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Tracing the Indian philosophy of transmigration in the poetry of WB Yeats

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Abstract

Metempsychosis also called, Transmigration or Reincarnation, is a religious or philosophical belief which states that the soul or spirit, after the death, starts a new life in a new body that may be human, animal or spiritual. The reincarnation depends on the deeds of the previous life. The term metempsychosis takes its origin from the Greek philosophy. Religions like Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism holds a strong belief in reincarnation, all of which arose in India. It is a fundamental doctrine of several religions in India among which one thing is very evident and common, that is, doctrine of 'karma.' It states that whatever we do in this present life will have its effect on the next life. In Hinduism, the cycle of birth and rebirth, that is, the transmigration of souls, is an endless process until one achieves moksha, or liberation. Moksha is the realization that the eternal core of the individual (Atman) and the physical form (Brahman) are one. Through this one can escape from the cycle of death and rebirth (Samsara). In Hinduism, several paths had been validated toward liberation. One of the most influential Hindu texts- 'The Bhagavad Gita' has presented three major paths to salvation. First one is the 'karma- marga' (path of duties and actions); second is the 'jnana- marga' (path of knowledge) and the third one is the bhakti- marga (path of devotion). One can select any path out of the above mentioned and is available to all. As mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita, that the action is inescapable, hence, it is better to thought of all the three paths of as simultaneously which definitely will add in achieving the goals of dharma and moksha. This could be seen in one's social and ritual duties whether it is about family or profession. This enables to maintain a broader stability in the world. This paper seeks to study and explore the Indian philosophy of Metempsychosis in the poetry of W.B. Yeats.

Keywords: Metempsychosis, transmigration, reincarnation, Hinduism, Bhagavad Gita, Karma

Introduction

William Butler Yeats (13 June 1865 – 28 January 1939) was an Irish poet and playwright, and one of the towering personalities of the twentieth century. In the field of English literature, W. B. Yeats serves as the connection between the nineteenth and twentieth century. His poetic career reflects a shift from the pre- modern to the modern. He always was interested in magic and the occult. He brought the mechanistic conceptions of the world to the surface by foregrounding the former along with the Celtic mythology and symbolism. Soon the real world enters into his poetry. He was in search of system rather than a set of beliefs. He constructed a philosophical system in order to organize the anarchy of modern civilization. He was in search for an escape that is different from the in general escape that is into a world of pure ideas.

The belief in the reincarnation is very much heterodox from the Christian's perspective and is related much with occultism as it presupposes the reappearance of the soul after the death. The subject of reincarnation in Yeats' work had been least explored area, as the critics of the time didn't take reincarnation seriously. They considered the element of reincarnation as worthless and not an appropriate subject for any scholarly discussions.

Yeats was strongly attracted by the element of supernaturalism from his early childhood. Yeats had been acquainted with the concept of reincarnation through the folk stories and legends of the Western Ireland, and it was through the book *Esoteric Buddhism* that Yeats first became acquainted with a systematic knowledge of reincarnation.

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Because of this book, Yeats got inspired to read other esoteric books like, Upanishads, etc. to gain more knowledge about reincarnation. Yeats was never satisfied with the gained knowledge of life and always eager to see deeper and hidden levels of life and to explore the element of mysticism.

Yeats was a very mixed kind of personality and one of his perspectives led him to the supernatural. Indian philosophy is one of the components that contribute to Yeats' literary works. Hindu philosophy majorly influenced his writings. During eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, literary and philosophical works from Sanskrit were translated into English, German and French. The translations served a new interpretation of India amongst the literary figures of Europe. The publications of Theosophical Societies directed Yeats' attention towards India. Yeats' first encounter was when he met a Brahmin Theosophist, Mohini Chatterji who was invited to Dublin in 1885 to give talks about theosophy and Indian philosophy. Yeats draws Mohini Chatterji's concluding remark as to suppress all desires, even the desire for salvation. Mohini Mohun Chatterji or, Mohini Chatterji was a member of the Theosophical Society. In Yeats' works he is referred as 'the Brahmin.' The philosophy gives emphasis on the realization of the inner self and not on the outer action or desire that would ultimately lead to action. It suggests to suppress all desires even the desire for emancipation, 'for even our desire of immortality was no better than our other desires.' The same idea has been expressed by Yeats in his poetry. The philosophy taught by Mohini Chatterji offered a kind of solution to the fundamental problems of life, death and after- life which were the constant concerns for Yeats.

Analysis

The poem 'Mohini Chatterji' describes a question about how one should pray was answered by the Brahmin putting forward the concept of the reincarnation of the soul. Yeats was not much convinced and happy with the Christian idea of the soul's immortality which is linear ending in heaven or, hell and so when the Brahmin asked him to repeat in daily prayer the idea of reincarnation of the soul which had already been present in the Pagan Irish consciousness, the idea was instantly received. Yeats got immensely impressed by Mohini Chatterji's reply to the question about how one should pray.

