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RE 117: Passage to India

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Time, Identity, Freedom and Beyond

Siddhartha by Herman Hesse, *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, and *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot are works that, upon first glance, appear to be unrelated, but actually prominently feature several of the same themes and ideas, namely time, identity, and freedom. All three authors explore parallel manifestations of these ideas by presenting time as circular, identity in a larger context, and freedom through transcendence.

All three authors portray time in a circular nature by giving it cyclical characteristics. Time does not proceed in a linear fashion, but rather in an infinite circularity in which the past and the future are both parts of the present. It is upon this realization, while intently gazing at the river, that Siddhartha achieves enlightenment (Hesse, 90). Similar to the way in which water in a river appears to be flowing to a single direction with a single destination, time appears to be moving forever forward – with the past forgone and the future to come. However, although a river appears to move in one direction, it is moving towards the sea where it evaporates and soon precipitates into the melting snow on the top of a mountain, trickling down into the very same river. It is this characteristic of water that compelled Hesse to use water as a symbol for time; he uses water imagery to convey this circular nature of time. Hesse describes water, writing, “the water changed to vapor and rose, became rain and came down again, became spring, brook and river, changed anew, flowed anew” (Hesse, 135). Here, Hesse creates a clear cycle of water as time, thereby displaying its circular flow. Readers can connect the cyclical movement of time to the water cycle and visualize time’s eternal nature.

Hesse adds to this by describing Siddhartha looking at the river and marveling at how “the water continually flowed and flowed and yet it was always there; it was always the same and yet every moment it was new” (Hesse, 102). Hesse uses the repetition of words “flowed” and “always” in order to convey the infinite circularity of time. By repeating these key words, Hesse is laying emphasis on the eternal nature of this flow of time—as represented by the river. The repetition of these words also mimics the infinite circular motion that Hesse is trying to convey. Hesse is suggesting that the water that has passed and the water that is yet to come is eternally present in the river—“it is always there”—and yet the moment is new.

Hesse further conveys the circular infinity of time by conveniently leaving out all quantifiable units of time in *Siddhartha*. Throughout the novel, the movement of time is conveyed without any years or dates. The readers move through time without material values exacting the years or days passed. This is an effective manner of conveying the unity of time. Readers are made to experience time through a non-linear approach, moving in infinite and unified circles.

Lahiri takes a different approach to conveying time’s circularity. Unlike Hesse, she is very exact with dates in terms of years and months passed as she covers Gogol’s entire lifetime. This approach, however, does not take away from her characterization of time as cyclical. Lahiri conveys the circular nature of time by taking the protagonist, Gogol, on a circular journey. The novel begins with the birth of Gogol, upon which the works of Russian author Nikolai Gogol are invoked. Having played a significant role in saving Gogol’s father’s life, these literary works characterize the moment Gogol comes into the world. As the novel progresses, many other books play a role in different events during Gogol’s life. For example, he expresses deep love for his architecture books. Additionally, he buys Moushumi a guidebook while planning a trip to Italy

(Lahiri). Different books come and go in Gogol's life, representing the things that are most important to him in those moments. In the final scenes of the novel, after returning to his childhood home, Gogol goes through his old books. Holding the *The Overcoat* by Nikolai Gogol in his hands, he has come back full circle to where he started (Lahiri, 290). The book that defined the moment he was born is once again in his hands; it is once again the most important book in his life.

Additionally, Lahiri conveys circular time by beginning the novel with imagery of death and rebirth. The beginning of the novel features an anecdote about a train accident in which Gogol's father, Ashoke, is almost killed. Lahiri describes the event vividly, writing, "the sound was like a bomb exploding" (Lahiri, 17). Lahiri depicts Ashoke's lasting memories of the horrific event as, "Twisted, battered, capsized bogies of the train, his body twisted below it, the terrible crunching sound he had heard but not comprehended, his bones crushed as fine as flour" (Lahiri, 21). After this destructive event, filled with death imagery, Lahiri describes Ashoke leaving for the United States, where he will live a new life that is entirely different from the one he almost lost. This anecdote perfectly illustrates the continual and cyclical nature of life and death, as after his near death experience, Ashoke is reborn and given a new life as he immigrates to the U.S.

