

## Connecting the 'Unreal':77 Reading Eliot's *The Waste Land* with Rabindranath Tagore's *Nationalism*

*Abin Chakraborty*

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Chandernagore College, West Bengal

**Abstract:** Despite all our laborious attempts to explain and analyse art, we often remain aware of a mysterious inexplicability residing at the core of artistic creation, which eludes all our critical tools of extraction and excavation. Furthermore, this indecipherable alchemy unites great artists across time and space. It weaves through all art connecting threads that mix and merge to create unexpectedly wonderful patterns that transcend the differences between various artistic works. This is why Kurosawa's *Dreams* (1990) merges with Van Gough's paintings or Ray's *Charulata* harmonises with Edouard Manet's *Sur la plage* (Guha 230-232). Such intercultural fusions cannot be dismissed as influence or plagiarism but must be acknowledged as one of those rarities that emerge from the magical matrix of art itself. Such alchemy can also be seen from a comparative analysis of Tagore's *Nationalism* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

**Keywords:** Art, Poetry, *Nationalism*, Beauty, Matrix

Apparently, such an attempt may seem rather audacious, if not downright absurd. Unlike Yeats, Eliot was never an avowed admirer of Tagore. They had drastically different personalities, and their approaches towards art were almost diametrically opposed, especially during the early half of Eliot's career, when *The Waste Land* was written. Tagore even rejected the whole trend of modern poetry and criticised some of its foremost practitioners, like Pound, Eliot and Amy Lowell, in his essay "Adhunik Kabya" (Tagore 497-507). Believing as ever in the Keatsian ideal of "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (Tagore 440), Tagore dismissed modernist poetry as the product of a universal scepticism ("bishwanindukota") which is mistakenly held

as fidelity to truth (Tagore 503). He even translated Eliot's "Preludes" to illustrate his arguments. Naturally, it is rather difficult to admit that such diametrically different artists could share similar ideas, opinions and even words or images, especially in texts as generically different as *Nationalism* and *The Waste Land*. Nevertheless, in the realm of art, the impossible is nothing.

The point of contact between the two texts is established through their similar thematic concerns. Although Eliot had once described his modernist epic as simply "a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life" (V: 1), it remains immortal for its insightful revelation of what Eliot perceived to be the innate disease of the times which had brought contemporary European civilisation to the twilight state of crumbling decay: "the city over the mountains/Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air" (426). According to Stephen Spender, "The central theme of *The Waste Land* is the breakdown of civilisation and the conditioning of those who live within it so that every situation becomes a symptom of the collapse of values" (Spender 106). In *Nationalism*, Tagore, too, speaks of a similar collapse of values as he prophesies the imminent doom of western civilisation intoxicated with the cult of national self-worship. Written during the horrors of the First World War, Tagore issues a warning to Western civilisation through his text and states:

Suddenly, all its mechanisms going mad, the dance of the Furies has begun,  
shattering its own limbs, scattering them into the dust. It is the fifth act of the  
tragedy of the unreal (*Nationalism* 49; emphasis mine).

As we read these lines, we stunningly recall the fifth section of *The Waste Land*, where Eliot echoes similar sentiments with similar words:

Falling towers  
Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria  
Vienna London

Unreal. (374-77)

Did Eliot ever read Tagore's text? Did he, like Romain Rolland, feel thrilled with those lectures? Perhaps he had not read them at all! Nevertheless, both stand united in the sameness of their vision, unravelling some ethereal communication that ever exists between artists of the highest rank, of which lesser mortals like us can only catch occasional glimpses.

The unreal world, heading for doom, highlighted by both Tagore and Eliot, is essentially a world deprived of spiritual values owing to its excessive obsession with the material aspects of life. This is evident from the opening lines of the section entitled "The Game of Chess" in *The Waste Land*:

The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne  
Glowed on the marble, where the glass  
Held up by standards wrought with fruited vine  
From which a golden cupidon peeped out  
(Another hid his eyes behind a wing)  
Doubled the flames of the seven-branched candelabra  
Reflecting light upon the table as  
The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,  
From satin cases, poured in rich profusion. (77-85)

