

W. B. Yeats, a Timeless Voice that Speaks, Inspires and Rules

Sanjib Kr Biswas
Post Graduation degree in English Literature
University of Gour Banga

Abstract

William Butler Yeats was a literary figure who cannot be bound within a particular genre or age. He cherished strong senses of Romanticism and Modernism. Irish nationalism comes as essential ingredient in many of his poems. His strong personality lies within his bravery to speak against English in English. He had great influence upon his successor Irish poets and other modern European poets. Irish nationalism and landscape, cry of humanity and quest for Oriental spiritualism are some aspects of his poetry. He was also a visionary and showed the degradation of morality and upcoming apocalypse in his poetry. His poetry inspired his countrymen to free themselves from the bondage of their colonial master. He possessed multifaceted talents and had fascination for Oriental culture and literature. In my paper, I have endeavoured to show how Yeats' verses have created a timeless appeal through which he still speaks, inspires and rules even after several decades of his death.

W. B. Yeats, a Timeless Voice that Speaks, Inspires and Rules

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), a prominent Irish poet and an influential literary giant of 20th century, was a man of multifaceted knowledge, wisdom, philosophy and pure excellence. A sole connector between Romanticism and Modernism, Yeats had a multidisciplinary approach while choosing the subject matters for his poetry from Nature, life philosophy, Oriental spiritualism, mythology and so on. Though he relied heavily on English language for his writing, he was never English from his mind. He was the first Irish literary figure to be awarded Nobel Prize, but he gained more popularity after receiving the prize. He, along with Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn, were the driving force for Irish literary revival. Though he spent a major portion of his life in England and went through lots of composition there, England could never become the fascination and inspiration for his composition. He remained Irish from his mind throughout his life. His Romantic attitudes towards Irish landscape and his sense of Irish nationalism emerged as truly inspiring for his native Irish poets as well as for his followers from the rest of the world. In my paper, I have endeavoured to show how Yeats's verses have created a timeless appeal, through which he still speaks, inspires and rules.

Irish nationalism and Irish landscape had come in Yeats's poetry in a lively manner. "The Wild Swans at Coole" is one of Yeats's old age poems celebrating the beauty of the natural landscape of Ireland and her eternal natural beauty in the course of time. He makes a comparative study between his mortal body, which is the subject to decay, and the swans at Coole Park, which are still unchanged and vigorous just as he saw them fifteen years ago. "All's changed, changed utterly", Yeats mourns referring to his mortal body and poetic spirit which has been also going on in a rapidly degraded manner. The swans are as spiritual as the spirit of

Ireland, who has gone through the major changes for the First World War and the Irish Civil war during the course of these fifteen years. War has demolished the nation and the country was still being tortured in the hands of British. But she appears to be still fresh and ready to face any hardship comes in its way. Just like the vigorous swans at the Coole park, her “hearts have not grown old” Yeats has also celebrated the eternal youth of Ireland in his famous poem “Sailing to Byzantium”. According to him, he has turned old and unsuitable for the country which is singing the spirit of youth. He has sung the hymn of Ireland through his verses throughout his life, but now he has become obsolete here.

“That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees”

“Ester 1916” is a revolutionary poem which provides us clear images how closely Yeats was associated with Irish nationalist movement. It was based on the event of the Ester rising staged in Ireland against the British rule on Ester Monday, April 24, 1916. Yeats usually did not prefer any violence during the course of the movement. But it brought to Yeats a great shock when a number of popular revolutionary figures were executed for leading the nation in anti British movement. The brutal killing could not demolish the spirit of the common Irish people and they followed the footsteps of their predecessors to free their nation from the bondage of the British rule. Though in the beginning of the poem, an ideological distance between Yeats and the contemporary revolutionaries can be observed, gradually Yeats proceeded to side away from his dogmatism and accepted the very fact that there can be no alternative way except violence to stand against the brutality of the British Raj. After the brutal incident of the Ester rising, people started to carry on their movement even with stronger enthusiasm and immense hatred against British rulers. Yeats wholeheartedly supported their movement:

“All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born”

Yeats alluded some of the prominent figures in this revolution like Countess Markievicz (Yeats long time school friend), Patrick Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh. Finally Yeats suggested that Ireland had to pursue Independence and national identity through rebellion. In the sixth stanza, Yeats appeals to the Irish common people to cherish the spirit of freedom so that the sacrifice of those prominent revolutionists does not go in vain. Yeats affirms that these revolutionists have changed everything and have proclaimed the new hope for the upcoming generation:

“Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly”

Yeats's age was the one when the power of British colonialism was gradually being ceased rapidly. Yeats has shown the degradation of his colonial master physically and morally through his poem “The Second Coming”. The poem brings a sharp image of the post World War England whose power had come at the stake for the revival of the colonised and oppressed people. The poet composed the poem in a Christian allegorical framework and brought Biblical imagery regarding Apocalypse and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Like his native Ireland, most of the British colonies have started to voice against the colonial master and the centre is unable to control this sudden tremor.

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,”

W.B. Yeats had a noteworthy influence upon Seamus Heaney, who is considered to be the most influential Irish poet after Yeats. He possessed the same quality of patriotism and high end nationalism just as his predecessor, as described by his own words “the gift of establishing authority within oneself”. Heaney, who passed away only a couple of years ago, left the treasure for his nation as a continuation of the effort of W.B. Yeats. Like Yeats, Heaney also brought Irish landscape as the foremost raw-material for his poetry. Heaney’s *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) contains some bog poems which deal with Irish landscape and Irish tradition. His “Digging” is a famous “bog” poem, through which he shows the changed Irish tradition of Digging. The poet accepts the truth that the physical ability of his countrymen has decreased to an extent. He can no longer utilise his physical strength while digging for the upbringing of the nation. But he finds the resolution that physical strength is now not enough to take the country to its summit. Intelligence is further required. So he invents the transformed mode of digging. Instead of digging with spade, he will do that with his pen which is mightier than all other instruments in this world.

“Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I’ll dig with it.”

Yeats’s deep sense of Irish nationalism is reflected heavily in Heaney’s poem “Act of Union”, where the pain of Ireland as a colonised one is a matter of much debate. Ireland has been represented as a female figure upon which the male colonial master Britain with “the tall kingdom over your[her] shoulder” has caused great harm. The poem brings strong sexual metaphor to portray the discriminated relationship between the colonial and the colonised. The “Act of Union” presents double standards, the political treaties between this two countries as well as the sexual act of uniting. According to Heaney, Britain has already caused great harm to her motherland and the pain will be still prominent there.

“And I am still imperially
Male, leaving you with pain,”

W.B. Yeats possessed a great fascination for Oriental culture, literature and most notably for poetry. Yeats’s “Byzantium” and “Sailing to Byzantium” brings Yeats’s attempt to merge the physically and materialistically enriched Occident with that of the spiritually rich Orient. His quest towards the Orient in his final age shows the perfect way of happiness for a human soul through gaining spiritual wisdom and aesthetic pleasure. Yeats’s strong association with the Oriental poets can be traced with his personal relationship with Rabindranath Tagore, noted multilingual Oriental poet, novelist and playwright and the first among the Asian to receive the Nobel Prize. Yeats had contributed a lot for the English translated version of Rabindranath’s *Gitanjali* (1912), a masterpiece containing 113 connected poetical compositions among which 53 songs were taken from the main Bengali version. When Rabindranath Tagore personally approached to Yeats during his visit in Europe, Yeats became overwhelmed to see his magical verses which were actually the hymns of Oriental spiritualism, life philosophy, religious devotion, and Indian landscape. Even he agreed to write an introduction for Tagore’s English translated version of *Gitanjali* (1912), the masterpiece which brought Tagore to the summit of his achievement. Rabindranath received Nobel Prize in literature as first non-European and *Gitanjali*

helped him to an extent to achieve this fame. Yeats had the following take on regarding Tagore's Oriental approach to poetry "I have carried the manuscript of these translations about with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me. These lyrics . . . display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my live [sic] long . . . a tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing."

When W. B. Yeats died, he had already achieved fame as one of the pathfinders of modernism. W. H. Auden composed a powerful elegy on the death of W.B. Yeats. Auden's elegy "In Memory of W.B. Yeats", which was composed in 1940 following Yeats death in 1939, mourns the death of "an honoured guest", who was then not only a prominent literary figure, but also an institution. He had great influence not only upon Irish poets like Seamus Heaney, but also upon the Modern poets from the rest of the world. So Auden laments "The day of his death was a dark cold day". Despite of being a mouthpiece of a British colonial nation, he dared to voice against the rulers. So he has become a timeless figure who not only inspires the people through his verses, but also through indomitable spirit. So Auden sings the hymn of his spirit which has crossed the boundary of a particular genre, nation or generation and still echoes into the mind of his followers.

"With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice"

Yeats had lots of depression and dissatisfaction over British as well as upon his own countrymen. He had been acquainted with World War – I and Irish civil war. The humanity was at the very crucial moment as the lust of human beings was causing the human relationship, love and sympathy falling apart. It was a period of great depression but Yeats was optimistic enough to encourage his countrymen. He still had the courage to praise the people to bring them up from the degraded condition. So Auden prayed to the soul of W. B. Yeats to inspire us again in the moment of great depression.

"In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise"

Yeats's verses, which inspired the whole world to set out for a new venture, have become a timeless one. This year is very special for the followers of Yeats as the whole world is celebrating the 150th birth anniversary of this renowned poet. Even after several decades of his death, Yeats Romantic thought and optimistic ideas still inspire us to sing the hymn of beauty even amidst the hardship of this post modern world. His pessimistic overview makes us think about the degradation of morality and the upcoming apocalypse. His idea of nationalism and patriotic thought still inspire us to stand beside the cry of humanity. Thus, Yeats rules the psyche of the people of all ages and genres.

Bibliography

Yeats, William Butler. *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose*. London: Norton Critical Editions, 2000. Print
Sen, Dr. S. *W. B. Yeats Selected Poems*. New Delhi: Unique Publishers, 2010. Print

Chattopadhyay, Kuntal. A History of English Literature in Bengali. Kolkata: Ratnabali Publishers, 2010. Print

Sparknotes. "Yeats's Poetry" <<http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/yeats/context.html>> Sparknote L.L.C, 15 June 2015. Web

Wikipedia. "W. B. Yeats" <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._B._Yeats> Wikimedia Foundation, Inc, 20 June 2015. Web

Heaney, Seamus. "Seamus Heaney" <<http://www.poemhunter.com/seamus-heaney-3/poems/>> Poemhunter.com, 20 June 2015. Web

Auden, W.H. "Poems W. H. Auden" <<http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poems/45593>> Academy of American Poets, 21 June 2015. Web

Sen, Malcolm "History Ireland" <<http://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/literature-mythologising-a-mystic-w-b-yeats-on-the-poetry-of-rabindranath-tagore/>> Dublin: Dept. of Medieval History, Trinity College, 29 November 2015. Web