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Sanskrit, the Source of Salvation for Modern Humanity in T. S. Eliot's poem The Waste Land

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Abstract

Though T. S. Eliot's poem The Waste Land opens with rootlessness of the modern wastelanders who have neither culture nor specific root juxtaposes various symbols, myths and comparisons to highlight the lives of past and present aimless wanderers yet ends up with Shantiah, Shantiah, Shantiah signifying the need and importance of Sanskrit and Hinduism in life.

Keywords: modern wastelanders; spiritual vacuum; mechanical life style; myths; civilizations; Sanskrit,

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) possibly the exceptional poet during twentieth century has not only influenced the modern humanity but also guided the future English poetry. He was born in St. Louis Missouri, U.S.A. in 1888. In 1906, he entered Harvard and then to Oxford where he studied Greek philosophy. During the First World War, he had to stay in England where he had to do low-paid teaching job and then, a bank clerk. He became an assistant editor of *The Egoist* (1917-19), and in 1923 he began his career as editor of *The Criterion*. Later, he became the director of *Faber and Faber* and then publisher. It was Ezra Pound who immensely inspired, influenced and guided T.S. Eliot's versatile intellect. He was also influenced by John Donne, Dante, Arthur Simon, Jean Laforgue, Mallarme, Charles Baudelaire etc. . He developed his taste



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for comparative literature under the perfect and able guidance of great teachers namely Irving Babbitt and George Santayana.

When T.S. Eliot started writing, English poetry was suffering from versatility. He was a true and original poet. Just as Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf transformed twentieth century English novel through the stream of consciousness technique, so also T.S. Eliot reformed English poetry from the thinned out romantic tradition. Like William Wordsworth and William Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot tried his best efforts to transform the stereo-type modern English poetry and brought to intellectual dignity. He had the talent of making ordinary things into extraordinary. He poeticized, modified and dignified the English language and literature. His use of various symbols, myths and implications through objective co-relative technique is exceptional in English poetry. His use of mythical method for juxtaposing of the past and present in his poetry is really commendable and remarkable. It could be possible only through his strong hold of his critical insight and creative intellect. In his Tradition and Individual Talent, T.S. Eliot explains: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion: it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality".(41)

His literary career dominated the English literary scene over a period of forty five years. He wrote twenty four immortal poems, six poetic dramas, eleven exceptional essays along with other creative works. Among them The Waste Land (1922) is a historical landmark in modern English poetry through which T.S. Eliot throws light on the people belonging to different sections of the ancient and modern worlds by using his mythical method. It seems that Jessie Weston's book From Ritual to Romance and James Frazer's The Golden Bough immensely influenced and inspired T.S. Eliot.

The Waste Land was published in *The Dial* in 1922. This poem highlights fragmented experiences of the 20th century through the eyes of Tiresias who belongs to the past and present. T.S. Eliot speaks about Tiresias in the following words: Tiresias, although a mere a spectator and not indeed a 'character' is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest..."(189) Thus, through Tiresias who has the experience of life as a male and female, T.S. Eliot connects various wastelands of ancient civilizations with the waste lands of modern civilization through objective co-relative technique. In order to highlight everything clearly and perfectly, T.S. Eliot prefers his mythical method to establish parallel between the ancient and the



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modern worlds. To achieve his motive, he uses various literary, mythical and religious allusions, quotations and imitations from Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Ovid, Saint Augustine, Dante, William Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer, Thomas Middleton, Andrew Marvell, Joseph Conrad, Aldous Huxley, Walt Whitman, Oliver Goldsmith, Charles Baudelaire, Lord Buddha, the Bible, the Holy Grail, King Fisher, the Chapel Perilous, the Hindu Brihadaranyaka Upanishads, Sanskrit language and literature. It is because of them that T.S. Eliot achieves mastery in delineating the spiritual paralysis, mental sterility and disruption among modern human beings through his five sections entitled as:

1. The Burial of the Dead
2. A Game of Chess
3. The Fire Sermon
4. Death by Water
5. What the Thunder Said

T.S. Eliot gives many examples from nature, ancient civilizations, various literary traditions and Christian scriptures that the people of those times had also seen spiritual decadence, barrenness and hopelessness. Thousands of such wastelanders had to face damnation whereas some rulers of ancient times regained their health and lands through repentance, high moral values, self-reformation, and penance. Thus, salvation can be found only through suffering and purification. Here T.S. Eliot seems to be much worried about those modern wastelanders who have become rootless, homeless and hopeless. They have nothing to do with their families, parents, society, and country. They have become too much selfish, money-minded and self-oriented. They can sacrifice anything for the sake of their personal instincts. Thus, we find Marie, the German princess who is homeless wanderer, then we meet a number of wastelanders like hyacinth girl, Madame Sosostris, Phoenician sailor, Belladonna, one eyed man, a merchant, the Lady of the Rocks, Lil, Albert, heirs of city directors, Mrs. Porter, Typist Girl, Plebes, unreal cities of London, Vienna, Alexandria, Athens etc. . They stand for sick humanity, animal passions, sexual perversities and barrenness. Due to the decadence of cultural values, mechanical routine life, prostitution and indiscipline life style of modern wastelanders lead them to the paths of death, decay and destruction. Thus, in opening of the poem, we receive extreme negativity like this:



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And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And dry stones no sound of water.(45)

As a result, the wastelanders will never experience purification and spiritual realms in life. They will never have peace of mind, relief and solace. Rather they will keep on revolving around the process of birth- death-rebirth. We agree with W.B. Yeats when he speaks about the human life in his poem Sailing to Byzantium:

Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.

