



Indian Philosophy and W.B. Yeats's Poetry: A Critical Re-Assessment

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Abstract

Indian Philosophy is a vast ocean of knowledge. Owing to India's colonial history, many scholars from across the globe have come to witness the grandeur of its literature including the Vedas and other ancient scriptures. W.B. Yeats is a name that every literature scholar calls out with utmost respect as he has contributed immensely to the literary discourse. He openly accepted the great influence of Indian Philosophy on his enormous collection of poetry. His later work, shows greater depth and spiritual growth, which undeniably reflects his vast reading of Indian scriptures (some of which he translated into English). In the present paper, the researcher ventures through his spiritual journey and analyzes his poetry from the lenses of Indian philosophy. The present research contains the critical re-assessment of Yeats's celebrated poems and their uncanny resemblance with many aspects and contexts of Indian Philosophy.

Keywords: *Indian Philosophy; Western Poetry; Socio-cultural influences; Vedanta*

Claudio Guillen in his article "Aesthetics of literary Influence" points out:

Influences make a poem possible and are transcended by it. There is a common confusion between influences and textual similarities and that influences need not assume the form of parallelism nor does every case of parallelism come from influence. (Claudio.58-59)

The study of literary, socio-cultural influences remains a fascinating area of comparative literature since long. According to Harold Bloom:

No poetic text is autonomous and original. The meaning of the text is not confined to the text alone but it has a meaning in relation to other texts. A particular poem is therefore a synecdoche, a part which stands for the whole that consists of innumerable texts. A poem exists only in relationship to other poems (Bloom.20).

According to Bloom, "influence is a psychological process", A poet is not always aware of the sources that influence his/her poetry. Various experiences and fields of knowledge that he/she familiar upon his/her mind and form new compounds which hardly bear any resemblance to the original sources.

Indian philosophical thoughts had influenced Western poets like T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Emerson and many more. They turned to Indian philosophy for various personal and historical reasons. W.B. Yeats a part of nineteenth century European movement, rebelled against Western tradition both religious and scientific, at an early stage of his career, and went to the East in his search for "metaphors for poetry". He came across several guides on this spiritual journey to the East. Of these George Russell the poet and mystic, was the first person who gave a definite shape to Yeats's metaphysical leanings and introduced him formally to the maze of Eastern thought at the age of nineteen. Through his connections with the Dublin Hermetic Society, the Theosophical Society, and the Hermetic order of the Golden Dawn, Yeats met Mohini Chatterjee, Madame Blavatsky, and McGregor Mather. It was mainly under the influence of these theosophists that Yeats studied Eastern literature, philosophy and symbolism



in earnest and this training shaped the entire course of his future development. From then onwards he constantly looked towards the Orient for enlightenment.

Yeats mainly influenced by following concepts of Indian philosophy which sustained his faith in eternal and everlasting concept of religion. According to Shankar Vedanta Atman the soul is one with Brahman the Absolute Reality. The soul is the form of Absolute Reality. Hence according to Shankara finite and nonfinite form a Unity of Being. There is no difference between Atan and Brahman because there is no difference between soul and super soul. Shankaara believes in the theory of Adwait Vendanta, which believes in the concept of "Aham Brahamashmi I am Brahman. We cannot separate Jivatma from Parmatma.

As per the philosophy of Shrimad Bhagwad Geeta the soul is eternal and everlasting. It is never born not die. Ājō nitya shaswato Aum Purano"(Geeta II) Indian believes in the theory of re incarnation of body, the soul remains immortal; it is the body which perishes. The joys and sorrow can be endured by the body , the soul remains unaffected by the realities of life.

Shankra Vedanta believes in the concept of "Braham satyam Jagat mithya" that means the world is an illusion, a form of maya and Braham is the only ontological reality. According to this theory although the finite and nonfinite are one, yet we in this earthly condition cannot see through it because of maya or illusion. The world according to Shankara is the illusion of God, the shadow of the Absolute Reality. However, the world of duality (Dwait) is not the ultimate character of reality. The ultimate reality is the unity between Reality (maya) with Absolute Reality (Brahman).

