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Yeats' Concept of Indian God: Amalgamation of Hindu and Christian Religious Notions in W.B. Yeats' *Indian upon God*

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Abstract:

W.B. Yeats's one of the most critically acclaimed poems, *Indian upon God*, bears testimony to the fact that he was immensely influenced by Hindu religious notions and Indian philosophy. Though there are a number of poems in Indian context written by him, which reveal Yeats's obsession with Indian culture and philosophy, but *Indian upon God* is possibly the only poem contemplating on the concept of God according to Hindu Philosophy. Yeats's interest in Indian philosophy resulted from his interaction with the Indian scholar and preacher, Mohini Chatterji. His affinity for Indian culture and philosophy is evident in the aforementioned poem where he expresses his notion of Indian God. Despite all his endeavours to encapsulate the essence of Hindu religion Yeats often struggles to establish his ideas because his concept seems to be imbued with his own religious notions of Christianity. Therefore the Indian's God delineated by him in this poem emerges as a religious amalgamation, or a God out of the mixture of Hindu and Christian religion. This research article is an attempt to concentrate on Yeats's concept of God as depicted in the poem and aims to seek answer to the question why Yeats's concept of Indian God is incomplete.

Keywords: Indian God, Hindu religion and philosophy, Christianity, amalgamation

Introduction:

Indian upon God is a highly meditative poem which explores and showcases Hindu philosophy and emerges as the quintessence of how adroitly W.B. Yeats used the Indian theme as the context of the poem. The poem, appeared in the *Crossways*, 1898, demonstrates not only Yeats affinity to Indian religion and philosophy, but also vindicates how engrossed he was with the aspects of Indian culture and Philosophical ideas. The Indianness of the poet which resulted after his interaction with Indian scholar Mohini Mohan Chatterji proved actually beneficial for that particular phase of his literary career. This interest and love for Hindu religion urged him to write poems in Indian context, like *Kanva on Himself*, *Indian to his love*, *Anashuya* and *Vijaya* and others. Especially, in this poem *Indian Upon God*, Yeats endeavoured to illustrate the concept of God according to Hindu philosophy. Not only he struggled to encapsulate his knowledge about Indian God, acquired after his interaction with the Indian preacher Mohini Chatterji, but also exerted to introduce the basic tenets of Hindu sacred text, *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita*.

The poem *Indian Upon God*, published in 1898, in crossways was inspired by Mohini Chaterji's lecture to the Hermetic Society. In this poem the poet persona is a person of Indian origin. While he is passing through a jungle, he observes different creatures and natural objects like, the moorfowl, a lotus, a roebuck and a peacock. Each creature imagines the form of God according to their own physical structure. The images of God, they delineate in their minds conform to their own image. Therefore, all of them have different notions about God. The central idea of the poem corresponds to the pantheistic notion which advocates God's ubiquitous presence. It also substantiates the notion in which God has been perceived as the all pervading soul or supersoul according to *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita* and a man who can perceive God in every creature, natural object and aspects of nature is a true mystic. This concept of Yeats bears similarity with the shlokas of *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita* where Lord Krishna divulges his true nature to Arjuna-

“And yet everything that is created does not rest in me. Behold my mystic opulence! Although I am the maintainer of all living entities and although I am everywhere, I am not the part of the cosmic manifestation, for Myself is the very source of creation.”

The Most Confidential Knowledge, chapter-9, shloka-5

Simultaneously, the poem conveys the ideas that every creature conceives God in his own image and therefore God resides in every creature. It is quite interesting to note that the concept coincides astonishingly with the essence of shloka 30 of chapter 6, *Bhagavad Gita*, where Lord Krishna, during his conversation with Arjuna, asserts that a true yogi perceives God everywhere and in every creature.

“For one who sees Me everywhere and sees everything in Me, I am never lost, nor he is never lost to Me.”

In chapter-10, *The Opulence of the Absolute*, shloka 25,26,27,28,29 of the *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna reveals that of all trees, He is the banyan tree, of horses, he is *Uchhaihrava*, of elephant He is *airavata*, among men, He is the monarch. He further continues saying among serpents, He is *Vasuki* and among many hooded nagas He is *Ananta*. Among beasts He is the lion and among birds He is the *garura*. The basic idea of these shlokas conforms to the central theme of the poem *Indian Upon God*. The natural object, the lotus and the peacock with which the poet persona interacts during his journey through the forest are interestingly associated and significantly attached with Hindu religion. Lotus symbolises divine beauty and purity. Lord Vishnu has been often described as “the lotus eyed one.” Hindu mythology says that Lord Brahma appeared from the lotus germinated from Lord Vishnu's navel. It is also mentioned in Hindu Religious scriptures that water signifies the procreative and the lotus represents the generative aspects of the absolute. Likewise Peacock is also associated with Hinduism. It is believed that the peacock was created out of one feather of *garura* the mythological bird believed to be the escort or mount of Lord Vishnu. The peacock feather is also regarded as an auspicious symbol in Hinduism because Lord Krishna, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu used to wear it on his crown. By using these symbols of Hinduism, Yeats tried to authenticate his Indian experience and knowledge in the poem to invest it with the required mood and ambience.

