Yeats' Poetry through the Lens of Post-Colonial Theory

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William Butler Yeats (1865 – 1939) is one amongst the eponymous figures of the twentieth-century English literature. An Irish poet and dramatist, his contribution to the history of English literature is particularly remarkable. Yeats’ works have been described as “inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of whole nation”. Interestingly, he became the first Irish to have been honoured with the Nobel Prize in the field of literature. Most of the earlier volumes of Yeats’ verse are definitively lyrical; it is only post-1900 that his poetry evolves into being realistic and corporeal, although, he remained enamoured with certain concepts of Eastern mysticism. Eventually, Yeats adopted a rather unique voice, evocative of the radically nationalistic and reactionary conservative ideologies. This paper attempts to cast a focus upon W. B. Yeats’ poetical works (emphasis on some of his most enigmatic poems) through the lens of Post-Colonial Theory. His Irish origin, his preoccupations with transcendental beliefs and his bold and rather developed nationalistic voice can be scrutinized in this context, in order to establish yet another interpretation of the maestro’s compositions. Works of Norman Jeffares, John Unterecker, Edward W. Said amongst others amongst others have been cited and various essays, published reports and articles have been consulted in this paper.

The art of poetry is a continual movement. It follows – and in a very real sense leads – the movement of life, of which it is an expression and interpretation. Its successive incarnations give place to one another and thus serve in the grand process of creating history of humankind. William Butler Yeats had begun with the similar scheme of interpreting life but eventually chose to ‘wither into truth’ and through ‘the art of poetry’ aspired to liberate and unite his countrymen and the spirit of their nation, Ireland – thereby weaving a chronicle universally relevant – of people and their native soil. ‘There should,’ he wrote, ‘be a pride in that national heritage that should lead to a new flowering of art and national life.’ Thus, to view Yeats’ nationalistic project is to realise that it is rather implausible ‘to know the dancer from the dance’ as nation from history, or people from national heritage, or life from the creation of art.

The academic debate on Ireland’s contested colonial history, and its difficult literary historical, and theoretical legacies (especially from the Eurocentric point of view), as discussed by Said in his seminal essay, Yeats and Decolonization, elucidates the significance of the postcolonial perspective in order to analyse the evolution of the contemporary Irish culture and Yeats – the poet and the Irish national poet. Yeats began his literary career in the year 1885; the Irish had subsisted almost seven centuries under the repressive aegis of the Great Britain by then. Yet as he matured, as a poet and a writer, his art could inspire and initiate the yearning for radical revival and renewal of the pre-colonial Irishness. Although Yeats was severely marginalized for being a Protestant
Irishman, as a Protestant he belonged to the superior class in a vastly Catholic Ireland, and being Irish in England he was merely the inferior ‘other’. It is the twofold sense of ‘otherness’ that influenced his work, his art and his desire to resuscitate the lost glory of the Irish. Consequently, he revived the ancient Celtic myths, legends and folklore, creating an alternative axiom for expression, which was essentially the invention of both the corporeal and metaphysical. This novel expression, cultivated in the fecund hybrid space of language (English) and ethnicity (Irish) between the two cultures, became the catalyst to the process of decolonisation of the subjugated subliminal self of the natives. As Said puts it:

One of the first tasks of the culture of resistance was to reclaim, rename, and reinhabit the land… The search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes and (occasionally) heroines, myths, and religions—these too are made possible by a sense of the land reappropriated by its people. And along with these nationalistic adumbrations of the decolonized identity, there always goes an almost magically inspired, quasi-alchemical redevelopment of the native language. [Said p.273]

Yeats professed that legends held essential morals for Ireland of the early twentieth-century. He believed that imagination had not an incongruous history during the past centuries. Instead, it had been laid in a ‘great tomb of criticism’ with ‘inextinguishable magical lamps of wisdom and romance’ placed over it. He was optimistic in his endeavour and expectation that a new epoch in the history of literature would emerge: ‘I cannot get it out of my mind that this age of criticism is about to pass, and an age of imagination, of emotion, of moods, of revelation about to come in place; for certainly belief in supersensual world is at hand again… for Art is a revelation, not a criticism.’ This strain of yearning for a new literature can be further traced in Yeats’ ‘Introduction’ (1912) to the English translation of Rabindranath Tagore’s Gitanjali as he enquired about Tagore, Indian writings and sensibilities:

I notice in these men’s thought a sense of visible beauty as though they held that doctrine of Nietzsche that we must not believe in moral or intellectual beauty which does not sooner or later impress upon physical things… I said, “In your country [India] is there much propagandist writing, much criticism? We have to do so much, especially in my own country, that our minds gradually cease to be creative, and yet we cannot help it. If our life was not a continual warfare… we would not know what is good, we would not find hearers and readers… he replied, “we too have our propagandist writing. In the village they recite long mythological poems adapted from the Sanskrit in the Middle Ages…”

Interestingly, in Culture and Imperialism Said sums together the works of towering figures of nationalistic ranks – writers like Yeats, Tagore amongst others, as the torchbearer of the coercive nationalism emancipating the spirit of resistance against imperialism. Although, he does differentiate between the intricate strands of colonial relations between England-Ireland and England-India, he provides an indicative assessment of the intrinsic erosion of native culture under the grand scheme of the
oppressive Eurocentric cultural process – the transformation of the colonial space in a manner that it was to no longer appear foreign to the imperial eye. Hence, the **Englishness** of the Irish was fabricated. Said further writes, ‘For Yeats the overlapping he knew existed of his Irish… and the English cultural heritage… was bound to cause tension, and… it was the pressure of this urgently political and secular tension that caused him to try to resolve it on a ‘higher’, that is, non-political level…’ Yeats’ poetical language of symbolism was thus born. Yeats’ evolved his language as he matured but his prolific individualistic style can be traced early in his career. In *The Stolen Child* (1886): ‘Come away, O human child! / To the waters and the wild/ With a faery hand in hand/ For the world’s more full of weeping than you can understand’, the tone is that of a longing for a better present, apparently utopic, but the suggestion, if thought in the ‘marrowbone’, would reveal the excruciating pain emanating from the inexorable struggle for the establishment of the Irish identity. The child and childhood in Yeats’ works has an emblematic significance indicative of the pure and unadulterated self, of the quintessence of a national identity under the persistent threat of modification and influence. The child is also the symbol of an effervescent past of hope and the seemingly imperishable and blissful ignorance. In *To a Child Dancing in the Wind* (1912) Yeats writes: ‘Dance upon the shore; / What need have you to care/ For wind or water’s roar?…/ What need have you to dread/ the monstrous crying wind?’. The ‘monstrous crying wind’ can be read as the oppressive colonial element that ruins the skein of the rather blithe essence of (the native) cultural advancement. The companion poem *Two Years Later* (1912-13) delineates the gruesome melancholy of being affected by the ‘monstrous crying wind’ and experience: ‘I could have warned you; but you are young, / So we speak a different tongue…/ But I am old and you are young,/ And I speak a barbarous tongue.’ Alternatively, the old barbaric ‘tongue’ can be read as indicative of the aggressive colonial pursuit of the rather oblivious other. The idyllic state of ignorant self of the native is often highlighted in Yeatsian projection of the pre-conditions of colonial conquests, but often the tone is quixotically optimistic. A halo of pristine beauty and bounteousness surrounds his skilful imagery; yet he posits the aching knowledge of the lost innocence at the nucleus of his magnificent renditions. For instance, in *The Dawn* (1916) he writes: ‘I would be ignorant as the dawn/ That has looked down/ On that old queen measuring a town/ With the pin of a brooch…/ I would be – for no knowledge is worth a straw – / Ignorant and wanton as the dawn.’ Moreover, the poem presumably provides a prophetic commentary upon the two-state solution created by the Fourth Government of Ireland Act of 1920 that separated the Irish island into what the British Empire termed ‘Northern Ireland’ and ‘Southern Ireland’.

