

## Mohini Mohan Chatterji's Influence on W.B. Yeats

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During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, literary and philosophical works from Sanskrit were translated into English, German and French, Bhagwat Geeta being one of them (Translated as 'The Hindu Bible'). This helped in new interpretation of India amongst the intellectuals of Europe. Besides these translated works, some learned monks from India influenced the intelligentsia of the west and made them understand that India is merely a country of mystery, magic, snake charmers and rope tricks as the average westerner thought. One of these monks was Mohini Mohan Chatterji. This paper is an attempt to trace the influence of Mohini Mohan Chatterji on the works of W.B. Yeats.

**Key words:-** Occult, Theosophy, Spiritualism

I have always sought to bring my mind close to the mind of Indian and Japanese poets."

W. B. Yeats

During eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, literary and philosophical works from Sanskrit were translated into English, German and French. This helped in new interpretation of India amongst the intellectuals of Europe. Earlier, India had been a country of myth, mystery, magic, romance and rope trick to an average Westerner.

Publications of Theosophical Societies are primarily responsible for directing Yeats' attention to India. A.P. Sinnet's books The Occult world (London, 1881) and Esoteric Buddhism (London, 1883) introduced Yeats to Indian metaphysical thought.

Mohini Mohan Chatterji or Mohini Chatterji was a member of the Theosophical Society. Yeats referred to him as 'the Brahmin.' Mohini Chatterji possessed a considerable knowledge of Hindu philosophy and literature. Madame Blavastsky of the Theosophical Society had sent Mohini Chatterji to European countries to preach Theosophical ideas. He came to Dublin (Ireland) towards the end of 1885. and stayed in these for a week. He heard the discourse of Mohini Chatterji during his stay in Dublin.

Yeats describes Mohini Chatterji, 'As a handsome young man with the typical face of Christ'.<sup>1</sup> Mohini Chatterji mainly presented, the old Hindu Philosophy of The Bhagwad Geeta and Vedantism of Samkara, the 8th century religious leader of Hindus, expounded in 'Viveka Chudamani.'

The emphasis of Samkara's philosophy is on the inner realization and not on any outer action or desire that would ultimately lead to action. Ultimately, one had to suppress all desires even the desire for emancipation, 'for even our desire of immortality was no better than our other desires. W.B Yeats expressed this idea in a quatrain.

"Long thou for nothing, neither sad nor gay;  
Long thou for nothing, neither night nor day.  
Not even 'I long to see thy longing over',  
To the ever- longing and mournful spirit say." <sup>2</sup>

In another quatrain W.B Yeats declares that salvation can not be obtained by action but by meditation, by feeding upon one's desires by consuming one's own heart.

"The ghosts went by me with their lips apart.  
From death's late languor as these lines I read.  
On Brahma's gateway, 'They within have few  
The souls upon the ashes of the heart'."<sup>3</sup>

After hearing Mohini Chatterji, W.B. Yeats felt that all action and all words that lead to action were a little trivial. In Yeats' poem, 'The song of the Happy Shepherd' we find great influence of samkara's philosophy. To him the earth seems to be of no solid reality.

"The wandering earth herself may be  
Only a sudden flaming word,  
In clanging space a moment heard,  
Troubling the endless reverie."<sup>4</sup>  
"Then no wise worship dusty deeds,

Nor seek, for this is also sooth,  
To hunger fiercely after truth,  
Lest all thy toiling only breeds  
New dreams, new dreams; there is no truth  
Saving in thine own heart."<sup>5</sup>

These lines declare the triviality of action in the 'dusty deeds'; even the hunger after truth is to be given up because it can only breed new desires.

It is the same as Samkara preached in 'Viveka Chudamani' that 'Vasana' accumulating 'Karya' and 'Karya' increasing 'Vasana'

The basic idea of the above quatrain is that truth is in one's heart, and the soul should feed on the ashes of the heart. The gist of Samkara's teaching as explained by Mohini Chatterji was that all external life and action is illusory, ephemeral and unreal. Only the self was worth thinking about. To go beyond the self was to leave the truth behind and to run after shadow. Thus according to Samkara's philosophy what appeared to be shadowy was substantial and what looked substantial (real) was shadowy (illusion).

