



Modern Aesthetics: A Comparative Study of T.S. Eliot and Rahman Rahi

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ABSTRACT

This abstract provides a concise overview of the modern aesthetics in the poetry of T.S. Eliot and Rahman Rahi. It highlights how both poets blend traditional and contemporary influences to explore cultural and philosophical themes. Eliot is noted for his use of fragmentation, allusion, and exploration of modernity's disillusionment, emphasizing the tension between past and present. Rahi, in contrast, merges Kashmiri cultural identity with modernist techniques, using vivid imagery and innovative language to delve into themes like loss, memory, and the quest for meaning. The abstract concludes by emphasizing the poets' ability to create a distinctive poetic language that reflects the complexities of their times.

Introduction

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965) played a pivotal role in shaping the Anglo-American literary canon in the early twentieth century. His poetry reflects a profound engagement with the divisions and torments of human consciousness, which he perceived not merely as anomalies of the individual psyche but as manifestations of the historical and cultural conditions of his time. His insights into issues such as ecology, urbanization, and the environment remain strikingly relevant in the twenty-first century. In many ways, Eliot anticipated developments in these areas that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, and his cautionary observations continue to serve as guiding principles for contemporary and future discourse.

During the interwar period, Eliot profoundly influenced the literary world, effecting a revolution in poetic and critical sensibilities. His journey from despair and existential alienation to spiritual tranquility and acceptance within the Anglican Church is meticulously chronicled in his poetry, creating an impression of preordained progression.

Abdur Rehman Rahi (6 May 1925 – 9 January 2023), a celebrated Kashmiri poet, translator, and critic, significantly contributed to modern Kashmiri literature. He was the recipient of numerous accolades, including the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1961 for his poetry collection *Nawroz-i-Saba*, the Padma Shri in 2000, and the prestigious Jnanpith Award in 2007 for his poetic collection *Siyah Rood Jaeren Manz* (*In Black Drizzle*). He was the first Kashmiri writer to receive the Jnanpith Award. Additionally, Rahi was honored with the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship in 2000.

Rahi began his career as a clerk in the Public Works Department in 1948 and was actively associated with the Progressive Writers' Association, serving as its General Secretary. He edited several issues of *Kwang Posh*, the association's literary journal, and later worked as a sub-editor for the Urdu daily *Khidmat*. He completed M.A. degrees in Persian (1952) and English (1962) from the University of Jammu and Kashmir, where he later taught Persian. Rahi also served on the editorial board of the Urdu daily *Aajkal* in Delhi from 1953 to 1955 and was connected with the cultural wing of the Communist Party of Kashmir during his student days. His translation of Baba Farid's Sufi poetry from Punjabi into Kashmiri is among his notable contributions. Influences of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre are evident in his work, alongside the impact of Dina Nath Nadim, particularly in his earlier poetry.

Rahi is regarded as the preeminent voice of modern Kashmiri poetry. Unlike traditional realists such as Abdul Ahad Azad and Ghulam Ahmad Mehjoor, Rahi's most significant contribution lies in the distinctly modern tone he introduced to Kashmiri literature. He was the first Kashmiri poet of the twentieth century to develop a modern poetic idiom, deeply influenced by Western literary modernism. His poetry, marked by existential despair, rich allusions, and dense symbolism, reflects a fusion of intersecting intellectual and aesthetic traditions. His work reveals affinities with T.S. Eliot—a poet he greatly admired—through a skeptical, ironic perspective that regards life as a sublime yet irresolvable enigma.

Modern Aesthetics in Eliot and Rahi's Poetry

The modern aesthetics in the poetry of T.S. Eliot and Rehman Rahi exhibit a mutual emphasis on fragmentation, cultural dislocation, and the quest for spiritual meaning. Eliot's work, particularly *The Waste Land*, employs fragmented narratives, mythological allusions, and varied voices to evoke the alienation characteristic of modern existence. In a similar vein, Rahi's poetry addresses themes of loss, displacement, and the tension between tradition and modernity, skillfully integrating Kashmiri cultural motifs with broader modernist themes. Both poets make extensive use of symbolism, ambiguity, and a profound historical consciousness to convey the complexities and uncertainties of the modern world.

