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## **Cross-Cultural Aesthetics: The Role of Eastern Philosophy in Shaping the Modernist Works of T.S Eliot, W.B Yeats, and Hermann Hesse**

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**Abstract:** The early 20th century was a period of the most intense cultural interaction between the East and the West, which greatly affected the modernist literature. To name but a few, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and Hermann Hesse were neither the only nor the last to infuse Eastern philosophical ideas, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, in their works. Such inclusion was the main shaping feature of their thematic issues and the new approach in their writing. This paper discusses the impact of the modernist literature on such ideas as cyclicity, non-self, and transcendence with these five texts: *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets*, *The Second Coming*, *Sailing to Byzantium*, and *Siddhartha* in detail. The main point is that Eastern philosophies were used as vehicles to enable modernist writers to explore alternative perspectives on spiritual renewal, non-duality, and impermanence. The modernist representatives did not rely solely on their own folklore and myth but instead engaged in Eastern (Asian) spirit ideas, time concepts, and the arts as well, thus providing fertile ground for East-West unification of thought. This research illustrates how transnational interactions between cultures reconstructed the Western literary heritage and thus how the modernist project of seeking for meaning in times of fast changes was taken to deeper levels.

**Keywords:** Eastern philosophy, modernism, cross-cultural aesthetics, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, cyclicity, non-self, transcendence, literary modernism, spiritual renewal.

### **Introduction to Cross-Cultural Aesthetics**

Western literature underwent significant transformation at the beginning of the 20th century, both in relation to conceptions and aesthetics, primarily as a result of the exchange of ideas between Eastern and Western writers. Globalization helped transform thought processes in Europe and America (and ultimately throughout the world); hence, writers, such as T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and Hermann Hesse, grew increasingly engaged in studying Eastern philosophies and greatly incorporated elements drawn from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism into their Modernist works. This fusing of cultural influences has allowed writers of this period to address issues such as identity, time, and spirituality in innovative new ways. By examining the nature of these interactions (referred to here as "Cross-Cultural Aesthetics"), this research attempts to



demonstrate how Eastern philosophy functions as a significant framework through which Modernist authors examined themes such as Cyclical, Self-Transcendence, and Interconnectedness, thereby offering a uniquely profound impact on the evolution of Modernism in Western literature.

Scholars like Edward Said and Roger T. Ames argue that the West's turn toward Eastern thought during modernism was not just about fascination but a response to the crisis following the World War I, which shook belief in progress, reason, and individualism. In *Orientalism*, Said explains how the West often reinterpreted the East through its own perspective, yet Eastern philosophies still offered a more fluid and interconnected way of understanding the reality. Drawing on these ideas, modernist writers began to question fixed identities and linear histories, exploring themes like impermanence, cyclical time, and the diminishing centrality of the "I," ultimately using Eastern thoughts not as a replacement but as a lens to rethink and reshape Western literary traditions.

Furthermore, translated Eastern literature, especially texts such as Bhagavad Gita, Buddhist sutras, and Taoist literature, provided Western scholars with an opportunity to access these alternative forms of thought. This cultural cross-fertilization has been described by David Damrosch in 'What Is World Literature?' as providing 'new energy to literary forms' (Damrosch, 2003). The philosophies revealed through these texts were a major resource for authors such as Eliot and Hesse, who had a great deal of engagement with Eastern literature, allowing them to explore a new method of creating art and defining identity beyond the parameters of Western existentialism. This paper will illustrate that the aesthetic intersections between Eastern and Western thought have reshaped modernist writing and can serve to create a larger, more inclusive definition of world literature.

### **Cross-Cultural Exchanges in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art and Literature**

The modernist era, known for its absence of formal constraints, was also for its incorporation of cross-cultural influences. In her work, *Memory in Literature*, Suzanne Nalbantian explains that modern Western literature's experimentations opened Western literature to Eastern influences. Nalbantian notes that Eastern thought was, due to its cyclical view of time, and fluid perception of self, (Eastern thought) was dominantly Western. In post-war literature, W.B Yeats and T.S. Eliot, as Hermann Hesse, embraced Eastern spirituality



and perception, and applied Eastern thought to their literature, altering and expanding the possibilities of the literary art of structure, thematic layering, and character self-perception.

