

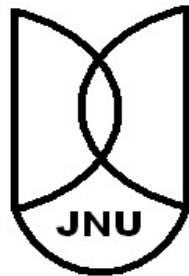
**Mystic Art and Astro-mythical Reality: New Perspectives on W. B.
Yeats's Symbols and Philosophy in the Light of Esoteric and
Philosophical Traditions of the East**

Thesis submitted to
Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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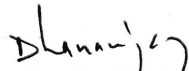
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CERTIFICATE

This thesis titled **“Mystic Art and Astro-mythical Reality: New Perspectives on W.B. Yeats’s Symbols and Philosophy in the Light of Esoteric and Philosophical Traditions of the East,”** submitted by **Mr. Pawan Kumar**, Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

This may be placed before the examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.


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DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This thesis titled, “**Mystic Art and Astro-mythical Reality: New Perspectives on W.B. Yeats’s Symbols and Philosophy in the Light of Esoteric and Philosophical Traditions of the East,**” submitted by me for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

Pawan Kumar

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Ph.D. student
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To W. B.

*And all like him, who have believed in the veracity of intuitive,
predictive, and mystical systems*

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INTRODUCTION

The mystical life is the centre of all that I do & all that I think & all that I write . . . I have all-ways considered my self a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance—the revolt of the soul against the intellect—now beginning in the world.

--W. B. Yeats's letter to John O'Leary dated July 23, 1892¹

I have always sought to bring my mind close to the mind of Indian and Japanese poets, old women in Connaught, mediums in Soho, lay brothers whom I imagine dreaming in some medieval monastery the dreams of their village, learned authors who refer all to antiquity; to immerse it in the general mind where that mind is scarce separable from what we have begun to call 'the subconscious'; to liberate it. . . .

--W. B. Yeats, "Anima Mundi" in "Per Amica Silentia Lunae" (1917)²

Ironically, of all the poses, voices, and masks that dominate his work—WBY the lover, the nationalist, the dramatist, the last Romantic, the modernist, the political actor of socialist or fascist leanings, the young dreamer or the wild and wicked old man—the most consistently important to him are the very personae that critics have tended to make the most marginal and capricious: WBY the theosophist, the hermeticist, the Rosicrucian adept, the spiritualist, the occult metahistorian, the seeker after Celtic or Indian mysteries.

-- Harper, *Wisdom of Two*³

W. B. Yeats's singling out of "mystical life" as the centre of all his preoccupations—actions, thoughts, and writings—says much about how one should ideally approach the corpus of Yeats's literary and philosophical writings. The gamut of Yeats's mystical lens includes all the variegated aspects of Yeats's creative journey, starting from his collection of Irish folklore to his life-long engagement with Eastern mysticism and esoteric philosophies. The literary, philosophical and mystical engagement of Yeats with the

¹ Yeats, *Collected Letters Vol. I* 303.

² Yeats, *Later Essays* 16.

³ Harper, *Wisdom of Two* 29-30

Eastern world has elicited miscellaneous reactions from critics over the period of past century and a half: while some have outright dismissed the influence of the East on Yeats's creative pursuits, some others have graciously acknowledged the affirmative reverberations of the wisdom of the East in Yeats's oeuvre.

The trajectory of Yeats's creative imagination brings together both the Eastern and the Western philosophical and knowledge systems. Having been a painter, a poet, a playwright, a philosopher and a collector of folklore, Yeats was engaged in a constant and endless search for media through which he could gain access to the mystical and the supernatural. Yeats gazed towards the East not with a desire to transform himself into a mystic or a modern *guru* like Blavatsky or the likes, but to infuse a breath of fresh air into his poetry and plays. Thus, the aims of as well as the uses to which Yeats's mystical and esoteric pursuit was put, were largely literary and creative, and not subliminal or numinous, as most people would want to believe. While critically engaging with Yeats and the East, one must not, even for a moment, lose sight of his creative persona, because it might mislead one to dismiss Yeats as a mystic or a devotional poet.

Yeats's literary and philosophical experiments with Eastern symbols and mythology enveloped his creative works in a mystic air, while at the same time, proving to be an effective tool for Yeats's subtle, yet perceptible, anti-colonial discourse. Yeats's use of Eastern elements in his work partly arose out of the prevalent discourse of growing interest in Oriental knowledge systems in the nineteenth century, a movement that was almost coeval with the heydays of imperialism. In retrospect, it seems very difficult to imaging the world in which Yeats lived and wrote, or have a complete grasp of the hurdles which the intelligentsia and the literati had to overcome to bring about an exchange of ideas, philosophies and narratives. It might have been a period of intense intellectual strife indeed, when on the one hand, Orientalists looked towards the East, especially India, as a seat of undiscovered knowledge and wisdom with a somewhat patronizing attitude, whereas, at the other end of the spectrum, arcane societies like the Theosophical Society and the Golden Dawn assimilated (and sometimes also appropriated) Eastern philosophy and esoteric knowledge to appeal to the masses.

During this period, the East, and particularly India was at the centre of discussions in colonial societies. In some cases, there also grew an abiding empathy for the cause of the people of the colonies. The Theosophical Society, for instance, was not only

disseminating Eastern philosophical knowledge and undiscovered facts about the ancient history of people, but was also actively participating in the Indian freedom struggle. In the context of Ireland, especially, many Irishmen were recruited and posted in India by the British Empire. Many a times, personal anecdotes and popular narratives from the colonies reached Ireland through the medium of such people, and Yeats took interest in them. Many of Yeats's friends and close acquaintances like James Cousins, Margaret Cousins, William Rothenstein, Aleister Crowley, and Annie Besant to name a few, travelled to India, spent a couple of months, even years in India, collected vast amount of information related to Indian literature, art, customs and culture, and shared their findings with people back home.⁴ Many Irishmen and Englishmen were instrumental in the translations of ancient Indian classical texts into English, or wrote about their first-hand experience of Indian rituals and customs, or recorded their reactions to the grandeur of ancient monuments, though left mostly in ruins by invaders, and the architectural style of ancient India.

Yeats remained an ardent follower of Eastern mysticism throughout his life, often facing sharp criticism for the same. W. H. Auden, making a pointed remark about the mystical pursuit of Yeats, wrote: "In 1900 he [Yeats] believed in fairies; that was bad enough; but in 1930 we are confronted with the pitiful, the deplorable spectacle of a grown man occupied with the mumbo-jumbo of magic and the nonsense of India. . . . he made it the centre of his work. Gentlemen, I need say no more" (139). And again, Louis MacNeice, whose criticism is more razor-edged: "There is a double point that needs making – first that Yeats was not so exotic as is popularly assumed, second that on the whole his exoticism was not an asset but a liability" (169). MacNeice goes a step further and subjects the readers of Yeats to jagged censure: "Yeats talked a good deal about magic and beauty and mysticism, but his readers have no right to gabble these words like parrots and call what they are doing appreciation" (169).

The extraordinary body of Yeats's works, however, has made the task of studying Yeats in entirety a far-fetched dream for Yeatsian scholars, biographers and critics. Initially, western critics largely interpreted the corpus of Yeats's works from a Eurocentric perspective, and the rest of the world fell for it hook line and sinker. As Materer notes, "Early critics, for example, David Daiches and Yvor Winters, deplored

⁴ Though with Crowley, Yeats later parted ways for reasons which will be discussed in the second chapter.

Yeats's occultism, and W. H. Auden and George Orwell ridiculed it. Allen Tate and R. P. Blackmur intelligently speculated on the problems Yeats's occultism posed for the poet's readers, but less serious critics simply ignored those problems. . . ." (26). However, the tide began to turn when critics like Richard Ellmann and Helen Vendler interpreted "his mysticism as in reality an aesthetic vision" (Materer 26). However, the 1970s saw some respite from the distracters of occultism and mysticism in Yeats's works.⁵ Recently, McDonagh made a very valid claim in asserting that Yeats "spent a lifetime seeking contact with the spirit world through occult researches and practices that informed much of what he did and wrote."

In the year 1917, Yeats writes in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*: "The poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment, the hero in defeat" (*Later Essays* 12). The poignant statement by Yeats not only highlights Yeats's conviction in his work and his strong belief in the supernatural world, it also hammers home the point that Yeats chose to wear the mystical mask to produce his best work despite facing the axe of trenchant criticism.

The Assessments of Yeats's involvement with the esoteric and the mystical tradition of the East by scholars and critics after Yeats can also be located to polar extremes. Richard Ellmann, a renowned biographer of Yeats, is of the opinion that "First he [Yeats] became convinced from Indian literature, and from the living proof of Mohini Chatterjee, that a man could live by doctrines wholly unacceptable to most Westerners. . . . Then, under the influence of the Theosophical Society . . . Yeats dreamed of sowing the West with Eastern thought" (*Identity of Yeats* 182). Naresh Guha does not mince words when he claims that western critics "explain . . . away" the Indian connections of Yeats "as his idiosyncrasy of little or no consequence for understanding his poetry" (*Indian Approach* 138).

In the last century and a half, opinions on the influence of India and the East on Yeats's literary produce have swayed slightly towards the affirmative, with the diligent work of scholars, biographers and critics like A. Norman Jeffares, F. A. C. Wilson, George Mills Harper, R. F. Foster and Terence Brown. Indian scholars who wrote their

⁵ A few books written in the 1970 and after "introduced a new phase of Yeats criticism in which occultism is granted its central importance in his poetic career: G. M. Harper's *Yeats's Golden Dawn* (1974), M. C. Flannery's *Yeats and Magic* (1977), James Olney's *The Rhizome and the Flower* (1980), Graham Hough's *The Mystery Religion of W. B. Yeats* (1984), Kathleen Raine's *Yeats the Initiate* (1986), and Frank Kinahan's *Yeats, Folklore, and Occultism* (1988)" (Materer 28).

doctoral dissertations on the Indian and Eastern sources of Yeats, namely Haribans Rai Bachchan, Naresh Guha, and Sankaran Ravindran, have also contributed significantly to the changing of the tide of criticism on Yeats and India, or Yeats and the East. Most of them studied the sources of Indian influences on Yeats, tracing them to the philosophies of the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavadgita* and the *Bhagavat Purana* and other *Puranas*. Western critics and biographers of Yeats have also drawn attention to the Indian sources of influence on Yeats, sometimes also hinting at the impression of Tantra and eastern esoteric philosophy, but not dealt with these sources at length.

The countryside of Ireland, especially County Sligo became a fertile ground for Yeats to encounter mystical and supernatural experiences and elements. Almost all of Yeats's biographers, including Ellmann, Jeffares, Foster and Terence Brown have explicated this in great detail. Richard Ellmann records that "the boy [Yeats] found what he wanted in reverie and solitude; he wandered by himself about the Sligo caves and dreamed the days away," while Brown reinforces the fact that "Sligo town as a thriving port was where he [Yeats] was touched with the romance of the mysterious and the exotic" (*Man and Masks* 25; *Life of Yeats* 2). Themes such as "reincarnation, communication with the dead, mediums, supernatural systems and Oriental mysticism fascinated Yeats through his life," the first few experiences of which Yeats had in County Sligo (McDonagh).

