

## **W B Yeats and Cultural Decolonization**

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### **Abstract**

The history of Ireland is marked by successive waves of invasion and colonization. After the Normans invaded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Ireland remains, at least in the north, in an imperial relationship with Great Britain to this day. But as a white European settler country, Ireland has been excluded from entry in early postcolonial discussion. However, with the creation of native body of criticism, it is Edward Said's essay "Yeats and Decolonization" (1988) which has played the vital role as an important catalyst for postcolonial study of Irish literature and culture. Yeats is considered here as a poet of decolonization who "during a period of anti-imperialist resistance articulates the experiences, the aspirations, and the restorative vision of people suffering under the domination of an offshore power"(Said 220). Yeats is thus interpreted as one who gave us a major international achievement in cultural decolonization nonetheless.

An important aspect of Decolonization (a process of moving from a dependent colonial situation to an independent one involving political, economic and cultural transformation) and the struggle against colonialism is the 'claiming back' of their own history by the colonized from the negative or non-existent version of it produced by the colonizers. This results in the construction of a specific national culture and national consciousness without which no anti colonial resistance can succeed. Writers, artists and intellectuals play a vital role in imagining the nation, in forging a new consciousness to subvert the hegemony of the Eurocentric culture. They reject the colonizers' culture and turn back towards their unknown roots. This is how they participate centrally in resisting colonialism.

In many of Yeats's works (poetry, plays, non-fictions) one notices a conscious effort in that direction. By virtue of reclaiming the Irish past, myth and legends Yeats tries to make an anticolonial resistance to the British cultural hegemony and is concerned with imaginatively constructing (or reviving) a national identity. Thus, many of his poems from the *Crossways*, *The Rose* provide an excellent example of the artist's geographical and cultural repossession

of his homeland and celebration of national culture. At the sametime by way of leading the Irish literary revival with a view to assigning a new autonomous identity to the Irish literature and through certain plays like *Countess Cathleen*, *Cathleen ni Houlihanas* subversions of the negative pictures created by the colonizers Yeats's role in the cultural decolonization of Ireland is brought into focus.

**Keywords** –Culture, Decolonization, National, Identity, Reclaiming.

William Butler Yeats (1865 -1939) represents in his life and work the transition from late Romanticism to Modernism and has now been almost completely assimilated into the canon of modern English literature and European high modernism. As one of the “the last Romantics”<sup>1</sup> his modernism, therefore, resides not in the use of highly allusive, fragmented narrative as in Eliot's *The Waste Land* nor in Poundian free verse, but in his rejection of Victorian literary conventions and his creation of a passionate syntax and modern diction. Thus, it is on these diverse and apparently contradictory traits of Yeats's aesthetics and temperament that innumerable studies have so far been undertaken and his achievement as a leading poet of the twentieth century English literature is unquestionably established.

However, with the creation of native body of criticism that has helped to introduce Ireland as a precursor to the postcolonial societies of the second half of the twentieth century, W.B Yeats has started to be interpreted as a poet who prefers to decolonize Ireland through a non-violent literary path and whose literary contribution contributes a lot to Irish independence from English cultural colonization.

But it is at the same time to be mentioned that there has been a debate over the issue of adopting postcolonial perspective and methodologies in the sphere of Irish studies over the last twenty years. The critics hostile to the postcolonial reading of Ireland are of the opinion that Ireland was never really a colony, and should therefore be excluded from consideration on that basis. Some other feel “that Ireland may once have been a colony, but since it was treated differently from, say, other British-governed territories in East Africa or Asia, the postcolonial models available to us are inappropriate” (Hooper & Graham 3). But contrary to these ideas there are several critics who think that “to overlook the Irish resentment at, and challenge to, colonization is to disregard a significant aspect of Irish history and national development and to reject Ireland's postcolonial status is to undermine the postcolonial literary project of other national literatures” (Holloran). Of course, Ireland's postcolonial

status can make no claims as to being the same as another colonial situation, but really no colonial situation is exactly a replica of another.