The synthesis of Western and Eastern thought led to the first establishment of Eastern philosophical societies in the West. Furthermore, during this time, the West saw the rise of academic work that interpreted Eastern thought for Western consumption. This was further facilitated by the translation of the Buddhist canon and the *Upanishads*, as well as the publishing endeavours of Sir Edwin Arnold. As such, Eliot's literature, particularly *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, reflects this postulate of intertextuality. Eliot's literature was non-dual, cyclic and transcended the Eastern. This study assesses how contemporary literature was enriched from the engagement with Eastern philosophies by Western writers, and how this affected their perspectives on, and approaches to, the reformulation of the spirit, the act of artistic creation, and the concept of the self.

### **Eastern Philosophy and its Influence on Modernist Literature**

Eastern philosophy introduced a suite of transformative ideas to modernist literature, particularly through concepts like cyclicity, non-self, and transcendence. By integrating these perspectives, writers such as T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and Hermann Hesse challenged Western norms of linearity, individualism, and materialism. Their works reveal how Eastern philosophical ideas provided fresh insights into identity, time, and existence, pushing modernist aesthetics toward greater complexity and a synthesis of global intellectual traditions.

Eastern ideas of time offered modernist writers a way to rethink a world that no longer felt stable. In traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism, time is not a straight line but a cycle, constantly moving through birth, death, and renewal. This perspective shapes the poetry of T. S. Eliot, especially in *Four Quartets*, where time seems to circle back on itself rather than move forward. His image of the “still point of the turning world” captures a sense of calm within motion, echoing Eastern thought. After the upheaval of the World War I, Eliot found it difficult to believe in steady progress, and his engagement with texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* reflects a search for meaning beyond Western frameworks. In *The Waste Land*, the line “Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata” quietly suggests that even in destruction, there is the possibility of renewal. A similar idea appears in the work of W. B. Yeats, who imagined history as a series of repeating patterns. In *A Vision* and poems like *The Second*



*Coming*, his idea of the gyre presents time as a cycle of rise and fall, where endings are never final but part of an ongoing transformation.

Alongside this rethinking of time, Eastern philosophy also reshaped how modernist writers approached the idea of the self. The Buddhist concept of selflessness challenges the belief in a fixed, independent identity, suggesting instead that the self is always changing and deeply connected to the world around it. This idea is central to Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, where the protagonist's journey is not about achieving success but about letting go of the ego. His eventual sense of peace comes from recognizing his unity with all life, rather than asserting his individuality. Even in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, identity feels unstable, with multiple voices blending into one another, reflecting a world where the idea of a single, coherent self no longer holds. By drawing on these Eastern ideas, both writers move away from the Western focus on individualism and instead explore a more fluid and interconnected sense of being.

At the same time, the theme of transcendence becomes a powerful thread linking these works. In Eastern traditions, transcendence is not about escaping the world but about moving beyond attachment and finding inner balance. This can be seen in Yeats's *Sailing to Byzantium*, where the desire to move beyond the physical world is tied to a search for spiritual unity rather than mere immortality. Eliot's *Four Quartets* also reflects this inward journey, suggesting that peace lies not in controlling time but in accepting it and finding stillness within it. Across these works, Eastern philosophy offers modernist writers a different way of thinking about life, one that accepts change, questions the ego, and seeks meaning beyond material success. In doing so, Eliot, Yeats, and Hesse create literature that feels both deeply personal and broadly universal, shaped by a dialogue between cultures that continues to resonate even today.

### **Comparative Analysis of Eastern and Western Aesthetics**

Modernist writers found themselves at a crossroads between two very different ways of seeing the world. On one hand, Western aesthetics shaped by Romanticism and its aftermath placed great value on individuality, personal expression, and a forward-moving sense of time. On the other hand, Eastern philosophies such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism offered a contrasting vision rooted in interconnectedness, impermanence, and cyclical existence. Rather than choosing one over the other, writers like Eliot, Yeats, and Hesse drew from both traditions, using their tension to rethink questions of identity,



time, and spirituality. This blending allowed them to challenge rigid Western ideas and open up more fluid, introspective modes of literary expression.

The way modernist texts think about the self is really different. Older Western books usually liked to talk about people being strong and individual. Modernist books start to ask if that kind of self really exists. They were influenced by Eastern ideas like the idea of no self. So writers started to show that people are made up of lots of parts and that we are all connected to each other.

For example in *The Waste Land*, Eliot does not just use one voice. Instead he uses lots of voices that overlap and show how mixed up perceptions are. Hesses *Siddhartha* is similar to this. It is not one person trying to achieve great things. It is about a person who learns to let go of themselves and become one with others. In both of these books the modernist texts are not trying to show who someone is. They are trying to show that it is better to let go of who you're. The modernist texts think that you can only really understand things if you stop trying to define the self and just let it go. The self is not the important thing and modernist texts, like *The Waste Land* and *Siddhartha* show this.

