the poetry and plays of T.S.

Eliot became an important part of Indian curriculum. Because of its simplicity and lucidity of style and also because of Eliot's background as a philosopher interested in Asian traditions and philosophy, Eliot's poems and plays continue to be attractive to students of literature in India.

### **Eliot's Declaration of Influence of Indian Thought**

Eliot himself wrote in his masterful essay on Christianity and Culture that his own "poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility" (Eliot 1949:190-191, *Christianity and Culture*). Eliot spent some good time learning Sanskrit and Pali and Indian philosophies, both Hindu and Buddhist. Eliot wrote, "... I came to the conclusion--seeing also that the 'influence' of Brahmin and Buddhist thought upon Europe, as in Schopenhauer, Hartmann, and Deussen, had largely been through romantic misunderstanding- that my only hope of really penetrating to the heart of that mystery would lie in forgetting how to think and feel as an American or a European: which, for practical as well as sentimental reasons, I did not wish to do"(T.S. Eliot 1934: 40-41, *After Strange Gods*).

While it is difficult to judge whether Eliot really began to think like an Indian did, his writings revealed some interest in and understanding of Indian thought. Sprinkling of some Sanskrit here and there added to the impression of his interest in and devotion to Hindu and Buddhist thought. And yet Eliot remained largely a western person showing great interest in eastern thought while retaining his or her strong moorings in western philosophy and Christian ethics. His poems and plays, discussed in this paper, clearly show that Eliot was primarily looking at this world through his Christian glasses.

### **The Quest of Our Souls**

Eliot's poems and plays focus on the quest of our souls for an identity with our Creator, almost in the fashion of Gautama Buddha or Maha Vira, but the paths the souls take in their quest are quite different. Yet, the similarities in the processes are quite striking even though the intended result may be at variance.

### **Self-searching Characters**

It is interesting to trace a pattern in the moods of T. S. Eliot as a writer from his works. Eliot came to write drama at a later stage, but in his verse there always was found dramatic potentialities. He is seen always as "a self-examining poet" (Howarth 1965:333). In his poems as well as plays there are characters who are sincerely self-searching characters. In the earlier works this search or Quest leads the characters to an experience of spiritual awakening sometimes not fully realized: but in the plays there is a marked spiritual achievement on the part of the characters, at least the protagonists.

### **Saintly Modes – Spiritual Struggles**

As early as 1914/1915, there is an arresting personality, a would-be saint, called Narcissus, found in the manuscript, whom Eliot named after a second century Bishop of Jerusalem. Eliot's *The Death of Narcissus* reflects the ongoing spiritual struggles and journeys. Eliot concentrates on the inner life of this peculiar character who feels most intensely alive when God's arrows pierce and mar his flesh. He wishes to be a dancer to God, he deliberately isolates himself, finds no divine light and his own flaws became magnified in his eyes "his self-enthralment his indifference to others, his masochistic delight in the burning arrows" (Gordon 1977:91).

Gautama Buddha's early effort at disciplining his physical body to attain *nirvana* and the Jaina tradition of fasting penances somewhat resemble the effort of Narcissus within the western tradition. This Narcissus' figure became the shadowy personality in *The Wasteland* - the prophet, the lonely pilgrim who shuns civilization and its history in search of a new life.

People from India with Hindu, Jaina and Buddhist backgrounds can easily relate to the saintly spiritual struggles. Buddha's pursuit of nirvana included a number of steps and processes that aimed at subordinating flesh for the sake of liberation. Traditional asceticism of Indian seekers of spirituality is well known and greatly admired. What is significant here is that individual may take pleasure in their physical suffering, as symbolic of their getting closer to the Supreme Being, or attaining Supreme Experience.

What Eliot appears to recommend is not total nirvana or total extinction, but a focus on sin and its redemption. At the end of the poem there is no self-enhancement, only self-loss. Narcissus had a genuine religious impulse, but was too ignorant of the ways of 'Sin and Redemption.' This theme of the Saint and the analyzing of the 'self' had been continually running through the poems of Eliot.

### **Disgust with the Modern Civilized Existence**

In *The Wasteland* (1921-22) is reflected the mood of complete disgust with the extreme horror of modern civilized existence, preoccupied with the sensual and the squalid; commingle with a sense of melancholy, it changed into the mood of *ennui* and exhaustion while he was writing the *Hollowmen*, which seems to stem from an intensely agonizing self-conflict.

Slowly this mood changes into one of humble and helpless self-surrender in *Ash Wednesday* and the *Ariel Poems*.

