

ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LITERARY THEORY IN INDIAN UNIVERSITIES: INDIAN AND WESTERN ONTOLOGICAL AND AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract. This paper examines the role of philosophical frameworks, especially the ontological and aesthetic ones, in shaping literary interpretations. The main focus of the study is the discipline of English studies in Indian universities. The paper argues that literary analysis is inseparable from underlying philosophical assumptions, and that English studies classrooms in India uniquely negotiate a plurality of Western and indigenous theoretical traditions. The study undertakes a comparative analysis of representative Western and Indian theorists, Virginia Woolf and Sri Aurobindo respectively. While Woolf conceptualizes reality as fluid and subjective, Aurobindo envisions it as an evolving spiritual continuum which is oriented towards higher states of being. These opposing premises generate contrasting aesthetic requirements from literature. While Woolf aspires for psychological realism, Aurobindo desires “mantric” spiritual expression. The paper applies these frameworks to T.S Eliot’s poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to demonstrate how the same text yields differing interpretive outcomes. It shows that Prufrock’s fragmented consciousness can be read both as an authentic representation of lived reality and as an unevolved state of being lacking spiritual transcendence, depending on the lens through which it is seen. The study highlights the productive possibilities inherent in integrating Indian and Western philosophical paradigms in literary studies and envisions a dynamic future for the disciplines of English in Indian universities, particularly in its role in shaping the evolution of world literature in English.

Keywords: Ontology, Aesthetics, Sri Aurobindo, Virginia Woolf, Comparative Literary Theory.

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§ Manuscript received: 26-04-2026; accepted: 02-06-2026.

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1. Introduction

In the diverse landscape of various literature department classrooms across different universities, one thing is fairly common. When a literary text is explored in the class, when it is discussed, the discussion and exploration essentially open a channel of connection between what can be called literary and the domain that lies beyond it. One can call that domain theoretical. Even though the theories are called literary theories, their foundations are almost always philosophical. Literary creativity gives expression to the abstract philosophical ideas and it is the exploration of those ideas and the exploration of different ways of manifesting those ideas in a given text or genre, that makes academic engagement with literature deeper than mere story reading. This is the hallmark of all literary studies, and English literary studies are no exception. Be it the romantic sensibilities of Wordsworth, metaphysical intellectualities of Donne or centreless structures of Eliot, a concrete literary lesson in the classroom of English department is marked by the analysis of the abstract behind it, and also the analysis of the ways the abstract manifests itself through the poetic expression. In other words, a study of literature, in English or any other language, can hardly be separated from the perception and observation of philosophical concepts. However, it becomes especially significant for English departments across Indian universities, because here the teachers and students have to deal with a vast gamut of philosophical concepts which not only brings in the innumerable shades of human thoughts but also are, sometimes, contradictory in their scope and rationale to each other. They engage not only with the Enlightenment rationalism and transcendental idealism of Europe, not only the Avant garde and the postmodern, they also deal with the philosophy of Rasa and Dhvani of ancient India, the idea of the cycle of manifestation of existence in authors like Sri Aurobindo as well as the postcolonial and nation building phases of literary expressions leading sometimes to the solid ground of cultural revivalism and sometimes flowing into diasporic fluidity. And all these various concepts shape the way of understanding, analysis, appreciation and criticism of a literary text. The present paper proposes to explore the way this tends to work in the field of English literary studies in India with special reference to chosen philosophical concepts of Western and Indian heritages. In other words, the study proposes an analysis of the meaning making mechanism of literary texts through philosophical concepts. For the purpose of a comparative analysis, two modern aesthetic thinkers have been engaged with who represent the epistemological variance in Western and Indian systems. From Western world, I have chosen Virginia Woolf and from Indian side the study considers Sri Aurobindo. The reason for the choice is not only that they are

