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An Exploration of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* Through the Lens of Contemporary Indian Dance

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Jeevika Bhat

Thesis Committee:
Professor Lisa Naugle, Chair
Professor Diane Diefenderfer
Professor Alan Terricciano

2023

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

An Exploration of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* Through the Lens of Contemporary Indian Dance

by

Jeevika Bhat

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor Lisa Naugle, Chair

Four Quartets is a series of four poems by British poet T.S. Eliot that explores themes of life, love, and spirituality. The poems abstractly follow the journey of life in different phases, with recurring motifs of time, dance, cyclicity, and death.

As an Indian Classical dancer, I am keenly interested in Eliot's lifelong connections with both early Modern dance and Indian spirituality, and am eager to investigate the manifestation of these connections in his writings. Specifically, I recontextualize the motif of spirituality in Indian Classical dance forms, particularly Odissi, and define the term "still point" through multiple contexts, including linguistics, dance, and mysticism to inform my choreographic process. Through my research and choreography, I explore the themes of dance and spirituality which are embedded in Eliot's work and visualize them through the media of Indian Classical and Contemporary dance.

PREFACE

I read poetry to cry.

Words are powerful, and poets manipulate words into impossibly beautiful lines, stringing together combinations as "my heart was heavy and my ribs were too thin and inevitably, they snapped," and every time I read a new poem, I decide once again that I will write.

I first came across T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* over a decade ago, and I have revisited it several times over the years. I discover something new in every read, and my favorite quotes have guided me through my understanding of dance and art and life in general. As an Indian classical dancer, the themes of dance and Indian spirituality which pervade Eliot's work have been pivotal in my own journey to define my art. At the same time, Eliot's rejection of traditional structural limitations parallels my own foray into contemporary movement, and finding a mechanism to allow my cultures and worlds to meet through choreography. In every way, *Four Quartets* was such a patent point of departure for my thesis.

I don't think I will ever really have an answer to the questions that I ask through this process, but I also think that's part of the beauty of it. I firmly believe that the meaning of art is not defined by the author, but entirely by those who perceive it. Maybe "still" meant something different to Eliot than it does to me, or that it might to you (as the consumer of my new, excogitative art). And maybe after another decade, I will completely upend every answer that I have gathered, and change my mind about how I interpret these poems, or what makes art good, or why I dance. But maybe these meanings are all true and they are all false, and maybe that's what makes it art. That's where the dance is.

I read poetry to cry.

Maybe poetry isn't just rhyme and metaphor. Maybe it's simply any representation of the most honest parts of the soul, whether a few syllables or a novella or a play or a dance. Maybe the poets I envy are within me, and if my heart cries enough, they'll slowly come crawling out.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

maṅgalācharaṇ

मङ्गलाचरण

maṅgala - auspicious

acharaṇa - conduct, practice

The introductory piece in the standard Odissi repertoire, performed as an invocation for an auspicious beginning. More generally, an introduction in the form of a prayer (for the attainment of success) at the beginning of any undertaking or of any work of composition. Here, the maṅgalācharaṇ refers to the introduction to the thesis research.

The field of dance can capture “slices of life,” stories which are often influenced by the choreographer’s perception of reality, sometimes extending to the far reaches of their imaginations, and traversing the scope of everything in between. I am interested in stories which are encapsulated into dance, and how choreographers adapt text-based stories into choreographic works. Synthesizing text with movement provides an opportunity to explore the adaptation between two aesthetic fields, namely poetry and choreography.

In this thesis, I examine Odissi, an Indian classical dance form hailing from the east Indian state of Odisha, in conjunction with the poetry of T.S. Eliot, specifically *Four Quartets*, as sources for the development of choreography and performance. I explore Eliot’s journey and curiosity about dance and Indian spirituality to influence a Contemporary Indian dance rendering of his *Four Quartets*? What is the “still point” that is referred to in *Burnt Norton* in the context of dance? in the context of Indian spirituality? Choreographically, what is the role of the children in *Burnt Norton*, the dancers in *East Coker*, the voyagers in *Dry Salvages*, and the traveler in *Little Gidding*, and how is their journey referential to the quest for spiritual enlightenment and life in general?

Stance of the Researcher

Odissi was my introduction to dance technique around twenty years ago, and as my movement home-base, it has since been a means to connect with my Indian-American heritage. I studied Odissi in the Bay Area, California, where I grew up, under the tutelage of my Guru, Jyoti Rout, who originally hails from Odisha, India. She taught a very traditional form of Odissi, and imparted to me a somatic practice and a means for connecting with my roots. I explored

contemporary and modern forms of dance through my undergraduate career, and now, as I pursue an MFA in Dance at UC Irvine, a university with a primarily western dance focus, I explore the confluence of these dance practices and cultures through my art.

My choreographic practice now focuses on contemporary Indian dance, a form which exists in the arbitrary in-between of being not quite this and not quite that. I find many instances of overlap between Ballet and Odissi - grand pli  and *baitha*, first position and *samapada*, fouett  and *biparita bhramari* - and I have enjoyed the process of synthesizing these through my choreographic and research endeavors. Breaking traditional Classical dance structural rules can be an important part of growth and learning how to choreograph. For me, that means incorporating the gossamer delicacy of Balletic, Modern, and other Western dance forms into my practice that is currently rooted in Odissi.

