

HYBRID IDENTITY INFLUENCE IN THE WORK OF WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

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Keywords: Yeats, poetry, hybrid identity, national identity, Ireland, revival, post-colonialism, critics.

ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the relationship of William Butler Yeats with regard to the matters of colonialism and post-colonialism, as well as his attitude of the post-colonial poet. A large number of critics have placed him as a revolutionary and anti-colonial figure on the one hand, and as a poet with revolutionary and colonial mentality on the other. The main argument of this thesis is the convergence of Yeats' position of a post-colonial poet by establishing issues of his dual changing as a person and consequently as a writer, as well as his political concepts and uncertainty. Theoretical framework is based on the concept of Homi K. Bhabha, of the complexity of the relationship of identity of colonizers and colonized. The views derived from this analysis regarding the hybridity of a colonial subject as the intrinsic complexity and uncertainty in the relation to the colonizer and the colonized can provide us some better understanding of the complex interactions of the Irish writer with Irish nationalism and British colonialism. By deeper reading of some Yeats' works from different periods of his very long career one can come down to the fact that in a bigger part of his life he accepted the double, ambiguous and even contradictory position in relation to its own political loyalty. The presence of tension and uncertainty that pervades the works of Yeats alienates us from uniformed, stationary and unchanged reading of his works with a special attention to issues of colonial identity to be paid. Finally, there is a common perception that the post-colonial approach that aims on the issue of hybridity and diversity of the colonial entity may increase our understanding of Yeats' complex role in it as well as his often juxtaposed relationship versus colonized and then postcolonial Ireland.

1. INTRODUCTION

When the poetry of William Butler Yeats is in issue, most critics think that it is moving from late romanticism to modernism. Great English romantics such as Blake, Keats, and Shelley influenced on him in his early creative period. The poetry from that time has romantic style and themes and his songs follow the patterns of romantic verse with the use of well-known schematic rhyme. The metrics and poetic structures have been focused on longing, love, loss, nature and Irish myths. Although Yeats does not represent a significant modernist personality such as Lewis, Woolf or Elliot, his creation especially in the late period, has some similarities with modernists. Thematic hostility to modern society and its values in the context of contemporary issues especially politics and tendencies towards aristocratic ideals is present in his late poetry.

2. CRITICAL VIEWS

When evaluating his works, the question of the relationship between Yeats and modernism is still a topic in literary criticism not being explained completely yet regardless that topic has been going on since the second half of the last century. Leading critics such as Harold Bloom and Edmund Wilson considered elements of romance in the poetry of William Butler Yeats.

Critics' opinions are contrary to the controversial matter of Yates and politics. The most of them are related to Yeats and Irishness, thoughts on the ideal rule, democracy, love of the aristocracy, interaction with socialism, eugenics, fascism and the status of anti-colonial and post-colonial poet. Yeats has been preoccupied during the Irish battle for independence by writing poetry and drama with national themes, the launch of the Irish Literary Revival and establishing a few literary associations that promoted Irish being through art. Moreover, he was very closely related to the political figures of that era, such as Mod Gunne and John O'Leary. In his youth he was even more active in political sense, being the president of the commemoration committee for the year-long commemoration of the Wolf Tone Rebellion and a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. In the last decade of life has flirted with the ideas of fascism, a brief supporting even the infamous Blueshirt Movement, an Irish version of fascism, thus expressing their provocative and reactionary thinking when it comes to the perfect rule, and was a politician in the role of senators Free Ireland. Despite all of

these direct and indirect political activities, Yeats was not a politician in the common sense of the word. He was primarily an artist but creating at a time when the relationship between art, nationalism and politics was very important. Many critics were devoted to the relation between his political ideas and his work. Despite some of these critics dismissing his political beliefs as reactionary, authoritative and completely opposed to solving the Irish question, most others try to portray him as a revolutionary and a nationalist who played a very important role in the Irish anti-colonial struggle. There is also a third group that has taken a more comprehensive and balanced approach to Yeats Policy, considering all its aspects.

All of the above mentioned critical views of Yates show how often this poet was the subject of different approaches of critics who viewed his creativity from different angles. Moreover, there are other considerations, such as, Yeats and English culture, the question of composition and review at Yeats, and his prose work. There are also numerous books that include collections of critical articles on various aspects of his work showing how much his life has attracted the critical attention of many literary critics.

A young Tory writer Isaac Butt, son of the rector in Donegal, described in the best way Yeats' understanding of national identity, comparing Ireland's understanding of identity with drunken emptiness, in contrast to the Scots that their identity understood as the direction of a peaceful and deep commitment to their national being. He said the following: "*If we had half the identity of the Scots, our country would not be what it is now. While the Irish praises his country, Scott works to earn the praise of the world. Irish [identity] finds its expression in pathetic poetry or noisy joy; Scottish [identity] is prominent in sobriety and effort. The cat cherishes his whip in his garden; The Irishman wears his clover until he dries on his chest, or drowning in his bowl.*"¹

Yeats had searched for identity all his life, not for himself but for the Irish people. He considered that the Irish people lived without national identity at the time, and that it was necessary to find it in a way that it becomes the strength of the unification of Ireland while struggling for independence. He saw that they had lost all those values that they had adorned them as a nation that emerged from the old Celtic culture. In his opinion, most Irish residents

