

W. B. Yeats's Cultural Identity**By****Assist. Prof. Dr. Faisal Abdul-Wahhab Hayder****Alimam University College****faisl.a@alimamunc.edu.iq**

Abstract

The traditional concept of identity includes its fundamental elements: ethnicity, race, nationality, language, religion, history, and customs. Cultural identity ignores the biological traits (ethnicity and race) and focuses on the cultural features (language, religion, folklore and traditions) which form a certain kind of nationality.

W. B. Yeats, the Anglo-Irish poet, struggled to conceptualise his cultural identity as he inherited two cultures: Irish or Celtic and English. He launched the Irish cultural revival with his colleagues based on Celtic folklore and culture. His knowledge extended to embrace the most known cultures of the world, religions and mysticism in particular. He constructed cultural dualities such as Celtic versus Christian and Christian versus Muslim. This cultural struggle developed a transcendental concept of identity. Consequently, his cultural identity was diverse and multiple. It has been promoted to be a cosmopolitan identity. This paper explores Yeats's cultural identity and analyses its fundamental elements.

Keywords: Cultural identity, W. B. Yeats. Celticism, Irish cultural revival, Cosmopolitanism.

Culture's Definition

Many definitions are available for culture, but all of them focus on the same points: "Culture is the shared characteristics of a group of people, which encompasses place of birth, religion, language, cuisine, social behaviours, art, literature, and music."¹ The definition of "cultural identity" is not different from the definition of "culture:"

"Cultural identity refers to identification with, or sense of belonging to, a particular group based on various cultural categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion. Cultural identity is constructed and maintained by sharing collective knowledge such as traditions, heritage, language, aesthetics, norms and customs."²

Yeats's Personal and Cultural Identity

Yeats was a descendant of an Anglo-Irish family, and "his ancestors, on both sides of the family, were of English extraction and continued to see themselves as Irish of

a particular sort.”³ The Yeats family's religion was Protestantism, and they were a member of the Church of Ireland, Anglicanism. They considered English as their natural language.⁴ The language problem was exemplified by “Yeats’s acute consciousness of the disparity between his Irish motherland and his mother-tongue.”⁵

Yeats was torn among many influences and identities he held that he “had to define a position regarding Irish literary revival and English cultural influence, in such a way that his own identities (Anglophone, Protestant, Blakean, occultist, London-resident) could be allowed for within an Irish nationalist framework.”⁶ Although Yeats was from the middle class, he tried to “ally himself with the aristocracy by blood and with the peasantry by sympathy. The main target of his attacks was the middle class, which had neither family tradition nor a belief in anything beyond the material world.”⁷

R. F. Foster mentioned the events and elements that had influenced Yeats and constituted his national identity:

"The marginalisation of the Protestant Ascendancy from the 1870s.

The chronology of nationalist revival in the 1890s. The importance of Fenianism around the turn of the century. The impact of the Boer War on Irish politics. The rise and nature of the Sinn Féin. The constitutional crisis before the First World War. The effect of deferring the Home Rule.”⁸

Yeats and Irish Societies

Yeats indulged and influenced by many political, national, and literary Irish societies:

1. Young Ireland: The old society or movement was founded by Charles Gavan Duffy, who led the Young Ireland movement in the 1840s. He published during his youth an anthology of poetry by Irish writers entitled *The Spirit of the Nation*.⁹ In 1848, the Young Irishmen led an unsuccessful uprising. The new

society was established in 1885 after John O'Leary returned from exile to Dublin.¹⁰ O'Leary urged Yeats to join “the Young Ireland society in late 1885, ethos whose was distinctly armchair-Fenian.”¹¹

