

ECHOES OF PURPOSE AND DESPAIR: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL THEMES IN T.S. ELIOT'S *THE WASTE LAND* AND *THE BHAGAVAD GITA*

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Abstract

This comparative study delves into the resonating themes of purpose and despair as depicted in the ancient scripture, the Bhagavad Gita and T.S. Eliot's seminal the modernist poem, The Waste Land. A close scrutiny of these two seemingly disparate works, this research illuminates their parallel exploration of the human condition. The Bhagavad Gita, a cornerstone of Hindu philosophy, addresses questions of duty (dharma), pursuit of self-realization(moksha) and the nature of existence. On the other hand, T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land reflects the disillusionment and fragmentation of the post-war era, showcasing the emptiness of modern existence. By examining the parallel threads of the purpose and despair in both works, this study not only uncovers their cultural and temporal influences but also underscores their enduring relevance in addressing fundamental questions about life's meaning and the human experience. The Bhagavad Gita's timeless counsel on navigating life's purpose resonates with the existential questions posed by The Waste Land. As The Waste Land reflects the disillusionment of modern, war-ravaged society, The Bhagavad Gita is offering spiritual solutions to the disillusioned society. By examining the works through a comparative lens, this study contributes to a deeper understanding how humans from different times and cultures dealt with the life's fundamental challenges.

Keywords: Comparative Analysis, the Bhagavad Gita, The Waste Land, purpose, Despair, Human Existence.

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In the realm of literature and philosophy, certain themes resonate deeply with the human experience, transcending temporal and cultural boundaries. Among these enduring themes, the dichotomy of purpose and despair stands as a fundamental and ever-relevant exploration of the human condition. This study delves into the portrayal of themes of 'Echoes of Purpose and Despair', offering a comparative analysis of two disparate yet profoundly influential works: T.S. Eliot's enigmatic masterpiece, *The Waste Land* and the timeless sacred scripture of Hinduism, *the Bhagavad Gita*. The objective of this research is to unravel the intricate tapestry woven by these literary and philosophic giants, revealing the profound interplay of purpose and despair within their respective narratives. The juxtaposition of Eliot's modernist opus against the ancient wisdom of the *Bhagavad Gita* serves as a captivating backdrop for our exploration. *The Waste Land* is a famous modernist poem written by T.S. Eliot in 1922. It is known for its complex and fragmented style and multifaceted themes. It explores a world marked by desolation and disillusionment. It reflects the sense of despair, emptiness, and disillusionment of the generation that has witnessed devastation and the trauma of World War I. It explores decline in culture and loss of spiritual values in a modern society. Eliot alludes to various mythological, historical, and literary references to highlight the cultural disintegration amidst despair. There are moments of hope and the possibility of redemption. The poem suggests that transformation and renewal are possible, but they require a deep reckoning with the past and a search for meaning. Ultimately, the poem can be seen as a quest for meaning in a world that is devoid of it. It raises profound questions about the nature of existence and the search for purpose. *The Bhagavad Gita*, a sacred text within Hinduism, addresses various relevant and enduring themes. The text introduces different paths of yoga including karma yoga, bhakti yoga, and jnana yoga. Each path offers a way to attain spiritual growth and realization. *The Gita* advises individuals to practice detachment from the material world and the fruits of their actions. It teaches that attachment to worldly desires leads to suffering. This comparative analysis employs a multidisciplinary approach

that combines literary criticism, philosophical inquiry, and cultural studies. The research delves into the historical and literary contexts of *The Waste Land* within the framework of early 20th century modernism. Additionally, it explores the *Bhagavad Gita's* religious and philosophical context, placing it within the realm of Hinduism and Indian philosophy. In analyzing the themes of purpose and despair, we closely examine specific passages, characters, and symbols within each work.

Theme of Purpose in *The Waste Land* and *The Bhagavad Gita*:

Eliot's *The Waste Land* presents a world where purpose often appears elusive and fragmented. He incorporates references to a wide range of literary, historical, and mythological sources. These references are often brief and disconnected, making it challenging for the reader to discern a clear, overarching purpose in the text.

"April is the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing memory and desire, stirring Dull roots with spring rain." (Poem Analysis, 2023)

This opening stanza of the poem alludes to Chaucer's 'The Canterbury Tales' and sets the tone for the poem's complex and fragmented style showcasing the modern generation's suffering and meaninglessness which is devoid of order and purpose.

