



# Mysticism in the Poetry of W.B.Yeats

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**Abstract:** Mysticism is not a doctrine or systematized philosophy. A mystic apprehends that there is a divine reality behind and within the ordinary world. This divine reality is perceptible by senses. It is a matter of experience, of faith, of intuition rather than reason. The present Article tries to explore the concept of Mysticism in the Poetry of William Butler Yeats.

**Key words:** Mysticism, Soul, Vision, Vedantha, Divinity.

It was on the occasion of W.B.Yeats's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday that T.S.Eliot, one of the major poets of the English Literature remarked "I can think of no poet, not even the greatest, who has shown a longer period than Yeats. Development to this extent is not merely genius, it is character." W.B.Yeats's whole poetic career shows tremendous development of his art and genius. He has composed poems on escape, romantic longing. Abstract and introspective elements are also found in abundance. Yet the main thing is the dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical, escape and involvement. In the later stage of his poetic career, the poet comes closer to life and earth, but the celebration of the physical world is not at the expense of the visionary goal. The mortal world is independent for him. The fusion between the natural and the supernatural, the human and the superhuman is always there in Yeats's poetry. He was not an adherent follower of religion in its limited sense. Nevertheless, he had certain beliefs and convictions of his own. He was anxious to seek and find a pattern or system which might give coherence and unity to his beliefs. He tried to seek a mode of expression rather than a

set of maxims and dogmas for his expression. This quest for a pattern or design stimulated or influenced him to study magic, occultism, Indian theology etc. This pursuit continued till he was able to formulate a system of his own. His pattern of philosophy is a peculiar and curious amalgam of philosophy, mythology, magic, occultism and symbolism. Yeats's system of philosophy is distinguished exclusively for two features. He considered history as a cyclic process, that is, periods of time in which events happen in a certain order and which constantly repeat themselves and he was also of the opinion that the human personality can be divided into twenty six different types regulated by twenty eight phases of the moon. According to him History is a wheel-like revolutionary process. Each age, each civilization has period of growth and maturity, each attains a pinnacle of glory after which it disrupts, giving place to a new age and a new culture.

Yeats's interest in Hindu Philosophy was kindled from his desire to effect a unity between poetry and nationalism on one side and philosophy on the other. A young Brahmin named Mohini Chatterji guided him in to the domain of Vedantic philosophy. From Chatterji he got a better and clearer understanding what he instinctively had believed already. Yeats also believed that a certain way of thinking and understanding which was in trend before the advent of Christianity, survived still and that linked men's sense of the eternal with the past life of the race and with hills and rivers around them. Mohini Chatterji who introduced Yeats to Vedantic philosophy had put before him a negative view of life. Mohini Chatterji was of the view that all desire was evil and ignoble. But such attitude is not found in the poetry of W.B. Yeats. He does not advocate repudiation of life. Yeats's poetry has an undercurrent of mysticism from the beginning to the end. It has been observed that the world of Yeats's poetry is a world of a mystic visionary in which the gods and fairies of Celtic mythology live again. He was of the conviction that the fairy and supernatural beings are a necessary link in the chain of beings. His system of philosophy is a curious amalgamation philosophy, mythology, magic, alchemy, occultism and symbolism. He also passed through the struggle or conflict between the Religion of Reason and Religion of Imagination, Objective truth and subjective truth, the Universal and the Individual. In the initial stages, he read Darwin and Huxley and had accepted them as 'established authority'. But upon considerations he saw that their beliefs contravened his imagination; and he could not accept as doctrines their assumption and methods. He broke away from the rationalism and the intellectualism and probed into the secret and the mysterious. Yeats's early interest in ghosts, sorcerers and fairies might have influenced his desire to move towards Mysticism. He was also of the opinion that life was not a rule, order, system, common sense: nature and the human mind have their 'right side' of the subconscious of dusk and half lights. According to him

Religion was the search for the irrational, the irruptive, the unpredictable. In order to understand the nature of mysticism of in his poetry it is also of importance to discuss in detail what Mysticism is.

Mysticism is not a doctrine or systematized philosophy. It can be considered as a temper, a mood. A mystic holds the opinion or apprehends that there is a divine reality behind and within the ordinary world perceptible by the senses. But it becomes rather difficult to communicate his apprehensiveness in a logical way. The Oxford dictionary defines 'a mystic as one who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truth beyond the understanding, and mystical poetry is concerned with the revelation of truth which lies beyond the purview of sense and reason'. It can also be described as 'Mysticism is matter of experience, of faith, of intuition rather than reason. Any rational interpretation is not capable of describing mystical experience fully. The term Mysticism is loosely applied to all that is obscure and inexplicable and it is a faith in the immortality of the soul. The body is mortal but the soul survives and keeps living on as part of the eternal. Keeping in view the difficulty one has to encounter in defining mysticism, the chief features of Mysticism may be summarized as follows:

1. It is an apprehension of divine presence in Nature.
2. It is a matter of faith. It is incapable of being communicated logically.
3. It is a belief in the immortality of soul which animates the physical frame of flesh and blood.
4. A mystic has experiences and visions and he is convinced of their reality.
5. The term is also used to denote what is obscure and incapable of rational interpretation.

