

Personification of the Nation as a Woman in the Literary Works of Tagore and Yeats

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the allegorical personification of the nation as a woman in the literary works of Rabindranath Tagore and W.B. Yeats. Both Nobel laureates worked on themes of nationalism, colonial dominance and gender. This was an aggressive, sometimes even driving force behind their nationalistic approach. Yeats and Tagore were both involved in the nationalist movements against British Raj. Both found nation as a feminine persona. Yeats portrayed Ireland as a woman, the victim of patriarchal dominance in his works. Maud Gonne was a political activist who actively participated in the Irish revolution against British colonial rule. Maud Gonne inspired Yeats to create a similar character in his drama *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. This drama's protagonist a vampire woman calls upon young men to higher callings and rescues the nation from colonial subjugation. In Tagore's *The Home and the World*, the female protagonist Bimala portrays the nation and the motherland. Bimala is also depicted as Durga; the goddess worshiped by young revolutionaries as both a guiding spirit and a destructive force in the Swadeshi movement. This study looks at the works of these two writers as well as the literature that is available. This paper efficiently analyzes and presents the principles behind nationalism through literary writings and imaginative strength.

Keywords: Tagore, Yeats, woman, nation, Nationalist Movement

Introduction

Representation of the nation as biological women, virgins, goddesses or female virtues has been a popular topic of discussion in nationalist thought in the colonized universe during the 20th century (Ray 2018). This paper examines the nation's allegorical personifications by W.B Yeats (1865-1939) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941).

1.1 Background

Yeats and Tagore were contemporaries who had similar ideas and experiences in their respective countries about politics and national expertise. They met in London in 1912. They were both patriots and had great respect for one another. Yeats wrote the introduction to Tagore's *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*. Both were colonial kids who realized that their nations needed their motivational writings to encourage the masses and stand up for their causes. Their friendship lasted for 37

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years and had an incredible impact on their literary works. This led to events of many historical, cultural and political significances (Banerjee 2015).

1.2 Contribution towards the Nationalist Movement

Yeats's and Tagore's contributions to postcolonial literature had a significant impact. These Nobel Laureates had a tremendous effect on the readers in their country under British Imperial rule. This contributed to their nationalist movements and nation-building attempt of postcolonial India/Ireland. They used the nation's traditional language and cultural heritage to build a national unity against the British Imperial narratives about civilization, development, and governance (O'Brien 2019).

1.3 Nation as a Woman

Yeats and Tagore had many similarities in their approaches to nationalism. It is impressive that both men have repeatedly portrayed the nation as a woman through their works. Modern writers recognized that the symbol and national spirit of the British Empire were essential to the nationalists. They needed a hero or goddess who could mobilize the masses against the colonizers and fight for a better cause. Their colonized motherland of India and Ireland was portrayed by them as a powerful or mythical character of a woman, reflecting the emotions of the countries under the British Empire. These nationalists needed a solid figure to represent their country and motivate them to risk their lives to save their nation.

1.4 Methodology

This paper is library-based research. This paper also uses two principal methodologies: analysis of historical records and analysis of documents. Analyzing historical records is "recording notes, content analysis, tape & film listening and analysis" (Kothari 2007). Studying a composition means "statistical compilations, manipulations, reference, abstract guides, content analysis" (Kothari 2007). These data help us to reach our target. This paper depends heavily on the works of Yeats and Tagore; specifically their depiction of nation as a woman.

Literature Review

We can see the mentality of nationalists through the works of Yeats and Tagore. This includes how India became mother India and how Ireland was considered the motherland. The literary characters representing the women were depicted in many different ways in their works. They could be passionate or aggressive. Tagore frequently portrayed the nation as a mother figure, especially in his Bengali novel and song- *The Home and the World* and *Amar Sonar Bangla* apparently. In *Cath*

leen ni Houlihan, Yeats portrayed the nation as a young woman/young queen, or even a fairy/vampire-like mythical figure.

