

Imprints colonialism and the treatment of sacrifice and the delineation of scapegoats

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Yeats's allusions to the dethroned pagan and pre-Christian deities of pre-colonial Ireland such as Tuatha De Daanan and Sidhe and his adaptation of folk legends for his poetic 'plays like Cathleen ni Houlihan and The Countess Cathleen reveal his politico-cultural stance. He has identified the wounds, mutilations and humiliations suffered by the dispossessed and liminal deities as those inflicted on the motherland during foreign domination. The imprints of successive colonisations can be deduced from the plight of the deities. As W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) and Edasseri Govindan Nair (1906- 1974) lived and wrote during a critical period in the history of their respective nations, the treatment of sacrifice and the delineation of scapegoats in their works bear the imprints colonialism. Ireland became an independent republic in 1922 and India in 1947. Both the nations had been under the British raj.

Their historical agenda of resistance to the imperium and to the imperial discourse is inscribed in the portrayal of the marginalized and the native in the works of these two writers. Edward Said, for instance, speaks of Yeats as the indisputably great national poet who articulates the experiences, the aspirations and the vision of a people suffering under the dominion of an off-shore power. From this perspective, Yeats is a poet who belongs to a tradition not usually considered his, that of the colonial world ruled by European imperialism now-- that is, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries--bringing to a climactic

insurrectionary stage of massive upheaval of anti-imperialist resistance in the colonies.

There are various references to native deities who had occupied central positions and who have been relegated to liminal positions. Sidhe is one of them. C.M. Bowra describes Sidhe as “the fairy people who travel in the wind and seduce men from habitual lives”. Stan Smith observes that Sidhe [pronounced Shee], the faery folk in the Irish legends, combines an idea of the souls of the dead with vague memories of the ancient inhabitants of the island, the Tuatha de Danaan, who left behind them long barrows and cromlechs. “Tuatha de Danaan, meaning Dana's children or Dana's people, is used to denote a group of deities also. Their plight is the same as that of the ancient or native people of Ireland who have been forced to live on the peripheries and the margins.

They were defeated by the sons of Miles or Milesians from Spain: Even though defeated and dispossessed, the Tuatha De Danaan held sway in men's minds for centuries--who is to say that they do not do so still? The invaders spread throughout the length and breadth of the land; the old race went underground. The archeologists list between 30,000 and 40,000 earthen and stone forts. The plain country people maintain that these forts or raths are the dwelling place of the fairies. The subdued Tuatha De Danaan survive as wee-folk doing mischief or occasionally doing good offices ... Those deities, it is believed, often haunt those who vanquished them to destroy peace of mind.

The deities of the folk and native traditions of Ireland have withdrawn into liminal regions. A.G. Stock remarks: The tradition in Ireland is that the gods were there before the Gaels came, that they fought for their possession of the country and at last came to terms and withdrew into hills, leaving the surface of the land to the invaders. There are faery hills, green terraced mounds into which no farmer will

drive a ploughshare ... the people remember what they are--the dispossessed lords who ruled before Christ came. The phenomenon of the natives' withdrawal into marginal regions with the coming of territorial colonisers had been a feature of Irish history. Speaking about the submission of Ireland to Anglo-Normans in 1171 and their gradual implementation of feudalistic set up, Jackson notes: The Anglo-Norman lords, with their private armies, advanced across the great cultural plain, and up the river valleys. The Irish retreated with their cattle to the hills, the woods and hiding places in the bog country.

The retreat of the natives in all the periods and stages of Irish history implies corresponding marginalization and contraction of the styles and values of life of the natives. Their deities have become discarded and shrunk. Yeats has observed that "Fairies are the gods of pagan Ireland who, when no longer worshipped and fed with offerings, dwindled away in the popular imagination". Their protest can be heard from the lines like "Taken away wheaten food/Taken away our altar-stone" (Mythologies 166). Prafulla C. Kar, analysing the image of the vanishing African in Chinua Achebe's novels, observes that Achebe seems to believe that the African in his primitive, agrarian and blissful state taking pride in his religion, numerous gods, folklore, magic and rituals no longer exists now; it is transformed into a myth and an archetype which are slowly passing into the ancestral memory of the race.

In the same way, in Ireland, most of the deities of the abandoned cults have vanished into the dark realms of myth and archetype. But compared to other European nations, Ireland is still a poor, undeveloped and less-industrialised nation. The people in the countryside, and even in towns, retain faith in ghosts, fairies and primitive deities. Many woods and places are considered to be sacred. The postulations of Christianity, the dominant religion, against primitive superstitions and beliefs have relatively less effect in Ireland. Norman Vance observes: "The

warlike paganism of the heroic cycles of pre-Christian Ireland was not colonized or suppressed by Rome or the Roman Church, but accommodated alongside the pieties of Christianity. And Vinod Sena has this to say: Unlike the materially progressive nations of the West, the Irish still retain a widespread belief in the supernatural, and many of them still cling to the ancient lore which Christianity had undermined elsewhere.