This dialogue between East and West also reshapes how modernist writers think about time, permanence, and fulfillment. Western traditions often sought to preserve meaning through art or legacy, but Eastern philosophies emphasize that everything is in flux. Yeats captures this tension in *Sailing to Byzantium*, where the desire for artistic immortality coexists with an awareness of life's transience. Eliot too reflects on time in *Four Quartets*, where moments of stillness exist within constant movement, echoing a more cyclical view of existence. At the same time, both Eliot and Hesse critique the Western focus on material success, turning instead toward spiritual insight and inner peace. By weaving together these contrasting perspectives, modernist writers create a richer, more nuanced vision of human experience, one that accepts change, questions the ego, and seeks meaning beyond the material world.

### **Integration of Recent Scholarship in Cross-Cultural Aesthetics**

The engagement of Eastern philosophy in Western modernist literature has long attracted scholarly attention, but recent criticism has added new layers of complexity to this discussion. Today, the focus is not limited to influence alone, but extends to how ideas travel, transform, and sometimes resist being fully understood across cultures. Scholars have begun to question whether these exchanges are as smooth as they



appear, or whether something is always lost or reshaped in the process. Including these newer perspectives makes the study of writers like T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and Hermann Hesse more grounded and relevant within a global literary context.

For instance, Emily Apter, in her book *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, introduces the concept of “untranslatability,” arguing that not all cultural or philosophical ideas move easily between languages and traditions. This becomes especially interesting when examining T. S. Eliot’s use of ideas from the *Bhagavad Gita* in *The Waste Land*. The line “Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata” carries deep philosophical meaning, yet in Eliot’s poem it appears in a condensed, almost symbolic form. Apter’s argument encourages us to reflect on how much of the original meaning survives this shift and how much is reshaped to fit a different literary and cultural framework.

At the same time, scholars like Sneja Gunew and Timothy Brennan help us see these writers not merely as borrowers of ideas, but as active participants in cross-cultural dialogue. In *Post-Multicultural Writers as Neo-Cosmopolitan Mediators*, Gunew explains how writers act as bridges between traditions, creatively reworking influences. This is evident in the works of Yeats and Hesse, where texts like *Sailing to Byzantium* and *Siddhartha* reflect a thoughtful blending of Eastern and Western thought. Brennan, however, adds a critical dimension by highlighting the power dynamics involved in such exchanges, especially in a postcolonial context. His work reminds us that these engagements are never neutral and are shaped by historical and cultural inequalities. Taken together, these perspectives show that the relationship between Eastern and Western aesthetics is complex, layered, and constantly evolving.

### **Conclusion**

The meeting of Eastern and Western thought in modernist literature reshapes how identity, existence, and spirituality are understood. Writers like T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and Hermann Hesse did not simply borrow ideas from Eastern philosophy; they used them to question deeply rooted Western assumptions about the self and the desire for permanence. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot’s shifting, fragmented voices unsettle the idea of a stable identity, while in *Sailing to Byzantium*, Yeats reflects on the tension between the longing for permanence and the inevitability of change. Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, in its quiet and reflective way, moves even further, suggesting that the self is not something to be built or achieved, but something to be understood



through connection and experience. Together, these works move away from the idea of the isolated individual and toward a more shared, interconnected sense of being.

At the same time, these writers question the growing focus on material success that defined much of modern Western life. Instead of celebrating achievement or external progress, they turn inward, exploring what it means to live meaningfully. In *Siddhartha*, fulfilment comes not from wealth or status but from inner clarity and harmony with the world. Eliot's poetry, especially, captures a sense of spiritual exhaustion in modern society, yet it also gestures toward renewal through reflection and detachment. What emerges is not a rejection of the world, but a rethinking of what truly matters, shifting attention from what we possess to how we understand ourselves and our place within a larger whole.

By bringing these different philosophical traditions into conversation, modernist writers open up a richer and more flexible way of thinking about human life. Their work suggests that identity is not fixed, that change is not something to resist, and that meaning cannot be found in surface achievements alone. Instead, they invite readers to sit with uncertainty, to recognize the value of impermanence, and to explore the deeper, often quieter dimensions of existence. In a world that often feels fragmented and fast-moving, this blending of perspectives continues to feel relevant, reminding us that the search for meaning and connection is something shared across cultures, histories, and time.

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