



William Butler Yeats and the Influence of Hindu Religion and Its Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

William Butler Yeats was arguably one of the most celebrated literary figures of the 20th century. Religion was an important part of his life as well as that of his literary pursuits. It is widely known that Yeats's life, philosophies, and views were enormously influenced by Hindu religion, and this continued till the end of his life. Contrary to the opinions expressed by many scholars who have claimed that Yeats's attraction towards Hindu philosophy is occasional, there is credible evidence to prove that Yeats's longing and fascination for Hindu philosophy are persistent and ubiquitous. This paper sets out to chronicle Yeats's journey towards Hinduism and his unflinching loyalty towards Hindu philosophy and its religious texts. The main focus of this paper is to foreground how Hinduism influenced Yeats's purview of life and his literary creations. To achieve that purpose, this paper has quoted extensively from different texts in which Yeats shows his admiration for Hindu religious texts and Hindu philosophy and also from other scholars who have studied his inclination towards Hindu philosophy. This paper also explores the influence of Hindu philosophy in his literary creations by analyzing some of his works.

Keywords: William Butler Yeats, Hinduism, Upanishad, Veda, Tagore, Brahman.

Before anything else, it is important to note whether the subject of this paper has been researched or not or how far the researchers on the subject have reached. To make a claim that this is the first study of the kind would be like misguiding the readers, but undoubtedly the present study contributes to the existing knowledge system by adding some fresh insights to the subject. Many of the scholars have studied this subject, but from different spatial and temporal landscapes than this study covers.

One could argue that Yeats cultivated his interest in Oriental philosophy gradually and methodically. It is not like he was interested only in literary subjects, and all of a sudden he got intrigued by the Hindu religion and its philosophy. His inclinations towards much-discussed subjects in Hindu religion and its philosophy had already fortified before he got introduced to the philosophy of Hindu religion. Religion, mysticism, spirituality, the occult, etc., are matters of great importance to Indian philosophy, and it is interesting to see how far Yeats was drawn towards these subjects.

Religion in Yeats's Poetry

Balinisteanu has argued that "Yeats's creative process is a form of religious experience that engenders faith, belief, and enthusiasm which in turn drive the labour of reconstruction of one's self as aesthetic self" (16). One can say it with conviction that religion was an integral part of Yeats's poetry. He claims to be "very religious" (*Autobiographies*, 91-92). Yeats's father, John, was a sceptic, which prompted him to look the other way. Yeats reveals, "My father's unbelief had set me thinking about the evidences of religion and I weighed the matter perpetually with great anxiety, for I did not think I could live without religion" (*Autobiographies*, 40). Balinisteanu's claims assist in interpreting the extent of influence religion wields on Yeats. He notes, "For W. B. Yeats, the transfiguration of the mundane into the sacred in one's vision can be achieved not only through participating in religious ritual, but also through poetry and other forms of art" (29). For Yeats, his "work is not drama but the ritual of a lost faith" (Clark and Clark, p. 899). Yeats contends that he sees his literary labour through religious experience: "I conceive of the play as a ritual. It must not give all to the first hearing any more than the Latin ritual of the Church does, so long as the ultimate goal is the people" (Clark and Clark, p. 869). Writing about *The Shadowy Waters*, Yeats says, "The whole picture as it were moves together—sky and sea and cloud are as it were actors. It is almost religious, it is more a ritual than a human story" (Clark and Clark, p.

865). Yeats imagines the actors of his plays performing the rituals, as one does in the case of religious pilgrimage or part of some religious event. It seems as if his literary mind revolves around religion to find inspiration for his literary creations. To understand the importance of religion in Yeats's creative productions, one shall not ignore Balinisteanu's observations, which are fairly valuable:

For Yeats, the aesthetic use of myth in the creation of art texts enables access to a sacred realm wherein profane reality is transfigured aesthetically. The aesthetic use of myth and subsequent aesthetic transfiguration of the mundane relies on the experiences of love and passion, and in turn sets out love and instils passion, providing through these an impetus to creative labour and social action. (30)

From the acknowledgements of Yeats and observations of other scholars on Yeats's works, it is not that difficult to deduce that religion played a significant role in the making of Yeats's literary career. Therefore, one is inclined to infer that to see Yeats's works disregarding the influence of religion on them is to look at a skeleton of a body from which the soul is missing.