Similar to the manner in which Lahiri started *The Namesake* with an anecdote conveying death and rebirth, Eliot begins *Four Quartets* by illustrating a rebirth from the ashes of fire in "Burnt Norton", thereby conveying the circularity of time. Flames often suggest destruction in the Western world, but in the Hindu tradition they are also a symbol of purity and release. "Burnt Norton" can be seen as an allusion to rebirth, as a dead body is cremated in flames and the soul is given a new life. Eliot begins *Four Quartets* with rebirth, simply by giving his first poem the title

of “Burnt Norton”. “Norton”, is an allusion to a house; giving this house a burnt characteristic sets the stage for new life, which Eliot proceeds to describe in the rest of “Burnt Norton”. Starting with an incinerated house foreshadows the rest of the cycle, as Eliot moves from destruction, to new life, to regrowth, and destruction again. Eliot writes, “Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended, / Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place / Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires, Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth” (Eliot, 23). By juxtaposing a series of opposites, such as “rise” and “fall”, “destroyed” and “restored”, and “old” and “new”, Eliot allowing readers to experience this eternal cycle of time. These words create an image of constant creation and destruction, continually moving in a cycle. These lines display this infinite cycle, of life under this eternal circular notion of time.

Eliot further conveys this circular structure through the symbolism of rose and fire. “Burnt Norton” repeatedly portrays an image of the “rose of perfection”. Flowers are natural symbols of fertility and new life. As readers are taken “towards the door we never opened, into the rose-garden”, we are exposed to new possibilities. In this case, the rose is a symbol of the fruits of rebirth, a new beginning. Eliot juxtaposes this rose imagery in “Burnt Norton”, with fire imagery in “Little Gidding”, the last poem in *Four Quartets*. This is a fire of purification, which was foreshadowed in “Burnt Norton”. Eliot describes “the exasperated spirit...restored by that refining fire” (Eliot, 55). Eliot uses revitalizing diction such as “restored” and “refining” in order to portray the fire in a positive light, as pure rather than destructive. The consonance of these two words further adds to this portrayal of fire as uplifting by creating a pleasing combination of sounds. Here, the fire is given positive characteristics so that it is clear that after the destruction caused by the fire, there is new life—conveying the circular nature of time.

Eliot then proceeds to combine these two contrasting images, of fire and rose, into one unified idea. He brings in the rose again, describing “the ash the burnt roses leave” (Eliot, 51). This image of a burnt rose symbolizes the renewal of the cycle, a constant motion between growth, death, and rebirth. In the final lines, the rose and fire are combined as Eliot writes, “the fire and the rose are one” (Eliot, 59). This signifies the unity of the beginning and end, exhibiting the circular nature of time.

Eliot consolidates this idea by saying, “In the beginning is my end” (Eliot, 23). He clarifies the notion of a co-existence of beginning and end, while also giving the two ideas an eternal characteristic. Eliot writes, “And the end and beginning were always there, before the beginning and after the end, and all is always now” (Eliot, 19). The repetition of “always” gives time, a constant cycle of beginnings and endings, a ceaseless quality. Eliot conveys the cyclical nature of time by equating beginning and end, thereby fusing time into an infinite cycle.

The three authors present notions of identity through the placement of the Self in a larger context and meaning. Siddhartha, in a very goal-oriented fashion, leaves his Brahmin upbringing to find himself; this is his search for identity. Consumed with the prospects of attaining *Nirvana*, Siddhartha goes to extremes in changing his personality. Arbitrarily switching from extreme materialism to extreme asceticism, Siddhartha follows others in trying to find himself. However, he is always faced with depressing thoughts of nothingness. It is only when Vasudeva, without teaching or pushing Siddhartha, leads him to self-enlightenment. By showing Siddhartha the ways of the river, Vasudeva exposes him to the idea of being a part of something larger than oneself (Hesse). Siddhartha reflects on this experience saying, “I reviewed my life and it was also a river, and Siddhartha the boy, Siddhartha the mature man and Siddhartha the old man, were only separated by shadows, not through reality. Siddhartha’s previous lives were also not in

the past, and his death and his return to Brahma are not in the future” (Hesse, 107). It is upon this realization that Siddhartha finally understands that his existence—as a boy, a man, or an old man—goes beyond just himself. Hesse uses the repetition of “Siddhartha” in this sentence to create the illusion of Siddhartha being everywhere. This chant-like repetition allows Siddhartha’s to surpass his singular self and become ubiquitous—unified with everything. Siddhartha equates his life to the river, which represents the unity of all things flowing together. It is through the river that Siddhartha is able to connect with the larger reality, and see himself, not as a singular person, but a drop in this divine and unified river.