Yeats never visited India, but he accumulated and perfected his knowledge about Indian culture and Hindu religion after interacting with the Indian Preacher Mohini Chatterji. Mohini Chatterji, the Indian Theosophist, was sent to London in 1884 by Colonel Olcott. He became immensely popular among the theosophist circles in London. Mohini visited Dublin in 1885 and his theosophical views left a deep impact on Yeats's mind. He was so influenced by his personality that he wrote a poem entitled Mohini Chatterji. Yeats's enthusiasm and zeal to explore the oriental culture, and religion is plausible in this statement-

"I have always sought to bring my mind close to the mind of the Indian and Japanese poets." During his stay in London, he got the opportunity to hear the discourse of Mohini Chatterji. Alfred Percy Sinnett's two books, *The Occult World* and *Esoteric Buddhism* enkindled his interest on Indian metaphysical thoughts. Mohini Chatterji introduced the basic concepts of the Bhagavad Gita and Vedantism of Samkara, the 8th century religious leader of the Hindus. The permanent and eternal nature of the soul was the point of discussion in Mohini's discourse. F.F. Farag asserted the fact that Mohini actually tried to implicate that one "should realise the permanence of the soul in eternal essence amidst all the transient forms through which it has passed."

Similar notion has been the pivotal theme of *Kanva on Himself*, which appeared in *The Wandering of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889)- "Isn't thy body, but a garnered rust?"

The theme of the poem, Mohini Chatterjee is also reincarnation which is the essence of Mohini Chatterji's words, once said in reply to the question if one should pray or not-

"pray for nothing, say

Every night in bed

I have been a king

I have been a slave

Nor is there anything.

Fool, rascal, knave

That I have not been

The theme of Reincarnation recurs in these lines-

"Birth is heaped on Birth

That sych cannonade

May thunder time away

Birth-hour and Death -hour meet

The poem virtually concentrates on the philosophical notions delivered by Mohini Chatterji which left an enduring influence on Yeats's mind. But the fact still remains that Yeats's concept of Indian God seems to be imbued with the basic tenets of Christianity too. Therefore Yeats's apparent Indianness remains incomplete due to the amalgamation of two divergent religious concepts. It is obvious that the central concept of the poem *Indian Upon God* corresponds to the biblical concept that God made man in His own image,-

"So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female, created He them." (King James Version, Genesis 1:27)

In this respect the poem also alludes to the concept of Genesis. Therefore the Eastern Spiritual tradition of pantheism and Western Biblical tradition are simultaneously present here. Daniel Albright remarked that

-“the premise of this poem that everything constructs an image of God on its own likeness is related to a passage from Browning’s dramatic monologue “Caliban Upon Setebos”(1867) where Caliban invents a Caliban shaped image of God.”

Yeats’s own opinion as expressed in a letter to Katherine Tyrn unravels his confusion regarding his own religious views-

“when I was a child, I used often to say, What religion do the ant have? They must have one you know.’

The conflicting demands of the body and the soul, or the tension between the self and the antiself can be considered one of the prevalent and recurrent themes of his poems. Richard Ellmann in his *Yeats: The Man and the Mask* evinces the fact that he actually suffered terrible confusion due to the contention of self and anti-self during a certain period of his literary career. Margaret Rudd also authenticated the same fact in *Divided Image: A Study of William Blake and W.B. Yeats*-

“His inclination, which had begun much earlier, to pose before the world as something different from what he was, to hide his secret self, had come to a point where he saw himself divided into two parts.”

He believed in the existence of spirit and matter. But he also endeavoured to establish his opinion that the spirit should prevail over and dominate matter. The union of the matter and the spirit is evident in the concept of Jesus Christ. T.S. Eliot suffered the same tension until he found his solution in the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*,

“And do not think of the fruit of action/Fare forward (The Dry Salvages)

Yeats’s affinity to Indian philosophy and religion is an undeniable fact. He was mesmerised by the ideas and presence of the Indian theosophist Mohini Chatterji. He used Indian names as the title of his poems. In the poem, *Kanva on Himself*, Kanva is the name of an Indian sage who was also the foster father of Shakuntala, the protagonist of Kalidasa’s drama, *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*. Anashuya was the name of Shakuntala’s friend which was adapted in his poem *Anashuya and Vijaya*. The natural object, the lotus and the peacock with which the poet persona interacts during his journey through the forest are interestingly associated and significantly attached to Hindu religion. Despite all his endeavours, he fails to encapsulate the true spirit and essence of Indian culture and religion, largely because as it has been analysed by Dr. Suman Singh, in his article, *Mohini Mohan Chatterji’s Influence on W.B. Yeats about the poem Anashuya and Vijaya*,

“However Yeats is unable to create the Indian atmosphere. The reason for this is that Yeats’s character in the play do not play or act according to Indian values. There are several instances in the play where the behaviour of Anashuya or Vijaya doesn’t conform to the Indian values. The reason for this is that Yeats learned about Indian culture from a far distance. He never visited India.”

Unlike Rudyard Kipling and George Orwell, who spent a considerable period of their lives in India, which was time enough to absorb the essence and feel the vibes of Indian lifestyle, W.B. Yeats had no firsthand information about the country. He had never been exposed to the milieu of the country, so that he can have a direct experience. With the mere bookish knowledge and intellectual conversations he was unable to capture the true essence of India. There lies the difference between knowledge and experience. After having a superficial knowledge about a distant country, Yeats could only use his imagination instead of perception. For true perception, direct experience is indispensable. He never lived his life as an Indian what Kipling and Orwell did. Inevitably, Yeats failed to showcase the true Indian spirit in his poem.

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