

## A critical study of the poetry of William Butler Yeats in the Light of Hinduism

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### ABSTRACT

*The theme of this paper is "A light to Hinduism" which means influence of Indian culture, literature and philosophy in the poetry of the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, and the influence of his poetry on Twentieth Century Indian Literature. The paper takes into account literary, cultural, philosophical as well as religious influence, their reception and responses of a culture to literature.*

*Yeats asserts that a "Poet writes always of his personal life, it is always finest work of his tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness." But he never writes of it directly, for he creates with the transformative power of his imagination, even when the poet seems most himself he has been reborn as an Idea.*

*The study seeks to examine the nature of Indian philosophical influence throughout his prolific life on the poetic works of William Butler Yeats, a literary giant of the twentieth century. **Yeats mature verse prompted me to engage in his poetic works;** which has earned him conflicting names from being Orientalist, Colonialist, Anti-Colonialist, Modernist, Nationalist, Revivalist and even Traditionalist in his attitude and writings. Such multi-labeling is in itself evidence enough to prove how complex Yeats life is, defining easy classification. Many texts have been written about Indian influence on the poet, and I wish to build on them and expand the field as there is still uncovered ground, without strictly categorizing (and thereby limiting) Yeats and his output. In this paper I will be analyzing some of his below mentioned poems to explore the light of Hinduism as a dominant theme in the selected poems of W.B. Yeats. The poems are "The wandering of Oisín"; "sailing to Byzantium"; "Lake Isle of Innisfree"; "An Irish Airman Foresees his Death"; "Aedh wishes for the Cloths of Heaven"; "Leda and the Swan"; "Death"; "Long Legged Fly"; "Among School Children"; "A Prayer for my Daughter"; "The Stolen Child"; "When you are Old"; "Down by the Salley Gardens"; "an Image from a past Life"; "Before the World was Made"; "Broken Dreams" etc.*

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### 1. Introduction

William Butler Yeats is widely considered to be one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. He belonged to the Protestant, Anglo-Irish minority that had controlled the economic, political, social, and cultural life of Ireland since at least the end of the 17th century. Most members of this minority considered themselves English people who happened to have been born in Ireland, but Yeats was staunch in affirming his Irish nationality. Although he lived in London for 14 years of his childhood (and kept a permanent home there during the first half of his adult life), Yeats maintained his cultural roots, featuring Irish legends and heroes in many of his poems and plays. He was equally firm adhering to his self-image as an artist. This conviction led many to accuse him of elitism, but it also unquestionably contributed to his greatness. As fellow poet W.H. Auden noted in a 1948 *Kenyon Review* essay entitled "Yeats as an Example," Yeats accepted the modern necessity of having to make a lonely and deliberate "choice of the principles and presuppositions in terms of which sense of his experience." Auden assigned Yeats the high praise of having written "some of the most beautiful poetry" of modern times.

### 2. Biographical Information

He was born in Sandy mount, Ireland and educated there and in London. He spent childhood holidays in County Sligo and studied poetry from an early age when he became fascinated by Irish legends and the occult. These topics feature in the first phase of his work, which lasted roughly until the turn of the 20th century. His earliest volume of verse was published in 1889, and its slow-paced and lyrical poems display Yeats's debts to Edmund Spenser, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the poets of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. From 1900, his poetry grew more physical and realistic. He largely renounced the transcendental beliefs of his youth, though he remained preoccupied with physical and spiritual masks, as well as with cyclical theories of life. In 1923, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

### 3. The Influence of Hinduism in Yeats Poetry

The wide range of traditions and ideas revealed by the term 'Hindu' is a problem in arriving at a definition. Most Hindu traditions revere a body of sacred literature, the Veda, as revelation, some traditions regard certain rituals as essential for salvation; some Hindu philosophies postulate a theistic reality that creates, maintains and destroys the universe, others reject this claim. Hinduism is often characterized as belief in reincarnation (samsara) determined by the law that all actions have effect, and that salvation is freedom from this cycle. Yet

other religions in south Asia, such as Buddhism and Jainism also believe in this. Hinduism does not have a single historical founder; it does not have a unified system of belief encoded in a creed or declaration of faith; it does not have a single system of soteriology; and it does not have a centralized authority and beauracratic structure. Therefore, it is a very different kind of religion from the monotheistic, western traditions of Christianity and Islam, though there are stronger affinities with Judaism.

Yeats was continuously in search of metaphors for his poetry which took him to a wide variety of sources including Irish folklore, spiritism, Romantic poetry, Theosophy, Caballah, the occult and magic Buddhism, the Noh theatre to name just a few. He went so far as attending séances, taking Hashish with the followers of St. Martin<sup>1</sup> and even undergoing the unusual glandular operation for this purpose. In this mixture of influences, Hinduism is one of the major influence and many of the poems which we will discuss now, are highly influenced by Hinduism. Yeats himself had thought of writing such a work.

Yeats image of India was a highly romantic one. He was not aware of the real India; perhaps he did not want to know the real India at all. His image of India never changed. It was essential for him to believe in India as a spiritual land just as it was useful for him to believe that the Irish peasants were in contact with the ancient gods. He did not allow anyone or anything to change his belief Indians respond very warmly to Yeats and see a great deal of Indianness in him due to some quality in his works that accommodates and fuses apparently contradictory ideologies.