Yeats's father, John Butler Yeats's utilitarian approach towards life also landed Yeats in a situation which accelerated Yeats's journey into the inner recesses of the raw forces of nature, into the world of mysticism. Describing a violent reaction of his father, Yeats writes in his *Memoirs*, "I began to read Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, and this, when added to my interest in psychical research and mysticism, enraged my father, who was a disciple of John Stuart Mill's . . . putting me out of the room he broke the glass in a picture with the back of my head" (19). Yeats, in the opinion of Materer, "is a classic case of a writer who turns to occultism as a compensation for a lost traditional faith" (25). Materer also brings to light the fact that although Yeats's family was Protestant, his father was "a sceptical rationalist deeply influenced by John Stuart Mill, Charled Darwin, and Auguste Comte" (25). However, for the young Yeats, who frequently reminiscences his childhood as one laden with pain, there had to be an alternative to his father's rationalism, a "religion" which Yeats could embrace to alleviate himself of his insecurities, physical frailties, and loneliness. Materer makes a stimulating remark in this regard:

In his *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*, Yeats wrote, “Father’s unbelief had set me thinking about the evidences of religion and I weighed the matter perpetually with great anxiety, for I did not think I could live without religion”. . . . Occultism was so crucial to Yeats’s resistance to his father’s intellectual power that he dated his break from that influence from the time he began to study “psychical research and mystical poetry.” (25)

Since “the path to conventional Christianity had been cut off for Yeats by his father’s religious scepticism,” Yeats had a strong “hunger for the spiritual life [which] led him to seek and devise an alternative system of beliefs” (McDonagh). “For Yeats,” writes Matherer, “occultism represented a total break not only with his father’s rationality but also with his respectability” (25). Moreover, Yeats’s uncle George Pollexfen was an astrologer and a seeker of the mystic experiences and magical powers. Later, when Yeats’s family shifted to London, the young Yeats performed several psychological experiments on him to test his newly acquired mystical techniques, courtesy MacGregor Mathers. Yeats’s *Memoirs* also bears a reference to Mary Battle, who was a servant of his uncle and had the gift of “second sight,” of visions (76). Yeats describes all these experiences at length in his *Autobiographies* and *Memoirs*.

Yeats had also received a copy of A. P. Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism* from his aunt Mrs. Pollenfex, as a young lad. Brown observes:

Sinnett’s book, together with his earlier more anecdotal text *The Occult World* (1881), was Yeats’s introduction to a way of thinking about reality that retained the supernaturalism of Christian faith, but in a totally different doctrinal context. Sinnett’s writings revealed that there were living in the world, in the secret land of Tibet or in inaccessible northern India, a group of spiritual masters, or Mahatmas, who shared their occult knowledge of the very nature of the universe with selected individuals with whom they could communicate at a distance. . . . In his early poetry, India, the India to which Sinnett’s writings had introduced him, became indeed a version of the Sligo of his dreams, a secret place apart, where, as on an isle in a western lake, the modern world could be escaped in a transcendental eastern peace. (Brown, *Life of Yeats* 33)

In London, the young Yeats was further introduced to “the study and practice of the occult while in art college in Dublin,” as a result of which “his instant fascination with the occult, metaphysics and paranormal activities was to remain with him throughout his life” (McDonagh). Outside the confines of his family, Yeats, along with his friends John

Eglinton and George Russell, founded the Dublin Hermetic Society in June 1885, which later became the Dublin Theosophical Society in 1886.

Yeats also met Madame Blavatsky in London in 1886, and was very impressed by her. For the young Yeats, she was a highly gifted individual, a chosen one, who could communicate with the “spiritual masters” of India and the far East. Yeats’s interest in the Eastern knowledge took a new shape after the arrival of Mohini Chatterjee to Dublin in 1886, whom Yeats invited to lecture on the wisdom of the East. Mohini Chatterjee introduced Yeats to the philosophy of Vedanta, which was to remain with him throughout his life. Chatterjee was also the first Indian who left an indelible mark on the mind of Yeats, with whom Yeats would be in correspondence till his later years.

Yeats joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1890, a society dedicated to the study of esoteric knowledge and magical rituals. It was founded by William Wynn Westcott and MacGregor Mathers on the basis a cypher manuscript discovered by A.F.A. Woodford, the authenticity of the discovery of which, however, is debatable.⁶ The most interesting aspect of the rituals of the Golden Dawn, which immensely fascinated Yeats, was the inclusion of Eastern esoteric philosophy and practices, especially Tantra philosophy, and its synthesis with other Western occult orders like the Rosicrucian and the Jewish mystical tradition of the Cabbala. Westcott himself made a remarkable comment about the Eastern and the Western occult/esoteric tradition:

The Eastern School of Theosophy and occultism and our own Hermetic Society of the GD are fraternities of students whose predecessors must have come from the same stock of *Magi*-the Scientific Priests of a remote antiquity—The two Societies, differing in mode of teaching and in language, are allied by mutual understanding and respect and their aim is similar. (Harper, *Yeats's Golden Dawn* 11).

In getting acquainted with various mystic and occult techniques and philosophies, Yeats got a new driving force for his literary and folkloristic pursuit, leading him to explore afresh and re(create) symbols, myths, legends and other elements from esoteric and occult knowledge systems. Additionally, it was during these formative years that Yeats was also introduced to the mystical philosophy of Swedenborg and Boehme. Bachchan weaves an interesting web of the influences of people, philosophical systems and mystical orders on Yeats at this point of his life:

⁶ *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats, Vol. I* 486.

The Golden Dawn was at once a Rosicrucian and Cabbalistic institution, and the influence of both is apparent on Yeats's writings. Mathers' personal influence was not less significant. At the same time Edwin Ellis introduced him to the writings of Swedenborg and Boehme. The philosophy of these two mystics, together with that of the Cabbala, was usefully employed by Ellis and Yeats in the interpretation of *The Works of William Blake* which they published in 1893. (11-12)

Additionally, the significance of the inclusion of Tantra in Golden Dawn needs to be delved into at this juncture. During my archival research at the National Library of Ireland, I came across several manuscripts of Yeats and his wife George Yeats (most of them unpublished as yet), which suggest that various tantric rituals and symbols were used in the Golden Dawn. From a literary point of view, it can be seen as a process of intelligent engrafting of the Eastern symbols and images over its Western counterparts. For instance, the symbols and pictorial representations of *kundalini*, Tattwa, Swastik, Serpent and various other symbols related to cosmology seem to have been discussed in great detail in the side lectures of the Golden Dawn. One must bear in mind the fact that Tantra has recently become a misnomer, and is used to refer to black magic, but in Yeats's times, it was a newly found philosophical elixir. Additionally, the first scholarly works on Tantra which reached Europe in 1913-14 were the translations of Tantric texts from Sanskrit and books written by the Irishman John Woodroffe, who wrote under the pen name Arthur Avalon. Yeats's library houses numerous works of Woodroffe.

It is around this time, that is, in the year 1912, that Yeats met another Indian poet and writer of the mystical and spiritual verse collection *Gitanjali*, Rabindranath Tagore. The several months that they spent together, interacting with each other, turned out to be a phase of both admiration and disenchantment for Yeats. Yeats wrote the introduction to Tagore's *Gitanjali* for which he was awarded the noble prize in 1912. Yeats writes about his experience of reading from the manuscript of *Gitanjali*:

I have carried the manuscript of these translations about with me for days, reading it in railway, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me. These lyrics—which are in the original, my Indians tell me, full of subtlety of rhythm, of untranslatable delicacies of colour, of material invention—display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long. The work of a supreme culture. . . . (*Later Essays* 167)

Stephen Regan is perhaps right in pointing out that “Yeats appears to have valued Tagore not only for his supreme lyricism but equally for revealing a civilization he inferred to be still organically integrated as the West no longer was” (93). The literary friendship between Tagore and Yeats lasted for a brief period, during which Yeats also got two of Tagore’s plays produced in Dublin.

Yeats, however, soon got disillusioned with Tagore. Critics still debate the possible causes of Yeats’s disenchantment with Tagore, but have not arrived at a concrete conclusion or consensus regarding the same. Guha, however, claims that Yeats’s “enthusiasm waned when he felt that Tagore’s mind was not mythological enough. . .” (*Indian Approach* 139). It is rather interesting to note that Yeats, after including Tagore in the twenty-seventh phase of his lunar system in the initial manuscript of *A Vision*, seems to have re-examined his choice and removed Tagore from the final publication of *A Vision* in 1925. Paul and Harper suggest that Yeats “may have determined it bad taste to canonize the living” and hence struck out Tagore from the phase (265). Based on Kathleen Taylor’s exposition that Woodroffe was in close association with the Tagore family, one would like to submit that there might have been a possibility of some exchange of information and ideas regarding Tantra philosophy between Tagore and Yeats.⁷

Another fascinating Indian Yeats met in the year 1913 was Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, a leading figure of his times, who also furnished Yeats with knowledge about Eastern mysticism and esoteric traditions. In an unpublished letter of June 1913, Yeats invited Coomaraswamy for dinner, “telling him ‘I greatly admire your work,’ probably referring to his *Art and Swadeshi*. . .” (Finneran and Bornstein, “Notes” 467). Yeats also wrote an essay for Coomaraswamy, “Art and Ideas.”⁸ Additionally, Yeats was in possession of several works of and translations by Coomaraswamy. One is also inclined to assume that Yeats might have been familiar with Coomaraswamy’s *The Dance*

⁷ Kathleen Taylor, *Woodroffe* 15.

⁸ In this essay, Yeats makes a reference to Rajput paintings, and the representation of the soul as a swan leaving the body after its final liberation. Needless to say, swans and other birds figured as significant symbols all through Yeats’s works. The symbolic representation of the swan in Rajput paintings and Indian culture might have left a significant mark on him.

of *Shiva*, as one finds Yeats incorporating the image of the dancing Shiva, the symbol of annihilation, in many of his later works.

A few years later, in 1917, Yeats married George Hyde-Lees, which proved to be an important stepping stone to his later works. Yeats met George at the Golden Dawn, and he was the one who initiated her into the Order. Their marriage was, in many ways, very fruitful for Yeats, as he discovered George attempting automatic writing just four days after their marriage. Together, they started work on *A Vision* the very same year, and finally published it in 1925.

Yeats's father wrote to him in 1915 "with characteristic sharpness: 'A mystic is a man who believes what he likes to believe and makes a system of it and plumes himself on doing so.' The warning, . . . did not dissuade Yeats from writing *A Vision*, . . ." (Materer 25-26). Yeats's *A Vision* is his philosophy, symbolism, literature and art crystallized into a visionary and prophetic system, which, of course would not have ever composed were it not for George.⁹ Moreover, the period after 1925, after the publication of *A Vision*, was one of intense creativity for Yeats, also abounding in numerous sexual metaphors. Though critics tend to read this in the light of Yeats's marriage, one would want to read this as a repercussion of the influence and proliferation of Tantric sexual symbols and rituals in Yeats's life.