Hesse analogously describes Govinda’s realization by the river, writing, “He no longer saw the face of his friend Siddhartha. Instead he saw other faces, many faces, a long series, a continuous stream of faces—hundreds, thousands, which all came and disappeared and yet seemed all to be there at the same time, which all continually changed and renewed themselves and which were yet all Siddhartha” (Hesse, 150). In this line, Hesse uses run-on syntax to mirror the movement of the flowing river as Govinda looks at it. The never-ending nature of this sentence enhances the description of the ever-flowing river. Hesse uses an antithesis by describing the continually changing yet uniform nature of the faces in the river. The use of these contrasting meanings in close proximity to one another plays on the complementary property of the opposites to create one vivid picture of a single person connected to thousands and thousands of faces at the same time, thereby connecting the self to a larger humanity.

Lahiri presents identity in a larger universal context through a second generation Indian-American, Gogol, coming to terms with the role of his native land and history in his identity. After a life of growing up as a perplexed second generation Indian-American, an ABCD (American Born Confused Desi), Gogol feels the need to return to his family’s culture.

Previously consumed by superficial notions of “fitting-in”, Gogol finally begins to see himself in a larger context by connecting to his roots. First, using Moushmi, a fellow Bengali-American, to come closer to his roots, Gogol seeks a connection to a larger history and people. It is in the moments of pure connection over common experiences of growing up Indian-American that Gogol is able to align his singular experiences with a larger base.

Lahiri adds to this idea of universal existence by connecting Gogol to a larger history. As Gogol grows older he realizes that his identity is more than just his singular self; it is connected to his father, and thus to a common past. This is perhaps best displayed when Gogol learns significance of his name. When Ashoke tells Gogol the story of how he nearly lost his life in a train accident, Gogol finally understands the origin and meaning of his name (Lahiri, 123).

Gogol was named based on an event that almost took his father’s life; the name thus represents Ashoke’s new life—a rebirth. The harrowing event and Ashoke’s subsequent survival represents his new start in a new country. Gogol, therefore, is the personification of his father’s new beginning. Gogol’s name figuratively represents what his father wanted to accomplish in the U.S. By understanding this history and the role of his familial roots in his life, Gogol sees how he is an extension of his father’s goals, life, and existence. Gogol lives for more than himself; his existence transcends his singular self and represents a larger history and people.

Eliot also presents notions of identity through the placement of the self in a larger context. Eliot, similar to Hesse, also uses water imagery and symbolism to convey this idea, specifically pertaining to an individual’s connection to their history. Eliot accomplishes this, firstly, by offering images of water and the sea. Eliot symbolizes the sea as our history, writing, “the river is within us, the sea is all about us” (Eliot, 36). He goes on to say, “the sea has many voices” (36). He further personifies the sea, writing, “the sea howl and the sea yelp” (Eliot, 36).

The sea, representing our collective history, is given human characteristics in order to bring it to life and make it a significant life force in the present. By giving it lively characteristics, Eliot is portraying it as something that is still with us, rather than dead and in the past.

Eliot adds to this by painting an image of the sea as time, through which travelers on boats move. Eliot writes, “You are not those who saw the harbor / Receding, or those who will disembark. / Here between the hither and the farther shore / While time is withdrawn, consider the future / And the past with an equal mind” (Eliot, 36). In these lines, Eliot addresses the readers directly. He does this in order to involve them and clearly assert his suggestion that we should connect to our past. He presents his readers as voyagers about to set sail, further supporting the idea of the sea as a symbol of the past. This symbolism is particularly impactful because it makes readers comprehend the limitlessness of the past, as if it were the deep seas. It makes our common history seem like a moving entity—moving back and forth like waves—with more life in it than anyone can possibly imagine. This concept is most in line with Walt Whitman’s poem, “Passage to India”, in which Whitman calls for “You captains, voyagers, explorers” to “Sail forth! steer for the deep waters only!” into the “The past! the infinite greatness of the past!” (Whitman).

Eliot further presents identity in a larger context, writing, “Not the intense moment isolated, with no before and after, but a lifetime burning in every moment and not the lifetime of one man only but of old stones that cannot be deciphered.” Eliot refers to “old stones”, perhaps alluding to the Rosetta Stone, which is a large ancient stone on which Egyptian hieroglyphics are translated into several languages. This stone is the only way we are able to interpret Egyptian hieroglyphics and understand the large wealth of knowledge carved on the pyramids and other great feats of the Egyptian civilization (Encyclopædia Britannica). This allusion calls upon the

ancient wisdom that has been present for years and years, but is often ignored by modern civilizations. The Rosetta Stone, as a work in translation, is the perfect example of the interconnectedness of the human experience and our common history. In today's culture, we tend to forget the unity of human experience grounded in our shared past. Eliot stresses that we should not forget our connection to the past and be aware of the common human experience, thereby connecting our individual identity to a larger history.