The strain of separation can be alternatively interpreted as the agonizing pain insinuating the birth of a nation – the Ireland(s), as Yeats retells the mythic tale *Leda and The Swan* (1923): ‘A sudden blow: the great wings beating still/ Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed…/ A shudder in the loins engenders there/ A broken wall, the burning roof and tower…/ Did she put on his knowledge with his power/ Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?’. The image is of overwhelming brutality akin to the act of Imperialism which Said deduces as ‘an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by loss of locality to the
outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored’. The ‘movement’ Yeats prescribed in his explanation\(^{10}\) can be drawn parallel to this need for restoration of native identity against the tyranny of the ‘indifferent beak’ (of the Imperialist occupation). Corresponding to this view, the phrase ‘engender there’ opens yet another argument, that of the emergence of the new native language – the aftermath of the colonial intercourse. Thus, Yeats and his Irish contemporaries were the progeny of a similar colonial transaction. It is important to note here, that one of the basic claims implied by the use of ‘post-colonial’ in relation to literature is a two-point manifesto: it carries with it the intention to promote, even celebrate ‘new literatures’ which have emerged from the subjective colonial association, and also asserts the need to analyse and resist continuing colonial attitudes. The concept of ‘new literature’ therefore, offers a vital resolution to the litigious ‘post-colonial’ status of contemporary Irish literature.

Nevertheless, Yeats’ creative maturity and change of style (from his early mellow Pre-Raphaelite delicacy) had not been collectively recognised until the publication of the volume *The Tower* in 1928. Yeats ‘a sixty-year old smiling public man’ (senatorship of the Irish Free State, Nobel Prize for poetry) reflects upon his life (marriage, family) and the ‘modern way’ (literature, politics, philosophy, ethnicity). This was also the trepidation (earlier implied in September 1913: ‘You have dried marrow from the bone? / For men were born to pray and save/ Romantic Ireland is dead and gone/ It’s with O’Leary in the grave’), further roused by the Civil War (1922–23), which finally ushered the dawn of an age of ruin and decay. *The Tower* is a memoir of the sense of loss (youth, love, national identity) wherein symbol of the tower is representative of the evanescent glory of past (family, home, nation), while the idealised Byzantium (as Rose) is set against the banal realities of an emergent decrepit society. Thus, Unterecker comments, ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ is an effort to justify the isolation he has accepted at the end of *Meditations in the Time of Civil War*. Having assumed the ‘ghostly solitude’ of his prophetic role, he is able to face with a kind of equanimity the destruction both of familiar social institutions and of great art products of the past.’ Yeats’ task is to chronicle destruction – the Civil War and the greater internal destruction (cleaving of the identity post partition). He argues that men move ‘to the barbarous clangour of a gong’; the music is ‘barbarous’; chaos has arrived – previously suggested by the screaming shelf of dolls (which could be also read as an evocative symbol of the colonised self: *The Dolls*, 1913) – while ‘All men are dancers’. Dance according to the Yeatsian scheme of imagery also signifies the supreme expression of the soul. However, the image of barbarism may also connote the English perspective of the Celt; the native men continue to dance in the face of the deliberate incursion. The dance becomes the corporeal manifestation of the Yeatsian art delineated through the language of literature and of soul.

Thus, Yeats’ art of poetry encircles the question of existence. The full structural system that can be perceived thereby is not merely of a cyclical circle but of the multiple overlapping circles spiralling in the continual movement of the gyre, which survives even as ‘Things fall apart [and] the centre cannot hold’\(^{11}\). Yeats’ art or the ‘swan’ – naked, potent and uninhibited – drowns the ritualistic ‘ceremony of innocence’, a make-believe sense of order and belonging in the realm of anarchy and ‘drifts upon a darkening flood’\(^{12}\), in order to engender the spirit of *post-colonial* Ireland.
Notes

1. William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) one of Ireland's most compelling national figure; a poet, dramatist, critic, nationalist, Nobel Laureate (1923), Senator. Claimed by Irish nationalists, occultists, fascists, modernists, Romantics, and most recently postcolonialist scholars, Yeats's life and work are open to myriad interpretations. As a writer, he devoted himself to building the process of revival of the Irish culture, literature and identity. Yeats's position as a postcolonial figure seems obvious in the light of contemporary critical analysis of the Irish native heritage, but the biographical fact that he was a member of the Anglo Irish Ascendancy and contemplated upon fascist ideas in his old age often stands problematical to a 'postcolonial' status. But his devoted efforts to revitalise Irish culture sustains his nationalist identity – The Abbey Theater (in 1904, Yeats, along with Lady Augusta Gregory and Annie Horniman, founded the Abbey Theater. At the Abbey, and with his educational pamphlets, Samhain, Yeats sought to create an Irish theater and educate the Irish public by offering a place for the performance of works by Irish dramatists) and his poetical ventures made important contributions to the Irish Revival, a resurgence of Irish drama, poetry and prose from the Victorian period to the 1920s. Yeats' life-long love for Maud Gonne (an Irish revolutionary nationalist), though remained unrequited, inspired the Yeatsian art and fuelled the spirit of nationalism within him.