This was the time when 'Victorian culture, with its strong ethical and social bias, was beginning to produce within itself its own antithesis', 'the life of the imagination', and it was appealing to the youth. It was the time when science was shaking the faith of the people in Church. Therefore, sensitive young men found a refuge in the doctrine 'art for art's sake'. Mohini Chatterji, during his visit to Dublin expressed the view that the doctrine 'art for art's sake' was the only sinless doctrine of art. Yeats accepted the philosophy of samkara because it suited his temperament and bent of mind during period of his life.

Yeats wrote an essay titled, 'The way of Wisdom', which was published in 1900. He tried to impart an added force to his arguments by relating it to the ancient philosophy of the Orient- the philosophy of contemplation and detachment from action.

Mohini Chatterji explained the nature of the individual self to Yeats by repeating the teaching of Lord Krishna to Arjuna as described in The Bhagwad Geeta:

Never is this (soul) born, nor does it die, nor having been does it ever cease to be ; unborn, eternal, un-decaying, ancient; this is not disintegrated by the disintegrating of the body. <sup>7</sup>

As, abandoning clothes that are destroyed, a man takes other clothes that are new, so the dweller in the body, abandoning bodies that are decayed, goes into other bodies that are new. <sup>8</sup>

"The indwelling spirit that is in everybody is indestructible, being eternal".<sup>9</sup>

Mohini Chatterji was trying to convey the idea that one should realize the permanence of the soul and that it (soul) was eternal. In his poem titled 'Kanva on himself which first appeared in The wanderings of Oisín and other poems (1889), Yeats expresses the similar idea. A few lines from the poem are quoted below:

"..... Is not thy body but the garnered rust  
of ancient passion and of ancient fears?"  
Then wherefore fear the usuary of Time,  
Or Death that cometh upon the next life-key?  
Nay, rise and flatter her with golden rhyme,  
For as things were so shall things ever be."

Whenever Yeats reflected on the self, life, death and the hereafter, he remembered Mohini Chatterji's syntax.

In his poem, 'The Indian Upon God'. Yeats conveys the idea, that everybody conceives God in his own image. To the moorfowl, God is an undying moorfowl. The lotus thinks that, God is a huge lotus with 'His petals wide'. The roebuck thinks that, 'He is a gentle roebuck'. To a peacock, he is a monstrous peacock.

It is important to note that this concept originates from The Bhagwad Gita. Yeats had published a paper on Krishna and also translated The Bhagwad Gita into English. We know that in The Bhagwad Gita Krishna says:

".....among those who illuminate I am the Sun  
..... among the orbs of heaven I am the moon  
..... among high peaked mountains I am Meru.  
..... of the things that move not I am the Himalayas.  
.....among serpents I am Vasuki.  
.....I am the lion among wild animals ; among birds I am Garuda.

.....among flowing streams I am the Ganges."<sup>10</sup>

On the foundation of Indian philosophy, Yeats formed his first conceptions of the eternal nature of the soul and the transitory nature of the manifestations through which it passed. The idea of eternity of the soul gave solace to Yeats whenever he remembered the impermanence of the forms.

His poem 'Ephemeria' is about two lovers who meet each other in the old age. They recall the love and passion of the young age, their 'first kiss' become gloomy. Yeats uses the idea of eternity of soul in this poem.

