

Shade more than man, more image than a shade: Problematising mysticism in W.B.Yeats from an Indian perspective

Dr. Arun Kumar Mukhopadhyay
Assistant Professor & Head
Department of English
Ramkrishna Mahavidyalaya
Kailashahar
Tripura

ABSTRACT

In addition to a basic pattern of dialectic, the poetry of W. B. Yeats is also rich in the use of symbolism and mysticism since in his mature poetry, Yeats seems to locate himself in the processional march of civilization and as a result metaphorically strives for the merger of the topical and the timeless. His incidental connection with the Indian spiritual heritage, mystics and poets like Tagore endeared him to the unique country of the East where writing was a traditionally held as a spontaneous activity and at the centre of art and culture worked a philosophy that provided men peace with a realization of truth, the unchanging nature of a spiritual reality. Many of Yeats' poems reflect his strong fascination for Indian mysticism with Hindu religious concepts such as the immortality of soul, the role of *maya* (illusion) in life etc.etc., as enshrined in epics and *Upanishadas*. But in the final analysis, his mysticism, though dominated by Oriental thoughts and philosophy, ultimately reinforces his own system of thought where the normative human experience is characterized by a persistence of tradition.

Key words: topical, timeless, mysticism, illusion, truth, peace

Shade more than man, more image than a shade: Problematising mysticism in W.B.Yeats from an Indian perspective

Dr. Arun Kumar Mukhopadhyay
Assistant Professor & Head
Department of English
Ramkrishna Mahavidyalaya
Kailashahar
Tripura

Mysticism of a peculiar kind forms the major fabric of the mature poetry of W. B. Yeats and to a careful reader, diverse strains of philosophy and thought even combining some arch binaries like the erotic and the esoteric, seem to actuate the Poetic interest which has ever sought to trace a 'Unity of Being' in the pattern of his perception of reality. This problematic nature of Yeats' mysticism comes to the fore with his maturity as a man and a poet over the years. Interestingly, as apparent in poems of his mature phase as in the *A vision*, *The Tower*, *The Winding Stair*, *Words for Music Perhaps* and *A Full Moon in March*, it is Indian spiritualism, especially the Hindu theological doctrines that seem to have fascinated the poet more than any other established philosophical discipline or dogma. The present article seeks to trace the complex pattern of how Yeats' poetic sensibility serves to assimilate the tenor of Indian mysticism in his original system of thought that aims at articulating according to him, – "a new religion, of a set of stories, and of personages, and of emotions inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians"(Brown para-31).

Yeats' concept of a new 'religion' as stated in his *Autobiographies* consists of those 'imaginary people' that are created out of the deepest instinct of man, to be his measure and his norm, whatever I can imagine those mouths speaking may be the nearest I can go to truth'(Brown para-31). The paper concentrates on some representative poems of Yeats' mystic muse that can offer a semblance of his faith in that parameter of human experience he expects to fit into the 'measure and norm' of individual experience where 'tradition is present perpetually'(Brown para-31).

It is undeniable that for a complex poet like W. B. Yeats, knack for mysticism forms only a part of his versatility of talent blessed with a zodiac range of interests such as - myth, romance, rituals, folk lore, political ideology, a cyclical theory of history, magic (even black art), witchcraft, automatic writing as a phenomenon of psychic communion with spirits, an individual theory regarding the phases of the moon et.etc., just to name a few. However, his active contact with Hindu theological doctrines took off when he had already become a renowned poet and public figure well above sixty and come in touch with Indian mystic cum theosophists like Mohini Chatterjee, Purohit Swamy and finally the great poet-philosopher Rabindranath Tagore.

Yeats' love for Indian spiritualism and mysticism even dates back to a very early phase of poetic career and poems such as *Anashuya and Vijoya*, *The Indian Upon God* and *The Indian to His Love* written sometime between 1889 to 1893, testify to this early fascination in Poet Yeats. In the poem *Anashuya and Vijoya* for example, the poet expresses through the conversation of two characters with names rooted in mythic origin, a paean of *Bramha*, the creator of the Universe as per Hindu pantheon:

Sing, O you little stars.! O sing and raise your rapturous/carol/To
mighty Brahma, be who made you many as the sands,/And laid
you on the gates of evening with his quiet hands.(Lines 27-30)