Background on *Four Quartets*

Four Quartets is a series of four poems by British poet T.S. Eliot which abstractly and philosophically explores vast concepts such as time, life, love, and spirituality. The poems, which were not originally written as a set, but have since been published as a group of four, are pessimistic and nihilistic in tone, yet at the same time, poignant and elegant. They are likely written as Eliot's response to the pre-World War II era in Britain, and are a philosophical inquiry into life's purpose (Jones, S. 32).

The first poem, *Burnt Norton*, laments the unintelligible nature of time, and darkly notes that despite time's circular nature, we must all inevitably die. The second poem, *East Coker*, which defines time in a more linear manner, speaks of beginnings, middles, and ends, and the

futility of rituals such as marriage in defining love. The third poem, *Dry Salvages*, compares life to the cycle of water, and includes imagery of rivers meeting the sea to symbolize a connection to something higher after death. This poem is explicitly spiritual and directly inquires into the existence, purpose, and definition of God. The final poem, *Little Gidding*, is detached, and follows the poet, a wise and weary traveler who has reached a stage of enlightenment after living through his life of pessimism (Eliot 10-59).

Eliot's lifelong connections with both dance and Indian spirituality, and their manifestations in his writings, inspire me to express them through the medium of Indian Classical and Contemporary dance.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

sthāyī

स्थायि

sthā - to stand

The second piece in the Odissi repertoire, which demonstrates foundational movements in the absence of poetry or prose. Often, the dancer will depict the process of getting ready - applying makeup, adorning herself with jewelry, and tying her sari in preparation for the performance. In Indian Classical music systems, *sthāyī* refers to the refrain, which repeats between verses. Here, the *sthāyī* refers to the foundation and backgrounds for the thesis research and focuses on the existing literature surrounding the research.

Eliot and Dance

Oxford English lecturer and former Scottish Ballet soloist Susan Jones establishes in her article “‘At the still point’: T.S. Eliot, Dance, and Modernism” that Eliot had a strong connection to Ballet and Modern dance throughout his life. She notes the influence of Ballet choreographers such as Léonide Massine and Antony Tudor on Eliot’s creative practice, specifically the impact of their modern take on Ballet choreography on his perception of art and structure (Jones, S. 32). She also references his previous poems, such as *The Waste Land*, to demonstrate the impact of dance throughout his work. She suggests that Eliot appreciated dance due to the fact that it was a means of creative expression that is not bound by the limits of language (unlike poetry), and was inspired by the way modern dance was able to break boundaries and structural limitations of what was previously accepted. As such, Eliot played with following and breaking structure through his poetry, with certain sections following set meter and rhyme schemes, and others completely shying away from that requirement (Jones, S. 38). Nancy Hargrove, Professor Emerita of the Mississippi State University English Department, also explores Eliot’s relationship with dance and how it influenced *Four Quartets* in her article “T.S. Eliot and the Dance.” Like Jones, Hargrove references Eliot’s personal connections with Isadora Duncan, Ballets Russes, and other pioneering dance artists in early modern dance and ballet history, and analyzes their influence on all of Eliot’s creative work, including *Four Quartets* (Hargrove 61).

Audrey Rodgers, Professor Emerita of English Literature at Pennsylvania State University, also speaks of the poetic references to dance in Eliot’s work in her article “Dance Imagery in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot.” Specifically, she points out that Eliot viewed dance as a form of transcendence, an artistic medium that was more nearly spiritual than literal (Rodgers

25). She synthesizes Eliot's lines that state that music and words can only communicate ideas through structure and form, whereas dance can break free of those structures to communicate more intrinsic and abstract ideas (Rodgers 35). She therefore suggests that Eliot created *Four Quartets* almost as a prosaic Modern dance, where the words were the dancers and the paper was the stage (Rodgers 38).

Eliot, The Still¹ Point, and Indian Spirituality

Choreographic works from Indian classical dance forms such as Odissi fall into two main categories: *nritta*, or pure, emotionless dance which explores rhythmic variations and shapes, and *nriya*, or expressive, storytelling dance, which narrates emotions and epics through hand gestures, facial expressions, and movement (Anoop 120). The themes explored in the second category, *nriya*, have recently begun to include more contemporary plotlines, but have traditionally drawn inspiration from Hindu epics and mythology. The International Encyclopedia of Dance reveals that one such epic, the *Mahabharata*, and within it, the *Bhagavad Gita*², navigates complex familial relationships, the concept of duty and its effect on the afterlife, and the eternal battle between good and evil (Jones, C. 1). This is especially seen through Indian Classical dance works that depict stories of Krishna (the main deity of the *Mahabharata*) and Arjuna (one of the morally conflicted protagonists), and the abstract spiritual essence of the *Bhagavad Gita* (Milstead 66). Over time, the possibly secular epic has evolved into a strong

¹ (adj.) not moving; or, (adv.) hasn't yet reached an end

² A subsection of the Indian epic poem, the *Mahabharata*, which details the dialogue concerning duty and life's purpose between Krishna (the supreme) and Arjuna (a mortal). Regarded as a holy text in Hinduism.

Hindu manifesto, interspersed with deities, blurred moral lines, and strong messages of the power of worship and devotion (Jones, C. 1).