According to the concept of maya the material world is imperfect, incomplete so one has to go through samsara the continual incarnation till one gets mukti (the release from the cycle of birth and death). The body has to take many forms before it attains Ananda or nirvana. Shrimad Bhagwad Geeta also believes in the theory of reincarnation. According to Geeta the salvataon is also not eternal. As Lord says: "Khinē punye martyaloakam vishanti" The entire creation is a divine design. We have to perform our Sansaric responsibilities as decided by God. It is the Absolute Reality which decides our actions in life we are merely performer of the actions decided by God.

Yeats's meeting with Mohini Chatterjee opened the vast treasure of Indian philosophy. He was highly impressed by the quietest philosophy of the Bahmin. As Yeats wrote, "It was my first meeting with a philosophy that confirmed my vague speculations and seemed at once logical and boundless". (Yeats: 91.92). The poems written during the period 1886-89 bears Yeats' pre occupation with Indian themes. The early poems like, Anashuya and Vijaya "Kanva on Himself" and "The Indian upon God" clearly indicate the influence of Indian philosophy as a shaping spirit of Yeats' poetic personality. The poem, "Anshuya and Vijya discusses the relationship between Purusa (spirit) and prakriti (matter). According to Indian philosophy the cosmos is a living, organized and conscious whole exhibiting a polarity between matter and spirit. Both prakriti and purusha are living substances-fundamentally equal. Every entity has two poles Prakriti and Purusha - and one or the other of them is accentuated according to the evolutionary ladder. The poem "Anshuya and Vijaya focusses on the higher and lower selves of Vijaya's personality represented by Anshuya and Amrita the two women. It is also interesting to note that Anshuya is the name of a character in the famous Sanskrit play Shakuntla by Kalidasa, the classical Indian playwright. It is apparent Indian playwright. It is aparent that Yeats was familiar by Kalidasa at this stage. In any case, Vijya vacillates between these contrary poles, but he soon submits to Anshuya for the praktric entity are much stronger in him than are purushic ones. We can see here the germs of Yeats's later pre-occupation with self and anti-self, objectivity and subjectivity and solar and lunar phases.

The two short sections in "The Quartains and Aphorisms" also bear witness to Chatterjee's influence on Yeats. Yeats gives expression to Vedantic philosophy that everything one perceives exists in the external world; that this is a stream which flows on, out of human control; one is nothing but a mirror and that deliverance consists in turning the mirror away so that it may reflect nothing. The poet says:

Long thou for nothing, neither sad nor gay,
Long though for nothing, neither night nor day,
Not even 'I long to see thy longing ever'
To the ever-longing and mournful spirit say.
The ghosts went by me with their lips apart
From death's late langour as these lines I read
On Branma's gate way, "They within have Fed.
The soul upon the ashes of the heart. (Yeats.61)



In 1912 Yeats met Tagore the Nobel laureate and India's foremost modern poet, this meeting gave a great impetus to his Eastern and especially Indian studies. The two poets had a twenty seven-year long association which had an important impact on both. However, this aspect has not received due attention from Yeats's critics and biographers. The first characteristic that fascinated him was that Tagore's poetry reflected an unbroken civilization where art, religion and philosophy were inseparable from one another. Yeats remarked, "A whole people, a whole civilization immensely strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination; and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image... our voice as in a dream (Yeats.392) Secondly in Tagore's poetry a union of "the cry of the flesh and the cry of soul" (Yeats.392). Under the impact of Tagore a new note of healthy affirmation of life appears in Yeats's poetry. "Soloman to Sheba", "On woman", "Michael Roberts and the Dancer", "The Tower" and "A Dialogue of self and soul" bears witness to this new attitude. At this level Yeats realized that one must learn to think with the whole body rather than with the mind, In A Dialogue of Self and Soul " Yeats reaffirms:

I am content to live it all again
And yet again, if it be life to pitch
Into the frog-spawn of blind man's ditch.
A blind man battering blind men.(Yeats,267)

Both Yeats and Tagore were romantic by temperament and religious by instinct. Even socially and politically their positions were similar. Both belonged to distinguished families which were associated with the national movements of independence from British rules.

