



**EnJourMe (English Journal of Merdeka):
Culture, Language, and Teaching of English**

Journal homepage: <http://jurnal.unmer.ac.id/index.php/enjourme/index>

T.S. Eliot and the Malaise of Modernity: An Islamic critique

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ARTICLE INFO

Received 04 May 2024
Accepted 31 July 2024
Available online
Available 31 July 2024

Keywords:

Islamic critique, Modern Malaise, spiritual quest, sufism, T.S. Eliot

DOI: 10.26905/enjourme.v9i1.12936

How to cite this article (APA Style):

Chowdhury, M. (2024). T.S. Eliot and the Malaise of Modernity: An Islamic critique. *EnJourMe (English Journal of Merdeka): Culture, Language, and Teaching of English*, 9(1) 32-41, doi: <https://doi.org/10.26905/enjourme.v9i1.12936>

ABSTRACT

T.S. Eliot, a towering figure in the literary world, casts illuminating beams across the fragmented and spiritually barren modern landscape. This paper thoroughly examines Eliot's oeuvre on modernity through an Islamic lens. By drawing upon Islam's philosophical and spiritual traditions, this research juxtaposes Eliot's poetic evaluation and tapestry of Islamic perspectives as an ointment to heal the wounds of modern society. At the core of this inquiry, Islamic concepts such as the acknowledgment of the oneness of God (tawhid), mystical Islamic belief and practice (sufism), and social solidarity (ummah) challenge Eliot's perspective on modern sickness. This analysis also delves into Eliot's poetic tapestry to explore how Eliot weaves a solution to the chaos of the modern era, including the fragmentation of identity, the decay of traditional values, and the existential crisis of humanity. This comparative discussion reveals how Islamic thought offers an alternative framework for comprehending the challenges of modernity. Ultimately, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Eliot's enduring critiques and the multifaceted Islamic responses to the complexities and disorders of the modern man living under the influence of modern Western civilization.

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1. Introduction

In the annals of literary history, T.S. Eliot looms large as a leading light of modernist thought. His name blooms as a poet, critic, novelist, philosopher, and pioneer of modern poetry in English literature. Throughout his poetry, he examines the contemporary condition intensely and tries to ventilate a path of redemption from modern society's social angst and upheaval. He also raises his voice against the turmoil and uncertainty of contemporary people of the twentieth century through poetry. The nature of modern people, such as excessive self-focus, aloofness from the community, impassiveness to pray, etc., is masterfully documented by Eliot in his poetry. The section "A Game of Chess" of "The Waste Land" and "Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock" by Eliot delicately highlight the self-focused nature of modern people. Modernism doctrine has been pushed to calm people about

religious thought in this era. Pope Pius X, in September 1907, recognized the modernism approach as a blemished scheme of thought leading to the destruction of all religions (Rzepa & Rzepa, 2021). So, it is a pretty divisive term.

Many scholars and poets wrote on the anarchy of that time. But with deep concern, Eliot sought solace in the decay of the modern era. As he was brought up in a Unitarian family, he embarked on a personal quest for the solution to contemporary anxiety within this religious home but found himself unsatisfied. During his studies at Harvard University, he delved into the study of both Hinduism and Buddhism under the guidance of Irving Babbitt and George Santayana in search of a spiritual solution to the universal human crisis. His poem, 'The Waste Land,' seems to reflect this study, as he approached Eastern religious thoughts through the lens of Hinduism and Buddhism. The Sanskrit words "*Datta./ Dayadhvam./ Damyata*" used in this poem mean "give", "accept", and "control" (433). These words or religious mantras are linked with Hinduism and Buddhism, reflecting his journey and exploration of different spiritual paths.

