

**INDIAN VISION IN W. B. YEATS'S  
'THE SONG OF THE HAPPY SHEPHERD'**

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**Abstract**

This article seeks to bring into light the Indian dimensions of the poem 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd' from W.B. Yeats's poetical collection titled *Crossways* by way of exploring Indian thoughts and vision in it. It further envisions Yeats's high fascination for India and things Indian as enunciated in her scriptures of universal significance and Yeats's humanistic effort to mingle the ideas of the East with the West with a view to bringing about a synchronized society of cultural unanimity.

**Keywords:-** Indian dimensions, scriptures, humanistic

Like his literary predecessors W. B. Yeats, an epoch making poet of the Modernist age from the soil of Ireland, was also overawed by Indian philosophy and wisdom as enshrined in her scriptures of universal relevance, namely, the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas* and no doubt the concise treatise of her overall philosophy--- the *Bhagavad –Gita*. India, a country known for its mysticism, spirituality, and its being domicile to philosophy and wisdom, provided a new ethos to the Western countries. It would not be out of place to mention here that literary traditions in the West since the times of Homer derive extensively from Indian philosophy and ideas. The Greek texts like *Antigone* of Sophocles, *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer witness tremendously the impact of Indian thoughts in their making. The literatures composed by British writers like Chaucer, Shakespeare, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Eliot, etc. were dominated highly by Indian thoughts. Although it is unfortunate that Indian dimension of the above literatures has not been given due magnitude in Indian classrooms meant for English literature, yet the verity can't be ignored that such type of

approach would have added avidly to the wider scholarship in the interpretation and explication of the canonical texts that have remained the interest of the select few in the era of postmodernism.

It is a fact that even during colonial days India was recognized as an abode of fresh and true ideas; a country where deeper level of thought process existed. Yeats's response to India and things Indian was quite mesmerizing. It seems that Yeats had imbibed the fortitude of Indian philosophy that ultimately yielded the poems having the thoughts of elevated intensity. The poet got his inspiration from India and things Indian beyond measure. He found a succor for his melancholic and tensed bent of mind in Indian scriptures and texts. It was the impact of Indian philosophy that gave birth to a new poet and a new facet in the writings of Yeats. He was pretty conscious of an ancient tradition regular to the East and the West. He himself writes in 1937, "It pleases me to fancy that when we turn towards the East, in or out of church, we are turning not less to the ancient West or North; the one fragment of Pagan Irish philosophy came 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 ours 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"(W.B. Yeats, Preface, *The Ten Principal Upanishads* 11) .

Ireland, the country of Yeats's birth, had its roots in India. If we examine the word 'Ireland' etymologically, it seems to be the curious blend of two words, i.e. Arya and Land that means the land of the Aryans. The fact about the Aryans being the earliest inhabitants of India could help in asserting India's cultural kinship with Ireland. Yeats's admiration for ancient India and Indian tradition, from the beginning of his career in 1885 to its end in 1939 gave him strength to delve deeper into the mysteries of her philosophy either from reading scriptures or meeting people who were initiated into Indian spiritual tradition. His reaction to India and her philosophy ought not to be deemed as an emotional gesture; rather it was a serious attempt to fetch the gems from Indian philosophy with a view to establishing a serene society. C.L. Wrenn rightly observes, "...there was one period in his early life when his imagination was captivated and stimulated by India and not the India of politicians, or historians or travellers, but an India of pure romance, which bears some subtle yet obvious relation to old romantic Ireland " ( Wrenn 9). However Yeats came directly into contact with three intellectuals from India, namely, Mohini Mohun Chatterji, Rabindranath Tagore and Shree Purohit Swami who added the understanding of Yeats about Indian philosophy and things Indian to a considerable degree. Endowed with the most exotic personality Mohini Chatterji came from a middle class Brahmin family of Bengal and had received higher university education. Yeats was extremely impressed with the personality of his.

Mohini Chatterji stood a big influence on Yeats, but it does not mean that Yeats was unaccustomed with the spiritual glory of India and things Indian before getting in touch with Mohini. It seems that in Yeats's early writings, ceremonial philosophy formed only a backdrop for his verses. Indian viewpoint or ideas were enunciated through Indian people and suggested through Indian themes. Unlike his friends, Johnston and George Russell, Yeats was trying to outline his art by utilizing Indian way of life as a background. The sustenance of art was his chief good during the period. The discourses of Mohini Chatterji were in correspondence with his own bent of mind and attitude of the then period. Here, the observation of A.G. Stock seems worth quoting, "Yeats's own mind had an affinity with many things he found in Indian thought, and finding them must have given him confidence. It gave an intellectual justification to much that he believed with feeling, and helped to set in order tangled experiences which neither Christian

orthodoxy nor contemporary science could deal with. Also it fortified in a conviction, necessary for the time being, that the meaning of life was in something other than action” (A.G. Stock 11-12). It was Mohini Chatterji who kindled the interest of W.B. Yeats in Indian philosophical ideas. He made him aware of the famous monist Shankaracharya whose famous opinion was *Aham Brahmasmi* – I am the Supreme Spirit. Chatterji’s talk strengthened Yeats’s conviction and took him nearer to the philosophical think tank of India. He was instrumental in intensifying Yeats’s interest in Indian philosophy and thought to a significant level.

