

INDIAN RESPONSE TO YEATS: A STUDY OF INFLUENCE

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Abstract

The long history of India is a fertile field for the study of cultural encounters. When artists of two diverse cultures meet they may either reject each other completely, or through a process of give and take lead to mutual enrichment. Indian poets like Tagore, Purohit Swami, and Mohini Chatterji have influenced the west and have been well responded. The same also happened in the case of Yeats, Eliot, and Baudlaire in India. As the history of the literary reception is fairly long it is impossible to consider all in this narrow frame work. This present paper aims at throwing light on the general gamut of the reception of Yeats in the Indian Literary culture and does not make an exhaustive survey of any single case, because of the multiplicity of the Indian Languages. The reception here does not mean the critical attention that Indian scholars have given to Yeats, as it confines itself only to creative works that how far and to what extent Indian Poets and writers have produced their literary creations being influenced by Yeats. Attempts have been made to trace the influence of Yeats by pointing at a certain observable trends which may be present in a very subtle form in different modern literatures of India.

Keywords: Cultural encounter, Reader Response, and cultural reception

Being influenced by any poet or an artist is merely one aspect of the response to them. Critics have already worked on influence studies and also ‘The Reader Response Theory’ is not far different from that of an artist being influenced by another. Yeats’ thought and poetry has influenced many modern Indian poets writing in different Indian languages: Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali, and also Indian English poetry. They have all responded to Yeats enthusiastically and creatively.

The response of Gujarati writers to Irish cultural and literary tradition can be traced back to late 19th century with the publication of Zoverchand Meghani’s *Charano ane Charani*, where he refers Irish bards as European Charans. It is not his only reference to Irish culture. He also wrote the history of Ireland *Salagatu Ireland* meaning “The Burning Ireland”. This shows a Gujarati writer’s understanding of Irish culture and history. In the post independence era when modernism emerged as a trend in Gujarati literature, the influence of European modernism became prominent, particularly, in the fifth decade when Harischandra Bhatta (1906-1950)

mentioned the name of Yeats and other in a letter to Umasankar Joshi on 19th September 1940. He wrote “I have come across an excellent book on Hopkins, Yeats and four modern youngsters” (Patel 87). Another Gujarati modernist poet Niranjan Bhagat, a professor of English who also responded Yeats and confines his response only to his introductory booklet in Gujarati *W.B.Yeats: Parichaya Pustika Pravrutti*. The booklet presents Yeats’ life and career in brief. Though Bhagat does not give any critical comments on Yeats in the booklet what he includes and emphasizes reveal his response to Yeats.

Most of the modern Gujarati poets were exposed to European modernism through the poetry of Eliot and Yeats. Eliot’s influence is clearly visible. But one can say that they were subtly influenced by Yeats too. They received Yeatsian elements through Eliot’s poems which echo Yeats.

In Hindi poetry, poets like Harivansharai Bachchan whose *Madhusala* based on the translations of Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyats* responded to Yeats in a special interest as his doctoral thesis was on “Yeats and Occultism” from Cambridge University. Apart from this research work which reveal some critical out look towards Yeats, his poetry exhibits some instances of Yeats’ influence. His translations of Yeats’ poem, his critical comments, particularly, his autobiography and his poems are addressed to Yeats. Bachchan’s poetic development resembles in many ways to Yeats, and his later poetry that reveals realism, hardness of style and a freedom from ornamentation of the early poetry is due to Yeats’ influence. In his Cambridge days Bachchan had the opportunity to visit and spent some time with Mrs Yeats discussing the life and the poetry of Yeats and a discernible change came in themes and style in the poems which he wrote while he was at Cambridge.

