



IRELAND AND W.B.YEATS AN ECOFEMINISTIC CONNECTION

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ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism extends itself to sensitivity towards exploitation of nations by other dominant nations whereby, basic socioeconomic relations are made to suffer. One can bring in the diverse ecofeminist discourse in connecting Ireland's subjugation by the British and W.B.Yeats's sensitive reaction that he expresses in his Autobiography, Memoirs and Poetry. In this paper I propose first to theorize ecofeminism as it is relevant in the present context, and restructured Yeats's mindset and attitude towards Ireland. Dorothea Butler's "purity of Irish vision" greatly influenced his thought and poetry. He looked at the British domination of Ireland as 'raping of the land' and sought to participate in the Irish National movement evoking an then to explore the intersection between the genre, the country –Ireland, and Yeats's nationalistic consciousness which is covert and symbolic. His many women friends like Maud Gonne, Madame Blavatsky, Olivia Shakespear, and Lady Gregory influenced and ecofeminist discourse by invoking the various Irish cultural paradigms. From the time of the conquest of Ireland by King Henry VIII, the Irish people were seething under foreign yoke of the British rulers. They revolted against the British imperialism in Ireland and demanded Home Rule for themselves with the immediate withdrawal of all British control from Ireland. Confirming to the ecofeminist philosophy of communion and harmony with the help of a saga of rich Irish cultural hallmarks like myths, legends, folktales and literature, Yeats attempts to write and rewrite Celticism and the question of Irish National Identity and its relationship to the production of literature.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, nationalistic consciousness, domination, Ireland, Yeats

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One of the hallmarks of ecofeminism is the idea of connection between the treatment of nature and treatment of women. Many feminists have argued that the goals of these two are mutually reinforcing; ultimately they involve the development of worldviews and practices that are not based on

male-biased models of domination. 'Raping of the land' and 'taming nature' are expressions relatively common and the same language is often used in connection with women. As Rosemary Ruether wrote in her book, *New Woman/NewEarth*:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this . . . society. (204)

Ecofeminism extends itself to sensitivity towards exploitation of nations by other dominant nations whereby, basic socioeconomic relations are made to suffer. It is here, that one can bring in the diverse ecofeminist discourse in thinking of Ireland's subjugation by the British and W.B. Yeats's sensitive reaction that he expresses in his Autobiography, Memoirs and Poetry. In this paper I propose first to theorize ecofeminism as it is relevant in the present context, and then to explore the intersection between the genre and Yeats's nationalistic consciousness which is covert and symbolic. His many women friends like Maud Gonne, Madame Blavatsky, Olivia Shakespear, Lady Gregory influenced and restructured his mindset and attitude towards Ireland. As noted by Deirdre Toomey in the Introduction to *Yeats and Women*, by 1890s Yeats had freed himself from the power of strong paternal influences and transferred his allegiance from men to women. He saw women not merely as "icons, sexual objects, muses, but as companions, mentors, fellow-workers" (xvi). He was vastly influenced by Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophical society. Dorothea Butler's "purity of Irish vision" greatly influenced his thought and poetry. He looked at the British domination of Ireland as 'raping of the land' and sought to participate in the Irish National movement evoking

an ecofeminist discourse by invoking the various Irish cultural paradigms.

II

Ecofeminism calls for consciousness raising, healing, and a communion with nature. 'It is best thought of less as a movement than a philosophy- or perhaps not a movement at all . . . [It is] a way of re-regarding the world that can be brought to bear on a whole variety of movements and tendencies' (Sale 304). There is little action; rather there is a call for concern and involvement in crucial issues. Leila Brammer says that "Ecofeminists do participate in the formation of ideology and recruitment in that, conferences and books are explicitly for the development and spread of ecofeminist thought. The message has spread . . . But, Ecofeminism has not resulted in collective action in a way Black Power as a philosophy did . . . Rhetorical analysis is the key to understanding phenomena like ecofeminism because their manifestation is rhetorical(Brammer 1-2). In phenomena like Ecofeminism ideology and meaning are more important than structure. People use new words or attribute new meaning to old words in order to express their thoughts and feelings, thus exhibiting a consciousness of their environment in the meanings. One's feelings fuse with the symbols and images which carry the feeling in communication and sustain it over time. One is led into a psychodramatic fantasy world, in which meaning in present, reality becomes clearer and involves others with similar interests.