The poem *The Indian Upon God* celebrates the Hindu tribute to the omnipresence of God and the creatures' persistent inability to image 'the dark, limitless ocean' of the Supreme Reality (God) leads, as per critic Rai, to the personal truth that the conception of God exists 'in the image of the contemplator himself' (Rai 54). The lines quoted from the poem lead to such a critical conjecture: 'For I am in His image made, and all this tinkling tide/Is but a sliding drop of rain between His petals wide' (Lines 11-12). The other poem with a strong Indian element is *The Indian to His Love* which articulates the emotion of an ethereal or platonic love which is very much free from fleshly desires much in the fashion of the Vaishnava cult of *Radha-bhava* which pleads true love as pure as gold purified off the dross of physical passion. The following excerpt from the poem echoes much of the sentiment voiced in Sarojini Naidu's *If You Call Me* or Shakespeare's celebrated sonnet no.116 *Let Me Not...* :

How we alone of mortals are
Hid under quiet boughs apart,
While our love grows an Indian star,
A meteor of the burning heart,[...]. (Lines 11-14)

It was the Bengali Bramhin Mohini Chatterjee who is claimed to have initiated the poet into mysticism which apparently seemed to enrich the poet with spiritual wisdom and aesthetic possibilities. The impact of this spiritual mentor upon Yeats as regards the latter's keen interest in Hindu religion can be traced in the poem entitled *Mohini chatterjee* included in Yeats's anthology *A Packet for Ezra Pound* (1929). In the poem, the persona seems to gesture to the Hindu concept of transmigration of souls through different incarnations surviving the cycle of birth, death and re-birth. The following excerpt seems to offer such an impression:

I ASKED if I should pray.
But the Brahmin said,
'pray for nothing, say
Every night in bed,

I have been a king,
 I have been a slave,
 Nor is there anything.
 Fool, rascal, knave,
 That I have not been,
 And yet upon my breast
 A myriad heads have lain. (Lines 1-11)

The cautionary intelligence in the third line uttered in the persona of Chatterjee, recommends the philosophy of man's stoic acceptance of the role assigned in this life of *karma* and equally the last two lines as if teach the endless potentiality of the human soul to show its- incalculable *leela* (role playing without attachment) or *maya* (illusion) on this 'bank and shoal of time' known as the earth. The ontological significance of human life across different incarnations gesturing to only the endless role-playing of *Shiva* (soul, the imperishable Being) through the *Jiva* (the human or the living body) is perhaps communicated through the image of a 'boy's turbulent days' echoing the description of god's nature as childish (i.e, having *Balka swabhava* or the habitual make of a boy) in Hindu Shastras. The philosophy of acceptance expressed here also corresponds to the *Ananda* (Happiness Absolute) aspect in Swami Vivekananda's *Vedantism* (the other two aspects being *Sat* and *Cit*) or the transcendent experience of 'Being' in Perfect Happiness or harmony with the world, where *maya*, the multi-faceted Illusion, causes the interplay of shadows of appearances such as joy and sorrow, love and pain, beauty and the ugly and even life and death and in this way prepares the individual soul (*Jivatma*) realise its potential divinity and immortality as part of the Imperishable Being, i.e, the *Paramatma* or God. This philosophy receives a hauntingly poetic evocation in a nice poem of Swami Vivekananda, *Peace* where the mystic nature and the paradoxical ways of Peace emerges in the vision of the mystic bard.

Yet what is significant is, how the impressions of Hindu philosophy presently help poet Yeats only to re-situate his stance in his own system of religion as a lover as well as a poet and in a way of commentary to the idea preached by the mystic Mohini Chatterjee as mentioned above, the speaker deduces his own impression of the position of the passionate and creative individual in relation to the world regulated by time and space. To the lover, the euphoria created by passion has the sacro-sanctity of something timeless in human experience which may scorn at the threat of flux characterized by birth, death and any other cataclysm:

Mohini Chatterjee
 Spoke these, or words like these,
 I add in commentary,
 Old lovers yet may have
 All that time denied --
 Grave is heaped on grave
 That they be satisfied --

xxxxxxx
 xxxxxx,
 xxxxxx

That such cannonade
 May thunder time away,
 Birth-hour and death-hour meet,
 Or, as great sages say,
 Men dance on deathless feet. (Lines 14-28)

As per the suggestion embedded in the last line of the quotation cited above, man, spiritual or not, is endowed with immortality in the vision of the poet.

