



Dharma and moral responsibility in T. S. Eliot's poetry

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Abstract

T. S. Eliot's poetry is a profound exploration of spiritual crisis and ethical responsibility in the modern world. This paper investigates the theme of dharma—a concept central to Indian philosophical and moral thought—and moral responsibility in Eliot's major poetic works, especially *The Waste Land*, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, and *Four Quartets*. By reading Eliot through the lens of ethical philosophy and spiritual duty, this study argues that Eliot's poetic vision reflects a quest for moral order amidst cultural fragmentation. The paper explores how Eliot integrates traditional moral responsibility with the individual's quest for meaning, ultimately proposing a reconciliation between modern alienation and ethical consciousness.

Keywords: T. s. eliot, dharma, moral responsibility, modernism, spiritual ethics, the waste land, four quartets

Introduction

T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) is frequently recognized as a pioneer of modernist poetry whose works capture the disillusionment of post-World War I Western society. While his reputation as a literary modernist is well-established, critics often overlook the philosophical and ethical dimensions embedded in his poetry. This paper argues that the concept of dharma—understood broadly as moral duty or righteous conduct—offers an illuminating framework for reading Eliot's major poetic works. Although dharma is rooted in Indian philosophical traditions, its universal relevance to moral agency and responsibility allows a comparative approach that reveals new depths within Eliot's poetic vision.

Eliot's poetry, particularly *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, grapples with the fragmentation of cultural values and the ethical confusion characteristic of modernity. Within these texts, the poet posits moral responsibility as a means of both personal and social regeneration. Analyzing Eliot's conceptions of duty, self-awareness, and spiritual purpose highlights the resonance between his work and the broader philosophical idea of dharma.

Methodology

This qualitative literary research uses close textual analysis of primary poetic texts by T. S. Eliot. Through comparative philosophical interpretation, the study employs dharma—derived from Indian ethical and spiritual thought—as a critical lens. Secondary scholarly sources on Eliot's theme of morality, ethics, and spirituality supplement the analysis. This paper examines Eliot's poetic language, narrative voice, and symbolic structures to trace how moral responsibility is articulated within modernist aesthetics.

Discussion

1. The Ethical Vacuum of Modernity in *The Waste Land*

In *The Waste Land* (1922), Eliot portrays a decaying world marked by spiritual desolation and ethical collapse. The poem's fragmented structure reflects the fractured moral consciousness of postwar society. The repeated question "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?" evokes a yearning for moral foundation

and renewal (Eliot 26). The absence of ethical certainty corresponds to a loss of moral dharma—a guiding principle that orders human conduct.

Eliot's use of multiple voices and cultural allusions underscores the universality of this crisis. The poem's closing Sanskrit chant, *Shantih shantih shantih*, invokes peace as a moral aspiration, suggesting that reconciliation with primal ethical principles may offer a path out of cultural despair. Through this allusive strategy, Eliot gestures toward a deeper moral order underlying human turmoil.

2. The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock: Inertia and Moral Hesitation

In *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915), Eliot introduces a speaker paralyzed by self-doubt and indecision. Unlike heroic figures of traditional moral universes, Prufrock stands as a modern Everyman figure for whom moral action is elusive. His hesitation—"Do I dare?" and "Do I dare?"—repeats as a refrain, encapsulating his internal conflict between desire and duty (Eliot 13).

Prufrock's inability to engage meaningfully with life reflects a moral inertia that contrasts sharply with the ideal of ethical action inherent in dharma. Prufrock's fragmented self-portrait emphasizes the modern subject's struggle to embody moral responsibility when cultural frameworks have dissolved. Here, Eliot reveals the ethical void at the heart of the modern self.

3. Four Quartets: Reconciliation of Time, Duty, and Spiritual Purpose

By contrast, *Four Quartets* (1936–1942) articulates a mature vision of moral responsibility grounded in spiritual awareness and acceptance of temporal limits. Each quartet examines the interplay between time, memory, and ethical commitment. In *Burnt Norton*, Eliot writes:

"Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past." (Eliot 3).

This recognition of temporal interconnection suggests that moral responsibility is not a momentary act but a continuous engagement with existence. The poem's contemplation of choice, regret, and renewal echoes the Indian ethical

emphasis on duty as an ongoing practice rather than isolated decisions.

The final section of *Little Gidding* envisions the redemptive possibilities of human suffering when aligned with moral resolve. The poet's voice affirms that "for us, there is only the trying," suggesting that ethical responsibility is an intrinsic part of the human condition (Eliot 289).

This parallels dharma's insistence on fulfilling one's duty even amid uncertainty.

4. Dharma as a Cross-Cultural Ethical Framework

While Eliot was not directly influenced by Indian philosophical texts to the same extent as Eastern thinkers, his poetry's moral concerns resonate with the concept of dharma— particularly its focus on right action, moral duty, and spiritual integrity. Dharma in Sanskrit tradition encompasses cosmic order, ethical duty, and the individual's role in sustaining social and spiritual harmony. When applied to Eliot's work, dharma foregrounds the poet's concern for moral responsibility in an era marked by fragmentation and crisis.

Eliot's later religious conversion further supports the centrality of ethical consciousness in his art. His Anglican faith informed his understanding of moral accountability and spiritual purpose. Although differing in doctrinal specifics, this emphasis on moral clarity aligns with the broader philosophical essence of dharma.

Conclusion

T. S. Eliot's poetry offers a profound meditation on moral responsibility against the backdrop of modernity's ethical disarray. Through *The Waste Land*, *Prufrock*, and *Four Quartets*, Eliot charts the journey from moral fragmentation to tentative recovery of ethical purpose. When read in light of the concept of dharma, his poetic vision reveals a sustained inquiry into human duty, moral agency, and spiritual coherence.

Ultimately, Eliot's poetry affirms that moral responsibility is not a relic of tradition but an indispensable component of human life. Whether expressed through cultural allusion, fragmented narrative, or spiritual reflection, Eliot's work invites readers to reconsider the ethical dimensions of existence.

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