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***Writing the Nation in the Plays of
Yeats, Shawqi, and Claudel: A
Comparative Study***

A Thesis Submitted for the Fulfillment of a PhD Degree

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Introduction

William Butler Yeats (1865 -1939), Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932) and Paul Claudel (1868- 1955) were renowned and greatest poets in their respective countries in the twentieth century, yet the three poets had an increasing interest in drama which forced them to playwriting for the purpose of writing their nations. The three writers had appeared in the early twentieth century at the time of the First World War and its repercussions on the world. The aim of the thesis is to explore the similarities and differences in the plays of the three dramatists as each one of them showed a great zeal in defending his country and in revealing a great sense of patriotism in his plays. Themes and techniques of relevant plays are to be explored and analyzed.

Roger Allen defined drama in his book *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* as “Above all, the very fact that drama is the most public of all literary genres, a performance, an act of impersonation and showing in front of an audience, has also made it in many, if not most, cultures and historical periods the focus of political oversight – in a word, censorship” (194).

In a definition of Poetic Drama which is the purpose of the study, it is;

a blending of the poetic and dramatic elements in a fruitful union. Here poetry is an integral part of the play, twined with plot, character and their interplay, not an element of isolated beauty or lyricism for its own sake . . .it means its themes and characters should be poetically convinced and should be larger than the average humanity and humdrum monotony of daily life, the passions and emotions permeating them should be naturally productive of the poetic expression, calculated to lift the mind of the spectator above the sphere of our ordinary joys and sorrows and send the penetrating gaze of his inner vision far down below the surface of the life to the very

springs of human action and human drives. (“Poetic Drama in English Literature”)

In the light of the above, it is further clarified in the article that the playwright must be fully cognitive of the modes of dramatic presentation on stage and master other poetic resources in fulfillment of his historical skill.

Joseph Chiari in his book *Poetic Drama of Paul Claudel* expounded on the nature of poetic drama. He believed that it is incumbent to examine the dramatic structure of poetic drama in order to throw light on certain aspects of the work of art and “in order to have an all embracing and complete grasp of that work one must try to reach the imaginative core which determines its nature and gives it its reality” (20).

Nationalism has its roots in its historical specificity formed by geopolitical and socioeconomic determinants and culture. The most significant of which is the language through which members of one nation can communicate. Language is a prime means of the formation of the national consciousness and so is literature. Hence, the three playwrights made an optimum use of the language while aiming at forming the awareness of their audience using figurative images, metaphors and symbolic language to relay their message.

William Butler Yeats was born on 13 June, 1865 at Georgeville, Sandy-mount Avenue, Dublin. He was the son of John Butler Yeats and Susan. In 1867 he moved with his family to London. His brother John and his sister Elizabeth were born there, his sister Susan Mary (Lily) was born at Sligo. Then the family moved to West Kensington in 1874. Yeats went to Godolphin School, Hammersmith in 1875. The family returned to Ireland after the land income was stopped because of the war in 1880. In Dublin, Yeats went to the High School, Harcourt Street. He graduated from school in

1883. Yeats fell in love with his cousin Laura Johnson in 1881 and joined the School of Art, Dublin in 1883.

Yeats' first collected poems and articles were published in the *Dublin University Review* in 1885. A year later, he became interested in reading Gaelic sagas and Irish poets who wrote in English. In 1887, Yeats joined the London Lodge of Theosophists. Two years later, Yeats compiled selections for Walter Scott, edited *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*. His first meeting with Maud Gonne was held in Florence Farr where he fell in love with her. He wrote *The Countess Cathleen* and offered her a role in the play but she refused to take it. Later, Yeats proposed to her but she declined his offer and went to France. In 1891, Yeats founded the National Literary Society with John O'Leary and the London-Irish Literary Society with T.W. Rolleston in Dublin. Yeats, proposed once again to Maud Gonne in Paris in 1894 and she declined his offer again. He initiated his first attempts with the use of symbols in conjunction with George Pollexfen and produce *The Land of Heart's Desire*.

