



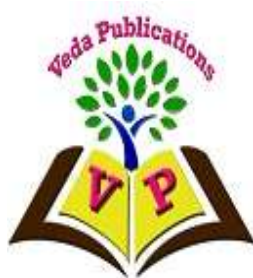
## FROM FANTASY TO FAITH: AN EXPLORATION OF SPIRITUAL DIMENSION IN THE POETRY OF YEATS AND IQBAL

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### ABSTRACT



In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Victorian scientific rationalism with its empirical world outlook was questioning the existence of metaphysical reality. Every new theory and invention contributed to the materialistic interpretation of the man-universe relationship. Darwin and Lamarck declared man as a descendant of the ape. The new discoveries in physics and astronomy dealt a severe blow to the biblical notion of the universe. It was the age of suspicion and every custom and belief was put to philosophical scrutiny. European colonizers manipulated these scientific theories to serve their vested interests by fabricating the myth of superior status in evolutionary hierarchy. The agenda behind such projection was to create a discourse so as to justify their subjugation of 'other' people. All these developments led to a spiritual crisis in which every metaphysical reality was analyzed through the prism of materialistic theories. However, there were individuals and intellectuals who tried their best to develop a counter-narrative to the materialistic world outlook. Among such intellectuals, the name of W.B. Yeats and Mohammad Iqbal is worthy of consideration. In this paper an attempt has been made to explore the spiritual dimension in their poetry.

**Keywords:** *Spiritualism, Materialism, Metaphysics, Mythology, Folklore.*

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**DISCUSSION**

The poetry of Yeats and Iqbal is a reaction to spiritual crisis of the age they lived in. In their poetry, the emphasis on the spirituality is in fact a protest against the prevailing materialistic philosophies. Whereas Iqbal contextualized this spiritual aspect from the Islamic perspective, Yeats found it in the realm of theosophy, magic and occult practices. Yeats was actively involved in theosophical activities. For him, theosophy was a route to realize the spiritual truth of the universe. Talking about the achievements of Theosophy, Richard Ellmann states that "spiritual evolution restored the hope which natural evolution had removed, and materialism was utterly condemned" (p.60). The movement of Theosophy was founded as 'mixture of Eastern mysticism and western science with spiritual overlay' by a Russian lady Helena Petrovna Blavatsky or HPB and an American lawyer Henry Steel Olcott in 1875 in New York (Harper p.153). But it was mainly Madame Blavatsky who spearheaded the movement and became its main proponent. It was launched as a counter discourse to materialistic philosophies. It had attacked all existing divine faiths and introduced itself as panacea for political and religious corruption. It did oppose science by firmly holding the belief that man is not the product of biological evolution with ape ancestry, rather, he is a part of 'Omnipotent, Eternal, Boundless and Immutable Universal Oversoul' with whom he has to unite by attaining final salvation by passing through the various cycles of Incarnation in accordance with 'Cyclic and Karmic law' (Ellmann 60-61). Madame Blavatsky projected herself as a prophetic figure in possession of the occult knowledge. She traced her apprenticeship to two Tibetan gurus, namely, *Koot-homi* and *Moorya* who had guided her personally and telepathically towards the path of spiritual powers. Theosophy attacked science wherever necessary but did not reject it altogether. In fact what differentiated theosophy from other spiritual systems was its unique blending of mysticism, science and philosophy.

Another reason why Yeats was influenced by the theosophists was the fact that 'they accepted and incorporated into their system ghosts and fairies, and regarded dreams and symbols as supernatural

manifestations' and showed opposition to materialism' (Ellmann 69-70). This metaphysical influence is quite evident in the poetry of Yeats. Even in folk tales, the fairies and ghosts are intimately associated with the mountains, rivers, forests and lakes of the Ireland. In Irish culture and folklore there exists a spiritual bond between supernatural beings and humans. It would not be an exaggeration if we state that the belief in metaphysical existence is an integral part of Irish consciousness. While referring to the poem 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', Harper points to the same inclination when she suggests that 'imagined lake water has a deeper spiritual significance than personal nostalgia for one remembered place and time' (p.152). It was Yeats' closeness with the spiritual realm that he desires an idealistic way of life where materialistic forces have no say in controlling life and dreams of an ordinary man. He says:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree  
And a small cabin build there, of clay and  
wattles made  
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for  
the honey-bee,  
And live alone in the bee-loud glade