### **Eliot, the Dramatist**

By now Eliot had turned a dramatist. In the 1940s emerges the mood of refreshing and renewal as it were, with a relatively healthy self-confidence and positive faith.

Carol Smith says:



It points the way out of the suffocating wilderness of the intellectual and material world, into the purifying wilderness of the spirit, where over whelming answers are to be found.

This answer lies in the way which is one of denial and detachment. These words, “denial and detachment” are again key words in Hindu and Buddhist ways of thinking and thus once again Eliot strikes a sympathetic cord in his readers from the East.

Those seeking the answer to the ineffable things of life become the individuals who make a spiritual Quest, Quest in a theme treated in most modern literature, but it differs in Eliot in that it is based on the Christian frame work.

### **The Knight Quester**

The knight Quester in *The Wasteland* goes on this quest. In 1920, Eliot suggested that the answer lay in the grail legend and he hinted at the hooded figure of Christ on the road to Emmaus.

Who is the third who walks always  
Beside you?  
When I count, there are only you  
And I together  
But when I look ahead up the  
White road  
There in always another one walking  
Beside you

Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle hooded  
I do not know whether a man or a woman  
-but who is that on the other side of you?

### **Vision Forever Elusive – Always in the Throes of Conversion**

The idealist’s quest for union with the vision forever elusive in this world is Eliot’s standard poetic theme. The concept of ‘ineffability’ means something, ‘too great to be described with words’. The heroes and heroines of Eliot, like those of La Forge and Conrad, try to probe into the questions of meaning, truth, reality and their relationship to time.

In all the plays of Eliot, the main character is portrayed as a king of soul in the throes of religious conversion. Neville Coghill suggests that Eliot would have definitely read the theories of the Psychologist, William James - ‘The varieties of Religious Experience’ wherein two types of religious minded men are distinguished. The ‘Once-born’ souls are the worshippers of God and believe in the all-forgiving mercy of God and do not pay much heed to the concepts of evil, and sin. On the other hand the ‘Twice-Born’ or sick souls are conscious of the sinfulness. They believe in the Day of Judgment, Justice, righteousness and asceticism. They prefer Protestantism to Catholicism, Puritanism to either.

## **Twice-Born**

The concept of being twice-born is not a novel concept for Hindu theology. Brahmanical ritual of *upanayanam*, or sacred thread ceremony, performed among the upper caste strata for boys, declares them to be *dvijas* or twice born, once in the womb of their mothers and again during the ritual along with the learning of Gayatri Mantra. *Upnayana* itself means near-sight, probably indicating greater accessibility of Truth to these twice-born men. Consciousness of sinfulness helps an individual to be born again within evangelical traditions in Christianity, to which Eliot returns again and again in his dramas.

## **The Role of the Spiritually Elect**

As pointed out by D.E. Jones, the central theme of Eliot's plays is the role of the spiritually elect in society. The dilemma of the spiritually aware individual struggling to live in a world unaware of spiritual reality is common to all the plays. The spiritual perception that the individual gains renders him or her isolated from others. The central figure goes on a spiritual pilgrimage and attains the divine vision. Eliot believed that evil was not only external but found also within the hearts of human beings. He elaborated and modified the concept of original sin from T.E. Hulme who said that man is a sinful creature aware of both perfection and limitations. Eliot believed that individuals must reach out to the Divine through self-examination and prayer.

## **Recognize that Man is Befouled**

From the beginning Eliot was concerned with the isolation of the sensitive individual in modern society permeated by competitions and moral compromise. Man must accept that he is 'befouled' and it is at that point of recognition that new vistas of reconciliation and harmony will open. This sin and guilt is universal not pertaining only to individuals. So the spiritually aware self has to come apart and separate himself or herself, and follow the way of the Cross or 'the bright angels' as in "The Family Recension".

Such an experience of recognising and following the spiritual path leads the individual soul to another intensity and deeper communion with the Divine.

## **Spiritual Experience of the Saint and the Ordinary Mortal**

All the five plays of Eliot *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The family Reunion*, *The Cocktail Party*, *The confidential Clerk* and *The Elder statesmen* deal with the different levels of spiritual experience of the saint and the ordinary mortal. The term *saint* means "a person of great holiness, virtue, or benevolence." Saints are ordinary men and women, who are made holy, sanctified by purity. The saint's sacrifice helps to illuminate the lives of others; as in the case of Thomas Becket, Harry Monchensey, Celia in the first three plays and Colby Simpkins in *The confidential Clerk* and Lord Calverton in *The Elder Statesman* may not be saints who make physical sacrifices, but they definitely follow the path of redemption.