"The woods were round them, and the yellow leaves  
Fell like faint meteors in the gloom,.....  
Turning, he saw that he had thrust dead leaves  
Gathered in the silence, dewy as her eyes,  
In bosom and hair." <sup>11</sup>

The lover tries to comfort the beloved with the idea that soul had and would have many lives, many youths and many old ages. Life is a cycle of meeting and departing. There is enough time for everybody to satisfy all the desires of the heart and yet keep desires unsatisfied. But then he says that there was no need to repent, because it would return-'Everything that has been shall be again'. The following quotation proves a similar point:

"Ah, do not mourn", he said,  
"That we are tired, for other loves await us;  
Hate on the love through unrepining house.  
Before us lies eternity; our souls  
Are love, and a continual farewell." <sup>12</sup>

These lines highlight that the soul was permanent, but it could not identify itself with any of its forms. Thel in Blake's 'Book of Thel', suffered from the same sense of anxiety-'the fear of incarnation'. There 'She, the pure spiritual essence, every fleeting because ever incarnating, laments her momentariness'. <sup>13</sup>

Yeats expressed this nervousness in his poem, 'Fergus and the Druid.' The poem is in the form of a dialogue between Fergus and the Druid.

King Fergus feels the burden of his crown. So he hands over the responsibility of his Kingdom to his son Conchubar and goes to the rocks in search of the Druid to learn from him 'the dreaming wisdom'. The Druid dissuades the king from his quest. But the king insists on gaining the knowledge. In the end, Druid says,  
"Take if you must, this little bag of dreams;  
Unloose the cord, and they will wrap you round." <sup>14</sup>

Fergus then has a vision of all the lives and forms through which he has passed. But one after the other they all slip from him in a continuous eternal process. The knowledge which should have elevated him to the realm of truth and given him peace of mind actually disturbs him because the illusion is not the truth. Fergus begins to lament his knowledge:

In 1898 Yeats wrote another poem, 'Mongan thinks of his past Greatness'. Here, Yeats assumes the identity of 'Mongan' to express his thoughts. He speaks behind the mask. The lines are:

"I have drunk ale from the Country of the Young  
And weep because I know all the things now:  
I have been a hazel-tree, and they hung  
The pilot Star and the Crooked Plough  
Among my leaves in times out of mind:  
I became a rush that horses tread:  
I became a man, a hater of the wind,  
Knowing one, out of all things, alone, that his head  
May not lie on the breast nor his lips on the hair  
Of the woman, that he loves until he dies." <sup>15</sup>

Here, again the sorrow of 'Knowing all', Yeats uses the imagery of 'hazel-tree', 'rush' and 'man'. In the two lines, Mohini Chatterji's idea of beloved lying at the feet of the lover has been reversed. This change is the result of the circumstances of the poet's personal life. At this point of time, Yeats was desperately in love with Maude Gonne. He had no hope of getting a positive response from her. In such state of mind the words of Mohini Chatterji



choed in his mind. It appears that Mohini Chatterji's influence on Yeats was deep and abiding.

The philosophy taught by Mohini Chatterji had offered some kind of solution to the fundamental problems of life, death and after- life which were constantly troubling - Yeats. However he could neither accept nor reject it.

In 1913 Yeats wrote 'The Three Hermit'. Here once again he raised the problem of what happens to the soul after death. At that time he was passing through the most depressing period of his life. Maud Gonne was not willing to marry him although she had separated from her husband in 1909. He was also disappointed with his country. He expressed his feelings in the poem 'September 1913'. The following two lines make the point very clear:

"Romantic Ireland 's dead and gone  
It is with O' leary in the grave." <sup>16</sup>

He had also not achieved success to the level that he had desired in his Mystical Theatre, though he had given best years of his life to this aim. Realistic plays were now being performed at this theatre. This state of mind forced him to turn to 'spiritualism' once again. As a result he started to wonder if there was any truth in what the Hindus and the Theosophists said about the life of the soul after death. In his poem 'The Three Hermits', we see that two hermits present different points of view; the third who can be taken as a personification of Yeats, does not commit to either view.

