



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Eternal Echoes: The Bhagavad Gita's Influence On T.S. Eliot's Poetic Vision

¹Dr. Abhimanyu Dev Singh Billawaria, ²Ms. Pranika Gupta

¹Assistant Professor in English, ²Teaching Assistant

Dogra Degree College Jammu

Dogra Degree College

Abstract: The Bhagavad Gita, an integral part of the Mahabharata, has had a profound influence on literary traditions across cultures. This research paper examines the philosophical and spiritual impact of Western literature, with a particular focus on T.S. Eliot's modernist poetry. The study highlights how the Gita's central themes—such as spiritual desolation, moral duty, self-realization, and the cyclical nature of time—resonate within Eliot's seminal works, *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*. Scholars, including Tasmiyah Ahmed, Rajib Majumdar, and Shikha Shukla, have examined how Eliot integrates Gita-inspired notions of detachment, existential struggle, and divine realization into his poetry. Comparative analyses reveal striking parallels between Arjuna's moral crisis and Eliot's portrayal of a fragmented, spiritually barren world seeking redemption. Additionally, this paper investigates the influence of Hindu philosophy on English Romantic poets, such as William Blake and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, emphasizing how the Gita's doctrines of emanation, reincarnation, and divine unity shaped their poetic expressions. Through a critical engagement with these literary influences, this study underscores the enduring relevance of the Bhagavad Gita in shaping philosophical discourse within Western literature.

Keywords: *Bhagavad Gita, T.S. Eliot, Modernist Poetry, Philosophical Influence, Western Literature, Spiritual Crisis*

Introduction

The *Bhagavad Gita*, written by the ancient Indian sage and poet Vyasa, is a Hindu scripture that is part of the ancient Indian epic literature, the *Mahabharata*. The *Bhagavad Gita* has been translated into numerous languages and remains one of the world's most widely read and studied texts. It inspired spiritual seekers and engaged people from various fields, including politicians, scientists and literature.

The Bhagavad Gita teaches us various essential concepts, such as the nature of the self (Atman), the purpose of life, and the path to spiritual liberation (Moksha). It emphasizes doing one's duty (Dharma) without

attachment to the results and presents different paths to spiritual growth, including devotion (Bhakti), knowledge (Jnana), and selfless action (Karma).

It takes the form of dialogue between Lord Krishna and Pandva prince Arjuna, who is confused and overwhelmed with doubt about fighting in the war against his kin and near ones. The path-lit text helped him take control over his senses to face his relatives, teachers, and friends. In his moment of crisis, he turns to Lord Krishna, who is his charioteer, for guidance.

It is the only religious text that remains as relevant today as it was centuries ago. It inspired scientists like Oppenheimer, Einstein, Blake, Wordsworth, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and many other famous personalities of the world. This paper highlights the impact of the Bhagavad Gita on the writings of T.S. Eliot.

T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) was one of the most prominent poets of the 20th century and a significant figure in modernist literature. Although a Western poet, he was greatly inspired by the profound concepts of the Bhagavad Gita, such as the “Self” being an eternal soul, the nature of existence, meditation, and the pursuit of liberation. In his poem *"The Waste Land,"* T.S. Eliot portrays a world of spiritual desolation and confusion, similar to Arjuna's inner turmoil in the Bhagavad Gita, where both characters struggle with moral uncertainty and a search for meaning. Both works depict the longing for guidance and renewal in times of crisis. In the Mahabharata and "The Waste Land" by T.S. Eliot, both characters are in parallel search of spiritual desolation.

Eminent researchers such as Tasmiyah Ahmed, Rajiv Majumdar, and Shikha Shukla highlight the impact of the Bhagwat Geeta on Western literature. For example, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* reflects Gita-like spiritual struggles, with its themes of disillusionment and redemption, as the Gita's teachings on detachment and the eternal soul are evident in works by Walt Whitman, particularly in *Leaves of Grass*. Through these analyses, scholars highlight how Western poets are influenced by our holy book, the Bhagavad Gita.

