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The Enduring Influence of Indian Knowledge System on English Literature : An Analysis

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Abstract

This study explores the profound and enduring influence of the Indian Knowledge System, specifically the Sanatan tradition and its core doctrines of Atman, Brahman, and Advaita Vedanta, on English literature. It delves into the intricate ways in which Indian philosophical, mythological, and cultural concepts have infused and reshaped the very fabric of English literary expression, impacting themes, motifs, and literary styles. By examining the contributions of key figures such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, T.S. Eliot, and W.B. Yeats, this research reveals how Indian traditional thought has seamlessly integrated into the Western literary consciousness, fundamentally altering philosophical perspectives and narrative structures. It analyses how these writers, drawn to the pristine philosophical essence of the Prasthan Trayi, absorbed and reinterpreted concepts of oneness, reincarnation, and ethical living, thereby highlighting the significant cross-cultural exchanges and influences that have enriched both literary traditions. These endeavors, acting as bridges between cultures, have facilitated a deeper understanding and appreciation of Indian thought within the English-speaking world. Thus, this ongoing exchange reflects the complexities and diversities inherent in both Indian and English cultural heritages, demonstrating that the dialogue between these two rich traditions remains a vital and transformative force in the world of literature.

***Keywords*:** Indian Knowledge System, English Literature, Cross-Cultural Influences, Literary Analysis, Philosophical and Mythological Concepts.

Introduction

Originating from the Indus and Ganges river valleys and guarded by the Himalayas, the ancient civilization of India was not secluded, as ongoing cultural exchanges were possible through trade and migration over land and sea. This interaction of cultures, especially in the sharing of knowledge, has profoundly influenced literary traditions around the world. As Emerson conceived India as "the land of mysticism and the cradle of civilization" (Mudge 377), although often considered distinct, English literature has historically incorporated and reinterpreted various influences, including the diverse Indian Knowledge System (IKS). The examination delves into the long-lasting impact of IKS on English literature, analyzing how ancient Indian philosophical, spiritual, and literary ideas have penetrated and enriched the Western literary prospect. From the earliest translations of Sanskrit literature to the significant influence of Indian philosophy on Romantic and Modernist authors, the IKS has been a source of inspiration that challenges traditional Western viewpoints and promotes a cross-cultural dialogue that continues to echo in modern literature.

Despite being suppressed for two centuries under colonial rule, the brilliance of India's ancient culture, known for its advanced knowledge in fields such as science, technology, philosophy, and religion, continues to shine. India's extensive heritage, which includes deep philosophical insights, spiritual

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practices, and ethical principles, has significantly shaped global thought, with the wisdom found in ancient Indian literature guiding many Western philosophers, thinkers, scientists, astronomers, and medical practitioners. The Vedas, Upanishads, Samhitas, and other foundational texts of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) remain a source of inspiration worldwide, underscoring the enduring relevance and international importance of this ancient knowledge base, even in the face of cultural suppression. This highlights the resilience of the IKS, whose influence has been integrated and reinterpreted within English literature, even though it is often viewed as a separate tradition.
Many Western texts have been profoundly influenced by the Indian Knowledge System throughout various movements and individual authors.

Nineteenth-century thinkers known as the Transcendentalists, like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, felt an enchanting attraction towards Vedanta philosophy, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita. These Indian texts deeply influenced how they observed the world earlier, emphasizing the idea that everything is associated, the importance of finding within oneself, and the need to live in a sense of balance with the natural world. Later, a global organization called the Theosophical Society that promotes a philosophy that seeks to understand the nature of divinity and the universe. This society was instrumental in bringing prominent individuals such as William Butler Yeats into contact with Indian philosophy, which profoundly influenced his views on the cosmological and mystical worlds. Modernist writers who understood the importance of Hindu and Buddhist texts, such as T.S. Eliot, included Sanskrit in their works. In addition to these movements, individual authors like Hermann Hesse actively engaged with Indian philosophies in works like "*Siddhartha,*" while Leo Tolstoy drew inspiration from the principle of Ahimsa, even communicating with Mahatma Gandhi. Aldous Huxley delved into Vedanta in his philosophical texts. In his intellectual writings, he examined Vedanta in great detail. He later had a close relationship with the Vedanta Society of Southern California. A lot of his writing, particularly "The Perennial Philosophy," was influenced by Vedantic ideas and concepts. Despite varying degrees of involvement, these writers collectively show the Indian Knowledge System's enduring and varied impact on the Western literary and intellectual landscape, underscoring a continuous intercultural dialogue.