Susan Jones remarks that Eliot's first quartet, "Burnt Norton," explores the idea of dance as a spiritual zenith. It describes dance as a state of being, employing a description that relies on *via negativa*, explaining what dance is by explaining what it is not (Jones, S. 34). This idea closely parallels the explanation of the soul or supreme consciousness found in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which essentially states that the true supreme consciousness cannot be described, and as such, everything that *is* describable is not It (Murthy 43, Srivastava 97). Multiple scholars state that specifically, Krishna, the embodiment of God in the *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad Gita*, is portrayed as the negation of all that is known - lying in the intersection yet absence of eternity and timelessness, "where past and future are gathered" (Jones, S. 31, Milstead 68, Srivastava 105).

This analog of God, dance, and supreme consciousness can also be seen in the second verse of "Burnt Norton" that states, "at the still point, there the dance is" (Eliot 17). According to Susan Jones, in dance, even stillness is movement (Jones, S. 33). Striking a statuesque pose requires constant shifting in the muscles of the feet, and arriving to a state of balance or perceived stillness is the result of millions of micromovements working in counterbalance and cooperation (Jones, S. 33). It is in this almost meditative stillness that dance lives, and in conjunction with the religious themes in the poem, Eliot explores spiritual notions of dance as an embodied practice (Jones, S. 44). Here, "still" refers to a mental state, the desired outcome of meditation. This also aligns with Indian Classical concepts of stillness and poses (Jones, C. 1). As well, the "still point," which Eliot defines to be the womb of dance, resembles the "still

center” that the *Bhagavad Gita* refers to as the supreme consciousness, or that indescribable God within (Srivastava 100). Throughout *Four Quartets*, Eliot incorporates spiritual allusions to the *Bhagavad Gita*, creating a parallel between the notion of God and pure dance as a means of connecting with one’s true center (Srivastava 99). Contemporary Indian Classical dance also explores these themes, encapsulating the essence of the *Bhagavad Gita* in a manner that while religiously prompted, is fundamentally not driven by worship or ritual practices but by spiritual connection and awareness.

According to Dr. Narsingh Srivastava, former professor of English at the University of Gorakhpur who focuses on religious poetry, and Dr. Claudia Milstead, a professor of English and specialist in Asian literature at the University of Northern Colorado, some lines of T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* include nearly direct translations of verses from the *Bhagavad Gita*, speaking of the mind’s wanderings at the time of death (Milstead 68, Srivastava 105). Eliot makes conspicuous allusions to the *Bhagavad Gita* in *The Dry Salvages*, the third quartet, with more spiritual allusions and suggestions in *Little Gidding*, the fourth quartet. *The Dry Salvages* overall is often speculative and musing, with lines such as “I often wonder what Krishna meant,” which falls in line with Eliot’s lifelong curiosity about Hinduism (Srivastava 97). Purasu Balakrishnan, a physician turned author in both English and Tamil, also explores the themes of the *Bhagavad Gita* that are pervasive throughout *Four Quartets*. He references the mysticism of the work, and likens the spiritual allusions to the notion of God, regardless of denomination. Balakrishnan identifies key verses of the *Bhagavad Gita* whose themes are present in *Four Quartets*, then analyzes the imagery of fire and roses to draw parallels to other Indian works, such as Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gitanjali*, which also explores spirituality. Queens College’s Russell T.

Fowler explores the idea of karma³ and the fruit of actions being inconsequential through his essay “Krishna and the ‘Still Point’.” He explores the pessimism of *Four Quartets*, specifically in terms of the futility of trying to perform actions to change one’s fate, as actions are and should be for action’s sake, rather than for the outcome. He also echoes that the motifs of time, incarnation, and karma are parallels of the teachings found in the *Bhagavad Gita* (Fowler 409, Murthy 19).

As an Anglo Catholic Christian, Eliot did not fully subscribe nor formally convert to Hinduism and Hindu spirituality, but did avidly explore the essential concepts through his writings (Milstead 65, Srivastava 97). Juan Carlos Saravia Vargas, Professor of English Literature at the University of Costa Rica, explores the coexistence of Christianity and Hinduism through T.S. Eliot’s work in his article, “The Cross and the Wheel.” He also brings to light some Buddhist themes, and claims that Eliot views each religion as a part of some whole, rather than conflicting entities. Vargas views “the still point” in terms of the metaphor of the wheel, and notes that though the wheel is constantly turning, its center remains “the still point of the turning world.” Srivastava highlights parallels between the Gita, the Bible, and *Four Quartets*, and notes that the poem’s emphasis on prayer, surrender, and devotion is universal and not representative of any one religion, concluding that the famed “still point” is God (Srivastava 101).

Poetry and Choreography

Jack Anderson, a poet and dance critic, speaks of the conversion process between the media of dance and poetry. He compares the cadence of poetry and words mapped within the

³ the Hindu concept that one’s current actions determines their future fate

page to the rhythm of dance and bodies mapped through the performance space. He also refers to the choreography of the poetry, namely the way words are spaced and the impact of that spacing, and how that can be mimicked using the pacing of the dance (Anderson 252). Anderson also specifically refers to Eliot, who attempted to symbolize, rather than express emotions in his work in order to make experiences come alive for his audiences (Anderson 259). Anderson compares the processes of consuming poetry versus consuming dance, stating that it often takes multiple readings or viewings to fully understand the content. I planned to mimic this by creating “easter eggs” in my choreography that might require further analysis or viewings to catch (Anderson 260). Mary Lewis Shaw, a professor of French Poetry at Rutgers University, also compares the language of dance with poetic language in her article “Performance in the Texts of Mallarmé.” She refers to the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé when she speaks of how dance is neither strictly emblematic nor mimetic, allowing for interpretation from the viewer (Shaw 4). She also laments that dance is bound by the rules of physics, and how many technical elements such as lighting and costumes might contribute to the ethereal and ephemeral feeling that poetry is able to achieve (Shaw 5). Thus, the relationship between poetry and dance is not exactly one to one, and rather both serve to inspire each other and translate in indirect ways.

