

# SPIRITUAL PARALLELS: T.S. ELIOT'S THE WASTE LAND AND THE BHAGAVAD GITA

**Dr. Seema Gupta**

Associate Professor

Department of English, RKSD College Kaithal

Email-id: [seema21169@gmail.com](mailto:seema21169@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** The present paper proposes to examine the parallel themes in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Eliot's poem, written after World War I, shows a world full of despair and confusion, symbolising the breakdown of moral values and the search for spiritual regeneration. The use of allusions and references suggest ways to find redemption. Similarly, the *Bhagavad Gita* tells the story of Arjuna's moral and spiritual crisis on the battlefield, where Lord Krishna guides him towards understanding his duty and finding enlightenment. Both works use water as a symbol of regeneration and draw from various religious traditions to find universal truths. Despite their different backgrounds, both texts explore the human quest for meaning and spiritual understanding in times of chaos, highlighting the potential for rebirth and inner peace. This comparison shows the significance of these works in understanding existential and spiritual struggles.

**Keywords** - Spiritual crisis, Degeneration, Redemption, Regeneration, Duty, Peace

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## 1.0 Introduction

Eliot's poem, written after World War-I, shows a world full of despair and confusion, symbolising the breakdown of moral values and the search for spiritual regeneration. The poem's mix of religious references suggests ways to find redemption. Similarly, the *Bhagavad Gita* tells the story of Arjuna's moral and spiritual crisis on the battlefield, where Lord Krishna guides him towards understanding his duty and finding enlightenment. Both works use water as a symbol of regeneration and draw from various religious traditions to find universal truths. Despite their different backgrounds, both texts explore the human quest for meaning and spiritual understanding in times of chaos, highlighting the potential for rebirth and inner peace. The present paper proposes to examine the similar themes in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. This comparison shows the significance of these works in understanding existential and spiritual struggles.

T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* captures the spiritual desolation of the post-World War I era. The world he portrays is fragmented, disillusioned, and devoid of meaning. The poem's characters are lost, disconnected from tradition and faith, reflecting the widespread sense of despair and hopelessness. This spiritual crisis is symbolised by the barren, infertile land, representing a culture in decline and in need of renewal.

"What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish?" (Lines 18-20)

Similarly the *Gita* opens with Arjuna in a state of deep spiritual and moral crisis on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. He is overwhelmed by the chaos of war and the moral implications of fighting against his own kin. This internal conflict mirrors the external turmoil, paralysing Arjun by doubt and sorrow, questioning the righteousness of the battle and his role in it. This existential crisis and confusion mirror the spiritual desolation depicted in *The Wasteland* though in a different context. Eliot captures spiritual desolation in lines like,

"I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (line 30).

This symbolises the barren, hopeless state of the modern world. Arjuna's crisis is also evident when he says, "I am confused about my duty, and am struck with sorrow, having lost my composure because of weakness" (2:7).

*Kārpanya-doṣhopahata-svabhāvaḥ  
prichchhāmi tvām dharmā-sammūḍha-chetāḥ  
yach-chhreyāḥ syānniśchitaṁ brūhi tanme*

*śhiṣhyaste 'ham śhādhi mām tvām prapannam (2:7)*

Eliot's poem *The Wasteland* is a quest for meaning in a fragmented world. It weaves together a rich tapestry of cultural, literary, and religious references from various traditions through which the fragments of wisdom are sought to piece together a coherent understanding. The poem's fragmented structure and shifting voices reflect the complexity and difficulty of this search. The poem's fragmented search for meaning in the line, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (line 430) reflects the attempt to find coherence in a broken world. In *Bhagavad Gita* Arjuna's dialogue with Krishna also represents his search for meaning and purpose amid chaos. Faced with a profound moral dilemma, Arjuna turns to Krishna for guidance, seeking to understand his duty and the broader spiritual truths that govern life. The *Gita* systematically explores these questions, providing Arjuna with a comprehensive spiritual framework. Arjuna's search for meaning is depicted in his plea when he tries to seek Krishna's guidance. He says, "I do not see how I can remove this sorrow which is drying up my senses" (2:8).

