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A study of literary and philosophical influences on W. B. Yeats

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Abstract

In the field of English literature, William Butler Yeats is the greatest poet and the connection between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He is a multifaceted person who is a lyric poet, a shaman, a mythologist, and a romantic. He is a poet with a political agenda (to a small extent); a poet with a prophetic outlook and mystic philosophy; and a poet with expertise of dramaturgy experiments. The aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of India and Hinduism on Yeats and his poetry. It claims that Mohini Chatterjee spiritually and aesthetically inspired Yeats and initiated him into mysticism. Later, Yeats' spiritual journey was fueled by his encounters with Indian monk Purohit Swami and Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore.

Keywords: W.B. Yeats, literary, philosophical influences

Introductions

Indian philosophy is one of the components that contribute to Yeats' unique brand of modernism. Yeats' modernism is influenced by a multitude of influences, including nineteenth-century English verse, French symbolism, Imagism, and so on. Irish myths and legend, European and Eastern mysticism, the supernatural and sorcery, the Caballah and Rosicrucianism, French symbolist and Romantic writing, theosophy, and Hindu philosophy were all major influences on his writings. It would be beneficial to hear about Irish tradition's clear interest in and response to India, as well as certain cultural conditions that reciprocated Ireland's and India's responses.

The Celts and the Indians

Yeats was heavily inspired by Shelley, who writes in his novel *Prometheus Unbound*, "And the Celts knew the Indians!" Yeats was well aware of this fact, as shown by his July 1889 letter to the *Irish American Boston Pilot*, in which he said, "The earliest poet of India and the Irish peasant in his novel nod to each other over the ages and are in complete agreement." There are also fascinating comparisons between India's culture, folklore, and political circumstances. These affinities foster shared literary and philosophical influences, as well as the reception of the two nations. In his book *Celts and Aryans*, Myles Dillon draws fascinating comparisons between Irish and Indian legends. King Cormac MacAirt, for example, has a related adventure to King Dushyant. Just as Dushyant meets Shankuntala by accident, Cormac meets Buchet by chance in the forest and marries her. The Irish god of the dead 'Donn,' the first to die and the lord of both men and women, is quite close to the Hindu god of death Yama. The Irish word Sidhe and the Sanskrit word Sidhe may have the same root. In the 1890s, Yeats started comparing Irish, Assyrian, and Indian images, with the aim of establishing an Irish holy order based on the Indian idea of Tattwas. Both the Irish and the Indians view themselves as strongly spiritual. India's main religion is Hinduism, while Ireland's primary religion is Catholicism. Despite certain fundamental religious and doctrinal disparities, the way they are practised is strikingly identical. While Christianity, unlike Hinduism, upholds monotheism, the pantheon of the many saints revered by Irish Catholics is similar to the myriad gods and goddesses of Hinduism, with the virgin Mary replacing the Hindu Mother Goddess. The strong similarities between India and Ireland in traditions, music, metre, mythology, symbols, and religious beliefs may be the result of an IndoIrish ancestry.

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Similarity in Political History

India and Ireland also share many similarities in political history. Both the countries were colonized by the British. The native culture and language were suppressed and English was imposed. The Young Ireland rebellion in 1848, much like the 1857 revolt in India was a failure. In 1907 the Irish Parliamentary Party turned down Britain's offer of limited Self Rule. Leaders like Aurobindo appealed to the Indians to follow the Irish example. Eminent Irish women like Annie Besant and Sister Nivedita's contribution to Indian nationalism and nationalistic literature is acknowledged by most Indian works dealing with the freedom struggle. Mrs. Besant took Indian wisdom to Ireland and this influenced Yeats as well as AE. AE (George Russell), a most devout follower of Theosophy was greatly valued in popular India and is also an important figure in Irish Renaissance. In the early nineteenth century, most Irish intellectuals looked upon India as another victim of colonial rule, and nationalists from both the countries drew inspiration from each other. Yeats was no exception to this. It is not surprising that in reclaiming the Irish past, Yeats as well as many Irish writers and poets found the exploration of Indian culture as a useful tool. Hence, they were profoundly influenced by Indian philosophy and the sacred literature. That is why Irish writers have always enjoyed great popularity among Indian lovers of English literature. The casual attitude to plot, the use of mythology and somewhat similar attitude to literature and literary criticism among the writers of the two countries may be the result of these affinities.

Mohini Chatterjee

The first real encounter of Yeats to an Indian who represented India was when he met Mohini Chatterjee, a Brahmin Theosophist who was invited to Dublin in 1885 to give talks about theosophy and Indian philosophy. Yeats wrote a number of poems rewrote and revised some of them again and again based on this first encounter. For example 'Kanva', 'Kanva on Himself' and 'Mohini Chatterjee' are different versions of the same poem. In 'The Way of Wisdom' says Yeats that Chatterjee's main teaching was to suppress all desires, even the desire for salvation. The poem 'Mohini Chatterjee' describes a question about how one should pray was answered by the Brahmin putting forward the concept of the reincarnation of the soul. Many Indian scholars have done extensive research on how Chatterjee's ideas found their way into Yeats's poetry. S.K. Jain in the article "Indian Elements in the poetry of Yeats: On Chatterjee and Tagore" quotes lines from 'Quatrains and Aphorisms', 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd', 'Fergus and the Druid', 'The Priest and the Fairy', 'A Meditation in time of War', 'The Shadowy Water', 'Ben Bulben', 'The Seeker', and 'Mosada' as some of the works directly or indirectly influenced by Chatterjee. The Indian poems in the collection 'Cross Ways', namely 'Anasuya and Vijaya', 'The Indian Upon God' and 'The Indian to His Love' are also believed to have been inspired by Mohini Chatterjee. 'The Pathway' indicates that the crux of Chatterjee's talk was asceticism that attracted Yeats. Though Yeats was familiar with certain Indian philosophical ideas before he met Chatterjee, we may presume that the way in which the Brahmin expressed them had a deep impact on his mind which resulted in his beautiful poem 'Mohini Chatterjee'. It is also certain that Chatterjee renewed and intensified

Yeats's interest in India. Yeats was already unhappy with the Christian idea of the soul's immortality which is linear ending in heaven or hell, and so when the Brahmin asked him to repeat in daily prayer the idea of reincarnation of the soul which had already been present in the Pagan Irish consciousness, the idea was instantly received. Thus Mohini Chatterjee's reply to the question as to how one should pray impressed Yeats and his companions tremendously.