In 1931, Yeats first met Purohit Swami through Sturge Moore, and this led to the most productive years of Yeats's literary career because of two reasons: firstly, it provided Yeats with an opportunity to understand the intricacies and nuances of certain Indian philosophical concepts, which he had earlier known only through theosophical teachings, books and the hermetic order of the Golden Dawn; secondly, in Swami, he saw the living proof of all that he had been reading about Indian philosophy, meditation, rituals, and Tantra, who claimed he had himself reached the third stage of meditation (and subsequent release); thirdly, he could learn from the subjective experience of someone like Swami

⁹ Guha notes: "Yeats methodically pursued his study of Indian systems, such as Yoga and Tantra, into middle age, and that his association with Tagore only renewed this interest . . . [which] was not religious but philosophical in the sense that *A Vision* is a philosophy. Hindu systems signify this distinction by implication of the word *Darśana*. This word does not indicate a system of philosophy in the Western sense. . . . [but] a system of coherent affirmation, co-extensive with human experience which it wants to interpret in its entirety. It is possible that by calling his "philosophy" a "vision" Yeats also was thus indicating its resemblance to the Indian variety of philosophy which is based more on intuition than on reason" (*Indian Approach* 100).

what he had known mostly through objective accounts mostly in books or distorted narratives – Tantra, Yoga, meditation, and Indian culture; and fourthly, and most importantly, he found in him a new go-to source of his symbols, metaphors and myths.¹⁰

Much to the dislike of his wife, Yeats entered into a literary and philosophical collaboration with Swami, wherein they read the *Upanishads* and Indian philosophies together and translated Indian philosophy. Yeats supplied the introductions to five of Swami's works, and was also instrumental in getting most of his books published from the reputed publication house Faber & Faber. Brown remarks, "Yeats's association with his Swami . . . account[s] for the deliberate orientalisising of his late poetry. As they had been at the outset of his career, Ireland and India are venerated by the poet in his final years as very ancient cultures in which the oldest wisdom of the world took deep root in traditions of pilgrimage, of sacred rivers and lakes, of holy mountains" (*Life of Yeats* 353). R. F. Foster also supplies significant information about the influence of Swami on Yeats:

Much of what he had read awoke ringing personal echoes: the swan as symbol of the soul, the importance of mastering the technique of the non-sleeping dream-trance, the round of miracles, pilgrimages, revelation. Through the Swami . . . [Yeats] had approached Patanjali's meditative techniques. . . . The Yogic idea that you could be 'fire or an eater', ascetic or sensual, struck . . . [Yeats] powerfully. . . . Indian philosophy seemed to allow, more than most intellectual systems, for the pull between rival ideals of heroism and abstraction. (*The Arch Poet* 537)

Thus, the four Indians who seem to have left a lasting philosophical, and consequently, literary impact on Yeats, came into his life at various crucial junctures, and left their indelible impression on his mind and creativity. Bachchan studies the effect of three of them (except Coomaraswamy), and summarizes how and why they left their impressions of Yeats, quite succinctly: "When Mohini Chatterjee met Yeats the latter was in his teens, at his most impressionable and receptive age. But when Tagore met Yeats the latter had matured and was too entangled with affairs that weighed heavily on his mind. . . . When Purohit Swami came into his life Yeats was approaching old age and had become credulous, receptive and impressionable" (72). There is very little record of Yeats's

¹⁰ Bachchan notes, "Purohit Swami with his bald head, bare feet, saffron coloured robe and all the tales of miracle of *Yoga* which he had experienced himself or had heard about from others, was just the type of man from India Yeats liked to meet—its true and authentic representative" (72).

personal correspondence with Coomaraswamy. However, suffice it to say that Yeats had read and possessed many of Coomaraswamy's works, and the influence was mostly in terms of Yeats's admiration of range of work Coomaraswamy was engaged into.

Yeats desired to travel to India or Asia, initially only spiritually or through the medium of his writings, and physically in the last phase of his life. In a letter written as a reply to Florence Farr (who wrote to him from Sri Lanka) on June 12, 1913, Yeats expresses: "Your letters are charming & make me long for a like life. Perhaps I too in a few years may drift into Asia" (qtd. in Golden, CL 2179). In his sub-section titled "Anima Mundi" in "Per Amica Silentia Lunae" (1917), Yeats bared his mind further: "I have always sought to bring my mind close to the mind of Indian and Japanese poets, old women in Connaught, mediums in Soho, lay brothers whom I imagine dreaming in some medieval monastery the dreams of their village, learned authors who refer all to antiquity. . ." (*Later Essays* 16). What began with a spiritual, metaphysical, and mystical fascination for Asia, the East, in the early years of Yeats's life, grew into an overwhelming desire to connect to the East spiritually, at the level of thought in the second decade of the twentieth century.

In the last decade of his life, Yeats developed a strong inclination to physically travel to India after Purohit Swami left Ireland and went back to India. In a letter written to the guru of Swami, Bhagwan Shri Hamsa on March 12, 1937, Yeats voices out his long-nurtured wish:

This winter amid gloom & ill health you have come several times into my mind. Once I thought I had some kind of communication from you. I have thought of going to India with my own book of spiritual philosophy in my hand & hiding my self [sic] there for a time. But there is a practical difficulty of a personal kind which seems under present circumstances to make that impossible. (qtd. in Golden, CL 6855)

And again, two months later, Yeats wrote another letter to Shri Purohit Swami, on May 15, 1937, where he expresses his inability to travel:

I must give up India for the present. I was ready to risk going so far from my doctor but I now find that if I did so it would cause my wife great anxiety. She has not tried to prevent me in any way; but I have found out in various ways how great her anxiety would be.

I most sincerely hope to go later. I find myself thinking out plans for next year. My recovering from that nearly fatal illness has been slow & gradual — it will I think continue.

Before the end of the summer A Vision will be out & only in India can I find any body [sic] who can throw light upon certain of its problems. (qtd. in Golden, CL 6932)

Perhaps the wish was to remain an unfulfilled one. Yeats could never really travel to India and see for himself the country, her people, her culture, her way of life which had been his source of “anima mundi” right from his early days. Yeats writes, somewhat regretfully, in his introduction to *Aphorisms of Yôga* (1938), “The little I know of India has come to me in the main by word of mouth” (*Later Essays* 177).

However, one must also understand that Yeats held India so close to his heart, because the idea of India for Yeats was, in several ways, akin to the image of an ancient, Celtic Ireland. Being an ardent supporter of the Celtic tradition, Yeats always viewed Britain as a leviathan which was slowly swallowing the ancient Celtic culture and tradition. And contrary to this he viewed India as the source of ancient culture. For instance, Yeats compares his *Countess Cathleen* with the *Bhagavad Gita* and writes in his *Memoirs*, “In Christianity what was philosophy in Eastern Asia became life biography, drama. A play passes through the same process in being written . . . When it is completely life it seems to the hasty reader a mere story. Was the *Bhagavad Gita* the ‘scenario’ from which the Gospels were made?” (150). Brown also suggests that “Yeats’s late poetry inhabits a kind of world geography in which ancient Ireland – with its mystic sites, Celtic crosses, burial mounds – is made to seem the spiritual kin of India, Japan, China, Alexandrine Egypt” (*Life of Yeats* 353).

During his lifetime, especially between 1885-1939, Yeats’s mind was being pulled in two different directions: on the one hand were his ever-increasing interest in magic and occult, the rich Celtic traditions and Irish folklore, his fascination towards and reformulation of tarot predictions, his introduction to astrology, his pursuit of art and painting; and on the other, the bitter political reality of Ireland, the Civil War and the Irish Revolution, and the larger socio-political scenario in Ireland.¹¹ This dichotomy is evident

¹¹ In his poems, Yeats uses various symbols from the tarot tradition and sometimes also reinterprets them on the basis of his instincts and imagination. For example, in his poem “Fergus and Druid,” he writes about the Wheel of Fortune Card, “I see my life go drifting like a river/ From change to change; I have been many things,/ A green drop in the surf, a gleam of light . . . And all these things were wonderful and great;/ But

in his dominant images and symbols which are diffused throughout his works. His idea of binaries can also be read as emanating from these dichotomies, which further played the role of a catalyst in his quest for mystical knowledge.

Yeats can frequently be viewed as existing in two states, or making sense and life out of binaries, or poetry out of contraries, be it the contraries between the West and the East, between objectivity and subjectivity, between reason and sensation, between rationality and emotion, between science and spiritualism/mysticism, between exoteric/spiritual and esoteric/occult, between narratives of scientific experiments and folklore/myths, or between empiricism and intuition, to name a few. In a way, he is probably the true inheritor of Blake's legacy of binaries. H. J. C. Grierson in his Preface to Narayana Menon, aptly notes:

It will be long before we can pass a final judgement on a poet who combined so many interests and was so indifferent to others—a poet interested in the occult but indifferent to modern science; a poet mystically inclined for whom the Christian religion had as little significance as modern science; a patriot whose aristocratic leanings have left him out of sympathy with the direction in which his country has moved; a faithful disciple of the doctrine of art, whose poetry, from its earliest phase to its very different latest phase, is pervaded by a metaphysic which has its roots in his own recreations to life and experience, is a criticism of life. (vii)

Grierson is absolutely right in claiming that it will take a lot of time to “pass a final judgement” on Yeats. The truth is, even a century after Grierson wrote, it is impossible to judge the antithetical tendencies of Yeats and take sides. Perhaps Swami is right when, in his dedication to Yeats of his translation of *Geetā* (1935), he writes about the essential dichotomy between the West and the East regarding Yeats the prophet, the visionary: “They say that East and West ‘shall never meet’, but forget history. *The West has captured the East materially, the East has captured the West spiritually, and it is only in*

now I have grown nothing, knowing all” (qtd. Raine, 35). If one delves deeper into the possible interpretations of the same, then the connotative meaning that arises is that Time is a series of changes and life floats on the river of Time.

Joseph Hone in his biography of Yeats writes about Yeats's astrological interests and his strong belief in old techniques and ideas to excite and recreate supernatural powers: “Indeed Yeats never got further than the old-fashioned square figure, which the higher-grade astrologers have abandoned. He frequently made horary figures, but he shrank from the mathematical calculations for progressions” (112).

Spirit that there has been, or can be, meeting. You had vision; you saw truth; you proclaimed it. The East is grateful, the West should be" (9, emphasis added).

Yeats's take on the idea of nationalism was also hazy. One could never really make out if he was a fierce nationalist or a humanitarian citizen/prophet of the world. Yeats was dissatisfied with the superficial representation of the Irish tradition in literature and the arts. Through the medium of his psychedelic trip into the folk, the mystical and the occult, Yeats made an attempt to trace out the ancient, folk Irish history in his works—an alternative history which would be based on the ancient Celtic lore and folk Irish culture, and hence more authentic.

However, and especially through his later years, Yeats, an old, mature man now, started to believe in an idea which transcended the narrow confines of nationalism. In 1937, Yeats wrote: "I am no Nationalist, except in Ireland for passing reasons: State and Nations are the work of intellect, and when you consider what comes before and after them they are, as Victor Hugo said of something or other, not worthy the blade of grass God gives for the nest of the linnet" (qtd. in Brown, *Life of Yeats* 354). In fact, Brown makes an even more prophetic and grand estimation of Yeats's attitude towards Ireland and the world:

Yeatsian purpose was not just rooted in a desire for cultural power . . . Rather it involved an exorbitant ambition. For he sedulously hoped that Ireland could be induced to become a new kind of society, one brought into being by occult powers which ritual magic and a ritual theatre could generate. . . . He wished to transform Ireland because he wished to transform the world. (*Literature of Ireland* 21)

However, one must also bring oneself to understand that for Yeats, political engagement of any sort was necessarily through the medium of literature and the arts. In his talk on modern poetry which was broadcast from the London BBC in October 1936, Yeats declared: "Nothing in this book is journalism," also adding, "Nothing was written to please a friend or satisfy an editor, or even to earn money. When I introduced a book, it was some book I had awaited with excitement; nor was anything written out of the fullness of knowledge; why should I write what I knew? I wrote always that when I laid down my pen I might be less ignorant than when I took it up" ("Yeats's Fantasy" 395-96). This partly explains why Yeats wrote introductions for so many of Swami's works, and even for Tagore's "Gitanjali" previously. It was his desire to know more, and know

about the as yet unknown that motivated him to write prolifically. He wrote more than 8000 letters in his lifetime (out of which only a few have been published); gave several senate speeches; wrote poetry, plays, essays, articles, reviews, introductions, prose and prophecies, which have been published in fourteen volumes by Scribner alone, and several other publication houses like Macmillan, Clarendon and Oxford.¹² Yeats was even writing the day he left the world for the next!