2. Contemporary Club: Yeats may not have been registered as a regular member, but he attended its meetings during this period 1885-1887.¹²
3. Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood (IRB): It is a Fenian movement (the Fenians were a legendary armed forces). Yeats considered the old Fenian John O'Leary an “inspiration of his own youthful patriotism.” O'Leary's significance to “the Yeatses (father and son) transcended his political credentials; he was an introduction not only to the acceptable face of the extremist Fenian tradition but also to a kind of free-thinking Catholic intelligentsia.”¹³
4. Rhymers Club: Yeats first mentioned the club on May 1890 and described it as a group of writers were meeting regularly at Fleet Street. The club was Celtic with Irish predominance. Rhys, Rolleston, and Yeats were its famous figures.¹⁴
5. Irish Literary Society in London: It was formed by Yeats and T. W. Rolleston at the end of September 1891.
6. National Literary Society in Dublin: With the aid of O'Leary and John T. Kelley, Yeats founded this society on 24 May 1892. Their objectives were “to publicize the literature, folklore, and legends of Ireland.” Yeats delivered a lecture entitled “Nationality and Literature” at the society on 19 May 1893.¹⁵
7. The 1898 Centennial Association of Great Britain and France: Yeats emerged not only a president of this association but also of the Wolfe Tone Memorial Association. Both associations were “inspired by the memory of the 1798 Rising, and carried coded references to revolution in the present: initiating, among other developments, the cult of Tone and the practice of commemorative visit to his grave.” Wolfe Tone was one of the leaders of the 1798 Rising.¹⁶

Yeats took a moderate position in all the Irish nationalist societies he joined. His beloved, Maud Gonne, was always in the extremist position, and he tried to

“cut out ‘some wild Fenian movement’; at the time, it looked

like wild Fenianism, though not quite wild enough for Gonne.
But his position in political organisation, part-time and ambivalent,
could not be decisively influential. For his part, he exercised more
direct power over her through his developing idea of a mystical
Celtic Order.”¹⁷

He delivered many lectures at the “Young Ireland Society presided over by John O’Leary, forming his ideas of bringing together Protestant and Catholic elements in Ireland in a national literature that would make Ireland beautiful in the memory, and yet be a literature freed from provincialism by rigorous criticism.”¹⁸ O’Leary, in his turn, referred to a new Ireland to which people of “both religious tradition” belonged, and “could share a pride of ancient culture, rather than remember the conflicts and dispossessions.”¹⁹

It was an ambiguous relationship that linked Yeats to the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) because of the “obscurity of the revolutionary movement itself, but there are also many conflicting testimonies. In old age, he liked to say he was a Fenian of the school of John O’Leary.”²⁰ Yeats “weakly sympathized with the Library of Ireland as a book reviewer; he criticized the Dublin National Literary Society. Ironically, by that point, Yeats had separated from literary Fenianism.”²¹ In his introduction to his book *A Book of Irish Verse*, and his articles in the *Bookman* 1895, Yeats tried to define cultural nationalism. He raised “the eternal question of Irish nationality, and the sense of national identity, a topic he argued with Standish O’Grady, who saw ‘nationalism’ as a recent growth irrelevant to Irish history in the medieval period.”²²

Yeats and Folklore & Mythology

Yeats comprehended that rich Irish folklore and mythology constituted a deep-rooted element of Irish identity. His ambition was to reveal this element “to create a national literary culture arose after the shattering fall of Parnell in 1891.” Charles Stewart Parnell’s decline left a vacuum that Yeats felt it should be filled with culture rather than politics.²³ In a letter to T. P. Gill on 13 November 1898, Yeats drew a link between patriotism and literature in terms of folklore or spirituality: People should be asked to support the Irish Literary Theatre on patriotic grounds, but they should first be

made to feel that there is an actual school of Irish spiritual thought in literature & that their patriotism will support this. Ireland is leading the way in a war on materialism, decadence, and triviality and affirming her own individuality.²⁴ He was interested in Irish folklore as early as he published his first book, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, in 1888. His second book in this field *The Celtic Twilight* (1893) was a collection of Irish folkloric tales. He felt that this trend resonated with “his feeling for ancient ritual, for pagan beliefs never entirely destroyed by Christianity. He felt that if he could treat it in a strict and high style, he would create a genuine poetry while, in personal terms, moving toward his own identity.”²⁵ He believed in the fairies, “though if he had been pressed, would say that he believed in them as ‘dramatization of our moods.’”²⁶

