

YEATS AND ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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Abstract

Being dissatisfied with the western tradition, both scientific and religious, Yeats looked towards the orient. Unlike Pound, who found solace in Japanese and Chinese sources, Yeats moved towards Indian literature and philosophy in his quest for “metaphor for poetry”. His long association with India which lasted for nearly half a century became productive in terms of his own aesthetic projects. These pervasive influences of Indian thoughts on the works of Yeats have been highlighted by almost all major critics. But no one has attempted to discern the echoes of Muslim thought, especially Persian mysticism and Arabic elements, however faint that might be. This present paper endeavors to trace the aforesaid influences in Yeats’ later works particularly his later poetry.

Though Yeats is a European poet, he did not stop at Europe in his poetic evolution; rather he went on to explore the Islamic and Arabic worlds in his quest for further horizons. Yeats also exploited the oriental sources for conceiving a new centre of life and new a basis of value. He felt irresistibly drawn to the glorious thought of ancient India and attempted to interweave certain strands in them with those of the west through his immortal works of art. He was influenced by eastern thought, but more as a borrower than as a disciple, because the temper of his own thinking was not eastern. Nevertheless, though Yeats took pains to explore all the systems of beliefs, there is considerable evidence that he assimilated only those traditions which confirmed and elaborated his prior belief. He spent a great deal of his life immersing himself in magical, mystical and the philosophical studies in order , as he claimed, “ to devise a personal system of thought”(AV (A) XI).

Yeats also found Indian ideas of art, philosophy, religion inspiring and stimulating though the intensity of his preoccupation with Indian ideas varied from time to time. But his interest in India was continual. Yet the impact of the Indian ideas that Yeats negotiated with was more direct at certain stages of his career. Through poetry and drama, in which the reproduction is subtle and artistic, and through prose where it is more direct and explicit, these ideas persisted in engaging him. It is Buddhism and Hinduism that moulded Yeats’ later thought. Nevertheless, faint echoes of Muslim thought, especially Arabic elements and Persian mysticism are traceable in his poetry.

The interest of Yeats in Arabia in fact stands on the same level as his interest in Indian philosophy, occult practices and magic. The interest shown in Arabia by the western people, especially in Britain, was very prominent in the romantic era and was at the highest level during 1850-1852, when a large number of translations, travel books and studies appeared about the

legacy of Arabia, its language and life. Yeats' interest was aroused especially after the publication of Richard Francis Burton's translation of *The Arabian Nights*. It influenced Yeats to such an extent that he wrote a letter to his friend Ethel Mannin wishing to write some of his works in the manner and style of *The Arabian Nights* (*Letters of Yeats* 781). Though Arabia is traceable in a few of Yeats' poems, its prominence is evident in the titles or in the themes of poems like "The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid", "Solomon to Sheba", "Solomon and the Witch", "The Second Coming".

'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid' is Arabic in content. The poem takes the form of a secret letter being written by Kusta Ben Luka to his colleague Abd. Al-Rabban. The choice of scenes and objects from *The Arabian Nights* gives this poem its Arabic ambience. Harun Al-Rashid as the main character in the poem is also a powerful figure in *The Arabian Nights*. 'Solomon Sheba', and 'Solomon and the Witch' both take the form of dialogue in which Yeats reveals Sheba's Arab race in, both of the poems. These two poems are related to 'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid and the character of Solomon which Yeats portrayed in these two poems are based on the Arabic sources. He also depicted Solomon's figure in accordance with the Arabic tradition. 'The Second Coming' might implicitly suggest the Christian belief in the return of Jesus, but the deep root of the Arabic elements of Yeats' poetry are first detected when he symbolically uses the falcon and the falconer to express the loss in communication between them. In another sense, the falcon image sums up the spiritual chaos in the aftermath of World War I, and represent the loosening bond between man and the divine master. The symbolic implication of the falconer metaphor, however, assumes deeper significance in view of a striking similar use by the great Persian mystic poet, Rumi, as has been pointed out by A. Schimmel, "the falcon is Rumi's and Attar's symbol of the soul's longing for the master's wrist". (*quoted in*. M. Hasan 193)

Yeats' affinity with Perso-Arabic mysticism has remained largely unnoticed, even though it is not entirely insignificant. Early in his life he had occasions to acquaint himself with Islamic Lore, and we gather from his *Autobiographies* that he attended the discourse of a Persian professor of Oriental languages at Trinity on Easter magic. In his talk, the professor related that, as a little boy he had seen in a vision a multitude of spirits in a pool of ink, singing in Arabic, "woe unto those that do not believe in us". Some other references show that Yeats associated Persia with quaintness and secret lore, Yeats also alludes to *The Arabian Nights* twice in the first version of AV (1925). The heroine of his short eponymous tragedy *Masoda* is also of Arab extraction- her favorite motto is "It was Allah's will".

Yeats' acquaintance with Persian mystical poetry is noticed elsewhere too. In the '*Discoveries*' he quotes the eminent Persian poet Hafiz. *The Cat and the Moon* is composed of "incidents and metaphors that are related to certain beliefs of mine as are the patterns upon a Persian carpet to some ancient faith or philosophy" (VP1 805). Now I shall examine the poem "Chosen" in some detail to substantiate above.