In 1931 Yeats met a Hindu Swami, Shri Purohit, a Vedantist philosopher. Vedanta is the most profound of the six systems of Hindu thought. He re-stated the theme of "Kanva on Himself" in his poem "Mohini Chatterjee" affirming his belief in the Brahmin's teaching:

I asked if I should pray,
But the Brahmin said,
"pray for nothing, say
Every night in a bed,
" I have been a king,
I have been slave,
Nor is there anything,
Fool, rascal, knave,
That I have not been
And yet upon my breast
A myriad heads have lain.(Yeats.279)

For four years Yeats and swami were closely associated until in 1936 Swami returned to India. During their friendship, Yeats wrote introductions to Swami's autobiography, to a partial autobiography by Swami's master, and to Swami's translation and annotation of Patanjali's Aphorisms of Yoga. In 1936, Swami and Yeats collaborated in the translation of the Upanishads. In Swami and his teaching." he met, "Asia at its finest and it seemed as if he found, something I have waited for since I was seventeen years old". (Yeats.429)

Besides Vedanta and Upanishads Yeats was also influenced by Shrimad Bhagwad Geeta terms of images, symbols and rhythm. Lord Krishana in chapter XV of Bhagwad Geeta uses the images of tree, branches, leaves and root to describe the reality of this world: He says:

Undravamula maah sakha mashwanshtham prahyraryam.

Yeats expresses these ideas using the same image in, "The coming of wisdom with Time "

Though leaves are many, the root is one
Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun.
Now I may wither into the truth. (Yeats. 49)

Krishana discusses three paths to attain God: the Gyan marg, Bhakti marg, and Karma marg. In Lapis Lazuli" we find the reference to Gyan Marg. The poet says:

All men having aimed at found and lost;
Black out; Heaven blazing into the head
Tragedy wrought to its uttermost.(Yeats.181)



In the same poem Yeats argues for gaiety because this life is full of miseries. But what we face here is a transitory phase. Yeats like Shakespeare compares this world to a theatre. All of us being tragic heroes must accept our roles and discharge our duty disinterestedly. Hamlet, Lear, Ophelia and Cordelia do not start crying during the play because they know that their end will not be altered and the tragedy shall not be reduced at all.

All perform their tragic play
Their struts Hamlet, there is Lear
That is Ophelia that Cordelia
Yet they should the last scene be there
The great stage curtain about to drop.
If worthy their prominent part in the play.
Do not breakup their lines to weep (Yeats.181)

Yeats is disappointed with the people who praise the unreal momentary and temporal things. The persona in the , "Sailing to Byzantium " is disgusted with the world full of desires. He says :

That is no country for old man, The young
In one another's arms, birds and tress
Those dying generations – at their songs
The Salmon falls, the mackerel crowded seats
Fish, Flesh or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten born or dies
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monument of un ageing intellect (Yeats.104)

In chapter XVI of Geeta the Lord tells Arjuna that those who run after material things can never reach him. The persona of the "Sailing to Byzantium " wants to be free from the bondage of life and death. He wants to get eternal form by being incarnated in the form of immortal bird. Mundaka Unaishada which has been translated by Yeats himself describes individual and eternal soul as two friendly birds sitting on the same tree. This thought is being expressed in the following lines.

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian gold smith make
Of hammered gold enameling
To keep the drowsy Emperor, awake;
Or set up a golden bough to sing
The lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past or passing or to come.
(Yeats.105)

It interesting to note that Yeats' study of Indian philosophy, Hindu scriptures and Shrimad Bhagwad Geeta from different sources enlighten his soul and strengthened his beliefs and opinions about art and religion. A.G.Stock rightly observes:

Yeats' own mind had an affinity with many things that he found in Indian thought and finding them must have given him confidence. It gave an intellectual justification to much that he believed with his feelings and helped to set in order tangled experiences which neither Christian orthodoxy nor contemporary science could deal with (Stock.12)

It is clear from the reading of W.B.Yeats' poetry that he came under the influence of Indian philosophy at a very young age and he remains a constant student of Indian philosophy throughout his life. Yeats' critics and biographers considered the impact of Indian philosophy on Yeats is short lived but the in depth reading of Yeats' poetry establishes the fact that the influence of Indian philosophy pervasive on him. The cultural and historical similarities between Irish and Indian traditions helped Yeats to understand Indian philosophy in the true sense of the term. W.B. Yeats once said "I want to make a last song, sweet and exultant, a sort of European Geeta". (Yeats.836) This statement is enough to prove the influence of Indian philosophy on W.B. Yeats in terms of themes symbols and images.



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