According to the Hindu View, the soul may take animal or human form depending upon its Karma. It may also attain freedom from death and birth cycle and attain freedom from this cycle. But the Theosophists believed that it was no longer possible to attain animal form once the soul assumes human form. In this poem, the two hermits put forward their arguments,

"..... now the second :  
'We' re but given what we have earned  
When all thoughts and deeds are reckoned,  
So it's plain to be discerned  
That the shades of holy men  
Who have failed, being weak of will,  
Pass the Door of Birth again,

.....  
Caught and cracked his flea, the third,  
Giddy with his hundredth year,  
Sang unnoticed like a bird." <sup>17</sup>

In the guise of the third hermit, Yeats shows his indifference, He remained concerned with the idea of rebirth till the end of his life. The idea is present even in his last full- length play The Hern's Egg. The play cannot be explained unless viewed from the idea of rebirth.

In two of the poems which W.B. Yeats wrote in 1920, we find echoes of philosophy of Samkaracharya and reference to Mohini Chatterji. These poems are; 'A Meditation in Time of War' and 'All Soul's Night'.

By 1920, there had been a great change in the life and outlook of W.B. Yeats. In 1917 he got married. His wife had the gift of creative writing. She was also interested in psychical research. Soon a daughter was born. In a way Yeats became more or less 'a settled man'. In one of his poems he wrote:

"All changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born." <sup>18</sup>

He succeeded in developing some kind of a 'system' which included all the knowledge of metaphysics, cosmology, sociology and psychology. The war between the English forces and Irish patriots taught him the futility of war. He wrote a poem titled 'A Meditation in Time of War'. A few lines are quoted below:

"For one throb of the artery,  
While on that old grey stone I sat  
Under that old wind-broken tree,  
I know that One is animate,  
Mankind inanimate fantasy." <sup>19</sup>

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These lines express the philosophy of Samkarachrya which says that God alone is truth, the world is fantasy. (Brahma satyam jagat mithya). The following lines from Yeats's poem 'All Soul's Night', also express the same thoughts :

"From a discourse in figurative speech  
By some learned Indian  
On the soul's journey. How is it whirled about,  
Wherever the orbit of the moon can reach,  
Until it plunge into the sun;" <sup>20</sup>

In the above lines the 'learned Indian' might be Mohini Chatterji.

In 1927-8. W.B. Yeats fell seriously ill, when he was past sixty. He suffered from lung infection and ran high fever. To Yeats, it seemed to be the first call of death. After this illness, he travelled to the warmer regions of the Mediterranean coast. The illness thoroughly perturbed him. During this period, he brooded over death and the after life. He expressed his feeling through his poems. He wrote two poems and were further printed in The collected poems. The first is called 'At Algeciras-a Meditation upon Death', and the second is titled, 'Mohini Chatterji'.

In the same year, he wrote another book, The Winding Stair. It contained a small poem called 'Death.' This poem might as well be called 'Meditation upon Death : III'. This seems to be Yeats' 'reply' to the 'Great Questioner' :

"Nor dread nor hope attend  
A dying animal ;  
A man awaits his end  
Dreading and hoping all ;  
Many times he died  
Many times rose again  
A great man in his pride  
Confronting murderous men  
Casts derision upon  
Supersession of breath ;  
He knows death to the bone-  
Man has created death." <sup>21</sup>

In these lines, the poet is expressing the idea given in The Bhagwad Geeta, namely- 'Everything that has been shall be again', 'that which is, shall never cease to be'.

It is important to note that, Yeats accepted the words of Mohini Chatterji and The Heeta but not their spirit. Yeats accepted the belief of rebirth because it gave him innumerable opportunities to live again. Yeats sought salvation in the re-living of this actual life. The Christian doctrine which is directly opposite to this did not appeal to him. Therefore, he asserted again and again:

"All lives that has lived ;  
So much is certain,"<sup>22</sup>

And  
"Many times man lives and dies  
Between his two eternities." <sup>23</sup>

Yeats had a great hunger for life like any other human beings. Therefore, he is ready to live again and again with all its imperfections.