In explaining this theory, Bormann (1983) says that, symbolic convergence theory adds to the idea of identity formation and consciousness, he observes, ' If several or many people develop

portions of their private symbolic worlds that overlap as a result of symbolic convergence, they share a common consciousness and have the basis for communicating with one another to create community, to discuss their common experiences, and to achieve understanding' (102). Important themes and artifacts are identified and then used to develop the rhetorical visions. The interactions of these elements provide reality for the group and provide insights into group motives, cohesion, values and style. In the present context I would like to underline the strain of ecofeminist thought and action in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats. In this paper I have attempted to focus on W.B.Yeats' use of Irish landscape, legends and myths in order to support the Irish revolt for independence and a separate cultural identity from the British. The identity issue becoming crucial, Yeats furthers his ecofeminist philosophy by using images and symbols that are purely Irish. They are dynamic and open ended and have historically enabled the Irish people to establish differential Identity, resist dominance and affirm group solidarity.

III

Since the conquest of Ireland by King Henry VIII, the Irish people were seething under foreign yoke of the British rulers. Majorie Howes in her book *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class and Irishness*, has elaborated the problems faced by the Irish people in the hands of the British. The geographical proximity and racial and cultural similarity to England rendered the Irish less radically "other" than the inhabitants of other British territories. In the British thinking, Ireland represented "home" rather than "empire". In the nineteenth century, the British wanted to integrate

Ireland with England socially, economically and geographically using coercion. The Celtic 'otherness' of the Irish was supposed to be complimentary to the English like that of the Scots.

Femininity marked the Celts difference from the Saxon, but also placed her [Ireland] in a relationship of natural complementarity to him [England]. Like man and woman they were made for each other, and should acquiesce in the dictates of nature and history, combining to form a more perfect whole. Both Celt and Saxon were radically incomplete. The Saxons possessed precisely the qualities that the Celts lacked, and the Celt could in turn supply the Saxon efficiencies. . . .The Celt's femininity stood, not merely for racial difference, but for a combination of racial difference and racial affinity in relation to the English. . . [Supporting the English cause Arnold says] the Irish could be a nation poetically only not politically (21).

This kind of pathological analysis of the Irish hurt their sensibility. The people of Ireland refused to take the colonial policy of the English people lying down. They revolted against the British imperialism in Ireland and demanded Home Rule for themselves with the immediate withdrawal of all British control from Ireland. Initiated by Maud Gonne, W.B.Yeats became involved in the National Movement of Ireland.

Yeats spent a major part of his life in a period of extreme movements for independence. This made him extremely nationalist in spirit and independence minded. He was never a politician in the true sense of the word but poetically he sought to be an active participant in the freedom movement. Ireland's mystic twilight, refreshing greenery and medieval relics enraptured the poetic mind of W.B. Yeats. He disliked London and longed for Sligo, a place in the Western part of Ireland,

where he had spent his childhood. Nostalgia for his homeland inspired the poem, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*. In his autobiography Yeats himself claims that, “ ‘ The Lake Isle of Innisfree’ expresses the idea that nature provides an inherently restorative place to which human beings can go, escape the chaos and corrupting influences of civilization”(http://www.thoreau.eserver.org/yeats).

He writes,

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and
wattles made:
Nine beam-rows will I have there, and a hive
for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade. (Jeffares
16).

