A Study of Indian Philosophical Thoughts in W.B. Yeats’ Poetry

Mamta
Research Scholar,
Research Centre, GCG-11, Chandigarh, India

W.B. Yeats’, came to believe in the efficacy of yogic, samadhi to enable the self, to transcend the world of its body mind combination, and attain to self-realization by means of mystical imagination. In his poem, 'The Tower', the yogic samadhi has been symbolized by the words, the tower. The fifth abiding element in Yeats’ poetic philosophy is the concept of the self, as explained in the Upanishads and Patanjali's Yoga-Sutra. His poetic faith also embraces the doctrine of Moksha, as outlined by Upanishads, attainable through yogicsamadhi.

Yeats’ poetic career coincided with that disintegration of faith towards the close of the 19th century which had such a profound influence both on the technique and subject matter of literature. Yeats was skeptical about religion as well as about Victorian science, which he hated with a monkish hatred. He was convinced of the reality of the fairies of the Irish folk-lore and regarded them as an essential link in the chain of being. But he searched for a pattern, for a 'system' which could impart coherence and unity to his beliefs. According to David Daiches, “The problem of Yeats was not that of finding what he ought to say…. His problem was that of finding order and proportion to his insights.”

His was a search for a system rather than a search for a set of beliefs: he sought a mode of expression rather than a set of dogmas to express. It was this search for a pattern that led him to the study of magic occultism, Indian Theology, etc., till he was able to formulate a system of his own. This system or philosophical thought represented with epic imagination in his prose work, the vision and his poems, 'The Tower', 'Sailing to Byzantium', 'Vacillation', 'Byzantium', 'The Statues', and many more.

The doctrine of self and anti-self which had been in his mind ever since 1907, developed logically in 'The Vision'. Within each individual there is a clash of personalities, each is torn by a number of opposite pulls within him. Yeats stresses, “If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are, and try to assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves, though we may accept one from other.” While torn with conflict within, despite frustration and disappointments, one must still wear a smiling face and do his duty.

In one of his letters, Yeats tells us about his three main interests: literature, a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality; his constant effort was to “hammer the three into unity.” It was this search for unity that explains his interests in Hindu Philosophy. In his famous poem, 'The Second coming', Yeats writes:

“Tuming and Tuming in the widening gyre,
the falcon cannot hear the falconer;
things fall apart, the center cannot hold.
mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

Yeats regrets that the man has become absolutely free from the restraints of morality, religion and discipline.

Yeats was initiated into Hindu Vedantic philosophy by a young brahmin Mohini Chatterji whom he and Russell had invited to teach them the Vedantic philosophy of the East. He received from him a clearer understanding of what he already believed by instinct. Stock sums up Yeats’ belief as: “There is a mind or spirit beyond the visible, and its external forms are the phenomenal world. In the same way a man's body is the form of his mind, which in turn is a form of the divine mind, as also are rocks and trees and water.” Accordingly, there is a universal fluid mind” and gods, faeries, demons, stone, water, and other objects of nature, are the different aspects of its thought.

W.B. Yeats was a great scholar of the Upnishads and Patanjali's “Yoga-Sutra”. In 1913, he went to see the English version of Tagore's Gitanjali, and got it published with his own introduction to it. In the last phase of his poetry Yeats advocates that true poetry must be rooted both in the life of the past and the present. A poet must be a visionary and he must remain true to his vision. Poetry, according to him, “is the commonsense of the soul: it distinguishes greatness from triviality, mere fancifulness from beauty that lights up the deeps of thought.”

In his anthologies The Tower (1928) and The Winding Stair (1933) Yeats has presented the doctrines of the Vedanta and Raja-Yoga. “The Tower” symbolizes the yogic samadhi in which the self transcends, the bounds of the body-mind.
combination and shines in its own eternal effulgence. “The winding stair” is a symbol of the eight-step stair of Raja-Yoga. These eight steps lead a yogi to attain to the Samadhi. These eight steps are Yama, Nigama, Asana, Prana Yama, Pratyahara, Dharona, Dhayana and Samadhi.

In his poem, 'Sailing to Byzantium,' Yeats writes about an ideal city, “it is the world of intellect and spirit as distinct from the world of the senses.” Byzantium is a symbol of the city of the soul. A human body, according to the Upanishads is made of three things. The first thing is his mortal body, which is born and dies, also called as “Isthool Sharira” (gross body) because it consists of gross matter. The second thing is what the Upanishads call “Sukshma Sharira” (Subtle body). It is of the size of a thumb and consists of the finest possible matter. It stays in the human heart. The third thing is the “Atman”, also called as the self. In the Upanishad, the subtle body has been described as a ‘golden city’ by virtue of the golden rays of Atman the sun. Having taken this clue, Yeats describes the subtle body of the soul as ‘Byzantium’. For Byzantium was an old city of golden buildings, gold ornaments, gold mosaics, etc.

The human form of perfect trinity is a ladder that can enable the self to attain to Moksha-liberation from the rounds of births and deaths. But, if a man's self chooses the path of pleasures, the ladder is gone in one poem, Yeats' self-laments as follows:

“Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladder start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.”
- The circus Animals' Desertion.

The self of man is forced to choose either the path of Moksha or that of sensual life. And if it chooses the second path, it must reject a heavenly abode through Moksha.

Evidently, the first abiding element in Yeats’ poetic philosophy is the belief in the immortality and transmigration of the soul. This belief is strengthened by his association with Indian theosophists in 1980s and 90s. The second abiding element in his belief is the existence of spirits, ghosts, fairies, etc. This belief drew its confirmation from the belief in the immortality and transmigration of the soul. The third abiding element in his philosophy is the belief in theosophical perception. Yeats drew this belief from the creed of St. Patrick, who assured his disciples that they could still have visions of Christ and Angels.

The fourth abiding element in Yeats' philosophy is a firm belief in the immense power of mystical imagination which was confirmed by Blake’s theory of imagination.

In his poem, 'Leda and Swan', “Leda” stands for what is called in the Upanishads “Maya”, that is, Nature as represented by the combination of the gross body and the subtle body. And the “Swan” represents the self. For it is the swan that lives and swims in the mind's lake. In the same poem later, the sorrowful self is represented as “Agamemnon dead” [cold and cheerless] with the shock of its dying human body.

Yeats, further, came to believe in the efficacy of yogic, samadhi to enable the self, to transcend the world of its body mind combination, and attain to self-realization by means of mystical imagination. In his poem, 'The Tower', the yogic samadhi has been symbolized by the words, the tower. The fifth abiding element in Yeats’ poetic philosophy is the concept of the self, as explained in the Upanishads and Patanjali's Yoga-Sutra. His poetic faith also embraces the doctrine of Moksha, as outlined by Upanishads, attainable through yogic samadhi.

Yeats also has a vague belief in the twenty-eight phases of the human soul, and also in the doctrine of history as a cyclic repetition of the phases of the great wheel. His great poetry is not simple. His poetic thought stands behind a complex system of private symbolism admits of Vedantic interpretation. The Upanishadic philosophy impressed him the most. Austin Warren rightly admits that Yeats’ “old companion is theosophy.”

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