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## **Enough Detachment to Live a Real Life**

There are also those who play subordinate roles in these plays who succeed in achieving enough detachment to live a real life. It is represented by the Chamberlaynes in *The cocktail Party*, the Mulhammers in *The Confidential Clerk* and Charles Hemington in *The Elder Statement*. These are those who have followed the second way.

## **On Isolation**

But the main characters either accept isolation or struggle to escape from it. Leonard Unger says, “In a sense all Eliot’s works in verse are variation on the theme of isolation” (Unger 1956:118).

On the larger scale the individual is isolated or estranged from the rest of the world. This is paralleled on a narrower scale by the breakdown in communication between man and woman. Like Henry James, Eliot also was an artist of an isolated and exclusive sensibility. But he had an advantage over James in that he surrendered to dogmatic religion which bridged the gap between the surrounding world and himself.

## **Divine Love and Human Love**

In *Murder in the Cathedral* and in *The Family Reunion*, there is a tragic sense of human solitude. The first is a heroic study in martyrdom. The extreme and intense isolation of Harry Moncheseoy in *The Family Reunion* is based on the idea of divine love being more important than human love.

While Eliot was writing his last play *The Elder statesman*, he was married to Valerie Foetcher with whom he found ideal spiritual and mental compatibility. This play is a drama of escape from isolation, within the limits of human relations.

For the first time Eliot portrayed with great enthusiasm the real and normal relations between the opposite sexes; this is illustrated by the relationship between Monica, Lord Claverton’s daughter and Charles Hemington through which Lord Claverton learns the importance of ‘Love’ in the process of self-knowledge.

The spiritual adventure of these characters who attain self-knowledge and redemption leads them into similar dilemmas. They have visions of the ineffable truths.

## **Moment of Death as the Moment of Living**

In the works of the three writers Eliot, Conrad and La Forge there is “the implication that the essential quality of the moment of death is also the essential quality of the individual in all this living”.

The picture of the chorus speaking of death, which is un-redeemable in *Murder in the Cathedral* is similar to the account that Marlowe in *The Heart of Darkness* gives of his illness and of his return to the sepulchral city. The chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral* suggests the mood of apprehending death:

The horror of the effortless journey,  
    To the empty land  
Which is no land, only emptiness,  
    Absence, the void.

Amy, the aunt of Harry in the Family Reunion tells Harry's uncles and aunts:

You none of you understand  
    How old you are  
And death will come to you  
    As a mild surprise  
    A momentary shudder in a  
    Vacant room.

### **Ineffable Experience**

This theme of the ineffable is treated throughout the Four Quartets. In "Burnt Norton" the theme says "Human kind cannot bear much reality" (*The Collected poems 1909-1962*). This crystallizes an important theme of Conrad's novels and the plays of Eliot.

Thomas speaks identical lines to the women of Canterbury when they have had a glimpse of that 'one moment' of their vision of horror expressed in their speech:

I have smelt them, the death-bringers;  
    Now is too late  
For action, too soon for contrition.  
-----  
I have consented, lord Archbishop  
    Have consented.  
Am torn away, subdued, violated,  
United to the spiritual flesh of nature. (*The Collected Plays*)

These are the words of the Archbishop to them:

Peace and be at peace with  
    Your thoughts and visions  
These things had to come to you and  
    You to accept them,  
This is your share of the eternal burden,

The perpetual glory.

This is one moment he says which will pierce them with sudden joy and the moment may seem unreal and he concludes his speech saying, “Human kind cannot bear very much reality.”

### **Martyrdom – A Tremor of Bliss, A Wink of Heaven**

Finally he has had a vision of glory “a tremor of bliss, a wink of heaven, a whisper”<sup>16</sup> this vision gets fulfilled in martyrdom when

he is murdered. The women say  
Every horror had its definition  
Every sorrow had a kind of end;  
In life there is not time to grieve long.  
But this, this is out of life, this is  
    Out of time,  
An instant eternity of evil and wrong.

### **Hidden Meaning Beneath the Surface of the External**

Harry in *The Family Reunion* is obsessed with the ineffable. He tells his family having had the vision of the horror;

You will understand less after  
    I have explained it.  
All that I could hope to make  
    You understand  
Is only events; not what has  
    Happened. (“The Family Reunion” (*The Collected Plays*, p. 65)

This refers to the ineffable meaning that is hidden beneath the surface of external happenings. Harry also tells them

You are all people  
To whom nothing has happened  
At most a continual impact  
Of external events. You have gone  
Through life in a sleep.  
Never woken to the nightmare. I  
Tell your life would be unbearable  
If you were wide awake. You do not know  
-----  
That is what matters, but it is  
    unspeakable,

Untranslatable : I talk in general  
terms  
Because the particular has no language.