Mysticism and Occultism in Yeats's Poetry

Clanton, in her thesis, observes that Yeats started developing his lifelong connection to Irish peasant and pagan tradition that catered to his spiritual yearning and further led to his pursuits into the occult (18). She further claims, "Yeats explored his occult interests through a brief period in Madame Helena Blavatsky's Theosophical Society. He later met one of the founders of the Golden Dawn, MacGregor Mathers, and was initiated into this magical order in 1890" (18).

The religious or spiritual systems around Yeats could never satisfy him, for Yeats says, "An obsession more constant than anything but my love itself was the need of mystical rites—a ritual system of evocation and meditation—to reunite the perception of the spirit, of the divine, with natural beauty" (*Memoirs*, 123). Yeats was slowly but surely inching towards Oriental philosophy when he was looking for answers to the questions related to mystic rites, meditation, spirit, and the divine. The religious texts of Hinduism see the union of *Atma* with *Paramata* as the process to find solutions to the riddles of the world. The solutions that Western philosophy could not provide to Yeats. Eastern philosophy fills the gap where Western philosophy lacks. Yeats maintains, "Western civilization, religion and magic insist on power and therefore on body, and hence these three doctrines—efficient rule—the Incarnation—thaumaturgy. Eastern thoughts answer to these with indifference to rule, scorn of the flesh, contemplation of the formless" (*Autobiographies*, 299). Balinisteanu views, "Yeats's interest in the occult, which eventually led to the creation of a syncretic personal myth, and his interest in poetic states of mind as revelatory experiences long predate the creation of *The Hour-Glass*" (40). In a letter to John O'Leary on 23 July 1892, Yeats wrote:

The mystical life is the centre of all that I do & all that I think & all that I write. It holds to my work the same relation that the philosophy of Godwin held to the work of Shelley & I have always considered myself a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance – the revolt of the soul against the intellect – now beginning in the world. (Yeats in Allan Wade, 1986, 211)

Yeats's firm belief in the supremacy of soul over intellect can be regarded as his faith in the supremacy of Oriental philosophy over Occidental, as the Occident stands for intellect and reason, whereas the Orient is known for emotion and intuition. It is often said that the East is the place for meditation, spirituality, and the supernatural. Many of the Western scholars have seen India as a place of mysticism, otherworldliness, and the unknown.

Harper considers that the time Yeats spent in religious experiments and experiences cements the idea that Yeats took them seriously (10). He further claims, "Although many students and scholars will deplore the time he spent, wishing that it might have been devoted to poetry or drama or criticism, it ought to be recognized that Yeats's life and creative art would have been greatly different, and most certainly poorer, without the occult religious experiences" (10). The problem of such scholars who deplored the fact that Yeats spent a lot of time in religious experiments is that they are oblivious of the fact that scholars of great repute have concurred on the idea that the highest kind of poetry can only be achieved by looking inwards. Such religious experiments and their experiences allowed Yeats to look inwards, therefore expanding his literary insights. Fennelly, in his essay "W. B. Yeats and S. L. MacGregor Mathers," observes:

When the young W. B. Yeats joined several mystical orders in the 1880s and 1890s, it is doubtful if many eyebrows were raised. Yeats's initial involvement with the occult was dictated by both the spirit of the age and his own temperament. Many persons of all classes were swept up by the occult revival that occurred during the last years of the nineteenth century; this was part of the inevitable reaction against the rationalism and materialism of the Victorian culture. But, while occultism was for most a passing fad, Yeats's interest did not wane; he was involved with the occult for most of his life". (*Yeats and the Occult*, 285)