Mohini Chatterjee is generally cited out by critics as an example of Yeats's poems where he uses Indian theme quite effectively. Mohini Chatterjee was the only Indian whose name was used by Yeats as the title of a poem. The poem has two clear parts: the first part where Yeats tells us how he asked the Brahmin if he should pray and then presents Mohini Chatterjee's answer:

*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 been \_ \_ \_ \_ \_  
And yet upon my breast  
A myriad heads have lain*

In "The Way of Wisdom" Yeats narrates the same incident. Someone asked him if we should pray, but even prayer was too dull of hopes of desire, of life to have any part in that compliance that was beginning of wisdom, and he answered that one should say before sleeping,

*"I have lived many lives. I have been a  
slave and a prince. Many a beloved has  
set upon the knees of many a beloved.  
Everything that has been shall be  
again". Beautiful words that I spoil  
once by turning them into clumsy verse.'*

This last sentence refers to the poem 'Kanva on Himself' which appeared in The Wandering of Oisín & Other Poems

(London, 1889) but was not included in later collections. Yeats rewrote the poem and added the second part which is his own commentary:

*That he might set at rest  
A boy's turbulent days  
Mohini Chatterjee  
Spoke these, or words like these.  
I add in commentary  
Old lovers yet may have  
All that time denied-  
Grave is heaped upon grave  
That they be satisfied-  
Over the Blackened earth  
The old troops parade,  
Birth is heaped upon birth  
That such cannonade  
May thunder time away,  
Birth-hour and death-hour meet,  
Or, as great sages say,  
Men dance on deathless feet*

Yeats met Mohini Chatterjee in 1885. The first poem based on his teaching was published in 1885. Yeats mentioned this incident in "The Way of Wisdom"-1900, then again with some changes in "The Pathway"-1908 and the poem 'Mohini Chatterjee' which is really the final draft of 'Kanva on Himself' was completed in 1928. Chatterjee's impact is obvious but the most interesting thing is the way Yeats uses the Indian concept of reincarnation preached by Chatterjee.

#### 4. Mysticism in Yeats Poetry

*Yeats was considerably influenced by the  
Yoga system in some of his own concepts  
particularly A Vision. Zimmer has  
explained that personality in the Indian  
system is regarded as a mask which must  
be put off to achieve one's real identity*

Raj Yoga is the discipline to shed this mask and attain unity with the Absolute Self and release from the illusion of matter. Yeats took great interest in Yoga, he read the Yoga system of Patanjali and he used the concept of the Tattwas as the Faculties and Principles in A Vision.

The Indian poems in 'Crossways' are no doubt Indian in terms of tiles and themes. 'Anashuya and Vijaya' says Jeffers in A New Commentary on the Poems of W.B. Yeats, is based on a translation from Sanskrit. Its original title was 'Jealousy'. It is quite likely that Yeats borrowed the name Anashuya from Kalidasa's Shankuntala which he had read in Monier William's translation. Yeats's own note to the poem describes it as,

*"a little dramatic scene (which) was  
meant to be the first scene of a play  
about a man loved by two women, who  
had the one soul between them, the one  
woman waking when the other slept,  
and knowing but daylight as the other only night"*

Since Yeats was familiar with Indian mythology, it is more likely that this is a reference to Kasyapa and Aditi, the parents of Agni, the son of Heaven and Earth.

The poem opens with a prayer for the well-being of the world which is similar to Vedic prayer. Anashuya's love for Vijaya and for God seems to be mingled. This blending of asceticism and sensuality is in the spirit of Indian tradition. The conflict though is Yeatsian, as Yeats faced the conflict during this period between asceticism and fulfillment of desires.

'The Indian Upon God' beautifully reveals the Indian belief that God is one with His creation and that the different creatures, animate and inanimate are all made in the image of god -the moorfowl, the lotus, the roebuck and the picture God's image, each in its own image. The original title of the poem was 'From the Book of Kauri the Indian-Section V, On the Nature of God'. Yeats later shortened it in 'The Wandering of Oisín' to 'Kanva the Indian on God'. The poem reflects the Rig Veda's notion of God which deifies nature, animals and human beings too. It expresses the idea that God is the perfect or the ideal form of every living thing on this earth, bird, animal or flower. The same concept is echoed in Yeats's another poem 'The Dancer at Cruachan and Cro-Patrick'

Yeats was interested in Indian philosophy for a particular purpose and that was the poetic purpose. His interest in India was not that of a philosopher but that of a poet. Therefore he accepted only those ideas and symbols which were useful to him for his artistic purpose. He also modified and subverted some of these concepts. Whenever he borrowed or liked an Indian idea he tried to find an equivalent or a parallel for it with some Irish or European ideas. He was of course more receptive to Hinduism and Indian elements in the Irish tradition. Thus, it is clear that there is a great deal of Hinduism impact on Yeats's poetry. Some of this influence came to him through his favorite poets like Shelley and Blake, some of it came through the Irish mythology, some of it came through theosophy and some of it

through Indian personalities and books on Indian literature, philosophy and religion.

## 5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted a comprehensive study of literary and philosophical influences, reception and response using W. B. Yeats and his life-long relationship with India, as well as the immense interest in Yeats's works displayed by Indian writers and students of literature. I have made an attempt to outline the process of reception on both sides as well as the quality or the nature of response generated by the mutual affinity between Yeats and India. These two lines of investigations become necessary to understand the complicated and complex cultural transactions involved in the process of literary and philosophical influences. I have also made an attempt to argue that such influence is not only a single layered literary event which can be established only by comparing texts or by relating the sources to its replication. Theories of influence available to us so far are generally based on observation related to a single literary tradition or alternatively on exclusive examination of textual evidence.

This research paper which can be said to belong to the area of Comparative Literature is a modest attempt to establish that the question of influence demands a complex critical apparatus in order to unravel its multiple strands, most of which are not obvious or necessarily visible in textual data. I hope this study will contribute to our understanding of Yeats's relationship with India and also the Indian Interest in Yeats. The individual chapters have their own individual conclusions; however, on the basis of the study and those conclusions, it is possible to make the following observations, it is possible to make the following observations pertaining to Yeats's response to India, India's response to Yeats and the process of literary influence and reception.

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