Bachchan’s later poetry is marked by a strong influence of modern poets like Eliot, Pound, and Yeats. The influence of Yeats particularly, is clearly visible in poems where he uses the common speech of the village folk. In many of his poems Bachchan makes use of folklore and myths in the same way that Yeats did. He is influenced by Yeats’ poetry not only in his style and symbolism but also in the basic themes which deal with man’s struggle with and acceptance of tragedy. Upanishads, Puranas, and Bhagabad Gita are also echoed in his poems which remind one of Yeats’ interests in these texts. Bachchan accepted some of Yeats’ ideas on poetry wholeheartedly, he responded to some of them critically, while some of his own ideas echo those of Yeats. Yeats believed that divine emotions or complex ideas too should be expressed in simple language. His advice to the poets was to think like wise men but express themselves like the common people. He tried to make the language of poetry coincide with that of normal passionate speech. Bachchan also felt that a poet should use simple language even when he expresses mysticism. In ‘Arati Aur Angare’ he says “cast not your shadows on me oh spirits of complex verse, I have made simplicity my life mantra” (55).

Yeats’ poetry is said to have been born out of the creative tension between two opposites. Bachchan too believes in the same, for him poetry is always in search of a balance between these opposites, he says: “my poetic personality has been formed by opposing elements” (Bhatanagar 66). Like Bachchan also wishes to see his poetry reflect aspects of Indian culture and life. He praises Yeats for reflecting his country through his poetry in his poem addressed to Yeats. Yeatsian concept of Unity of Being impressed Bachchan. In his opinion when one attains Unity of Being, only then one can become a great poet.

Bachchan’s response to Yeats is not only an Indian reader’s response but also an Indian poet’s response to Yeats, Yet his response does not reveal blind praises but a creative and critical evaluation. Many times this response resulted into poems. Bachchan considers Yeats the greatest

poet of symbolic expression in modern times and he learnt a great deal from Yeats' symbolic expression and borrowed some of Yeats' symbols. Navalkishore Bhabhda suggests that the impressive use of new and accurate symbols in Bachchan's later poetry is the result of his deep study of Yeats' poetry and vision. The well known Yeatsian symbol of swan finds expression significantly in the poetry of Bachchan. Other common symbols in Yeats and Bachchan are arrow, bird, tree, and ditch. Bachchan says that he borrowed the symbol of the ditch from Yeats' line from 'A Dialogue of the self and soul'. Yeats' concern for aging and awareness of failing strength, yet renewed passion were shared by Bachchan and finds expression in 'Bahut Din Bite', and 'Patjhar Aur Vasat'.

The modernism in Indian Literature written in English is borrowed from the west would be accepted even by the Indian writers themselves. Indian poets were specifically influenced by Yeats, Eliot, and Baudelaire among others. What M.K.Naik has observed that the history of Indian English literature is one of imitation. He writes: "from the imitation of Milton-Shelley-Tennyson the Indian poets later turned to imitation of Yeats-Eliot-Arden in the modern period" (Naik 9-10). These poets showed the possibility of using the urban material with its harsh reality in poetry. Almost every modern Indian poet began by imitating Eliot and Yeats or subtly influenced by them.

To place the influence of Yeats on Indian poets writing in English in the right perspective it would be useful to look at some poets who may not have been directly influenced by Yeats rather underwent similar experiences and created poetry that in some ways seem to echo Yeats' poetic concern. Such poets are Sarojini Naidu and Sri Aurobindo. Naidu (1879-1949), who happens to be a contemporary of Yeats and had possibly come in personal contact with Yeats. While reading at Cambridge and London for three years was influenced by the Rhymer's Club and Visited Yeats regularly as recorded by Jeffares (Jeffers 185). Yeats himself also refers to he in his *Autobiographies* as "Little D-F- of Hydrabad" (485).

Sri Aurobindo, is among the first Indian poets writing in English to respond Yeats warmly and enthusiastically. His response to Yeats and Irish culture is clearly seen in his *The Future Poetry*. Though Sri Aurobindo is not directly influenced by Yeats, yet he shares many things with Yeats. He refers Yeats a number of times in his *The Future Poetry*. Sri Aurobindo's concept of poetry as Mantra that emphasizes the mystic and the spiritual dimension of poetry in some ways come close to Yeats who considers poetry and music "arisen, as it seems, out of the sounds of enchanters....." (*Essays and Introductions* 146). To Sri Aurobindo the rhythm is of primary importance in poetry and to Yeats a poem is "an elaboration of the rhythms of common speech" (*Essays and Introductions* 508). Sri Aurobindo calls Yeats "a supreme artist in rhythm".