"I am content to live it all again  
And yet again, if it be life to pitch  
Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,  
A blind man battering blind man ;  
Or into that most fecund ditch of all  
The folly that man does  
Or must suffer, if he woos  
A proud woman not kindred of his soul. <sup>24</sup>

This hunger for life is also revealed in his poem 'Meditation upon Death II'. It is revealed in the following lines. In these lines, Yeats tries to mystify his love of life and living. This hunger for life is even more apparent here:

I asked if I should pray,  
But the Brahmin said,  
"Pray for nothing, say  
Every night in bed,

'I have been a king,  
I have been a slave,  
Nor is there anything,  
Fool, rascal, knave,  
That I have not been,  
And yet upon my breast  
A myriad heads heads have lain!'

In the above lines, Yeats has put words of Mohini Chatterji, with a few additions and deletions. These lines convey the same idea in ten lines what Yeats had earlier expressed in his poem 'Kanva on himself' in twenty lines. In this poem, Yeats has not merely versified what Mohini Chatterji had said. He has added his own commentary. In this poem, he has transformed the idea of The Bhagwad Gita into something more favorable to his own way of thinking. The knowledge of infinite births and deaths gives him the assurance that in his future births he can satisfy all his desires to full satisfaction.

Let us also read the second and concluding stanzas of the same poem.

"That he might set at rest a boy's turbulent days  
Mahini Chatterji  
Spoke these, or words like these,  
I add in commentary,  
'Old lovers yet may have  
All that time denied-  
Grave is heaped on grave  
That they be satisfied-  
Over the blackened earth  
The old troops parade,  
Birth is heaped upon birth  
That such cannonade  
Many thunder time away,  
Birth-hour and death-hour meet,  
Or, as great sages say,  
Men dance on deathless feet'. " 25

Yeats accepted the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation because it assured him that, he can live life again and again.

The titles of some of his famous poems were taken from Indian names. Let us consider his poems, 'kanva on himself' and 'kanva, the Indian, on God.' 'Kanva' is a classical Indian name. 'kanva' was the foster-father of Sakuntala in the famous Sanskrit drama written by Kalidasa the 'Abhigyan Sakuntalam.'

One of his dramatic poems is entitled 'Anashuya and Vijaya.' The name Anashuya is also associated with Kalidasa's drama. In the drama 'Sakuntala', Anashuya' is a playmate of Sakuntala. This shows that Yeats had read the Sanskrit drama in translation as he had no knowledge of Sanskrit.

The fact that W.B. Yeats had read Sanskrit drama in translation is evident from Mr. C.L. Wren's article in The Durban University Journal. A few relevant lines of the article are quoted below.

Finally, there is one very significant aspect of the question we are now considering which I think has never yet been touched upon by any of Yeats' critics. Speaking last at a gathering of Indian students at Oxford, he (Yeats) said that at period of his literary career he had tried to steep himself in translation of the Sanskrit plays and to assimilate for use in his writings whatever in them seemed valuable and congenial. Now the Sanskrit drama is purely lyrical-a succession of shadowy scenes and it seems therefore a fair conjecture that Yeats' readings in this kind went to confirm and to crystallize his own native tendencies ..... They (the ancient Irish legends and parables), together with the Sanskrit plays, whose tones they are said to produce, may well constitute a class to themselves and we need not trouble to look for parallels, but apply to them the convenient logician's phrase and set them down as 'sui generis'. 26

Yeats' drama has generally been accepted as an extension of his lyrical poetry, and that its qualities and peculiarities separate it both in degree and in kind from the traditional English poetic drama.