Tagore was the first Indian author to be awarded the Nobel Prize. His Bengali novel *The Home and the World* portrays young nationalists worshipping the nation as the goddess-mother, or Devi Durga, the Hindu goddess power. Vande Mataram, which is the name of their nationalist slogan, means worship the mother goddess.

Bimala, the Swadeshi female protagonist, was often seen as both an influential figure and a lover by Sandip, one of the male protagonists. This is what Sandip says passionately to Bimala. The truth is in geography. A map is not something that can be given up. "When I see you in front of me, only then do I realize how beautiful my country truly is." (Tagore 2005).

Tapati Guha-Thakurta in her article *Bharat Mata: The Nation as a Goddess* analyzes this aspect of the nation as a goddess:

In a land brimming with gods and goddesses, this new goddess staged her arrival at the turn of the 20th century, claiming a unique space of her own. As her image proliferated over the coming decades in popular print pictures, the motherland as deity frequently grafted on the physical contours of the map, giving a new sanctity to the territorial and administrative entity. (Guha-Thakurta 2016).

In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Lady Gregory portrayed the character of Cathleen as Ireland. Yeats had the idea for the Drama *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, and Lady Gregory helped him learn the Irish language, which Yeats wasn't familiar with. Yeats fondly recalled the creation of the play and the presentation of it in February 1903:

One night I had a dream almost distinct as a vision, of a cottage where there were well-being and firelight and talk of a marriage, and into the midst of that cottage there came an old woman in a long cloak. She was Ireland herself, that *Cathleen ni Houlihan* for whom so many songs have been sung and about whom so many stories have been told and for whose sake so many have gone to their death. (Merritt 2001)

The story's central theme is that the older woman asks Michael Gillane, her young groom, to serve the military to defend the country. Cathleen's character isn't the traditional one. "Cathleen's portrayal differs from previous depictions. It was intended to establish the definitive Cathleen." This is done by combining two very different and well-established figures: the beautiful *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and the legendary Cailleach Bhhearra. The Lady Augusta Gregory, with Yeats's consent,

would have done this linking. Both figures were much more familiar to her than Yeats. "It would seem that she took a clue from Yeats's dream and connected the two individuals. She refashioned traditional *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* into the composite Old Woman/Young Queen. This innovative, powerful and deadly fusion between mother figure and sweetheart was a dangerous and deadly one." (Merritt 2001).

In Ireland, as the nationalists needed a female personification of the nation, John A. Byars observes in his essay "The Brief and Troublesome Reign of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902-1907)":

Cathleen, who mourns for the loss of her four green fields, the ancient provinces of Ireland, ranked with other old sad women who symbolize Ireland grieving over British controls of her race. According to Seumus MacManus, the origin of such females could do to British suppression: "During our many dark ages when it was treason for our singer to sing for Ireland, the olden poets sang of and to, their beloved, under many . . . endearing titles." Though MacManus's rather simplistic suggestion birth of these symbols is rightfully challenged, it is symbols of Ireland were women grieving over the loss or inviting their young men to glorious death for the freedom. (Byars 1975).

Yeats depicted Cathleen in a mysterious and influential role. She has power over men who can serve her to keep them alive for centuries. Yeats believed strongly in spirituality and the occult, so he often visited the shrine of Countess Cathleen, who inspired the Old Woman. Cathleen was an icon of worship, as Byars described in his essay, "The Brief and Troublesome Reign of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902-1907)" says, "Proving himself Irish poet in his peculiar occult fashion, had worshipped at the shrine of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* that should have gladdened the hearts of any olden poets certainly those of the more recent late nineteenth-century poets, Mangan and Ferguson." (Byars 1975).

Both writers included the notion of motherhood of nation into their writings. Tagore used the nationalistic symbolism of the mother, "Bharat Mata" in *The Home and the World*, However, the idea of the nation being a mother is not new. It was brought to India by the British Raj long before the nationalist movement against it. Valmiki composed the great Indian Epic *Ramayana*. In *Ramayana* Bharad-waja, one of the Vedic sages (Maharishi) addressed Rama:

mitraani dhana dhaanyaani prajaanaam sammataaniva
jananii janma bhuumishcha svargaadapi gariiyasii

This Sanskrit verse can be translated as "Friends, riches and grains are highly honored in this world. (But) mother and motherland are superior even to heaven." (Chary 1930).

