

Yeats and Mahapatra: A Poetic Confluence

Adiba Faiyaz

Ph.D Scholar

Centre for English Studies
 Jawaharlal Nehru University
 New Delhi

Abstract

The concept of western ideas intersecting with eastern philosophy has never been new. Several instances can be quoted to prove this point. In our present paper we are to look at it from the lenses of poets. Yeats is a prominent name in the modern age of English poetry. By closely examining and comparing some of the poetic themes of Yeats' poems with that of Mahapatra's- an emerging Indian English poet, the paper aims to establish a poetic confluence between the two. Jayanta Mahapatra seems to be influenced by his poetic style and Yeats's quest for Irishness. Some of the questions that inevitably come up here are: What is so distinctive about Yeats's poetic style and his nationalistic zeal? What does it say of him as a postcolonial writer? How does Yeats use/ write/form history in/ through his poems? What is the line of difference/similarity between him and other Indian English poets as they both share the past of same colonial regime? How has he influenced these poets in their thoughts and writings? It is to grapple with questions such as these that the paper would do a close reading of Yeats's representative poems densely textured with meanings and allusions.

Keywords: Modern British Poetry, Indian English, Poetic Confluence.

Yeats's poetic career can be seen shifting from the pre-modern to the modern age as he was the master of both the styles. If Christianity was Eliot's way to deal with fragmentation of modern society, magic and mythology became the answer to Yeats's disillusionment. Throughout his life, Yeats was actively engaged in constructing a distinctive Irish identity with the help of Celtic myth, legend and folklore. The struggle against British colonialism not only produced political verse but also lead to search for identity through Irish history, mythology, folklore and peasant culture.¹ Poetry according to him was the result of the conflict and turmoil that goes within oneself. Yeats has this unique way of constructing a philosophical world to counter the anarchy of modern civilization. For Yeats, mythology may be historical, prophetic, local or patriotic. This he calls as the "unity of being" which is often symbolized in the perfectly proportioned human body, stored in *Anima Mundi*, a vast storehouse of images. He mentions it in his *Autobiographies* that, unity of being can be attained through projection into consciousness of a person's ancestral memories: "Nations, races, and individual men are unified by images, or a bundle of related images, symbolical or evocative of the state of mind." (12). This is also evident in his poem *The Statues*²:

¹ Anthony Bradley. "Imagining Ireland in the Poems and Plays of W. B. Yeats", Springer Science and Business Media LLC, 2011.

² From the institute of technology, Sligo.

We Irish, born into that ancient sect
 But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
 And by its formless spawning fury wrecked
 Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace
 The lineaments of a plummet- measured face. (28-32)

Even during his early days, he worked to bring together the political conscience of Ireland by gathering the literature of the country- the fairy tales, legends and myths- thus establishing a link. Yeats in his work, *Four Years, 1887-1891* states that³:

Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill? We had in Ireland imaginative stories, which the uneducated class knew and even sang, and the educated classes rediscovering for work's sake what I have called, the applied arts of literature", the association of literature with music, speech, and dance... and this might so deepen the political passion of the nation, that all, the artist and poet, craftsman and day labourer would accept a common design? (26)

Yeats in his early poetry wishes to escape to dreamland whereas in the later poetry nostalgia is his driving force. Though he was passionately involved in Irish politics, yet he was distrustful of its nationalistic zeal. He was drawn into politics because of his love for Maud Gonne but he remained doubtful about the tragic heroism in the futile Easter rebellion. Yeats' idea of nationalism also seemed to be different from the regular notion of it. His poem, *Easter 1916* has the oxymoronic theme of terrible beauty being born of which the poet creates a memorial and says, "I write it out in verse." The first two stanzas deal with the change and the stanza goes like⁴,

To some who are near my heart,
 Yet I number him in the song;
 He, too, has resigned his part
 In the casual comedy;
 He, too, has been changed in his turn,
 Transformed utterly:
 A terrible beauty is born. (34-40)

The third and fourth stanza show a reversal by interpreting that change in a 'stone' a tragic incapacity for change. According to Yeats, the process involved in the birth of beauty is not a pleasant one- it is one of estrangement, alienation and bloodshed.

⁵Too long a sacrifice
 Can make a stone of the heart.

³ Yeats's Poems, 1989.