In fact, with the tortuous nature of experiences over years (as an individual, an Irishman, a lover and a poet) that led to an astounding maturity in Yeats' poetry both in terms of theme and technique, the treatment of Indian spiritualism/mysticism likewise undergoes a sophisticated treatment away from the evocation of a naïve wonder in the poet and the poetic valorization of the Oriental schools of thought characterizing his early poetry. Thus the element of Hindu spiritual cults is found to bear a most powerful yet complex implications in many poems produced in the later phase of his career. Another most important fact to reckon with in this context is, Yeats' serious illness and its limiting effect upon his body which paradoxically served to whet his poetic sensibility as he expressed in poem after poem how the decrepitude of age was pitted against his muse growing younger.

In this way, the changed gear in handling mysticism becomes apparent in poems of Yeats' mature stage as an artist. In *Sailing to Byzantium*, one of Yeats' most famous and representative poems and the opening piece of a celebrated anthology *The Tower*, one finds a cogent use of spiritual imagery to serve the poet's aesthetic purpose. The overtly sensual orchestration of life in general in the natural world (symbolized by Ireland) appear to the old poet as the fiesta and fetish of temporal passion of the dying flesh, a phenomenon similar to the manifestation of *kama* (desire) in Hindu religion and a fit subject for celebration to mortal men and animals ('dying generations') whose lack of spiritual quest has necessitated the old poet's desperate search for a spiritual haven for his soul. The hearty alacrity of the soul tasting liberation from the fetters of flesh as expressed in the following extract, corroborates to Hindu spiritual concepts such as that of ectoplasm enunciated by the great Ramkrishnite mystic Swami Avedananda in his book *Life Beyond Death* and also to that of the soul's joyful and endless journey through incarnations as explained in the *Bhagvad Gita*: 'Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing/ For every tatter in its mortal dress,[...](Lines 11-12).'

However, the form of *nirvana* or salvation aspired for by the persona, differs from and exceeds the deliverance promised by traditional religion in so far as it (the former) subscribes to the ideal of an artist as something which combines both the warmth of life and the eternity of art. Here the chosen form for the soul - a golden bird singing of eternity ('Of what is past, or present or to

come' Line-8, sec-IV) attains by implication a coveted 'Unity of Being.' What Professor Bhabatosh Chatterjee has aptly pointed out seems relevant to the positive role of mysticism in poems included in *The Tower*: "Yeats' poetry shows no trace of morbid anguish, of Baudelaire's excruciating boredom; there is, on the contrary, an assertive faith in life, in the human will" (Chatterjee 108).

Another poem *Byzantium*, a sequel piece to *Sailing* as it marks a fresh spurt of the poet's venture in quest of an independent entity of art and artists to the outright exclusion of nature (hence life), nevertheless contains a faint yet memorable glimpse of Indian mysticism. The predicament of living, the chaotic reality of life which art disdains ('All that man is,/All mere complexities, The fury and mire of human veins' Lines 6-8) parallels in a religious context the *Advaityan* concept of – *neti* (ie, not here but elsewhere) and the concept of nihilism as expressed in the *sloka* - *Bramha satya, jagat mithya* (the only reality or truth lies in the *Bramha*, the Imperishable Being or God, not in the physical world man finds himself in). Again, whereas the 'unpurged images' (of life) in the poem seek to be purged by the holy fire of art for initiation into eternity, the same expression evokes in Indian consciousness, the post funeral rites of Hindus called *Shraddha* through which the spirits of the deceased get purified off the dross of *Pretaloka* (the lower world of ghosts or spirits) and are entitled to enter *Devaloka*, the higher abode of the blessed or paradise.

As stated earlier, the fourth phase of Yeats' poetic career when his poetic collection *The Tower* was published in 1928, appears to be the most prolific and matured one and it is characterized by, among other things, the poet's growing interest in Hindu religion though his contact with Purohit Swamy and his strenuous learning in and acquaintance with India's authentic religious texts such as the *Bhagvat Gita*. He also undertook the translation of *Upanishadas* under the tutelage of Swami side by side his eager involvement in the activities of Theosophical society.

The title poem of the section *The Tower* also shows esoteric symbols and reflections that so often bear a semblance of Indian spiritual reflections on life and death. Expressions such as – 'Death and life were not/Till man made up the whole, Lines 28-29,III) or, '...being dead, we rise./Dream and so create/ Translunar Paradise' (Lines 34-36, III) - *willy nilly* gesture to the priority given to the proper pitch of realization in Hindu religion, the calibration of perception to form the proper impression of realities such as life and death. The quoted lines can again be applied to the continuity of soul's existence which survives natural death of man as enunciated by Hindu philosophy. The ending of the poem likewise articulates the speaker's resolution for proficiency in spiritual realization to counter the trauma of old age so that the 'wreck of body', 'dull decrepitude' or the 'death of friends' will seem as fleeting shadows of illusion ('Seem but clouds of the sky/When the horizon fades'(Lines 72-73, III)). In the poem *Meditations in time of Civil War*, one again comes across the ecstasy of mystic revelations ('the abstract joy') as a rich palliative for the sickening soul inhabiting the ageing body.