### **Don't Know How to Explain It**

Finally after having been reconciled to his vision of horror and having chosen the 'long journey' Harry says, "I do not know the words in which to explain it" and just before parting from his family he says:

I would explain, but you would  
None of you believe it.  
If you believed it, still you  
Would not understand.  
You can't know why I'm going  
You have not seen  
What I have seen.

### **Lifting the Veil of Ineffability**

Unlike Harry who is alienated from a world of people, the characters in *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk* who are all isolated are making an effort to understand themselves and each other. Hence the idea of the ineffable becomes softened. Celia Coplestone has been able to have a vision of the types of hell she had been in and consequently chooses the extraordinary. The characters other than Celia in *The Cocktail Party* are able to take the ordinary way. In *The Confidential Clerk* there is no unbearable reality that is suggested. The two aspects of reality are integrated and reconciled there. In *The Family Reunion* "The two worlds or two realities are opposed and in *The Cocktail Party* they are alternatives and in *The Confidential Clerk* they are complementary" (Unger 1956: 137).

In his last play *The Elder Statesman* there may not be found any spectacular reckoning of ineffable truths by Lord Claverton. But he does have a glimpse into the ineffable meaning of God's love which makes him a recipient of the peace of God that passeth understanding.

"Like Yeats, Eliot supports the idealistic 'non-Aristotleian theatre' (Roy 1972:7). The protagonists of these writers are not annihilated by social pressures. They have strong personalities and self-control to make decisions. The 'self' at the Crossroads has to make choices regarding the path to follow:

A single moment of choice,  
The kierkegaardian choice,  
Is set before the main character,  
The rest of the play leads upto  
And leads away from this moment. (Bradbrook 1950:45)

## No Digressions – Choice between Two Kinds of Actions

There are no minor interests or digressions, no subplots. The moment of choice is the same for all. Sometimes there is the repetition of the same theme as Eliot himself has said in *The Four Quartets*:

You say I am repeating  
Something I have said before  
I shall say it again. (*The Collected Poems*)

“Eliot confronts Society with choices with basic alternative Reminiscent of a prophet again; “Choose you, whom you will serve.” It cannot be God and Mammon. Or even God and nice philosophies. Like Kierkegaard who posits an “either/or “, it has to be despair and sensuality or religion absolutely.” (Dharmaraj 1965:116)

The choice lies between two kinds of actions. Choosing either the way of the saint or the second best way of acceptance. In the case of Becket, Harry and Celia, divine love holds sway at the point of making the choice. Divine love precedes life. Sacrificial death comes before human considerations. Becket embraces the death of the martyr. Harry’s choice leads him away to an unknown future, which also kills his mother. Celia chooses death instead of life. Colby also has to make the difficult choice of giving up human love for divine love. Only in the last play *The Elder Statesman* human love becomes a substitute for divine love or a reflection of divine love.

## Self-Realization as the Main Focus

Thus Eliot made his study of self-realisation on the part of his main characters a focal point in all his plays. In order to make this serious kind of drama more effective and interesting Eliot incorporated into modern drama conventions from ancient drama. “Among Eliot’s investigations has been the use of myth in the plays in a contemporary setting as an attempt to ensure that each play has a poetic heart, a vision of human life, more profound than naturalism can give” (Jones 1960:80).

*Murder in the Cathedral* is indebted to Greek tragedy. It is actually a series of episodes knit together by choral odes. Eliot did not just copy the Aeschylean chorus; he has given it a Christian dimension and through it his visions.

The spiritual conflict in Becket is objectified through the choral odes. The myth of the Aeschylean here Orestes serves to convey the self-realisation process of Harry Monchensey as a saviour of his family in *The Family Reunion*.

Eliot has taken the death-rebirth symbolism from the *Alcestis* of Euripides as a framework for the path of action that Celia takes in *The Cocktail Party*. Ion of Euripides becomes the mythical framework for the search of fatherhoods by Colby Simpkins in *The Confidential Clerks*. The

final play *The Elder statesman* has a general likeness to Oedipus at Colonus' of Sophocles. Like Oedipus the exiled king, Lord Claverton, the retired statesman, reaches the last resting place. Thus the myths and the characters are endowed with Christian significance by which Eliot has been able to produce poetic drama, making it a vehicle to depict the permanent human nature in its modern predicament.

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