All three works use the transcendental qualities of different forms of art, such as music, literature, and dance, to display freedom. Hesse uses Siddhartha's enlightenment through the sound of "Om" to convey the transcendence of freedom. The motif of "Om" comes up throughout the novel, however it is only after Siddhartha truly comprehends the meaning of this sound that it leads him to freedom. "Om" is the divine syllable that signifies the unity of all things. "Om" characterizes Siddhartha's enlightenment, which is his ultimate freedom. Siddhartha is finally free when he achieves true enlightenment, realizing that "all the voices, all the goals, all the yearnings, all the sorrows, all the pleasures, all the good and evil, all of them together was the world. All of them together was the stream of events, the music of life. When Siddhartha listened attentively to this river, to this song of a thousand voices...when he did not bind his soul to any one particular voice and absorb it in his Self, but heard them all, the whole, the unity; then the great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: Om—perfection" (Hesse, 136). In these lines Hesse uses a grammatical incorrect form by applying the verb "was" to "all of them". This purposeful error creates an emphasis on the unity of "all of them" by applying a singularly conjugated verb to them. Additionally, Hesse repeats "all" several times, further conveying the unity of all things. Moreover, Hesse brings art into this by referring to the unity of "a thousand voices" as a singular "great song". He says that the "music of life" is a

“song of a thousand voices”. He equates this song to the sound “Om”. By connecting the sound to a great song, Hesse is bringing the transcendent qualities of music to convey the freedom of “Om”.

In the final scene of the *Namesake*, Lahiri uses the transcendental quality of literature to display Gogol’s freedom. In order to make his freedom more impactful, she juxtaposes his supposed entrapment in menial household obligations. Gogol is being forced to participate in the Christmas Party taking place at his house. His mother comes up to his room and interrupts his reading, forcing him to come help her entertain the guests, insisting that there is “no time for books” (Lahiri, 290). This mild form of entrapment in social obligations is juxtaposed with the open-ended nature of the last paragraph in the novel, thereby enhancing the portrayal of freedom in Gogol’s life. Lahiri conveys this unrestricted feeling by consistently using future tense in the final passage. Lahiri writes, “he will apologize...he will go downstairs...he will eat as well” (Lahiri, 290). These images of progression, taking place in the future rather than the present, let the readers transcend Gogol’s life from just the bounds of this novel. Gogol as a character can exist in the future, as well as the past, transcending time and becoming an ever-present experience. Gogol is not merely a character in Lahiri’s novel, he exists beyond that; he exists as a representation of lives of many similar Indian-Americans, many similar divorced men, many similar confused teenagers, and many similar loving sons. Gogol transcends Gogol.

Lahiri ends her novel with Gogol reading literature; she writes, “for now, he starts to read” (Lahiri, 291). By finally reading the book his father gave him years ago, Gogol is expanding himself; he is living beyond himself. Literature allows one to surpass the bounds set by mere singular existence; it lets one transcend the boundaries of human bodies and revel in the beauty of shared experience. Lahiri, wanting Gogol as a character to transcend *The Namesake*,

ends her novel with an inspirational image of Gogol reading and rising above reality into a world of literature, thus motivating her readers to do the very same.

Eliot also uses art forms, such as music and dance, to display the transcendental freedom. Throughout “East Coker” there is repeated imagery of a dance. Eliot urges the readers to “see them dancing around the bonfire”, he describes them as moving “round and round the fire / leaping through the flames, or joined in circles” (Eliot, 24). He further describes them as “Keeping the rhythm in their dancing / As in their living seasons” (Eliot, 24). He later describes these dancers as “all gone under the hill” (Eliot, 27). Eliot then adds, “So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing” (Eliot, 28). This dance has a continuous and eternal nature to it. This is apparent in Eliot’s circular characterization of the dance, by writing that they are “joined in circles” and they are moving “round and round the fire”. Additionally, Eliot adds to the circular nature by alluding to seasons, which move in cycles. This cyclical nature is what lets Eliot bring the idea of death and rebirth into this dance. He describes the dancers as having “all gone under the hill”, a euphemism for death. But he then brings life back into them by saying that “darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing”. Here, Eliot uses oxymoron by describing dark as light and stillness as dancing. The dance of “East Coker” allows for transcendence from life into an eternal state of being, separate from life and death. This profound eternal dance is the path to the blissful freedom. Eliot uses dancing in this section as an illustration of personal liberty through the cycle of death and rebirth, thus utilizing the transcendental quality of dance to display freedom.