There, Eliot finds something, but not to his Heart's Content. Some questions are still hovering in his mind. Then comes his religious conversion to Anglo-Catholicism to respond to the quarries of the tormented soul in his quest for spiritual freedom. His life ends up coming back to Western Christianity. Eliot's poetry, "Ash Wednesday", is a pure example of his reversion. However, one point is seemingly debatable in his search for a spiritual solution and the inner tranquillity overlooking Islam to solve the chaotic condition of modern people. According to Lewis (2002), the question arises: "What went wrong concerning Islam?" One cannot rule out the vast potential of Islam to solve critical human issues ranging from individual to social and global, as Islam deals with both temporal and spiritual aspects of mankind with solid and straightforward reasoning. Islamic solutions are expected to solve social issues significantly (Bayumi & Jaya, 2018). Eliot was concerned with the spiritual purification of modern people. In Islam, there are plenty of orders and laws for people's spiritual purification, especially the practice of remembrance of the name of God, which is carried out through Sufism. As Allah stated, "Verily, in the remembrance of Allah, do hearts find rest" (The Qur'an 13:28). Along with this Quranic verse, numerous others in Islam address the core issue of spiritual restlessness of humankind and offer substantial solutions to modern dilemmas and distress. This study aims to review Eliot's observations on modern chaos and critique Eliot's efforts through the touchstone of Islam alongside potential reasons for overlooking the solution in Islam, despite his efforts to find a spiritual solution to the crisis of contemporary man in almost all major religions. It underscores the potential of Islamic thought as an alternative framework for comprehending the challenges of modernity. Moreover, this study hopes to open a new window of thought to strengthen the spiritual uplift of modern people.

Scholars have extensively studied T.S. Eliot's works and explored their intersections with diverse philosophical and spiritual traditions. Eliot's portrayal of modernity has been a subject of inquiry, particularly in the context of Islamic critique. This literature review surveys key scholarly contributions that explore Eliot's portrayal of modernity and its intersections with Islamic critique.

According to Al-Badrani and Al-Badarneh (2016), Eliot's poetry represents the disorders of modernity. His greatest work, the poem sequence "Four Quartets," aimed to diagnose the illness infecting the modern age and offer a solution. The Quartets intended to renovate clarity for the

cluttered modern reader and arouse feelings of religious belief through art. The poem's chief goal was to show how a person lives in the contemporary world. Güven (2015) argues that Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" portrays the anxiety and despair of individuals in the modern world through the protagonist. Güven (2015) also criticizes 20th-century societies where there is a lack of communication among people. The failure of communication stands for the isolation and loneliness of the people, and thus, the poet represents the paradoxes of modern urban civilization.

Zhang (2023) believes that Eliot's criticism of modernity in "The Waste Land" comes from his understanding of the society he lived in. Eliot lived in an age of technological explosion, war, and materialism. He deeply felt the absurdity of the "alienated world," and this poem contains his understanding of the society at that time. On the other hand, Eliot's religious thoughts greatly influenced modernity in "The Waste Land". Religion was the salvation, which is usually reflected in this poem. According to Sufian (2014), in T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land", Eliot portrays the crises of modernity, and the remedy for these crises has been sought chiefly in religions like Hinduism and Buddhism.

According to Imam al-Ghazali, a Persian Muslim polymath, the purpose of knowledge is to attain the pleasure and fear of one God (tawhid) (Rosmizi & Yucel, 2016). Tawhid is an eternal and unchanging principle that unifies all aspects of life and cosmic manifestation under a common center governed by Islam's unitary perspective (Kounsar, 2016). As stated in the Qur'an, "Your God is one God [Allah], there is no god but He. Most Gracious, Most Merciful" (Al Qur'an, 2: 163).

Seemingly, Modernists ignore Imam al-Ghazali and Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari because they are the most significant intellectual obstacle to accepting the West. They restricted and blocked all avenues of atheism, secularism, and liberalism in Islamic societies. According to Nasr, modern society's knowledge has separated humans from their spiritual happiness (Selamat et al., 2022). He says modern Western man has fallen miserably beyond his spiritual existence. The solution is that modern humans must return to their innate nature, as is the essence of every human who needs religion (Selamat et al., 2022). Finally, Bellour (2016) argues that religion is the only cure and means of achieving peace and harmony within, and it is the sole way to regain the lost and vanished unity. Unity means social solidarity (ummah), opposite to modernity's self-centered approach. Islam is a worldwide nation called ummah, with religious, social, and legal identity; faith is a personal commitment judged by God (Kounsar, 2016).