Yeats, arguably though, surpassed all modernist writers in the complexity of his literary style, but seen from an Eastern philosophical perspective, Yeats's journey remained unfinished due to his mortal limitations and the dynamism of esoteric knowledge. Nevertheless, throughout his life, Yeats remained an ardent follower of these little-known or lost traditions and civilizations, magic, occult and esoteric knowledge. Yeats casts a philosophical eye on this aspect of his creative dimension in *Rosa Alchemica*: "[E]very experience, however profound, every perception, however exquisite, would bring me the bitter dream of a limitless energy I could never know, and even in my most perfect moment I would be two selves, the one watching with heavy eyes the other's moment of content" (*Mythologies* 5).

The current study seeks to delve into Yeats's mystic and esoteric literary journey and provide an insight into what Yeats was possibly trying to achieve through the same. More specifically, the study bases itself primarily around Tantra philosophy, Kundalini Yoga, Eastern symbols, the methodology involved in creating symbols, and other philosophies of the East. As the title of the work suggests, the current research only tangentially touches upon what is purely academic, and instead bases itself in the philosophy of mysticism, astronomy (and astrology), myths and esoteric philosophy of the East, attempting to decode Yeats's philosophy of symbols. As the title also suggests, the study will uncover how Yeats's esoteric symbolism and mystical philosophy came to acquire the status of reality for him. In fact, Yeats strongly believed that the wholeness and validity of his philosophical and visionary system will be established some day.

Moreover, the term 'astro' used in the title of the present work is not just related to celestial objects but has a philosophical connotation when viewed from the perspective that beyond existing ideas, perception and conventional values, the term 'astro' represents

¹² Kelly, in his painstakingly compiled *Yeats Chronology*, mentions the 8000 largely unpublished letters as one of the main sources for his book.

a vast continuum like the celestial space, and stands for the exploration of the unknown or lesser-known aspects of human existence, especially that of the mind. Somewhere between the realms of the mystical and mythical, astronomy and astrology, occult and magic, lies imagination which breaks the limitation of words and boundaries of space and time, leading to what in *Mandukya Upanishad* is known as *turiya*.¹³ In Yeats, mystical philosophy constitutes his aesthetic reality, and his intensive study of Irish and Eastern myths serves as a fodder for his imagination, thus enhancing the veracity of his writings.

This research also aspires to fill a certain gap in Yeatsian studies by primarily focussing on the esoteric aspect of Yeats from an Eastern vantage point. The study focuses on Tantra philosophy in particular, and Yeats's symbolism arising out of his mystical and esoteric pursuits. In my knowledge, such a study has not been attempted by far. While a sizeable number of scholars like Haribans Rai Bachchan, Naresh Guha, Mokashi-Punekar Shankar, Sankaran Ravindran, and a few more have studied Yeats from an Eastern/Indian perspective, none of them have dealt with the philosophy of Tantra.

More recently, i.e. in the last four decades, a number of researches have been conducted in India, either on the Christian mysticism in the symbols of Yeats (Susan George), on the influence of Hinduism on Yeats's poetry (Rawal Tarun Kumar Dasharathray), on the literary response of W. B. Yeats to India and vice versa (A. P. Macwan), and, a reading of Yeats in the light of the Indian theory of *dhwani/dhvani* (suggestion) (Anitha R.).¹⁴ None of them deal with Yeats in the context of Hindu mystical or Tantric philosophy. The only works on Tantra in relation to Yeats that one could find are Dabić, Soud, and Margot Wilson, but there are serious problems of misunderstanding or incompletely comprehending Indian philosophical postulations that one could locate in their works, mostly emanating from cultural differences. However, one would like to put on record one's admiration for Dabić's work, followed by that of Soud, though the latter's understanding of Tantra is severely flawed. The research aspires to make up for just such fissures in the understanding of Yeats from an Indian philosophical and Tantric perspective.

¹³ In *A Vision*, Yeats recognizes *turiya* as the fourth state of human mind. He also writes about it in detail in his "Introduction to *Mandukya Upanishad*."

¹⁴ For more details, refer to the bibliography.

The methodology adopted for the study is that of a close textual analysis of select poetry, plays and personal/private correspondence, articles, prefaces, introductions and radio talks of Yeats spanning the period 1885-1939. The theoretical engagement of the study comprises philosophies from the classical Indian system as well as western theoretical paradigm. Significant theoretical perspectives have been borrowed from Indian philosophy, Tantric philosophy, western psychoanalysis (Jung particularly), and select readings from South Asian and Indian literary criticism (Coomaraswamy, Aurobindo and Bimal Krishna Matilal). Additionally, the research has been supplemented with rigorous archival research into Yeats's unpublished manuscripts and letters, mostly conducted at the National Library of Ireland and the library of Trinity College, Dublin. Lastly, the research employs tools of a literary/cultural analyst as well as that of a philosopher, both complementing each other in order to provide an insightful analysis into the work and life of Yeats.

The research is mainly divided into four chapters. The first chapter, entitled "W. B. Yeats and Eastern Esoteric Philosophy" opens with a debate between science and mysticism/esotericism and Yeats's opinion about the same, then delving into Yeats's encounter with Tantra through various sources and the reasons which drew Yeats towards Tantric philosophy and symbols. The next section will discuss briefly the reception of Yeats's engagement with Tantra philosophy by scholars and critics in the West, and then launch into a study of why and how Yeats's employed his knowledge of Tantra philosophy to his literary and creative works.

The second chapter entitled "Yeats, Sexuality and Tantra" will look into the role of sexuality in Tantra philosophy and investigate how Yeats's knowledge of Tantra's position on sexuality influenced Yeats's life and works. The chapter will first investigate the significance of desire and sexuality in ancient Indian literature and philosophy, which will be followed by an evaluation of sexuality in Tantra philosophy. The chapter will then proceed to trace the trajectory of Yeats's evolving opinions on sexuality, and his views on the idea of sexual union leading to cosmic union. The chapter will also review the positions of Western critics on sexual symbolism in Yeats's later works.

The third chapter entitled "Yeats, Tantric Philosophy and *Kundalini*: A Study of Yeats's *The Herne's Egg*" will launch into a critical study of Yeats's play *The Herne's Egg* (1938) through the lens of *kundalini* yoga and the use of sexuality for the awakening

of *kundalini*. The chapter will first offer an introduction to *kundalini*; followed by a discussion of Yeats and *kundalini*; and then a brief survey of the opinions of various critics on the Indian/Upanishadic/Eastern elements in Yeats's last verse play *The Herne's Egg* will follow. Finally, the chapter will attempt a detailed investigation of the play through the perspective of *kundalini*—studying the plot, characters, stage directions and the title of the play. Finally, the chapter will conclude with an exploration of how and why Yeats employed esoteric knowledge (*kundalini* and Tantra) to create an exoteric form of art.

The last chapter entitled “The Hermeneutics of Symbolism and Yeats's Philosophy” will primarily look into the elaborate symbolism of Yeats, and his methodology to arrive at new symbols over the course of his literary life. The chapter will mainly launch a detailed inquiry into two kinds of symbols Yeats uses in abundance: mystical symbols and evocative symbols, mostly through the blending of Eastern and Western meditational techniques. The chapter will also suggest how through the use of mystical symbols, Yeats is subtly indulging in an anti-colonial discourse, by tracing the ancient roots of symbols in order to understand and unearth, in turn, ancient Celtic symbols. Evocative symbols have not been studied elaborately so far, so the study, in its novel attempt, aims to offer some new food for thought for scholars of Yeats in the times to come.

Finally, the study will proceed to the conclusion by drawing all the strands of the study together. The research also concludes, as a whole, that if one analyses Yeats's work from an Eastern perspective, a new understanding of Yeats's writings dawns upon us, which shows his serious engagement with the various aspects of human existence which are considered to be supernatural but at the same time have a trans-reality of their own.¹⁵

¹⁵ Yeats always believed in the trans-reality of esoteric knowledge. Yeats writes about alchemists in *Rosa Alchemica*: “I had discovered, early in my researches, that their doctrine was no merely chemical phantasy, but a philosophy they applied to the world, to the elements and to man himself; and that they sought to fashion gold out of common metals merely as part of an universal transmutation of all things into some divine and imperishable substance; and this enabled me to make my little book a fanciful reverie over the transmutation of life into art, and a cry of measureless desire for a world made wholly of essences” (*Mythologies* 3).

CHAPTER ONE

W. B. Yeats and Eastern Esoteric Philosophy

East and West seem each other's contraries—the East so independent spiritually, so ready to submit to the conqueror; the West so independent politically, so ready to submit to its Church. The West impregnated an East full of spiritual turbulence, and that turbulence brought forth a child Western in complexion and in feature. Since the Renaissance, literature, science, and the fine arts have left the Church and sought elsewhere the variety necessary to their existence; perhaps the converse impregnation has begun, *the East as male*. . . .

We have borrowed directly from the East and selected for admiration or repetition everything in our own past that is least European, as though groping backward towards our common mother.

--W. B. Yeats, Introduction to *An Indian Monk*¹

W. B. Yeats's keen interest in the esoteric traditions of the East has both baffled and fascinated critics and scholars alike, largely owing to its mythological, philosophical, and psychological significances. The esoteric aspects of Yeats's works, especially the complex symbolism he draws from Tantra, paints a unique and compelling picture of Yeats's creative imagination, a subject matter which has, more often than not, only tangentially been touched upon by scholars working on 'Yeats and the East.'² Truth be told, a comprehensive study of the symbolic system of Yeats—illustrations of which can be found in his entire oeuvre, but especially in his magnum opus, *A Vision*—is rendered incomplete without a detailed analysis of the philosophy, the imagery and the sacred geometry of Tantra.³ Tantric symbols and philosophy are deeply embedded in Yeats's

¹ *Later Essays* 134, emphasis added.

² As humbly as one can possibly submit the point, one would like to express a sense of shock and dismay over the fact that most scholars and critics of Yeats have chosen not to deal with Yeats's involvement with Tantra at length. While one can surmise that critics and scholars located in the West might have had limited or no access to esoteric philosophy and circles of the East, and might have had to face several linguistic and cultural barriers, the same cannot be said to hold true of scholars and critics located in India, or the East.

³ Yeats's symbolic system culminates in his magnum opus *A Vision*, which is a highly complex and codified philosophy, first written in 1925, and then significantly revised and republished in 1937. Aspects of Tantric and Eastern philosophy in the same will be discussed in detail in the chapter on *A Vision*.

later poetry and plays. The creative use of sexual images that form an integral part of Tantric philosophy, incorporation of *yantra*-s and *mandala*-s (geometrical patterns) from Tantra, tantric concepts of cosmology, and many other symbols from Tantra permeate most of Yeats's later works. The present chapter explores select aspects of Tantric symbols and philosophy that influenced and shaped Yeats's creative mind, his poetry and dramaturgy.

During the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, various psychological and scientific experiments were being carried out all over Europe in order to unravel the hidden mysteries of the universe. During this period, while on one hand, eminent psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung were engaged in exploring the latent secrets of the human personality, on the other, scientists and mathematicians like Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell were probing the matrices of space and time. John Bramble, in his *Modernism and the Occult*, observes that "the East West syncretism" was "born in an age of creative chaos from a union between pre-existent Western occultism, newly expanded imperial horizons, a 'second oriental renaissance' and new/old ways of construing 'religion' . . ." (2). The "East West syncretism" that Bramble writes about, especially in the hay days of modernism, was a two-way interface, where both science and philosophy influenced, and sometimes, substantiated each other.

