Yeats’ Image of Ireland and Reflections in His Works
Shivani Verma
Assistant Professor
Lovely Professional University, Punjab

Abstract: William Butler Yeats, an Irish poet, was one of the foremost figures of Twentieth Century Irish literature. As a poet of Irish Literary Revival, his literature was purely Irish in tone, as well as subject matter. During the early years of his writings, his Irish obsession remained an integral and complex part of his personality. Along with his other compatriots, he believed in awakening of the legendary past of Ireland in common folk. This attempt of his, is relevant in his works. It is interesting to see that Yeats’s poetic dream of Ireland, as Suheil B. Bushrui says, “was not petrified, but possessed the living quality of change.” Yeats’s attitude towards Ireland changed (matured) as changes took place in Ireland. As every living being on this earth is time bound and changes with the passage of time, Yeats’s dream was also very much ‘alive’.

Keywords: Ireland, mythopoeic, stressed relationship, compatriots, awakening, complex, subject tone, aware, Indianness, Englishness

W.B. Yeats held an image of ‘ideal Irish nation’ that was based on the “aristocratic, heroic and peasant ideals intrinsic in his poet’s creed.” He held a pride in his own Irishness. He attempted to celebrate his own nationality while trying to emphasize his Ireland’s relation to spirituality. Through his works, he attempted to make Irishmen aware and proud of their inherited nobility. According to R.J. Loftus, “Yeats’ real hope for Ireland was not a politician’s platform, it was the poet’s dream.” Yeats had a picture of Ireland in his mind and in order to envisage Ireland, he formulated a ‘national myth’. This myth, according to Bushrui was an intact one that had its roots firmly grounded in Ireland’s history and heritage. Explaining this, Yeats writes in 1888, “To the greater poets everything they see has its relation to the national life, and through that to the universal and divine life: nothing is an isolated artistic moment; there is unity everywhere. . . But to this universalism, this seeing of unity everywhere, you can only attain through what is near you, your nation, or, if you be no traveler, your village and the cobwebs on your walls. You can no more have the greatest poetry without a nation than religion without symbols. One can only reach out to the universe with a gloved hand-
that glove is one’s nation, the only thing one knows even a little of.” Yeats holds a very significant idea of necessity of a nation for an artist to attain a level of greatness. He emphasizes upon the importance of having historical and cultural knowledge of one’s own nation for an artist. He further goes on to compare poetry with religion and asserts that a religion is as futile without symbols as poetry without nation. When a poet holds his nationality in his mind, due to historical and social circumstances, he has with her/him certain symbols, to which she/he feels related. The use of these symbols in reference to Ireland is a developing feature of Yeats’ poetries and verses. These symbols along with Irish folk tales and common myths enabled him to develop, what Taneja calls as “personal and individual mythology.” The further influence of other symbolists like O’Leary encouraged Yeats to turn ‘mythical figures into private symbols.’ Themes such as pride, individualism, passion, ideals of aristocracy, peasantry and heroism, held central position in Yeats’ mythopoeic process of creating a national myth for Ireland. He encouraged Irishmen to value and practice these emotions. Through his writings, he showcases Irishmen’s harmonic relationship with nature, as R.J. Loftus says, “he would seek to invest the Irish race with a deep-rooted sense of the spiritual passion that permits men to live in harmony with Nature’s grand design.”

