



Modern Mystic Poets: Ravindranath Tagore's Eternal v/s. W.B. Yeats's Ethereal

Dr. Preeti Oza
St. Andrew's College
University of Mumbai
Mumbai, Maharashtra (India)

I. INTRODUCTION

“Mysticism in its simplest and most essential meaning is a type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness on relation with God, direct and intimate awareness of divine presence. It is religion in its most intense, acute and living stage.” (Dictionary of Philosophy). Mysticism is defined as, “A brief in the existence of realities beyond perpetual or intellectual apprehension that are central to being and directly accessible by subjective experience.” Anything that is explained from a state of higher than the average consciousness of a human being is mystic. Poetry has been a preferred medium for the mystics all through the ages as poetry is when an emotion has found its thoughts and a thought has found words.

Ravindranath Tagore and W.B. Yeats are widely considered to be the greatest poets of the 20th century. The long association between Ravindranath Tagore and W. B. Yeats has received scant notice from the critics and biographers of these two great figures. Their friendship of over thirty seven years had influence on both great men. To Yeats, Tagore represented the wisdom and dignity of the East and justified the faith that he had placed in Asian philosophy. For Tagore Yeats was the symbol of the creative energy of the West.

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

“---while Mr. Tagore, like the Indian civilization itself, has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to its spontaneity. He often seems to contrast life with that of those who have loved more after our fashion, and have more seeming weight in the world, and always humbly as though he were only sure his way is best for him: ‘Men going home glance at me and smile and fill me with shame. I sit like a beggar maid, drawing my skirt over my face, and when they ask me, what it is I want, I drop my eyes and answer them not.’ At another time, remembering how his life had once a different shape, he will say, ‘Many an hour I have spent in the strife of the good and the evil, 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 useless inconsequence.’ Innocence, simplicity that one does not find elsewhere in literature makes the birds and the 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...”

Nature has been a source of inspiration to many in their mystic quest. The Rigvedic seers had a sort of quasi vision of the Supreme Truth- in the midst of natural phenomena and to them nature was a living inspiration, with which they always remained in direct communion. Ravindranath Tagore may be ranked among the leading mystics for whom Nature has always been a source of inspiration and a manifestation of the Infinite. In fact, it emerges with deeper significance. Nature's majesty makes a deep impression on the Tagore of *Gitanjali*, - but it is not allowed to obscure the truth of his inner being. The mystic illumination which brightens the world of Nature also sends its reflections to dispel the darkness from within the poet.

Rabindranath Tagore is often considered ‘Shakespeare’ of India. A great mystic, Tagore was a teacher of W.B. Yeats and Robert Frost, a close friend of Albert Einstein and Mahatma Gandhi and the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature. Two most important works of Tagore ‘*The Gardener*’ and ‘*Gitanjali*’ offer a glimpse into his spiritual vision. This paper deliberates upon the Tagore- Yeats relationships with specific reference to ‘Mysticism’ in their works. The most important bridge between the spirituality of the East and the West, Ravindranath Tagore is the most remarkable mystic poet of the first half of the 20th century. Deeply spiritual and profoundly sensitive, his verse speaks to people from all backgrounds who seek a deeper understanding of self, country, creation, God, and love.

The Tagore–Yeats relationship is iconic of Indo–Irish connections, and the Irish poet’s introductory remarks in *Gitanjali* are among the most-cited in academic treatises on the subject. Both the poets in their iconic poetry harp on the eternal problem of life and death. There is good reason for this. Although, like a teenage love affair, Yeats’s fascination with Tagore was intense but short-lived, it is not only a commentary on cross-cultural encounters within the British colonial world but also exemplary of Western conceptions of the Orient. What struck Yeats, like other western readers of Tagore, was the religious and devotional nature of the poetry, and its ability to read beyond national and class distinctions a human condition.



By assuming the role of the eastern sage, Tagore outplayed at their own game the narrow-minded Orientalists who viewed, like the Colonisers, real places in the world as ephemeral locations in which to play out one's fantasies. India, sieved through Tagore's poetry, appeared to Yeats as everything that he had expected it to be: enamoured of the mystical, and supporting a tradition where poetry and religion were the same thing. Yeats was not wholly naïve either. There was subversion in Tagore's effective rewriting of his poems. But, Tagore's poems reflect a spiritual sense with divine love while Yeats' poems reflect philosophical sense with earthly love and that is why Tagore seems to be one step ahead of Yeats. As mentioned by Swami Adiswarananda:

“Rabindranath Tagore's philosophical and spiritual thoughts transcend all limits of language, culture, and nationality. In his writings, the poet and mystic takes us on a spiritual quest and gives us a glimpse of the infinite in the midst of the finite, unity at the heart of all diversity, and the Divine in all beings and things of the universe.”

However, the interpretation of the word 'mysticism' has gone through many transformations. One of the research papers says that, “in the contemporary usage, the term is often used loosely to refer to a range of phenomena and beliefs including the paranormal, occultism, magic, spiritualism and Eastern or new age philosophies, as well as to the sublime experiences of saints and spiritual geniuses” (Daniels, 2005). From this analysis difference between religious experience and mystical experience can be interpreted.

Carl McColman 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 a 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.

Ravindranath Tagore finds the presence of God in the 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 the nature like 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 is able to 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 to him but our Father in Heaven.”



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.*

Yeats is the only modern poet who initiated occult system and mysticism in his poetry. Mysticism runs throughout his poetry in which the gods and fairies of the Celtic mythology live again. To Yeats, a poet is very close to a mystic and poet's mystical experience give to the poem a spiritual world. Yeats 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, a 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.*

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 Magi*" (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 the Countess Kathleen ever have come to exist. The mystical life is the centre 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*

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 conducted experiment 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 dolphin's 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.*

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 in order 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.

II. 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 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.

REFERENCES

1. *From Rabindranath Tagore's 'Gitanjali', a work which is in public domain according to the Berne convention since January 1, 1992.*
2. Moharil, A. Yogi Aurobindo: A Mystic Poet. *International Referred Research Journal*, VoL.III, 21-22.
3. Parachin, . Rabindranath Tagore-Mystic Poet. Little India. 2011
4. T. McAlindon, "The Idea of Byzantium in William Morris and W.B. Yeats," *Modern Philology* 64 (1967):
5. Tagore, R., & Yeats, W. B. *Gitanjali: song offerings; a collection of prose translations made by the author from the original Bengali* (Macmillan pocket Tagore ed.). Madras: Macmillan India. 1994
6. W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald ,New York: Scribner, 1999