Fennelly's observations prove the fact that Yeats's interest in the occult was not temporary, but it was something that stayed with him forever. Yeats's love for religious imagery and symbols in the poetry of other poets also describes his devotion towards his interest. Clanton affirms that Yeats was charmed by the religious feeling and imagery in Shelley's poetry (28). Yeats, in his 1900 essay "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," wrote, "I have read Prometheus Unbound, which I had hoped my fellow-students would have studied as a sacred book, and it seems to me to have an even more certain place than I had thought among the sacred books

of the world" (*Essays and Introductions*, 65). The divided-self of Yeats found resort in mysticism, the occult and oriental philosophy, which he extensively used in his poetry. The tenets of Continental philosophy allows the poets to look outwards to find subjects for poetry, but Yeats went away from the prescribed approach to make his own way with the help of Oriental, mainly Hindu, philosophy. Dabić's observations confirm this assertion:

It seems that the occult and Oriental material upon which Yeats drew while writing and the disciplines of which he was the practitioner had multiple meanings for him. On a personal level, they gave him a unifying image of how to mend the rupture between his secret insecure self and the worldly confident self or public persona. He learned to hide his timid, sensitive nature and conceal a dreamer behind the pose of a man of action" (25).

Encounter with Mohini Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, and Purohit Swami

William Butler Yeats got married to Georgie Hyde-Lees in 1917, after which a new creative period began in which Yeats experimented with automatic writing. The couple believed that their writing sessions were guided by forces from the spirit world, through which Yeats formulated intricate theories of human nature and history.¹ This must be probably one of the first confessions of Yeats of his encounters with the other world. Yeats was discontented with western materialism as well as its scientific outlook. There were plenty of questions related to life that had puzzled Yeats's unsatiated mind (Dabić, 23), for the answers to which he turned towards Oriental philosophy. His friend George Russel was well-versed in the oriental mystical literature (Dabić, 22). George Moore is of the opinion that much of George Russel's writings bears the stamp of Chatterji's speeches: "... his [A. E.'s] life did not take its definite direction until an Indian missionary arrived in Dublin. . . . A. E. had gone to him instinctively as to a destiny; and a few months later the Upanishads and the Vedas were born again in verse and in prose" (30). Russel can be termed as one of the first influences, who was considerably instrumental in shaping Yeats's metaphysical leanings and introduced him to several texts from the Eastern world, after which Yeats's interest in Hinduism grew and he invited Mohini Chatterji, a Bengali Brahmin, to Dublin in 1885 or 1886 to lecture on Indian theosophy (Jain, 82). Yeats was massively impressed by Chatterji's views and explanations (Jain, 82). Jain maintains that "the influence of Chatterji on the young mystics of Dublin was of the profoundest (83). Approximately 15 years after meeting Chatterji, Yeats confessed that Mohini Chatterji had 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." ("The Ways of Wisdom," 40)

It would be unreasonable to say that Rabindranath Tagore influenced Yeats's vision or his interest in Hinduism, as Yeats was already drenched in Hindu philosophy before he met Tagore. This is an undeniable fact that Yeats was in awe of Tagore's poetry, at least in the beginning, but to claim that Tagore introduced Yeats to Indian philosophy would be an unsustainable conjecture. It can indisputably be claimed that Tagore had a huge influence on Yeats's approach to literature and life. When he first got to read Tagore's poetry, he concluded, "If someone were to say he could improve this piece of writing, that person did not understand literature" (Dutta and Robinson, 90). It is interesting to know that the admiration was mutual, as Tagore too seems to have benefitted from his meeting with Yeats in many ways, and he acknowledges the same. Malcolm Sen notes, "On his third visit to Britain, in 1912, Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore met with a variety of literary figures, such as Ezra Pound and Thomas Sturge Moore. None would prove as beneficial as his meeting with W.B. Yeats on 7 July 1912." Roy Foster asserts that even though Yeats never visited India, it can be noted that right from the beginning, he was captivated by Hindu philosophy. His admiration for India and his support towards the works of Tagore are significantly acknowledged. Yeats's interest in India gets a fillip after reading Rabindranath Tagore's works, as nothing has captivated Yeats for several years the way Tagore's works did. He claims:

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. (*Gitanjali*, vii)

Yeats's interest in India was so much so that he wanted to keep track of everything happening in India. He sees Tagore's poetry as the new beginning in India. He acknowledges:

For all I know, so abundant and simple is this poetry, the new Renaissance has been born in your country and I shall never know of it except by hearsay. (*Gitanjali*, viii)

It is fairly evident that Yeats had great admiration for Tagore's poetry, at least in the earlier phase of his life, but to claim that Tagore solely influenced Yeats' philosophical proclivities would be to undermine Mohini Chatterji's as well as Purohit Swami's role in Yeats's philosophical inclinations. After meeting Purohit Swami, Yeats once wrote, "It was my first meeting with a philosophy that confirmed my vague speculations and seemed at once logical and boundless. Consciousness, he taught, does not merely spread out its surface but has, in vision and in contemplation, another motion and can change in height and in depth" (*Autobiographies*, 91-92).

¹ Much of the information on Yeats's life has been taken from <https://www.biography.com/writer/william-butler-yeats>.

Yeats's long association with Purohit Swami, which continued till the end of his life, could perhaps be credited as one of the most robust collaborations that brought him closer to different Hindu religious texts that ultimately provided solace to his unquenched thirst for Oriental knowledge. Roslyn Mackay, in her thesis, credits Yeats's prolific last years to his meeting with Purohit Swami and their work together. She opines that this relationship that operated at many levels was deeply intellectual, literary, and mutually beneficial (33). *An Indian Monk*, which is an autobiography of Purohit Swami, was actually written in response to the demands made by W. B. Yeats. Yeats wanted a "concrete life, not an abstract philosophy" from Purohit Swami (*An Indian Monk*, vii).

Yeats and the Upanishads

Yeats considers *the Upanishads* as books that are replete with knowledge. He professes, "Upanishad is doctrine or wisdom (literally 'At the feet of', meaning thereby 'At the feet of some Master'), the doctrine or wisdom of the Vedas" (*The Ten Principal Upanishads*, 11). Mackay elaborates on how the Upanishads are seen as a summation of knowledge of the Vedas. She explains:

The Upanishads are distillations of the Weda (the origin of the English word 'wit'), philosophic texts believed to have been passed down through the oral tradition of Aryan tribes from an unknown time, which deal with metaphysical knowledge and practices. This knowledge covers concepts such as the three realms of existence (the physical, subtle and causal). However, what in Vedic terms is commonly seen as knowledge in the West is limited to what is offered in the physical realm. There are also four states of consciousness central to the system and to the process of understanding that some point of observation exists apart from what is observed. The Self, as Yeats and Purohit Swami translate this point of unity, transforms all multiplicity and diversity to one. Advaita or non-duality describes the state where the Self and the soul are one. The idea was in the zeitgeist. T.S. Eliot, a Sanskrit scholar, imagined this unity as 'the still point of the turning world', a well-known phrase from his 1935 poem "Burnt Norton" where the same principle is explicated. (10)