Todd Bolender, a mid-20th century choreographer, choreographed a work based on *Four Quartets*, entitled *The Still Point*. Heavily inspired by the format and structural breakthroughs of Eliot’s poetry, Bolender stated in an interview with the New York Times that even though his background was in Ballet, he felt that the choreography of *The Still Point* was not Modern or Ballet, but dance (Dunning 22). In the same way, I feel as though my choreography is neither Indian Classical, nor Contemporary, but dance. I am inspired by this idea of moving past the

limits to traditional Indian Classical dance structure, as Eliot and Bolender did, while creating the choreography for my thesis concert.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

pallavī

पल्लवि

pallavīn - blossoming, sprouting

The third piece in the Odissi repertoire, an elaboration of pure, abstract dance based on creative counterpoint with the music. Often, it begins slowly with straightforward footwork, and culminates in elaborate, quick rhythmic variations. Here, the pallavī refers to the methodology of the thesis, elaborating on the established framework to create the work.

The process of creating choreography for the concert component of my thesis consisted of three main phases: first reading *Four Quartets* for flow and general understanding, then analyzing and selecting text for adaptation into a movement outline, and finally staging for a performance. Through the process of my thesis research, I use Eliot's poetry, along with Odissi and Contemporary dance techniques, as pillars to create a choreographic work that explores narrative and structure through choreography.

Reading and Content Analysis

The narrative of my concert choreography is loosely based on Eliot's poetry, so I read *Four Quartets* multiple times to various degrees of depth in preparation. Since my first perusal was several years ago, I recalled how the text made me feel more so than the content. I also knew there were particularly poignant lines that I wanted to incorporate into the choreography, whether literally or abstractly. During the thesis research process, my first read was dedicated to understanding the text from a literal sense. I read and annotated Eliot's poetry, focusing on defining new vocabulary and terms, and taking notes to paraphrase any parts of the text that weren't immediately clear to understand. By the end of this read, I felt very comfortable with the content of the poems. At this beginning phase of my research, I was approaching the text from a literary perspective, focusing on the literal meaning and definitions rather than the artistry and aesthetic choices, and approaching it as if it were the first level of analysis in an English or response to literature context.

For the second read, I focused on the beauty and emotional impact that the poems had on me. I have always been drawn to subtle beauty in art and life, which can be defined to be either

visual or emotional. In dance specifically, I appreciate visually aesthetic movement, particularly that which visualizes the music but I am also very attracted to poignant messages or thematic concepts. I especially appreciate the subtle beauty that might be found in the seemingly mundane - the deeper meanings and takeaways that are spun out of the ordinary. In poetry, I search for lines and words that impact me or form a personal connection in some manner beyond the surface level - maybe it reminds me of something from my own past, or causes me to change my perspective on an experience or situation which I did not consider prior. So, I made notes of quotes that stood out to me as related to or suggesting “beauty” and briefly journaled about how I was affected by them. I included lines with meanings of depth that struck me, as well as intricately constructed phrases that were also more artistic. I then digitized this set of annotations by highlighting and color coding an online copy of the poems. Examples of some of my annotations can be found in Figures 1-4.

Adaptation

The process of annotating and digitizing allowed me to look at the poems as a whole and notice where significant moments were located in the big picture. It seemed that each of the four poems had two to three pivotal moments which led me to develop a structure for my choreography. I organized the quotes I selected and concentrated the moments and themes and planned to have two to three movement vignettes per poem, thus creating a choreographic structure in four acts. I used these organized annotations to develop a more detailed outline of moments to be included in the narrative arc of the choreography. An initial outline of these ideas can be found in Figure 5.

Overall, *Four Quartets* is not based on a strict narrative, although I imagined a subtle narrative through my three reads. It felt very much like the story of a voyager as they navigated through the journey of life, starting with birth, exploring love, questioning spirituality, and accepting death. Keeping in accordance with the idea of cycles and cyclicity, I noticed which elements and seasons corresponded with each quartet, and chose to incorporate that into the structure of choreographed scenes. In order, I decided on spring/air, autumn/earth, winter/water, and summer/fire. Keeping in mind Eliot's British background, as well as the South Asian backdrop upon which I planned to present in my concert, I thought about the essences of the seasons in both geographic locales, and made note of what emotions these seasons and elements evoked.

Within the first quartet, *Burnt Norton*, I envisioned three scenes of young life - one of birth, portraying a mother and child, one of childhood, portraying the same child's transition into young adulthood, and one of pure dance, visualizing the quintessential quote: "at the still point, there the dance is." The second quartet, *East Coker*, I split into two scenes of love - one of a grand wedding (between the now older voyager and their companion), and one of the more intimate side of young couple's new love. For the third quartet, *The Dry Salvages*, I constructed three scenes to represent the spirituality that is portrayed in the text - an abstract depiction of the river and sea, a vignette of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the battle of Kurukshetra, and a collage of religious motifs without a clear resolution as to which the protagonist chooses to pursue. Finally, for the last quartet, *Little Gidding*, I created four scenes leading to death - the metaphorical death of the romanticized setting of the first three poems, the death of a companion, the remembrance of childhood and the death of innocence, and finally, the death of the self.