Additionally, Eliot’s description of this dance perfectly matches one of the most beautiful examples of a dance conveying destruction and subsequent renewal of life, the divine dance of Shiva. Shiva’s cosmic dancing form is known as *Nataraja*; this dance leads to the destruction of

the world. *Nataraja* dances energetically amongst the flames of the divine fire. Most statues depicting this dance include several rings of fire around him, called the *prabhamandala* (Encyclopædia Britannica). This is strikingly similar to Eliot's description of people dancing "round and round the fire" and "leaping though flames". *Nataraja* dances in a cyclic manner that consumes everything in the cycle of life. This is a graceful example of destruction, leading to renewal and rebirth. This dance exactly matches Eliot's words, "darkness shall be the light"—implying renewal of light after darkness. The dance of East Coker matches *Nataraja*'s dance exquisitely; they are both the dances of freedom through transcendence.

Similar to the manner in which Hesse equates "Om" to the sound to a great song, thereby bringing the transcendent qualities of music to convey freedom, Eliot also uses the this quality of music to display freedom. Eliot presents the idea of "music heard so deeply, that it is not heard at all, but you are the music" (Eliot, 44). This beautiful quote best encapsulates the meaning of music and is most in line with the philosophy of the Sufis. Sufis approach music in a transcendental manner, conveying their genuine love for it and using it to connect themselves to the divine (Singh, 71). Eliot presents the idea of becoming one with music to the type of freedom that Sufi's achieve with their music. He describes this connection with music using an antithesis, saying that the music is heard so deeply that it is not heard at all. This antithesis uses supposed opposites—of hearing and not hearing—to emphasize the idea that one does not merely hear music; instead, one transcends traditional notions of music as simply sound to be heard, and like Sufis, also feels music, touches music, becomes music, becomes free.

These congruent ideas of time, identity, and freedom in the three works all ultimately seek to unite the individual with the infinite and present the fundamental oneness of the world. The circularity of time, the unification of identity, and the transcendence of freedom all push the

readers to go beyond the individual experience and understand the unity of the world. These stories define the human experience; Gogol runs to the Indian roots he once ran from and Siddhartha teeters from severe asceticism to severe materialism. Eliot urges his readers to openly consider the past and connect to these stories—that exist now with just as much life as they did thousands of years ago—instead of linearly moving forward. In order to grasp the meaning of these common stories, we must go beyond shallow individualism and genuinely expose ourselves. Acknowledging the oneness of these common narratives is how we place our singular existence into a larger context and see the inevitable unity of all people, all existence, all.

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Note to Professor Nikky:

There are times in each person's life in which they are forced to explore ideas that they would not necessarily give importance to otherwise. The ideas presented in this paper, particularly the ones pertaining to the work of T.S Eliot, are such ideas.

After reading the Four Quartets for the first and second time I understood the concepts on a very superficial level. It was only after perhaps the tenth time reading it, over and over again, did I relate everything to everything and all these ideas came together before me.

Once that happened, for three whole days I did not do anything else but this paper—all day I lived and breathed this paper. I stayed awake at night thinking about the ideas in this paper. I put my life into this paper. At this point, I sincerely do not care what grade I get on this paper, because for me, this was not a paper, this was a transformative life experience. I was made to explore themes I had previously overlooked with haughty derision or blank confusion. I was made listen to myself, explore my love of literature, music, dance, and more.

There are so many things I wrote that I had to leave out. I wrote a lot of "brown god" and Krishna, and also the Vedas, but a lot of that did not fit properly into flow of the essay. I just want you to know there is a lot more I thought about that simply what is presented in this paper.

I re-read Whitman's Passage to India in a whole new light. The images of sailing, the seas, the water, the past, the singing, and the genuine self-reflection—it makes (more) sense now.

I cannot possibly explain the significance this paper has for me. All I can say is that I am a different person because of this. What you are reading is not an intellectual exploration of these works, it is a spiritual exploration of life.

Thank you—I sincerely enjoyed your class,
Amya