Mackay notes that Yeats's association with Purohit Swami began in 1931, and it spurred his re-engagement with the Upanishad doctrine. Purohit Swami's direction in the system of thought, as well as the intensive years of work on the translation, fueled Yeats's creative imagination and shaped the conceptual parameters of his works. The Upanishads establish the notions of immanence and concurrence between the natural and supernatural worlds. They provide a practical guide to the concentration process required for experiencing immanence. Acceptance of the system afforded Yeats a much-needed reprieve from the burden of antinomy and conflict that had previously been central to his creative productions (3). She goes on to mention that "William Butler Yeats's long relationship with the Upanishads reached a greater intimacy in the last years of his life when he collaborated with the Indian monk Shree Purohit Swami in translating ten Upanishads. The ten they chose to translate are most commonly translated from Sanskrit for the European reader" (7). Mackay's thesis has tried to establish that the Upanishads are a defining force in Yeats's late works, for Yeats is attempting to practise the teaching and record the results (14). This idea is cemented when we read the last letter published in *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, edited by Allan Wade (1986), written in France on January 4th, 1939. Yeats confidently articulated his belief in experience:

I will begin to write my most fundamental thoughts and the arrangement of thought which I am convinced will complete my studies. I am happy, and I think full of an energy I had despaired of. It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I try to put all into a phrase I say, 'Man can embody the truth but he cannot know it.' I must embody it in the completion of my life. The abstract is not life and everywhere draws out its contradictions. You can refute Hegel but not the Saint or the Song of Sixpence'. (922)

For Yeats, Upanishads is not only an overwhelming reservoir of knowledge but also a model from which he inherited a great deal in his symbolic arsenal. Malcolm Sen affirms the same notion when he remarks, "Rather than the amorphous language of mysticism, Yeats was intrigued by the artistic and imaginative quality of the Upanishads. No matter how hurriedly and scantily learnt, Indian philosophy figured in Yeats's symbolic vocabulary throughout his life".

Influence of Hinduism and Indian Philosophy on Yeats

Shamsul Islam in his thesis asserts, "It may be noted that Hinduism and Buddhism form the main sub-divisions of Indian philosophy, and that Islam is more or less a part of Western tradition rejected by Yeats. Yeats's thought . . . was chiefly moulded by Hinduism and Buddhism" (1). His thesis enumerates the features of Indian philosophy and literature that influenced Yeats in particular:

1. The concept of *Atman*. *Atman* (transcendental self or soul) is considered to be one with Brahman (the Absolute Reality), and thus the finite and the infinite form a Unity of Being.
2. Doctrine of Maya. Although the finite and the infinite are one, yet we, in this earthly condition, cannot see through it because of *maya* (illusion). However, the world of duality is not the ultimate character of reality.
3. *Samsara* (Transmigration of souls). Since *maya* (physical existence, illusion) registers the imperfections of the material world, one has to go through *samsara* (continual incarnation)

until one gets *mukti* or *moksha* (release from the cycle of birth and death), and finds *ananda* (bliss) in nirvana (salvation).

4. Unity of Being. It is a corollary of the above-mentioned doctrines of *Atman* and *samsara*.

5. Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies. Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies conceive of a never-ending universe in a continual process of rise and fall. (Islam, 1-2)

Many scholars have argued that Yeats's first contact with Hinduism or Indian philosophy was when he met Mohini Chatterjee in Dublin in 1885 or 1886. This conjecture seems inconsistent, as Yeats had already been introduced to Hinduism and Indian philosophy when he got to read Max Müller's translation of some Hindu religious texts. But his interest in Hindu philosophy is bolstered after meeting Chatterjee which can be asserted by the fact that not long after meeting Chatterji went on to write four poems with Indian themes: "The Indian Upon God" (1886) (*Collected Poems*, 13-14), "The Indian to His Love" (1886) (*Collected Poems*, 14); "Anashuya and Vijaya" (1887) (*Collected Poems*, 10), and "Kanva on Himself" (1888) (*Variorum Edition*, 723-24). "Kanva on Himself" does not find a place in the *Collected Poems*. The poem informs about Mohini Chatterji's response to one of the students asking him if they should pray, a poem of which Yeats said in "The Pathway," "Beautiful words, that I spoilt once by turning them into clumsy verse" (Pathway, 193). He later revised and improved the poem in his post-1900 style, calling it "Mohini Chatterjee" (1928). Pabitra Kumar Rana, in his essay, "Yeats's Connection with India: A Re-evaluation from Postcolonial Perspective," concludes:

It is true that Mohini Chatterjee's lectures on *The Bhagwat Geeta* and Vedantism of Samkara influenced him so deeply in his early youth that he tried to find solutions of the metaphysical questions of life through the ancient Indian Philosophy as is demonstrated in the poems like "The Song of the Happy Shepherd", "Kanva on himself", "Ephemera", "Mogan Thinks of His Past Greatness" etc. Yeats learnt from Chatterjee the multi-dimensionality of human personality and realized that "Men dance on deathless feet" as he says in the poem "Mohini Chatterjee." (22)

Many years later, after his association with Mohini Chatterjee, Yeats helped Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, whom he greatly admired, revise his translations of the *Gitanjali*, "Song Offerings" directed to God, and wrote an introduction to the little book (1915). He later produced Tagore's *Post Office* at the Abbey Theatre (Hone, 263). Dabić notes, "The earliest references to the India of exotic places and "strange" philosophy occur between 1885 and 1886, in the first poem from the collection of "Crossways", *The Song of the Happy Shepherd* (written in October 1885), and in two dramatic poems, *The Seeker* (September 1885) and *Mosada* (June 1886), all three previously published in *The Dublin University Review* (30). Dabić holds that Yeats's early connection with Oriental thought was primarily in search of ultimate reality:

His early preoccupation with Eastern thought was part of a more complex religious and artistic search for a system of values, ideas, and beliefs. On the one hand, it was an inevitable element of his individuation process and maturing as a young man, poetically bent and curious; on the other, it satisfied his epistemological and metaphysical needs to delve into the nature of knowledge and ultimate reality." (20)

Yeats wrote "Meru" after reading Shri Purohit Swami's *The Holy Mountain*, a work to which he also wrote an introduction. In that introduction, Yeats tells about the spiritual journey of Shri Purohit Swami and Bhagwan Shri Hamsa, the Swami's master. Both renounced the comforts of the material world to explore the real meaning of existence and to unify with the Absolute. To achieve this purpose, they went to meditate on Meru mountain after crossing icy and snowy mountains. Bhagwan Shri Hamsa attained this insight on Mount Meru, commenting, "What a great bliss it was! I cannot describe that joy, as it is beyond any description through words ...--all merged into the Absolute Brahma! I found myself reflected everywhere in the whole Universe!" (Yeats, "Mandukya Upanishad," 479-481). Yeats's "Meru" resonates the same idea and takes us on a similar spiritual journey to reality, a journey that fails to culminate in the joy experienced by Hamsa. Janet Zimmerman Marsh has tried to establish that Yeats's increased interest in and his admiration of Hindu philosophy and the manner in which "Meru" is written, one could gather that Yeats accepted the teachings of the Upanishads, including their portrayal of reality. To show the influence of Hindu philosophy on Yeats, Bachchan has insisted that Yeats was "saturated with Samkara's philosophy" (Bachchan, p. 24).

Conclusion:

With the above discussion, one can infer that there is ample evidence to substantiate the claim that Yeats was heavily invested in Hinduism and Indian philosophy. Just two years before his death, Yeats said, "I have fed upon the philosophy of the Upanishads all my life" (Hone, 459). This statement bears testimony to the fact that Hinduism guided Yeats's life all along and the influence of Hinduism or Indian philosophy was not intermittent, as some scholars have tried to establish. This conclusion seems fairly convincing, as his devotion towards Hinduism and Indian philosophy finds constant expression throughout his body of literary works. It can be said with conviction that Yeats was in search of ultimate reality and absolute truth, which he got through his study of Hindu religious texts and Indian philosophy. There is enough scope for working further on this topic to strengthen the idea proposed through this paper.

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