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Rabindranath Tagore and W.B. Yeats: The two contemporary spiritual poets

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Abstract

W.B. Yeats and Rabindranath Tagore are generally regarded as the best poets of the twentieth century. The two have a long tradition of scholarly collaboration. Many comparisons have been drawn between Rabindranath Tagore and W. B. Yeats as a result of their long association. Their thirty-seven-year relationship affected both great guys. Tagore reflected the insight and integrity of the East to Yeats, justifying his faith in Asian philosophy. Tagore saw Yeats as a sign of the West's artistic spirit. The Tagore–Yeats relationship is emblematic of Indo–Irish relationships, and the Irish poet's opening remarks in *Gitanjali* are among the most-cited in scholarly treatises on the topic. Both poets' legendary work focuses on the timeless issue between life and death. There's an explanation for this. While Yeats' obsession with Tagore was strong but brief, it is not only a reflection on cross-cultural experiences within the British colonial realm, but also an example of Western perceptions of the Orient. This paper considers how to situate both poets' works within the framework of contemporary mysticism.

Keywords: mystic poets, Rabindranath Tagore, W.B. Yeats's, Indo–Irish connections etc

Introduction

Mysticism, in its most pure and fundamental sense, is a form of religion that stresses immediate knowledge of one's relationship with God, as well as direct and intimate awareness of divine presence. It is a religion at the most intense, acute, and alive. Balckburn (2005) defines formalised formalised formalised formalised formalised formalised formalised formal Mysticism is characterised as a fleeting belief in the presence of realities beyond perpetual or intellectual apprehension, which are fundamental to being and directly accessible by subjective experience. Something that is described by a greater degree of consciousness than the ordinary human being is mystic. Poetry has long been a favoured medium for mystics because poetry is where an emotion seeks its thoughts and thoughts find language.

W.B. Yeats and Rabindranath Tagore are generally regarded as the best poets of the twentieth century. The long friendship of Rabindranath Tagore and W. B. Yeats has attracted little attention from reviewers and biographers of these two great figures. Their thirty-seven-year relationship affected both great guys. Tagore reflected the insight and integrity of the East to Yeats, justifying his faith in Asian philosophy. Tagore saw Yeats as a sign of the West's artistic spirit.

Yeats has written the preface/ introduction of *Gitanjali* where he writes

Mr. Tagore, like Indian culture itself, has been content to seek the soul and yield to its spontaneity. He always seems to equate life with that of those who have loved more after our fashion and have more apparent weight in the world, always humbly as if he is only convinced his path is better for him: Men walking home look at me, grin, and make me feel ashamed. I sit like a beggar maid, pulling my skirt over my ears, and when they ask what I want, I lower my eyes and say nothing.' 'Many an hour I have spent in the strife of the good and the bad, but now it is the pleasure of my playmate of the empty days to draw my heart on to him, and I know not why this sudden call to what pointless in effect,' he would say at another time. An purity, a simplicity that one does not find anywhere in literature makes the birds and the leaves seem as close to him as they are to children, and the changes of the season's great events seem as close to him as they were before our feelings had appeared

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between them and us'. 1961 (Yeats)

Many people have taken inspiration for their mystic journeys from nature. The Rig Vedic seers had a kind of quasi view of the Ultimate Truth—in the middle of natural phenomena and to nature was a living source, with which they still stayed in direct communion. 193 (Chateerjee) Rabindranath Tagore is one of the most famous mystics for whom Nature has always been a source of inspiration and a representation of the Eternal. It takes on more importance as time progresses. Nature's majesty has a profound impact on Tagore of Gitanjali, but it is not permitted to obscure the reality of his inner being. The mystic light that brightens Nature's universe often sends its reflections to dispel the poet's inner gloom.

Rabindranath Tagore is sometimes referred to as the "Shakespeare of India." Tagore, a brilliant mystic, was a tutor of W.B. Yeats and Robert Frost, a close friend of Albert Einstein and Mahatma Gandhi, and a Nobel Prize laureate in literature. Tagore's two most important books, "The Gardner" and "Gitanjali," provide insight into his spiritual vision. This paper explores the Tagore-Yeats relationships in their works, with an emphasis on Mysticism. Rabindranath Tagore is the most outstanding mystic poet of the first half of the twentieth century, serving as the most significant link between Eastern and Western spirituality. His verse, which is deeply spiritual and profoundly sensitive, appeals to people of all backgrounds who pursue a deeper understanding of themselves, their country, life, God, and love.