At the end, the narrative paves way for the whole story to start again, and even though it is now occurring with different people and different experiences, it is somehow intrinsically and fundamentally the same. This portrayal of a reincarnation, of sorts, reflects the circular and repetitive themes of the unintelligibility of time that are present throughout the work. This reflects another representative quote from the poems: “And the end and the beginning were always there / Before the beginning and after the end” (Eliot 36). After a discussion with my thesis chair, I noticed these patterns of cyclicity could be further incorporated into the choreographic structure. While I had the idea in mind to create the choreography as a circle, we realized that it was more of a four way Venn-diagram, with overlapping whispers from all four poems that manifest themselves in all four acts. As such, I began the concert with a glimpse of the end, and ended with a glimpse of the beginning.

Choreographic Structure

The main focus of the choreographic process was to translate the concepts mentioned above from the poetry and outline into dance.

I spent much of my time searching for music that fit the narratives of the individual sections I had curated, including reaching out to a composer for one section, 3.3. I noted key musical moments, and tried to capture essential moments of the narrative that I wanted to portray. My aim was to have the musicality of movement contribute to my perceptions of beauty within the poetry. I then filled in the gaps with choreography that was inspired by the style that I had assigned to that particular section, and started to assign roles within the choreography to the dancers.

The remaining sections, 3.1, 3.3, and portions of 1.3, were far more collaborative than the other sections. I spoke with the dancers about my choreographic intentions, my interpretation of Eliot's ideas, and the internal feelings I felt upon reading the work. I also read key quotes with my dancers to see how their interpretations differed from mine, and how we could incorporate all of our individual interpretations into our concept and visualization. These interpretations did not influence the choreography itself, but rather how we performed the movement and how we internalized the emotion.

I now go through the process of choreography and intentions behind the various sections of the concert:

1.1

This section follows a young mother, witnessing the miracle of birth and life through her daughter's early years. As such, this section is mostly a solo, where the mother uses abhinaya⁴ to portray the imagined daughter as she progresses through infancy, toddlerhood, childhood, and young adulthood, before finally leaving on her own to explore the world. The choreography uses Odissi hand gestures and expressions, with contemporary structured improvisational moments of play and joy that were informed by the dancer. As the imagined daughter leaves the stage, the next dancer (myself, as the daughter) enters, ready to explore the world. Four other dancers open this section as a glimpse of the end, section 4.4, creating a foreshadowing into what the entire piece ends with.

1.2

⁴ The primary mode of storytelling and expression in Indian classical dance, which utilizes facial expressions, hand gestures, and body language to convey a mood or narrative.

This section is a solo that portrays exploration, following the young voyager and her awe and fear of the gigantic world she has been thrust into. The choreography is based mostly in contemporary dance, with Odissi influence in the form of facial expressions. Nine other dancers gently enter toward the end of this section as manifestations of the other children in the poems, all exploring an imagined secret garden that is meant to represent their world. These dancers portray laughter, and the children amongst the foliage.

1.3

This section is what I have defined to be the most crucial to my thesis research, directly referencing the “still point,” and the several meanings and interpretations of the word “still.” On the first day of our rehearsal, I asked the dancers to define “still,” and recorded their voices through their definitions and readings of the poem. I incorporated these, as well as a recording of Eliot himself, into the music, creating a chaotic sanctuary of voice that then resolved itself with the line “there the dance is.” Choreographically, the dancers cyclically repeat a phrase that represents themselves, culminating in a frenzy before reaching a point of off-balance stillness. I then asked the dancers to explore the idea that stillness cannot exist in the body, exaggerating the movements of stabilization and breaking free into a pure, Odissi nritta based dance segment that explores joy, release, calm, childhood, and community. The choreography also incorporates the idea of circles (a recurring theme across all four acts), including both individual and group rotations and revolutions.

2.1

This section represents the grand Indian wedding, incorporating an almost bachelorette party feel into the choreography. The bride-to-be bounces between excitement and apprehension for her life

ahead, while eight other dancers tease and encourage her for the soon to be future. The groom-to-be is then whisked in at the end of the section. Choreographically, this segment incorporates more circles, specifically inspired by Indian folk styles such as Ghoomar and Raas, along with more contemporary release components and Odissi based hand gestures and footwork. The use of these forms was inspired by traditional movements that are danced during a typical Indian wedding, in conjunction with the idea of turning that is present in the poems.

2.2

This section attempts to showcase the softer, more subtle aspects of love. The choreography is a blend of Odissi and Contemporary movements, with emphasis partnerwork and lifts, and prolonged slow moments of touch. The section represents a consummation of pure, tender love outside of the official bounds of marriage.

3.1

This act is more dreamlike and spiritual, representing the protagonist's qualms and questions of spirituality. This section represents the cycle of water, and the dancers are drops and waves in the ocean, lapping as they reach the shore. The movement is improvisational, with a structure choreographed in conjunction with the dancers, and is meant to be a literal depiction of the sea. Like waves succumbing to the pull of the tide, the dancers allow themselves to be pulled by the movement of the other dancers in the spacing, ebbing and flowing in harmony. This is done based on the sense of touch, with the dancers ignoring the other commonly used senses of sight and hearing.