Yeats himself has noted this aspect: "The ghosts and goblins do still live and rule in the imagination of innumerable Irish men and women and not merely in remote places, but close even to big cities". And Philip Edwards attributes "the great subliminal strength of Irish intractability" to what he calls "the stubbornness of an outlawed religion which refused to be quenched and which took on more and more the features not of belief but of tribalism"

. This "outlawed religion" has been formed by the amalgamation and syncopation of all the marginalised cults and beliefs. It has been the creation of the native Irish ethos. To Yeats, it supplies an alternative discourse against the dominant Christian discourse of the empire. Stan Smith comments that for Haud Conne and Yeats the idea of a spiritual other world is represented by a strange amalgam of Irish myth, astrology, Judaeo-Christian heresies, and neo-Platonism, in which druid, priest and seer merged . It places a reborn Ireland as the antithesis to everything English. Vinod Sena observes that Yeats had the habit of viewing every conceivable subject in terms of Irish versus British . Yeats wanted to establish a nation-wide network of literary societies committed to the cultivation of Irish myth, folklore, history and literature to build up and train a larger, more representative and critically more responsive reading public . In Yeats's view, Ireland's opportunity lay in its access to the primitive and folk mind . Yeats believed that Ireland could produce a vital people's literature as it has national traditions living in the minds of the populace

. Yeats's attempts at reviving and revitalising folklore tradition have a direct bearing upon the colonial status of Ireland. Commenting upon the poems of the reputed Irish poet Samuel Ferguson (1810-1886), Yeats writes: In these poems and the legends they contain lies the refutation of the calumnies of England and those among the Irish who are false to Ireland. We are often told that we are men of infirm will and lavish lips, planning one thing and doing another, seeking this today and that tomorrow. But, a widely different story do these legends tell. (UP 104)

Yeats has also indicated that the attitudes of the British and the Irish towards the native legends and beliefs are different:

The world is, I believe, more full of significance to the Irish peasant than to the English. The fairy populace of hill and lake and woodland have helped to keep it so. It gives a fanciful life to the dead hillsides, and surrounds the peasant, as he ploughs and digs with tender shadows of poetry. No wonder that he is gay, and can take man and his destiny without gloom and make proverbs like this from the Old Gaelic: "The lake is not burdened by its swan, the steed by its bridle, or a man by the soul that is in him." The legends and memories associated with the hills, valleys and woods might seem to be a burden to the settlers and their followers. The "presencer" of ancient deities and queens like Dana, Meava and Scotia might appear to be a superstitious nuisance. The colonial discourse wanted to efface them. In its school texts they are absent: "The children did not know much of them in those days of British rule, certainly nothing good of them. As mentioned earlier, like "Bimbisarente Edayan," "Panikutakkam" too discusses at length the implications of "real" and ritual sacrifices. The poem written in the rhythm of marching songs suits the revolutionary tone. The slogans of the agitators are interwoven with the pictures of ordeals suffered by the labourers. The motif of sacrifice undergoes the required transformation. The rhythm of chanting prayer and the tone of adoration can be seen

in poems on mother goddesses like 'kavile Pattu." The basic assumption behind the theme of mother goddess / male victim is that the fertility and welfare of the consequent depend upon the victim's sacrifice and the consequent rejuvenation of the deity. Such an assumption has however been gradually eroded in the wake of colonial domination and other kinds of cultural invasion. And mother goddesses have turned into archetypes giving way, among other things, to the conception of "motherland." Edasseri remarks that the well-being of all the members of the society depends upon the subversion: of the wealthy class and landed aristocracy. The ideals of Indian freedom struggle and the Russian Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 had succeeded in subverting many of the assumptions of the dominant ideology of the time. The mill-owner in "Panikutakkam" who conducts ritual retreat is unconsciously or indirectly trying to perpetuate the dominant ideology. He does not seem to analyse the medical or material reasons for his or his wife's sterility.

TO him, God's curse, because of the sins he and his spouse might have acquired during their previous births, is the root cause of their sterility. From the point of view of such an ideological plane, the labourers should view their poor wages and other grievances as the result of their inherited sin or blight. Instead they question their "god-given" plight and launch an agitation. The iron hand with which the owner handles the issue of the strike and his unrelenting pride in not yielding to the labourers' demands, together with his observation of the yajna, have, thus, the same ideological background. He is also asserting his power. He has the prestigious position and privilege to destroy valuable items like ghee and rice.

He can withhold what is due to the starving coolies. In a similar fashion, King Bimbisara, in "Bimbisara Edavan," plans to immolate goats and offer them into the fire-altar.

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