Disillusionment and Isolation:

The themes of disillusionment, isolation, and modernism in the works of T.S. Eliot and Rehman Rahi can be apparently seen. Both poets critique the effects of modernity on human life, focusing on the loss of spiritual and moral values. Eliot's *Prufrock* and Rahi's poem *Suon Gaam* are used as parallels to show how modernism has left man indecisive, disconnected, and self-centered.

In *Prufrock*, Eliot portrays the modern city as lifeless, chaotic, and filled with people who lack genuine communication or connection. *Prufrock* himself is isolated, hesitant, and aware of his own shortcomings, yet he does nothing to change his situation. Similarly, Rahi's village, depicted in *Suon Gaam*, becomes a microcosm of the effects of modernity, where traditions are losing their value, and selfishness and materialism are replacing the communal and spiritual life once found in villages.

Rahi presents the village as pure and harmonious, drawing sap from religious traditions, in contrast to the thirst of the city, which he associates with conflict and impurity. He warns against the contamination of modernity, which he sees as destroying the spiritual and moral fabric of society, much like Eliot's critique of modern urban life. The villagers, like *Prufrock*, are aware of the decay but remain passive.

Both poets highlight the spiritual paralysis of modern man. Eliot's description of *Prufrock* as a "hollow man" reflects the emptiness caused by modern life. Similarly, Rahi shows how modernism has led to the loss of religious values and a descent into vulgarity, deception, and superficiality. He criticizes how people now pursue material gains, even using religious rituals for selfish purposes, much like *Prufrock*'s self-absorption and inability to connect with others.

The imagery in both poems reflects the decay brought by modernity. Eliot's foggy, smoky cityscape contrasts with Rahi's village imagery of doves, recitations, and divine blessings. Both poets show that modernism has alienated people from their spiritual roots and made life uncertain and chaotic. Rahi, like Eliot, offers a solution through a return to faith, tradition, and spiritual values, urging people to reject the disillusionment brought by modernism and to embrace their cultural and spiritual heritage.

In the end, Eliot's Prufrock, despite his awareness of his moral emptiness, remains trapped in modernism's clutches, longing for a "human voice" to save him. Rahi positions himself as that voice, calling his people back to their roots, urging them not to be swayed by modernity but to remember their identity and traditions. Both poets ultimately critique modernity's hollow promises and call for a return to faith, tradition, and authentic human connection.

Allusions and Intertextuality:

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* reflects a world in decay, fragmented both spiritually and culturally. The poem is a tapestry of voices and allusions, drawing from various myths, religions, and historical periods to portray the collapse of civilization in the aftermath of World War I. Eliot's world is barren, disconnected, and spiritually desolate, filled with individuals who are lost and directionless. Like Rahi, Eliot critiques modern society's loss of moral and spiritual values, using imagery of urban decay ("Unreal City") and a wasteland where traditional structures have disintegrated. *The Waste Land* is famous for its fragmented structure, symbolizing the breakdown of coherence in the modern world. Despite its bleakness, the poem ends with a faint hope for renewal in the chant of "Shantih shantih shantih."

Eliot's *The Waste Land*

1. Mythological Allusions:

Tiresias: The blind prophet from Greek mythology serves as a key figure, witnessing the modern world's decay without being able to intervene, symbolizing spiritual blindness and foresight.

The Fisher King: Drawn from the Arthurian legend, the wounded Fisher King represents a barren land waiting for healing, symbolizing the need for spiritual renewal.

The Grail Quest: The search for the Holy Grail is woven throughout, symbolizing the quest for meaning and redemption in a spiritually desolate world.

2. Religious and Literary Allusions:

Buddhism and Hinduism: The reference to “Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata” and “Shantih” at the poem’s end reflects Eastern philosophies of self-control, compassion, and peace, offering a glimpse of spiritual salvation.

Christianity: Eliot incorporates Christian imagery, particularly in the section “What the Thunder Said,” where themes of death and resurrection echo Christ’s crucifixion and hope for renewal.

Shakespeare and Dante: Eliot quotes from *The Tempest* and *Inferno*, emphasizing themes of exile, suffering, and moral judgment.

3. Intertextuality:

Literature and History: The poem is intertextual, pulling from works as varied as the Bible, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, to name a few. This eclectic mix mirrors the fragmentation of modern civilization, with each reference contributing to the overall theme of cultural and spiritual collapse.