The Tagore–Yeats relationship is emblematic of Indo–Irish relationships, and the Irish poet's opening remarks in Gitanjali are among the most-cited in scholarly treatises on the topic. Both poets' legendary work focuses on the timeless issue between life and death. This is due to a valid cause. While Yeats' obsession with Tagore was strong but brief, it is not only a reflection on cross-cultural experiences within the British colonial realm, but also an example of Western perceptions of the Orient. The mystic and devotional quality of Tagore's writing, as well as its ability to read beyond national and class boundaries, struck Yeats and other western readers of Tagore.

Tagore outplayed the narrow-minded Orientalists who, like the Colonisers, saw actual sites in the world as ephemeral locations in which to carry out one's dreams by playing the part of the eastern sage (Sen, 2010) ^[11]. India, as seen by Tagore's poems, seemed to Yeats to be what he had wanted it to be: enamoured of the supernatural and committed to a tradition in which poetry and religion were synonymous. Yeats, on the other hand, was not completely innocent. Tagore's successful rewriting of his poetry was subversive. Tagore's poetry, on the other hand, represent a metaphysical sense with divine love, while Yeats' poems reflect a philosophical sense with worldly love, which is why Tagore seems to be one step ahead of Yeats. Swami Adiswarananda mentioned:

Rabindranath Tagore's metaphysical and theological ideas cross the boundaries of language, history, and nationality. The poet and mystic takes us on a mystical journey in his writings, revealing the eternal amid the finite, unity at the centre of all diversity, and the Divine among all creatures and things of the world. Tagore (2004) defines formalised formalised formalised formalised formalised formalised formalised

However, the definition of the term "mysticism" has undergone several changes. According to one of the study papers, "in modern use, the word is sometimes used loosely to apply to a variety of manifestations and ideologies like the mystical, occultism, sorcery, spiritualism, and Eastern or new age philosophies, as well as the sublime encounters of saints and mystic geniuses" (Daniels, 2003) ^[3]. This research can be used to interpret the distinction between religious and mystical experiences.

Carl Mc Colman (2010) ^[7] in his article A Contemplative Faith' gives four major elements of Mysticism:

1. The pure experience of mysticism itself (whether this means a joyful encounter with God's presence at the Eucharist, or a mind-blowing absorption into Divine Unity during deep contemplation or any of countless other ways of experiencing the Mystery);
2. The struggle to wrap words around such pure experience (always doomed to at least partial failure, since by its very nature mystical experience is ineffable);
3. The quest to invest such mystical language with meaning and relevance (interpreting the reports of mystical experience in terms of their religious, social, political, psychological and moral value, both to the individual and to the community in which the experience occurs);
4. And finally, the effort to pass on the treasures of mystical wisdom, not only in written works such as the writings of the great mystics but also in more informal ways such as individual spiritual direction and the formation process for monastics and oblates.

Rabindranath Tagore finds the presence of God in nature around him. He addresses God by admiring the beauty of nature which is the reflection of the presence of God himself. Tagore is not a self-centered person. At the time of hardships and complaints, he does not forget the blessings showered by God. Direct references are given in the poems wherein he says to God that He gifts man things unasked. Those things which man enjoys in this universe, for example, the elements of nature like the sky, stars, wind, flowers, etc. are the greatest gifts man can ever have.

This is my prayer to thee, my lord —

Strike, strike at the root penury in my heart.

Give me the strength to lightly bear my joys and sorrows. Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service.

Give me the strength never to disown the poor or bend on my knees before insolent might.

Give me the strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles.

And give me the strength to surrender my strength to thy will with love.

Rabindranath Tagore

The above prayer could easily be attributed to a Christian mystic, such as Ignatius of Loyola or Francis of Assisi or Teresa of Avila. 'Gitanjali', collection of Tagore's devotional poems expressing spiritual adoration for God and contemplation of God's many blessings. For Westerners, they resembled the Psalms of the Old Testament. The themes resonate with people of all faith because of their spiritual sincerity and beauty. Like the writers of the Psalms,

Tagore can put his spiritual experiences into words, which are not only attractive and compelling but with which they can deeply identify.

In *The Little Flute*, he writes,

Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.

This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new...

The power of *Gitanjali* came from Tagore's personal experience of God. Edward J. Thompson, a biographer of Tagore, wrote: —What matters in (Tagore) is ... his personal experience of God. Of the depth and sincerity of this, no one who has read *Gitanjali* can doubt. God is strangely close to his thought. He is often more theistic than any Western theist.... God becomes more personalized for him, the Indian, in the most intimate, individual fashion, than He does for the ordinary Christian... I can only assume that he found it so in personal experience that neither flesh nor blood revealed to him but our Father in Heaven. (Thompson, 2003)

Consistently, his poetry conveys a deep-seated spiritual awareness and mysticism. This is evident in his book *Fireflies*, published in 1928:

I touch God in my song
as the hill touches the far-away sea
with its waterfall....