(Yeats, *The Collected Poems*, P.31)

At many places Yeats tries to blend the natural with the supernatural to achieve some desired goals. Edward Said refers to the same fact when he says that Yeats used Irish 'backwardness as a source for radically disturbing, disruptive return to spiritual ideals lost in an overdeveloped modern Europe' (*Cult. and Imp.* 274). As a freedom-loving human being, he felt disgusted with the social reality of his time. Injustice and exploitation at the hands of foreign colonial power presented a heart-rending scenario to his inner-self. As a politician he was well-aware about helplessness of his fellow Irish men. However, through his poetic potentialities he tried to raise the banner of resistance through various means. The world of fairies for him was not only limited to mythical interpretation, rather, he used it symbolically to highlight the picture of independent Ireland in which trouble and anxiousness had little presence. For him the journey to mythical Ireland was a journey to his lost identity. After all Irish folklore and fairy tales preserved the essence called



Irishness. The African Novelist Ben Okri refers to the same opinion when he says, "Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories, individuals and nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations" (D. Jefferessp.3). Yeats was thoroughly acquainted with the importance of using native literature and folklore to achieve political ends. It was after deep contemplation which made him to convince himself that he should never go for the scenery of a poem to any country but his own, and he had thought that he should hold on to that conviction to the end' (N. Jeffares 12). In 'The Stolen Child' there is an interaction between the physical and the metaphysical world. The stolen child is symbolic representation of all those human beings who had been victims of injustice and oppression. It was only in the fairy world that panacea was available for their grief and sorrow. It is in the fairy world that joy and happiness is assured to its visitor:

To and fro we leap  
And chase the frothy bubbles  
While the world is full of troubles  
And is anxious in its sleep

(Yeats, *The Collected Poems*.p.14)

Iqbal has also laid great emphasis on the metaphysical aspect of man and the universe. There are many instances in his poetry where he unequivocally condemns the materialist outlook of the West. In his poem '*Maghribi Tehzeeb*', he has made scathing criticism on western materialism. He says that western civilization is sheer chaos for body and soul because it has lost its spiritual essence to materialistic philosophies. In fact this is the same position which Yeats had taken regarding the decadence of English materialistic civilization by referring to the literature produced by it as 'the poetry of cigarettes and black coffee, of absinthe and the skirt dance' (Watson 97). Despite being a citizen of a third world country, Iqbal was well-aware about the spiritual bankruptcy of the west. He had been to Britain, Italy, Germany and Spain. He had obtained the first-hand experience of how it worked. He warned the European people of their dangerous love for materialism. He launched scathing criticism against capitalism and communism.

Similarly, Yeats' quest for spiritual values of the past was again a form of protest against the

status quo and stagnancy of the social and political reality of his time. The celebration of pagan and Christian heroes alike clearly show that the religious boundaries are not redlines to him. Rather, he was more interested in universal humanitarian values. He showed deep reverence for Oisín's patriotism and Cúchulain's bravery and drew inspiration from them. He treated these pagan heroic characters in his poetry with crystal-clear vision. By reintroducing these mythical characters, he tried to restore the lost identity of his fellow countrymen. He reminded them of their heroic history which was full of sacrifices. Keeping his Anglo-Irish background in mind, it was not possible for him to advocate armed resistance against the British. However, what he did was no less significant than armed struggle itself. He definitely helped in creating many Cúchulains of his time by bringing back the past heroes in native Irish psyche. Edward Said refers to the same contribution when he says, "Think of what Yeats does for the Irish past, with its Cúchulains and its great houses, which gave the nationalist struggle something to revive and admire" (Said, *Cul. and Imp.*, p. 17). In this regard Yeats says:

What stood in the Post Office  
With Pearse and Connolly  
What comes out of the mountain  
Where men first shed their blood?  
Who thought Cúchulain till it seemed  
He stood where they had stood  
(Yeats, *The Collected Poems*, p. 12)