Few years later, Yeats became involved in politics, influenced by Gonne, he joined the I.R.B. (The Irish Republican Brotherhood) and boosted the idea of uniting the Irish political parties. He first met with Lady Gregory in 1896, and they collaborated together in collecting the Irish folklore. In the same year, he wrote his sole unpublished Novel *The Speckled Bird*. Two years later, he founded with Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn the Irish Theatre. Yeats was appointed as the president of Irish National Democratic Society in 1902 and in the same year he produced his play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* in which Maud Gonne played a title role. However, her marriage to John MacBride in 1903 made him slip into deep agonies. He became more indulged into work. He founded the Abbey Theatre in 1905 where he

staged his *The King's Threshold* and *On Baile's Strand*. In 1908 he produced his *Collected Works* and in 1910 wrote *The Green Helmet*. Yeats wrote his first autobiography, *Reveries*, in 1914. In 1916, he met with Ezra Pound and wrote the *Plays for Dancers* and his poem "Easter 1916". He went to Normandy and proposed to Gonne once more but she refused him, then he proposed to her adopted daughter, Iseult Gonne, but she declined his offer as well. Finally he got married to Georgie Hyde-Lees on 21st October 1917. In 1919, he had his first daughter, Anne Butler Yeats in Dublin, then his second daughter, Michael Butler Yeats, in 1921. In the same year he produced his *Four Plays for Dancers*.

Yeats was awarded Nobel Prize in 1923. A year later, he looked deeply into philosophy and history, he wrote *Essays*, *The Cat and the Moon* and finalized his major work *A Vision*, which was published in January 1926. Yeats's first encounter with illness was in 1927 when he had a congestion of lung. In August 1929, he wrote *A Packet for Ezra Pound* as he was deeply influenced by him and he came across the Noh theatre through Pound. "The Seven Sages" was written in 1931 followed by Lady Gregory death in 1932, which had a great impact on Yeats. Few years before his death, however, Yeats participated in the translation of *Upanishads*, wrote *Dramatis Personae*, *A Full Moon in March*, *A Speech and Two Poems*, followed by a revised version of *A Vision* in October 1937. He fell seriously ill in 1936, a few months before his death. Maud Gonne paid him a visit at Riversdale. He died on 28 January 1939 and was buried at Roquebrune.

From the time of Shakespeare British Drama has been concerned with the realities of everyday life and daily situations encountered by individuals. It presented the "complexity of psychological insight, social observation and

philosophical speculation along with the aesthetic pleasures of plot construction" as indicated by Richard Taylor in his book *A Reader's Guide To The Plays of W.B. Yeats* (3) all were combined to result in a climatic dramatic situation or catastrophe which worked itself out into a denouement. The plot kept the audience interested in the interaction between characters and events. Yeats did not follow traditional drama and decided to introduce a new theatre with new techniques in expression of his radical views although he was upbraided for that. Yeats was interested to uncover the spiritual and metaphysical forces controlling human life conditions. He was not concerned with experiences of realities or everyday life as much as he was concerned with "the living relationship between the temporal world and an antecedently spiritual universe" (*A Reader's Guide* 4).

The National Dramatic Company was founded by the Fay brothers who were born in Dublin into O'Fahey family in County Galway. Francis John (Frank) was born in 1870 and William George (W.G.) in 1812. They went to Model School in Marlborough Street, Dublin, a few minutes walk away from the Mechanics' Institute that was converted later into Abbey Theatre. Frank J. Fay's articles in "The United Irishman" show a great respect for Yeats's work and for his theatre. He wrote: "Plays dealing with Ireland should be played by Irish actors." Miller further added in his book *The Noble Drama of Yeats*:

In Ireland we are at present only too anxious to shun reality. Our drama ought to teach us to face it. Let Mr. Yeats give us a play in verse or prose that will rouse this sleeping land. There is a herd of Saxon and other Swine fattening on us. They must be swept into the sea along with the pestilent breed of West. Britons with which we are troubled, or they will sweep us there. This land is ours, but we have ceased to realize the fact. We want a drama that will make us realize it. We have closed our ears to the piercing wail that rises from the

past; we want a drama that will open them, and in no uncertain words point out the reason for our failure in the past and the road to success in the future. (65)

Thus, Frank Fay and Yeats formed an Irish Nationalist theatre that meet Yeats's nationalist aspirations.

Yeats was the founder of the Abbey Theatre. He managed to overcome the challenge of lack of money, theatre, actors, aware audience, but when "he died, he left behind him a world-renowned theatre with many moving plays and able actors who brought fame and fortune to Ireland and delighted the public of England and America" (M. Gill 7).

Yeats elaborated his approach to the theatre in the following paragraph:

I would not be trying to form an Irish National Theater, if I did not believe that there existed in Ireland, whether in the minds of a few people or of a great number I do not know, an energy of thought about life itself, a vivid sensitiveness as to the reality of things, powerful enough to overcome all those phantoms of the night. One thing calls up its contrary, unreality calls up reality, and besides, life here has been sufficiently perilous to make men think. I do not think it a national prejudice that makes me believe we are a harder, a more masterful race than the comfortable English of our time, and that this comes from an essential nearness to reality of those few scattered people who have the right to call themselves the Irish race. (Liam Miller 110)

In his attempt to keep the Irish identity, Yeats stressed reliance on the Irish culture, myth and legend inspiring the people, forging their current personality and raising their nationalist passion, he further added:

It is only in the exceptions, in the few minds, where the flame has burnt as it were pure, that one can see the permanent character of a race. If one remembers the men who have dominated Ireland for the last hundred and fifty years, one understands that it is strength of personality, the individualizing quality in a man, that stirs Irish

imagination most deeply in the end. There is scarcely a man who has led the Irish people, at any time, who may not give some day to a greater writer precisely that symbol he may require for the expression of himself. (110)

Therefore, Yeats looked for a new, unconventional and non-narrative form. He searched for a workable precedent in myth, Celtic and Gaelic tradition besides experimenting with theoretical techniques, traditional as well as revolutionary. Conventional plot oriented plays are no longer relied on rather a single incident is introduced and repeated while the action or story is familiar to the audience as it is derived from traditional myth, legend, or ritual. For Yeats, theatre was a means for the celebration of Irish political and moral ideas. Yeats replaced the multiplicity of characters and events with songs, music, rhythmic movement and dance to maximize the effect or the moment of intensity. He also paid attention to designs, costumes, lighting and scenery.

Personality and passion are key concepts in the plays of Yeats. They reflect "the experience of an intensely passionate moment in the life of a character which gives those rituals their dramatic quality and power" as Taylor expatiated (*A Reader's Guide* 12). Characters face situations of conflict or they lack harmony with the forces around them, so "they seek a more congenial or fulfilling mode of existence" (12). The solution to the conflict, or the choice of a way out, or the making of a decisive decision may require conscious intervention or action or it is suddenly and strongly pushed upon them by universal or spiritual forces manifested in the physical world. "The dramatic action of the plays centers on the transformation of character from one state to another, a transmutation of personality through an ecstasy of passion which both purifies and ennobles" (12).

According to Stephen M. Gill in his book, *Six Symbolist Plays of Yeats*, Yeats was not interested in the complexities of plots and the development of characters, so his characters are not fully developed. He was interested instead in the intensity of the dramatic situation (6). Therefore, he rejected the naturalistic drama for they do not capture the dramatic moment of intensity as in *Antony and Cleopatra* in Yeats's view. He aimed at capturing the moment of intensity and isolating it as he did in the series of Cuchulain plays, the subject of the thesis. Each play rests upon one moment of intensity or one main dramatic situation. The intensity of a dramatic situation was one feature of the symbolist drama.

Yeats sought to conceive characters, language and settings from a new mode. He is after detachment from reality in a quest of the world beyond. He did not intend to create new conceptions to western drama as much as he was interested to be different from the traditional Irish and English drama and present new form and technique of drama staged on theatre.

Yeats himself at the beginning of his life was a perfectionist or attempted to be an ideal person, when he turned to drama he changed his mind. Yeats was greatly influenced by Shakespeare though he did not occupy equal rank as a playwright. His admiration of Shakespeare gives evidence to his sense of tolerance and avoiding political bigotries as Ireland was occupied by England. Yeats was against commercial theatre or naturalistic theatre that was pioneered by Ibsen. He believed such kind of theatre lack imagination. So, he turned to the Gaelic tradition and translated them into English.

Yeats managed to create a congruity between the ritual action in his theatre and the real world they exemplify. Such combination acted as an

"arcane of esoteric wisdom" (Taylor, *A Reader's Guide* 7) he wanted to communicate to his audience. He had exclusive visions of his own he wished to present. He believed that by invocation of spiritual power one can overcome the barrier between the spiritual world and the natural world. He pointed out that "The central principle of all the Magic of power is that everything we formulate in the imagination, if we formulate it strongly enough, realizes itself in the circumstances of life, acting either through our own souls, or through the spirits of nature." (qtd. in Taylor, *A Reader's Guide* 7).

In Yeats's view, every human aspect or historical epoch has its own identifiable nature, which represents its opposite which contradicts with and seeks reconciliation with. "Yeats believed that all human or temporal activity is in a constant state of movement between the extremes of primary (objective, solar, active, or reasonable) and antithetical (subjective, lunar, creative, or emotional) being" (Taylor, *A Reader's Guide* 8). So when the primary state is complete, one reaches its own opposite i.e. one moves from objectivity to subjectivity. He called that image a gyre or the great wheel. All human beings, societies, and historical ages go through twenty-eight phases until they realize their full potential and reconcile with their opposites. Such ideas of universal order were presented in detail in his ritual drama which reflected the various patterns and interrelationships of the visionary systems he built. The characters show their motives and actions in order to represent the inner workings of the universe. "In addition to the concept of verse drama as a structural symbol or magic talisman based on the metaphor of gyre and great wheel, some of the middle and later plays

also include actions or situations which exemplify the doctrine of dreaming back" (Taylor, *A Reader's Guide* 12).

Yeats elaborated that ghosts and other supernatural manifestations are projections of the imagination of spirits of the dead and who have a strong attachment to life that they dream back through their past experiences. "His object as a poet is not to create a world out of language and image, so much as to create the conditions necessary to the confrontation with a spiritual reality which is beyond man and comes to him through a process both dramatic and poetic" (Hayes 59).

Yeats derived his theory of gyre and the twenty eight phases of man from Empedocles who believed that Concord forms all things into an "homogenous sphere" (Yeats, *Vision* 67) and Discord separates elements, yet Concord does not mean changeless eternity but it gives us an image of what is changeless and stands for love. In the movement of the increase of Concord in the face of the retirement of Discord and vice versa, Yeats reached his philosophy of cones and antithesis "Dying each other's life, living each other's death" (68). So for Yeats, all physical reality such as the universe, the solar system, etc is a double cone. As space or nature is a form of external world and time and senses are a form of internal world, Yeats held that the subjective cone is of the antithetical tincture because it is achieved by the continual conflict with one's opposite, while the objective cone is of primary tincture. So Discord is subjective and Concord is objective, he indicated that "Discord" as I think – tends to separate man from man, objectivity brings us back to the mass where we begin" (72).

Within the realm of the antithetical tincture that is emotional and aesthetic and the primary tincture that is reasonable and moral the four