Accordingly, Ireland has been excluded from entry in early postcolonial discussion and it is Edward Said's lecture "Yeats and Decolonization" published as a pamphlet by Field Day in 1988, which has played the vital role as an important catalyst for postcolonial study of Irish literature and culture. Yeats is considered here as a poet of decolonization who as a central figure in debating and asserting an overt drive towards the construction of a national Irish identity as a vital act of decolonization "during a period of anti-imperialist resistance articulates the experiences, the aspirations, and the restorative vision of people suffering under the domination of an offshore power" (Said 220). Said ends the essay by placing Yeats somewhere along the way to full postcolonialism, "True, he stopped short of imagining full political liberation, but he gave us a major international achievement in cultural decolonization nonetheless" (238). Said's study is, therefore, significant for the dual effect it had of bringing postcolonial theory into Irish cultural criticism, i.e; for moving Ireland closer to the postcolonial arena and also for his placing of Yeats as an important artist within the Irish context of nationalistic aspirations and decolonizing enterprises.

However, later studies in support of the Irish literature with Yeats in its centre becoming a part of the postcolonial discussion followed. Thus, David Lloyd's book *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (1993) stands at the intersection of two strands of debate that of culture and politics in contemporary Ireland and that of post-colonialism and cultural politics, for which Irish history furnish as an invaluable example. In her book *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness* (1996) Marjorie Howes attempts to examine Yeats's continuous search for political origins and cultural traditions through the most recent theoretical work on literature, gender and nationalism in post-colonial cultures. Howes places Yeats at the centre of debates on nationalism and gender that occupy critics in post-colonial studies. Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (1996), through a largely Saidian interpretation of Irish culture offered a number of comparisons between Irish and other postcolonial contexts along with a reading of Yeats as a writer of decolonization. In her book *Yeats and Postcolonialism* (2001) Deborah Fleming recognizes that as an AngloIrish Protestant whose work swung a prominent role in the debates surrounding the issues of Ireland's cultural and political identity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Yeats might seem an ideal subject for postcolonial criticism. In his book *Deep-Rooted Things: Empire and Nation in poetry and Drama of William Butler Yeats* (2006) Rob

Doggett examines Yeats's shifting relationship with warring discourses of British cultural imperialism and Irish nationalism during Ireland's transition from colony to partially independent nation.

From the above discussed part it becomes quite clear that Yeats reacted as well responded to the march of colonialism and cultural imperialism in Ireland during a transitional phase in the Irish colonial history. In order to demonstrate that the Irish were more than substandard Englishmen, in order to provide a basis for "asserting [an authentic] difference from the imperial centre" which is one of the "project[s]" of postcolonial literatures" (Ashcroft et al. 5). Yeats turned to the ancient myths and legends of the Celts, which "offered an alternative way of seeing and representing the world, a non-classical, anti-urban, anti-mechanical, anti-material intermixture of the physical and the metaphysical and of the sensual and the spiritual" (Sanders 495).

For Fanon, culture was a vital part of the resistance and indigenous culture is a primary means of decolonization for he stresses that that the colonized native fears of being assimilated totally into the culture of the colonizer, of 'being swamped'. It is both a link to our ancestral past and to another way of thinking, of seeing the world. It is the essence of our identity as indigenous peoples and a vital part of challenging colonial ideology. Naturally, to Fanon cultural nationalism is a prerequisite to national liberation and the liberation of the nation is as necessary for the renewal of culture. Hence, he stresses that it is through decolonization that the colonized country begins to construct a history. This can be conceived only as a result of the war of liberation whereby the colonized nation is able to rediscover its own genius, to reassure its history and assert its sovereignty. Accordingly, all the efforts of Yeats's celebration of Irish nationality were directed toward the spiritual ennoblement of Ireland, and to make the Irish people aware and proud of their nobility.