The close analysis of Yeats's poetry reveals that it has undercurrent of mysticism from the beginning to the end. The world of Yeats's poetry is a world of mystic visionary in which the gods and fairies of Celtic mythology live again. Yeats was of the conviction that the realities of the fairy and other supernatural beings are the necessary link in the chain of beings. Quite early in his career Yeats came in contact with Mohini Chatterji and was deeply impressed and influenced by Indian Vedantic Philosophy. Every mountain and valley, every stone and coppice is rich with the memory of the past and is the haunt of the supernatural. His early creations include three poems on Indian themes. The Indian landscapes of these poems are pervaded with the life of spirit enveloping the Universe. This belief is given an emphasis expression in 'The Indian Upon God':

*I passed a little further on, and heard a peacock say'*

*Who made the grass and made the worms and made my fathers gay*

*He is a monstrous peacock, and he waveth all the night*

*His languid tail above us, lit with myriad spots of light.*

In another poem which the poet penned towards the close of his career also there is a mystic note:

*I proclaim that there is*

*Among birds, or beasts or men*

*One that I perfect or at peace*

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*All that could run or leap or swim*

*Whether in wood water or cloud,*

*Acclaiming, proclaiming, declaring Him.*

Indian Philosophy had influenced Yeats's mind and temper very much and Indian thought proved instrumental in giving clarity and shape to his own convictions. He had shown deep interest in the teachings of Indian Upanishads, Vedantic Philosophy. The poetry of Rabindra Nath Tagore and Blake had also influenced him a lot.

Christianity and Victorian Science had stopped influencing him at the early stage and consequentially Yeats developed convictions of his own and was anxiously looking for a system which could give his beliefs and convictions a pattern and coherence. This anxiousness pushed him to study magic, Astronomy, Theosophy, the doctrines of Plato and Plotinus. He also showed interest in occult systems. Hence the curious blend of philosophy, mythology, magic and expository symbolism is found in his poetry. The poem 'The Vision' records all these searches. Yeats's theory of the cyclic process of history, the revolution of gyres, the correspondence between the phases of Moon and the phases of human personality. His concept of Aninias Mundi and Spiritus Mundi etc are essentially mystical in nature; and as such they are not susceptible to rational exposition. Despite his best efforts, it was rather difficult for him to make it explicable to his readers because what he wanted to convey was a matter of faith.

Yeats also believed in visions and trances like the mystics and it is said that he had experienced them too. He sought to communicate his experiences and beliefs to his readers. Unfortunately ordinary language was incapable for the purpose, hence he had to rely on or fall back upon the use of symbols. Symbolism is primarily mystical in nature. The use of symbols could convey the supernatural experiences and visions. In the poem 'All Soul's Night' the poet talks about the practice of calling up departed spirits. In 'The Double Vision

of Michael Robertes' two visions of great significance are referred. In 'The Second Coming' the vision is prophetic giving us a peeping insight into the alarming future. An intellectual solitude in which the poet would experience a mystic's delight and joy is explained in 'Sailing to Byzantium'. The experience enshrined the following lines is mystical in essence:

*So great a sweetness flows into the breast,*

*We must laugh and we must sing,*

*We are blest by everything,*

*Everything we look upon is blest.*

It is also to be admitted that Yeats's poetry is obscure and intricate like the works of other mystics. Yet the differences can be found between Yeats and other mystics. A true Mystic professes his faith in one spirit of Mind working in Nature, shaping all objects and phenomena. But Yeats's belief in magic and the supernatural elements waters down his mysticism. It is also to be noted that mysticism repudiates life and its pleasures. Mysticism's other-worldly inclination lays stress on asceticism and a negation of life. Yeats on the contrary does not negate life, instead he expresses a deep desire to enjoy the life fully. In the poem entitled 'The Dialogue of Self and Soul' life is accepted positively and with passionate zest. Even at the old age, Yeats was eager to enjoy the benefits and blessings of life and prayed for an 'old man's frenzy' and longed to be 'a foolish, passionate old man'. In 'The Politics' a poem written at his last phase, he averred that he could not fix his attention on Roman, Russian or Spanish Politics with 'that girl standing there' and desired:

*But O that I were young again*

*And held her in arms.*

This sort of yearning is ridiculous in the case of an old man who is a mystic. A mystic always tries to shatter the fetters; of every kind of pattern. But Yeats searched for pattern all his life. He sought to impose order, not, as the true mystic did, to break down a too neatly ordered system and get beyond it. He turned to mysticism not in search of shattering new incites but in quest of categories. He also maintained casual scepticism concerning what to the mystics themselves were the essential truths.

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