The next person who influenced Yeats was Rabindranath Tagore. Yeats met Rabindranath Tagore in the year 1912. Both were the poets of stature and both were bent upon a devout mission for "the Unity of Being". The amity between the two poets proved an enduring one. They shared common spiritual and political ideas. The overall relationship was rewarding. Yeats wrote an illustrious "Introduction" to the *Gitanjali* (1912) of Tagore. An excerpt from the "Introduction" reads thus, “But though these prose translations from Rabindranath Tagore have stirred my blood as nothing has for years, I shall not know anything of his life, and of the movements of thought that have made them possible, if some Indian traveller will not tell me.... For I know, so abundant and simple is this poetry, the renaissance has been born in your country, and I shall never know of it except by hearsay” (W.B. Yeats, Introduction, *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* VII-VIII). Yeats’s "Introduction" to *Gitanjali* remained an epoch-making response of a Westerner towards Indian literature and its heritage. Yeats rendered an immense service to India by introducing an unknown Indian poet to the West and by making the world comprehend Tagore’s brilliance.

The third great Indian who came into contact with Yeats was Shree Purohit Swami who was a *Brahmin* from Maharashtra and a graduate of Calcutta University. Yeats was also overwhelmed seeing the handsome and stalwart personality of Shree Purohit Swami, a person whose sole aim was to interpret the abstruse phase of Indian life to the West. Yeats, quite enthusiastic about getting Shree Purohit Swami’s autobiography published, was pleased to write an "Introduction" to *An Indian Monk*, the Swami’s autobiography. The next book of Purohit Swami that appeared two years later was *The Holy Mountain*, an English rendering of a Marathi book, written by his *Guru* Bhagavan Shri Hamsa. Yeats, while writing the "Introduction" to *The Holy Mountain*, described the experiences of Bhagvan Shri Hamsa’s meticulous effort in search of his Divine Master, who could manifest his own will. Another example of the cultural communication could be found in Shree Purohit Swami’s publication of his rendition of the *Bhagvad Gita* as *The Geeta* in 1935. Shree Purohit Swami devoted this book to Yeats. He wrote, “Accept this *Geeta*, the Upanishads in essence, a humble offering on your seventieth birthday.... I adore your friendship, your devotion; I love your sincerity, your sacrifice. May the Lord bless you, that Lord in whom India has found her rest” (Shree Purohit Swami, trans. *The Geeta: The Gospel of Lord Shri Krishna* 5). Their translation of the *Upanishads* came into a book form as *The Ten Principal Upanishads* (1937) to which Yeats wrote an excellent preface.

The poem "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" seems to be the upshot of Yeats’s initiation into a world of bleak realities. It seems as if he had realized a few dreary experiences by then. The very death of the “woods of Arcady” is the symbolic demise of the good old days of the organic community with euphoric fantasy. The pleasures of adolescence were being rendered into worldly responsibilities. When the poem was composed it seems probable that Yeats was drenched fully with the esoteric values and thoughts of famous Advait Vedantist of his own right Jagadguru Sankaracharya that he had come to know through Mohini Chatterji. The shepherd juxtaposes the “antique joy” with “painted toy” to have the scintillating effect,

“The woods of Arcady are dead,  
And over is their antique joy;  
Of old the world on dreaming fed;  
Grey Truth is now her painted toy;” (C.P. 07)

The visionary poet is of the opinion that with the passage of time the natural things will be replaced by what is known as ornamental, and here, Yeats's very comparison between the old "world on dreaming fed" with the new, under the delusion of the "painted toy" like Shakespeare's "painted pomp" in *As You Like It* clearly refers to the impact of Shankar's philosophy that the earth is a false impression. And later the poet asserts,

“But O, sick children of the world,  
Of all the many changing things  
In dreary dancing past as whirled,  
To the cracked tune that Chronos sings,  
Words alone are certain good.” (C.P. 07)