In the initial phase of his career, Yeats had an image of Ireland which was receptive of his imagination. During the last two decades of nineteenth century, the circumstances too, favoured him. Ireland developed from ‘a crude nascent nationalism in politics’ to a rich cultural awareness. However, in later years his dream got tainted with political violence and fanaticism and he ended by finding an Ireland recalcitrant to it, as Seamus Deane suggests. His works had a theme of alienation and isolation experienced by Agrarian society of Ireland. There emerged a conflict when his ideal society clashed with the realities of the modern world. He believed on the necessary distinction between art and life. The art has to be ideal, somewhat like the picture of his ideal Ireland. He emphasized this with the use of relatively remote themes and literary traditions of Ireland. John O’Leary played a significant role in shaping Yeats’ about Ireland an Irish identity. This desire of Irish National culture that he inherited from O’Leary, probably transformed Yeats into an aggressive nationalist in his later days. Bushrui calls Yeats as one of the last Romantic, and being a romantics, as he believed, like various other romantic poets of that era, Yeats was destined to face a conflict between artistic and spiritual values. But in Yeats’s case, conflict was even more complicated with the emergence of violent or potentially violent element in Irish nationalism. This was probably because, not everyone in Ireland held
the same ideals as Yeats’s. He thus, ‘combined a revolutionary aesthetic with traditional politics.’ The idea of nationalism varied, from poets, to politicians, to masses. The concept of ideal nationalism of Yeats, however, covered up the stressed relationship and differences that rose in the Irish society with the emergence of Industrialization. Yeats attempted to fill the gap originated from class division of society through uniting Irish folk into his ideal concept of Irish identity. He called Irishmen to struggle against colonial regime by uniting for the sake of their ‘Irishness’ and Irish identity, neglecting their class differences. This call for sacrifice found small reciprocity in the minds of Irishmen whose idea of nation varied from that of Yeats’s, and they followed Parnell’s death in the cause of nationalism. Due to this reason, probably Yeats always condemned the middle class that arose as a result of Industrialization, being a middle class man himself. Expressing his condemnation towards middle class he wrote in 1907, “I could not foresee that a new class, which had begun to rise to power under the shadow of Parnell, would change the nature of the Irish movement, which, needing no longer great sacrifices, nor bringing any great risk to individuals, could do without exceptional men and those activities of the mind that are founded on the exceptional moment.” It is interesting to see how Parnell’s death affected Yeats and a new idea of nationalism followed the nationalism that emerged after Parnell’s death had an instinct of, as Yeats calls, “immediate victory and immediate utility”, and beneath these nationalist issues there lies more fundamental issues which are often neglected. The new emerging idea of Irish nationalism lacked ideals of nobility, spiritual effort and sacrifices, for which Yeats’ compatriots labored.