It is a well known fact that Yeats had sympathy for India. But sympathy alone could not help him create genuine Indian atmosphere in his poems such as 'Anashuya and

Vijaya'. Unfortunately, his note on the poem does not throw any light on the theme either. Harbans Rai Bachchan also gives his opinion on this subject in his book W.B. Yeats and Occultism. He expresses his views in the following words :

My conjecture is that perhaps it was Mohini Chatterji who introduced him to Sanskrit drama, particularly to the works of Kalidasa. The names from the drama of Kalidasa and the thought of Mohini Chatterji are so woven into his poems of the period that it is very likely that he made the acquaintance of both at the same time.<sup>27</sup>

However, his interest in the Sanskrit drama was short-lived, only lasting through? She years 1885-1886. W.B. Yeats himself wrote in one of his notes :

Many of the poems in Crossways, certainly those upon Indian subjects or upon shepherds and fawns, must have been written before I was twenty, for where the moment when I began The Wanderings of Oisín, which I did at that age, I believe my subject-matter became Irish.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to 'Kanva' and 'Anashuya', W.B. Yeats used two other proper names in his dramatic piece. These names are 'Vijaaya' and 'Amrita'.

In his early days, Yeats had training as a painter. Due to his background as a painter, he had a keen eye for paintings and illustrations. He took help of illustrations from other publications, particularly translations of Sakuntala, to vividly describe scenes in his own plays. For example in the stage direction of his own play, Yeats wrote the following description:

A little Indian temple in the Golden Age. Around it a garden ; around that the forest. Anushuya, the young priestess, kneeling within the temple. 28

The scene resembles the hermitage of Kanva where Sakuntala was brought up with her two playmates Anashuya and Priamvada.

In his lyrical play, ' Anashuya and Vijaya', the lead characters of Anashuya and Vijaya are clearly inspired by the characters of Sakuntala and Dushyanta. A few similarities between them are mentioned below.

As we know that king Dushyanta was already married when he fell in love with Sakuntala. In the play, Sakuntala charges Dushyanta with loving another woman. At that he gives her renewed assurance of his love for her. Dushyanta tells her, "Sweet maiden, banish from the mind the thought That I could love another, thou dost reign Supreme, without a rival, in my heart." <sup>29</sup>

Similarly, in Yeats' play Anashuya also charges Vijaya. She says, "Another fills your mind." And Vijaya, reassures Anashuya of his love by saying, " I loved another ; but now I love no other." <sup>30</sup>

However, Yeats is unable to create the Indian atmosphere. The reason for this is that Yeats' characters in the play do not act or think according to Indian values. There are several instances in the play where the behavior of Anashuya or vijaya does not conform to Indian values. The reason for this is the fact that Yeats learnt about Indian culture from a far distance. He never visited India.

Now I will discuss another poem of Yeats namely, 'The Second Coming'. Yeats is of the opinion that the first coming of the Christ in the form of man had proved a failure ; Therefore, the second coming would make another experiment, that of appearing in the form of a beast. He ultimately combined the beast and the man.

It is same as the Narsingha-Avatar (Man-Lion incarnation) of the Hindus. It is alluded to in one of the lines of Sakuntala and Williams added a note to it, which reads thus :

Vishnu, in thw monstrous shape of a creature half man, half lion(which was his Fourth Avatar or incarnation) delivered the three worlds, that is to say earth, heaven and the lower regions, from the tyranny of a demon called Hirayan-Kasipu)

As we know that Narsingha had a man's body and a lion's head, whereas Yeats' image of the second coming has a lion's body and a man's head.

It is likely that 'half man, half lion' of Williams captured the imagination of W.B. Yeats and he experimented with the image in 'The Second Coming'. It is relevant to note that Narsingha-Avatar (Man-Lion incarnation) has a closer affinity both by its form and associated with Yeats' 'new revelation'.

Yeats used this combination of the human and the lion in some other contexts also. In his poem 'Against Unworthy Praise', Yeats writes,

'Yet she singing upon her road,



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Half lion, half cloud, is at peace.'

Once again in his poem, 'The Double Vision of Michael Robartes', W.B Yeats wrote,  
'On the grey rock of Cashel I suddenly saw

A Sphinx with woman breasts and lion paw.'<sup>32</sup>

It seems that 'half man, half lion' of Williams captured his imagination and he took  
liberty with it used it in a number of his poems.

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