The long struggle for freedom and the sacrifice of the past heroes, the contemporary political situation, the family background, the unhappy life in London and the nationalist literature – made Yeats a strong nationalist, a hero worshipper, firmly rooted in the soil of his country, who attempted to create a literature that was Irish in subject matter and tone and strove to reawaken in his people a sense of the glory and significance of Ireland's historical and legendary past. Born into a country that was perceived by many of its people to be occupied by a foreign power Yeats spent a lifetime determined for cultural decolonization and to 'nationalise' writing in Ireland. In order to envisage Ireland as it might become Yeats created

national myth, not loosely fabricated, but deeply rooted in heritage and history of Ireland. Thus he writes on September 2, 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. (Cited in Fleming 66)

Clearly validating the characterization of Yeats as a poet of decolonization, many of his early poems endeavor to describe the geography of his Irish countryside. As Ó Tuama asserts in *Repossessions*, “It is unlikely.....that feeling for place (including feeling for home-place) is found so deeply rooted, and so widely celebrated, in any western European culture as it is in Irish literature at every level and in every era from early historic times to the present day” (249). In postcolonial terms, this celebration of place is a literary reappropriation of the native's homeland from the imperial power. According to Deane, “The naming or renaming of a place, the naming or renaming of a race, a region, a person, is, like all acts of primordial nomination, an act of possession” (18). Hence, by celebrating the Irish countryside in his early poetry, Yeats substantiates not only a postcolonial ethic; he also reifies an Irish poetic heritage that predates any of England's colonizing influences.

“The Stolen Child,” from the collection of poems *Crossways* (1889) provides an excellent example of the artist's geographical and cultural repossession of his homeland. Much of the poems entails acts of naming and describing the Irish countryside: Sleuth Wood in the first stanza, Roses in the second, and Glen- Car in the third. In a note to the poem, Yeats asserts, “The places mentioned are round about Sligo. Further Rosses is a very noted locality. There is here a little point of rocks where, if anyone falls asleep, there is danger of their walking silly, the fairies having carried off their souls” (619). By describing the local geography of his childhood home in this poem, Yeats reaffirms his celebration of not only physical geography, but culture as well.

The narrative poem “The Wanderings of Oisín” represents in itself a pivotal text not so much on the textual structure as on the thematic place chiefly because it demonstrates quite literally for the first time in Yeats's poetic career his commitment to celebrate and poeticise national

mythology, culture and geography and also represents a radical shift from his early celebration of the virtual and artificial reality of Arcadia. Yeats's project to nationalise poetic production and his determination "to dwell in the house of Fenians" are unambiguously expressed in the last two lines of the poem. In a self-reflexive fashion, the lines literally put an end of Yeats's own Arcadian thematic wanderings:

I will go to Caoilte, and Conan, and Bran, Sceolan,  
Lomair,  
And dwell in the house of the Fenians, be they in  
flames or at feast. (The Wanderings of Oisín)

The poetic act here is as such politicised and is re-territorialised within the context of Irish geo-politics. It becomes an act of cultural resistance, a de-colonising project, as Edward Said argues (232).

The poem, in other words, articulates a desire to shift from the poetics of Arcadian pastoralism to what Yeats calls 'imaginative nationalism', that is to say, from the rhetoric of universalism to the politics of particularism. In his letters of 1890 Yeats asserts this call for aesthetic localism: "All poetry should have a local habitation; when at all possible"; "We should make poems on the familiar landscapes we love, not the strange and glittering ones we wonder at" (Ellman 14). Accordingly, he urges the young Irish artists to look within the national borders for creativity, authenticity and originality:

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought  
All we did, all that we said or sang  
Must come from contact with the soil, from that  
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong. (The Wanderings of Oisín)

for he believes that this politics of aesthetic nationalization sets in motion the process of emancipation from the colonial aesthetic, cultural and political yoke as well as resists cultural subordination by virtue of celebration of geographical and cultural proximity. Yeats asserts, "...I would have our writers and craftsmen of many kinds master this history and these legends, and fix upon their memory the appearance of mountains and rivers and make it all visible again in their arts, so that Irishmen, even though they had gone thousands of miles away, would still be in their own country" (205-6).

