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A STUDY OF T.S. ELIOT'S "THE FOUR QUARTETS" IN LIGHT OF  
THE "BHAGAVAD GITA"

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ABSTRACT

*Bhagavad Gita* translated roughly as the 'Song of God' is a well-established work in the realm of philosophy and theology that can also be examined from various other points of view. As a work of Indology, the historical and the linguistic aspects along with its prevailing ideas could be considered and examined as a possible way of reading the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Gita* having found a rapt audience in the West, left a deep impression on T.S. Eliot, one of the most prominent modern poets, dramatist and literary critic, who later incorporated the Vedic philosophy in his poems. Thus, an Indic idea transited the Western mind and became an inspiration to the German Romantics, notably Humboldt and Goethe, and to the American Transcendentalists, who believed that the knowledge of God was intermediary to gaining spiritual insights and the deepest of truths. These ideas then transcended reason and logic; adhering to the values of individualism, idealism, and the divinity of nature. Therefore, this paper attempts to delineate the fundamental ideas and concepts propounded in the *Bhagavad Gita* as expressed in T.S. Eliot's *The Four Quartets*.

**Keywords:** Vedic thought, Western mind, T.S. Eliot, *Bhagavad Gita*.

Introduction

The great classical treatise forms a part of the Bhishma parva of Mahabharata, the great Indian epos and consists of a dialogue conducted between the commander of the army Arjuna and his charioteer, cousin and friend, Krsna. The dialogue contained in 700 verses, is concerned with subject matters of the highest theological and philosophical order. The *Bhagavad Gita* was originally counted among the Upanishads and draws heavily from it. The word Upanishad means "to sit down near" and suggests a passing on of knowledge or wisdom from a teacher or the *guru* to a disciple. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna submits himself at the lotus feet of Lord Krishna and accepts him as his teacher, the giver of knowledge. The Lord enlightens him with teachings of Cosmic and Universal order, telling the ways to perform actions while being detached to them.

The Mahabharata which makes up a tiny part of the *Bhagavad-Gita* sows the seeds of Krishna's ascent to supremacy. It projects the image of Krishna as a majestic, an all-powerful force who reveals his cosmic form to his friend Arjuna. The epical circumstances originate as a result of a long family conflict, large armies gather at the battlefield of Kuruksetra, in support of either of the two-family branch, the Pandavas or the descendants of Pandu, and others in defence of the Kauravas, the sons of Dhrtarastra. Arjun foresees the mass slaughter about to take place and is reluctant to raise his weapons against his family members, friends and teachers. 'O Madhava, having killed our own kin, what hope for happiness remains.' He wishes to renounce the war altogether and

does not want to retaliate against his miscreant cousins. However, at this point he is bereft of the knowledge that Krsna had already caused their death before he encountered the lot in the battlefield of Kuruksetra. Arjuna, then, turns to Krsna and asks for guidance on what he sees as a severe crisis, a moral dilemma. Answering Arjuna, Krsna speaks the Bhagavad Gita that comprises of the ideals of dharma for the moral upliftment and the Upanisadic tradition that calls for one to rise above dharma, to go beyond moral ideals in a constant thrust for self-realization. Moksha, then, aims for a higher, imperishable perfect state that altogether relinquishes the vicious cycle of birth and death.

Chapter III, verse 35 of the Bhagavad Gita states:

*shreyan svadharmo vigunah paradharmat svanusthitat*

*svadharme nidhanam sreyah paradharmo bhayavahah* (BG, 3.35)

(One's own duty, even though lacking in merit, is more desirable to the duty of another well performed. Even if one dies in the discharge of one's own duty, it brings beatitude; another's duty is laden with fear).

Dharma is a central theme throughout the whole of Bhagavad Gita and forms the ground for later dialogues of Karma and the nature of good karma and bad karma. Dharma plays a fundamental role in the teachings of the Gita- as well as Indian philosophical and religious thought. In the context of Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna's Dharma is that of a warrior, or Kshatriya. It is his duty to fight and engage in war.

"Dharma aspires to organise the world through action; the Brahmin teaches and sacrifices, the kshatriya rules and protects, the vaisya farms and trades and the sudra works manually" (Srivastava 79).

The principle of Karma is equally central to the Bhagavad Gita which has implications beyond the present life. The concept of action reinforces the idea of Karma that in turn influences the life of a person. Good actions yield good results and the person in doing so is elevated. On the other hand, bad actions have consequences that cause distress and drags him further down to the existential root. In substance, every action is thought to bear instant as well as long-term consequences. The concept of action is further branched out into ideals of action (karma) and inaction (akarma) alongside the performance of improper action or Vikarma.