In YALÇIN's (2020) analysis of fitrah (primordial nature), the concept is viewed as a lens through which broader themes in literature and philosophy can be interpreted, including T.S. Eliot's exploration of modernity. Fitrah emphasizes the universal human quest for transcendence and spiritual fulfilment, a grounding concept in Islam. According to the Quran (The Quran, 30:30), fitrah is the innate recognition of the oneness of Allah that exists within each human being. This helps us reflect on Eliot's concerns with the modern age's existential void and moral decay characteristics. Kounsar (2016) suggests that one cannot make someone a Muslim as Islam follows the natural tendency or fitrah. Rather, ideas from external factors may corrupt this fitrah and prevent the truth from being realized. Several scholars, such as Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Qayyim, Imam An-Nawawi, Al Qurtubi, Shah Waliullah, As-Sabuni, Al-Faruqi, Naquib Al-Attas, Tantawi Gohary, Muhammed Asad, and Mufti Muhammed Shafi, have spoken positively about it (YALÇIN, 2020). They provided the

solution to each modern problem according to the teachings of Islam. Some Sufis, like Ibn-al-Farid, a 13th-century Sufi from Arabia, suggest that the highest mystical experience is not harmful but positive, as the Sufi becomes enraptured in ecstatic bliss upon finding God (Azizmohamadi & Afrougheh, 2011).

Most critics have expressed T.S. Eliot's concern about modern man's spiritual emptiness and his proposal of adopting religious beliefs, such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, as a solution. However, some critics and Islamic scholars suggest that only worshipping one God, as in Islam, can alleviate the hollowness of modern life. The nature and method of worship, according to Islamic belief, are fundamental to the spiritual emancipation of mankind. Therefore, this study presents a new perspective on Eliot's thoughts on modernity and offers a potential Islamic solution to contemporary issues.

2. Methodology

This study uses a comparative analysis approach to examine how T.S. Eliot portrays modernity in his poetry by drawing insights from Islamic critique. The study analyzes Eliot's works through close reading and thematic analysis to identify key themes related to existential angst, spiritual desolation, and cultural decay. In doing so, the researcher uses the book entitled *TS Eliot: Selected Poems* as a primary source and religious text from the holy Quran. Besides, the researcher visited many cities as secondary sources to adapt and adopt the insightful documents of the scholars, both Islamic and non-Islamic. To juxtapose Islamic theology and modern literature, the study uses mystical elements such as Sufism, Ummah, and Tawhid to flourish the beauty of Islam. It also examines parallels and divergences between Eliot's exploration of modernity and Islamic perspectives on the human condition, drawing on Islamic philosophical and theological texts, such as those discussing Tawhid from Al-Ghazali's *Ihya Ulum Id-Din* and Sufism from *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* by Carl W. Ernst. This interdisciplinary methodology allows for a nuanced understanding of the intersections between literature and philosophy, shedding light on the enduring questions posed by modernity through the lens of Islamic thought. Given the vastness of Islamic spirituality's areas and approaches, it is a bit challenging to include all the facets of spiritual health suggested by different schools of Islamic thought within the article's narrow scope.

3. Discussion

T.S. Eliot's poetry deeply reflects the unease of the modern era, exploring existential anxiety, spiritual emptiness, and the breakdown of traditional values during the tumultuous early 20th century. Eliot's works, particularly "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock," "The Waste Land," "The Hollow Men," "Ash Wednesday", and "Four Quartets" address themes that are relevant to Islamic critique, illuminating the more extensive human experience and the search for purpose in a time of uncertainty.