3.2

This choreography is neoclassical, and incorporates elements of hip hop and modern movement into the Odissi framework. The story follows the famous scene from the *Bhagavad Gita*, where Krishna and Arjuna march into the battlefield. Arjuna laments the fact that he is being asked to kill his kin, to which Krishna attests that it is his [Arjuna's] duty to destroy evil, no matter the physical effects. Krishna reminds Arjuna that even though the mortal body will perish, the soul lives on. As the battle ensues, the protagonist questions the means and the end, almost accusing Krishna (thereby rejecting God, and religion) for causing the destruction. However, this rejection simultaneously upholds the idea of religion, since Krishna, being the depiction of God, does not die.

3.3

This section is purely internal and reflective. Each dancer exists as themselves in a tranquil, transitory state, exploring their own relationship with spirituality and God. The narrative goes back to the protagonist (in the real world), coming to terms with her own spirituality and recognizes that for her, religion and God are an ongoing process and she will continue to ponder, but cannot commit to. The choreography aims to parallel the mental discomfort of the initial stages of meditation and soul searching, by creating a sense of discomfort in the audience as well. The section is meant to be vague and open to interpretation - are the dancers meditating? Sleeping? What are they thinking during the section? What do they think after?

4.1

The narrative resituates itself in a more modern context, possibly abroad, possibly in the twenty first century. The movement is pedestrian and showcases the whirlwind of the world against the

(now older) protagonist's sense of peace and calm. The companion, from earlier, passes away, and we see the beginnings of a funeral.

4.2

This section shows the protagonist's reaction to the death of her husband, and how she copes with the prospect of death (grief, then detachment). The choreography incorporates elements of Odissi and Contemporary dance.

4.3

This section showcases the protagonist remembering the joys of her own childhood, before eventually succumbing to her own sleep, a motif, leaving the audience to wonder what she is thinking.

4.4

This section simply wraps around to the start, bringing the motif of turning and starting the story anew, with the voyager, now a new mother, with a new baby, and a new story, different, and yet the same.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

abhinaya

अभिनय

abhi - towards

naya - leading, guiding

The fourth piece in the Odissi repertoire, which tells a story or expresses an emotion through body language, hand gestures, and facial expressions. The choreography often follows the structure of the lyrics or mood of the music to lead the audience through a story or theme. Here, the abhinaya refers to the findings, answering the questions and guiding the reader towards understanding the story or theme.

Through the research and creative process, I sought to answer my research questions surrounding Eliot, *Four Quartets*, and the choreography. These answers were found through the literature as detailed in the Literature Review chapter, the reading and translation as detailed in the Methods chapter, and the choreographic process as detailed in the Method chapter. I will now summarize my findings; first from a deeper understanding of the literature and then through the creation of choreography.

My first research question inquired into Eliot's journey and curiosity about dance and Indian spirituality, and how I can use this influence within my Contemporary Indian choreographic process. Eliot was likely influenced by early Modern dance greats such as Isadora Duncan and the Ballets Russes, who performed in Europe in the 1930s. During this time, his poetic structure veers away from traditional rhyme schemes and leans towards prose, which parallels the branching of Modern dance away from Ballet. Both aesthetic forms contain elements from their parent form, while also making intentional choices to expand and create freedom within a work. As well, the themes and motifs of dance and dancers in his poetry, which are always portrayed sublimely, suggest the strong positive influence of dance in his creative work. Eliot also likely explored eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, and includes elements of these teachings in his work, especially in *The Dry Salvages*. I used these connections in my work, using Contemporary Indian dance as the choreographic base for the performance component. Here, I too veered away from traditional Classical Indian dance, and incorporated Modern and Contemporary dance ideas into the movement. From a more emotional and storytelling perspective, I utilized the traditional mythological themes that Classical Indian historically uses, but in a modern context.

Since I had a clear outline, the process of translating the poetry to a narrative arc, and then to choreography, felt straightforward. Nearly every section was heavily informed by the music, since Indian Classical dance traditionally relies on music visualization as a starting point for choreography. The section that felt the most difficult to create choreography for was 3.1, where we went through several iterations before settling on a way to communicate waves at sea, but even this was heavily driven by the music.

In the process of working with the dancers, I found that it was natural to communicate the concepts and themes behind the choreography. However, it was more challenging to convey the movements and their qualities considering the variety of technical backgrounds of the dancers - some came from a Ballet background, some from Bharatanatyam, some from Hip Hop, and some from Post-Modern techniques. As such, I relied heavily on demonstration while teaching and tried as much as possible to convert terms into English. I also spent several days working individually with each dancer to help meet them and work on the specific questions they brought.