Through the poem "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" from the volume *The Rose* Yeats wished to provide his audience with ideas and emotions that would spark a new faith to Ireland and also make them aware of the part as a starting point to inspire new feelings about

modern Ireland. As Eugene O'Brien writes, "By delving into Celtic pre-history, the political and historical divisions that had come to define the Irish situation could be elided and annealed into a mythic and heroic cultural archive which would allow people to take pride in their own culture" (128).

There is no doubt that in imperialism there is a dynamic interaction between the colonizer and the colonized. In the first stage of interaction the indigenous culture exists before colonization but comes to be appreciated and remembered after colonization has taken place for the purpose of liberation. While there is a tendency to romanticize indigenous culture around nationalist themes, this often requires re-imagining or remapping a national culture and tradition. What is interesting to note that in the poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" Yeats as a cultural nationalist is concerned with the recovery and repossession of colonized land through the act of imagination:

One of the first tasks of the culture of resistance was to reclaim, rename, and reinhabit the land...The search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes and occasionally heroines, myths, and religions – these too are made possible by a sense of land reappropriated by its people. (Said 273)

Throughout the eighteenth century the theatrical culture in Ireland reflected the London taste and was a vehicle for colonial domination and exhibitionism. It was against this socio-cultural backdrop and through the endeavour of the figures like Lady Gregory, Edward Martin and W B Yeats and others that the creation of the Abbey Theatre of Dublin, also known as the Irish National Theatre, as a part of a systematic effort to remove the influence of the imperial power was made possible. The aim of this venture was also to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland and the freedom to experiment which is not found in the theatres of England. In all these Yeats's role is worth mentioning for by the end of the century he (along with Maud Gonne) became not only involved in direct action to resist cultural imperialism but from now on as an active man of Irish Dramatic Movement his literary career began to flourish with the publication of a series of dramatic works most of which took their subject matter from the Irish folklore and mythic past.

Yeats's first play *The Countess Cathleen* with a plot from the Irish folk lore is unmistakably Irish in setting, in subject, in characterization, in sentiment, style and literary allusion and thus from the outset the play was conceived, advertised and read as a national work. On the other hand, in no other work Yeats more clearly expresses the cry to break free of the English

shackles than his 'little play' *Cathleen ni Houlihan* where Yeats' portrayal of Ireland as the traditional wronged old woman calling on her children for help was seen as a clarion cry to political action. In the years since *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was continued to be viewed as a battle-cry for the Irish republican movement and considered a sacred work. In the play Yeats shows us an image of Irish society, based on a class distinction where all classes together are fighting shoulder to shoulder for their freedom. Charles Ferral makes a brief comparative thematic study on these plays. He comments:

In both plays there is a female character who personifies the Irish nation, a peasantry characterized by their grasping materialism and a plot which culminates in an act of personal sacrifice. Only the later play, however, makes the role of self-sacrificing nationalist available to a character from the Catholic peasantry. In the earlier play, the Countess Cathleen is both a personification of Ireland and the figure who rescues the starving Irish peasantry from the clutches of the Devil's emissaries, the merchants, whereas the peasantry remain passive throughout as the Countess and the merchants struggle for their souls. (23)

Thus, in today's globalised and multicultural world English literary canon has been remapped, reconstructed and redefined in the course of its sustained negotiations with critical issues pertaining to culture and society. The entry of Irish literature with Yeats as a poet of cultural decolonization in the centre into the English literary canon can therefore be interpreted as a shift in focus from a purely aesthetic dimension of literature to the socio-political, encouraged by the fluidity of the discipline itself which has opened up this kind of exciting possibilities for interdisciplinary negotiations.

### Notes

1. Yeats once described himself as one of the "the last Romantics": "We were the last romantics - chose for theme/Traditional sanctity and loveliness;" he announced to Lady Gregory. [Collected Poems of W B Yeats. London: Macmillan, 1950. P.276]

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