The theme of a 'deeper insight' of spiritual realization wrought by old age is further traceable in another poem *The New Faces* where in the new born light of the poet's realization, 'the night overbalance the day' and the 'living look more shadowy than the shadow' (Line 6) 'roving the garden gravel'(Line 7) of the poet's tower. This trend of mystic revelation in the evanescent phases of perception acquires a wider dimension in the poem *All Souls' Night* which serves as an epilogue to Yeats 'A vision.' This poem celebrates a ritual party at the end of Yeats' strenuous labour to build his 'System.' One soul, that of Florence Emery, reveals to the poet the euphoric dance of the soul when it gets liberated from carnal fetters in order to merge with the Imperishable Being and thus attains deliverance from the cycle of birth and death what in Indian mysticism is known as *moksha* ('Forget its broken toys/And sink into its own delight at last' (Lines 59-60).

This spiritual complacency of realization in the old poet can be traced also in poems like *A Dialogue of Self and Soul* and *Death*, though equally bringing into surface the ironic stance central to Yeats. In *A Dialogue of Self and Soul*, the Platonic argument of Soul for dismissal of human life in favour of contemplation of heavenly bliss is rejected by Self which prefers love and desires of the ageing body which paradoxically triumphs over the ultimate liberation of the soul from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth as assured by the Soul. Thus the religion of the poet triumphs, by implication, over that of the prophet. The poem *Death* projects a superior stage of Yeats' realization. It is the imaginative faculty of man only (unlike the sense of animals that shows no capacity for intellectual analysis) that can imagine/realize the myths around death whereas the Soul revolves with ecstasy in the wheel of time that comprises the 'past, present or to come' as earlier envisaged in *Sailing to Byzantium*. Being wiser than animals, man alone 'casts derision upon/ supersession of breath'(Lines 9-10) known as death. The poem *Vacillation* too, contains a philosophic description of death in the fashion of a mystic --'A brand, or flaming breath,/ Comes to destroy / All those antimonies,'[...] (Lines 3-5). Yet, being a disciple of an artist like Homer who had an unchristened heart or a soul without allegiance to any particular faith, the poet in his final choice, can only prefer life's pleasure and ordeals as the only message from his unorthodox religion, to playing of a 'predestined part' with mute stoicism as preparatory for the grave.

The group of poems entitled *Supernatural Songs* published under the caption *A Full Moon in March*, testifies to the acme of Yeats' mystic vision welded into superb poetry sung in the persona of an old hermit Ribh whom critic V. Rai has observed to be a representative of Irish Christianity and yet a raconteur of 'paganism or Asiatic elements' (Rai 156). Poems like *Ribh considers Christian Love Insufficient* and *He and She* thematically point to different principles of Indian spiritualism. For example, the speaker confesses in the former that his capacity for one singular emotion hatred ('For that's the passion in my control') may endear him to God as, being mortal, it is beyond the power of man to realize God and inculcate any love for him -- 'Why should I ask for love or study it?/ It is of god and passes human wit'(Lines 1-2). This very choice of the soul to unite with God through enmity has its parallel in Indian epics and Puranas and one may recall in this respect, the stories of mythic Kings like Kansa and Ravana. The other poem

He and She projects the longing of the soul (the feminine 'She') to be unified with the bridegroom 'He', ie, God and thereby corresponds much to the Vaishnava cult of love called *Radha-bhava* as mentioned earlier.

The poem *Meru* is the finest specimen of the Oriental impact upon the mystic perception of the poet and it was probably influenced by Purohit Swamy's translation of Bhagvan Sri Hamsa's *The Holy Mountain* (1934) of which Yeats was pleased to write the introduction. The Himalaya ('meru' meaning the peak) here stands for the ideal space of retreat necessary for the spiritual recluse for their austere measures or *sadhana* ('dreadful blast' of snow on their 'naked bodies', Lines 11, 12), to gain the illumination of truth (the Supreme Reality or *Bramha*, the God) under the fleeting show of illusions or *maya* that propels life under the façade of civilizations. Yet the conclusion of the poem leaves us suggestions that highlight the primordial secularity of Yeats' mystic vision. What the poet seems to suggest is that, Indian mysticism may be more adept in exploring spiritual intuition than Western schools of philosophy and yet, in the final reckoning, man's spiritual quest ultimately ends in a dark void of ambiguity since the Absolute is neither comprehensible nor effable to human intelligence: '[...] day brings round the night, [...] before dawn/ His glory and monuments are gone' (Lines 13-14).

