

## INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHTS AND THE SHAPING OF W. B. YEATS

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W. B. Yeats' relationship with Indian thought and Indian outlook on life has somehow been deeper than on any other Western poet. Although in poets like Emerson and Whitman Indian thought has been an important influence, the Indian experience was largely a curious, exotic experience. It hardly ever became a way of feeling; a modified power of perception. Many have written on Indian themes with a lot of enthusiasm, as Huxely for instance, but there is little in the way of participation, i.e. the manner in which a writer might make the Indian standpoint a fact of his personal experience and not merely give it the approval of an intellectual experience. It is noteworthy that T. S. Eliot's references to Sanskrit scriptures are rather incidental in the total poetic situation which is basically un-Indian. Critics like Helen Gardner have the opinion that such references as those in *The Waste Land* and *The Dry Salvages* project a little, not being quite integrated with the matter of the poem as a whole. Eliot's response, in a sense, is the observer's comment and not the warm participation as one finds it is in Yeats. The focus of this paper is to look at the shaping influence of Indian philosophical thought on the life and works of W.B Yeats. Yeats conveys authentic Indian feelings. His Indian connection has deeper roots because it is also partly his Irish connection, for he had come to see primitive Ireland and India as complementary to each other.

W. B. Yeats' predisposition towards India and its subsequent effect on his poetry giving a definite shape to his poetic philosophy and vision have attracted a lot of critical attention. Sushil Kumar Jain in an article on "*Indian Elements in the Poetry of Yeats: On Chatterji and Tagore*" claims that "with the appearance on the scene of the Indian theosophist Mohini Chatterji, a new note entered Yeats' poetry. The random attempts of his first two or three years of creative activity gave way to a consistent vision that possessed the sanctions for an authoritative religion." However, Yeats was no novice to Indian tradition before 1885, the year he met Mohini Chatterji. He had tried to understand the philosophical tradition of India by reading books related to the subject. In the opinion of John Middleton Murry Yeats' turning his attention to books dealing with Indian tradition might be a conscious attempt to find an intellectual direction that could lead him out of the realms of conventional religious orthodoxy and mechanical

materialism. His early readings included *The Sacred Books of the East*, edited by Max Muller, *The Buddhist Sutras* (1881), the translations of *the Bhagavat Gita* (1882), the translations of the Upanishads (1884), and books connected with the Theosophical movement like A. P. Sinnet's *The Occult World* (1891), Sinnet's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), and Mabel Cook's *The Light on the Path*. But Yeats was profoundly influenced by some notable Indians among whom Mohini Chatterji was the first.

During Chatterji's visit to Dublin in 1885, W. B. Yeats came in contact with him. Though the exact date of the meeting is not known, an announcement about Chatterji's visit to Dublin appeared in the August issue of *The Dublin University Review*, 1885. It is highly probable that he visited Dublin in the final months of 1885. In the May, 1886 issue of *The Dublin University Review* appeared an article by Chatterji, "*The common Sense Theosophy*." We do not find any information from Yeats' *The Pathway* or from *The Dublin University Review* about what aspects of Indian philosophy did Chatterji talk about, though it is speculated that he talked on Sankar's philosophy. May be Chatterji did not deliver any systematized lectures. However, from Yeats' account given in *The Pathway* it is evident that the crux of the talk was asceticism. Two passages in *The Pathway* are significant. The first:

I think he would not have trained anybody in anything but in the arts and in philosophy, which sweeps the pathway before them, for he certainly thought, as William Blake did, that "the imagination is man himself," and can, if it be strong enough, work every miracle (94).

The second:

Not only did he think that the imaginative arts were the only things that were quite sinless, but he spent more than half a day proving, by many subtle and elaborate arguments, that "art for art's sake" was the only sinless doctrine, for any other would hide the shadow of the world as it exists in the mind of God by shadows of accidents and illusions of life and was but Sadducean blasphemy (94).

This meeting had tremendous effect on the young poet W. B. Yeats. In these two significant passages, Yeats records what he heard from Chatterji about art and literature. Yeats himself acknowledges Mohini Chatterji as one who helped to give his own vague thoughts a shape: "I had thought to write of one to whom I, at any rate, owe more than to any book" (Yeats, *Pathway* 40).