Yeats felt that he should not only compose poetry reflecting his nationalist and occult ideas but also put them into practice by managing a group to enhance these activities. He was saturated with "vague theories of druidic worship and Celtic revival," spreading throughout France and Britain.²⁷ Yeats, J. M. Synge, and Lady Gregory struggled to launch an Irish literary revival by establishing a national theatre and a literary movement that was not political.²⁸ Yeats managed to present some Celtic and Irish plays at the Celtic Theatre in Dublin every spring. The suggested writers were George Moore, Standish O’Grady, Fiona Macleod, Edward Martyn, and Yeats himself.²⁹ Yeats removed the word “Celtic” from the title of the theatre and became “Irish Literary Theatre” because he “discovered that ‘Celticism’ was a highly problematic concept in historical or cultural terms.”³⁰ However, the last version of the theatre's name was “Abbey Theatre,” which was founded in 1904.

The Irish Literary Theatre was founded on 16 January 1899, and the first produced plays were *Martyn’s Heather Field* and Yeats’s *The Countess Cathleen*.³¹ Yeats’s play *The Countess Cathleen* and John M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* stirred the audience's riot. The themes of these two plays were misinterpreted and politically exploited.

Language and Identity

In his theory of cultural nationalism, the German philosopher and scholar Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) focused on language and cultural properties that distinguished any nation from others.³²

Douglas Hyde (1860-1949), the Gaelic scholar and writer, the president of the Republic of Ireland (1938-1945), “was the outstanding figure in the struggle for the preservation and extension of the Irish language.” He was the president of the Gaelic League, but he resigned when it became separatist. His opinion was

“that Irish language, Irish pastimes and even Irish dress must be defined against English modes. He was careful to repeat that this message was essentially unpolitical: an agenda of cultural revival should be as attractive to Unionists as to nationalists for any Irish identity.”³³

Douglas Hyde pleased Yeats with his Anglophobic stress, “but its central argument denied that there could be a distinctively Irish literature in the English language, and this contradicted everything Yeats’s own work stood for.” However, he changed his idea later and argued that “Irish literature could be written in English, but in a Gaelic mode: Hyde’s own translations were adduced as proof.”³⁴

A Catholic journalist, Charles Gavan Duffy (1816-1903), founded the weekly *The Nation* in 1842 with Thomas Davis and John Dillon. Davis and other Protestant intellectuals thought “that the divisions of Ireland could be transcended only by awareness of a common national heritage.” Duffy and his New Irish Library tried to “establish a genuine Irish literary tradition in the English language implicitly culminating in the efforts of W. B. Yeats himself.”³⁵

Celtic vs. Christian Identities

Yeats’s first poetic work, *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889), marked the conflict between Celticism, the native culture and

Christianity, the imported culture. Oisín, the Fenian hero, confronted St Patrick, the representative of the new culture:

"So watched I when, man of the croziers, at the heel
of a century fell,/ Weak, in the midst of the meadow,
from his miles in the midst of the air,/ A starling like
them that forgathered 'neath a moon waking white
as a shell/ When the Fenians made foray at morning
with Bran, Sceolan, Lomair."

The Wanderings of Oisín: Book III (ll: 101-104)

Yeats intended to use the word "Fenians" in his poem referring to the heroic age of those ancient Celtic warriors. He selected the version that concluded with Oisín's conversion to Christianity from the known versions of Oisín's myth, because its end was suitable for Yeats's incline.³⁶

Yeats's personality and his diverse cultural identity were influenced by his

"early interest in mysticism, Irish legends and folklore,
Eastern religions and mythologies, and Celtic heritage
[which] dug a deep fissure in his consciousness that
effectively split his character into two contradictions—the
Western and the Eastern, or the orthodox and the heterodox.
The former was the current Christian faith, which still struggles
to find its identity in Yeats's deep personality, and the latter
was Yeats's Celtic inherited culture, particularly Druidism,
which branched out to absorb Eastern religions and
mystical realms."³⁷

Christian vs. Muslim Identities

In his earlier and middle works, Yeats created drama, poetry, and stories configuring the clash between Christian and Muslim identities.