Yeats was considerably interested in the developments mentioned above; he kept himself abreast of the latest discoveries in the field of science and psychology.⁴ He knew, on the basis of his readings and research, about most of the scientific innovations and psychological discoveries around him, but he did not embrace them with a child-like enthusiasm, never with a sense of uncritical acceptance. Coupled with the progress in modern science was a decline in the spiritual exploration of inner self and the study of

⁴ One can find in Yeats's personal library collection books such as Albert Einstein's *The Meaning of Relativity: Four Lectures Delivered at Princeton University, May, 1921* (1922), Bertrand Russell's *The ABC of Relativity* (1925), A. V. Vasiliev's *Space, Time, Motion: An Historical Introduction to the General Theory of Relativity* (1924), and L. Bolton's *An Introduction to the Theory of Relativity* (1921), and Prof. Boris Hessen's *The Social and Economic Roots of Newton's "Principia"* (1931), Alfred North Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* (1926), among others, related to contemporary scientific developments, as well as texts related to psychoanalysis and philosophy of the mind like C. G. Jung's *Collected Papers on Analytical Psychology* (1916), G. N. M. Tyrrell's *Science and Psychical Phenomena* (1938), and Ernest John's *Essays in Applied Psycho-analysis* (1923). The publication details of these works can be found in *Works in the Collection* cited in the bibliography.

supernatural phenomena. Yeats was intrigued by science, but at the same time, quite sceptical of the absolute truth-value and uncontested validity of the same. Yeats was not against the scientific spirit, but against the exclusionist tendency of modern science which completely banished human experience and mystical encounters from its laboratory. He was against the excess of realism and empiricism involved in the spirit of science, which considered the material world as the only reality, and labelled subjective experiences based on psychedelic or spiritual encounters as ‘pseudo’ or paranormal.

Being a poet-philosopher, Yeats always believed in the inspiration which lay hidden in the inner recesses of the human psyche, and in the archetypal sources of creativity of a writer and artist. Writing about the members of the Hermetic Society, to which Yeats was also associated, Ellmann maintains, “They looked to the poets rather than the scientists for truth, and discovered in the belief of Shelley and Coleridge in the power of the imagination confirmation of their conviction that miracles were still possible to man” (*Man and Masks* 44).⁵ Critical of science for the above mentioned reasons, Yeats strongly believed that he could offer an alternative in the form of a flawless system of philosophy. He succinctly clarified his stand on the debate between science and philosophy in an essay titled “On the Boiler,” written in 1938: “I am philosophical, not scientific, which means that observed facts do not mean much until I can make them part of my experience” (*Later Essays* 233).⁶ One can easily deduce the significance that mystical and philosophical experiences held for Yeats from the foregoing statement. Richard Ellmann also makes a pertinent remark in this regard: “He [Yeats] is convinced that science has failed and hopeful that another way of discovering truth exists. Though he waits for proof, he waits impatiently and with a certain amount of deliberate credulity. Like the young Goethe, he is ‘destitute of faith, yet terrified of scepticism’, a zealot in search of a creed” (43).

⁵ All references to Richard Ellmann in this chapter are from *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, unless indicated otherwise.

⁶ However, this statement of Yeats, coming as it is, a year before his death, should not be taken at its face value to mean that he had an aversion to science or scientific methods. Yeats, by way of a comparison, means to proffer how philosophy and spirituality are of consequence to him, over every other discipline.

Yeats was deeply motivated to, and struggled hard to ‘remake himself’ during this phase of his creative life and literary career.⁷ The literary force inside him was waiting to gush forth, and move past the hackneyed, constricted imagination imposed on artists and writers by the church and the society.⁸ A relentless search for this innovative philosophical voice drew Yeats towards different philosophical and esoteric systems of both the West and the East. Yeats, however, was peculiarly bent towards the mythical, mystical and philosophical sources of the East, as he was sure that a ‘distinct’ knowledge of the East would lend him a unique poetic and literary idiom.⁹

On the other end of the spectrum, one must also take cognizance of the fact that the scientific developments of Yeats’s times which substantially influenced his mind, also, to some extent, drew inspiration from Eastern mystical, esoteric and philosophical concepts. Numerous scientific inventions which took place in Yeats’s times were conjoined with an explanation from the Eastern knowledge systems. While both Einstein and Heisenberg had met Tagore, Nicolas Tesla was immensely influenced by Swami Vivekanand’s speeches in the United States of America. The exchange of Western scientific ideas and Eastern philosophical ideas bred definitive results which led to the benefit and progress of mankind, evidence of which can be found in the personal letters and memoirs of the aforementioned scientists and philosophers. “The picture of an interconnected cosmic web which emerges from modern atomic physics has been used extensively in the East to convey the mystical experience of nature. . . . The cosmic web . . . plays a central role in Tantric Buddhism,” writes Capra 151. Capra also asserts that Julius R. Oppenheimer strongly believed in the ancient Buddhist and Hindu roots of atomic physics, while

⁷ This phrase has been adapted from Yeats’s poem “An Acre of Grass:” “Grant me an old man’s frenzy. / Myself must I remake” (*Collected Poems* 348).

⁸ Richard Taylor explains: “One should remember that Yeats was brought up in an age of agnosticism which followed both the confirmation of scientific method in Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and the disillusionment of the late Victorian times in materialism and progress. . . Like many other individuals of that time Yeats could no longer believe in a formal or conventional Christianity. In both folklore and mystical-occult disciplines such as Platonism, cabalistic studies, oriental philosophy and theurgic magic, he encountered an active spirituality which existed both outside of and within man, linking him by an unbroken chain of being to an ultimate spiritual reality. Out of these ideas Yeats constructed a system, not itself reality, but the pattern of reality” (11).

⁹ In his preface to Naresh Guha’s *W. B. Yeats: An Indian Approach*, Ellmann records that “Yeats’s lasting interest” in the juxtaposition of “eastern conceptions” and “western art” can be witnessed in “such very early poems as ‘Anashuya and Vijaya,’ and in such very late ones as ‘Meru’ and ‘Lapis Lazuli’” (10).

Werner Heisenberg believed that the ideas of theoretical physics could be traced to Japan (22-23).

John Bramble validates the connections between Western science and Eastern spirituality and mysticism. “The invention of x-rays also proved the occultists right: solid matter was an illusion . . .” writes Bramble, citing many other examples in his work (9). Classical Indian philosophy has, one must take note, always characterized the material world as *māyā* (illusion), a state, believed to have been created out of Brahma’s dream, which persists throughout one’s life because of *avidyā* (ignorance) of the ultimate purpose of life.¹⁰ Bramble cites another example with regard to the Eastern philosophical explanation of scientific developments in the West: “At a time when electricity still equated with ‘life-force’, American physician George Miller Beard devised an electrical cure for neurasthenia. Electricity was also associated with Indian *prana*, so creating room for a synthesis of the scientific and the occult” (9). Again, in classical Indian philosophy, *prāṇa*, usually associated with life-force, holds deep psychological reverberations. Surendranath Dasgupta explains, “When the *prāṇa* vibrates and is on the point of passing through the nerves (*nāḍi-saṃsparśanodyata*), then there appears the mind full of its thought process (*saṃvedanamaya*). But when *prāṇa* lies dormant in the hollow of the veins (*śirā-saraṇi-koṭare*), then there is no manifestation of mind, and its processes and the cognitive functions do not operate” (*Indian Philosophy, Vol. II*, 256). Furthermore, in Tantra, *kundalini*, the dormant energy, coiled like a serpent, is called *Śakti* and the power generated by her arousal is said to have electrifying energy, *Śāktipāta*, which leads to the union of *Śakti* with *Śiva* (the embodiment of the Ultimate Reality), thus implying the dissolution of dichotomies and a realization of the Self.

An astute observer of the perceptible world and an artistic genius, Yeats’s creative oeuvre is a blend of metaphysical inquiries and philosophical speculations with a scientific rigour. Eastern esoteric and mystical philosophy provided a fresh life-breath, a novel vantage point to the mystical, philosophical, mythical and folkloristic elements Yeats found in the repertoire of the West. Yeats studied and practiced Tantric and other

¹⁰ In *A Vision* (1937), Yeats writes about the illusion under the spell of which we lead all our lives, mistaking it to be the reality: “[A]t phase 19 we create through the externalized *Mask* an imaginary world, in whose real existence we believe, while remaining separate from it; at phase 20 we enter that world and become a portion of it, we amass historical evidence, and, that we may dominate it the more, drive out myth and symbol, and compel it to seem the real world where our lives are lived” (*Vision Revised* 114).

eastern esoteric philosophy and rituals during his membership of the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. In *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn*, Ellic Howe elaborates on the use of eastern esoteric practices in the Golden Dawn, “Those who joined the G. D. during the 1890s had access to a store of ‘hidden’ or ‘rejected’ knowledge—some of its departments belong to what some people claim to be ‘the Perennial Wisdom’—that had no contemporary counterpart in the west. It was certainly far more elaborately codified than anything the Theosophical Society could offer” (xxvii). The young Yeats ventured into an exploration of these mystical and hidden aspects of the universe both in the Theosophical Society and more elaborately, in the Golden Dawn circle. He continued working on these abstruse concepts throughout his life, bringing them to bear heavily upon his magnum opus, *A Vision*.

Yeats was particularly intrigued by Tantra philosophy not only because of its radical or revolutionary ideas which stood in stark opposition to the inhibiting norms of the then European society, but also because of the fusion of the scientific spirit and spiritualism that it brought about in terms of its rigorous methodology of a disciplined practice of its rituals.¹¹ Moreover, variegated aspects of Yeats’s sources of Tantric knowledge can also shed light on the transcontinental philosophical correspondences taking place during this period, particularly between India, the far East and the West, especially Europe.

Before proceeding further, one must offer a brief insight into Tantra philosophy and the reasons behind it being frequently referred to as esoteric. In his introduction to *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga*, Sonu Shamdasani explains that “Tantrism was a religious and philosophical movement that became popular from the fourth century onward and influenced Indian philosophy, mysticism, ethics, art, and literature” (xxii).¹² Writing about the origin and meaning of the word ‘Tantra’ in the context of the classical Indian categorization of time in terms of the four epochs or ages, John Woodroffe explains: “For each of the ages a suitable Śāstra [religious and philosophical treatise] is given, for Satya

¹¹ Woodroffe writes about the explanation behind Kundalini Yoga in *Śakti and Śākta*: “The area of knowledge is . . . very widely increased. Knowledge may be gained of subtle chemistry, subtle physiology (as of the cakras or subtle bodily centres), of various powers, of the ‘world of Spirits,’ and so forth. But though we are here dealing with subtle things, they are still things and thus part of the sense-world of objects—that is, of the world of Māyā” (33). Quite akin to scientific experiments, Yeats practiced mystical, yogic and tantric rituals to make them integral to his own experience and creative energies.

¹² Some scholars date the origin of Tantra to the beginning of the common era.

or Kṛita the Vedas, for Tretā the Smṛitiśāstra, for Dvāpara the Purāṇas, and for Kaliyuga the Āgama or Tantra Śāstra” (*Śakti and Śākta* 7). Scholars have also explained the various meanings that Tantra denotes, as well as the etymological roots of Tantra in their respective works.¹³ Dasgupta points out that the word Tantra can assume “diverse meanings such as ceremonies, rites, rituals, doctrine, theory, science, or any scientific work and the like” (*Philosophical* 151). According to Woodroffe, Tantra denotes “injunction (Vidhi), regulation (Niyama), Śāstra generally or treatise,” and suggests that “[w]e can speak of ‘the Tantras’ as we do of ‘the Purāṇas’” (*Śakti and Śākta* 50; 51).