The *Last Poems* of W. B. Yeats show a sort of valedictory retrospection on the part of the poet regarding his diverse themes, characters, images, expressions and impressions out of which he sought to attain a 'Unity of Being' and make poetry his natural utterance. Here the readers come across a variegated spectrum of poetic reflections such as -- the theory of history in the poem *Gyre*, the artistic worth of tragic gaiety in *Lapis Lazuli*, Greek statuary and the destiny of present civilization in *The Statues* etc.etc. In addition to such poems dealing with serious issues, there are short lyrics marked by a tonal bitterness arising out of a conflict between the poet's ill health and the persistence of lust and passion at his heart. It is natural that mysticism claims the poet's attention at this stage more as a subject of arduous analysis than as one of ardent adulation.

Yet it is true that notwithstanding Yeats' prioritization of the philosophy of the East with regard to the capacity of perceiving the dark and the mysterious reality behind existence, (a theme implied in the poem *Meru*), his final stance regarding Indian mysticism remains ambiguous. This becomes obvious in poems like *Statues* and finally, his self-chosen epitaph *Under Ben Bulbin* where he stresses the ubiquity and necessity of conflict for the completion of the making of a man, especially a creative artist. His final message as a prophetic bard comes out in a sort of exhortation for the revival of virtues like heroism, conflict and tragic dignity (exactly the qualities that the poet found to be missing in Indian philosophy and culture) in the poets and artists of posterity so that they too can contribute like the poet, to the 'monuments of unageing intellect' and thereby help the revival of European art and civilization from the quietist outlook of Oriental outlook and philosophy.

It is amusing to note how Indian spiritualism, once a cornerstone of 'truth' to Yeats, now becomes a crucible of ambivalence, something in between help and hindrance to his shrewd poetic intelligence that shows a bias for a Hesperian revival as envisioned in poems like *Statues*

or *Under Ben Bulben*. In the final reckoning thus, Indian spiritualism/mysticism ceases to represent any longer the visceral level of poetic faith in Yeats and perhaps turns into the vesture of the ideal opposite or anti-mask to the Lear-like mask of heroism that Yeats recommends European poets and artists to adopt.

To be objective, such a change of stance is not unusual for a creative soul who throughout his career sought to remake himself with visions and revisions; and perhaps could, like Tiresias, view 'death in life and life in death' (*Byzantium*, Line 16) in his vision as an artist.

Works Cited

Brown, Terence. *The Life of W. B. Yeats: A Critical Biography*.

<<<http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/b/brown-yeats.html>>> Accessed 08.12.2016.

Chatterjee, Bhabatosh. *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*. Calcutta: Orient Longman, 1962. print

Jeffers, Anglo Norman. *Yeats: Selected Poetry*. London: Pan Books, 1974. print

(The lines of all poems except *Anashuya and Vijaya*, *Mohini Chatterjee, An Indian Upon God* and *An Indian to His Love* have been cited from this edition.)

Naidu, Sarojini. *If You Call Me: The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry*. Ed.

V.K.Gokak. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1970. print. P.152-53.

Rai, Vikramaditya. *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*. Delhi: Doaba House, 1991. print.

Shakespeare, William. *True Love* (Sonnet 116): Palgrave's The Golden Treasury. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2013. print. P.41

Vivekananda, Swami. Peace. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Ed. Swami Suparnananda. Kolkata: Ramkrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2014. Print. P.42

....., *Vedanta: Its Application to Indian to Indian*

Life..<http://www.ramkrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_3/lectures_from_colombo_to_almora/vedanta_in_its_applications_to_indian_life.htm>. Accessed on 10.12.2016.

Yeats, William Butler. *Anashuya and Vijaya* <<<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/anashuya-and-vijaya/comments/>>> Accessed 29 September 2016.

..... , *Mohini Chatterjee*. <<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/mohini-chatterjee/>> Accessed 08.12.2016.

... , *The Indian To His Love*. << http://www.poetry-archive.com/y/the_indian_to_his_love.html>>. Accessed 08.12.2016.

... , *The Indian Upon God*. <<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-indian-upon-god/comments/>>. Accessed 08.12.2016.