

Influence of Indian Philosophy in Depiction of Youth and Age in the Poems of T S Eliot and W B Yeats

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ABSTRACT

Indian literature has influenced to a great deal the literary artists across the world. The western world has seen and accepted its impact on its writers more than any other literatures in the world. Myths, images and symbols of life in Indian Literature are so deep and pregnant of meaning that they have been frequently applied by several imagists and poets in their work. People who feel that indirect way of instruction, education and warning may be more effective than the direct one always apply symbols and images. All authors of English literature have been deeply moved by the generation gap between youth and age. They took it seriously and as the real teachers, mentors and facilitators, they started to depict it through their work to create a balance between the two pillars of society. T S Eliot and W B Yeats have also portrayed youth and age excellently in their poems. This papers attempts to reinstate influence of Indian Philosophy on T S Eliot and W B Yeats especially when they depict youth and age in their poems.

Keywords: Youth, Age, Indian Philosophy, Values, Religion

It has been one of the important trends in literature that it depicts life in all its manifestations. There is hardly an individual who denies the fact that there will be no literature without life. In fact, literature is the interpretation of life ‘as it is, as it was and as it ought to be’. This faculty of literature creates a significant and very much notable difference between literature and history which looks at only one aspect of life i.e. ‘as it was’. Since the day literature became the medium of expression through any mode, mankind has been dealing with all stages, phases and aspects of life. In Indian literature, life has been divided into four major *ashrams* (phases) i.e. *Brihamcharya Ashram* (Studentship), *Grihastha Ashram* (Married Life), *Vanprastha Ashram* (Shedding out all family centered responsibilities and becoming a teacher to share knowledge) and finally *Sanyas Ashram* (Self enlightenment and penance for salvation). Similarly, other literatures and cultures across the world divide life and its purposes into three to seven phases. In English Literature, Shakespeare in his play *Twelfth Night* (1601-

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02) mentions seven phases of life. In his one of the best tragedies *King Lear*, he talks about follies of old age. Francis Bacon in his essay *Of Youth and Age* talks about correct coordination between energy of youth and experience of age. Even in the Transitional Period and the Romantic Age, different phases and their effects on life have been discussed in detail. In modern literature, the age has been depicted directly or indirectly through various symbols and images. The whole efforts of the literary artists have been to create a sort of essential understanding towards various phases of life.

It has been almost an uncontroversial fact that life beyond sixty takes a painful turn in some or the other ways. Retirement, reminiscence, crisis of identity, loneliness, chronic diseases, old age abuse, generation gap and many other factors are the harsh realities of life after sixty. These realities, either some of them or all of them, have to be faced by all. Even medical science has defined aging as a gradual process of physical, mental and natural changes that have to be encountered, sooner or later, by very individual. Although the process of ageing doesn't start at a particular point yet the modern medical science claims that many bodily changes start occurring during forties because during this period several functions of our body start declining gradually. Still there is no official or specific age defined by the government or by the medical science where ageing starts. Various governments have fixed 60-65 years as the age of retirement for the government servants. On the basis of this, the age from 60-65 has been designated as the beginning of old age in various countries. But the question which crops up in one's mind is whether the reason for the beginning of old age is historical or biological. Many years ago, Germany became the first country to declare age of 65 years as the age for retirement which was taken as the beginning of the old age. The same system was adopted by several developed countries as well. But later on, in view of experience, utility and performance of aging people, this tradition was changed by many countries which shows that there is no fixed boundary where aging starts. Rather, it varies from person to person, place to place and time to time.

Over the period of time, several studies have revealed that aging is not merely dependent on chronology, but ailments and psychology also contribute equally in reducing our bodily functions. In Korea, Japan and China, it has been noticed that decline in bodily functions of people is slower than Indian and most South Asian, European and Middle East countries. Thus, it is clear that besides chronology, life style, habits and several other factors are responsible for aging. In fact, chronology must have been taken into consideration only for legal and financial purposes.