Influence of Hinduism and spirituality on the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Ralph Waldo Emerson, a renowned essayist, poet, and philosopher, was born in 1803. His personality displays two sides of a single coin: on the one hand, he is highly analytical when it comes to Western ideology, but on the other, he is quite reflective when it comes to the quality of the Eastern knowledge system. Hindu mysticism and philosophy had a profound impact on Emerson from an early age. The Gita, Upanishads, Manu, Vedas, and Vishnu are among the texts that inspired him all in his life. Emerson's ideas were greatly impacted by the Indian Vedas and Upanishads, which had a significant impact on him. In this regard, F.I. Carpenter, in his '*Emerson and Asia*' points out, His reading of Indian literature forms one of the most important chapters in the story of his literary development, for not only did he owe his poems '*Brahma*' and '*Hamatreya*' entirely to Hindu works, but large parts of his essays on *Plato*, *Fate*, *Illusions*, and *Immortality* are based on Hindu thought, and his famous '*Sphinx*' probably shares in it. (Carpenter 104).

A lot of Emerson's thinking came from Indian philosophy. Especially he laid much emphasis on the four concepts of Hinduism, namely, Brahma, Maya, Karma, and Atman. Back in 1836, when his book '*Nature*' came out, Emerson had been reading the '*Code of Manu*' which was an Indian text. The book's idea about being independent and focusing on self-reliance is this: "Single is each man born, single he dies, single he receives the reward of his good, and single the punishment" (Harris 175). He discovered a lot of Eastern-derived notions and ideas, mostly from Hinduism, or more specifically, Advaita Vedanta. His poem '*Hamatreya*' was inspired by a section of the Vishnu Purana. The character Maitreya from the Vishnu Purana is adapted in "Hamatreya." Emerson's poem "Brahma" most likely captures the essence of Hindu philosophy more effectively and precisely than any other text in the English language, possibly even more so than any work in Hindu literature itself. Brahma is one of Emerson's best poems

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and a profound and nuanced rethinking of the Hindu concept of absolute unity. It is also one of the best representations of the Hindu concept. (Carpenter 110-11)

The idea of Brahma came to him after his extensive reading of the Hindu Vedas. He wrote in his journal, "Then I discovered the secret of the world: that all things subsist, and do not die, but only retire a little from sight and afterwards return again" (*The Journals* VII 127). His essays, such as The Over-Soul, further explore these themes, echoing the Vedantic idea of the Atman (individual soul) being a part of the universal Brahman. He also believed in the concept of Maya and how it deludes all in this world. He completely agrees with the notion of Maya and believes that the whole world consists of Maya. His essay "Illusion" is based on the concept of Maya. Emerson was highly influenced by the translated version of the Bhagavad Gita by Charles Wilkins. Emerson recognized Hindu religious beliefs and philosophy after reading the Bhagavad Gita. He wrote, "I owed - my friend and I,- owed a magnificent day to the Bhagavad Gita. It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercises us" (qtd in. Mudge 386). Thus Emerson's work reflects the Indian thought and his deep engagement with Indian philosophy, exploring concepts like Brahma, Atman, Maya, and Karma in essays such as '*The Over-Soul*', '*Brahma*' and '*The Conduct of Life*'. His readings of the Bhagavad Gita had a profound impact, inspiring him to encourage others to explore ancient Hindu texts.

Influence of Eastern philosophy and spirituality on the writing of T.S. Eliot: T.S. Eliot was highly influenced by the Indian knowledge system. He extensively studied Sanskrit, Pali and Indian philosophy, religion and spirituality at Harvard University (an eminent center for Orient studies) between 1911 and 1914 and had a profound and varied influence on his thinking. Eliot had a close relationship with both Buddhism and Hinduism, which had a significant impact on his poetry and worldview. He also studied Patanjali '*Yoga-sutra*'. **He drew considerable influence from Irving Babbitt,** whose "system of thought was based upon the study of the *Pali* manuscripts, the earliest authentic Buddhist documents" (Mayo 173). His use of the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Patanjali's 'Yoga Sutras, and Buddhist texts as inspiration for his writings demonstrates Eliot's passion for Indian literature. There are numerous overt references to Indian philosophy in his well-known works, including *Four Quartets, The Waste Land, To the Indians Who Died in Africa,* and *The Cocktail Party*. Not only this, Eliot was also greatly influenced by the Gita, and he believed it, "the next greatest philosophical poem to the *Divine Comedy* within my experience" (*Selected Essays* 258).