Mosada, (1886) was his poetic drama that dealt with this theme, reflecting the crisis during Medieval Spain's Inquisition period. Yeats admired the Arabic civilisation in Spain. The West-East conflict was also depicted in this verse drama.³⁸

Yeats used the "mask," an Arabic invention, to create many characters that mainly related to the East and Arabic or Muslim culture. He created his fictitious characters "and uses them as masks to dramatise and objectivise his writing."³⁹

Yeats developed the mask theory as Richard Ellmann argued that "his opposite, instead of being solely a mask, a conscious product of his own mind with slight independence of its creator, might be a spirit or daimon with a full personality of his own."⁴⁰ His opposite or "contrary mind" was Leo Africanus, the Muslim geographer and traveller from Fez in Morrocco who lived in Arabic Spain and was obliged to convert to Christianity and became a Papa's councillor.⁴¹

In his poem "Ego Dominus Tuus," Yeats described his "opposite" as his "double," "Daimon," "guide," or "anti-self" and referred to Leo Africanus with his Arabic sort of living "Staring upon a Bedouin's horse-hair roof." (l. 29).⁴² In Yeats's automatic writing, Leo Africanus said "that he was Yeats's opposite, that 'by association with one another' they 'should each become more complete.'"⁴³ Yeats's belief of "Gnostic dualism" or the opposites was developed in his symbolical system "in which the symbol emerged from the conflict of opposites and transcended it, a literary extension of his theories of spiritual development."⁴⁴

Choosing an Arabic Muslim as Yeats's opposite reflects the significance of Arabic and Islamic civilisations for Yeats in particular. He acknowledged the ancient civilisations of Mesopotamia and believed that the third egg of civilisation would be hatched in the desert of Arabia.⁴⁵ In his two poems "The Phases of the Moon" and "The Gift of Harun Al-Rasid," Yeats created many characters as masks to veil his personality or cultural identity. In the first poem, Owen Aherne "represents the orthodox, and Michael Robartes represents the

heterodox.” Robartes was adherent “to the Eastern side of Yeats’s personality and to his Arabic interests in particular.”⁴⁶

In the second poem, “Yeats added the character of Kusta Ben Luka, who was the Caliph’s translator and philosopher, in order to deliver an allegory for his own life, to take the mask of Kusta for himself and take Kusta’s fairy bride for his wife, George.”⁴⁷ Kusta Ben Luka, the Christian character, was opposed to the Caliph Harun Al-Rasid, the Muslim character, to denote the dialogue between these two different cultures. In addition, Yeats glorified this Caliph and his culture as the Caliph appointed a councilor from different religion and culture, while the Pope, Leo X, obliged Leo Africanus to change his name (his Arabic name was al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad al-Wazzān al-Zayyātī or al-Fāsī) and convert to Christianity.⁴⁸

Yeats and Cosmopolitan Nationalism

Yeats's concept of nationalism has undergone several stages according to many influential elements, including his reaction to the Fenian extremism, extensive knowledge of occultism, magic, spirituality, and the philosophies of the world's most influential religions and cultures.⁴⁹ He felt that “the full development of a nation’s literature required a cosmopolitan frame of reference.”⁴⁹ Yeats’s ambition was to “redefine the whole vexed question of literature’s relationship to the national effort— and, in the process, to claim a cosmopolitan identity for the Irish literary movement.”⁵⁰

In his search for the metaphysical truth, Yeats studied some eminent world cultures, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Celticism, and Christianity. He found many shared thoughts among these cultures and tried to develop his cosmopolitan theory. In 1912, he met the Indian cosmopolitan poet and thinker Rabindranath Tagore, who absorbed the Indian culture and suffered the same problems of nationalism versus cosmopolitanism.

