

## Revisoning the Cross-Cultural Mythopoetic Configuration in T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'

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### Abstract

Long before man developed the power of logical discourse and intellectual interpretation, the material world transmitted into the mind of man through stories and legends which later came to be known as myths. Derived from the Greek word 'mythos', a myth is a capacious term that etymologically denotes stories made out of words circulated across generations. Man in the ancient civilization was suspended in an incomprehensible cosmos; whenever he couldn't understand the forces of Nature, he created stories out of it that embodied their core value systems and worked as their source of sustenance which today has become rudimentary and undervalued. Mythopoetic work encompasses stories and structures of feelings that are culturally hegemonic and chronotopic. This research through a qualitative research design attempts to pinpoint T.S.Eliot's *raison d'être* behind employing the mythic framework in voicing the modern condition, enumerating the plethora of conventional narratives as a cultural mix turning it into a verbal salad. The coinage of the term "mythic method" in relation to Eliot's 1923 review 'Ulysses, Order and Myth' is stated where he traces a continuous parallel between Homer's 'Odyssey' and Joyce's 'Ulysses'. A table listing the variegated mythical allusions and the implication they hold is also laid out for a clearer reception.

**Keywords:** logical discourse, myths, capacious, etymologically, rudimentary, structures of feelings, culturally hegemonic, chronotopic, allusions.

### Introduction

Eliot's 'mythic method' is dipped in a symbolic network of objective correlatives that help prevent the sterile condition of modern man's death-in-life experience from where there seems to be no exit. Myths in T.S.Eliot's literary oeuvre function as a clinical therapeutic cure or an antidote to modern ailments. Their timelessness adhere to the cyclical notion of Time rather than the linear one making them immune to perishability. They draw a parallel between antiquity and contemporaneity as if the past, present and future are in a continuum. They are elementally rooted alluding to the five constituting elements of an individual- the 'Panchamahabhoot' i.e. earth, air, fire, water and ether. The magical quotient of myths help activate mysticism within one's spiritual makeup aiding a reboot or a restart for an entire civilization that has fallen apart.

They work as a corrective measure to rehabilitate the modern man. Northrop Frye in 'Myth, Fiction and Displacement' states that a myth "is a drive towards a verbal circumference of human experience"(598). Following the same line of thought, T.S. Eliot relies upon the treatment of myths as repositories of ethnic memory taken out of archetypal frameworks and transformed into a part of the 'collective unconscious'. They reflect the ethos and psyche of the human kind, not in a given temporal frame but in a universal human context. Probably that's the reason the 'Mahabharata' declares with conviction: "...that which cannot be found here exists nowhere"(Vyasa 1.56.33).

### **Method and Methodology**

For this research, qualitative research method like textual analysis is used wherein an exhaustive array of texts including 'The Waste Land' as a primary source and extracts from related intertexts and their interpretations in various journals is referred to as secondary sources. Archetypal or Myth Criticism is the methodological framework operational in this study.

### **Discussion**

T.S. Eliot's revisionary mythopoetic tactics was an attempt at finding the solution to modern man's anomie, fear and spiritual grief by rekindling the mythical sense as an elixir. In 'Ulysses, Order and Myth' (1923) the term 'mythic method' was introduced as:

In manipulating a continuous parallel between. contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr Joyce is pursuing a method. which others must pursue after him... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of. futility and anarchy which is contemporary history(Eliot).

Through the modus operandi of myths Eliot links the predicament of modern man with that of the other ages of human history turning the contemporary malaise into an eternal problem of man. Thus, the past and present merge together and antiquity is brought into the embrace of contemporaneity.

As pointed out by distinguished social thinker Emile Durkheim, modern man has gone through successive stages of 'ent zauberung' (disenchantment); a process of unmagicking where people have demythified themselves and brushed aside myths ultimately leading to anomie - a state of rootless unhappiness. The leit motif of Eliot's "mythic method" is to be found in the words of German poet, Stefan George: "It is only through magic that life stays awake"; and this magic can be performed by holding the yardstick of myths supposes Eliot.

For Indians, mysticism has been a kind of buffer, that helped survive the onslaught of several crisis or else we too would have collapsed into the vortex of anomie like the West. The West has lost its mystical bent of mind and Eliot desperately searches for an artistic compensation to rejuvenate the mystical thirst of man hence his fetish for cross-cultural myths.