Review Literature

Shukla, in “The Influence of Bhagwat Gita on English Romantic Poets, particularly on William Blake” (2019), examines the profound impact of the Bhagavad Gita on English Romantic poets, with a particular focus on figures such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Blake. Shukla highlights the introduction of the Gita to the Romantic literary scene around 1796 through translations, such as Wilkins', which brought Hindu philosophy to the attention of English thinkers. Shukla notes that Coleridge's first encounter with the Gita in 1796 left an indelible mark on his works. Poems such as "Religious Musings," "Ode on the Departing Year," "The Eolian Harp," and "Tintern Abbey" exhibit themes central to Vedantic thought, particularly the Gita's emphasis on the unity of the divine and the natural world. **William Blake**, who was introduced to the Gita after Wilkins' translation, integrated ideas from the Gita into his works, such as *Milton* and *"To the Mountains."* She emphasises his doctrine of "emanation" — where all things emanate from a supreme source — is directly linked to the Gita's teachings on the relationship between Atman (the soul) and Brahman (the supreme spirit). Additionally, Shukla discusses Blake's belief in reincarnation, which mirrors the Gita's doctrine of the cycles of birth and rebirth, as seen in *Vala or the Four Zoas*. Shukla observes that the Gita's influence extended beyond Coleridge and Blake, affecting other key Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth and Shelley. While their engagement with Hindu philosophy is less direct, themes of interconnectedness, transcendence, and spiritual unity found in the Gita are evident in their works. Shukla notes that Wordsworth's meditations on nature and Shelley's radical exploration of life and death echo the Gita's influence.

Rajib Majumder's study, “In the Light of The Bhagavad Gita: A Study of T.S. Eliot's The Four Quartets” (2023), explores the philosophical influence of the Bhagavad Gita on T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets, particularly focusing on shared themes such as time, karma, action, and the divine. Majumder emphasizes how Eliot's concept of time, especially the "still point," resonates with the Gita's eternal and cyclical view of time. Similarly, Eliot's exploration of detachment from the fruits of action aligns with the Gita's teachings on karma.

Key connections highlighted in the study include Eliot's reflections on the human condition and divine presence, which echo the spiritual principles of the *Gita*. For example, in *Burnt Norton*, Eliot's line "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future" mirrors the *Gita*'s teachings on the eternal nature of the soul and the illusion of time. In "*The Dry Salvages*," Eliot's "*O my soul, be prepared for the coming of the Stranger*" echoes the *Gita*'s theme of self-realisation and understanding the divine. Similarly, the concept of cyclical spiritual journeys in Little Giddings echoes the *Gita*'s perspective on the soul's ongoing journey toward enlightenment.

While Majumder's study presents a clear connection between the two works, it does not delve deeply into the historical context of Eliot's engagement with Eastern philosophy or the challenges of interpreting Indian thought in a Western literary context. A broader comparative analysis, including other Western works influenced by Eastern philosophy, would have further enriched the study. Additionally, the paper could benefit from more critical engagement, such as exploring potential tensions between Western and Eastern philosophies or questioning Eliot's interpretation of the *Gita*.

Overall, Majumder's study provides valuable insights into the spiritual influences that shaped Eliot's modernist vision, particularly regarding his engagement with the *Bhagavad Gita*. However, a more comprehensive and critical exploration of these connections would provide a fuller understanding of Eliot's literary approach.

Tasmiyah Ahmed's *The Bhagavad Gita and the Critical Struggle* (2024) examines the fusion of Eastern and Western philosophy in T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets, particularly in the third poem, "Dry Salvages," which directly references the *Bhagavad Gita*. Critics view Eliot's work as a masterpiece, acknowledging its philosophical depth. While Western critics often overlook or dismiss the influence of Indian philosophy in the poem, Indian literary critics embrace it, emphasising the emotional and spiritual connections to the *Gita*.

Eliot himself regarded the *Gita* as a major influence, considering it the second most significant philosophical poem after *The Divine Comedy*. The *Bhagavad Gita* presents ideas of time, reincarnation, and duty, which Eliot integrates into his exploration of life's cyclical nature. Some critics, like Gardner, argue that the introduction of Krishna disrupts the poem's harmony, citing the tension between Hinduism and Christianity. However, Srivastava counters this, suggesting that both philosophies can be viewed in parallel, highlighting the synthesis between them.

Eliot's references to the *Gita* are nuanced and often ambiguous, inviting readers to consider the intersection of Eastern and Western spiritual thought. His use of Krishna reflects a blending of philosophies, which, while distinct, share common themes of the cyclical nature of existence and spiritual progress.

