Research Paper English

Poetic Indeterminacy in W.B.Yeats' Easter 1916

Supriya Mitra

ABSTRACT

Yeats poetic dream was always uppermost in his outlook on Ireland. The political stance he took often worked as a stage on which he directed the modern poetry in his own term. Deviating from the rigid objectivity and harshness presented extravagantly in the modern poetry by numerous poets, Yeats did a nice blending of subjectivity and objectivity, urban and rustic, romanticism and pragmatism. His poems, often being susceptible to dialogic reading, remain inconclusive and open ended. Not only that, the theme he dealt with was also fraught with uncertainty and presented the poet's ambivalent attitude to it. In this paper my basic intention is to show how W.B.Yeats occupies a state of in-betweenness in his seminal poem Easter 1916.

KEYWORDS Dichotomy, Duality, Ambivalence, Indeterminacy

On 11th may, 1916 W.B.Yeats writes a letter to Lady Gregory conveying duality and dissimulation that he possessed in his mind at that time:

I am trying to write a poem on the men executed- 'terrible beauty has been born again'. If the English Conservative Party had made a declaration that they did not intend to rescind the Home rule these would have been no Re bellion. I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me- and I am very despondent about the future. (Jeffares- 191).

Easter 1916, a seminal poem in the Yeatsian canon, presents the scenario of the then Ireland and reflects how a group of common young people suddenly woke up and sacrificed their lives in the revolution. Though their life sacrificing effort sprinkled Ireland with the essence of freedom, it simultaneously put Yeats into a state of flux as he questions whether the movement was worthy enough to sacrifice their life. Yeats showed how Dublin where people acted as motleyed fool was a spiritless, disunited, disoriented city before the rising. Now after the Rising, the protagonists have resigned their parts in the 'casual comedy' of the country's former life.

The second stanza is also fraught with duality and dichotomy of the poet's mind. The poet registers a deep nostalgia for the past in one hand, and makes a vivid confession of how his ideas get shattered and he realizes and perceives the dark sides of Ireland on the other. This stanza can be taken as a portrait gallery where the poet paints the picture of those revolutionaries. First he passes few references about Countess Constance Markievicz. She was very beautiful and has a sweet voice. Yeats had an acquaintance with her since 1890s. Though initially she was sentenced to death, later she was given amnesty and was ultimately released in 1917. Then the poet gives the description of another revolutionist- Patrick Pearse. He had taught at St. Edna's School and had a great potential to become a poet. Yeats then depicts the picture of Thomas MacDonagh who was a great poet and a critic too as Yeats himself claimed that 'he might have won fame in the end' (Line- 28). Lastly he mentions John MacBride, another revolutionist, as 'a drunken, vain-glorious lout' (Line-2). Now the ambivalent attitude of Yeats is very much prevalent here. The poem begins with a general description of Ireland as a spiritless, disoriented ghetto of motleyed fools whom the speaker met at the 'close of day'. The poet exchanged certain expressions or some casual 'meaningless words'. Even John MacBride who did wrong to Yeats by marrying Maud Gonne is also included in his 'song' since MacBride contributed immensely to the revolution and sacrificed his life for the sake of his country. He transformed his own self and was determined to take part in the revolutionary movement; as a direct consequence of what 'a terrible beauty is born' (Line-16).

The dichotomy is further enhanced when Yeats further mentions that sacrifice of the revolutionists produced both beauty and terror. In the third stanza the poet describes that how their determination has become 'a stone' with which they intend to trouble the 'living stream' during 1916. The stone in one hand may be presented as the pin point of the focus, but at the same time it implicitly demands sacrifice, bloodshed and tragic death which the revolutionaries were oblivious of. More to the poet's astonishment those apparently timid people gathered together and channelized their quintessential energy into a single way without thinking much about the common human feelings that they could have cherished quite easily. Again by mentioning the horse, rider, birds, clouds the poet apparently takes us to the world full of promise, love and bliss. But it also stands in stark contrast with the image of 'stone' that signifies the heart of the fallen revolutionaries devoid of any human feelings. Rightly does Norman Jeffers opine:

'…parts enchanted to a stone were Yeats's symbol for those who had devoted themselves to a cause without thought of life or love' (Jeffares188).

In the last stanza the poet reconsiders the contribution of the leaders. Quite surprisingly those fools of 'casual comedy' have transformed themselves into the unchanging world of 'glorious dead'. Ireland might have endowed with long waited Home rule, but their sacrifices have mutated the comedy into a tragedy. Quite pertinently Daniel Albright observes:

In his portraits of the rebels, Yeats shows how attractive youth, a somewhat lax sweetness of disposition, a comic boastfulness, can be altered by extreme tension into self-resignation, self-oblivion. (Albright-190)

Yeats himself felt the heroic zeal of the revolutionists quite well and thereby praised and glorified those Irishmen whose selfless devotion brought into Ireland the long waited freedom. Thus critiquing his own stance that he took in the first stanza, Yeats 'found in Irish history a tradition of heroic gesture of dedication and courage in the face of overwhelming odds'. (Quoted in Taneja-35).

Though the poet blamed the people, yet in the last stanza he praises them to an extent. He, as mentioned in the first stanza, talked to those common men only as a gesture of courtesy, yet quite interestingly it was not the emotion that ranged from the core of his heart. But the poet now realizes the importance of those revolutionaries as he now lacks the occa-

sion to do that- for they have already been executed. Again, if Yeats' one self praises the revolutionaries for their contribution, his another self feels that they are responsible for their own plight as the revolution proved detrimental to them. Further, to substantiate his claim and to make this poem polyphonic, Yeats puts a rhetorical question- 'was it needless death after all?'(Line-64).

Yeats' duality can be traced out quite easily by a conscious reader in his inherent addressivity. The poet in the second stanza addressed those revolutionists as 'that woman', 'this man', 'this other man' and in the first stanza gave emphasis on 'I'. This is probably because Yeats deliberately wanted to deny the worth of their contribution and wanted to prove how averse he was to them emphasizing his own existence. But in the last stanza this singular 'I' gets transformed into the plural 'we'. Certainly this proves how assimilated the poet has been with those common men in the course of time.

The Easter Rising- the occasion which is associated with the title of the concerned poem is a double entendre on the holiday. Though the festival celebrates Jesus' resurrection, simultaneously this week is marked by the death of the revolutionists because of whom 'a terrible beauty' was 'born'. Hence the title, unveiling Yeats' indeterminacy more intensely, synchronously presents resurrection and crucifixion, myth and reality, delight and dejection.

Importantly such in-betweenness proves Yeats's dual nature and keeps the ending of the poem open. He, in a Derrida-ian manner, creates such an arena where the contradictory thematic tenors overlap. But though Maud Gonne herself rebuked Yeats and made a confession that 'No I don't like your poem, it isn't worthy of you and above all it isn't worthy of the subject' (Quoted in Ross-90), Harold Bloom perspicuously observed that '*Easter 1916* is a model of sanity and proportion, and is genuinely Yeats's eighteenth Century poem […] (Bloom-314).

REFERENCES

1. Albright, Daniel. W.B.Yeats: The Poems, London. J.M. Dent. 1991. Print. | 2. Bloom, Harold. Yeats. London. Oxford University Press. 1972. Print. | 3. Jeffares, Norman A. A New Commentary on the Poems of W.B.Yeats. London. Macmillan. 1984. Print. | 4. Ross, David A. Critical Companion to William Butler Yeats: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work. New York. Facts on File. 2009. Print. | 5. Taneja, G.R. W.B.Yeats: An Anthology of Recent Criticism. Delhi. Pencraft International. 2005. Print. |