Regarding the origin of Tantra philosophy, scholars are generally divided on their opinion in tracing the roots of the philosophy. While some scholars claim that Tantra finds its source in Hinduism, while some others claim that it originated from Buddhism. Dasgupta steps in to clear the air:

Both the Hindu and the Buddhist Tantras have . . . [a] fundamental feature common to them—a theological principle of duality in non-duality. Both the schools hold that the ultimate non-dual reality possesses two aspects in its fundamental nature,—the negative (*nivṛtti*) and the positive (*pravṛtti*), the static and the dynamic,—and these two aspects of the reality are represented in Hinduism by *Śiva* and *Śakti* and in Buddhism by *Prajñā* and *Upāya* (or *śūnyatā* and *karuṇā*). (*Tāntric Buddhism* 3-4)

Gavin Flood presents a nuanced picture of the origin and growth of Tantra in his exceptionally well-researched work *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion*. Drawing out the various kinds of Tantras that arose in the Indian subcontinent, some of which have not survived, Flood maintains:

¹³ An exploration of the etymology of the word ‘Tantra’ sheds light upon the sources of its various meanings. Surendranath Dasgupta writes, “The word ‘Tantra’ has been derived in the *Kāśika-vṛtti* . . . from the root *tan* to spread. . . . Vacaspati Ānandagiri and Govindananda, however, derive the word from the root *tatri* or *tantri* in the sense of (*vyutpadana*) origination, or knowledge. In *Gaṇapāṭha* however *tantri* has the same meaning as *tan* (to spread) and it is probable that the former root is a modification of the latter. The meaning *vyutpādana* is also probable derived by narrowing the general sense of *vistāra* which is the meaning of the root *tan*” (*Philosophical* 151). Woodroffe elucidates further, “According to the derivation of ‘Tantra’ from *Tan* to spread, Tantra is that (Scripture) by which knowledge (Jñāna) is spread (Tanyate, vistāryate jñānam anena, iti Tantram). The suffix *Tra* is from the root “to save”. That knowledge is spread which saves. What is that but religious knowledge? Therefore, as here and generally used, Tantra means a particular kind of religious scripture. The Kāmika Āgama of the Śaiva Siddhānta (Tantrāntara Paṭala) says:—

Tanoti vipulān arthān tattvamantra-samanvitān / Trānanca kurute yasmāt tantram ityabhidhīyaye. (It is called Tantra because it promulgates great knowledge concerning Tattva and Mantra and because it saves)” (*Śakti and Śākta* 52-53, emphasis in original).

The tantric traditions arose during the early centuries of the common era, developing in Buddhist, Jain and Hindu contexts. The vast body of tantric texts are inseparable from the traditions that gave rise to them. Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and Śākta Tantras were believed by their followers to have been revealed by Viṣṇu, Śiva, and the Goddess (Devī), and there were even Tantras revealed by the Sun (Sūryā). . . There were also Jain Tantras believed to be the word of Mahāvīra and, above all, Buddhist Tantras believed to be the word of the Buddha, which became incorporated into the vast Buddhist canon between c. 400 and 750 CE, to this day integral to the living traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. (7)¹⁴

Dasgupta also brings to fore the independent standing of Tantra philosophy in terms of its body of revealed texts, though not discrediting the fact that it might have made substantial borrowings from different philosophies: “[T]he Tantra, whether Hindu or Buddhistic, has to be regarded as an independent religious literature, which utilised relevant philosophical doctrines, but the origin of which may not be traced to any system or systems of philosophy,” adding that “[t]he subject-matter of the Tantras may include esoteric yoga, hymns, rites, rituals, doctrines and even law, medicine, magic and so forth” (*Tāntric Buddhism* 1).

Victor Fic’s introduction to and explanation of Tantra is quite exemplary in its simplicity and depth. Fic explains Tantra in terms of its theory of genesis, and he writes:

The Tantra is a body of theories, techniques and rituals developed in India in antiquity, which later spread to other parts of Asia. There are two fundamental aspects of the Tantra. The first aspect is its theory of creation, which posits that the universe has no beginning and no end, and that all its manifestations are merely the projections of divine energy of its Creator. The second . . . is the belief that the performance of Tantrik techniques and rituals facilitates access to this divine energy, enabling their practitioners to empower themselves as well as . . . others associated with them in the guru-disciple relationship. Thus the knowledge and proper application of

¹⁴ However, Flood is quick to add that “the theistic Tantras and traditions, those of Viṣṇu, Śiva and the Goddess, are interrelated and share common structures of practice and belief that can be distinguished from those of the Buddhists and Jains by their proximity to the Vedas, orthodox Brahmanical revelation, and their interpreters” (*Tantric Body* 8). Generally, the theistic Tantras are put under the banner of Hindu Tantra. Flood, however, warns that the term Hindu might be an “anachronistic” application of the Persians referring to the people of India (Hindoostan), and which came to be used in common parlance by the nineteenth century as a word to distinguish the “Hindus” from the “Muslims (Yavanas)” (*Tantric Body* 7-8). However, in contemporary times, what really survives of Tantra are the Hindu Tantras (the three theistic ones) and the Buddhist Tantra.

Tantrik techniques and rituals is believed to harness the Creator's cosmic energies to the promotion of the mundane as well as spiritual goals of their practitioners. (23-24)

It is really unfortunate that the common populace is unaware of the range of Tantra philosophy(ies), and usually disregard it as a singular, monolithic esoteric cult based on magical techniques and impractical rituals, with no functional and utilitarian value whatsoever. S. B. Dasgupta and D. N. Bose, among other scholars, however, make a case for the contrary. Shedding light on the pragmatism of Tantra and the higher philosophy embedded therein, Bose writes:

[T]he Tantras have attempted to make a practical exposition of the truths and philosophical assertions expounded in the Vedas and the Upanishads. The Tantras have succeeded in giving practical demonstration of the most sublime teaching of man. . . . They have developed a system of thought and practices by which one can reach the conclusion that the divine glories in the macrocosm are no less immanent in the microcosm and that man by purification of heart and disciplined practices can attain a divine greatness which ultimately consumes his self and establishes his eternal unity with the Absolute when he can exclaim in wonder "I am He". They have opened the way to the acquirement of divine powers. The highest contribution of the Tantras towards human knowledge is however the discovery and location of the centres of energy, technically known as *chakras* in man—a discovery which is . . . revolutionary.¹⁵ (5)

Thus, one can discern from Bose's detailed exposition that Tantra was an approachable, more tangible system of ancient Indian thought and practical knowledge, and might have struck a chord with its practitioners because of its ritualistic and application based nature. Dasgupta also makes a similar assertion as Bose, while also marking a difference between Tantra and other major systems—both orthodox and heterodox—of Indian philosophy: "The different metaphysical systems deal with the nature of the reality and the philosophic methods for its realisation; whereas the Tantras lay stress on the esoteric methods for realising that reality" (*Tāntric Buddhism* 1). Woodroffe sums up the arguments of Dasgupta and Bose quite economically, when he claims that Tantra philosophy is a rich system of "the knowledge" that "saves" (*Śakti and Śākta* 50). Tantra

¹⁵ A sustained delineation of the *chakras* and their awakening through the power of the *kundalini yoga* will follow in the third chapter.

Yoga, sums up Jung, “produces the light of a higher suprapersonal consciousness” (qtd. in Shamdasani, Introduction xxiii).

Moreover, the goal that both the Hindu and the Buddhist practitioners of Tantra intend to achieve through their philosophies and methodologies is also the same: liberation. Fic’s explanation might come handy to understand this point of view, who writes, “As a simplified and easily understood parable, the Tantra is seen as a system of yogic practices used by its devotees ‘to swim across the stormy sea’ of human existence. It is perceived as raft, enabling one to cross the ocean of material existence and merge into cosmic consciousness” (Fic 23). Gray, however, underlines the difference between how the Hindus and the Buddhists define liberation:

[A vast] range of ritual and contemplative techniques [are] employed by tantric practitioners in order to achieve magical powers (*siddhi*) as well as liberation. Liberation in the Hindu theistic traditions is generally defined as the attainment of union with or proximity to the supreme deity, while it is defined as the achievement of the awakening of a buddha by Buddhists.¹⁶ *For both traditions liberation is characterized by both knowledge and freedom.* (emphasis added)

Thus, Tantra, as much as any other school of Indian thought, is propelled towards the realization of the Ultimate Reality, albeit the methodology through which it believes the realization can be brought about, is quite different from other schools, and perhaps comes closest only to the Yoga school of philosophy.¹⁷

However, in recent times, Tantra has acquired pejorative connotations. It is looked upon as ‘bizarre,’ often equated with ‘black magic’ or reduced merely to ‘esoteric sexual rituals.’¹⁸ Illuminating prevailing perception about Tantrism, Shamdasani quotes Jacob

¹⁶ The supreme deity is variously referred to as the Brahman, the self, the soul, and so on, in ancient Hindu philosophy.

¹⁷ However, one must bear in mind that Yoga and Tantra prescribe vastly disparate methods and techniques towards the realization of their goals. While Yoga relies more on meditation and physical, mental and spiritual postures and exercises, Tantra is highly ritualistic, contemplative and esoteric in its approach. One must, however, also take note of the fact that Tantra is no ‘school’ of thought like Yoga, the latter being a complete school with its treatises and various sub-branches and is one among the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy.

¹⁸ Bose succinctly clears the air around such stigmatic assumptions about Tantra: “The most notorious instance of the . . . misinterpretations of these cryptic expressions is the deliberate misconstruction of the

Needleman, “the moment one hears the word ‘tantrism,’ various wild and lurid associations spring forth in the Western mind which add up to a pastiche of psychospiritual science fiction and sexual acrobatics . . .” (Introduction xxiii). The reasons for these misplaced perceptions about Tantra may be possibly be traced down to the rigorous ritualistic practices that Tantrism recommends in terms of the mind and body, a broad, sometimes bewildering range that cannot be grasped by a lay man or an uninitiated.¹⁹ Basing his argument on his reading of Prof. Nalini Kanta Brahma’s *Philosophy of Hindu Sadhana*, Bose writes: “The Tantric form of *sadhana* [meditation] is of a highly mystical type . . . and much of it is expressed in dark symbols, ‘the key to which rests only with the initiated’” (86).

Tantra philosophy first reached Europe possibly in the late eighteenth century. The first few references of Tantra one can find in the Western world are in the articles titled “A Catalogue of Sanscrita Manuscripts Presented to the Royal Society” by Sir William Jones, Lady Jones, and Charles Wilkins, Esq. F. R. S. published in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* in 1798, which references the *Tantra Sara*, and the article “On the Philosophy of the Hindus. Part IV” written by Henry Thomas Colebrooke, published in the *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* in the year 1826, which mentions the sacred, but heterodox *tantra* or *agama* (589; 575).²⁰ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Tantra became popular in

Pancha Makars of the Tantras: *madya*, *matsya*, *mansa*, *maithuna*, and *mudra*. Now, *madya* is not wine; *matsya* is not fish; neither *mansa* is meat; nor *maithuna* is sexual intercourse, as they are literally interpreted to be” (86). Also, one must also bring oneself to distinguish between the different traditions within the larger discourse of the Hindu Tantric tradition. Thus, “the ritual use of ‘substances’ prohibited within Brahmanism [the five substances pointed out above]” is exclusive to the *Śrī Vidyā* category, which falls within the *Śākta* tradition (goddess worship), and is not to be found in the Tantric traditions which adhere to *Vaiṣṇavism* and *Śaivism* (Flood, *Hinduism* 189).

