

INTRODUCTION

The resolute never relinquish their goal.

(Bhartrihari: 1967 : 52)

W.B. Yeats's poetry and dramatic works have been a favourite subject of study for literary critics and researchers working for their dissertations. There is a spate of criticism by eminent critics, both Indian and international. Diverse aspects of the poet's verse have been focused upon by different critics. The gradual development of the poet, the different influences, symbolism as a basic ingredient of his art, the theory of the mask, the use of biography, the interest in the occult, the handling of myth, his role in public life and detailed criticism of individual poems have engaged critics. Though D.G. Boyce, O.D. Edwards and M. Hurst candidly speak of Celtic nationalism in general, the topic of Irish nationalism and W.B. Yeats's poetry has been touched upon perfunctorily by eminent critics dealing with other seminal aspects of the poet's works. Suheil B. Bushrui's dissertation *Images of a Changing Ireland in the Works of W.B. Yeats* and R.J. Loftus's *Nationalism in Modern Anglo-Irish Poetry* are two of the works that throw a light on this aspect, but in comparison to the abundance of critical writings on Yeats, there is still a dearth of writing on this standpoint. The intrinsically nationalistic domain in Yeats's verse, scantily hinted at, is still an unexplored territory. The fact that Yeats trapped his native resources at every phase of his poetic career is the key gap in Yeats criticism that I propose to explore in this dissertation.

In post colonial criticism, the concept of nationalism has become a subject of discourse. On January 3, 2005 there was a seminar in New Delhi where the debate on nationalism was of key interest. Lord Megnad Desai of the London School of Economics argued that the concept of nationalism was no longer relevant in a region where there was a motley collection of religious entities, castes, communities and linguistic groups. Dr. Amartya Sen mounted a frontal attack by saying that it was the pluralistic character which was the strength of a country that was multilingual, multicultural and multiracial. Such arguments cannot be applied to Ireland, for it never had a multifaceted character like India. In Ireland, the idea of nationhood was embedded not only in the assertion of political sovereignty but in the creation of a strong individual identity. Seamus Deane in his introduction to Eagleton, Jameson and Edward Said's *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*. (1990) says,

Irish nationalism is, in its foundational moments, a derivative of its British counterpart. Almost all nationalist movements have been derided as provincial, actually or potentially racist, given to exclusivist and doctrinaire positions and rhetoric. (7)

In the same introduction he writes,

All nationalisms have a metaphysical dimension, for they are all driven by an ambition to realize their intrinsic essence in some specified and tangible form. The form may be a political structure or a literary

Thus, nationalisms attempt to "create a version of history for themselves in which their intrinsic essence has always manifested itself" (9). This is exactly what this paper attempts to show. Yeats's poetry gives a voice to this essence of Ireland.

The French theorist Ernest Renan categorically emphasised in "What is a Nation" that the nation is a "soul", a "spiritual principle" (1996 : 53). Yeats searched for the soul of Ireland in his poetic works and this paper proposes to go into an indepth study of this nationalist spirit in the poet, and to agree with Rabindranath Tagore's contention that the soul of Ireland has been laid bare in the poetry of Yeats (1991: 667). The two poets, one Indian and the other Irish, worked under similar conditions and were both haunted by the idea of emancipation from the same colonial power. The British hegemony was a source of excruciating anguish for both. Tagore queried animatedly, "The night's penance, shall not the dawn arrive?" (1991: 149 trans. mine). Another nationalist poet, Nazrul Islam, vehemently asserted "My country is my own, it is my home" (1974 : 31). Similar query and assertion are found in Yeats's poems.

Yeats sought to awaken an essentially native consciousness within Ireland and also assimilated his poetic resources to unravel the rich native Irish reservoir for all other nations. Ernest Gellner's comment, "Nationalism is not only the awakening of nations to self consciousness : it invents nations where they do not exist" (1996 :

34) is relevant to Yeats's early verse. The poet was composing at a time when Ireland was still under the British rule. However, the distinctive Irishness could be felt in the nuances of his verse. My proposition is that Yeats's poetry shows a strong bond with Ireland at every phase.