The retrieval to the past was in fact a spiritual journey in itself. After all Yeats was in search of some spiritual philosophy. The desire for such a journey is thoroughly expressed in the poem 'Sailing to Byzantium'. In this poem Yeats expresses his inner desire of spiritual elevation. For him, medieval Christian city of Byzantium was the place where he could find spiritual peace and tranquility. He says, "...Byzantium was the centre of European civilization and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolize the search for the spiritual life by a journey to that city" (N. Jeffares 21-30). He shows the intensity of his love for such a spiritual journey when he says that if he could be given a month of antiquity and leave to spend it where he chose, he would spend it in Byzantium (N. Jeffares 212). This symbolic journey



to Byzantium is the journey to one's soul. As the poet has realized the fading nature of youth and various pleasures associated with mortal life, he is in search of spiritual eternity. One of the central ideas in the poem is destructive nature of time vis-à-vis the worldly beauty. The abundance of material means offer no escape from death and decadence. He realized the hollowness of materialistic philosophies of the modern world. Consequently, he acknowledges the supremacy of spiritual world in which mortals achieve immortality by uniting with the Omnipotent Universal Soul. As a result, he decides to sail to Byzantium where spirituality is at its zenith. Spiritual symbols are scattered everywhere in the city. It is the place where death is defeated by eternity. It reflects the victory of love and justice over the forces of evil and darkness. He says:

An aged man is but a paltry thing  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing,.....  
.....

And therefore I have sailed the seas and  
come

To the holy city of Byzantium.

(Yeats, *The Collected Poems*, p.163)

The same spiritual quest for eternity is evident in Iqbal's famous poem *Masjid - i- Qurtabah* (Mosque of Cordoba). A striking similarity appears in the thought process of Yeats and Iqbal when we compare the two poems. Iqbal tries to achieve the same end by contextualizing the mosque of Cordoba in its great Muslim civilization which Yeats tried to realize in 'Sailing to Byzantium'. Compared to Yeats's Byzantium, Iqbal's poem is more organized and descriptive in nature. In the very first stanza he highlights the significance of time as the source of all changes in the universe. Time brings death and destruction with it. But he is not pessimistic in front of this reality. The poem shows his longing for permanence in the metaphysical cosmos. In fact it is the permanence of art which renders eternity to its artist. However, true art springs from the lofty aims and ideological depths of its creator. For Iqbal, it was the spiritual reservoir of Islam which enabled them to create such a masterpiece. In the poem, the mosque of Cordoba has been treated as a place where natural and supernatural intermingle with each other to

transcend the barrier of time. Using structuralism terminology, the mosque acts as a signifier and the signified is the pre-renaissance Muslim civilization of Spain. As is always case with Iqbal, the retrieval of the past is not meant to escape from the harsh realities on the ground, rather, he tries to sensitize people to their downfall and decadence by juxtaposing their glorious past with the despondent present. As such the call for resistance against stagnancy and status quo becomes louder than ever.

The mosque of Cordoba attains a symbolic significance in his poetry where the metaphysical truth gets reflected in physical reality. Hundreds of years have passed since it was built by a pre-renaissance Muslim civilization of Spain. However, Iqbal tries to see a glimpse of that civilization through the pillars and walls of the mosque. He tries to experience that spiritual calm which would have been associated with the great city of Cordoba. He showed great reverence for the city as it represented the height of material progress within the boundaries of spirituality. He was also fascinated by the philosophy and philosophers of the city he dreamt of. By referring to the ascetic and intellectual Arabs of the city in the Dark Ages of Europe, he highlights the period of time when spiritual values were the governing rules of the society.

Like Yeats, Iqbal celebrates the native and religious heroism to hit at the stagnancy and pessimism of his nation. While Yeats had rejected orthodox Christianity in his young age, Iqbal always remained a staunch defender of core Islamic values. Consequently, his heroes were not of pagan in origin and were not of mythical nature. They were real life heroes of by-gone centuries. There appears a long list of characters in his poetry who are remembered in history for defending general human values and morality by sacrificing their precious lives to uphold spiritual values against the onslaught of materialistic forces. To such a list belong persons like Imam Hussaina.s. and Tipu Sultan.

The spiritual message of Yeats and Iqbal is as relevant today as it used to be hundred years back. In fact looking into the current political situation in the third world countries where blood thirsty wars are being fought everywhere, the message of peace and harmony propagated by their



poetry is need of the hour. When clash of civilizations theory has become the guiding force of western foreign policy, their message of dialogue among the civilizations needs to be promulgated with full enthusiasm. When territorial Imperialism has been replaced by the cultural Imperialism which involves the use of cultural means to ensure imperial hegemony over the third world countries by manipulating their political, economical and social system, their poetry which deals with the questions of identity, self-reliance and cultural resistance has found new relevance from twenty the first century perspective.

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