In the literary world especially in the British Literature, ageing has been depicted in various ways across the entire history. Poets, essayists, dramatists and other literary artists have very well noticed different phases of life and included their observations into their works. W B Yeats like his predecessors and contemporary poets has noticed a sharp contrast between youth and age. Like Francis Bacon, he feels that a young man is full of dream, energy, aspiration, physical strength and beauty. He also feels that young age is best for love making though the feeling of love never dies. He seems to advise the youth to find their love-

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*"Go and love, go and love, young man,
If the lady be young and fair,"
Ah, penny, brown penny, brown penny,
I am looped in the loops of her hair.²*

Having studied his literature, It seems that Yeats has been very sensitive in nature and meek in behavior specially in case of expression of the feeling love in real life. Throughout his youth, he was madly in love with Maud Gonne (the most beautiful nationalist of the Irish Movement) who hardly took his feelings seriously. Finally, at the age of 52, he married his secretary and started pouring all his feelings and experience into his literature. With the passage of time, he turned mature and started talking about the real problems of the real world and ageing is one of them. Yeats feels that there is an identity crisis for the elderly generation as she/he hardly finds a suitable place for her/him. He writes-

*That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
—Those dying generations—at their song...
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect³*

Yeats is pained as he had to leave his mother land because he doesn't find it fit for the ageing population. Referring to the country of his origin, he says that his country is not fit for the old men as it is full of young people *lying in one another's arms like the birds singing in the trees*. He regrets that young generation is so engaged in sensual pleasures that they even forget the call from their soul.

T S Eliot, the most intelligent poet of the entire history of English Literature also finds a significant difference between thinking, actions and feelings of youth and age. He is the unmatched master of using symbols and images in his poems. In fact, he is so skilled in using deep images and symbols that even his sort poems can be expanded to a book. Like Yeats and other poets, he also realizes that an old man who has spent his youth fighting for his country has to fight again against his current old age life for finding his identity. At this juncture of life, he has a very strong dislike for those who are money-minded, religiously dull and politically ambitious people in society. Eliot chooses to educate people through monologues also as he wants to tell the critics that a character's study is best possible through this mean only.

He depicts both youth and age with very scary images signaling a clear crisis of identity when people grow old.

² From *The Young Man's Song* of W B Yeats

³ From *Sailing to Byzantium* of W B Yeats

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*Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain...
I an old man,
A dull head among windy spaces.⁴*

In *Gerontion* of T S Eliot, his protagonist seems to represent his own contemporary generation of aged people. Eliot through various symbols shows that like Gerontion, an old man is pessimistic, meek in behavior, less courageous with lost will to live. Eliot doesn't forget to tell his readers that in young generation there is absence of appropriate knowledge on religion, spirituality, history, humanity, philosophy, faith, will, and sexuality.

Both T S Eliot and W B Yeats agree on the issue that there is lack of communication between youth and age which is a major problem leading to boredom and restlessness. Under such circumstances, people feel that they are *neither living nor dead*. They try to instruct people to fill this gap and have peace in life. In his *The Waste Land*, Eliot shows the plight of the waste landers who are on the verge of old age. It seems that everyone who is a victim of boredom urges, *My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me. Speak to me* (The Waste Land). In the opinion of Eliot, this situation occurred as man has stopped giving value to the values. Religion that is duty of people has been put aside and replaced by a materialistic mechanical life that has no creativity. He warns that man without religion is a seed on wings wandering this way or that. Eliot further points out that without values, the ship of mankind is sinking and there is no one to save it.