Yeats and Tagore were “nationalists, but they have been misunderstood because their particular forms of nationalism, which were remarkably similar, were different from those of more well-known nationalists. Rather, the nationalism they espoused resembles the ‘new’ cosmopolitanism,” and those

“new” cosmopolitans also have been “called ‘rooted’ or ‘realistic’ cosmopolitans, respect the variety of traditions and nationalities, but also believe in universal values that all people in all countries should accept.”⁵¹

Yeats and Tagore believed that the anticolonial nationalists copied or imitated the imperialist ideology and they failed to find the alternatives for their states after independence. The cyclic theory of history helped

“both authors become cosmopolitan nationalists by enabling them to transcend Western antithetical thinking and anticolonial nationalism. Rather than assume that a dichotomy existed between hemispheres, races, or nations advocate the triumph of a superior one, Tagore and Yeats insisted on the balance or harmony of opposites in all areas of thought and life.”⁵²

Conclusion

Language is the main element for defining cultural identity. Yeats descended from a middle-class, Anglo-Irish, Protestant family. He was torn between his Irish motherland and his English mother-tongue. He joined and presided over many nationalist and cultural societies. He tried to be moderate in politics, rejecting all kinds of violence, and this position was reflected in his attitudes in the nationalist and literary societies he joined.

He believed that Irish folklore and mythology constituted an essential part of Irish identity. He contributed with his colleagues Lady Gregory and John M. Synge in establishing The Abbey Theatre, which founded the Irish Cultural Revival.

Language and cultural features were regarded as the main elements of cultural nationalism. Yeats believed that writing in English did not diminish the value of his Irish identity. His early poetic work, “The Wanderings of Oisín,” reflected the clash between two cultures: Celticism, Yeats’s inherited culture, and Christianity, the imported culture. Yeats was biased towards his native culture.

Yeats's extended knowledge led him to the Eastern cultures, particularly mysticism. He quoted the mask from Arabic culture and adopted his opposite, double, or anti-self from Arabic Spain, Leo Africanus. Yeats's interests in Eastern civilisations, especially in Mesopotamia, caused him to adapt Eastern characters in his works.

His poems; "The Phases of the Moon" and "The Gift of Harun Al-Rasid" reflected Yeats's admiration of Arabic and Islamic cultures, and he took the mask of Kusta Bin Luka, the Caliph's Christian councillor, for himself.

Indian mysticism and culture influenced Yeats, and he was in harmony with Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian mystical poet and thinker. They believed in "cosmopolitan nationalism," which respects traditions of all nationalities and in universal values that the world's peoples shared. Yeats's cosmopolitan identity emerged from his concept that humanity inherited all the world's civilisations, and people should acknowledge them, believing in unity in diversity.

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الهوية الثقافية للشاعر وليم بتلر بيتس

يتضمن المفهوم التقليدي للهوية عناصره الأساسية: الأثنية، والعرق، والجنسية، واللغة، والدين، والتاريخ، والعادات. وتتجاهل الهوية الثقافية السمات البيولوجية (الأثنية والعرق) وتركز على السمات الثقافية (اللغة والدين والفولكلور والتقاليد) التي تشكل نوعاً معيناً من الجنسية. كافح الشاعر الأنجلو أيرلندي دبليو بي بيتس من أجل تكوين هويته الثقافية لأنه ورث ثقافتين: الأيرلندية أو الكلتية والإنجليزية. أطلق مع زملائه النهضة الثقافية الأيرلندية بناءً على الفولكلور والثقافة الكلتية. وامتدت معرفته لتشمل أشهر ثقافات العالم والأديان والتصوف على وجه الخصوص. قام ببناء ثنائيات ثقافية مثل الكلتية مقابل المسيحية والمسيحية مقابل الإسلام. وقد طوّر هذا الصراع الثقافي مفهوماً متعالياً للهوية. وبالتالي، كانت هويته الثقافية متنوعة ومتعددة. وقد تم الترويج لها لتكون هوية عالمية. تستكشف هذه الورقة هوية بيتس الثقافية وتحلل عناصرها الأساسية.