¹⁹ D. N. Bose dismisses the “prejudices” against Tantra, thereby establishing the inextricability of the recommended practices and rituals to Tantrism: “[T]here are some prejudices . . . against the Tantric creed on account of some of its rites and rituals, which would on superficial survey appear to be either highly licentious, or extremely cruel, or exceedingly loathsome. But if one . . . [goes] deeper into things, he will find that they are neither . . . but they are some mystic rites and rituals . . . calculated to help the devotee to advance along the path of moral perfection, which is absolutely essential for one’s final emancipation. Again, some of these practices are . . . intended for the attainment of complete mastery over one’s senses and passions, which are indispensable both for spiritual emancipation and for moral perfection, both of which go together” (6).

²⁰ Jones, Sir William, Lady Jones, and Charles Wilkins, Esq. F. R. S. “A Catalogue of Sanscrita Manuscripts Presented to the Royal Society.” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 88 (1798): 592-93. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Nov. 2017.

the West because of the translations of classical Indian texts and the accounts of British officials, and sometimes through the testimonies of Indians who travelled to Europe. The scholar Gordan Djurdjevic rightly notes:

The tendency toward syncretism is one of the defining characteristics of Western esotericism. By the end of the nineteenth century, this tendency was strongly manifest as openness toward Eastern, most notably Indian, religious traditions. These were otherwise becoming increasingly familiar through numerous translations of original texts and through popular accounts written by colonial officials and travelers. (36)

Numerous projects in translations of ancient Indian texts from Sanskrit and other prominent Indian languages to English in British India were commissioned by the colonial regime or taken up independently by some colonial scholars. This was, in part, a result of the policy of the British government in India to understand their colonial subjects, their religions and laws, and their literature and philosophy better, so as to ensure that governance of the colony becomes easier. Alternatively, the new found interest in the knowledge texts of the Orient, especially among Western researchers, scientists, scholars and writers, also simultaneously aided the project of discovery of the exotic and the esoteric in India.

Among the first complete texts of Tantra philosophy in translation were those of John Woodroffe, which became quite popular in England and Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century.²¹ They were initially considered offensive and landed into

Colebrooke, Henry Thomas. "On the Philosophy of the Hindus. Part IV." *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1.2 (1826): 549-79. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Nov. 2017.

²¹ Kathleen Taylor writes, "[A] hitherto unknown orientalist called Arthur Avalon is quoting another Western scholar, the Sanskritist L. D. Barnett. The year is 1913, when the first translations and editions of tantric texts under the name of Arthur Avalon were published. . . . Arthur Avalon attacked Western orientalist 'knowledge' which shaped the self-perception of the English-educated in India, and claimed this was particularly so in relation to the tantric tradition within Hinduism. He believed that the influence of foreign orientalist was almost solely responsible for the extremely negative reputation of Tantra among members of English-educated Indian middle class" (*John Woodroffe* 1).

It must be noted here that Sir John Woodroffe was initiated into Tantra, and undertook a serious study and translation of Tantric texts under the pseudonym, Arthur Avalon. He was assisted in his study of classical Indian texts, mostly written in Sanskrit, by trained *pundits* of Sanskrit and the Indian knowledge systems. This may explain his opinion about Western Orientalists, who were not formally schooled in the systems of Indian thought, and mostly relied on secondary sources and blatant generalizations of the vast reservoir of Indian philosophy. In fact, Woodroffe can be given a lion's share of the credit for the spread and popularity of Tantra in the Western world.

controversies primarily because they projected erotic practices as a subset of tantric rituals.²² According to Kathleen Taylor:

[I]n Tantra there seemed to be much to offend. A large array of divinities, among whom goddesses were more important than their male consorts, were worshipped by complicated rituals strongly focused upon figurative or geometric images and *mantras*. Then the ‘infamous’ *pañcatattva* rite included sex and alcohol as well as meat and fish among its ‘five substances’ for worship. With all these elements, plus a reputation for black magic, Tantra represented everything that the notions of ‘paganism’, ‘idolatry’ or ‘witchcraft’ summoned up for Europeans of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (*John Woodroffe* 4)

Thus, in the Western esoteric circle, Tantra was largely misinterpreted as a source of liberation through illicit and uninhibited sexual union. Tantra appealed to the European minds because of the primacy it gave to sexuality, a concept which the West transformed into “sexual magic,” and that is how they continued to perceive Indian Tantric sexuality for a very long time before John Woodroffe could seriously attempt to intervene to change the prevalent notion of the Tantra in the West through his dedication towards and initiation into Tantra.²³ On the one hand, the western populace found the tantric rituals abominable because of their erotic/sexual esoteric practices, while on the other, some esoteric societies in Europe adopted tantric rituals because they provided a unique combination of magic, mysticism and sex. For instance, Yeats’s contemporary and the Golden Dawn associate, Aleister Crowley, with whom he later developed a feud, also established his own society, The Order of Oriental Templars, based on his tantric and yogic knowledge, giving predominance to the liberating potential of sexual rituals.²⁴

²² Taylor records the reactions of some Europeans to Woodroffe’s translations of books on Tantra: “[O]ne or two remarked that Arthur Avalon took a surprisingly unhistorical attitude to his texts compared to what was expected of a Western scholar” (“Arthur Avalon” 149).

²³ Urban describes “sexual magic” as “not simply the use of sexual union as a metaphor for spiritual experience but, rather, the explicit use of sexual intercourse and genital orgasm as a source of creative magical power that can be harnessed and manipulated by the practitioner. . . . western occult traditions were being increasingly mingled with esoteric practices drawn from recently discovered eastern traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism—and perhaps above all, from the esoteric sexual rituals of Indian Tantra” (“Magica Sexualis” 696-97).

²⁴ Urban writes, “[W]ith the rise of Freudian psychoanalysis in the early twentieth century, the ‘liberation’ of sex from its alleged repression would be seen as the key to personal and social health. . . . With their emphasis on sexual magic as the most powerful ritual secret, authors like Randolph, Crowley, and Bernard

In the early twentieth century, the Indologist Wilhelm Hauer and the psychoanalyst C. G. Jung were also delivering a series of lectures on Yoga and Kundalini across Europe and the United States of America (Shamdasani, Preface xi). Mulk Raj Anand sheds light on the fact that the Bloomsbury Group also took interest in “a forbidden subject” called Tantric philosophy, especially in the exploration of the feminine and masculine representation of *Śākti* and *Śiva* as *ardhanarishvara* (the androgynous form), to which they were acquainted through John Woodroffe’s work, especially *Śākti and Śākta* (Bramble 100).²⁵ Additionally, Heinrich Zimmer, Julius Evola and Mircea Eliade, according to Urban, were “the three most influential modern scholars of religion . . . [and] also among the most widely read authors on the subject of Tantra” in the twentieth century (*Tantra* 166). Urban notes that all the three scholars viewed Tantra as “the culmination of all Indian thought: the most radical form of spirituality and the archaic heart of aboriginal India” (*Tantra* 166).

However, despite the interest that the spiritually desolate Western world, especially the intelligentsia and the artists showed towards Tantra philosophy in the times of the great wars, there remained a cultural gap between the Western understanding of Tantra and the Eastern philosophy wide enough to be filled. Most scholars hold the opinion that Tantra philosophy has not been studied or understood in depth by Western scholars.²⁶ They are perhaps right, because even a commonsensical approach to this debate would lead one to believe that there is a great gulf between the Eastern and the Western cultures, which is seldom easy to overcome. The challenge becomes even more daunting when one person from a certain cultural vantage point approaches dense philosophies and ritualistic practices of the other culture. Moreover, in order that one understand ancient Indian philosophy, one needs to go back into antiquity and carry out a rigorous study of the sources which are involved in the origins of a school of philosophy, as there exists a chain of ‘dependent origination’ between the various schools. The task is as arduous for

epitomize this modern fascination with sex. And with their bold call for a liberation of sex from its Victorian shackles, they would take the ‘repressive hypothesis’ to its furthest extreme. For them, the liberation of sex is not only a means to psychological health in Freud’s sense but the ultimate key to magical power” (“Magica Sexualis” 698-99).

²⁵ A detailed discussion of the concepts of *ardhanarishvara*, *Śiva* and *Śākti* and their relation to the ideas of androgyny and the act of creation inherent in the cosmic body in Indian philosophy, especially Tantra, will follow in the next chapter.

²⁶ See, for instance, Gilmore (1919), Urban (2003) and Soud (2016).

someone from the East as it is for someone from the West. Moreover, when one attempts to fathom a philosophy as esoteric and ritualistic as Tantra, the problems become manifold because it is extremely difficult to identify and gain entry into such esoteric circles. Gilmore makes a nuanced observation regarding the study of Tantric philosophy by foreign scholars:

The Tantras have as yet been little studied by foreign scholars, even by those versed in Sanskrit. Some . . . have spoken of this literature after . . . *the most cursory examination of a few texts*, in many cases with *almost complete misunderstanding* of their purpose and meaning. . . . A further reason for this neglect is that in the Tantras God as Mother is the object of worship, and this was naturally seized upon as indicative of an immoral trend. . . . Additional suspicion was caused by the fact that *portions are cryptic, mnemonic, and symbolic*, and of course this was seized upon as proving that nastiness was thereby covered up. In short, most of those who came upon the Tantras at all arrived with *antagonistic presuppositions so strong that they were incapable of rendering a fair and candid judgment*, even if they had been able to read them. (441, my italics)

More recently, David Soud has taken up an analysis of the reception of Tantra and Yoga philosophy in the Western world, in his study of Yeats along with some authors. He does a commendable work in tracing the origin of Tantra philosophy in the West, as also uncovering the history of the assimilation and reception of Tantra philosophy in Western academia. Soud writes:

Because this nuanced understanding of the history, contexts, and practices of Tantra has only recently been integrated into Western scholarship, it has not yet been reflected in critical discussions of Yeats's engagement with Tantric thought. Margaret Mills Harper has described Tantra as "a marginal and radical offshoot of Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism . . . in its emphasis on sensuality and eroticism as a pathway to emancipation and rebirth," when more recent research has made clear that Tantra has been "the predominant religious paradigm, for over a millennium, of the great majority of the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent". (60)

One cannot, however, launch into a celebratory mode at this recent development in Western academia, or, on reading Soud's argument which is partially flawed. For, Harper might not be completely right in her understanding of Tantra, but she is quite close to the reasons behind the rise of Tantra, and it is quite certain that she has carefully read her primary sources to arrive at the conclusion. Soud, however, undertakes a monumental task in his work, but his claim is based merely on secondary readings. When he quotes

from David Gordon White's *Kiss of the Yogini*, that Tantra has been 'the predominant religious paradigm, for over a millennium, of the great majority of the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent,'" his interpretation of Tantra is grossly misplaced, as Tantra is neither "the predominant religious paradigm," nor of "the great majority" (60). Tantra, as has been clarified earlier, is an esoteric cult, not pertaining to the majority of the Indian population, but an order practiced in closed and secretive circles. Additionally, Tantra has never been "the predominant religious paradigm," but a reactionary cult established in opposition to the authority of the Vedas and the social stratifications and prohibitions they propagated.