Since centuries, the perception that aging is always a problem has been so deeply rooted in human mind that the historians and literary artists even did not hesitate to compare an old man with a tattered coat and useless things. Yeats was not an exception of it. He experienced these bitter realities of life and, through his poems, started to educate people about their impact both on human physique and psyche. He regrets-

*An aged man is but a paltry thing...
A tattered coat upon a stick...⁵*

Certainly, this is not the perceptions that have been developed and followed by a civilization based on good and moral cultural values. Such biases in society may be the result of soul-killing materialistic, corrupt and cruel ideologies. In almost every corner of the world, time to time, such ideologies have been bitterly criticized by the intellectuals, reformers and saints. Right from our childhood, we are taught that we are so heavily indebted to our parents and teachers that payback is not at all possible. Secondly, we should also know that the next generation is watching our activities carefully and learning all that we are doing with our parents. Having noticed this problem, Alexander Pope has warned us-

⁴ From *Gerontion* of T S Eliot published in 1920

⁵ From *Sailing to Byzantium* of W B Yeats

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*We think our fathers fools, so wise we grow.
Our wiser sons, no doubt will think us so.*⁶

Philosophers, teachers, poets and reformers across the globe have been extremely concerned about healthy human relationships. The Indian masters seem to have gone a step ahead not only in analyzing the problem but also suggesting the most appropriate solution that could be applied beyond time and place. Their division and propagation of four stages of life clearly shows that after *Brahmcharya* (Studentship) and *Grihastha* (Married Life) Ashrams (Phases of life), people should adopt *Vanprasth* (Shedding out all family centered responsibilities) and contribute in preparing the young generation for a better future. Our biggest and the most valuable epics *The Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata* are not merely the stories of rise and fall of two great empires but these are also the most appropriate educational medium to establish the importance of loving and respecting our family and giving due regards to our parents and aged population. The two magnum opus of our mythological treasure i.e. these two unmatched epics have been the best medium to teach our young generation about giving value to the values and ethics in life.

Both Eliot and Yeats have been deeply affected of Indian philosophy and it seems that both of them were very much serious about composing a sort of *European Geeta*. The amount of literature that they produced explicitly depict the influence of Indian *Upanisadic* philosophy on them. Where Yeats uses this philosophy *To keep a drowsy Emperor awake*, Eliot advises to take the shelter of Upanishadic Philosophy when everything is *Burning burning and burning* and man seem to urge *O Lord Thou pluckest me out O Lord Thou pluckest*. This shows that mankind is passing through an age in which no one is faithful, hardly anybody is secure and in which it is impossible to follow the cardinal virtues. They find no hope for the resurrection of values except man takes shelter under the *red rock* (the holy place) or becomes *the singing-masters of our own soul*. Yeats also gives another solution to the ageing population who is suffering from boredom and isolation. In his *When You are Old*, he says that reunion with the old love in the old age may be one of the best solutions because true love never dies and it has been felt that there is always *one man loved the pilgrim soul in you, And loved the sorrows of your changing face*. To many people, this solution seems to be a mundane solution but if someone analyses it deeply, it advises both the youth and the age to be more in love with someone's soul rather than his/her body. Soul to soul love is true love which sustains and consoles.

Therefore, it is a very much remarkable fact that both T S Eliot and W B Yeats were deeply influenced with Indian philosophy of life and its manifestations. Both the poets studied Indian classics deeply and incorporated their teachings into their work which could perhaps won them the Nobel Prize also. On depiction of youth and age, they seem to warn that the youth must understand the inevitable phase of ageing. In his *The Waste Land*, Eliot has been frank enough to tell that there is no fixed point in life from which this process starts. People in mid-thirties and forties may start behaving like the old ones specially when their *nerves are bad* or they visit a dentist to *get yourself some teeth*. This shows that Chronology only marks the beginning

⁶ From *Essay on Criticism* of Alexander Pope

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of aging process while aging is such a complex problem that it needs to be revisited and seen through scientific, sociological and psychological lenses also. Both the poets have been bold enough in accepting the follies of youth as well as age. But at the same time, they have also been instrumental in suggesting a perfect solution for the same. To them the youth is energetic creative but careless, ignorant, materialistic, believer of physical pleasure, lost in its own world, religiously detached, mythically plain and psychologically self-centered. On the other hand their works portray the age as experienced, learned, culturally rich, religiously aware and philosophically sound. But because of the generation gap, they feel themselves isolated, ignored, disgusted, weak, unhealthy, victim of boredom, paltry thing and so on and so forth.

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Conflict of Interest

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