This is precisely what Tagore defines as the "multiplication of materials" devoid of "spiritual fulfilment" (Nationalism 67), which Eliot would perhaps identify as the piling of "withered stumps of time" (104). According to Tagore, such fulfilment remains perennially unavailable to citizens of modern nations as the essential elements of the nation is its gross mechanicality. This is why Tagore compares the nation to a "hydraulic press" (Nationalism 21) and states, "A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose" (Nationalism 13). This

mechanism of the nation, Tagore feels, is driven by "instincts of self-aggrandisement" (Nationalism 32) which inevitably rupture what Tagore calls "the living bonds of society" (Nationalism 33). Therefore, he asks—"You, the people of the West who have manufactured this abnormality, can you imagine the desolating despair of this haunted world of suffering men possessed by the ghastly abstraction of the organising man?" (Nationalism 33) The answer can be found in Eliot's vision of the "Unreal city" (60), where Tagore's notion of "ghastly abstraction" finds embodiment in the walking crowd of 'hollow men, a procession of the living dead:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many  
I had not thought death had undone so many...  
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street  
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours  
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine. (61-68)

This vision of a clock-bound, hollow humanity corresponds to Tagore's idea of the modern citizen as a "human automaton" (Nationalism 17), driven by an interminable "greed of wealth and power" (Nationalism 16). As a result, "the political and commercial man" triumphs over "the moral man, the complete man" (Nationalism 20), which also leads to a distortion of the normal relationship between men and women—"...the natural thread is snapping which holds them together in harmony..." (Nationalism 14). The same disharmony also plagues Eliot's characters:

My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.  
Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.  
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What? (111-113)

The fragmentary, staccato lines reveal the "dissolution of personal humanity" (Nationalism 13), which Tagore had harped on. Therefore, after the abrasive encounter with the carbuncular clerk, the typist-woman reacts with perfect robotic nonchalance:

She smoothes her hair with automatic hand

And puts a record on the gramophone. (255-56)

The mechanical movements of the woman are the product of that mechanical framework of modern nations, which Tagore equates with that of a tentacular mechanical monstrosity. The driving force of this machinery is the ceaseless quest for wealth and power devoid of all moral concerns. He describes nationalism as "the apotheosis of selfishness" (Nationalism 48), which is "carnivorous and cannibalistic in its tendencies; it feeds upon the resources of other peoples and tries to swallow their whole future" (Nationalism 62-63). Time and again, Tagore stresses this destructive spirit of "fearful and hopeless voracity" (Nationalism 63), which overwhelmed European imperial powers and defines Europe as "a glutton, who has not the heart to give up his intemperance in eating..." (Nationalism 87). In fact, he envisioned the entire World War I as a struggle between "predatory creatures" who are "fighting among themselves for the extension of their victims and their reserve forests" (Nationalism 26). Such conflicts, Tagore believed, would inexorably lead to what he called the "ultimate crash of death" (Nationalism 27). Moreover, he warned the Japanese and stated: "My brothers, when the red light of conflagration sends up its crackles of laughter to the stars, keep your faith upon those stars and not upon the fire of destruction" (Nationalism 94). Did Eliot not share the same apprehensions when he wrote: "Burning burning burning burning" in *The Waste Land*? (308)

Of course, the traditionalists of the world would argue that the flames of "The Fire Sermon" only refer to the sterile burning of lust and have nothing to do with the conflagration Tagore talks about. They fail to realise that the various manifestations of lust in "The Fire Sermon" only emphasise one aspect of the petrification of moral vitality, the other aspects of

which reveal themselves through colonial exploitation and imperial wars which, according to Tagore, have set Europe on the path of doom. The prostituting promiscuity of Mrs Porter and her daughter (197-201) and the barbaric brutalities of imperial armies represent two aspects of the same immoral appetite, driven on by a collective worldliness. Furthermore, such worldliness or materialism is the apparent result of a loss of faith in fruitful spiritual values brought about by the displacement of the true god. In a later poem, Eliot would himself express these opinions more directly when in 'Marina' he refers to:

Those who sharpen the tooth of dog, meaning

Death

Those who glitter with the glory of the hummingbird, meaning

Death

Those who sit in the sty of contentment, meaning

Death

Those who suffer the ecstasy of the animals, meaning

Death (6-13)

Instead of attending to this spiritual malady, the West busied itself with "the cult of the self-worship of the Nations," as a result of which "the individual worships with all sacrifices a god much inferior to himself" (Nationalism 46). It is to chastise this misled humanity that Eliot's narrator echoes Ezekiel's exhortations to the unbelieving Israelites and states:

Son of Man,

You cannot say or guess, for you know only

A heap of broken images where the sun beats

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief (20-23)

The subsequent references to images of "empty cisterns and exhausted wells" (384) further emphasise this notion of worshipping false gods, generating the movement towards impending

doom for western civilisation. Hence the narrator's cry: "London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down" (426). In the context of the poem, this innocent line from a nursery rhyme attains the force of a prophecy that is true for the whole of European civilisation. It is in anticipation of such a fall that Tagore said:

...earthquakes are being hatched to restore the balance of the moral world,  
and one day the gaping gulf of spiritual vacuity will draw into its bottom the  
store of things that have their eternal love for the dust. (Nationalism 41)

A similar end was anticipated by Eliot as well for the hollow men and women of the temporal cities of the West through the concluding vision of *Gerontion*, which Eliot initially conceived as a prelude to *The Waste Land*:

De Balihache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, whirled  
Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear  
In fractured atoms. Gull against the wind, in the windy straits  
Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn,  
White feathers in the snow, the Gulf claims...(67-71)

Such lines project a cataclysmic vision of destruction akin to the splitting of atoms or the death of gulls in storms, which the speaker perceives as the destined end for faithless cosmopolitans. It is indeed possible to read such poetic caveats as prophesied outcomes of Europe's megalomania and greed which defy and violate those fundamental moral and spiritual premises of life, which Tagore had also emphasised. He warns, "But ruins of skyscrapers of power and broken machinery of greed, even God's rain is powerless to raise up again..." (Nationalism 64-65). The same fears of a barren future shorn of all hopes of spiritual regeneration are transmuted into poetry by Eliot when he states:

Here is no water but only rock  
Rock and no water and sandy road

The road winding above the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water...  
There is not even silence in the mountains

But dry, sterile thunder without rain. (331-42)

It seems as if the same thoughts were stirring the minds of the two authors who, following different routes, came to meet at the same crossroads—a meeting which transcends the scholarly excavations of source-hunters and unites two artists through the rare alchemy of art. And because of this alchemy, Eliot concludes with the *Upanishadic* parable of thunder and hopes for the "damp gust/Bringing rain " (493-94)." Tagore, too, hopes for a solution through "trust in God and the truth of the human soul" (Nationalism 51), symbolised by the "showers of grace" (Nationalism 64). He firmly believed that Europe could only save herself by turning to the essentials of eastern philosophies, such as that of *the Upanishads*:

...when the morning comes for cleansing the blood-stained steps of the Nations along the highroad of humanity, we shall be called upon to bring our vessel of sacred water—the water of worship—to sweeten the history of man into purity and, with its sprinkling make the trampled dust of the centuries blessed with fruitfulness. (Nationalism 51)

Eliot also agreed and therefore turned to the message of self-control, charity and compassion ('Datta', 'Dayadhvam', 'Damyata') found in the *Parable of the Thunder* in *Brihadaranyaka Upanaishada* (400-22) as the basis of any possible path to salvation for a Europe devoid of the sustaining light of faith. Tagore himself had ruefully observed that. To a Western observer, our civilisation appears as all metaphysics, and a deaf man playing the piano appears to be mere movements of fingers and no music. He cannot think that we have found some profound basis of reality upon which we have built our institutions. (Nationalism 65) Unlike such observers, Eliot had perhaps sensed such a "deep basis of reality" in the Indian philosophies

which he became acquainted with. That is why *The Waste Land* ends on a note that decidedly looks East, just as Tagore had predicted it must: "Shantih, Shantih, Shantih" (433).

Incidentally, Eliot found his 'still centre' by articulating a worldview strongly and overtly grounded in religious faith, as evident from the *Four Quartets*, where he continued to refer to Krishna and aspects of Indian philosophy. Tagore, too, in an anthology like *Punashcha*, would re-explore the significance of Christ through either a poem like 'Shishuteertha' or 'Teerthojatri', which was a translation of Eliot's own 'Journey of the Magi'. In this aspect, at least two poetic stalwarts of their time converged towards a shared horizon of belief and experience despite their various apparent differences. In reading Tagore's *Nationalism* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* together, we can sense a deeper understanding of such subterranean linkages and are reminded again of the relevance of Forster's famous phrase for our academic and pedagogical practices— 'only connect' (Forster 198).

### Works Cited and Consulted

- Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. Faber and Faber, 1968.
- Eliot, Valerie, editor. *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Typescript of the Original Drafts, Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*. Faber and Faber, 1988.
- Forster, E.M. *Howards End*. Pennsylvania State University, 2007.
- Guha, Chinmoy. *Chilekothar Unmadini: Forashi Sahityo Bishoyok o Onyanyo Probondho*. Ananda Publishers, 2006.
- Spender, Stephen. *Eliot: Fontana Masters Series*. Fontana/Collins, 1975.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Nationalism*. Macmillan, 2001.
- . *Rabindra Rachanabali*. vol. X, Govt. of West Bengal, 1989.