That he tells the seekers after physical charms that all the things existing in the world are subject to change with the passage of time. However only one thing will survive the test of time and that is 'word', in Indian terms referred to as '*shabda*', the composite form of 'Akshar' or '*Sphota*'. He intends to suggest the humanity not to run after mundane things of life but the higher form of the Self that is suggested through '*Akshar*'. Thinking about one's clan and fake glories of the materialistic world would be merely an escape from the higher goal of self realization and salvation. In the 15th chapter of the *Bhagvad-Gita*, namely, *Purushottam Yoga*, Lord Krishna Himself tells the downhearted Arjuna, "I am enthroned in the hearts of all; memory, wisdom and discrimination owe their origin to Me. I am He Who is to be realized in the scriptures; I inspire their wisdom and I know their truth" (*The Geeta* translated by Shree Purohit Swami 66). Herein Krishna glorifies the wisdom enshrined in the scriptures in the form of letters. The first *mantra* of '*Kanda 4 Sukta 1*' of the *Atharvaveda* further enunciates the origin of the sacred word as thus,

“That Sacred Word which was born first in the East  
The Seer has revealed from the shining horizon.  
He disclosed its varied aspects, high and low,  
The womb of both the Existent and the Nonexistent” (Panikkar 105).

Again in the *mantra* 1 of '*Mandal 10 Sukta 71*' of the *Rig Veda* the reference to what we call in other terms *Akshar Brahma* is quite obvious,

“O Lord of the Holy Word! That was the first  
beginning of the Word when the Seers fell to naming each object.  
That which was best and purest, deeply hidden  
Within their hearts, they revealed by the power of their love” (Panikkar 71).

The well known scholar Gaurinath Shastri also views on the essence of word and its impressions in day to day life. He writes, "...it appears that the grammarian approaches the subject not only from the transcendental but also from the empirical point of view taking in account both the metaphysical nature of the Ultimate Reality, the Word –Spirit (*Sabda-tattva*) and the pattern of its realization in our everyday life with the gradual emergence of correct knowledge and the corresponding disappearance of ignorance to which every human being is more or less subject. It remains to be said that the limitations of the cognizing subject are

responsible for the transference of the properties or attributes of sounds to *sphota* to which they do not actually belong” (Shastri 2).

Further in the poem, Yeats questions the readers rather mockingly,

“Where are now the warrior kings,  
 Word be-mockers?—By the Rood  
 Where are now the warring kings?  
 An idle word is now their glory,” (C.P.07)

And,

“The wandering earth herself may be  
 Only a sudden flaming word,  
 In clanging space a moment heard,  
 Troubling the endless reverie.” (C.P.07)

Herein the poet brings to fore general phenomenon of life and death. He, through the examples of past kings and princes who survive today only through their names, tells the humanity not to aspire for the materialistic gains only because they are temporal and will not bring about any spiritual elevation of soul and heart. He further writes,

“Then nowise worship dusty deeds,  
 Nor seeks, for this is also sooth,  
 To hunger fiercely after truth,  
 Lest all thy toiling only breeds.  
 New dreams, new dreams; there is no truth  
 Saving in thine own heart.”(C.P. 07)

He didactically suggests the common people not to run after seeking truth. The more you are a seeker after truth, the more you will get confused. The poet, while advocating Advait philosophy of Shankar makes it clear that one cannot find truth in this world because it is an illusory place. Here one is reminded of Shankara’s famous maxim “*Brahma Satyam Jaganmithya; Jivo Brahmaiva na parah*” that means the Supreme Self is existent, the world is deceptive; the Individual Self is the Supreme Self and nobody else. He is well known to the fact that one exploration will lead the way for another one. That desire is the ultimate cause of a person’s spiritual decay. To find what truth is, one should explore one’s own heart. A person ought to delve deeper into the layers of personal consciousness then only he/she will be successful in achieving *Brahma Tattva* (Divine essence). See the succeeding extracts where the poet sings the glory of words,

“Go gather by the humming sea  
 Some twisted, echo-harboured shell,  
 And to its lips thy story tell,  
 And they thy comforters will be,  
 Rewording in melodious guile  
 Thy fretful words a little while,  
 Till they shall singing fade in ruth  
 And die a pearly brotherhood;  
 For words alone are certain good:

Sing, then, for this is also sooth.” (C.P. 08)

And in the last portion of the poem the poet persona insists on having the dream as it may bring the image of God and become a medium of salvation,

“Pierced by my glad singing through,

My songs of old earth's dreamy youth:  
But ah! She dreams not now; dream thou!  
For fair are poppies on the brow:  
Dream, dream, for this is also sooth." (C.P. 08)

The poem, though composed by an Irish poet, propagates Indian ideas through and through. If we take into account the title of the poem, the fact becomes self evident that the persona of the shepherd is happy owing to his growing knowledge of the temporal dimensions of the worldly aspirations and consequent realization of the real fact that lies within. His realization is based upon the fact that in place of searching cheerfulness and divine blessings in temples and holy shrines, it would be a good practice to undertake meditation and explore the Light of the Self that Shankar through his aphorism *Aham Brahmasmi* (I am the *Brahma*) and Indian scriptures like the *Bhagvad-Gita* and the *Upanishadas* too maintain.

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