⁴ Voices.yahoo.com

⁵ ftp.cdut.edu.cn

O when may it suffice?
That is Heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream enough
To know they dreamed and are dead; (57-71)

The two Byzantium poems, *Sailing to Byzantium* and *Byzantium* is an attempt to escape from old age and decay. Images of breeding, growth change and death give way in *Sailing to Byzantium* to the world of artifacts.⁶ Byzantium turns out to be a poem not only about life and death but also about the relation between permanence and change echoing the theme of Keat's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

When the poems of Jayanta Mahapatra, R.Parthasarathy and Kamala Das are examined, it is found that the element of Indian poetry permeates their poems which lend them credibility, respectability and an identity of their own.⁷ Just like Yeatsian Irishness gets reflected through his poetry, Indian sensibility gets best displayed in poems like *Dawn at Puri*. The poem begins with the line:

⁸Endless crow noises
A skull in the holy sands
Tilts its empty country towards hunger.

White-clad widowed Women
Past the centers of their lives
Are waiting to enter the Great Temple

Their austere eyes
Stare like those caught in a net
Hanging by the dawn's shining strands of faith. (1-9)

It stresses on the importance of pilgrimage, Puri, in the life of a hindu. Attaining salvation is the key thing here. Mahapatra uses the theme of landscape which reflects his Indianness

⁶ "Yeats's Poems", Springer Science and Business Media LLC, 1996.

⁷ Zecchini, Laetitia. "Marginalised : Indian Poetry in English", Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 2014.

⁸ poemhunter.com

and his strong connection with the roots. Deeply felt personal experiences are sunk into the interior layers of a poet's sub-consciousness. After having undergone a dramatic metamorphosis, they assume the form of poems. Thus, the poet's perceptions of the world are revealed as abstractions, paradoxes and internal conflicts. And the poems convey the uncertainty of human life which results in a sense of restlessness.⁹ Mahapatra's poems are addressed to that group of readers who are willing to take pains to encounter the experiences that are held captive within the framework of the poem. With their own respective experiences guiding them, the readers have to unravel the mysteries of Mahapatra's poetic creation. The great strength of Mahapatra's poetry lies in the poem itself. Making the readers look inward, question themselves about life, its significance, uncertainty and so on lead them into a process of personal discovery.

Coming from Orissa, Mahapatra has made significant contribution to Indian poetry. Orissa forms the background of his poems, but he goes beyond the chartered territories of his themes like poverty, prostitution, patriarchy, crime and his region Orissa in his treatment of the people's pleasure and pain. He portrays human weaknesses in general and Indian in particular with reference to universal themes like religious animosity, corruption, social discrimination, communal disharmony, ecological imbalance etc. and goes on to throw light on the individual and social reality of human life that one very easily observes in his poems. *Relationship* is a long poem in which are found shadows of W.B. Yeats.¹⁰ The imagery and the theme seems to be integrated very much in proportion. He writes in free verse and keeps himself away from the rigorous metrical verse. The tone is colloquial and conversational. Mahapatra seems to trigger the Indian consciousness and sensibility by evoking the Indian tradition without sentimentalizing the past. He suggests a detachment of viewing and objectivity in presentation. Poetry must involve itself with the people and the lives they live. The participation in the life process of the people accounts for its success. Mahapatra's poems show such involvement and participation. The poet never loses sight of his native tradition and is always in touch with it. He is constantly watching from the close quarters the contemporary society and its ways. He is always with the reality and faces it with courage and conviction. To quote Mahapatra from *Relationship*¹¹,

We have come as dream disguised that pinned us down,
 artisans of stone,
 messengers of the spirit,
 twelve hundred artless brown flowers in passion
 to the night in humble brotherhood,
 aerial roots of a centuries-old banyan tree:
¹²not taking lives seriously
 for our lives are only seeds of dreams,
 forgetting the cruelties

⁹ docplayer.net

¹⁰ Poemanalysis.com

¹¹ www.ijritcc.org

¹² www.rockpebblesindia.com

of ruthless emperors who carved peaceful edicts
 on blood-red rock,
 forgetting our groans and cries,
 the smells of gunsmoke and smoldering flesh,
 forgetting the tactics and the strategy
 that led to the founding of the infinite distance
 inside our watery skulls. (20-35)

Thus his poetry gains authenticity of lives and people depicted in it. His description of happenings and characters evokes reader's sympathy. Like W.B. Yeats, Mahapatra is deeply rooted in his soil and by that quality he may be called a postcolonial poet. He also writes about other parts of the country and the world which presents elements of globalisation. Mahapatra's *Relationship* is a long sustained long poem, an expansion of a lyric voice embracing a region, a tradition, a whole way of life. Just like Yeats, he was a myth maker, weaving myths which are personal and private just like Yeats' *Sailing to Byzantium*. He was truly a singer of Orissan history, art and sculpture, tradition and space. The poem is about loneliness finding meaning in relationships. Imageries of Konarka- sun, stone Mahanadi is used along with local myths so much so that the images form a mass, piled one upon another –binding and together. Thus, by comparing some of the poems of these stalwarts- one from the Eastern world and the other from the West- we find a major thematic link between these two.

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