Richard Handler holds the view that nationalism is "an ideology about individuated being", under any circumstances, congenial or adverse. As corollary it is easy to see how Yeats conformed to the belief that nationalism as an ideology concerned itself with "boundedness" and "continuity", or rather "homogeneity encompassing diversity". He looked upon Ireland as a haven, utilised her resources in his endeavour to harmonize his spirit of nationalism and art.

Recent writers on nationalism like Adrian Hastings argue that for the "development of nationhood from one or more ethnicities, by far the most important and widely present factor is that of an extensively used vernacular literature" (1997 : 2). This is in fact the contention in this paper. Much has been said about the gradual but distinctive change in Yeats's poems belonging to the first phase of his literary career and those of the last. My objective is to show that despite the changes, at no phase did he omit home-spun, native materials.

"Nationalism" as a term is used to refer to political movements seeking or exercising state power and justifying such action with

nationalist argument. It implies a devotion, often chauvinistic, to one's own nation and a good nationalist is, according to Yeats, "one who is ready to give up a great deal that he may preserve to his country whatever part of her possessions he is best fitted to guard..." (1927 : 59).

The poetic works of Yeats reveal the poet's conviction that there can be no "great literature without nationality" and no great "nationality without literature" (1986 : 297). The poet strove to capture the spirit of Ireland in his verse. He portrayed Ireland with her singularity and to do justice to his enterprise, he exploited the rich and inexhaustible Irish heritage in his poems.

When Yeats began his literary career Ireland was still a colony under the British imperialism. Though Yeats lived in London for a major period of his life and mingled freely with the literary circles, he felt a keen urge to voice intrinsic Irish thoughts and beliefs, to deal with indigenous materials in order to preserve the distinctive essence. He claimed, vehemently though not vociferously, "I am a nationalist" (1927 : 56). Many national artists of decolonization and nationalism like Tagore, Pablo Neruda, Vallejo, Cesaire, Senghar, Darwish and Faiz expressed similar urge, for it is true that in "time of acute national consciousness ... the deeper life of the people is expressed" (O'Driscoll: 1971 : 11).

During the later part of the nineteenth century there was a quest for the roots or the "typically Irish" among the people of Ireland.

Douglas Hyde's presidential address, "The Necessity of De-Anglicising Ireland", delivered to the National Literary Society in Dublin on November 25, 1892 proved to be a significant eye-opener. It specified the problem that the Irish, while struggling for political independence from England, had been impersonating her both culturally and socially. In the process the Irish people were on the verge of abandoning their lineage and traditions. However, they could not assimilate English ways completely due to their inherent racial differences. The lack of homogeneity was evident in every sphere. Hyde believed that the only hope for restoring national dignity and insularity was a retreat to Gaeldom. He specified that this would be largely accomplished by reviving the Irish language, and by restoring Irish personal names, music etc. Although he made an approving reference to the Anglo-Irish literature at the end of his address, the entire general purport of his argument was that Irish national literature in English was an impossible feat.

Yeats responded to this perturbing concept by forwarding a letter to the *Editor of United Ireland* on December 17, 1892. He wrote,

... can we not build up a national tradition, a national literature, which shall be none the less Irish in spirit from being English in language? Can we not keep the continuity of the nation's life, not by trying what Dr. Hyde has practically pronounced impossible, but by translating or retelling in English, which shall have

an indefinable Irish quality of rhythm and style, all that is best of the ancient literature? Can we not write and persuade others to write histories and romances of the great Gaelic men of the past, from the son of Nessa to Owen Roe, until there has been made a golden bridge between the old and new?

(1986 : 338)

To support his contention he referred to America, "with no past to speak of, a mere parvenu among the nations" (338), attempting to carve a national literature which differs almost as much from English literature in its distinctiveness as does the literature of France. Therefore he asserted, "It should be more easy for us, who have in us that wild Celtic blood, the most un-English of all things under heaven, to make such a literature" (339).

At the inception of his career Douglas Hyde was a compelling influence upon Yeats. He appreciated Hyde's gifts as a folklorist, and his verse and prose which were written in the English of Connacht, Gaelic in idiom and Tudor in vocabulary. Hyde was, however, more interested in the preservation of the Irish language. He curtailed his own literary endeavours in order to devote substantial time and resources to the accomplishment of his primary mission. He had no wish to be known as a writer in English and from the very beginning he regretted the need to make any translation from his Irish texts.