In Eliot's famous modernist poem "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock," the speaker expresses a feeling of isolation and hopelessness in the face of intricate challenges in modern society. The line "Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (Eliot, 2009) suggests that the speaker feels overwhelmed

and suffocated by everyday life's shallow and mundane interactions, yearning for a deeper connection that seems elusive and unattainable. This line perfectly captures Prufrock's sense of being lost and disconnected in a world he struggles to relate to or find meaning within. Prufrock seems confused and struggles to adopt a Sufi approach to find inner peace and the meaning of life. Eliot was influenced by Dante, who introduced the idea of Sufism into Western culture (Hasan et al., 2015). Subsequently, Eliot wrote "The Waste Land," where he shows the vacuity of modern life and desperately seeks to offer balm to the spiritual wounds of the tormented soul in his quest for freedom.

The title "The Waste Land" itself is highly allusive to the barrenness of Western land, paving the way for the appropriate settings regarding the spiritual hollowness of that age (Akber, 2022). The Waste Land consists of five parts, each titled. Part I, "The Burial of the Dead," introduces themes of the Holy Grail, sexuality, religious guilt, and the effects of the First World War (Mihsin, 2020).

The poem is often interpreted by critics as reflecting the decline of values and morality in the twentieth century (Bellour, 2016). This is evident in the poem's opening line, which conveys human suffering and misery. The speaker's description of April as "the cruellest month" (Eliot, 2009) suggests that heightened senses can be dangerous, leading to desire and lust. When people let their emotions guide them blindly, they lose control of their minds and are driven into disaster. Similarly, the image of "crowds of people, walking round in a ring" (Eliot, 2009) suggests that people wander in pursuit of pleasure, comfort, and excitement because their lives are empty, meaningless, and lacking spiritual guidance. The prioritization of the sensual over the spiritual has resulted in a spiritual crisis, leaving modern individuals feeling desperate, pessimistic, and morbid. Additionally, the words "dead land," "dull root," "dried tubers," "dry stone," and "dead sound" convey the nature of a barren society and the existential predicament of a modern man. The poem also mentions Madame Sosostris, a clairvoyant (fortune teller) who represents modern man's belief system and sense of religiosity. Sosostris is portrayed as a non-believer who does not believe in an afterlife (Bellour, 2016). This lack of faith leaves Madame Sosostris as a wanderer, unable to provide any certainty and solace to the pilgrim's predicament.

The title of the second section, "A Game of Chess," symbolizes the manipulation of emotions and sexual desires. In the first line, Eliot's reference to Cleopatra is significant as it highlights the destructive effects of excessive desire, which can deplete one's spirituality, as seen in the story of Antony and Cleopatra. The poem then depicts a conversation where a woman is trying to engage her partner, who remains silent:

Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
.....
Nothing again, nothing. (Eliot, 2009)

This illustrates modern life's loneliness, emptiness, frustration, and robotic nature, often leading to nervous breakdowns. Ultimately, they find nothing meaningful in their lives.

Eliot's regret reaches a climax in "The Fire Sermon," which is the most explicit about the vagaries of human desire. This part of the poem is entitled "The Fire Sermon" after Buddha's well-

known “Fire Sermon,” a teaching text from The Buddha about freeing oneself from desire (Azad, 2019). The Buddha’s Fire Sermon emphasizes a spiritual lesson that the entire material universe is on fire and the created world of time and space is nothing but an illusion (Mihsin, 2020). “The Fire Sermon” ends with allusions to the Buddha for abandoning the pagan world and finding spiritual peace.

O Lord, Thou pluckest me out
O Lord, Thou pluckest
Burning (Eliot, 2009)

Part IV of T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Waste Land” tells the story of Phlebas, a Phoenician sailor who drowned tragically. This section of the poem reminds those who lead a directionless life and suffer from spiritual emptiness. The part concludes with a warning to the reader to Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you (Eliot, 2009). This implies that, regardless of who you are, death will inevitably reach you (Sufian, 2014). Similarly, in the holy Quran, Allah admonishes us, “Every soul shall have a taste of death” (The Qur’an 28:13). It means we have to be very careful in doing each deed. Throughout Eliot’s poetic career, no evidence exists that he ever tried to explore Islam. This is quite puzzling, given that he sought inner peace amid modern problems and dilemmas and explored every major religion except for Islam. Therefore, it remains a topic of debate.