The pristine beauty of Ireland inspired Yeats that he wanted to give up everything and return to the humbleness of his native Ireland. The abundance of indigenous Irish folklore and legends became an inspiration for Yeats. Never an active political activist, Yeats proved to be a distinct rhetorical visionary, whereby he contributed to the Irish National movement, conjoining and linking together the people of Ireland by invoking their distinct cultural paradigms- fairy tales, myths and legends. Yeats was much imbued by these native Celtic and Gaelic sagas. Lady Gregory and other Nationalistic mythologists of his time inspired him to invoke the names of mythological characters like, Fergus, Cuchulain, Conor, Maeve, Deirdre etc. in his poetry, whereby, he could entreat a sense of common cultural heritage and belonging in people of Ireland. In *To the Rose upon the Rood of Time* we find Yeats saying,

Come near me, while I sing the ancient ways:

Cuchlain battling with the bitter tide;

The Druid, grey, wood-nurtured, quite-eyed,

Who cast round Fergus dreams, and ruin untold;

...

Sing of old Eire and the ancient ways:

Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days.

(Jeffares 10).

Some critics have said, “Yeats was escapist, for with his romantic imagination, he could not take the world as a habitable place” (Sarkar 47). Daniel Albright writes:

Perhaps it is this: a frustrated man seeks escape from an inadequate world- escape from nature, escape from society, escape from history, escape from himself; in pursuit of the Eternal Beauty that lies beyond, he immerses himself in dreams of supernatural splendor; he dwells in an austere and symbolic tower and tries to transmute himself to metal or stone, in order to assume a permanence equal to beauty he seeks; but in the end . . . he finds that what he has painfully sought, what he has painstakingly constructed, is nothing but an image of his own simple perishing face. (Albright xlv).

Albright’s opinion is in a way straight jacketing Yeats. As a romantic he did not want to escape the fret and fury of life. Rather, like an ecofeminist he wanted to bring into the wake of the Irish people the connections they had with their soil, their cultural heritage and the relics from their own ancestors. He created a different agenda that in turn contributed to the then Irish agenda of bringing the people of Ireland under one unified roof, that is, by establishing a distinct cultural identity amongst them. His romantic imagination became a common point of reference for all the people of Ireland. With Lady Gregory, Yeats worked relentlessly for the cultural revival of Ireland. He founded Abbey theatre to present Irish plays on Irish subjects, performed by Irish actors. Forever wanting to preserve the sanctity

of Irish culture and the symbols that stood for it, Yeats was deeply agitated by the British laws for the poor that were reducing the rent of the old houses. He thought that these houses were the centres of tradition, Art and Culture, that he valued most. In a heartrending lament he writes in *Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation*:

. . .And the sweet laughing eagle thoughts
that grow

Where wings have memory of wings, and all
That comes of the best knit to the best?
Although

Mean roof-trees were sturdier for its fall,
How could their luck run high enough to
reach

The gifts that govern men. . . (Jeffares 46-47).
“the sweet laughing eagle” represents art and culture of traditional Ireland. Yeats is convinced that Art and Culture inherent in the big Houses instruct the morals of the people of Ireland and cannot be allowed to become crippled and devalued by the coercive British laws that allow all and sundry possession of these priceless ‘gifts that govern men’.

Yeats’s reaction against British domination is ecofeministic in nature. British domination insisted that the Saxons were superior as a race and their domination was natural and inevitable. Majorie Howes observes that “The version of femininity Arnold ascribed to the Celt allowed him to express at the same time the Celts’ valuable uniqueness and crippling inferiority, spiritual strength and practical weakness, energetic passion and the inability to govern it, imaginative richness and incapacity for sustained and balanced logical thought. It enabled Arnold to construct a Celtic racial or national difference whose complimentary relation to the Saxon combined cultural separation and political integration” (22). This attitude of the British and the politics of the times impressed upon Yeats to write

the poem “*Leda and the Swan*”. Michelangelo’s painting of ‘Leda and the Swan’ that told the story of the birth of the Hellenic civilization wrought a very different reaction from Yeats. Instead of making the union between Leda and the Swan or Zeus a love story, he made it one that gave birth to a new culture. Yeats sees it as a rape by a bestial culture of an innocent woman signifying Ireland. Contrary to the British vision of integration, Yeats sees the process as a cultural rape which will only beget pain and disaster. He justifies the plight of the Irish people in his poem ‘*Leda and the Swan*’:

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening
thighs?