T.S. Eliot and the Influence of the Bhagavad Gita

T.S. Eliot, one of the most influential Western poets and essayists of the 20th century, was deeply influenced by Eastern thought, including the *Bhagavad Gita*. Eliot's known for his modernist style, often explored themes of spiritual desolation, moral uncertainty, and a search for meaning in a fractured world. In his works *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, his works resonate with ideas central to the *Gita*, such as detachment, the eternal nature of the soul, the cyclical nature of time, and the quest for spiritual renewal.

Eliot was drawn to the *Gita*'s ideas on the cyclical nature of time, the impermanence of life, and the possibility of spiritual redemption. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot incorporates themes of spiritual emptiness, the search for renewal, and the confrontation with death, which are central to the *Gita*. In his *Four Quartets*, Eliot further explores ideas of time, self, and transcendence that align with the *Gita*'s view of spiritual evolution and the journey toward self-realisation.

Spiritual Desolation and the Search for Meaning.

One of the most significant ways in which the *Gita* influenced Eliot was in shaping his understanding of spiritual desolation and the search for meaning in a fractured world. In his poem "*The Waste Land*," Eliot presents a world that is spiritually desolate and fragmented, where individuals struggle to find meaning amid the destruction of the old world. The disillusionment and fragmentation of society echo the internal chaos and confusion that Arjuna experiences at the start of the *Gita*, as he is overwhelmed by doubt and despair before receiving Krishna's guidance.

In this context, the *Gita* offers a vision of detachment and transcendence, suggesting that by acting by one's duty, without attachment to the results, one can overcome suffering and attain spiritual clarity. This theme of spiritual awakening through action and detachment resonates strongly in *The Waste Land*, where Eliot explores the necessity of transcendence and the overcoming of personal despair through self-awareness and spiritual growth.

Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943),

The line "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future" from *Burnt Norton* reflects the cyclical view of time found in the *Gita*.

In these lines, Eliot tries to explain his understanding, where he explains that time is not linear but cyclical, and the past shapes the present, while the future is an extension of both. Similarly, the *Bhagavad Gita* presents time as eternal and cyclical, with the universe undergoing cycles of creation, preservation, and destruction.

"In my beginning is my end." The line from *East Coker* reflecting the idea of returning to the "beginning" aligns with the *Gita*'s emphasis on understanding one's true nature and spiritual renewal. *East Coker* conveys the notion that the beginning and the end are inextricably intertwined, reflecting a cyclical understanding of existence. The soul (atman) is eternal and unchanging; the end is not an absolute conclusion but a return to the original state or beginning. Spiritual growth involves transcending the cycle of birth and death.

The line "O my soul, be prepared for the coming of the Stranger" from "The Dry Salvages" aligns with the *Gita*'s notion of seeking connection with the divine; here, the "Stranger" can be interpreted as an external force or divine presence that will eventually come to the soul. The *Bhagavad Gita* teaches that the ultimate purpose of life is to realize one's connection with the divine, and the "Stranger" could symbolize this divine presence or realization. The call for the soul to be prepared suggests a readiness for spiritual awakening or union with the divine, much as the *Gita* urges individuals to prepare themselves for understanding their true nature and their relationship with the divine.

"The end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time." Lines from 'The Last Quartet' and 'The Little Giddings' beautifully capture the idea of spiritual transformation and the realisation that the end of our journey is a return to our beginning, but with deeper insight and understanding. It also emphasises that this cyclical return is not just a repetition of the past but an awakening—a return to our true nature seen with a new perspective.

Eliot's poems, especially *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, demonstrate how the *Bhagavad Gita*, an ancient Indian text, continues to influence writers and thinkers today. Through Eliot, we can see how the *Gita*'s teachings have helped shape Western literature's exploration of spirituality, identity, and the big questions of life.

It is observed that T.S. Eliot's poetry is often analysed for its rich intertextuality, spiritual depth, and philosophical reflections. Among the many sources that shaped his literary and spiritual imagination, the *Bhagavad Gita* occupies a crucial position. The *Gita*'s themes of duty (dharma), detachment, and divine surrender resonate deeply in Eliot's works, particularly *The Four Quartets*. Eliot's engagement with the *Gita*, filtered through his modernist and Christian sensibilities, yields a distinctive synthesis of Western and Eastern

spiritual traditions. This section presents an analysis of Eliot's poetry in light of the Bhagavad Gita's philosophical and theological influences.