My second research question focused on defining the “still” that is referred to in *Burnt Norton* in multiple contexts, specifically dance and Indian spirituality. While there are so many definitions of still, I narrowed it to two general categories: the adjective definition, and the adverb definition. The adjective, which is the common definition in dance, refers to stillness, not moving or making a sound. This is visualized through the choreography as poses or moments of meditation. However, within this perceived stillness, there are still infinitesimal movements being made to stabilize the body musculature, and no matter how imperceptible, we are always *still* breathing and our blood is *still* flowing, because to be “still” is to not be alive. Even in inanimate objects, stillness is impossible, considering quantum movement and universal

expansion, and on a technicality, to be “still” is to not exist. Hence, I consider the adverb definition of still, the idea that something exists in a state of continuation. Applying this to the quote “at the still point, there the dance is” (Eliot 17), I postulate that the still point is both a point of perceived unmoving, but also a point of continuation - when we are uncertain whether and how we can go on, yet somehow, we persist.

Finally, my third research question explored the role of the children in *Burnt Norton*, the dancers in *East Coker*, the voyagers in *Dry Salvages*, and the traveler in *Little Gidding*, and how their journey was referential to the quest for spiritual enlightenment and life in general.

Throughout the choreography, the dancers are seen searching. This is portrayed through Odissi hand gestures and curious facial expressions, which aim to create a world inside the stage. This includes both literal and metaphorical searching, such as searching for a new milestone in a child’s life, searching for a magical little bird that leads that child through a secret garden, searching for friendship, searching for love, searching for meaning, searching for closure, or searching for a new purpose. It seems that even Eliot, through all his poetry, was searching for meaning, and *Four Quartets*, rather than a set of answers, is a set of laments that the said meaning is unattainable. At the end of both the poems and the choreography, we see a sense of detachment and acceptance again communicated through a forlorn into neutral facial expression - that this is bound to happen again, and again, and again, and that there is no point searching for a meaning that can never be found. At the same time, whatever meaning *is* found, is enough.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

mokshya

मोक्ष्य

mokṣ - to liberate

The concluding piece in the Odissi repertoire, in which the dancer offers herself in complete surrender to the divine to attain enlightenment, detachment, or liberation. It is regarded as the most essential expression of devotion, where the dancer and the dance become one. Here, mokshya refers to the conclusion, tying together and restating the essence of the thesis.

Through this thesis, I embarked on a choreographic journey to use *abhinaya* to portray life as it is, a philosophical yet mundane exploration of the quest to find the meaning of it all. To aid in this endeavor, I sought out a similar abstracted portrayal of life, and found it in a set of poems I had first read many years ago.

In *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot explores abstract, philosophical, and nihilistic themes within the cycle of life. His work is strongly influenced by his interactions with early modern dance and with eastern philosophy, and it includes motifs of both dance and spirituality as an avenue towards understanding life's meaning. Through my research, I explored these connections, and used them in my quest to define the word "still" in many contexts, including linguistics, dance, and spirituality. Across all the definitions, the one that I now resonate with most strongly is the adverb definition - it hasn't yet reached an end.

The choreography utilized movement concepts from the east Indian classical dance form, Odissi, synthesized with Contemporary and Modern ideas. The concert loosely followed the story of a voyager in her journey through life, capturing her experiences as she found love, questioned her spirituality, and experienced death, paving way for a new story to start again.

Part of the beauty of art is that the meaning found in it can fluctuate with every new look. While I feel confident in the answers to my questions now, I could very well change my mind and interpretations the next time I engage with this work. Maybe I will find a new meaning of still, or find a new medium to express these words, or create a new takeaway. But maybe, the next time, I will have a more clear path, and a more clear purpose in my engagement. In the words of Eliot, "We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time."

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APPENDIX

Figure 1.1

II

Garlic and sapphires in the mud
Clot the bedded [axle-tree]
The [trilling wire] ^{beam which connects wheels of a bullock cart} in the blood ^{↳ karma + mahabharata}
Sings below [inveterate scars] ^{habitual, unlikely to change}
Appeasing [long forgotten wars.]
The dance along the artery
The circulation of the lymph
Are figured in the drift of stars
Ascend to summer in the tree
We move above the moving tree
In light upon the figured leaf
And hear upon the sodden floor
Below, the boarhound and the boar
Pursue their pattern as before 60
But reconciled among the stars.

At the [still] point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor
fleshless; ^{unmoving, perceived stillness} ^{suspension, circular monkey bars → inflection point? apex?} ^{it hasn't reached an end}
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance
is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it [fixity],
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement ^{the state of being permanent}
from nor towards,
[Neither ascent nor decline.] Except for the point, the still
^{could be a maximum or a minimum}
point,

(15)

Figure 1.2

V

Words move, music moves
 [Only in time,] but that which is only living
 Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
 Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern, 140
 Can words or music reach
 The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
 [Moves perpetually in its stillness.]
 Not the stillness of the violin, [while the note lasts,]
 Not that only, but the co-existence, ^{lingering, suspension} \rightarrow what is stillness in music?
 Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
 And the end and the beginning were always there
 Before the beginning and after the end.
 And all is always now. Words strain,
 Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
 Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
 Decay with [imprecision] will not stay in place,
 Will not stay still. ^{synonyms don't exist} Shrieking voices
 Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,
 Always assail them. The Word in the desert
 Is most attacked by voices of temptation,
 The crying shadow in the funeral dance,
 The loud lament of the disconsolate [chimera]
 The detail of the pattern is movement, <sup>female fire-breathing monster
lions heads goats body, serpents tail
also, something that is hoped for
also, genetic blending</sup>
 As in the figure of the [ten stairs.] ^{from "The Dark Night of the soul" 160}
 \rightarrow (19) St. John of the cross
 \rightarrow ten steps on the ladder of divine love
 ladder of contemplative purification

Figure 1.3

The river is within us, the sea is all about us;
The sea is the land's edge also, the granite
Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses
Its hints of earlier and other creation:
The starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale's backbone;
The pools where it offers to our curiosity
The more delicate algae and the sea anemone. 20
It tosses up our losses, the torn seine,
The shattered [lobsterpot] the broken oar
And the gear of foreign dead men. The sea has many
voices,
Many [gods] and many voices.
The salt is on the briar rose,
The fog is in the fir trees.
The sea howl
And the sea yelp, are different voices
Often together heard: the whine in the rigging,
The menace and caress of wave that breaks on water,
The distant rote in the granite teeth,
And the wailing warning from the approaching headland
Are all sea voices, and the heaving groaner
Rounded homewards, and the seagull:
And under the oppression of the silent fog
The [tolling bell]
Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried
Ground swell, a time
Older than the time of chronometers, older
(36)

Figure 1.4

While time is withdrawn, consider the future
And the past with an equal mind.
At the moment which is not of action or inaction
You can receive this: "on whatever sphere of being
The mind of a man may be intent
At the time of death"—that is the one action
[(And the time of death is every moment)]
Which shall fructify in the lives of others: ^{every moment has a little death, like words in movies that fade in and out 160}
And do not think of the fruit of action.
[Fare forward.] ^{just do it → go onward.}
^{there is no forward, except the direction}
O voyagers, O seamen, ^{you are currently facing.}
You who come to port, and you whose bodies
Will suffer the trial and judgement of the sea
Or whatever event, this is your real destination.'
So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna
On the field of battle.
Not fare well,
But fare forward, voyagers.

IV

[Lady], whose shrine stands on the promontory,
^{she caught me, and I won.}
Pray for all those who are in ships, those
Whose business has to do with fish, and
Those concerned with every lawful traffic
And those who conduct them.

(42)

Figure 2

	42 One - Air - Spring	15 Two - Earth - Autumn	12 Three - Water - Winter	9 Four - Fire - Summer	6
Scene	clock, woman, birth	3 folk, men, earth, grounded???	2 river, sea	2 modern, urban, city	1
Music	clock ticking, bell strikes one, baby crying, soft, staccato piano? unclear?	harvest, earthy, instrumental	flute + ocean sounds, todis, bass, low, painfully slow, one note at a time (moon song)	city sounds	
Costumes	off white, rough spun sari, tucked on side	dhotis	dull, cadet blues, churidhars	denims and black, professional meets casual	
Smell	-	-	salt, ocean breeze		
Lighting	low light, amber, soft spot	warm, sunrise	cool, maybe turn ac wayyyy down	bright, city lights, neon	
Movement	solo with baby prop, ends with sleep mostly contemporary, hints of indian, expressionless, mudraless, footworkless	*** may delete this scene or annex it to 1.2	river imagery, into ocean wave, one person stands in the water and the waves lap her feet <small>contact, dha, rolls</small>	urban movement, mixed with pedestrian motion, contemporary influence, but more hit/concrete/sharp/sturdy	
Scene	garden dream	8 folk, wedding, rajasthan	7 kurukshetra, bhagavad gita,	3 funeral	3
Music	pilu, mishra kafi, sitar, bell chimes, sparkles	folk, ghoomar vibes, aayo ri vibes	war sounds, todi, tabla, karmanye	bhairavi, violin? flute? sitar?, low, guttural, bass	
Costumes	whites, flowy, twirly, dresses, sufesque, flower crowns	ghagras, mirrors, cholis, dupattas	dull, cadet blues, churidhars	white practice saris, dhoti saris	
Smell	-	jeera? saffron?		-	
Lighting	dream sequence, pinks, glows, low fog	warm, bright			
Movement	child airy, balletesque, leaps, some mudrawork for flowers <small>wonder</small>	folk, ghoomar circles, applying henna, harshna	chariots, battle, army becomes background, only krishna and arjuna dance	mostly classical, slight contemp influence somber	
Scene	sufi, at the still point there the dance is	4 bride and groom duet	3 sea envelopes, boat sailing onward	4 woman and fireplace	1
Music	spoken word, various voices, into uplifting alhaiya bilawal?? soft percussion (ferrymans)	jiv rangla	om mani padme ham, budham sharanam gachami, hymn, om, todi, adhaan, shanti mantra (asatoma or purnamadah?)	fire crackling, remembrance of garden dream (radio? humming??), raghuram raina beeti jaaye?	
Costumes	whites, flowy	dhoti/kurta pyjama, ghagra choli	dull, cadet blues, churidhars	off white, rough spun sari, not pinned on shoulder, pulled over head	
Smell	-		rain? petrichor?	smoke, warm	
Lighting	happy lighting, whites, pinks, yellows, low fog turning, random aggressive movement, lyrical hits	sunset into dark, shadowy, candle-esque		soft spot in front corner	
Movement	"still" stillness, there the dance "is" into classical contemp	ballety partnerwork but with indian influence	layers representing religions, procession death? meditating girl awakens, sees death, cries	embroidery, funeral	
Scene				silhouettes, shadows, ashes	1
Music				fire crackling fades out	
Costumes				white practice saris, dhoti saris	
Smell					
Lighting				silhouetted	
Movement				shape based, posey, silhouetted silence, flames	