Caught in that sensual music all neglect

Monuments of unageing intellect. (56)

It seems that T.S. Eliot has understood and realized that all the ills and sufferings, sterilities and disruptions can come to an end if the modern human beings make sincere efforts to study and follow Indian philosophy, Vedas and Upanishads. That's why he just provides a glimpse of ray of hope to solve all the problems of modern wastelanders. Redemption and salvation can be possible if the wastelanders follow seven precious words from Sanskrit by the names of Da, Datta, Dayadhvam, Damayata, Ganga, Himalayas and Shantih. They are not mere ordinary seven words. Rather they have their special reference and importance in Hindu Sanatan Dharma and Sanskriti. It represents seven days in a week, seven colours in rainbow, seven suras, seven seas and seven steps round the sacred fire by newly married couple. It is estimated that T.S.Eliot knows them very well and has deliberately left them unsolved to the readers. Here, it seems that T.S. Eliot keep on suggesting the wastelanders to understand and follow Sanskrit, the source of salvation. Because it is the storehouse of knowledge, wisdom, solace, relief, spiritualism, redemption and salvation. Here modern humanity can also learn the lesson of love respect, discipline, self- reformation, tolerance and eternity.

Thus, it is in the fifth section *What the Thunder Said* of the poem The Waste Land, T.S. Eliot shows that there was a time when the Ganga (174) had achieved a very lower water level. The land was hot and dry, the leaves cried for water and rain. Everything seemed to be burning due to that pierced drought. The dark clouds appeared over the Himalayas.(175) The poet here



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refers to one of the Hindu Upanishadas where in a period of doubt and confusion, gods and demons prayed to God for the knowledge of the path of salvation. The Creator answered to their prayers through a divine thunder which uttered one word thrice - Da, Da ,Da.(165) Each group not only listened to Him carefully but also interpreted and followed as per their own understanding:

Men said “Da” which means “Datta”-to give.(179)

Demons said “Da” which means “Dayadhvam”- to sympathize.(179)

Gods said “Da” which means “Damayata”- to control. (179)

Perhaps, T.S. Eliot took these words from Brihadarayanak Upanishad:

“Manushaytam manushyatvam daane

Devanam devatvam indriyannam damane

Balbatte asursya ch balam dayanam asti.”(148)

As far as men were concerned, they realized that they should understand the true meaning and purpose of life. Life does not mean that it should be lived only for personal benefits. Everybody should take life like a sea in which there is assimilation of various sources of water, air, earth and sky. Man should be broad-minded, but not mere narrow minded. Everybody should realize their contribution not only in making the lives of others happy, satisfied and prosperous but also guiding them to spiritual way of life or to surrender to a higher purpose. Thus, it is noble deed of ‘to give’ whatever one has, must be spread in the lives of poor, miserable, helpless, hopeless, rootless people for the betterment of their lives. It is only then human beings may start experiencing solace, peace of mind, contentment as well as salvation.

In the same way, the demons realized that they should not feel proud of their strength and power. They should try their best efforts to sympathize others. They should learn the lesson that each individual has personal identity, status and life. Thus, it becomes their duty to create such an atmosphere in which each individual may live together, breath together and rise together. And there will be no place for egoistic, selfish and bloody ways of life. Such ways may lead to united, peaceful and disciplined life and finally to salvation, not to damnation.



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Thirdly, the gods also realized that they had become too much sensual and materialistic. They have no pricks of conscience in regard to the lives of others. They had made the lives of others disturbed for the sake of their personal interest. Thus, they should apply and follow certain sorts of rules and regulations in their lives. They should hear the voice of their inner conscience and apply spiritual discipline to control their selfish feelings and emotions. Thus, life may become easy, calm and comfortable in such pleasant and living atmosphere. There will be a time when everyone live, think and decide freely and positively. This will lead the followers to the way of salvation.

Here T. S. Eliot has proved that by following these three valuable concepts, human beings can easily experience salvation because human has all these three qualities of human, angelic and demonic. He refers these three things as three categorical challenging ways which are necessary for the survival of entire humanity. This will lead the universe to the path of peace, progress, prosperity, justice, brotherhood, harmony and unity. All will lead humans to reach the realms of spiritualism and salvation. It is, thus, because of all this, T. S. Eliot closes his this historic document by uttering Shantih, Shantih, Shantih. Thus, Shantih - peace of mind can be found only in Hindu philosophy and Sanskrit language and Sanskrit literature.

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