*na hi prapaśhyāmi mamāpanudyād  
yach-chhokam uchchhoṣhaṇam-indriyāṇām  
avāpya bhūmāv-asapatnamṛiddham  
rājyam surāṇāmapī chādhipatyam (2:8)*

While predominantly bleak and barren, *The Waste Land* offers glimpses of hope and the possibility of spiritual rebirth. The final section, "What the Thunder Said," introduces the idea of regeneration through the cleansing power of water and the wisdom of ancient teachings. The thunder's command "Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata" (Give, Sympathise, Control) suggests a three-fold path to redemption and regeneration. The *Gita* culminates in Arjuna's transformation. Through Krishna's teachings, Arjuna overcomes his despair and confusion, gaining a deeper understanding of his duty and the nature of the self. This enlightenment enables him to act with clarity and purpose, embodying the *Gita*'s message of spiritual redemption through knowledge and righteous action. Transformation and redemption as suggested in "What the Thunder Said" with the lines, "Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata" (Give, Sympathize, Control) (line 433), hint at spiritual renewal. Arjuna's transformation is evident when he declares, "My delusion is destroyed, and I have gained knowledge through Your grace, O Krishna" (18:73).

*arjuna uvācha  
naṣṭo mohaḥ smṛitir labdhā tvat-prasādān mayāchyuta  
sthito 'smi gata-sandehaḥ kariṣhye vachanam tava (18:73)*

Since *The Waste Land* provides fragmented guidance drawn from various traditions, Eliot references works from the Bible, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Western literature, suggesting that wisdom can be found in the collective knowledge of humanity. However, the fragmented presentation symbolises the difficulty of finding coherent guidance in a chaotic world. In contrast, the *Gita* offers direct and coherent spiritual guidance. Lord Krishna imparts wisdom to Arjuna, who explains complex philosophical concepts like karma (action), dharma (duty), and yoga (the path to realisation). This structured dialogue provides clear answers and a spiritual roadmap contrasted with the fragmented wisdom in *The Waste Land*. The fragmented guidance can be seen in the mix of religious and cultural references, like "Shantih shantih shantih" (line 434), a Sanskrit mantra for peace. In *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna provides direct guidance: "Perform your prescribed duty, for action is more important than inaction. One cannot even maintain one's physical body without work" (3:8).

*niyataṁ kuru karma tvam karma jyāyo hyakarmanāḥ  
śharīra-yātrāpi cha te na prasiddhyed akarmaṇāḥ (3:8)*

In *The Wasteland* also, the spiritual degeneration and the need of action is emphasised with the use of nature imagery in the opening lines of the poem:

"April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain" (Lines 1-4)

Eliot's *The Waste Land* is known for its eclectic references, drawing from Eastern and Western philosophies, myths, and religions. This blend of diverse traditions reflects Eliot's belief in the interconnectedness of human

cultures and the universality of spiritual quests. The poem's allusions to the *Upanishads*, the *Bible*, and other texts create a mosaic of human spiritual experience like the allusion to the Upanishads: "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata" (line 432), showing the interconnectedness of spiritual wisdom. While the *Gita* is a core text of Hindu philosophy, its themes and teachings have universal appeal. It addresses fundamental questions of duty, righteousness, and the nature of the self, making its wisdom relevant to various spiritual traditions. The *Gita*'s integration of different philosophical concepts reflects its inclusive approach to spiritual knowledge. The *Gita* integrates different paths of yoga (action, devotion, and knowledge) to offer a comprehensive spiritual framework, such as in, "By devotion alone can I, as I really am, be known and seen and entered into" (11:54).

*bhaktyā tv ananyayā śhakya aham evam-vidho 'rjuna  
jñātum draśṭum cha tattvena praveṣṭum cha parantapa* (11:54)

Eliot explores the loss of moral and spiritual duty in a fragmented world. The poem's characters struggle with meaninglessness and a lack of direction, reflecting a society that has lost its sense of purpose. This theme is exemplified in the disillusioned individuals who populate the poem, aimlessly navigating a world devoid of coherent values. The *Gita* emphasises the importance of fulfilling one's dharma, or righteous duty. Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna that performing his duty as a warrior, without attachment to the results, is essential for spiritual growth. This focus on dharma contrasts with the aimlessness depicted in *The Waste Land*, offering a clear path to moral and spiritual fulfilment. The sense of lost duty is portrayed in lines like, "He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying" (lines 328-329), showing a world without purpose. In *Bhagavad Gita* Krishna emphasises dharma: "Better is one's own duty, though imperfectly performed, than the duty of another well performed" (3:35).