both 20th century thinkers, but also that in both their works we clearly see an amalgamation of both ontological and aesthetic perspectives and they both marked a departure from the dominant modes of literary thinking of their time. The analysis will be comparative in nature and will be aimed at finding the points of convergence and divergence between them. A chosen literary text will be used for the analysis. In this context, the paper is going to shift its attention to two foundational branches of philosophy: ontology and aesthetics. The reason these two are specifically chosen is they are found to be linked with each other. The study of being and existence probes the fundamental questions of human existence and reality, the study of the nature of beauty, taste, and artistic expression on the other hand, frames how we perceive and interpret that reality through sensory and emotional experiences. And these philosophical inquiries become lenses through which literary narratives are constructed and themes are explored by the authors. Not only that, the reader's responses too are shaped by them. Philosophical contexts provide critical framework for understanding the deeper layers of literary texts.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

In the Western world, from ancient Greek philosophers like Parmenides and Plato to modern thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, ontological inquiries have evolved to encompass diverse perspectives and methodologies, yet they remain united in their quest to grasp the fundamental fabric of reality. Aesthetics, on the other hand, shifts the focus to the realm of experiences, particularly the experience of beauty, taste, and artistic expression. Rooted in the ancient Greek concepts of aesthetics articulated by philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, this branch of philosophy too has come a long way from classical theories of beauty and proportion to modern explorations of the sublime and the avant-garde. Indian philosophical traditions, however marginalised within this dominant discourse, do offer distinctive insights from their own perspectives. Indian philosophies are not only rooted in millennia-old texts such as the Nyāya Sūtras, Brahma-sūtras, Upaniṣads, and the philosophical treatises of thinkers like Shankara and Nagarjuna. They too have evolved with time and interestingly seminal texts like Nāṭyaśāstra, Dhvanyāloka, Aucitya-vicāra-carcā and Nyāya Sūtras seem to achieve a seamless merger of ontological and aesthetic theories in a flow.

In 1945 David Daiches in his work *Virginia Woolf* stated that Woolf's rejection of Edwardian realism and her search for an "ideal" fiction helped to capture the "pattern behind appearances". He stated that Woolf's idea of using stream of consciousness of the characters to represent their inner life actually captures the true locus of reality. For Daiches, Woolf's "Modern Fiction" is both aesthetic experimentation and epistemological inquiry.

In 1957 Erich Auerbach in his work *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* interpreted that modernist writers like Virginia Woolf had transformed the notion of realism. He stated that Woolf had replaced external, material reality with interior psychological depth, where truth lies in subjective perception and momentary consciousness. Reality, therefore, becomes fragmented and fluid.

In 1960 Sisir Kumar Das in his book *A History of Indian Literature* (Vol. 2) highlighted how *The Future Poetry* by Sri Aurobindo synthesised the aesthetic aspects of poetry like those of sound, rhythm etc with the spiritual intuition of human mind. Das called his concept an examples of distinctly Indian aesthetic modernity. He also underlined the fact that Aurobindo believed that future poetry will embody a universal consciousness, not merely individual expression.

In 1972, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar in his book *Sri Aurobindo: A Biography and a History*, attempted to situate Aurobindo's poetics within both Indian and Western traditions. He stated that Aurobindo's concept of poetry moves beyond aesthetic pleasure and enters the level of what he called spiritual illumination, where poetry becomes a means of realizing higher consciousness. He successfully pointed out the "mantric" dimension of poetry that was important for Aurobindo and stated that for Aurobindo, poetry is revelatory rather than representational.

In 1975 came the revised edition of Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* in which he argued that interpretation is shaped by historically conditioned consciousness. He also stated that meaning is not fixed in the text but emerges through what he calls a 'fusion of horizons' between reader and text. Ontologically, the text exists as an event of understanding; aesthetically, interpretation is a participatory experience, not objective analysis.

A more recent work titled *A Comparative Study of the Indian Poetics and the Western Poetics* by Mohit K. Ray published in 2008 has done systematic comparison between the Indian and Western theoretical frameworks. He discussed about the existence of what he calls 'literary universal' across cultures and provided a comparative mapping of various concepts across the world.