Tagore also included the *Ramayana* into his novel *The Home and the World*, where Sandip quotes the incident in which Sita was abducted by Ravana and Sandip compares himself with Ravana. Sandip says, "That is exactly how Ravana, whom I look upon as the real hero of the '*Ramayana*', met with his doom." (Tagore 2005). Tagore had pictured Sandip as Ravana, the anti-hero of great epic *Ramayana*. Tagore's character Bimala was an antagonist to Sita, who lived beyond the boundaries of her home. Sita, however, was faithful to Ram. Sandip also expresses his desire to make Bimala his by nature of force, which also shows his violent nationalistic techniques, "I shall simply make Bimala one with my country. Turbulent west wind which swept away the country's veil of conscience will sweep away the veil of the wife from Bimala's face, and in that uncovering there will be no shame." (Tagore 2005)

In Tagore's *The Home and the World*, the slogan *Vande Mataram* became an iconic inspiration and synonym for independence. He also wrote the song *Amar Shonar Bangla* (My Golden Bengal) which became the national anthem for Bangladesh later on after the liberation war of Bangladesh, which portrayed the national spirit of motherhood of the nation in its patriotic lyrics.

Sumathi Ramaswamy, a noted historian, elaborately explains how the notion of the nation turned into the idea of a woman, mother, and sometimes lover in her essay *Maps and Mother Goddess in Modern India*. Ramaswamy provides substantial evidence to support the statement that nationalists have a psyche:

In addition to enlivening the nation-space, corporealizing it and archaizing it, these body capes gender it, frequently as female. Feminist geographers have suggested that the conception of the nation as cartographically female enables a 'masculinist' relationship to place. Such gendered body capes, along with the poetry on these goddesses which frequently accompany them, encourage the male subject-citizen to view the national territory as a vulnerable woman who needs their protection and as a mother who had to be rescued through heroism and sacrifice. (Ramaswamy 2001)

Saswati Sengupta in "Goddesses, Women, and the Clutch of Metaphor" analyzed for "the Bengali nationalist discourse that valorised the militant mother also propagated the domestic woman." (Chaudhuri 2020)

Similar to Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Maud Gonne represents a powerful nationalist figure. She was inspired by the legend of Countess Cathleen, who looked after her people and served as a protector and mother.

Yeats had a strong influence over Maud Gonne and he saw her as a symbol

of the Nationalist movement. She was also attractive and very similar to Cathleen who personified a nation. Maud Gonne was therefore chosen to play the part of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. It represented Yeats's relationship to Gregory and Gonne, and metaphorically represented Cathleen's character through both the old and young women. "What she did is significant; her steering of its composition not only helped shape Cathleen. It also helped to distance Yeats from Maud Gonne and provided a vehicle for remaking him into someone more acceptable not to 'Mother Ireland' but to another 'old woman', Augusta Gregory herself." (Merritt 2001)

Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* also displays an oedipal fixation with the nation. Cathleen is both a mother and lover, and a strong charismatic character. Michael is irresistibly drawn to her influence and abandons his mother & fiancée to fight for the country. In the Drama, the Old Woman tells Michael, "Not long. Not long. However, there were other people who died for my love a long while ago." Similar events took place in Ireland. This made colonized nations' experiences more common, and globalized their sufferings and trauma. Both India and Ireland also had similar political movements, which allowed them to think and write the same way.