Eliot's Spiritual and Philosophical Struggles

T.S. Eliot's poetry is replete with existential and spiritual crises, reflecting his deep concern with time, mortality, and redemption. His modernist works—such as *The Waste Land* and *The Four Quartets*—explore the human struggle to find meaning amidst the chaos of modernity. The Bhagavad Gita offers a philosophical resolution to such dilemmas by advocating selfless action and devotion to a higher principle.

In *The Four Quartets*, Eliot acknowledges the limitations of human reasoning and emphasizes the necessity of divine grace. This echoes Krishna's advice to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, where he states that human intellect alone cannot achieve liberation; instead, surrender to the divine is essential:

“Abandon all varieties of dharma and simply surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear” (Bhagavad Gita 18.66)

Eliot's poetry mirrors this philosophy as he moves from a quest for knowledge to an acceptance of divine will.

The Concept of Time and Eternity

The Bhagavad Gita presents a cyclical view of time, in which the soul transcends birth and death through continuous cycles of karma. Eliot integrates this concept in *The Four Quartets*, where time is presented not as a linear progression but as an eternal present. The opening lines of *Burnt Norton* capture this sentiment:

“Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past.”

This resonates with the Bhagavad Gita's assertion that past, present, and future are interwoven in the cosmic design. Krishna reveals his universal form to Arjuna, signifying a reality beyond temporal limitations. Eliot's struggle with time and eternity in his poetry reflects this Vedantic worldview, wherein the self must transcend the material realm to attain spiritual realization.

The Path of Detachment and Renunciation

Krishna's teaching on detached action (nishkama karma) is one of the most fundamental lessons in the Bhagavad Gita. Eliot, in his spiritual evolution, gradually comes to embrace the idea that true fulfillment lies in selfless devotion rather than personal ambition. In *The Four Quartets*, he writes:

“The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.”

This aligns with Krishna's message that individuals should act without attachment to results:

“You have the right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions” (Bhagavad Gita 2.47)

Eliot's poetry thus reflects an acceptance of spiritual surrender, where personal ego dissolves into divine purpose.

The Crisis of Action and the Role of the Individual

A key theme in the Bhagavad Gita is the ethical dilemma of action. Arjuna's hesitation on the battlefield of Kurukshetra mirrors the modern individual's moral paralysis. Eliot echoes this in *The Waste Land*, where indecision and inaction plague the fragmented post-war world. In contrast, *The Four Quartets* moves toward resolution, much like Arjuna's ultimate acceptance of his duty.

Eliot's religious journey—culminating in his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism—suggests that he found in the Bhagavad Gita a model for navigating moral uncertainty. His poetic voice, shifting from despair to faith, reflects Krishna's assurance that righteous action, guided by divine wisdom, leads to liberation.

The Concept of Surrender and the Divine Will

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna emphasises surrender to divine will as the ultimate path to liberation. This concept profoundly influenced Eliot's later poetry. In *The Dry Salvages*, he writes:

"For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."

This mirrors Krishna's exhortation to Arjuna to relinquish control over outcomes:

"Be steadfast in yoga, O Arjuna. Perform your duty and abandon all attachment to success or failure" (Bhagavad Gita 2.48)

Eliot's theological vision, therefore, aligns with the Gita's philosophy of complete surrender, illustrating his acceptance of divine authority over human existence.

Conclusion

T.S. Eliot's engagement with the Bhagavad Gita provides a rich intertextual foundation for his poetry, particularly *The Four Quartets*. His exploration of time, duty, renunciation, and divine surrender echoes Krishna's teachings, albeit within a modernist Christian framework. While Eliot does not adopt the Gita's philosophy wholesale, he integrates its spiritual wisdom into his poetic and religious vision.

Eliot's work exemplifies the confluence of Eastern and Western thought, demonstrating that literary modernism is not merely a rejection of tradition but also a reinterpretation of ancient wisdom. His poetry serves as a bridge between the Bhagavad Gita's transcendental vision and the existential concerns of modernity. By incorporating the Gita's insights into his Christian worldview, Eliot affirms that spiritual realization transcends cultural boundaries, offering a universal path to redemption.

The continued study of Eliot's engagement with the Bhagavad Gita enriches both literary and philosophical discourse, reaffirming the relevance of ancient texts in contemporary thought. As scholars and readers return to Eliot's poetry, they find a profound meditation on faith, action, and the quest for eternal truth—principles that the Bhagavad Gita has illuminated for centuries.

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