'What is action? What is inaction? Even the wise are confused in this matter. Now I shall explain to you this subject matter of action; having known this you shall be free from evil. One must know what action (karma) is, one must know what improper action (vikarma) is, and one must know what inaction (akarma) is, as profound indeed is the course of action.' (BG 4.16-17)

### **Ideals of the Bhagavad Gita in *The Four Quartets***

Eliot who was greatly influenced by the Vedic thought and philosophy touches closely upon the ideals of The Bhagavad Gita in *Four Quartets*. The Bhagavad Gita, which is universally acknowledged as one of the loftiest literary and spiritual masterpieces of the world, was his main source of influence and he expresses his admiration of The Bhagavad Gita thus, the "next greatest philosophical poem to the Divine Comedy within my experience." The linking of *Divine Comedy* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* have a direct bearing on *Four Quartets*. George Williamson informs that the basic idea contained in the *Four Quartets* is seen as parallel to both Christian and Hindu thought, in St. John of the Cross and The Bhagavad Gita. Although rooted in Christian faith and doctrine, it carries explicit references to Bhagavad Gita.

*Four Quartets*, a set of four poems, was published over a period of six years. The first poem 'Burnt Norton' was issued with a collection of his early works in 1963 followed by the production of his famous play 'Murder in the Cathedral'. The other three poems entitled 'East Coker', 'The Dry Salvages', 'Little Gidding' were composed during the Second World War period and were published in the year 1940, 1941 and 1942 respectively. Each of these poems has five well marked sections. The central theme as established in *Four Quartets* is man's relationship with time, the universe and the divine. It is rife with philosophical, poetic and mystical elements; works from both Eastern and Western religious and cultural traditions, with references to the Bhagavad Gita as well as St. John of the Cross.

The references to Bhagavad Gita occur in the third quartet, *The Dry Salvages*.

“And do not think of the fruit of action.

Fare forward...

So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna

On field of battle.”

The admonition of Arjuna is one of the key verses of Bhagavad Gita:

*karmanyevadhikaras te ma phalesu kadacana*

*ma karmaphalahetur bhur ma te sango'stvakarmani* (BG 2.47)

The Lord advises Arjuna not to be indolent, but to discharge his prescribed duty without expecting the fruit of action. One who is inclined to the result of his action is never able to follow the path of salvation; it becomes the cause for bondage. Therefore, performing one's prescribed duties and resisting from any form of inaction leads to the path of liberation. In the path to spiritual salvation, inaction is abominable as is the attachment to the fruit of action.

“Your business is only with action, at no time with its fruits. Then will you be free from the bonds of action. At the same time do not slip into inaction” (qtd. Balakrishnan 73).

At the moment which is not of action or inaction

“You can receive this: “On whatever sphere of being

The mind of man may be intent

At the time of death” – this is the one action

(And the time of death is every moment)

Which shall fructify in the lives of others.”

Eliot, in *The Dry Salvages*, gives a glimpse of the doctrine of *Karma*. He reiterates the philosophy of an individual soul who is bound to his obligatory duties; however, he must resist any form of attachment to the result. The aforementioned extract from Eliot's *The Dry Salvages*, emphasizes on the theoretical insights of the Vedic philosophy.

Eliot introduces in “Burnt Notion,” the concept of “the still point”, which is known as *Atman* (the self), *parama brahman* (the Supreme Brahman) or *Brahman* in the Upanishads. Eliot defines “the still point” in various ways in his poems. “The still point” is Brahman/God, who is the source of eternal peace.

The very first section begins with the implication of time and its nature, that includes moments of present, past, future together. One state dissolves and from it springs the conception of another time.

*bhutagramah sa evayam bhutva bhutva praliyate*

*ratryagame vasah partha prabhavatyaharagame* (BG 8.19).

At the beginning of Brahma's Day, the living souls are raised from their unmanifest state to manifest state, and thereafter, when the night falls, they consolidate into their unmanifest nature. All living entities are bound to their material nature during Brahma's Day, and at the coming of the cosmic night, they are all annihilated and become unmanifest. In this way, multitude of beings are born again and again, and thereafter, destroyed. It is only when one is focused in Krishna consciousness, that he is able to achieve the immortality located in time.

*avyakto 'ksara ity uktas*

*tam ahuh paramam gatim*

*yam prapya na naivartante*

*tad dhama paramam mama* (BG 8.21).

Avyakta implies 'unmanifested'. The Bhagavad Gita mentions the Supreme abode as unmanifested and infallible. A vivid description in the *Bhagavad-samhita* also states that there is nothing higher to the abode of the Supreme Lord, and that abode is the final destination. (Purushan na param kincit sa akstha parama gatih). When one attains to it, he never comes back to the material world.

Such a nature of time is reflected in Eliot's "Burnt Norton", wherein he establishes an absolute connect between the past, present and the future:

"Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past.

If all time is eternally present

All time is unredeemable."

Time becomes the main theme in "Burnt Norton" and is further associated with human salvation. It emphasizes on how the present and past are always a fragment of the future. On the literal front, it implores how only man has control on the present, and at a metaphorical level, only through God as deliverer can one's actions be made purposeful. Time is observed in two different perspectives – in a temporal perspective that accounts for the flux of events and a timeless and eternal perspective that explains the concept of absolute time.