Analysis

Joseph Chadwick examines the portrayal of the two female protagonists, Cathleen in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and Bimla in *The Home and the World* as sexual beings in his essay "Family Romance: National Allegory in Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *The Dreaming of the Bones*":

Michael's devotion to this figure, of course, can only operate at an ideal level. It is a political rather than a strictly sexual devotion, and it is made possible by the appearance of a supernatural, phantasmal mother-figure who personifies Ireland: the Poor Old Woman who was put to wandering because of "Too many strangers in the house" and has lost the "four beautiful green fields" of Leinster, Ulster, Munster, and Connaught (pp. 222, 223). But by representing Michael's decision to join the 1798 rebellion as a choice between Delia and the Poor Old Woman, the play identifies a certain pattern of Oedipal desire as a psychic mechanism through which nationalist political devotion may operate. (Chadwick 1986)

In the Indian National context in the early 20th Century, Casci analyzes a similar situation in Bengal where the nation becomes an obsession of passion and desire:

Various elements converged within the Mother India icon. Bharat Mata manifested her energy in several representations: she was the emaciated

widow, who retains strength in spite of her frailty, she was the primitive Kali and she was the powerful Durga. As Tanika Sarkar argues (17), in Bengal where female cults had always been very popular, the image of a devastated and vindictive Mother aroused deep emotions. In popular belief, she not only inspired her subjugated sons, but also empowered them through her destructive and erotic force. Thus the selection of a traditional icon such as the bloodthirsty Mother enabled extremists to challenge the raj asserting their invincibility. (Casci 1999)

Both Yeats and Tagore opposed militant nationalism. Both were opposed to the way the nation was made into a weak victim of patriarchy. Nationalism became a macho worship of it and made it a female body and a feminine god. Both criticised the idea that a nation was bloodthirsty. In Tagore's *The Home and the World*, it was reflected through Bimala. Sandip, the leader of the Swadeshi movement, often depicted it in *The Home and the World*:

If only women could be set free from the artificial fetters put round them by men, we could see on earth the living image of Kali, the shameless, pitiless goddess. I am a worshipper of Kali, and one day I shall truly worship her, setting Bimala on her alter of Destruction. (Tagore 2005)

Sandip was a fundamentalist nationalist who wanted violence and division in the country. He also caused the transformation of the nation into the symbol of a goddess, which began to take shape in the early 20th century. Later, Tagore was against Swadeshi movements as they began to move away from their main cause and had become very violent. Yeats also had a dislike for the Irish rebellion in 1798, which led to much bloodshed.

Tagore, through his anti-hero Sandip, depicted a nationalism that had become diseased. He pictured the nation as a place of volatile violence with a woman being taken advantage of and looted.

Bimala was seen as a desirable object by Sandip who envisioned the nation as a sexualized creature. As Bimala observes "Sandip's eyes took fire as he went on, but whether it was the fire of worship or passion, I could not tell."

Shirshendu Chakrabarti takes the argument even further when he explores how Tagore's focus on this "mystification of woman" in *The Home and the World* helps to expose "the interlocked combat of domination and submission underlying it." To see women "in the specific form of the goddess of shakti . . . reduces her to the stereotype of the bewitching enchantress whose power... springs from her dependence on male fantasy and desire." Thus the rhetoric of "nationalism and

female shakti, exchanged between Sandip and Bimala is contaminated by furtive, manipulative sexuality.”(Chaudhuri 2020)

Yeats believed that mythical and spiritual ideas were important, so he saw a revival of his country, the transformation of an Old Woman into a Young One. The poet believed in rebirth, which is evident in many of his works. Therefore, the idea for a "Young queen" could refer to a New Ireland without the patriarchal dominance of Britain. This was metaphorical because Britain was the Empirical Tyrant who subjugated feminine Ireland. To achieve independence, the nation needed many martyrs. The Old Woman responds to Michael's question in the Drama by stating that the women died because they were unable to understand why the men died, "He died for love of me: many a man has died for love of me." (Yeats 1911)

Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is filled with the idea of a bewitching enchantress, or a vampiric woman. The poor old woman becomes a young queen after the deaths of many young men in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. As the Old Woman sings, "They will always be remembered forever" after the deaths of many men.