"A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, I had not thought death had undone so many." (Poem Analysis, 2023)

This passage references Dante's 'Inferno' and creates a sense of a bleak, purposeless and mechanical movement of modern urban life.

"Hurry up, please, it's time." (Poem Analysis, 2023)

This recurring refrain throughout the poem, often spoken by various voices, creates a sense of urgency and fragmentation in narrative.

The poem is known for its multiple narrators and voices, which often present conflicting and incoherent perspectives. This fragmentation of voices reflects the idea that there is no single, coherent purpose or narrative in the modern world. Instead, poem presents a cacophony of voices, each struggling to find meaning and purpose. The characters in the poem often appear disillusioned and lost. They are searching for meaning and purpose but unable to find it in the fragmented and decaying world. Throughout the poem, there are depictions of empty rituals and superficial social interactions. These portrayals suggest that many of the actions and behaviors in the modern world lack genuine purpose and are performed only out of habit or social convention. Their senseless actions and struggle for purpose reflect the broader sense of disillusionment in the post-World War I era.

"I was neither Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, Looking into the great of light, the silence." (Poem Analysis, 2023)

This passage reflects the sense of existential disillusionment and emptiness felt by the narrator, who is caught in the state of ambiguity and uncertainty.

"The dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, And the dry stone no sound of water." (Poem Analysis, 2023)

This quote portrays a barren and desolate landscape, emphasizing the absence of solace or relief, which contributes to the sense of disillusionment. These passages capture the mood of a generation grappling with the aftermath of World War I.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, purpose is intricately tied to the concept of duty, known as dharma. The text emphasizes the importance of fulfilling one's duties in life, regardless of the outcome, as a path to spiritual realization and fulfillment. *The Gita* also explores the purpose of human existence as the realization of one's true self (atman) and connection with the divine (Brahman). This spiritual perspective provides a structured and profound understanding of purpose.

"You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions." (BG 2: 47) (S. Radhakrishnan, 2010)

This verse emphasizes the concept of performing one's duties (dharma) without attachment to the outcomes, highlighting the idea that the purpose of life lies in fulfilling one's responsibilities.

"No one can remain without performing any activity; strangely enough, a person cannot even remain for a moment without action." (BG 4:13) (S. Radhakrishnan, 2010)

This verse underscores the inevitability of action in life and suggests that activity is an inherent part of existence, contributing to one's purpose.

"By following his qualities of work, every man can become perfect. Now please hear from Me how this can be done." (Poem Analysis, 2023)

This verse showcases the idea that individuals can fulfill their purpose by aligning their actions and qualities with their inherent nature (svadharma). Above mentioned quotes of *The Bhagavad Gita* reflect its teaching on the purpose of existence, which include fulfilling one's duties, recognizing the divine presence, and seeking spiritual realization and liberation through devotion and selfless action.

Theme of Despair in *The Waste Land* and *The Bhagavad Gita*:

Eliot vividly conveys moments of despair, where, characters grapple with existential crisis and feelings of hopelessness. Despair is depicted as a pervasive and paralyzing force eroding individuals' sense of identity and purpose. Similarly, the poem critiques empty rituals and superficial social interactions as manifestations of despair, highlighting the hollowness of contemporary existence.

"I will show you fear in a handful of dust." (Poem Analysis, 2023)

This line suggests that even the most mundane and insignificant things can reveal profound feelings of fear and despair.

"I had not thought death had undone so many. Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, And each man fixed his eyes before his feet." (Poem Analysis, 2023)

These lines emphasize the subdued and disheartened nature of individuals who have experienced loss and despair. So, these quotes from *The Waste Land* showcase the pervasive themes of despair and disillusionment, reflecting the hopelessness of the modern generation.

The *Bhagavad Gita* opens with Arjuna, the warrior prince, facing a profound moral and existential crisis on the battlefield. His despair stems from the conflict between his duty as a warrior (kshatriya) and his reluctance to engage in violence.

"Arjuna said: O Krishna, seeing my friends and relatives assembled here, eager to fight, my limbs fail m and my mouth becomes dry. My body quivers and my hairs stand on end." (BG 1:30-31S) (S. Radhakrishnan, 2010)

The Gita offers a cosmic perspective on despair, emphasizing the eternal nature of the soul (atman) and the transient nature of suffering. It provides spiritual guidance to overcome despair through realization and devotion to the divine.