Among other modern poets writing in English who share many things in common with Yeats is Sankar Mokashi-Punekar whose poetry was highly influenced by Yeats and written two books dealing with the later phase in the life and poetry of Yeats. However, some of his poems show considerable Yeatsian echoes are titled as 'Eliot and Yeats' and 'The Yeatsian Dark'. Another poem 'Three bad Pups' is subtitled 'A Yeatsian allegory Showing that Psychology is baseborn Mysticism' which reminds Yeats' poem like 'The Three Beggars' and 'The Three Hermits'. Some other titles of poems by Punekar are also similar to some titles of Yeats' poems.

Among the literatures written in Indian languages, perhaps Bengali literature responded to Yeats more strongly than any other literature. This is because of the kinship between Tagore and Yeats and the tremendous influence of Tagore on other Bengali writers. Tagore and Yeats spent a considerable time together and Tagore was impressed by Yeats is beyond doubt as his letters reflect his admiration not only for his mastery of language but also his poetic genius.

Tagore wrote on Yeats on 16th July 1935, “... I shall always remember the generosity of your simple and sensitive youth which exercised in my mind a profound attraction for your genius” (*Letters of W.B.Yeats* 577). Twenty years earlier Tagore had written probably on 31 Aug 1915 about his own writing: “I think you will find in them a better mastery of your language which I owe to your guidance” (*Letters of W.B.Yeats* 315).

When two great poets who admired each other and shared many things in common worked so closely together, they are bound to have influenced each other. Apart from *Gitanjali* which we know the contribution that Yeats made for its publication and giving Tagore a world wide recognition, I would like to refer to some other writings of Tagore after he met Yeats to compare it with his earlier writings to show if there is any Yeatsian influence, be it very invisible even. The Chiseled style of Tagore’s later may owe something to Yeats.

Other noted modernist Bengali poets Budhadeb Bose and Jibanananda Das whose poetry show hardness of modernism were both influenced by Yeats. Both of them were great admirers of Yeats, what Ramesh Chandra Shah says: “It was not a coincidence that Jibanananda Das was a great admirer of Yeats” (65). It is likely that Das might have read Yeats’ criticism of Tagore and that was what gave his poetry a different character suitable for the tougher context of the post independence India. Reminiscent of Yeats’ poetry, the poetry of Das reveals a conflict of opposing forces such as birth and death, love and loveless ness.

Budhadeb Bose as a professor of English was quite familiar with Yeats’ work and was influenced by Yeats not only in his technique but also the theme of his plays. His play *Prayaschita* was based on Yeats’ play *Purgatory* and the play *Ikkaku Senin* was based on the Japanies Noh drama, a form which was earlier used by Yeats. So, it is probable that Bose was attracted to Noh drama through Yeats. The play of Bose exhibits a blending of weakness of the flesh and strength of the spirit, of speech and rhythm and of poetry and drama. This is also found in Yeats who always wanted to bring together body and soul, spirit and matter, the natural and the supernatural.

The poem ‘Devta Dui’ express both the Dionysian and Appolonian aspects of creativity. According to Alokranjan Dasgupta, Bose displays a transparent, uncompromising and a faultless attitude much like Yeats. Dasgupta informs us that in ‘Damayanti’ Bose renews the challenge of youth like Yeats and in ‘Kankavati’ common speech and the folk character of Kankavati are used and it is possible that Bose was inspired to use these devices because of Yeats’ similar use (Dasgupta 12). Bose’s survey of modern Bengali literature *An Acre of Green Grass* borrows its title from the title of one of Yeats’ poems. The book displays the typically Yeatsian characteristics of granting an objective and universal nature to an individual or personal feeling. He also shares Yeatsian opinion that one cannot write musical poetry in a language that is not one’s mother tongue (19).

Thus, from the above discussions and deliberations we can conclude that Indian literature responded to Yeats and was influenced by his works in a number of ways and led to the enrichment of Indian literature.

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