As there occurred a distinction between the Ireland’s view of Yeats and masses, Yeats believed that majority of Irish mass needed education. This was one of the goal of Yeats and his compatriots. They used their art as a means to educate common Irishmen. As Yeats was a firm believer of historical and cultural values of Ireland, this was well reflected in his educational system too. His educational system was both a modern method and, at the same time promoted deep-rootedness in Irish past. Yeats’s principle of education was very much identical to his own idea of nationality. Being modern too, education according to him, was never controlled and confined to rigid logics and science. His educational system had a dominant theme of Ireland’s ancient myths and legends to which he alluded in the hope of instilling pride into the Irish folk. He strived to incorporate the ideas freedom and spontaneity in his countrymen. Explaining this same idea he says in his essay Compulsory Gaelic, “I am not sure that I like the idea of a state with a definite purpose, and there are moments, impractical moments, perhaps, when I think that the State should leave that mind free to create. I
think Aristotle defined the soul as that which moves itself, and how can it move itself if everything is arranged beforehand?” Education for Yeats, was undoubtedly necessary, but that education should be a noble one. The kind of education he wanted Irish people to have, propagates individualism. An education without these ideals were hollow, according to him. Yeats’s writings represented an amalgam, of romanticism with revolutionary aesthetics with traditional politics. Nietzsche is another writer in whose writings we find wonderful blend of these ideas. Apart from being deep rooted in its culture, Yeats’s writings also had a strong theme of regeneration, which was an influence of other romantic writers such as Blake and Shelley, upon him. His Ireland was a regenerated one, which arose while breaking the shackles of British empirical philosophy and Industrial capitalism. For Yeats, “the miracles of technology had already lost their aura inside the dreary frames of empiricism.” This is the reason why he wished to educate Irishmen differently, based on the notions of traditions and historical nobility, that the concepts of capitalism and empiricism can never give. Yeats created his own philosophy of history based upon his knowledge of history and magic while giving it a specific mystical element. He opposed the empirical tradition by formulating his own conception of ‘Irishness’ in same way as earlier writers before Hobbes and Locke did, by formulating ‘Englishness’ much earlier. He viewed ‘death’ from a different perception by relating it to mysticism found in Irish traditional folk tales. Yeats fought the battle against utilitarianism and Capitalism by bringing together aristocrats and peasants together in the name of nationality and Irishness. They were distinct in class but shared the same bond of Irish brotherhood. Through employing these ideas in his works, Yeats fought a romantic battle against Industrialization. He held a romantic notion that such a unification of aristocrats and peasant class is only possible in a country like Ireland. The ideal image of Ireland, Yeats held in his mind, constantly encouraged him towards his struggle against industrialization and also suggested his victory, which according to him was Ireland’s victory of historical traditions. This victory of Ireland against utilitarianism was very important for him, not only because he held Ireland as a special country, but because this battle between romanticism and utilitarianism was lost by romantics, everywhere else in the world. They had a hope associated with Ireland. He viewed the history of Ireland emerging from contemporary politics. He represented in his works a blend of magic, mysticism and art, which helped to view economical and technological backwardness of Ireland under the shadow of spiritual glamour. This perception of Ireland’s ‘rusticity’ as spiritual rather than being uncivilized or backwards, is significant. Deane compares this perception of Ireland with “vestigial Greece in a sternly Roman world.”
Yeats’ condemnation of middle class is one of the well-known characteristic of Yeats’ writings. Deanne compares Yeats’ view of middle class with that of another famous writer James Joyce. James Joyce’s works depict another important aspect of Irish society, that is ‘Irish bourgeois class’ which is absent from the works of Yeats. James Joyce, being one of the greatest Irish writer of bourgeois tradition describes Irish middle class catholic society. On the other hand, it is interesting to see how Yeats, being a middle class man himself, always distanced himself from bourgeois class. His condemnation of the middle classes is the inevitable social extension of his aesthetic. In the essay Ideas of Good and Evil in The Cutting of an Agate, Yeats distinguishes between the “three types of men (who) have made beautiful things, (aristocrats, countrymen and artists) and those who being always anxious, have come to possess little that is good in itself.” He calls artists as the opponents of ‘makers of religion’ who have established their ceremonies on the basis of ‘fear of death’. This ‘fear of death’, according to Yeats is very much prevalent in middle class. An example of this is can be seen in his poem September 1913:

What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone?
For men were born to pray and save:
Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,
It’s with O’Leary in the grave.

Here ‘shivering prayer’ depicts middle class’ attachment to praying and saving. Their prayers to be saved are out of their fear of death. He calls middle class as ‘unredeemable’ from the ‘things of earth’ and they are unaesthetic due to their fear of death. Middle class’ perception of death as something imaginative and a physical reality clashes with Yeats’ idea of reincarnation. According to Yeats, middle class neutralized the idea of death, whereas he viewed death in relation to reincarnation, as Deanne says, “This, I believe, is a governing feature of Yeats’ thought and experience. His abhorrence of the neutralization of death in the
middle-class consciousness led him towards disciplines and interests in which the notion of death was pre-
eminent and the contemplation of it a crucial activity.”