"O son of Kunti, the nonpermanent appearance of happiness and distress, and their disappearance in due course, are like the appearance and disappearance of winter and summer seasons. They arise from sense perception, O scion of Bharata, and one must learn to tolerate them without being disturbed." (BG 2:14) (S. Radhakrishnan, 2010)

Above quotes from the *Bhagavad Gita* provide spiritual guidance on overcoming despair by emphasizing detachment from desires, control of the restless mind, the path of devotion, and surrender to the divine as means to find inner peace and liberation from suffering.

Interplay of Themes of *The Waste Land* and *The Bhagavad Gita*:

The interplay of themes in *The Waste Land* and the *Bhagavad Gita* is fascinating exploration of how these two texts, despite their cultural and historical differences, share

some common threads. Both the texts share themes of purpose, despair, spiritual renewal, and human quest for meaning. Both the texts *The Waste Land* and *The Bhagavad Gita* contain moments where themes of purpose and despair intersect. The characters in both the works grapple with conflicting emotions and motivations. And the interplay of purpose and despair is intertwined with spiritual and existential themes in both the texts, highlighting the depth of human contemplation on these topics. Quote from *The Waste Land*:

“April is the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing Memory and desire, stirring Dull roots with spring rain” (Poem Analysis, 2023)

It suggests that even in the season associated with rebirth and purpose (spring), there is a sense of cruelty and despair. April month is traditionally associated with rebirth, renewal, and blossoming of life in nature. Still, in the fragmented disillusioned world of the poem, that purpose is also turned cruel.

“The dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, And the dry stone no sound of water.” (Poem Analysis, 2023)

In this quote, the mention of a ‘dead tree’ implies the absence of life and purpose. In nature, a tree is a symbol of growth, shelter, and sustenance. However, a dead tree serves no purpose; it is barren and devoid of life. This absence of purpose illustrating the interplay between the desolation of surroundings and the despair of the characters.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, *“I am the father of this universe, the mother, the support, and the grandsire.”* (S. Radhakrishnan, 2010)

This verse highlights the interplay between the divine presence (Krishna) and the purpose of existence. Recognizing the divine as the source and support of all life can provide and alleviate despair.

“A person who is not disturbed by the incessant flow of desires- that enter like rivers into the ocean, which is ever being filled but is always still- can alone achieve peace...” (S. Radhakrishnan, 2010)

This quote illustrates how the interplay between desires and inner peace is addressed in the *Gita*. It suggests that the pursuit of desires can lead to restlessness and despair, while inner peace comes from detachment.

So, these quotes from *The Waste Land* and the *Bhagavad Gita* demonstrate how both works explore the complex interplay purpose and despair, albeit from different cultural and philosophic perspective. While Eliot’s poem reflects the disillusionment of a post-war

society, *the Gita* offers guidance on finding purpose and overcoming despair through spiritual means.

Cultural and Philosophical Influences on *The Waste Land* and *The Bhagavad Gita*:

The Waste Land is written and published in the post-World War I era, reflects the widespread impact of war on European society. The poem depicts the aftermath of war that leads to disillusionment and a sense of cultural and moral breakdown and subsequent loss of traditional values. Eliot is a key figure in the modernist literary movement who pursues a break from traditional forms and explores new ways of expressing the complexities of the modern world. *The Waste Land* is a modernist work, known for its secular and fragmented structure, multiple narrators and allusive style. The poem is rich with references to mythology, religion, and literature from various cultures. These references serve to highlight the disintegration of cultural and moral values and the search for spiritual meaning in a fragmented world. For example, the allusions to the Fisher king legend and the myth of the sirens are woven into the poem's narrative to enrich the themes of spiritual desolation, disillusionment, and the search for meaning. (Eliot, 2010)

The Bhagavad Gita is a 700- verse Hindu scripture that is part of the Indian epic Mahabharata. It explores fundamental philosophical questions, including the nature of the self (atman), the concept of duty (dharma), and the paths to self- realization (yoga). The *Bhagavad Gita* synthesizes various philosophical and religious ideas prevalent in ancient India. It presents paths to spiritual realization that cater to different temperaments, including the paths of knowledge (jnana yoga), action (karma yoga), and devotion (bhakti yoga) and emphasizing on the concept of liberation (moksha). So, both the texts grapple with the questions of purpose, meaning, and despair but within vastly different cultural and philosophical contexts.