Rehman Rahi’s *A Call* is a deeply existential poem, filled with despair and disillusionment. It explores themes of personal and collective crisis, using rich imagery of mythological, religious, and historical references. The speaker reflects on his own failures, symbolized by cutting down the pine forest behind him and allowing fairies on solitary islands to be devoured by bitter thoughts. The poem critiques society’s moral and spiritual decay, alluding to cultural and historical figures such as Sita, Oedipus, and Rostum. It portrays a world where leadership is absent (“The shepherds have fled”), love is corrupted, and the speaker finds himself playing futile games in a metaphorical quicksand. Despite the chaos and decay, the speaker calls out to an undefined higher force, hoping for guidance and meaning.

Mythological Allusions:

Sita and Ram: The poem references Sita transgressing the boundary set by Ram, alluding to the *Ramayana* and its themes of duty, exile, and suffering. This reflects moral conflict and a break from tradition.

Rostum and Rakhsh: Drawing from Persian mythology, Rostum’s ride on his steed, Rakhsh, symbolizes heroism and epic battle, used here to invoke a sense of a lost heroic past.

2. Historical and Religious Allusions:

Oedipus: The speaker mentions Oedipus gouging his eyes, drawing from Greek tragedy to symbolize self-inflicted suffering and tragic fate, echoing the consequences of human actions.

Karbala: The reference to the “restless waters” of Karbala and the “dust that smiles over Abu Turab’s body” (referring to Ali) invokes Islamic history, particularly the tragedy of Karbala, emphasizing themes of martyrdom and injustice.

Genghis Khan: His mention reflects destruction and conquest, symbolizing the relentless violence of history.

3. Intertextuality:

Hafiz and Yazeed: The poem combines Islamic history with Persian mysticism, creating a tension between spiritual longing (Hafiz’s Sufi mysticism) and betrayal (Yazeed’s actions in the Battle of Karbala).

The Quran: Rahi alludes to Quranic verses, particularly referencing those who are “deaf, dumb, and blind,” symbolizing spiritual ignorance and moral failure.

Both Rahi and Eliot utilize a wide range of allusions, myths, and intertextual references to enhance the depth of their poems. While Rahi’s “A Call” draws heavily on South Asian and Islamic mythology and history, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* incorporates Western, Eastern, and classical traditions. Both poets use these references to comment on the moral and spiritual crises of their time, weaving together past and present to illustrate the fragmentation and alienation of modern existence.

"An Apology" critiques power structures, depicting the rich's dominance and the poor's plight:

Who will say no if you declare blood Zam Zam?

Who will question if you interpret staggering steps as dance?

"The Suffering Clown" mocks victims, depicting sages as fools:

Where Plato looks like

The sage of fools.

Rahi's poetry reflects concerns for moral and societal degeneration, akin to Eliot's exploration of modernity's impact on humanity.

Love and Desire: Eliot's poetry represents intense yet discrete expressions of desire, continuing the Occidental tradition of unconsummated love. He uses four core elements of modernism: apocalyptic vision, Imagism, organic vs. mechanical sublimity, and precision. In *Prufrock*, Eliot uses precisionism to conceal and reveal desires. In *The Waste Land*, desire is expressed through negation—shame, sadness, and violence. Pound's edits show Eliot's struggle to express desire acceptably. In *Four Quartets*, language itself bears the burden of ideal love, reflecting the refinement of Eliot's expression of desire. The intricate themes of love, desire, and existential anxiety in T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and Rehman Rahi's *Creation*, emphasizing their modernist treatment of these emotions. Both poems delve into the psychological landscapes of their protagonists, revealing an internal conflict between yearning for connection and the crippling effects of self-doubt and alienation. In Eliot's work, *Prufrock* intellectualizes love and desire to the point of paralysis, his over-analysis and fear of rejection preventing him from acting on his feelings. Eliot portrays love as fragmented and fraught with anxiety, reflecting the disorientation of modern life. Similarly, Rahi's *Creation* portrays love and longing as elusive and spiritual, with the speaker caught between desire and isolation. The imagery of the poem juxtaposes the speaker's emotional intensity with the fleeting and ethereal nature of the beloved. Both poets reflect modernist concerns with existential searching, where love is neither redemptive nor attainable but rather a source of emotional turmoil and philosophical contemplation. Through close analysis of these works, Eliot and Rahi's modernist sensibilities reveal the complexity of desire, positioning it within broader existential and cultural frameworks.

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