Yeats strived towards reincarnation and spiritualism because he held it as a means through which one
could overcome physicality of death. If Yeats notions are viewed politically, one realizes that he attacked the
notions of empiricism while defending traditionalist and cultural beliefs. One can assert that this can be
probably because the traditional beliefs of Ireland are inclined towards the concept of Reincarnation. These
traditional beliefs are very much identical to Greek as well as ancient Indian traditional beliefs which holds
concept of reincarnation central to it. That is why, like Greece, Ireland was for him a holy land. According to
him, rebirth and transformation of a soul from one body to another is its capability to defeat physical aspects
of death. Unlike bourgeois, he didn’t fear death, rather he ‘outfaced it’ and related this idea as prevalent in
Irish tradition. Ireland became for Yeats, according to Deane, “the embodiment of such beliefs and attitudes.”
Deane draws similarities between two contrary concepts- Yeats’ romantic world and bourgeois world. He calls
them as, not so different while explaining that “neither world will yield to the fact of extinction”. Both lead to
emphasize upon the notion of eternity, just the ways are different. Romantic world believes in the eternity of
world, while bourgeois world believes in eternity of consciousness. One idea that binds the two contrary
notions of the notions of the world is ‘fear of death.’ Yeats considers art as a form that death cannot alter. Life
without achievement of art is meaningless like a cycle of meaningless action. An art gets its aesthetic form
when one thinks about death in relation to personal and historical terms. This fusion of personal with historical
is seen in his poem, Leda and The swan. This blend of personal with historical established a kind of equilibrium
or balance, further leading to immortality of art. Through this kind of art, one can overcome death and this art
can’t be altered by death. Yeats’ lament for the loss of his own bodily (sexual) powers, coinciding with his
lament for the loss of a civilization in his works, can be seen as an example of this mixing of personal with
historical. When he talks about death, this death is not only his own physical death, but also the death of
civilization. But again, as he was a firm believer of regeneration, his lament for the decay of his physical body,
transformed into his imaginative strength that emerged from his soul. He reinforced the autonomies of body-
soul, material- spiritual, and physical-imaginative. He often described the cycle of meaninglessness, into which
Europe and Ireland feel, by using various violent images and symbols. The Second Coming is an example of
this. His works reflected a lament for his loss of sexuality and loss of Ireland’s culture as intertwined. ‘Mystical
order’ present in Yeats’ writings can also be linked to Maud Gonne’s influence upon him. On her behalf he engaged in political organization, and wrote *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*: an empty castle on the Castle Rock in Lough key where he and Maud Gonne were to preside. This empty castle symbolized the combination of both Pagan as well as Christian Ireland. The Easter Rebellion of 1916 effected Yeats, as much as it did to Ireland. But, despite of him being personally affected, ‘heroic ideal’ he held in his writings never wavered. It was always relevant in his works. According to Loftus, “the Rising Poets found in Irish history a tradition of heroic gesture, of dedication and courage in the face of over-whelming odds.” This ‘heroic gesture’ he held in his writings was similar to the heroic ideal image of Ireland he had in his heart and mind. Thus, he glorified central figures in Easter Risings of Ireland in 1916 and establish a heroic, ideal image of them, as reflected in his poem *Easter Rising 1916*, one of his finest public and political poem. This poem not only depicts the political situation of rebel Ireland, but also the inner thoughts of Yeats. Both of them represented a kind of ambiguity, not only of revolution but also inside Yeats’ mind. Both an ominous and joyous reaction is implied, in the last line of poem, when he says, “A terrible beauty is born.” Here his mixed personal feelings are expressed, where he is himself amazed with the martyrdom of sixteen rebellions, but at the same time he condemns the kind of hatred emerged in the hearts of people due to this martyrdom. According to Deanne, Irish nationalism became increasingly transfigured in his imagination by the sacrifice of Easter week into a movement opposed to everything that middle-class England, Arnold philistines, stood for- Utilitarianism, statism, the greasy till. By offering themselves to death in Easter Rebellion 1916, they broke the cycle of recurrence. This symbolized the awakened consciousness of those sixteen men, which later became the consciousness of the whole Ireland, irrespective of their status and class differences. By describing the completeness of recurring meaningless cycle of Irish revolution through sacrifice of sixteen men, Yeats draws a similarity between the earlier meaninglessness of recurring cycle with his idea of meaningless life cycle of bourgeois class. He denied the bourgeois character of the Irish rebellion and attempted to preserve ‘aristocratic emblem’ fading the era of flourishing Industrialization. He held the race factor as supreme against class division. Irish historical past was the key image upon which he held the image of future Ireland. We can see this idea of him in his poem *The Second Coming*, in which future is seen in terms of past. As V.S. Naipaul explains in *An Area of Darkness*, about the prevalence of the concept of Englishness, even after colonizers’ departure, the whole Irish revival and idea of Irishness, upon which Yeats stressed and emphasized can be understood as a contrary response to forced ‘Englishness’ that colonizers propagated in their colonies. Yeats’ works can be interpreted as a
nationalist response to forced superiority of Englishness upon Ireland. This can also be compared and understood in terms of somewhat similar situation in India where emphasis on Indianness was stressed, through many of Indian writers, as a response to colonial rule of British in India.

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