The orient which had laid a strong hold upon Yeats' imagination came to him in the form of Mohini Chatterji. Alex Zwerdling observes that "the mystical, contemplative elements of Eastern religions attracted Yeats greatly, particularly after he met a Brahmin named Mohini Chatterji" (150). "The little Brahmin with his Christ-like face poured out wisdom in riddles," says Dr V. K. Menon and adds a statement by the poet himself: "Alcibiades fled from Socrates lest he might do nothing but listen to him all his life long and I am certain that we ... all dreamed that but to listen to this man ... and to think as he did was the one thing worth doing and thinking. Yeats imagined that he found in the Brahmin one of those imaginary people who are created out of the deepest instinct of man, to be his measure and his norm and that the nearest he could get to truth was what those mouths had spoken" (Menon 12). In the words of Bachchan, "We must not ignore the fact that Yeats carried a Pater (though murmuring about beauty cannot explain him) within himself or even a Sankara in embryo. By heredity, environment, early training, or by mere fact of being a Celt, or if we like, by the simple force of the Zeitgeist, Yeats

was a dreamer; ... and whatever the Brahmin said seemed to him to be giving shape to his own vague speculations” (27).

W. B. Yeats systematically developed the ideas which he came across in his Indian sources. He was aware of an ancient Indian tradition common to the East and the West. He stated in the preface to the *Ten Principal Upanishads* in 1937:

It pleases me to fancy that when we turn towards the East, in or out of the church, we are turning not less to the ancient West or North; the one fragment of pagan Irish philosophy come down, ‘The song of Amergin’ seems Asiatic; that a system of thought like that of these books, though perhaps less perfectly organized, once overspread the world, as our today; that our genuflections discover in the East something ancestral in ourselves, something we must bring into the light before we can appease a religious instinct that for the first time in our civilization demands the satisfaction of the whole man (11).

Yeats believed that ancient tradition of India has universal significance. Its affirmation of life through attachment and detachment, contemplation and action meant to impart fullness to life. He firmly believed that some aspects of Indian tradition would be useful for the entire mankind. He never accepted anything from any sources blindly and his own cultural background and critical thinking often decided what he wanted to accept from his Indian sources. His early inclination towards the ascetic aspect of Indian philosophy, which enumerated that all actions were meaningless and that only the contemplative search into oneself could lead to the truth was in harmony with the Celtic ideas of dreamy wisdom. He shaped a few ideas about the nature and function of art in these early years. His Celtic background and awareness of current literary trends were the major forces that shaped those ideas.

Yeats and his friends were introduced to the Sankara philosophy by Mohini Chatterji which propounds that the whole complex of phenomena, when we regard it from the point of view of ultimate reality, is created, maintained, and imposed upon the soul by ignorance. It springs from false cognition and is merely a deceptive supposition. The illusion that rope is a snake, or that the trunk of a tree is a man, or the mirage is an expanse of water is disproved on a closer examination and disappears. The whole world is an illusion which Brahma as magician evolves from himself, and by which he is no more affected than is the magician by the illusion which he has produced. Chatterji accordingly taught Yeats that the external life of action is illusory, ephemeral, and unreal. The real life was that of dreaming, imagination, and contemplation. Only the self was worth thinking about, for all that mattered was centered in it. To go beyond the Self was to leave the truth behind and run after shadows. In brief, what happened to be shadowy was substantial and what looked substantial was shadowy. This idea soon found its way to Yeats’ poetry:

Wisdom and dreams are one,  
For dreams are the flowers aglow,  
And Wisdom the fruit of the garden;  
God planted him long ago. (Variorum 743)

Yeats was greatly influenced by the philosophy of renunciation as taught by Mohini Chatterji, who told him that one must suppress all desire, even the desire for emancipation, ‘for even our desire of immortality was no better than our other desires’ (*Pathway* 40). Yeats’ poem “*Quatrains and Aphorisms*,” published in the *Dublin University Review* in 1886, echoes a similar feeling:

Long thou for nothing, neither sad nor gay;  
 Long thou for nothing, neither night nor day;  
 Not even "I long to see thy longing over,"  
 To the ever-longing and mournful spirit say.

The influence of Mohini Chatterji had a great impact on the poetic imagination of Yeats. Paying rich tribute to Mohini Chatterji Yeats wrote in "*The Pathway*," "...some of us when we look backward upon our lives see the coming of a young Brahmin into Ireland helped to give our vague thoughts a shape" (8: 191). Yeats' "*The Song of the Happy Shepherd*," "*The Priest and the Fairy*," "*Fergus and the Druid*" etc. bear clear signs of Indian influence which was the result of his coming in contact with Mohini Chatterji. On the whole, Yeats' imagination was so stirred at the time of Chatterji's fresh approach to life that he developed a general interest in India and in Indian poetry in particular. Mohini drew his attention to the works of Kalidas, the great Indian poet, and he managed to read some of it in translation. Discussing Yeats' early period, G. L. Wreen writes of the captivation of Yeats' imagination by "an India of pure romance" (Wreen 9)