2. From Yeats’ *The Coming of Wisdom with Time* (1909)

Though the leaves are many, the root is one  
Through all the lying days of my youth  
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun  
Now I may wither into the truth

Analogous to the image of withering is that of nakedness, as resounds in *A Coat* (1912):  
I made my song a coat  
Covered with embroideries…  
But fools caught it  
Wore it in world’s eyes…  
Song let them take it  
For there is more enterprise  
In walking naked.

These metaphors signify that true art sheds the otherwise popular caveat of ostentatious *artifice*.

3. From the *Introduction* to *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*.

4. Yeats in *Among School Children* (1926):
O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

5. Yeats and Decolonization, published in 1988, merely two decades ago, bears witness to the fact that post-colonial discourse has only begun to contribute to both Irish culture and an understanding of that culture. As this process continues, with the publication of works by scholars like Lloyd and Kiberd, the example of Ireland should play a significant role in the establishment of current models of post-colonial thought. Certainly Ireland shall add to post-colonial discourse while post-colonialism will open up new critical spaces for the study of Irish literature and culture.

6. Unterecker points that A Song from ‘The Player Queen, anticipates Leda and the Swan as it swings a golden cradle on a peasant’s willow tree. Yeats in the later poem draws parallels between Helen’s conception and Christ’s birth, being fascinated by the mythical tales of kings born in stables and bird or animal analogies. Such myths united the inferior to the superior classes otherwise fragmented by the conventional social categorisation. Thus, Yeats’ fascination became a justification for the system he was attempting to establish.

7. Interestingly, the other figures that Said draws Yeats’ vocation parallel to viz. Faiz (Pakistan), Neruda (Chile), Darwish (Palestine) amongst others.

8. Yeats’ A Prayer For Old Age (1935):

   God guard me from those thoughts men think
   In the mind alone;
   He that sings a lasting song
   Thinks in a marrowbone;

9. Yeats in the ‘Introduction’ to Tagore’s Gitajali writes:

   ‘…Mr. Tagore, like Indian civilization has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to its spontaneity. … An innocence, a simplicity that one does not find elsewhere in literature makes the birds and leaves seem as near to him as they are near to children, and the changes of the seasons great events as before our thoughts had arisen between them and us. … Indeed, when he is speaking of children, so much a part of himself this quality seems… “…. Children have their play on the seashore of the worlds. They know not how to swim, they know not how to cast nets. Pearl fishers dive for pearls, merchants sail in their ships, while children gather pebbles and scatter again. They seek not for hidden treasures, they know not how to cast nets.”’
The impression of Tagore’s words is resonant of Yeats’ own creative and philosophic thought process. The dialogue between the celebrated artists continues beyond the periphery of their creations.

10. Although, Yeats wrote a note to explain that he:

‘…wrote Leda and the Swan because the editor of a political review [The Irish Statesman] asked me a poem. I thought ‘After the individualist, demagogic movement founded by Hobbes and popularised by Encyclopaedists and the French Revolution, we have a soil so exhausted that it cannot grow that crop for centuries.’ Then I thought ‘Nothing is now possible but some movement, or birth from above, preceded by some violent annunciation’. My fancy began to play with Leda and the Swan for metaphor and I began this poem; but as I wrote, bird and lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it…’

modern interpreters examine the poem as a close study of the colonial pursuit of newer territories. Moreover, it is significant to note that the need for a ‘movement’ chronologically follows the failed Easter Rising of 1916. Thus, the ‘Hearts [no more] with one purpose alone through summer and winter seem enchanted to a stone’ rather the ‘higher’ realisation dawns ‘He that sings a lasting song/ thinks in a marrowbone’ (A Prayer For Old Age).

11. Yeats’ The Second Coming (1919):

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity…

12. From Yeats’ Coole and Ballylee, 1931 (1931).

We were the last romantics – chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness
Whatever's written in what poets name
The book of the people; whatever most can bless
The mind of man or elevate a rhyme;
But all is changed, that high horse riderless,
Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode
Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood.
Works Cited:


