



Novel Insights, *An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Research Journal

ISSN: 3048-6572 (Online) 3049-1991 (Print)

Impact Factor: 4.25(IIFS), 8.2(IJIN)

Volume-II, Special Issue, February 2026, Page No. 120-123

Published by Uttarsuri, Sribhumi, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://novelinsights.in/>

DOI: 10.69655/novelinsights.vol.2.issue.specialW.076



Urban Modernism and the Search for Meaning: Fragmentation and Existential Crisis in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Buddhadeb Basu's *Raat Bhore Brishti*

Ankita Sarkar, *Research Scholar, Department of English, Raiganj University, West Bengal, India*

Received: 01.01.2026; Accepted: 20.02.2026; Available online: 28.02.2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Uttarsuri Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Abstract

The modernist era was marked by a rupture in literary expression, shaped by historical upheavals, urban alienation, and the erosion of traditional meaning-making structures. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* stands as one of the defining texts of this crisis, capturing the fractured consciousness of the twentieth century through its disjointed narrative, shifting voices, and intertextual allusions. The poem presents a world in which meaning is elusive and fragmented across cultures and histories, with the invocation of "Shanti, Shanti, Shanti" from the Upanishads serving as both an echo of lost spiritual coherence and a reflection of modern disillusionment. The depiction of London as a wasteland—populated by individuals disconnected from their surroundings—reinforces the anxieties of modern urban life, where memory, history, and identity dissolve into a landscape of uncertainty.

Buddhadeb Basu's *Raat Bhore Brishti* offers a strikingly parallel engagement with these themes within a Bengali modernist framework. Set in an urban milieu, the novel explores the psychological disintegration of its protagonist, whose existential crisis unfolds against the backdrop of a rapidly changing Kolkata. Like Eliot's work, Basu's narrative is fragmented, capturing the uncertainties of modern existence through shifts in perspective and an introspective, deeply alienated protagonist. While Eliot's modernism emerges from the trauma of war and the collapse of European cultural authority, Basu's work reflects the anxieties of a postcolonial city grappling with its fractured identity. This study examines how both texts articulate a literary response to urban modernity, emphasising how the search for meaning, identity, and coherence transcends cultural and geographical boundaries, shaping modernist literature in distinct yet interconnected ways.

Keywords– Urban Modernism, Existential Crisis, Fragmentation, Intertextuality, Alienation

The early twentieth century marked a decisive shift in literary consciousness, shaped by unprecedented transformations in social life, political order, and urban experience. The expansion of cities, the acceleration of daily rhythms, and the weakening of inherited belief systems produced a condition in which individuals increasingly experienced the world as unstable and disorienting. The literature responded to this condition by abandoning linear narratives and moral certainties, turning instead to fragmented forms and inward

psychological exploration. Modernist writing did not attempt to restore coherence to a fractured world but sought to register its disintegration with honesty and precision.

A defining feature of this literary shift is the centrality of urban space. The modern city emerges not merely as a setting but as a force that reshapes perception, identity, and emotional life. Urban existence, characterised by anonymity, constant movement, and sensory overload, alters the ways individuals relate to themselves and others. Writers began to depict the city as a site where meaning becomes unstable and the self increasingly fragmented. This transformation finds one of its most influential expressions in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. This poem captures the exhaustion, alienation, and cultural disinheritance of modern life through formal disjunction and intertextual density.

Similar concerns surface in Bengali modernist literature, particularly in Buddhadeb Basu's *Raat Bhore Brishti*. Set in colonial Kolkata, the novel explores the psychological unravelling of a modern subject navigating an urban environment shaped by colonial modernity and social transition. Though separated by geography and historical circumstance, Eliot and Basu articulate strikingly parallel anxieties regarding urban existence, existential uncertainty, and the erosion of meaning. Bringing these texts into dialogue allows for a comparative examination of modernism as a transnational literary response to the pressures of modern urban life.

The changing conditions deeply inform modernist representations of urban life. Georg Simmel's reflections on metropolitan existence offer a helpful framework for understanding this shift. Simmel argues that the modern city overwhelms the individual through constant sensory stimulation, leading to psychological withdrawal as a means of self-preservation. This withdrawal manifests as emotional detachment, rationalisation, and a diminished capacity for deep experience. The urban subject learns to survive by distancing the self from overwhelming stimuli, but this survival strategy comes at the cost of emotional vitality and meaning.

This theoretical insight helps illuminate the fragmented subjectivity central to modernist literature. Fragmentation in modernist texts is not merely formal experimentation; it reflects the psychic consequences of urban life. The city produces individuals who experience the world in fragments, unable to sustain continuity of feeling or belief. Alongside this sociological condition emerges an existential dimension in which meaning is no longer grounded in stable traditions or collective narratives. Modernist texts often register this condition through characters who confront emptiness, disorientation, and a persistent sense of incompleteness.

Both *The Waste Land* and *Raat Bhore Brishti* engage with these theoretical concerns, depicting urban life as a catalyst for psychological fragmentation and existential crisis. Their narratives do not resolve this crisis but remain within it, suggesting that modernity itself resists resolution.

Eliot's *The Waste Land* constructs a world in which fragmentation shapes both form and consciousness. The poem moves abruptly across voices, scenes, and cultural references, refusing narrative continuity. This structural disjunction mirrors the experience of modern urban life, where perception is interrupted and coherence elusive. The reader encounters the poem much as the contemporary subject encounters the city: through discontinuous impressions rather than sustained understanding.

London, as depicted in the poem, exemplifies the psychological effects of metropolitan life described by Simmel. Crowds move through the city in silence, bound together by proximity but divided by emotional distance. Individuals appear reduced to routine and repetition, their actions governed by habit rather than intention. This mechanisation of daily life produces emotional numbness, a condition repeatedly reflected in the poem's speakers, who struggle to articulate desire or belief.

The poem's intertextual structure intensifies this sense of dislocation. References to myth, religion, and literary tradition surface throughout the text, yet they fail to provide grounding. These fragments of cultural memory appear disconnected from lived experience, functioning as echoes of a coherence that no longer exists. The invocation of "Shanti, Shanti, Shanti," drawn from the Upanishads, gestures toward peace, but the poem does not arrive at spiritual resolution. Instead, the line underscores the gap between spiritual aspiration and the realities of modern existence.

Existential anxiety emerges from this persistent failure of meaning. The speakers in *The Waste Land* inhabit a world where neither tradition nor modern progress offers orientation. Time appears fractured, with past and present collapsing into one another without producing understanding. Identity becomes unstable, shaped by external stimuli rather than inner coherence. Eliot's poem thus presents fragmentation as both a condition of modern life and a necessary mode of representation.

Buddhadeb Basu's *Raat Bhore Brishti* engages with similar concerns through a narrative grounded in psychological interiority. The novel centres on a protagonist whose emotional life is marked by restlessness, dissatisfaction, and a pervasive sense of isolation. Set within the urban environment of colonial Kolkata, the narrative explores how modern city life intensifies psychological disintegration rather than alleviating it.

The city in *Raat Bhore Brishti* operates as a space of emotional congestion and inner withdrawal. Crowded streets and social interactions fail to produce intimacy, reinforcing the protagonist's sense of alienation. This aligns closely with Simmel's observation that metropolitan life encourages emotional distance as a means of survival. The protagonist's inward turn reflects a modern subject attempting to protect the self from overwhelming external pressures, yet this withdrawal deepens existential unease.

Basu's narrative structure mirrors this condition through introspective repetition and unresolved emotional states. Thoughts recur without conclusion, and moments of clarity dissolve into ambiguity. The persistent rain that frames the novel reinforces a sense of stagnation rather than renewal, suggesting a world suspended in emotion. Time appears stretched and circular, intensifying the protagonist's inability to move toward resolution. Unlike Eliot's context of post-war European disillusionment, Basu's modernism emerges from the experience of colonial modernity. Modern life in the novel appears imposed rather than self-directed, shaped by external forces that destabilise social and personal identities. This produces a distinctive form of existential anxiety, where the search for meaning unfolds within conditions not thoroughly chosen by the subject.

Reading *The Waste Land* and *Raat Bhore Brishti* together reveals fragmentation as a shared response to the pressures of modern urban life. In both texts, fragmentation operates not as aesthetic excess but as an existential condition. The refusal of narrative closure reflects a recognition that modern life does not easily yield coherence.

Eliot's fragmentation is overt and structural, presenting the reader with a collage of voices and references that resist synthesis. Basu's fragmentation is psychological and temporal, unfolding through introspection and emotional repetition. Despite these differences, both strategies reflect a common understanding of modern subjectivity as unstable and incomplete.

Urban space functions as a catalyst for this fragmentation in both texts. London and Kolkata emerge as cities that intensify isolation while demanding constant engagement. Others surround individuals yet remain emotionally detached, caught between movement and stagnation. The modern city thus becomes a site where existential questions surface with urgency, yet remain unresolved.

The comparison between Eliot and Basu challenges the tendency to locate modernism exclusively within Western literary traditions. While shaped by distinct historical circumstances, both writers' articulate concerns that arise from shared conditions of urban modernity. Existential anxiety, emotional alienation, and fragmentation emerge as recurring responses to a world in which certainty has eroded.

This dialogue reveals modernism as a flexible literary mode rather than a unified movement. Basu's engagement with psychological disintegration does not imitate European modernism but converses with it, offering a Bengali articulation of modernist sensibility grounded in local experience. The shared emphasis on existential crisis suggests that modernist literature responds less to specific events than to broader transformations in how individuals experience time, space, and selfhood.

The Waste Land and *Raat Bhore Brishti* offer sustained explorations of modern existence shaped by urban alienation and existential uncertainty. Through fragmented form, introspective narration, and unsettling urban imagery, both texts register the difficulty of sustaining meaning in the early twentieth century. Theoretical perspectives on metropolitan life and existential anxiety illuminate how these literary strategies emerge from the conditions of modern urban existence.

By placing Eliot and Basu in dialogue, this study demonstrates that modernism operates across cultural boundaries while remaining attentive to historical specificity. Fragmentation emerges not as a failure of representation but as a necessary response to a world where coherence can no longer be assumed. In confronting uncertainty without offering resolution, both texts affirm modernism's enduring relevance as a mode of literary inquiry into the conditions of modern life.