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is significantly infused with Indian philosophical and cultural references, reflecting his deep interest in Indian philosophy. The third section of the poem titled "The Fire Sermon" (Adittapariyaya Sutta), is a clear allusion to Buddhist text. This part of the poem is wholly inspired by the sermon given by Gautama Buddha at Sarnath under the Bodhi tree, where he taught his pupil about the agony of modern man and his sufferings brought on by his reckless pursuit of passion and desire, which are characterized as being "on fire" and finding the path of Nirvana. In the fifth section of the poem, "What the Thunder Said" Eliot has suggested a Vedic-based solution. A significant source of inspiration for this section is the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad tells a story about Prajapati, the creator, and his three kinds of children: gods, humans, and demons. After they lived with him for a while, learning like students, the gods asked for guidance. Prajapati simply said "Da" and asked if they understood. The gods replied they did: he meant "Control yourselves" (damyata). Prajapati agreed. Then the humans asked for their instruction. Again, Prajapati said, "Da." The humans understood it as "Give" (datta), and Prajapati confirmed their understanding. Finally, the demons asked for their teaching. Prajapati said "Da" once more. The demons took it to mean "Be compassionate" (dayadhvam), and Prajapati said they were right. The story goes that even now, the sound of thunder echoes this "Da," "Da," "Da," reminding everyone to practice these three things: self-control, giving, and compassion. That's why, the text says, people should learn and live by these virtues. (qtd. in North 62-63)**.** At the end of the poem, the Sanskrit phrase "Shantih shantih shantih (शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः)" recurs. This is a traditional prayer for peace that appears at the conclusion of the Upanishads.

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Eliot's use of it conveys a desire for a deep and comprehensive tranquility that surpasses the chaos and confusion the poem portrays. Here, seeking peace is on three levels physical, mental, and spiritual or finding relief from internal conflicts, external issues, and supernatural powers is one common interpretation of the triple recurrence. T.S. Eliot's deep interest in Indian philosophy and knowledge systems sets him apart from many writers of his era.

Echos of Eastern wisdom in the writing of W.B. Yeats: W.B. Yeats, like Emerson and T.S. Eliot, was also significantly influenced by Indian philosophy and knowledge systems. The modern literary genius Yeats made a lasting impression on poetry with his writings, which reveal a deep interest in Hinduism and spirituality. When Yeats joined the Theosophical Society in 1890, it was largely via this association that he first became familiar with Indian philosophy. Through a Theosophical prism, this early stage exposed him to ideas like rebirth, karma, and the notion of a unified mind. Yeats's poetic vision was also greatly influenced by Hinduism, with its mythological stories and spiritual philosophy. Drawing on Hindu mythology, the poem "Byzantium" from "The Tower" refers to the idea of the "gyres" as a representation of the Hindu Yugas, or cyclic years. Beyond merely examining Hinduism thematically, Yeats became deeply involved in studying Hindu philosophy and Sanskrit literature. Poems like "The Gyres," in which he contrasts his own intellectual thoughts on history and life with the Hindu idea of returning time, demonstrate his involvement with Hinduism. Therefore, W.B. Yeats, much like his contemporaries Emerson and T.S. Eliot, was profoundly impacted by Indian philosophy and the Indian Knowledge System.

Conclusion

To sum up, this investigation shows how the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) had a significant and varied impact on three important writers and thinkers in Western literary and intellectual history: Ralph Waldo Emerson, T.S. Eliot, and W.B. Yeats. From Emerson's early immersion in Vedanta and the Bhagavad Gita to Eliot's academic study of Buddhist and Sanskrit texts to Yeats's exploration of Theosophy and direct translation of the Upanishads, each writer incorporated fundamental ideas of Indian philosophy and spirituality into their ideas and artistic creations through different paths of engagement. With their distinct voices and settings, these authors highlight the IKS's timeless strength and universality, demonstrating its ability to cut across national and cultural borders and enhance Western literary and intellectual traditions. Their involvement is a potent illustration of the East's role as both a recipient and an essential contributor to the global intellectual landscape, promoting an ongoing and dynamic cross-cultural dialogue that still has an impact on how we perceive the human condition and the pursuit of meaning. The IKS's value as a source of wisdom that has questioned, inspired, and eventually expanded the boundaries of Western thought and artistic expression is solidly established by its tremendous influence on these literary giants.

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