¹Butt Isaac, *Irish Nationality and the Conditional Defence of the Union 1833-1870*, in D. George Boyce & Alan O'Day (eds.), *Defenders of the Union: A Survey of British and Irish Unionism since 1801*, p. 65-89 (London: Fontana, 2001)

have forgotten this fact about their Celtic roots. The old Celts appreciated life and lived in harmony with nature and Yeats found it as necessity to set this romantic spirit and heroism that adorned the old Celts as the root of Irish identity. He found that the Irish people were more inclined to turn themselves as individuals rather than as society as a whole. Therefore he wrote many songs with a romantic theme at the beginning of his poetry career thinking that such should also be an Irish identity. Yeats' Irish national identity is a key theme that encompasses his poetic interaction with Irish tradition embedding in Irish fairy tales, heroes, legends and mythology. Many critics have always focused on Yeats' Irish origins, his literary roots, and in particular the connections he had with the Anglo-Irish Protestants on the one hand, and with the Irish Catholics on the other. His origin as a descendant of a mixed Anglo-Irish marriage which was regarded by domestic autochthonous Catholics as an attachment to English colonisers. It forced Yeats to always prove his status as an Irish poet who concentrated on the Irish question and the Irish identity in his creations. One of his favourite statements from young age was: "*Ireland is a true thing for the Irish.*"²

The best confirmation of this poet's motto is the fact that he paid special attention to Irish peasantry having extremely difficult life, his tireless work on collecting Irish folklore and mythology as well as contribution to Irish literary revival. However, in his middle and late creative period, when disappointed by the mainstream of Irish nationalism and the emergence of a free newborn Catholic state, Yeats turned to a different version of Ireland, a state in the reputation of the 18th century, with Protestant leadership and in the spirit of the Anglo-Irish tradition.

Yeats did not become famous only thanks to his poetry but also as a fruitful playwright. Together with Lady Gregory, Edward Martin and George Moore he founded the Irish Literary Theatre with the aim to promote Celtic and Irish drama in 1899. His dramatic opus moves from that drama filled with dreams like *The Land of Heart's Desire*, through the controversial *Countess Cathleen* to the very nationalist *Cathlin Ni Houlihan* and those of his middle and a late creative period like *The Player Queen*, *Fighting the Waves* and *Purgatory*.

The use of music and poetic language in order to create a kind of poetry in which speech played a main role in every action and the whole scenario is what he liked most in his

²Wade Allen, *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, p. 221 (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954)

plays. Thanks to the socializing with Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenellos Yeats met the Japanese No Drama which has become an inspiration for some of his later plays such as *The Death of Cuchulain*.

Although there were many critics who have dealt with this matter two of them whose approaches have been widely accepted are Edward Said and Seamus Dean.

Said was one of the first critics who considers Yates as an anti-colonial poet while Dean belongs to a group of those who emphasize colonial thoughts in his work. Their interest towards the Yeats' poetic relationship with the Irish national identity also proves that the classification of this poet and his work in any of the two above mentioned categories is insufficient, since his work can not be entirely classified into either of them only. Therefore, this work proves that any criticism that aims to classify this author exclusively in one of the above categories is half because his works does not fit into such a limited labelling. Yeats' double loyalty came from the fact that he was a child from a mixed marriage. His mother Susan Mary Pollexfen Yeats was a daughter who came from a prosperous Protestant family and father John Butler Yeats from a long line of successful traders, civil servants, landowners and priests at the Irish church. That was the reason why his life and work were filled with a hybrid identity in no one country, between colonizers and colonized, labelled by Homi K. Bhabha as “a separated space, a separation space, systematically denied by both colonialists and nationalists.”³

Most studies have confirmed the view that Yeats cannot be classified either as an anti-colonial poet or extreme reactionary. They were made in the form of an essay and considered one or two author's works. The lack of extensive research including Yeats' attitude toward the Irish national identity from various periods of his career was the task of this paper. The theoretical basis of this study was based on a complex relationship between colonizers and colonized identities, as Homi K. Baba exposed, along with Edward Said one of the greatest postcolonial critics. Said saw the national identity in Yeats' work as an example of a “nativist-

³Bhabha K. Homi, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 120. Homi K. Bhabha (born 1949) is a professor of English and American language and literature and director of the Humanities Center at Harvard University. He is one of the most prominent figures in modern postcolonial studies and is the creator of numerous neologisms and key concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, difference and ambivalence.

phenomenon that flourished elsewhere, as a result of colonial conquest,” while Din says that “Yeats learned the notion of racial identity from both his Anglo-Irish parents and English romantics.”⁴

3. CONCLUSION

Therefore, Yeats’ creativity can be considered a reflection of the uncertainty of his national identity. The author himself pointed out that: “No nation hates it as [they] to whom the past is always alive. Everything he likes comes through English.”⁵ Despite the difficulties caused by his hybrid identity William Butler Yeats was proud on his Irish origin and prove it not only by writing his poems and plays but even more in speeches, his behaviour and performances. His initiative of calling people to protest against the visit of Her British Majesty Queen Victoria to Ireland, support to Boers when fighting against British Empire, open glorification of Easter 1916 martyrs and many other things proved him as being an pure Irish ready to fight for his beloved country in an artistic way.

Literature:

⁴Said W. Edward, *Yeats and Decolonisation*, in *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 275 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993); and Dean Seamus, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980*, p. 48(Wake Forts University Press 1987)

⁵Yeats Butler William, *Essays and Introductions*, (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 518-519

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