The comparative study of Indian and Western poetics, however, did not begin only in the contemporary period. Several major scholars had already laid the intellectual foundations for comparative aesthetics long before the publication of Mohit K. Ray's work. Thinkers such as K. C. Pandey, Krishna Rayan, Raniero Gnoli, and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy played a pioneering role in bringing Indian aesthetic traditions into dialogue with Western literary and philosophical frameworks. K. C. Pandey's studies on Indian aesthetics and

poetics explored the metaphysical foundations underlying Sanskrit literary theory, while Krishna Rayan's works attempted to interpret Indian poetic concepts in relation to modern literary criticism. Raniero Gnoli's translations and studies of Abhinavagupta significantly contributed to the global understanding of Rasa theory, especially its philosophical and spiritual dimensions. Similarly, Ananda Coomaraswamy consistently argued for the intellectual and aesthetic sophistication of Indian artistic traditions and challenged the colonial tendency to marginalize them within global aesthetic discourse. These foundational studies established the methodological basis for comparative literary aesthetics and made it possible for later scholars to systematically examine the convergences and divergences between Indian and Western theoretical traditions. The present study therefore situates itself within this larger trajectory of comparative aesthetic inquiry.

3. Methodology

While dealing with Virginia Woolf's concepts of reality as well as literature, I have used her essay "Modern Fiction". In this essay her major point consists of the idea that reality is not external and fixed. Rather, it is fluid, subjective, and constructed through consciousness. But when we peep into that consciousness of a being we find that the being is, at its best, experienced as fragmented and shifting. Based on this ontological concept, her aesthetic theory focuses on the inner life and perception of a character, leading to the literary techniques like plotless stories, stream of consciousness etc, because, literature, she believes, should capture all the atoms of perceptions that are continuously raining on the consciousness of an individual and those random atoms do not go by any rule of any genre or plot.

On the other hand, Sri Aurobindo's work *The Future Poetry* forms the basis of our analysis of his theories. In this book he mentions that reality is spiritual and evolutionary. Being is not static, rather it is progressively unfolding consciousness. He also stated that human consciousness is moving toward a higher, supramental state. Based on this ontological concept his aesthetic theory proposes that poetry is not imitation, but revelation of deeper planes of existence. So, the highest poetry is "mantric" in quality, by which he means that it does not merely describe, it invokes and embodies truth.

Let me add at this point that I am aware of the difference in the scope of the chosen theoretical works as an essay and a book and also that while one of them mainly concerns itself with fiction the other one focuses on poetry. Nonetheless, they are brought together for comparative analysis because, the present study focuses on the foundational concepts of literary imagination and creativity in general and does not propose to make a genres

specific study. For examining the role of the philosophical theories in shaping the understanding of a literary text, I have chosen the modern era text “The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T.S Eliot which I will analyse through the lens of the theories propagated by both the theorists.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Sri Aurobindo’s Perspectives. Sri Aurobindo’s work *The Future Poetry* outlines the evolution of English poetry in a unique way. When he mentioned the necessity of poetic delight over utilitarianism, he did not only talk about the ornamental aspect of poetry which gives pleasure to the readers. He meant spiritual poetry based on what he called soul vision. For him poetry is the medium of the evolution of human consciousness. He said that while ordinary poetry speaks to the mind and emotion of the readers, the ideal poetry speaks to the soul. This poetry is an expression of deep consciousness. He gave a concept of hierarchy among poetic speeches. The lowest of them is decorative poetry and the medium one is intellectual poetry, but the highest form of poetry is called the spiritual poetry. This is the poetry which is the domain of ‘Mantra’. This concept of Mantra is one of Aurobindo’s major contributions to philosophy and this is where his ontological and aesthetic aspects come together. The mantrik or spiritual poetry deals with the truth of existence, inner consciousness and universal reality. His idea of mantra was different from the ordinary sense of mantra though. He defines mantra as the metaphysical expression where sound, rhythm, meaning and vision come together to create a spiritual awakening. It is the highest intensity of human speech and it rises spontaneously from the heart of the Seer. He mentioned three essential ingredients without which a poem cannot become a mantra. They are, vision, rhythm and realisation. The poet must have an inner seeing, he must see the truth inwardly before speaking. Aurobindo stated that the future poetry will be governed by five eternal powers: Truth, Beauty, Delight, Life, and the Spirit. In this context there will be an evolution of rhythm as well. In fact, Aurobindo believes the future of English literature will be deeply influenced by the Indian temperament which is aimed at transforming consciousness. And that consciousness will be spiritual because here will be a continuous evolution from the *physical mind* to the *vital mind*, then the intellectual mind, and finally towards the higher mind, ‘illuminated mind’, ‘intuitive mind’, and ‘overmind’. But this will not be done easily. To achieve this future poetry, the poet must undergo Integral Yoga, transforming the body, life, and mind to handle higher spiritual consciousness without losing grounding in reality. It is here when, Aurobindo says, the poet will become a rishi, a seer or guide, who will interpret the present, re interpret the past