Theologians generally agree that conversion is a spiritual change from sinfulness, ungodliness, or worldliness to love of God and pursuit of holiness. In “Ash Wednesday,” the conversion process is spatial and temporal. To convert, one must constantly reject the past while reconciling present experience and future hope. The opening passage of the poem is particularly significant in this regard: Part V, “What the Thunder Said”, is the concluding section of the poem, where Eliot discusses the current state of decay in Eastern Europe. The line “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down”(Eliot, 2009) in this part of the poem represents the theme of the world’s disintegration. Finally, the poet suggests a religious remedy from the Upanishad, proposing the three principles of “Damyata” (control), “Dayadhvam” (sympathize), and “Datta” (give) as the keys to a new life for those who got stuck in the spiritually barren “Waste Land”. Eliot seems to be convinced that by following this religious Montra propounded in the Upanishad, “Shantih” or inner peace may be attained by alleviating the suffering of modern humans.

In the poem ‘The Wasteland,’ T.S. Eliot turned mainly to Buddhism and Hinduism rather than Christianity for spiritual solace after the world’s devastation. In the 20th century, some Western thinkers and writers emphasized the significance of spiritual experiences in combating emotional and intellectual despair, spiritual malaise, and moral decay that plagued urban areas after the war. Writers like T.S. Eliot in England were influenced by Indian spiritualism for supervision and affluence in their writing (Das, 2021).

In Eliot’s work “Hollow Man”, Barzinji (2013) argues that the poem is primarily Eliot’s exploration of the state of his soul, which represents the condition of many modern souls who suffer from the same torment of hollowness. This hollowness comes from the loss of faith and belief in humanity. One of the hollow men in the group describes themselves as being without any spirituality or human

content, like puppets or scarecrows filled with straw. Furthermore, they are not satisfied with their lives. This metaphorical assertion suggests spiritual vacuity:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!

The poem suggests that hollow men cannot communicate with each other and cannot interact with transcendent spirituality. Singh (2013) explains that a sense of self-alienation and breakdown of communication extends throughout society, causing the hollow men to lose their identity and purpose. “The Hollow Men” reflects the bitter reality of modern men (Sharma, 2021).

The poem “Ash Wednesday” symbolizes T.S. Eliot’s post-conversion poetry, as it was the first poem he wrote after converting to Anglicanism in 1927. The poem’s title refers to the Christian movable feast day that marks the beginning of Lent, a time of spiritual contemplation and humility. In the poem, Eliot explores the mystical tension between the flesh and the spirit, similar to medieval literature such as Dante’s or Donne’s. The poem also delves into the psychological and spiritual dilemma that the poet experienced, particularly regarding the past and present, mortal time and space, and eternal and timeless ones. Eliot suggests that to attain redemption, one must recognize past errors, renounce past attachments, and reject earthly things for a greater end.

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not want to turn. (Eliot, 2009)

Throughout this poem, Eliot expresses remorse for his wrongdoings and vows to embark on a spiritual path. The poem’s various sections represent stages in Eliot’s spiritual journey, which progresses from doubt, disillusionment, and inner darkness to temptation and desire before finally culminating in redemption (Sawyer, 2010). This poem conveys the end of Eliot’s spiritual anguish.