Yeats believed in reincarnation in his own way. His interpretation of reincarnation is different from that of a true mystic. A mystic is an individual who tries to find his way to God- union through a special discipline like yoga which requires the quietness of heart and lung action to attain the mystic goal of God- union. To a mystic poet like Rabindranath Tagore, whom Yeats had known well during his lifetime, reincarnation is an impediment as Buddhism or Hinduism teaches. Buddhism expounds that an individual's soul reappears in the world again and again till it is eventually released from the cycle of reincarnation and enters into nirvana, a condition of perfect beatitude in Buddhist theology, which can be attained only after the extinction of all desires and passions. The mystics believe that reincarnation is an obstacle to that union.

On the contrary, Yeats thinks reincarnation as a privilege because it would offer an individual a wonderful opportunity to have as many different lives as he could unless he attempted to suppress desires and passions through

special disciplines such as yoga, and in the course of these spiritual transitions, he passes through the whole gamut of possible experience.

Poets like Yeats and Rabindranath Tagore are usually paired for their significant similarities. Both the poets have won the Nobel Prize in Literature: Rabindranath Tagore in 1913 and W. B. Yeats later in 1923. They both were involved in cultural and political movements representing their home countries of India and Ireland during the peak of British Empire. They both takes keen interest in spirituality, music and poetry and they both used imageries of landscape and nature on their poetry. Both being the key personality, Yeats of the Irish Literary Revival and Tagore of the Bengali Renaissance, realized the position of their poetry and the potential within the larger global connections which was a result of colonialism. They both met for the first time in the year 1912 at the home of a photographer Rothenstein. Rothenstein already had sent Yeats the manuscripts of Tagore's partial translation of Gitanjali. After the reading, Yeats and Tagore started working on the translation of the remaining part of Tagore's Gitanjali, while they were in London.

The primary theme presented in Tagore's Gitanjali was the union of atman and brahman as in the Hindu tradition. The meeting of Yeats with Tagore draws a parallel significance that is of the union of Culture and Being. Tagore's influence was primarily moral in nature and he symbolized to the Irish poet about the power, the strength, the wisdom that could be achieved through and assimilation of the Indian holy books. Gitanjali or "The Song Offerings" is a reflection of Rabindranath's consciousness, wisdom & philosophy. The original work, which was published on August 14 1910, comprised 157 songs. The English version was released in November 1912 by the India Society of London. It contained translations of 53 poems from the original Bengali Gitanjali. It had a long introduction by the noted poet W.B. Yeats. Gitanjali has 2 aspects. Firstly, most of these songs are written as conversations between the poet and God. Sometimes the words of God remained unuttered, yet the poet speaks of his prayers and feelings. On the other hand, apart from some personal prayers, some songs also addressed to the Bharatvidhata—the God of India. The prayers of the poet are not for mortal or earthly things. They have aspirations for a better life. Yeats says that these songs came from great sorrow & deep emotion. A single line of his poetry can make anyone forget of all the troubles of the world. The songs of Gitanjali can purify our body & mind to get closer to our God. Although the God of Rabindranath is the God of beauty, wisdom & perfection, not a rigid deity prescribed by religion or tradition. This God does not have any specific image nor did the poet ever represent his God through any symbols. He resembles the God of the Upanishads, the concept of a supernatural power. The first song of the collection Amar matha nata kre dao he tomar charandhular pore apparently cites a request from the poet to his God to bend the poet's head down forcefully before the Almighty. But the inner meaning of the song is the devotee has to give up his pride to get the ultimate peace & happiness from his God. The concept of death comes to him as a peaceful ocean where he can rest after his mortal life passes. Tagore proficiently has incorporated the wealth of spiritual wisdom in his poem Gitanjali. The poem is the story of soul's liberation to meet the divine Lord. It is an anthology of devotional lyrics which blend a number of

themes and ideas along with providing the poet an opportunity to explore the relationship between Man and God, between individual and humanity. Everyone wants peace and happiness in one's life and it is possible through meditation and prayer of God. Tagore's poem lights the inner world (peace) of human feelings and sensibilities. This poem depicts the universal truth of death as Gitanjali reveals that death is not the end of life rather it is the renewal of the life. Tagore is a true mystic and he always craves for the union with the creator. The poem Gitanjali has the concept of Bhagavad Gita that soul is eternal and immortal. Man's prime strength is in religion and his humanity is spiritual. Self-realization is the highest wisdom, which can be achieved through a varied experience over the ages. The poem is the voice of his own soul. The poem is self-contained and bears the impact of Upanishadic thoughts. This poem has universal truth that human life is the most precious gift of God to man on this earth and the aim of this gift (Birth as a man) is to use it in a perfect way.