and reveal the face of the eternal. The poet's goal is to become a channel for the Divine Voice, bringing down the truth of the transcendental Divine into material existence.

4.2. Virginia Woolf's Perspective. Virginia Woolf in her work "Modern Fiction" mentions that reality is not fixed, in fact, reality is not external either. It is fluid and subjective, as well as momentary. Reality is not a centred or structured phenomenon; it's a de-centred and scattered phenomenon. Life, she famously said, is a 'luminous halo' where the boundaries cannot be pinpointed. Reality in general is beyond the boundary of one individual's experiences because experiences overlap and create a layered and vast reality. But for an individual, reality is shaped by his experiences only, because there is no other source of reality out there. She calls every strand of an individual's thoughts as 'atoms' and the atoms are not logically coherent or linear. And this illogicality of thought is the building block of reality. The inner most flames of a person's consciousness are uncircumscribed but they are the only thing that create truth. And based on this ontological concept, Woolf's aesthetic theory rejects the concept of linear story telling in literature. The Aristotelian idea of a plot was not accepted by Woolf and she, in her landmark essay *Modern Fiction* asks the question 'is life like this'? She dictates that a proper fiction cannot have a plot or even a genre, because plot requires external and linear reality. And a text should not focus on the external reality. On the contrary the proper stuff of fiction is the internal world or the psychological depth of the characters, or the inner stream of their consciousness. Woolf famously called the writers to follow 'the pattern' of the uncharted peripheries of human consciousness however incoherent it may be. For her, literature should capture the texture and movement of inner thought. The writers who are able to do that are called spiritual by Woolf as opposed to the materialist writers who cannot.

4.3. Textual Analysis. For analysis I have chosen T.S Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" mainly because this poem belongs to the time contemporary to both the thinkers. This is a modernist poem. The title of the poem itself is ambiguous. Though it is a love song, the name Prufrock has an anti-romantic suggestion to it. The poem opens with a few lines from Dante's *Inferno*. Through these lines Eliot has established a tradition in the beginning itself and then has placed himself within that tradition through the poem. As Eliot believes that every poet writes with his past in him, so this was his way of carrying the legacy of some concepts. And these concepts constitute the major theme of the poem. In Dante's work, the sinners in the hell ask for nothing but oblivion. The flame of tongue speaks to Dante and says that he is sure he is not going back and that is why he shares with him what he did. So, this poem is about the crisis of memory and the tension in the human mind to be remembered or not. In other words, it is about existence. The