Rabindranath Tagore

Twenty-six years after meeting with Chatterjee, the second great personality who came into Yeats's life was Rabindranath Tagore in 1912. Yeats wrote introduction to his Gitanjali, and his corrections are said to have played vital role in its success. There were suggestions that English Gitanjali was practically written by Yeats. Tagore himself was always ready to accept Yeats's contribution: "I am sure that the magic of his pen helped my English to attain some quality of permanence."² Tagore's influence on Yeats is difficult to trace and analyze. Yeats was impressed by the image of the popular poet who was also a seer, a sage. His introduction to Gitanjali does not say much about poetic techniques of Tagore except for its simplicity. Tagore confirmed and justified Yeats's faith in Indian philosophy. Tagore was for him an example of unity of Being. Another attraction that Yeats found in Tagore was the use of religious theme in his poetry. Tagore shrewdly combined the solemnity of the sacred books, and the beauty of art. This fusion of art and religion was close to Yeats's heart who wanted to make a religion of artistic tradition. It is generally felt that Yeats acquired the tradition of the Self from Purohit Swami and his work of translation of The Ten Principal Upanishads. However, this was not Yeats's first encounter with the tradition of the Self. In fact what Yeats received from the three, Chatterjee, Tagore and Purohit Swami was the tradition of the Self with a difference in their emphasis. That Yeats was touched with Tagore's dramatization of 'the self' is evident from the introduction to Gitanjali. Since he was already familiar with the Upanishads, he could appreciate Gitanjali. Gitanjali poems are all about the union of the Individual Self and the Universal Self. His dissatisfaction with the separation between God and Man and longing for a tradition where human and divine are united, where both seek each other must have helped him to respond so strongly to Tagore. Yeats had used the Indian concept of reincarnation in his early Indian poems. The concept of the self was exciting and it was perhaps a pleasant discovery for Yeats to be later used in his works. In Gitanjali and the plays, Post Office and The King of the Dark Chamber, the king stands for God. Guha suggests that The Herne's Egg was based on a variation of the same theme. He also suggests that Yeats's King of the Great Clock Tower was a calculated reply to Tagore's The King of the Dark Chamber. Yeats's poems 'The Hero, the Girl and the Fool', and 'For Anne Gregory' refute and echo Tagore's 'Chitra' in which we find the same theme of a woman's obsession with her real self. Tagore's real impact on Yeats was to reawaken in him an attraction to India, particularly, to the concept of the Self.

Purohit Swami

Yeats met Shri Purohit Swami in 1931. Swami told Yeats that in the wisdom of eastern thought "The Individual Self, eater of the fruit of action is the Universal Self, maker of

past and future.”³ This statement greatly impressed Yeats who himself said in the second of the ‘Supernatural Songs’ written around 1935, “Natural and the Supernatural with the self same ring are wed.”⁴ Swami’s response to “what matters is to do all the good one can”, was a similar case of Yeats’s own belief expressed more forcefully by one who seemed to be the embodiment of philosophy and mysticism. During his short association with the Swami, Yeats was deeply impressed and influenced by him. He wrote the introduction to Swami’s autobiography *An Indian Monk*, introduction to his master’s autobiography *The Holy Mountain*, Purohit Swami’s *Yogsutras of Patanjali* and along with the Swami translated into English the *Ten Principal Upanishads*. Yeats realized from Swami that asceticism does not come from fear or suppression of desire. Louis MacNeice in his book *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* says that Yeats found in the Swami “a spontaneity of soul” (Yeats’s own phrase) as against the Utilitarianism of the West.”⁵ Yeats’s inclusion of the Swami’s three poems, ‘I know that I am a sinner’, ‘Shall I do this?’ and ‘A Miracle Indeed’ in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* raised many eyebrows. The introduction to *An Indian Monk* echoes the extravagant praise of Gitanjali, “It seems to me something I have waited for since I was seventeen years old.”⁶ Yeats learned a number of concepts from the Swami such as liberation, self-realization and Samadhi. Swami’s teaching about the unity of the Atma and the Paramatma perhaps took Yeats to study of Tantric philosophy which completely eliminates the distinction between the physical and the spiritual. It also considers sex an amoral act and does not preach abstinence from it. We can say that the more explicit content in the *Supernatural Songs* and the *Crazy Jane Poems* are based on Yeats’s reading of Tantra. The poem ‘Meru’ can be considered the result of discussion between the two men in addition to Yeats’s knowledge.

Conclusion

Yeats’s response to India was deeper than that of Eliot whereas others believe Eliot’s to be a more rational one. Yeats’s pagan Irish background allowed him to accept many Hindu concepts whole-heartedly. He did not need an intellectual understanding of these concepts. He responded to them emotionally and intuitively. Besides, he was not interested in the accuracy of these concepts and modified them conveniently to suit his poetry. Yeats interpreted Christianity in terms of Indian concepts and looked at these concepts through his Irish Christian eye with sympathies for paganism.

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