The quest for self-realization in *The Waste Land* and *The Bhagavad Gita*:

Though approaching from different cultural and philosophic perspectives, the search for meaning or self- realization is the central theme in both the texts. In *The Waste Land*, self- realization is depicted as a challenging and elusive endeavour in the modern, fragmented world of the poem. The characters in the poem are portrayed as spiritually lost and disconnected from their inner selves. The poem suggests that the self- realization is impeded by various obstacles, including societal disillusionment, cultural decay, and spiritual desolation. But various allusions to mythological and religious figures, such as Tiresias and the Fisher King, underscore the characters' quest for self-understanding and spiritual rebirth. Ultimately, the poem presents that self-realization as a difficult, even tragic, pursuit in a world marked by despair and fragmentation. However, the poem hints at the possibility of renewal and transformation.

“These fragments I have shored against my ruins.” (Poem Analysis, 2023)

This line alludes to the idea of collecting fragments of wisdom or self-awareness as a means of self-preservation amidst personal or spiritual ruins. It implies that even in a fragmented world, the pursuits of self-realization are crucial.

“Shantih shantih Shantih” (the closing line of the poem) (Poem Analysis, 2023)

These lines offer a sense of closure and peace, suggesting that self-realization or enlightenment may bring inner tranquility. The repetition of ‘Shantih’ (peace) reinforces the idea of finding a state of calm after tumultuous journey of self-discovery. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, self-realization is a central focus of its teachings. (Pavulraj, 2014) Arjuna’s moral and existential crisis on the battlefield serves as a backdrop for his journey towards self-realization. *The Gita* teaches that the true self (brahma) is eternal and divine, and that self-realization involves recognizing this true self within oneself. Lord Krishna imparts wisdom on various paths to self-realization, including the paths of knowledge, action and devotion. The concept of ‘jivatma (individual self) merging with the ‘paramatma’ (supreme self) reflects the ultimate goal of self-realization in Hindu philosophy. Arjuna’s transformation throughout the Gita exemplifies the journey from doubt and despair to self-realization and spiritual enlightenment.

“The soul is neither born, and nor does it die.” (BG 2:20)

(S. Radhakrishnan, 2010)

This verse underscores the Gita’s teaching on the eternal nature of the soul (atman). Self-realization in the Gita recognizing the true self (atman) as beyond the physical body, birth, and death.

“When a person responds to the joys and sorrows of others as if they were his own, he has attained the highest state of spiritual union.” (BG 6: 32)

(S. Radhakrishnan, 2010)

This verse highlights the concept of oneness and empathy indicating that self-realization involves recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings and responding with compassion and empathy. These quotes from both texts reflect the theme of self-realization.

In exploration of the themes of purpose and despair in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, it becomes evident that these two texts, though distinct in cultural and philosophical contexts, share a common thread of grappling with the complexities of human existence. *The Waste Land*, a product of post-World War I western modernism, presents a world fragmented by disillusionment, while the *Bhagavad Gita*, an ancient Hindu

scripture, offers spiritual guidance rooted in ancient Indian philosophy. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot portrays a world where traditional values have eroded, leaving characters in a state of existential crisis. Purpose in this landscape is elusive and fragmented, marked by disillusionment and despair. The poem's fragmented structure, allusions to mythology, and juxtaposition of diverse voices underscore the disorientation and loss of meaning experienced by the characters. Conversely, the *Bhagavad Gita*, set on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, addresses purpose and despair within the framework of Hindu philosophy. Here, purpose is deeply intertwined with fulfilling one's duties, seeking spiritual realization, and recognizing the divine presence. The interplay of these themes revolves around the moral crisis of Arjuna, who grapples with the duty to fight and the despair of confronting his own kin. In both texts, there is a recognition that purpose and despair are intimately linked to the human condition. *The Waste Land* reflects the disillusionment of a post-war era, while the *Bhagavad Gita* offers a path to overcome despair through devotion, self-realization, and alignment with one's duties. The former presents a fragmented, disoriented world in which purpose is obscured, while the latter offers a spiritual framework for finding purpose and solace in the face of moral and existential crises. Ultimately, these two texts, originating from vastly different cultural and philosophical backgrounds, converge in their exploration of the human struggle to find meaning and purpose amidst despair. They remind us that the search for purpose and the confrontation of despair are universal themes that resonate across time and cultural boundaries, serving as enduring inquiries into the human condition.

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