The "mythical method" is encapsulated under the umbrella term of "intertextuality" coined by Julia Kristeva which refers to the positioning of texts within a text thus making the textual autonomy not absolute but relative. Tissues of quotations from Charles Baudelaire's 'Flowers of Evil', John Milton's 'Paradise Lost', Dante's 'Inferno' and 'Purgatorio', Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' and 'Antony and Cleopatra', Edmund Spenser's 'Prothalamion', Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress', John Webster's 'The White Devil', Ovid's 'Metamorphosis', Thomas Middleton 'Women Beware Women', Oliver Goldsmith's 'The Vicar of Wakefield', Thomas Kyd's 'Spanish Tragedy' etc are fused into the text. T.S. Eliot profusely quotes from authors like Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, Aldous Huxley, Andrew Marvell, Walt Whitman, Charles Baudelaire, Ovid and Homer. But all this is not a cosmetic transplantation, there is an organic relationship in Eliot's usage of these intertexts.

In 'The Waste Land' (1922) one myth coalesces into another and this kaleidoscopic comingling of myths brings to one's mind one of Eliot's own statement: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal" taken from his essay 'Philip Massinger'(1920).

Within the textual fabric of 'The Waste Land' there lies embedded Mis Jessie L. Weston's 'From Ritual to Romance', Sir James Frazer's 'The Golden Bough', The Bible, The Hindu Upanishads, Buddha's Fire Sermon, St. Augustine's 'Confesions', Legend of the Fisher King, The legend of the Holy Grail, Myth of Oedipus, Myth of Tiresias etc. Eliot uses these myths to reboot the cancerous civilization of the West. The torquing of myths provided Eliot with an appropriate cultural bulwark for the wounded times - Post First World War havoc. He uses myths culled from the Eastern civilizations and other Middle-Eastern traditions because he detects in them a strange power which Modern man, the metaphoric Prufrock may bank upon to bring about a synthesis of global value systems thereby paving the way for a better future.

To any person belonging to the non-literary background, myths would connote things related to the past but T.S. Eliot escaping out of the vortex of time and reassuring in his 'Four Quartets' that "all time is eternally present" holds myths to be omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient.

In primitive communities, myths were expressive forms that satisfied man's primeval need of spiritual reassurance and social stability. Most myths address the elemental roots of an individual and deal with the five constituting elements of all matter- earth, fire, water, air and ether. When one chooses to dissociate from myths, one is actually getting severed from his elemental sense.

Eliot opined that one needs to restudy, reform and adapt the myths to rekindle one's imagination and prescribed injecting themselves with the elixir of these myths as a proposed solution for the state of anomie.

Myths	Their Implications
The Fisher King Myth	Spiritual impotency and emotional sterility
The Legend of the Holy Grail	Urgency for socio-cultural rejuvenation
Vegetation and Fertility Myths pertaining to Adonis, Attis and Osiris	Possibility of restoration
The Myth of Philomela	Inability to communicate when inflicted with violence
Buddha's Fire Sermon	Purging away material desires and disciplining the self
Tiresias from Greek mythology	Suggests in-betweenness between man/woman, sight/blindness.
The Myth of Tristan and Isolde	Alienation and death-in-life experience
St. Augustine's Confessions	Quest for salvation
Myth of Sibyl from 'Satyricon'	Craving death
Graeco-Roman and Eastern myths	As a supposed preventive against degradation
Biblical allusions	Disbelief over religious faiths
Miss Jessie L Weston's 'From Ritual to Romance'	Influenced the text's nomenclature signifying aridity and infertility
Sir James Frazer's 'The Golden Bough'	Fertility rituals bridging the past and present
Brihadaranyaka Upanishads	Formulaic Religio-mythical resolution to modern anomalies

Table 1: Myths embedded within 'The Waste Land'.

### Conclusion

Eliot was heavily influenced by world myths, to him myths were of Herculean significance. He foresaw a time when the Western man would be coaxed into a sense of abysmal loss of faith leading to a collapse and holocaust and then, rekindling the mythic sense of magic through the mystic generation of belief systems would be the ultimate resolution to rescue the European culture from the threat of extinction.

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