...

Did she put on his knowledge with his
power

Before the indifferent beak could let her
drop? (Jeffares 127).

The dominating Saxon’s were indifferent to the real problems of Celts. All they desired was economic and political power over the Celts. Yeats was greatly disturbed by the reactionary revolution in Ireland. Contemporary uprisings, rebellions, executions, murders etc. pained him vastly. He anticipated a change: a change of disintegration that would probably herald a new civilization. In the “*The Second Coming*” he writes,

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity. (Jeffares 99).

“This was a period when Yeats’s metaphysical gloom deepened, assisted by personal, political and occult promptings” (Dyson 27). He envisioned the image of an Egyptian Sphinx with the body of a lion and the head of a man which could only represent evil. The

vision of bloodbaths is Yeats's desperate spiritual vision that warns of impending disaster, a disaster which would be the resultant of exploitation and domination. In this connection it will not be too far-fetched to bring in the ecofeminist spiritual vision, that the 'golden age' was a 'partnership society' where no one was dominated; no one was inferior or superior. "However, warring, dominating patriarchal society intruded on this Utopia and it was destroyed" (Brammer 1998). This is very much akin to what Yeats says in *The Second Coming*:

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood deemed tide is loosed, and
everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned. . .
(Jeffares 99).

This vision seeks to bring about a new consciousness about the perishing culture and morals of humanity. It poses a warning to the Irish people who are so taken up by violence and emotions that they forget the basic purpose of their endeavour, that is, establishment of harmony and peace and revival of a great Celtic culture. In an attempt to protect the future generation from exploitation, Yeats in *A Prayer for My Daughter*, beseeches that God protect his daughter as He protects nature :

May she become a flourishing hidden tree
That all her thoughts like the linnet be . . .
O may she live like some green laurel
Rooted to one perpetual place. (Jeffares
102).

Yeats chose the Rose as a symbol and built fantasies around it. He insisted that the rose had sufficient breadth of reference to include nationals as well as private concerns. "The Rose is a favourite symbol with the Irish poets. It . . . is used, not merely in love poems, but in addresses to Ireland" (Albright

448-49). The "basis of ecofeminist consciousness is built upon sharing fantasies that deny uniform, constraining thought" (Brammer 11). Rose as a symbol was a shared fantasy amongst the Irish poets of the times, but garners a distinct meaning in Yeats's poem, "*To Ireland in the Coming Times*". Yeats sings the saga of a utopian Ireland in this poem

... *Because the red-rose-bordered hem
Of her, whose history began
Before God made the angelic clan,
Trails all about the written page
When Time began to rant and rage
The measure of her flying feet
Made Ireland's heart begin to beat;
And Time bade all his candles flare
To light a measure here and there;
And may the thoughts of Ireland brood
Upon a measured quietitude.* (Jeffares 22).

In this poem Yeats connects the future of Ireland to the past of the great Irish poets whose patriotism in the form of ballads, stories, ranns (verses in Irish) and songs, sought to alleviate the sorrows of the Irish people. They were Davis, Mangan, Ferguson and others who, like Yeats himself, unanimously abhorred violence, championed the case of Irish independence and urged for the creation of an Irish National Literature.

*Nor may I less be counted one
With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson, . . .
While still I may, I write for you . . .
I cast my heart into my rhymes,
That you in the dim coming times,
May know how my heart went with them. .
. (Jeffares 22-23).*

Yeats, in the poem "*To Ireland in the Coming Times*" (22-23), identifies with these poets and wants to establish a fraternity with them. Thereby, confirming to the ecofeminist philosophy of communion and

harmony with the help of a saga of rich Irish cultural hallmarks like myths, legends, folktales and literature. It was mainly through his attempts to write and rewrite Celticism, that Yeats addressed one of the questions that preoccupied him throughout his career, that is, the question of Irish National Identity, Irish land and its relationship to the production of literature.

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