Eliot's conception of time is of a past, present and future set in succession, all time is regarded as being concurrent. There is no beginning, middle or end that can be accorded to time. One cannot say where it begins, where it will lead, or where it will end. However, we can arrive at the understanding that all past, present and future are contained in the centre since it is universal time. The first five lines of 'Burnt Norton' show this concurrence of cyclic time. That which is fixed at the centre is the absolute time asserted as a timeless proposition. It is essentially a point of emanation or where the compression of past, present and future takes place. Eliot in the first five lines of 'Burnt Norton' establishes the idea that the present and past are already a fragment of the future, which in turn is resolved by what has occurred in the past, and so all temporal experiences are part of the present. The flux of time if viewed from a higher reality is 'the realm of pure possibilities', that points to the ever-present 'Eternal or Timeless in the flux', which is a source of elucidation of that flux.

The prominent and most often quoted ideas from the Bhagavad Gita in Eliot's work are the ideas conveyed by Krsna to Arjuna in section III of "Dry Salvages". These ideas centre on the conjunction of time, and the inevitability of action. It specifies on the need of the doer to be selfless in his discharge of daily duties, and develop a heightened consciousness at the moment of his death as it determines rebirth.

The theme of action in life and death over which humans have no control is also presented in *The Four Quartets*. Eliot has employed the direct use of *The Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishad* in the poem. Eliot juxtaposes elements of Life and Death, also contained within Vedic thought and the Upanishads, that deal with creation and end. In "The Dry Salvages," this idea is presented symbolically by the image of a rock in the sea that acts both as the preserver and destroyer in different moments:

"On a halcyon day it is merely a monument,

In navigable weather it is always a seamark

To lay a course by: but in the sombre season

Or the sudden fury, is what it always was."

Evidently, Eliot's reference to Lord Krishna reinforces the idea of a timeless reality both as eternal preserver and destroyer. Moreover, it also refers to the recurrent idea of the unity of all time in eternity in which divisions of time into past, present, and future do not exist. In the Gita, the form of the Supreme Lord is the all-devouring force, that is also present in the form of all-devouring time. There seems to be no essential difference between the concept of time and the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Therefore, surrender to Him would ensure freedom from the wheel of time and transcendental delight. "Surrendering all duties to me, seek refuge in Me alone." (BG 18.66.). "Seek refuge in Him also with all your being, Arjuna, through His grace you shall obtain supreme peace and eternal abode" (BG 18.62.).

In the sixth couplet of Chapter VIII of the Bhagavad Gita the Lord tells Arjuna that "thinking of whatever object one leaves the body at the time of death, that and that alone he attains, being ever absorbed in its thought."

*"yam yam vapi smaran bhavam tyajatyante kalevaram*

*tam tam evaiti kaunteya sada-tad-bhava-bhavita"* (BG 8.6)

Eliot reflects on a similar idea in "The Dry Salvages":

"At the moment which is not of action or inaction

You can receive this: "On whatever sphere of being

The mind of man may be intent

At the time of death"—that is the one action

(And the time of death is every moment)

Which shall fructify in the lives of others."

But Eliot does not merely focus on the metaphysical idea of the soul as being 'unborn, eternal, everlasting', or the efficacy of man's actions in determining a deliverance from time. He gives a broader perspective to his thought by following the principal of inclusion.

Associated with the representation of time as a cycle or an ever-revolving wheel is an underlying idea of the concept of Maya. Time in its cyclical movement manifests as present, past and the future and this changeability of time and events are held in the illusion of absolute time. This is typical of 'human kind', which 'Cannot bear very much reality' ('Burnt Norton' I, 45-6). This conviction and presentation of reality is based on the concept of *Maya*, that recognizes individual as being susceptible to interpreting reality while blinded by illusion.

According to Vedanta the material world is an illusion and exists in ignorance. However, it has its own identity in the form of Prakriti which is the realm of time, and which allows "but a little consciousness" (Eliot 16). This realm, as Narayan Shastri also supposes, is permeated with the all-pervading timeless Brahman, and that adds value and meaning to the world-in-time. Eliot's assertion that "To be conscious is not to be in time" seems to be essentially derived from Bhagavad Gita which describes knowledge (consciousness) as the best way to self-realization or unity with God—the "still center."

## Conclusion

T.S. Eliot anticipates a world that is enlivened and fully conceives it in the Four Quartets. All four poems that form a part of the collection express one common theme- of man's relationship with time, the cosmos and the Supreme being. They are rife with mystical, philosophical and poetical elements, frequent allusions to the Bhagavad-Gita and the fundamental truths proposed therein. There is a coexistence of past, present and future with suggestions of past flowing into the future and the future flowing into the present. Eliot forges together the two antithetical points i.e., time and eternity. He seeks to locate eternity, the origin of time, the place where time is non-existent and the place that renders existence to time. Further, he speaks of time as eternal and omnipresent that is unredeemable. It is unredeemable because life is perpetual and eternity is a perfected state

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that does not require redeeming. It is also unredeemable because of its destructiveness; time cannot redeem instead it can only lead to change.

“Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.”

Eliot’s conception of time is of a past, present and future arranged in linear sequence, all time is regarded as being concurrent. This concurrence of cyclic time is supported in *Four Quartets*, a set of four poems: *Burnt Norton*, *East Coker*, *The Dry Salvages* and *Little Gidding*. Eliot’s concept of a timeless reality is further reinforced by references to Lord Krishna as the eternal preserver and destroyer.

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