This poem, a celebration of the physical union of man and woman, is based on a subtle combination of three strands of Eastern thought: the belief in a pre-natal choice of a lover, the doctrine of *samsara* or transmigration of souls, and the Indo-Persian mystical cult of achieving union with the Absolute through the senses. The belief in a pre-determined choice of the "lot of love" in the pre-natal state of being is a commonplace Indian idea. This idea also stipulates that usually the lovers get separated either owing to the entry of one of them into the material world all alone or because one of the two has to take a different material shape on account of karma, the action determining the condition under which one is reborn. The *atmans* (souls or true selves) of the lover, however, continue to hunger for each other until they are united once again; and,

therefore, true love is not affected by the turnings of the Wheel. Yeats probably got this idea from Tagore's poetry, and he wrote a couple of poems on this theme, for example, "An Image from a Past Life," which is based on Tagore's poem "In the dusk path of a dream I went to seek the love who was mine in a former life." (Tagore 129). Yeats discovered the same thought in the 14th-century Persian mystic poet Hafiz Shirazi, and he based his poem "His Bargain" on the one hundred and seventy-third poem of Hafiz's *Divan*. He quoted Hafiz's poem in a speech in *Diarmuid and Grania*, which he and George Moore wrote together in 1902; "Life of my life, I knew you before I was born, I made a bargain with this brown hair before the beginning of time and it shall not be broken through unending time"(quoted by Ellmann 279).

The lover in this poem has already entered the physical world, and the beloved can no longer bear the pangs of separation. She, therefore, takes the crucial decision of coming to the material world in search of her lover and struggles for "an image on the track / of the whirling Zodiac." What she in fact chooses is almost the endless and agonizing cycle of love in the material world, night followed by day, union by separation: the wheel of human existence ceaselessly turning, and providing no possibility of consummation. The woman, however, accepts suffering as the condition for the realization of true love and she admits:

I struggled with the horror of daybreak,
I chose it for my lot! (Yeats, Collected Poems 311)

This acceptance of suffering on the part of the woman, nevertheless, is not completely stoical for she knows the fulfillment to be derived from "pleasure with a man", though that pleasure is far more than merely sensual. The lovers meet for a fleeting moment only, yet they achieve the consummation of physical love: "... his heart my heart did seem..." This physical consummation of momentary love now leads them to the ultimate goal of an Indo-Persian mystic, *fana-fil-hag*, the merger in the Absolute:

And both adrift on the miraculous stream
Where -- wrote a learned astrologer--
The Zodiac is changed into a sphere. (Yeats, Collected Poems 311)

The sphere or the thirteenth cone is Yeats' symbol for nirvana, the union of the Self into the Impersonal Self and release from the cycle of incarnations. The Zodiac, on the other hand, represents the circular movements of the gyres, contrasted with the stillness of the sphere which contains and transcends them. Further, the sphere is an appropriate symbol as it signifies perfection and the idea of the Unity of Being. In the moment of knowledge the *atman* discovers that it is one with Brahman, the Universal Spirit, and realizes that all creation forms one circular Chain of Being.

Here we may note that Yeats diverges from Vedantic Hindu thought by making the lovers attain nirvana through the senses. For Yeats total spiritual experience is not possible without the fulfillment of physical love, and this idea is the distinguishing feature of certain Indo-Persian mystic cults. I have already noted Yeats' familiarity with the Persian mystic poet Hafiz, who was an exponent of the idea of *vasl-i-majazi*, physical union, leading to *vasl-i-haqiqi*, spiritual union with God; and, therefore, the physical union of man and woman was the most effective expression of the achievement (in one moment) of complete fulfillment both on the human and

cosmic plane. This Persian concept particularly appealed to Yeats who was always concerned with the problem of resolving the duality of physical existence. Sexual intercourse, Yeats realized,

was a momentary union of antinomies, and thus, it led one to a consciousness of the Unity in Diversity. Blake had showed him this path, and the East confirmed it. Yeats acknowledged his debt to the East by sending the hero of his unpublished novel, *The Speckled Bird*, to Persia in order to improve Christianity by reconciling it with natural emotions and particularly with sexual love:

He was going to the East now to Arabia now to Persia, where he would find among the common people so soon as he had learnt their language some lost doctrine of reconciliation; the philosophic poets had made sexual love their principal symbol of a divine love and he had seen somewhere in a list of untranslated Egyptian MSS. that certain of them dealt with love as a polthugic [sic] power. In Ireland he [found] wonderful doctrines among the poor, doctrines which would have been the foundation of the old Irish poets, and surely he would find somewhere in the East, a doctrine that would reconcile religion with the natural emotions, and at the same time explain these emotions. All the arts sprang from sexual love and there they could only come again, the garb of the religion when that reconciliation had taken place. (*quoted in*. Ellmann 52)

Yeats' meeting with Tagore, India's foremost modern poet in the early twenties of the twentieth century gave a great impetus to his engagement with Eastern and especially Indian thought. At this stage, he also discovered Hafiz Shirazi, a fourteen century Persian mystic poet, who strengthened Yeats' belief in the sanctity of the senses. He also read *The Arabian Nights* with great interest, and his attention was drawn towards certain Indo- Persian mystical cults, which aim at union with the Absolute through the senses. Under the impact of Tagore, Hafiz and the Tantric cults a new note of healthy affirmation of life appears in Yeats' poetry of this period.

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