In contrast, Yeats wanted to do much more than only recall and revive the Gaelic language, and strive for its preservation. He

was more interested in the Irish tradition and culture. The view that he wanted to establish was that when one thinks of the grandeur and stateliness of Cuchulain and the grace of the despairing Deirdre, one should not forget that it is that majesty and charm that are irresistible and immortal, and not the Celtic language that first recorded them. Yeats emphasized the notion that Irish writers who were concentrating on foreign literature and seeking out foreign sources of inspiration, should focus their attention on their own land, "for no man who deserts his own literature for another's can hope for the highest rank" (298).

Yeats found no dearth of talent in Ireland but felt sure that the resources were not being harnessed properly and not applied to the exigencies of Ireland. He programmed himself to this end, remembering and reminding the people:

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 movement; 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 traveller, 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.

(1970 : 174)

The poet had a strange foreboding that the de-nationalising forces operating on the Irish soil would eventually crush and overpower the Irish. In order to constrict this constraint, he urged upon the Irish to maintain all their "central fire", that is, their sense of 'nationality'.

The letters written to his family members, friends and associates provide an insight as to what he felt and what he wanted others to feel about the nation. They also reveal how he consciously made his verse draw sustenance from Ireland. They pronounce his idea of the Celtic largesse and the poet's conviction that poetry should be essentially national. He wrote to Katharine Tynan, a fervent admirer of Parnell and O'Leary:

I feel more and more that we shall have a school of Irish poetry - founded on Irish myth and history - a neo-romantic movement.

(1986 : 10-11)

In another letter he advised Tynan:

I think you will be right to make your ballad Irish, you will be so much more original - one should have a speciality. You have yours in Ireland ... (66)

A similar note is found in his letter to Elizabeth White:

... You will find it a good thing to make verses on Irish legends and places and so forth. It helps originality and makes one's verses sincere and gives one less

numerous competitors. Besides one should love best what is nearest and most interwoven with one's life.

(131)

This zest to hold on to Ireland as a cherished treasure was there throughout the poet's long literary career. His perennial cry, without beginning and without end, seemed to be : "I won't let you go", an entreaty very similar to the vehement plea of the fictional child to the father in Tagore's "Sonar Tari". He held on to Ireland by giving voice to the myths, legends and folklore that were in fact the life blood of Ireland. Imagery and symbols with distinct Irish touch were utilized. Native issue, concepts, concurrent contexts were compatibly handled. His grievance against 'melancholy London' appeared not only in his prose work, *John Sherman*, but also in poems like "The Lake Isle of Innisfree". He felt like the hero of the prose work, cast away upon a reef from where he could look at native Ballah, that is, Sligo, with a terrible feeling of solitude in the midst of a multitude, a feeling of oppression with which he longed for his own. A similar aspiration to project an individual nation through the English language was evident in many Asian, African, European, Latin American and Caribbean writers. This was perhaps the most intrinsic desire of any colonial writer. Edward Blyden, as President of Liberia College, used English as a means of asserting African identity in 1881, saying,

The African must advance by methods of his own. He must possess a power distinct from that of the European

.... We must show that we are able to go alone, to carve
out our own way.

(Barlow: 2001 : 32)

These words echo Yeats's creed, his desire to create a literature based on his own soil, Irish in spirit and essence, though written in the English language. Yeats did not find the task as difficult as the Indian writer Raja Rao, who expressed his predicament in the foreword to his novel *Kanthapura*:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language.

(1938 : ii)

Yeats amiably fused the Celtic spirit into the English language. His poetry is an ode or hymn to Ireland where the poet takes the privilege of saying, as Tagore says in the "Earth", "Yes, I shall/Deck you with my all" (2003 : 92). Shabine, the narrator in Derek Walcott's poem "The Schooner's Flight" affirms :

I have a sound colonial education
I have Dutch, Nigger, and English in me
Either I'm a nobody or I'm a nation.

(1979 : 34)

Shabine can be seen as representing not only Walcott himself, but also Yeats by the subtle substitution of 'Dutch' and 'Nigger' by 'Irish'.

It is easy to see how Ireland combined with the poet's consciousness to give vent to a distinctive voice. The need to project the nation undeniably moulded the poet and this projection, direct or oblique, is an assertion of nationalism.