central character in the poem is a person who failed in everything in life. In this dramatic monologue the readers are given a peek into the inner consciousness of the character. The poem describes a typical modern man who was troubled by questions of his own identity in the society. He is a man filled with feeling of isolation, fear and a kind of inferiority complex. He appears to be addressing a potential lover in the poem but he also says that he is attacked with a feeling of fear. Eliot makes his central character's mind travel and meander arbitrarily. This not only signifies his emotional distance from the world; it also asks questions about his existence itself. He feels that his existence is not relevant. He is frustrated by everything and his own universe is ironically complete with this irrelevance. So much so, that he feels if he tried to make his existence relevant in any way it will 'disturb the universe'. The insecurity experienced by Prufrock is explained through various metaphors mainly that of a cat. Another metaphor is that of a crab. The imagery of the silent sea points to his vast mind that wants to remain isolated. There are visual as well as auditory images in the poem. The yellow colour, or smoke act as indicators of the fact that his mind is crowded by adverse feelings. He is incapable of making any move forward. The setting of the poem, both temporal and physical, convey the same concepts. Conflicting thoughts and feeling tear through his consciousness and he feels there is nothing worthy of being remembered. The poem adopts a conversational language and combines it with the stylised language appearing in places. There is variation in the length of the lines and meter. The thoughts are presented in the poem in the same intensity at which they are passing through his mind. On the whole the poem depicts that aspect of human psyche which is characterised by a kind of meaninglessness and purposelessness. Interestingly, when we analyse this text, a quite strong point of convergence between the two theorists and their concepts becomes apparent to us at the beginning. Both Woolf and Aurobindo reject external realism and go for the inner world of the human consciousness. And that is exactly what this poem has done. But a closer look at the theories reveals that, the purpose of the rejection is different in them, and so is the purpose of literature. While for Woolf, a successful literary work should represent life as it is experienced, for Aurobindo, literature, especially poetry, should elevate the consciousness and reveal higher truth. And this is where the divergence starts.

If we analyse the text from Aurobindo's ontological concept, we see that Prufrock, as a character and also a representative of the poet's own psyche is trapped in, fear and indecision which comes from him being stuck in his level of self-consciousness. He cannot rise beyond the mental-vital plane of existence. He has no spiritual ascent thereby no potential for transformation. So, the poem on an ontological level represents a consciousness that

is arrested or unevolved. And it is this ontological concept that takes us to the level of aesthetic analysis of the text and we see that this poem lacks what can be called the mantric force and that is why it fails to unify the consciousness of the character with the universe, may be because the poet himself has not achieved that state yet or is too hesitant to even try to. So the fragmented and hesitant grasp of the poem on the existence of the universe makes it fall short from achieving the higher poetic expression. And the text, at its best, can be called an intellectual poetry and not a spiritual one.

On the other hand, Virginia Woolf would use the same concept of 'spiritual' to explain this text. When we look at the poem from Virginia Woolf's theoretical lens, we see that Prufrock's fragmented mind is, in fact, what reality is actually like. And there is no need to transcend it so to speak. The poem does not present a linear narrative, or even an organised outer world. It only presents a stream of disordered impressions, hesitations, and fragmented perceptions in the mind of its character. This rejection of external details is so complete here that even when any details appear, they do not appear for their own sake but do so as triggers for the inner anxiety and self-consciousness of the character. This move perfectly aligns with Woolf's call to move away from material realism to psychological truth. It is by presenting the inner reality, however chaotic it is, that the real spirit of the authentic form of being is captured. And this is essentially what makes this poem an aesthetic success because this is what makes the poem faithful to the lived experience of a consciousness. And the unstable nature of that consciousness is very aptly represented through the artistic techniques of interior monologue, shifting perceptions and temporal fluidity seen in the text. For Woolf, the poem is a success because this poem enacts the movement of thought itself and as there is no reality outside of thought, the poem has successfully captured the luminous halo, the fog like scattered phenomenon that is reality.

