

What The Thunder Said: Sattva, Rajas and Tamas in T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land

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The ancient Hindu philosophy, chiefly the Samkhya school of thought believed in the dualistic concept. The prakriti and purusha analogous with the female spirit and male spirit respectively were regarded as the primal forces in creation. Coexistence and harmony between the two were essential for the sustenance of the world. All the actions are a manifestation of the prakriti. The social order, conventions and the consciousness of the individuals have been overshadowed by the tamasic aspect of prakriti. The coexistence between prakriti and purusha is of utmost importance for harmony in the world.

Purusha and prakriti are two abstract entities clearly defined in Samkhya philosophy. It is a dualistic and realistic philosophy which discusses the two main principles called purusha and prakriti in a detailed manner. Purusha and prakriti are two basic, opposite, independent and eternal principles that are the main cause and reason behind the human existence. Purusha is a Sanskrit term which means spirit, person, self or consciousness in Indian philosophy. In Samkhya it means the principle of spirit or pure consciousness. It represents the male aspect of creation. "Prakriti is the source from which the things of the world are produced; but it has also come to refer to all the products of prakriti, that is nature as a whole" (Taylor 1299). Prakriti is an active, changeable, earthly and eternal entity. It represents the female aspect of creation. The purusha is the universal cosmic male, the supreme Brahman, the subject as well as the object of sacrificial ceremonies, whose self-sacrifice results in the manifestation of life and worlds and by making a sacrifice to whom, a person gains an entry into the higher worlds or achieves liberation itself. "The principles of matter (prakriti) and consciousness (purusha) were transformed into cosmological and divine principles. Prakriti as the material cause of the world was understood as dependent on the divine principle, and was personified as a goddess"

(Taylor, 1300). According to Sir John Woodroffe, “there is Prakriti, taken from the Samkhya philosophy, primeval matter, Nature, who stands in contrast to Purusha, the male spirit, and is identical with Shakti” (Woodroffe 118). The concept of Purusha is well documented in the Vedas, especially in the Purushasukta of the Rigveda which describes how the worlds were created, beings came into existence, and the social order was established from the purusha. “Prakriti is better conceived of as force or power rather than a specific material object. It contains within it three different forces with three different qualities (gunas): sattva leads towards the good, rajas towards activity or passion and tamas towards darkness and decay” (Lochtefeld 556).

Similar to the Greek creation myths, the Indian creation myths also involve a male and female primal beings who bring forth the creation. According to the Rig Veda, it was the purusha or the cosmic male, who brought forth social order. Prakriti, the embodiment of the female, represented the nature. Sir John Woodroffe, identifies prakriti and purusha as the divinities Shiva and Shakti. As he mentions, “Shiva is the unchanging Consciousness and Shakti is its changing power appearing as mind and matter. Shiva-Shakti is therefore consciousness and its power” (Woodroffe 12). Shakti, the primal female force is similar to the idea of the supreme female being represented by Gaea, Nyx and the Eumenides in the Greek myths. While purusha is largely inert and passive, symbolizing the consciousness and cosmic order, prakriti is active and dynamic. The latter is the cause of action and changes. “The fully Real, therefore has two aspects: one called Shiva, the static aspect of consciousness and the other called Shakti, the kinetic aspect of the same” (Woodroffe 44). The coexistence and harmony between these two forces is essential for the survival of creation.

In *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot relies on different myths and legends to create a sardonic portrait of the modern man and his predicament. One of the sources he draws upon is the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. The dominant poetic voice of the 1920s, Eliot used an essential, allusive and elliptical technique to put across the view that modern western urban civilisation was sterile and unsatisfying. *The Waste Land* is divided into five sections. The “Burial of the Dead” introduces the diverse themes of disillusionment and despair. The second is “A Game of Chess” and the third, “The Fire Sermon,” shows the influence of Augustine and Eastern religions. The fourth is “Death by Water” and the fifth and final section is “What the Thunder said,” which features the influence of Indian thought on Eliot.

Eliot’s prescription for a new dawn is given in Part V — “What the Thunder Said.”

“Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
Waited for rain, while the black clouds
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.
The jungle crouched, humped in silence.

Then spoke the thunder
DA
Datta: what have we given?
My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only, we have existed
Which is not to be found in our obituaries
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider
Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor
In our empty rooms

DA
Dayadhvam: I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus

DA
Damyata: The boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
To controlling hands
I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad alludes to Prajapathi, the Creator, talking to his three offspring — Gods, Demons and Men. In the first Brahmana Chapter V, all the virtues are brought together under the three Da's which are heard in the voice of the thunder namely Dama or self-restraint for the Devas, Danas or self-sacrifice for the humans and Daya or compassion for the Demons.

In the Hindu tradition, the attributes of Sattva, Rajas and Tamas were associated with Gods, Humans and Demons respectively. Sattva manifests itself as purity, knowledge, and harmony. It is the quality of goodness, joy, satisfaction, nobility, and contentment. It is free of fear, violence, wrath, and malice. Sattvic quality is pure and forgiving. It is the guna that

people want to increase in order to reach the state of Samadhi or Liberation. Increasing sattva is possible by reducing rajas and tamas, both in one's mind and body. Rajas represents itself by passion, action, energy and motion. Rajas is characterized by a feeling of attachment, a longing for satisfaction and desire. Tamas manifests itself as impurity, laziness, and darkness. It is the consequence of ignorance and it prevents all beings from seeing reality.

The Gods, associated with Sattva are the most powerful beings in Prajapati's creation. Hence, the creator advises them to practice restraint. The humans associated with the trait of Rajas are by nature greedy and covetous. Prajapati advises the humans to develop the quality of generosity. The demons associated with the trait of Tamas are cruel. Hence, Prajapati exhorts them to be compassionate. Unless and until there is a subtle balance and harmony achieved between the three gunas, it is well-nigh impossible for the creation to sustain itself.

T.S. Eliot composed *The Waste Land* in the aftermath of the First World War. The chaos and destruction Europe had witnessed was beyond anything the human mind could conceive. The death, despair and disillusionment took its toll on the psyche of commoners as well as intellectuals who struggled to come to terms with a world beyond their comprehension. In *The Waste Land* T.S. Eliot offers solutions that could restore peace and order; these solutions have been drawn up from myths, legends and religious teachings. In the fifth section of the poem, Eliot alludes to the words of Prajapati from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. He is well and truly aware of the fact that unbridled power, greed and cruelty have been at the root of the destruction and chaos that engulfed Europe. The balance needs to be restored between the three gunas of Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. This can only be attained when the people conforming to the qualities of Sattva restrain their unbridled power. Likewise, the Rajasic class of people who are greedy and covetous need to learn generosity and the Tamasic class of people who are cruel, need to be compassionate. Thus, a balance can be attained in the society and the former harmony can be restored. By alluding to the teachings of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, T.S. Eliot tries to address the issues plaguing the human community; he also comes up with solutions in the light of the three gunas. Datta, Dayadhvam and Damyata or generosity, compassion and restraint are the solutions offered by Brihadaranyaka Upanishad for the creation's problems and Eliot refers to the same to confront the problems affecting Europe following the conclusion of the First World War.

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