Love remains a secret even when spoken,
for only a lover truly knows that he is loved....
In love, I pay my endless debt to thee for what thou art.
(Tagore, 1999)

Yeats is the only modern poet who initiated the occult system and mysticism in his poetry. Mysticism runs throughout his poetry in which the gods and fairies of Celtic mythology live again. To Yeats, a poet is very close to a mystic, and the poet's mystical experience gives the poem a spiritual world. Yeats's explorations of the esoteric helped give him deep access to this primary field of consciousness and imagination.

The mystical gospel according to Yeats:

1. That the borders of our mind are ever-shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, single energy.
2. That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
3. That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols. (Jantzen, 1995) ^[6]

However, Yeats's use of imagism to represent the mysticism in his poetry is quite remarkable as he brings the images of these mythical places alive with his words. He had a deep fascination with mysticism and the occult, and his poetry is infused with a sense of the otherworldly, the spiritual, and the unknown. His interest in the occult began with his study of Theosophy as a young man and expanded and developed through his participation in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a mystical secret society. Mysticism figures

prominently in Yeats's discussion of the reincarnation of the soul, as well as in his philosophical model of the conical gyres used to explain the journey of the soul, the passage of time, and the guiding hand of fate. Mysticism and the occult occur again and again in Yeats's poetry, most explicitly in —*The Second Coming* but also in poems such as —*Sailing to Byzantium* and —*The Magil* (1916). The rejection of Christian principles in favor of a more supernatural approach to spirituality creates a unique flavor in Yeats's poetry that impacts his discussion of history, politics, and love.

Yeats had a lifelong interest in Mysticism, Occult, and astrology. He read extensively on the subjects throughout his life, became a member of the Paranormal Research Organization

The Ghost Club in 1911. Way back in 1892 he wrote: If I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word of my black book, nor would Countess Kathleen ever have come to exist. The mystical life is the center of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write. In *Byzantium*, Yeats describes the cryptic realm of spirits for which he so fervently searched.

Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path (Yeats, 1962)

The world of spirits is obscure; the speaker doesn't know if he is beholding an image, man, or shade. Eventually, he decides that the apparition is ultimately composed of an image. Unraveling this image reveals still more mysterious pathways into the spectral realm of Hades, the invisible foundation of the daylight world.

Yeats's theories of life and history have a very interesting personal experience behind it. He with his wife experimented with the psychic phenomenon called automatic writing, in which her hand and pen presumably served as unconscious instruments for the spirit world to send information. They held more than four hundred sessions of automatic writing, producing nearly four thousand pages that Yeats avidly and patiently studied and organized. He believed that certain patterns existed, the most important being what he called *gyres*, interpenetrating cones representing mixtures of opposites of both a personal and historical nature. He contended that gyres were initiated by the divine impregnation of a mortal woman—first, the rape of Leda by Zeus; later, the immaculate conception of Mary. Yeats found that within each 2000 year era, emblematic moments occurred at the midpoints of the 1000 year halves. At these moments of balance, he believed, a civilization could achieve special excellence, and Yeats cited as examples the splendor of Athens at 500 B.C., Byzantium at A.D. 500, and the Italian Renaissance at A.D. 1500. *Byzantium* evokes a world of phantasmagoric rapture and revelation.

Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.
Astraddle on the dolphins mire and blood,
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor

Break bitter furies of complexity,
 Those images that yet
 Fresh images beget,
 That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

12. McAlindon T. The Idea of Byzantium in William Morris and W.B. Yeats, *Modern Philology* 1967, 64.

Yeats immersed himself in this imaginable realm through experiences of visionary trance, yet these sorts of experiences are not only possible for a mystic or master poet. Yeats did not provide a specific prescription to follow to enter these visionary states of mind. Yet his life and work led the way for people to consider how they might best enter into more imaginative and cultured perspectives on life and the soul. He was willing to take risks and even appear a little foolish for the sake of finding a more vibrant and transcendent experience of life, and for that, he stands as a worthy model for those who have strong, eclectic spiritual yearnings yet do not feel welcome or comfortable in mainstream religious traditions.

Conclusion

Both Rabindranath Tagore and W. B. Yeats provide a reading which transcends time, religion, and sometimes even language. Our life today is full of chaos where we blatantly manipulate language, frightened citizens cling desperately to narrow systems of belief, and people have more communication technology yet feel more isolated than ever before. Tagore and Yeats's help illuminate our confusing inner experiences in this age of historical and psychological upheaval. Their focus is on an ancient worldview in which soul and imagination are primary, forging a vital middle ground between consumer materialism and rigid fundamentalism. Still relevant and timely, humanizing vision that challenges us to explore the mysterious spiritual foundations of our lives and create a culture receptive to beauty and a meaningful sense of the sacred.

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