Maud Gonne was an inspiration for Cathleen's character. Her fierce nationalism reflected her feminist ideologies as well as her nationalist beliefs through the "United Irishman". Yeats was inspired by her romantic feelings and she also elicited them. Many critics believe that Yeats was inspired to imagine Cathleen, who was an ideal symbol of nationalism throughout Ireland's history. In the first production of the Play, Maud Gonne also played the role of Cathleen. Some of the characteristics of Cathleen in *Cathleen-ni Houlihan* are a result of Maud Gonne's militant nationalism. Maud Gonne, like Cathleen, actively collaborated in the late Nineteenth century and early Twentieth centuries with the French. Karen Steele explains in her essay "Raising Her Voice for Justice: Maud Gonne, and the United Irishman":

One common charge against Gonne---notably among Yeats critics---was that she was a political fanatic. If one reads her earliest columns, one can see how this reputation emerged. Her early impulse as a writer was to express anti-English sentiment. Rallying against Irish enlistment in the English army, Gonne detailed the experience of disabled Irish soldiers in the workhouse who were denied government pensions, and declared, "Think of this, Irish mothers, even when there is hunger in your cabins and things look dark and hopeless for the land we love." A subsequent letter to the editor pointed out the inadequacy of such romanticized expectations when Irishmen's choices "so far as they see, lies between the workhouse, the jail, and the army...If Ireland cannot give them employment what are the poor devils to do? As Steele further adds "Gonne's early columns also blithely advocated armed rebellion, arguing that for many the tumult of war comes as a refuge from grief." (Steele 1999)

It is also supported by Steele's essay "Raising her Voice for Justice: Maud Gonne and the United Irishman" that "even before her memorable performance as *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in the 1902 play, Gonne's lectures and essays returned repeatedly to her fascination with the symbolic power of a woman leading her men to freedom. Gonne's belief in the old prophecy that Ireland will be saved by a woman legitimated not only her militancy but also the activism of all Irishwomen doing their part for Ireland." (Steele 1999)

This sounds familiar and resembles Cathleen, who sought militant nationalism and bloodshed. She also took sons away from their mothers and divorced husbands.

Yeats's personification of the nation and the portrayal of a militant nationalism is a critique of Maud Gonne's militant nationalism as he in his later poems "Prayer for my Daughter", "Easter 1916," and "On the Boiler" (1938), regrets for women who trade their "natural" pleasantness for "unnatural" political opinions. Gonne's political play *Dawn* portrays similar characteristics with *Cathleen ni Houlihan* as Steele has observed:

At first glance, the play seems to mimic *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, in which Gonne performed the lead two years earlier. Like *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the drama centers on a symbolic female named Bride, who combines the impoverished despair Gonne witnessed among the native Irish with the persistent hope and defiant pride that she sought to instill in them. Like Cathleen, Bride's energies are focused on ridding her land of the "Stranger." (Steele 1999)

Yeats had previously seen Maud Gonne to be a heartless individual who believed only in one political cause. He never returned his love for her. Cathleen, on the other hand, is a cruel character who urges men to give their lives for her. Yeats was charmed by Gonne's rhetorical power so much that he left behind his fiancé to follow her. Steele's essay explains this idea:

In "No Second Troy," Yeats memorably recalled that Gonne "taught to ignorant men most violent ways. "As Gonne spoke out against the effects of British imperialism, she sometimes explicitly alerted readers that "first the river of blood must flow" before Ireland would be free. (Steele 1999)

Tagore played a similar version of Bimala, who was fascinated at Sandip's militant nationalism. It was Michael who was also charmed and influenced by Cathleen. Both Bimala, as well as Cathleen, were the icons of fiery passions and fierce nationalism for Sandip and Michael. In the beginning, Tagore was heavily influenced by Gandhi's Swadeshi movement. He was the first to confer Gandhi the title

Mahatma (Great Spirit). However, he soon becomes disillusioned with the violent fanatical form of nationalism and embraces a more secular and reform-oriented nationalism.

Yeats was initially attracted by the Irish revolutionary movement's strong fundamentalist beliefs, Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin had a similar idea to boycott British goods and also advocate the use of Irish products. Gandhi was actually inspired by Sinn Féin. Both Yeats' and Maud Gonne's lives were influenced by the nationalist newspaper *United Irishman*.

Tagore believed in a spirituality of humankind "Grounding his view in the metaphysics of the Upanishads, but also aligning it closely (through Rammohun Roy and the Brahmo Samaj) with Unitarianism and the theological principle of universalism in Christianity. Tagore thus frames his conception of world literature with a universal spiritual humanism (Kopf 1979). Tagore injects a distinctively Indian concept of the *atma* (self, spirit, or soul) into the equation here, but his humanism is not far from Goethe's deep humanism" in which, as Hans Kohn notes, "The individual's highest goal...[is to] achieve consciousness of himself as part of the whole, not of a national whole, but of the whole of humankind" (Eckermann 1964: xii, xi)." (Dharwadker 2011)

In *The Home and the World*, he strongly rejected the idea of blind worship of a nation through the character Nikhilesh who was a zamindar like himself and who believed in universal peace and communal harmony. As Thakurta observes in her article *Bharat Mata: The Nation as a Goddess*:

This was precisely the kind of figuration of the motherland from which Rabindranath Tagore began to recoil. It was an icon his anti-hero Sandip had willed into being without realising the emotional catharsis of a form of worship of the nation that could easily turn into a politics of fanaticism and hatred. (Guha-Thakurta 2016)

Tagore's love of his motherland before the Bengal Divide in 1905 was obvious through Nikhilesh's strong rejection by the British Empire's idea of Bengal Divide in *The Home and the World*. In his essay "Rabindranath Tagore and National Identity Formation in Bangladesh Essays and Reviews", Fakhru Alam observes:

Looking back from my present perspective at the burgeoning popularity of Rabindra Sangeet in the late sixties and 1970 and 1971 (Alam pg.249), it is obvious that our taste for songs of Rabindranath has to do with the national longing for form. The Bangladeshi moment had come, and Rabindranath's song appeared especially appropriate for all of us budding nationalists. Everyone everywhere was humming tunes such as "My Golden Bangla, I

love thee!" At rallies and demonstrations, the idea of Bangladesh seemed to have been vividly encapsulated in Rabindranath's lyrics: "From the heart of Bangladesh suddenly today. And all on your own/ You have emerged in beauty that is beyond compare, mother!" (Alam 2012).

Yeats and Tagore, the writers, expressed in their works the idea that a nation could be turned into a woman or a female nation for which martyrs could give their lives. They also mentioned the idea of a mother, lover and deity who could motivate and inspire nationalists to fight for their nation. Both writers share the idea of a nation that is divine, mystic, and immortal.

Conclusion

Both Tagore and Yeats had similar political and religious stands. Tagore did not believe in the mainstream militant movement Swadeshi. Likewise, Yeats did not believe in the violent form of nationalism; he rejected the idea that the nation was merely an object of desire. He further states the nationalist's cause, "A terrible beauty is born" (Yeats 1916). This refrain of Yeats's view of Irish nationalism is ambivalent, considering his support saving the Irish culture. He disagreed with nationalists who act purely out of passion and without the guide of an ideology.

Both the writers are Humanists and Universalists, as critics would put it right, who believed in a cosmopolitan nationalism, not a militant fanatic nationalism that ruled the mainstream nationalism of both Ireland and India. As renowned historian Louise Blakeney Williams documents in her article "Overcoming the Contagion of Mimicry: The Cosmopolitan Nationalism and Modernist History of Rabindranath Tagore and W. B. Yeats":

Tagore and Yeats were not such skeptics. This may be because they lived when nationalist thinking was more fluid than it is today. After years of analysis, it often seems that the only choice is between dichotomies, first nationalism, and universalism, and then, if nationalism is adopted, between and secular, traditional and modernizing, conservative, and liberal varieties. Tagore did not see the need to make such choices and instead hoped balance of opposites that, as Tagore put it, accepted "neither the colourlessness of [universalist] cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship. (Williams 2007)

The works of both Tagore and Yeats thus show the facts that their women characters were depicted to create an ideal picture of a country, not a nation that could be bloodthirsty, violent, cruel to innocent people or callous to their human causes; it is a nation which would supply sanctuary to her youngsters regardless of

their background, their religious beliefs, caste or ethnic culture.

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