*śhreyān swa-dharmo viguṇaḥ para-dharmāt sv-anuṣṭhitāt  
swa-dharme nidhanaṁ śhreyaḥ para-dharmo bhayāvahaḥ* (3:35)

*The Waste Land* questions the nature of existence and the human condition in a spiritually barren landscape. The fragmented narrative and shifting perspectives highlight the uncertainties and complexities of modern life. Themes of death, rebirth, and the cyclical nature of existence are explored, reflecting a quest for understanding amidst chaos. The *Gita* delves into the nature of the self (atman) and its relationship to the universe and the divine (Brahman). Krishna teaches that the self is eternal and transcendent, beyond the physical body. This philosophical exploration provides a clear understanding of existence and the self, offering a spiritual foundation that contrasts with the uncertainties in *The Waste Land*. The poem questions existence with lines like, "Who is the third who walks always beside you?" (line 360), hinting at the search for deeper understanding. In *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna explains the nature of the self: "The soul is never born, nor does it ever die; nor having once existed, does it ever cease to be. The soul is birthless, eternal, imperishable, and timeless" (2:20).

*na jāyate mriyate vā kadāchin  
nāyam bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ  
ajo nityaḥ śhāśhvato 'yam purāṇo  
na hanyate hanyamāne śharīre* (2:20)

While indirect, divine presence and intervention are suggested through religious allusions. The divine is alluded to through indirect references, like "Who is the third who walks always beside you?" (line 360), suggesting an unseen divine presence. The poem's references to various deities and spiritual figures imply that divine wisdom can guide humanity through chaos. However, this guidance is fragmented and elusive, reflecting the modernist scepticism of clear divine intervention. In contrast the *Gita* features direct interaction with the divine. Lord Krishna, as an incarnation of the god Vishnu, provides Arjuna with explicit spiritual guidance and revelation. This direct divine presence contrasts with the elusive divinity in *The Waste Land*, offering a clear and authoritative source of wisdom. Krishna's direct divine role is evident: "Whenever there is a decline in righteousness and an increase in unrighteousness, O Arjuna, at that time I manifest myself on earth" (4:7)

*yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata  
abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānam sṛjāmyaham* (4:7)

Eliot employs a modernist, fragmented narrative to reflect the disjointed nature of contemporary life. The

poem's structure and style mirror the chaos and fragmentation of the post-war world. Philosophically, it explores existential despair and the search for meaning in a seemingly purposeless universe. Eliot's modernist approach is reflected in the poem's fragmented form, such as the shifting voices and styles throughout, like in "A Game of Chess" (lines 77-138). But *The Gita* uses a structured dialogue and didactic approach to convey its teachings, which is clear in Lord Krishna's systematic teaching, "Engage your mind always in thinking of Me, be devoted to Me, worship Me, and offer obeisance to Me. Thus, you will come to Me without fail. I promise you this because you are My very dear friend" (18:65)

*man-manā bhava mad-bhakto mad-yājī mām namaskuru  
mām evaiṣhyasi satyaṁ te pratijāne priyo 'si me* (18:65)

The conversation between Arjuna and Krishna systematically addresses philosophical and spiritual questions, providing clear and comprehensive answers. This structured, cohesive approach contrasts with the fragmented form of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Despite its bleak portrayal, *The Waste Land* suggests the potential for regeneration and redemption through spiritual awakening. The fifth section's "What the Thunder Said" allusions to rebirth and the wisdom of ancient teachings hint at the possibility of regenerating the barren land through spiritual growth and understanding. The Bhagavadgita also demonstrates the path to spiritual regeneration and enlightenment through understanding and fulfilling one's duty. Krishna's teachings lead Arjuna from despair to clarity, highlighting the transformative power of spiritual knowledge and righteous action. This clear path to renewal contrasts with the more ambiguous potential for redemption in *The Waste Land*.

Thus a parallel between T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the *Bhagavad Gita* involves examining how both texts address themes of spiritual crisis, redemption, regeneration and the quest for meaning amidst chaos. Although they arise from different cultural and historical contexts, their exploration of existential and spiritual themes offers intriguing comparisons.

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