This poem is the realization of God through self-purification, love, constant prayer and devotion, dedication and surrender to God through service to humanity. The title of the poem is perfect and suitable to the theme. It is made by the combination of two words Gita + Anjali. Here the word Gita denotes that Tagore's influence of Vedas especially in the Gita. The word Gita means songs too. And the word Anjali means a tribute to his Creator. So the title Gitanjali denotes that these songs are an offering to God. It shows the great influence of the Upanishads and the Gita on Tagore. The songs are pure and holy. Through the poem "Gitanjali", the poet is addressing his Maker and expresses his gratitude for giving the poet the divine inspiration to sing. The lyrics in Gitanjali have a total unity. The sequence of thematic unities runs through love of God, love of nature and love of humanity. It is the story of soul's liberation, a tale of soul's wait to meet with eternal. This song has the concept of the Bhagavad Gita that the soul is eternal and immortal. It is the will of God that it should be so human body is like a weak vessel, which can be easily broken. God fills this again and again constantly renewed. Man dies and is born in another form. This implies the theory of incarnation of soul after death. In this regard the line of the Bhagavad Gita is given below: "As a human being puts on new garments, giving up old ones, the soul similarly accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones." These lines are remarkable to show God's kindness on human being because the soul has the ability to reach God, only after being born in a human soul. Souls get body only after involving through an infinite number of births as lower species.

"Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure.

This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life."

Here the words "frail vessel", "emptiest", "fillest", and "fresh life" are effectively employed by the poet. Human body is compared with "frail vessel". The word "emptiest" is used for death of body and the word "fillest" and "fresh life" is applied to new birth. In this respect the poet alludes to the Hindu belief and the doctrine of the transmigration of soul. He wants to give message to his reader about the supremacy and kindness of God. God gives a fresh life to the human soul every time a man dies.

At the immortal touch of thy hands
My little heart loses its limits in joy and
Gives birth to utterance ineffable.

God is the creator of this universe and the poet longs to unite with Him. He knows it is only through music and song that the human soul can become one with the divine. God is immortal and His gifts are infinite too but man is mortal and his hands are too small to hold the gifts. Human soul is not vast enough to enjoy the abundant measure of the divine bliss. Man requires great wisdom to enjoy God's gifts. Tagore calls his maker, the eternal flute player, Krishana, of Vrindavan. He says that he is a flute of God and God is playing this flute. He wants to say that he is singing only due to the inspiration of God. God is spreading His gifts to humanity in the form of melodious music from His flute. The immortal touch of God's hands makes him forget his worldly limitation. He unites with God through his music and forget about his physical limitations. In such moment of union with divine he feels immense joy, which cannot be expressed through words.

The poet has full faith in God who is kind, magnanimous and omnipotent. He firmly believes that he can establish relationship with God by union through love with humanity itself. In his poetry Tagore sings of the whole humanity. His song is the lyre of Heaven, emitting out the note of Eternity; it is the voice of all mankind, like the murmuring breeze of spring dawn, Tagore's poetry soothes and embalms the heart of humanity.

Towards the end of the poem, the poet depicts the universal truth of death that it is not the end of life rather it is the renewal of the life. He is not afraid of it but greets it in his life because it is the gateway through which he reunites with his maker. It shows an optimistic attitude towards death. Death is a guest who must be welcomed with an open hand. He further says that death will make no difference to this world and its activities will continue as usual. Here he has drawn a very realistic picture of life, death and situation after death that life goes on unconcerned. Through this poem, Tagore gives true picture of the journey of human life. His philosophy of death is remarkable. His message to his readers about the realization of God through self-purification, love, constant prayer and devotion, dedication and surrender to God, is valuable.

Conclusion

In addition to philosophical thought, Yeats investigated informal and exotic religion to ease his own anxiety about unbelief. Through his investigation he adopted both religious and philosophical traditions that emphasized concepts such as reincarnation, karma, and the evolution of a higher consciousness. He longed for evidence of spiritual phenomena and hoped to obtain hidden wisdom through his spiritual education. Yeats suggests that in life, one is torn between two conflicting ideologies; that of reincarnation and enlightenment. He prefers not to think of the nothingness of death and as comfort seeks a resolution to the unimaginable aftermath. Torn between these two conflicting desires, the poet ultimately chooses reincarnation as his preferred outcome of death. Perhaps in this way the poet eased his anxieties about passing away and found comfort in the possibility of reincarnation and escape from eternal spiritual nirvana.

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