So, there is a clear divergence between the two theoretical perspectives. Aurobindo's ontological view refers to a hierarchical reality while Woolf's view refers to a fluid and experiential one. As for Aurobindo, the ideal state of being is transcendence and so his aesthetic standard requires 'mantrik' unity in poetic expression. On the other hand, Woolf's ideal state is that of immanence and therefore she follows the aesthetic standard of psychological realism. So when Aurobindo would look at the central character Prufrock as an unevolved consciousness, Woolf would view him as an authentic one. So, over all, from the former's point of view the poem is a deficient one while in the eye of the later it is definitely a successful one. This is almost ironical that the same fragmented consciousness that Virginia Woolf's modernist aesthetics validates as the authentic texture of how life

actually is, appears to be a limitation or failure of human evolution when looked at from the perspective of Sri Aurobindo's spiritual ontology.

We may also say that the comparative reading of Eliot through Woolf and Sri Aurobindo opens up other larger theoretical and cultural implications as well. And these implications go beyond the question of mere literary techniques. The crisis represented in modernist literature is not merely psychological in nature. But it is also spiritual and civilizational. Eliot has repeatedly returned to the condition of spiritual paralysis and existential exhaustion experienced by modern humanity in his works. Poems such as *The Hollow Men*, *Ash Wednesday*, *Marina*, and *The Love Song of St. Sebastian* portray individuals who are suspended between desire and redemption, between memory and oblivion and most importantly between faith and scepticism. It can be safely said that *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* too participates in this larger exploration of spiritual stasis within the context of Christian modernity. Prufrock's inability to act, decide, love, or transcend himself can therefore be interpreted not only as psychological fragmentation but also as a symptom of metaphysical disconnection.

This is precisely where Sri Aurobindo's spiritual ontology becomes particularly illuminating. For Aurobindo, human consciousness remains trapped so long as it cannot rise beyond fear, ego-consciousness, and mental limitation. And once it rises beyond these, it reaches supramental realization. Thus, Prufrock's paralysis signifies not merely social alienation but an unevolved condition of human psyche. And anything unevolved can always be said to have a hope and possibility of evolving. Aurobindo seeks that possibility. In this sense, Eliot's poetry and Aurobindo's philosophy can be read together as two complementary responses to the condition of modernity: one symptomatic in nature and the other evolutionary in scope.

Virginia Woolf's perspective introduces yet another dimension to this comparative framework. That is the dimension of what may be termed as modernist spirituality. This spirituality is rooted in subjective experience and more importantly in psychological truth. Although she does not advocate transcendence in the sense Aurobindo did, her exploration of fluid consciousness challenges purely external or materialist understandings of existence. In this regard, Woolf's literary vision may also be connected to broader questions of feminist spirituality, where interiority, emotional experience, and subjective becoming acquire epistemological value. Interestingly, this creates an unexpected point of resonance with Aurobindo's own emphasis on spiritual evolution through the human psyche seen in his timeless work *Savitri*.

5. Conclusion

In the conclusion I would like to state mainly two points. The first point is that philosophical theories, both ontological and aesthetic, provide interpretive frameworks for our appreciation and interpretation of literary texts as shown through the example of the chosen text. The second point is that the discipline of English studies in Indian universities holds a unique position within the academic landscape where they are both burdened by and privileged with a vast and varied theoretical framework that draws its sustenance from both the Western and Indian philosophical concepts. In other words, they serve as vital conduits between these two worlds. And so, the disciplines of English studies in India have the potential to ground global literary engagement within indigenous philosophical traditions. As Mathew Arnold stated that literary theories are always in wilderness, and that it is their strength, we can say that the discipline of English studies in India form the densest part of that wilderness; and it is a strength of this discipline and not a weakness. But in order to make full use of that strength the said departments need a re-fashioning of their view points to widen their scope so that they can include the best of the both worlds in their curriculum. Separate research on the pedagogical aspects of English literary studies may shine more light on the path for it. To conclude, one can say, if the future of English poetry is to be enriched by the spiritual and aesthetic resources of India, as Sri Aurobindo has envisioned decades back; then let our English departments stand at the forefront of that evolution and emerge as dynamic site of that evolution.

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