Mention must be made of another poem, "Jealousy" by W. B. Yeats, which appears in the Collected Poems under the title "Anashuya and Vijaya." In this poem Yeats makes full use of the knowledge he gathered about India from Chatterji. In the opinion of Sushil kumar Jain it also reproduces the Arcadian atmosphere of Kalidasa's play *Sakuntala*, which Yeats had read in the translation of Monier Williams. The poem uses as a theme the conflict within an Indian priestess that makes her fluctuate between meditation and jealousy. Yeats has evidently taken the name "Anashuya" from Kalidasa's play. The scene is also very much like the hermitage of Kanva where Sankuntala is brought up with her two playmates Anashuya and Priyamvada. "The Indian Upon God" which was originally published under the title "From the Book of Kauri the Indian—Section V, On the Nature of God" is another important poem of Yeats composed during this period which reflects the intellectual thrill that his youthful mind obtained from a fresh idea supplied by Mohini Chatterji. The Indian in this monologue discovers that the personal conception of the divinity is a magnified form of the Self of the thinker. According to the moorfowl, God

Is an undying moorfowl, and He lives beyond the sky.  
 The rains are from His dripping wing, the moonbeams from His eye.  
 (Collected 14)

To the lotus, God is He

Who made the world and ruleth it, He hangeth on a stalk,  
 For I am in his image made, and all this tinkling tide is but a sliding drop  
 of rain between His petals wide. (Collected 15)

And to the peacock, He

Who made the grass and made the worms and made my feathers gay,  
 ...is a monstrous peacock, and He waveth all the night  
 His languid tail above us, lit with myriad spots of light. (Collected 15)

This idea probably came from the *Bhagvad Gita* as translated by Chatterji. The Blessed Lord spoke:

Among Adityas I am Vishnu; among those who illuminate I am the sun...  
 Among weapons I am the thunder; ... among serpents I am Vasuki ... I  
 am the lion among wild animals; among birds I am Garuda ... among

fishes I am Makara; among flowing streams I am the Ganges (Chatterji, Bhagavad 165-66)

The concept of immortality of soul was among the many concepts that Yeats adopted from the teachings of Mohini and the Dublin Theosophists. Mohini taught that souls are emanations of the divine spirit, sparks from the central fire; that each soul is incarnated in a body times without number, and that birth and death go on until the soul returns to the divine source whence it came. Wrote Yeats: “Somebody asked (Chatterji) if we should pray, (or if) even prayer was too full of hope, of desire, of life, to have any part in that acquiescence that was his 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 beloved has sat upon my knees, and I have sat 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” (Yeats, Pathway VIII: 193)

A similar concept concerning the permanence of the soul in the eternal essence amid all the transient forms through which it has passed is developed into poetic form in “Mohini Chatterji.”

Birth is heaped on birth  
That such cannonade  
May thunder time away . . . . (Variorum 723-24).

W. B. Yeats was no doubt one of the most versatile artists. He was an open minded poet who absorbed ideas from Japanese and Chinese sources along with ideas from the Western sources. However, India was a major source of ideas for Yeats and individuals from India aroused and intensified his interest in India. A close study of Yeats’ art in relation to Indian ideas of art is rewarding because it clarifies where his personal relationships with India begin and end and how his art maintains a high level of individuality and autonomy. He shared some of the Indian ideas like reincarnation and the immortality of the soul. Yeats saw that the Indian tradition hold out a possibility for the individual to realize that wholeness and harmony which was once possible for men who lived in the age of Byzantine Christianity. The Indian, he said, displays ‘care for the spontaneity of soul’ because his belief in many lives frees him from the ‘moral indignation’ of the Western man. Though his Irish background helped him to share these beliefs easily, it was inputs from noted Indians like Mohini Chatterji, Rabindranath Tagore and Shri Purohit Swami that enriched his art and philosophy culminating in a poet who has been endeared to so many readers because of the sheer variety of ideas incorporated in his artistic creation.

W. B. Yeats’ fascination for India continued almost throughout his life. He was imaginatively and intellectually trying to discover India. In 1931, he wrote to Tagore, “What an excitement it was the first reading of your pomes which seemed to come out of the fields and rivers and have their changelessness” (Yeats, Letters 175). Yeats discovered India from books and men. His India was not the geographical India; it was the India of ideas. The ideas that he came across in Indian books and the three men (Mohini Chatterji, Rabindranath Tagore and Shri Purohit Swami) whom he met had something mysterious and mystic about them. These ideas and men reminded him of the mystery of the universe, which fascinated him always. Some of his art became emblems of his preoccupation with Indian ideas. Unlike any other Western Poet who responded to Indian thought, Yeats is unique in many aspects. No one can ever cultivate an interest in an alien philosophy and culture for more than five decades unless he has genuine interest for it. Yeats maintaining his interest in Indian tradition and periodically intensifying and reviving his interest, explaining Indian ideas to Western readers through his prose and recreating those ideas through his poetry reveal a commitment and involvement with love and respect.

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