And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated
And let my cry come unto Thee. (Eliot, 2004)

In “Four Quartets”, every part of the poem reinforces the idea of salvation from spiritual distress. This poet’s work uses mysticism poetically to convey a sense of divine influence behind the spiritually desolate world (Bruno, 2013). Eliot’s “Four Quartets” is heavily influenced by religion, as it was written during his post-conversion period (Senemta^oi, 2017). He may have converted to Anglo-Catholicism, but he still profoundly appreciates Hinduism. This is particularly evident in “Dry Salvages,” where the lesson on detachment taught by Krishna to Arjuna in the Hindu epic, Bhagavad Gita, exposes the true nature of spirituality as active participation in the path toward spiritual en-

lightenment. The final part of this poem, “Little Gidding”, serves as the ultimate point of reconciliation, where the speaker’s journey culminates in realizing spiritual freedom. Through contemplation on memory, the speaker initially realizes that he is connected to a spiritual reality in “Burnt Norton”. In “Four Quartets”, temporal time becomes a medium for achieving divine union, and purification of the mind leads to spiritual receptiveness. As the observation goes, T.S. Eliot’s poems, from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to “Four Quartets,” describe the spiritual emptiness, suffering, misery, and lack of meaning in the lives of modern men.

In his search for spiritual freedom and inner peace, Eliot explored various religions, including Buddhism and Hinduism, before eventually converting to Anglo-Catholicism. However, it is noteworthy that he never showed any interest in Islam despite its potential to offer a permanent solution to modern problems. Islam offers many subjects, including Tawhid (worship of one God), Ummah (social solidarity), and Sufism (mystical Islamic belief and practice), that could have helped Eliot have a more balanced, comprehensive, and durable religious perception. In *Ihya Ulum Id-Din*, an epoch-making book on Islamic spirituality, Al-Gazali talks about Tawhid. He says that Tawhid is to believe there is no deity but Allah, He is one and there is no partner for him (Al-Gazali, 1993). He added:

The devil turns you from this stage of Tawhid to such a place where you have doubts for two reasons. The first reason is to look at the freedom of will of man and the second reason is to look at the lifeless thing. (Al-Gazali, 1993)

That means Tawhid keeps a man aloof from doubt, uncertainty, absurdity, and inner turmoil of existentialism, on the contrary, the unwavering belief in Allah gives him inner tranquility. Besides, the concept of Sufism in Islam has a great influence to get spiritual peace. According to Carl W. Ernst (2011), Sufism is a path that guides individuals from the ordinary external aspects of life to discover the inner reality of God and it emphasizes the practice and embodiment of ethical virtues and the adherence to religious duties. He added that these qualities are associated with the concept of being *Salih*, or righteous, which encompasses right action, goodness, peace, and the creation of harmony and order (Ernst, 2011). Al Gazali also discusses broadly the rights of a man to his neighbor and the importance of maintaining relations with them which is considered a Ummah concept in Islam. Similarly, there are plenty of concepts of Islam to attain spiritual peace and dispel the darkness of modernity.

Why Eliot overlooked Islam and did not explore its teachings further is mysterious. Eliot’s philosophical approach to religion seems to be the primary reason for overlooking Islam in his exploration of modern man’s dilemma and his effort to find a solution to the spiritual crisis suffered by modern humanity. Eliot deviates from Unitarianism, his ancestral Christian faith, which is rather close to Tauhid(Monothelism) in Islam, and seeks a solution to the spiritual crisis of modern man through philosophical and imaginative flights as observed in paganistic creed and culture suiting his bent of mind. Eliot seems not to embrace a forward, simplistic, and submissive approach to invisible cosmic reality as propounded in Islam, as his spiritually unstable temperament finds refuge in different shades of abstract images under the impulsive influence of art, philosophy, literature, and humanistic fantasy.

4. Conclusion

T.S. Eliot's poetry explores the malaise of modernity and societal fragmentation. Islamic critique shares these concerns, critiquing modern civilization's materialistic and spiritually devoid aspects. Scholars can uncover new meanings and pathways toward renewal by synthesizing Eliot's poetic vision with Islamic critique. Eliot's exploration of modernity inspires reflection and ongoing dialogues that bridge intellectual traditions, exploring universal themes of alienation, longing, and spiritual fulfillment. This interdisciplinary approach recognizes the transformative power of literature and philosophy. Thus, there may be a new pathway to discovering the fact of Eliot's detachment from Islam in finding spiritual pleasure.

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