Writing about contemporary researches and the projection of Tantra in the West as the "exotic Orient," Hugh B. Urban maintains: "Tantra is a far messier product of the mirroring and misrepresentation at work between both East and West. It is a dialectical category—similar to what Walter Benjamin has called a *dialectical image*—born out of the mirroring and mimesis that goes on between Western and Indian minds" (*Tantra* 3). Arguably though, one can posit this as one of the reasons why the study of Tantra, not only in the Western world, but especially in the context of Yeats, demands a thorough examination, thereby necessitating a critical study of the existing body of research on Yeats. Soud also clarifies the reasons behind the paucity of study on the Tantric influence in Yeats's work: "Because . . . [a] nuanced understanding of the history, contexts, and practices of Tantra has only recently been integrated into Western scholarship, it has not yet been reflected in critical discussions of Yeats's engagement with Tantric thought" (60). For one to be able to understand the creative dimensions of Yeats and his literary output comprehensively, Tantra philosophy and Yeats's inclination towards the same as well as the inspiration he derived from the rituals and symbols of Tantra underpin Yeats's mystical and creative interests in the East.

The following sections analyse how Yeats came into contact with Tantra philosophy, the reasons why Yeats arduously engaged with Tantra, and the different sources through which he acquired the knowledge of Tantric philosophy and symbols; followed by a brief discussion of the reception of Yeats's engagement with Tantra philosophy by Western scholars and critics; and lastly, an inquiry into the rationale behind Yeats's employment of his knowledge of Tantra philosophy to his literary and creative works, or rather, a compendious bid to answer the question as to why would a creative writer be interested in a mystical and esoteric philosophy.

Yeats's Encounter with Tantra

Yeats's introduction to oriental occult philosophy was through A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1884), which, in the words of A. Norman Jeffares, "seems to have triggered off a search which was to occupy him all his life," following which he embarked on a life long journey of exploration of the different aspects of "psychical research and mystical philosophy" (*New Biography* 19).²⁷ In the year 1887, Yeats joined the Theosophical Society which was founded by H. P. Blavatsky, and then the esoteric circle of the society in 1888. In Richard Ellmann's view, Yeats joined the esoteric section of the Theosophical Society because he thought "that the Esoteric Section would give him the opportunity of providing to his own satisfaction, and to the satisfaction even of sceptics like his father, that occult phenomena were possible" (66).

Yeats, from here on, immersed himself further into Tantra philosophy and other occult philosophies of the West as well as the East. In her teachings in the Theosophical Society, Blavatsky created a new spiritual discourse by borrowing and synthesizing ideas from Tantra philosophy and other Indian philosophies with Western occult philosophies.²⁸ In Blavatsky's books *The Key to Theosophy* and *The Secret Doctrine*, one can find numerous symbols and images borrowed from Tantra and other Eastern philosophical systems fused with European philosophies.²⁹ Additionally, in Yeats's close literary circle too, there were many writers, scholars and practitioners of esoteric rituals who were

²⁷ Yeats was given the book by his aunt Isabella Pollexfen in the year 1885 (Jeffares, *New Biography* 19). Joan Hardwick also writes: "[W. B. Yeats's] interest in Buddhism and the occult was increasing, much to his father's annoyance. There is a nice irony in the fact that it was Isabella [Pollexfen], whom John [Butler Yeats] had taken great delight in encouraging to pursue her interest in art against her family's will, who encouraged Willie in his minor rebellion against his father by sending him a copy of *Esoteric Buddhism*. . . . Lily even began to take an interest in the Buddhist doctrines he was excited about because the ideas seemed to her to have some affinity with the tales and beliefs of the people of Sligo which were so important to her" (45).

²⁸ Bachchan gives a detailed account of this complex fusion of Blavatsky which she referred to as Theosophy, and its effect on Yeats: "[H]aving had no systematic religious education before, he found in this book which he read at a very formative period of his life . . . the first basic principles of a metaphysic, which his mind readily accepted and which in some form or the other he continued to cherish till his old age. After all, those principles were not those of A. P. Sinnett, nor of Madame Blavatsky herself, nor of the Indian *Mahatmas*, but of the Western occultists, the Cabbalists, Rosicrucians, Alchemists and Hermetists; and this is coming more and more be recognised" (220).

²⁹ Based on his reading of Bachchan, however, George Mills Harper, quite categorically suggests in his *Yeats and the Occult* (1975), that "Madame Blavatsky's teachings are not truly Eastern; they consist mainly of Western concerns disguised under Eastern nomenclature" (290).

working with the mysterious cults of Tantra and other oriental esoteric systems. Moreover, during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the dawn of the twentieth century, journals such as *The Theosophist*, *Theosophy*, *The Quest*, to name a few, regularly published articles on Tantra and Eastern occult practices. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford has pointed out that “Victorian scholars viewed Tantra as a revolting mixture of sex and black magic posing as religion: a combination guaranteed to appeal to Yeats” (252). Yeats, an avid reader and seeker of unknown or lesser known knowledge systems, actively engaged with articles, books, rituals, and practitioners who dealt with Tantra or any other related arcane philosophies.

Another significant organization that dealt with the magical and mystical was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn established by William Wynn Westcott and S. L. MacGregor Mathers. Yeats joined the society “a few months before his expulsion from the Theosophists,” on March 7, 1890 (Ellmann 89).³⁰ Yeats had a considerably long association with the Golden Dawn, a society that profoundly influenced Yeats’s creative imagination, by way of its frequent use of tantric rituals, meditation techniques and eastern philosophy in its teachings. Giorgio Melchiori explains:

Yeats remained a member of his esoteric society for nearly thirty years, and together with Mathers he devised some of the rituals used by the adepts. . . . Golden Dawn . . . made a tremendous impact on Yeats’s imagination, providing him with much occult knowledge and setting him to the study of esoteric texts of different ages and civilizations—books of alchemy, Rosicrucian symbolism and oriental cults (24-25).

The Golden Dawn relied heavily on the Kabbalah tradition, and the use of esoteric Kabbalistic and tantric symbols in unique and innovative ways made it quite distinct from the Theosophical Society.³¹ Ellmann also notes the crucial difference between the two societies: “Instead of giving Yeats theories as Theosophy had done, the Golden Dawn

³⁰ In the Theosophical Society, Yeats was not allowed to pursue magical practices, and was asked by the secretary of Madame Blavatsky to resign from the society when he actively advocated for them (Ellmann 65-69). Also, for an in-depth understanding of Yeats’s relationship with Theosophy, one can read Ken Monteith’s *Yeats and Theosophy*, which deals with the various tenets of theosophical teachings that assisted Yeats in formulating his own philosophy and gave a new vigour to his literary and mystical pursuits.

³¹ One must briefly note the similarities between the Kabbalah and Tantra philosophies at this juncture: both the mystical and esoteric traditions rely heavily on ritual practices, and have similar representative symbols acquiring meanings with close resemblance. Sometimes, not often, however, the very same symbols may acquire divergent meanings in the two traditions.

gave him the opportunity and method for constant experimentation and demonstration. Yeats spoke of it later as the chief influence upon his thought up to perhaps his fortieth year” (96). Elsewhere, Ellmann explicates:

The Golden Dawn . . . had less doctrine than the Theosophists, and *was even more active in research into symbols*. Certain symbols evoked certain kinds of dreams or ‘visions.’ Yeats made many experiments with his friends to see if similar dreams would result in many people from the same symbolic stimulus, for example, the Tantric symbol of fire, and was gratified by his success” (*Identity of Yeats* 27, my italics).

This information by Ellmann is crucial, which also serves to explain why Yeats, the creative writer, took his association with such esoteric societies, especially the Golden Dawn, so seriously. The answer is quite plain and simple when it concerns Yeats: the symbols invoked during his practical tests and trials he would be able to put to use in his poetry and plays. A prolonged discussion of the same will follow in the last section of this chapter as well as in the full-length chapter on Yeats’s symbols.

Chronicling Yeats’s first encounter with the mystical power of tantric rituals, and the resulting reverie, Ellmann writes:

Yeats joined the order in 1890 because MacGregor Mather’s magical powers deeply impressed him. *The poet, in spite of his great interest in visions, had little clairvoyant ability, but early in his acquaintance with Mathers, the magician put the Tantric symbol of fire against his forehead, and Yeats slowly perceived a huge Titan rising from desert sands*. He was greatly excited because this form of vision seemed to him to confirm his belief, still unsteady, in the supernatural, and he soon found that he could obtain even more remarkable results by trying Mather’s methods with others, especially with sensitive women. (96, emphasis added)

The Golden Dawn afforded Yeats, not only the opportunity to practice magical rituals of the Kabbalah, but also magical and alchemical Tantric rituals—vantage points from which he could explore nature’s mystery hidden behind symbols, carve out his own myths, and most importantly, a personal system. Despite being sceptical of, and into the habit of scrutinizing every small detail of these clandestine practices, Yeats was convinced that he could evoke images and symbols through meditation and rituals—raw material which he could then put to use in his poetry. Furthermore, his association with Indian theosophists, scholars and writers, and mystics like Mohini Chatterjee, Ananda

Coomaraswamy, and Purohit Swami at various stages of his pursuit of the mystical and the mysterious, further enriched his knowledge about the East and helped him in understanding the nuances of tantric rituals and practices.³² For instance, the very first Indian who had a towering impact on Yeats's life and works was Mohini Chatterjee. Bachchan succinctly explains: "Mohini Chatterji's influence on Yeats was deep and abiding, not because of his personality, nor because of the way he taught his philosophy, nor even because of the Indian doctrine which he was expounding : but because to some of the fundamental problems of life, death and after-life which were constantly troubling Yeats, he had offered certain solutions which the poet could neither accept nor reject" (53). One must take into cognizance the fact that most of the Indian mystics, saints and writers Yeats met at various junctures of his life offered him some relief from the dilemmas he was then mired in, in the form of some snippet of Indian philosophy, which in turn also aided Yeats's creative pursuits.

Yeats was also a zealous inquisitor after facts and new knowledge, as well as an avid reader. Several books on Tantra shelved in Yeats's personal library collection worth a mention here are Shiva Chandra Vidyārṇava Bhattāchāryya's *Principles of Tantra* (edited by Arthur Avalon and in two volumes), *Tantra of the Great Liberation (Mahanirvana tantra)*, and *Hymns to the Goddess*, all of them translated and commented upon by Avalon/Woodroffe. Naresh Guha, in his book *W B Yeats: An Indian Approach*, claims that Yeats was in possession of at least twenty-one books on Tantra.³³ Kathleen Raine, in

³² Although Yeats had met other Indians throughout his life, it is probably only through his many meetings and exchange of letters with Chatterjee, Coomaraswamy and Swami that Yeats gained a better knowledge of Tantra philosophy.

³³ Interestingly, scholars like Soud have analyzed Yeats's work by relying excessively, almost exclusively, on the above mentioned books. But on a closer examination, there arises a possibility that Yeats might have read only a few pages of these works, and sometimes merely cast a cursory glance at them. One can posit this because of the archival research that one carried out at the NLI between July-November 2016, where one noticed that the edges of the pages of Avalon's books were quite neat and tight, pointing to the possibility that some of them had not even been opened, or not thoroughly read by Yeats. But the few pages that Yeats did read bear important marginalia and notes made by Yeats himself, which provide significant clues to Yeats's interest in Tantra. However, if one is to entrust faith in Edward O'Shea's catalogue of Yeats's library, there are indications that "at the very least the poet read Woodroffe's lengthy introduction to the first (1913) edition of *The Great Liberation*, his groundbreaking translation of the *Mahānirvāna Tantra*, as well as Woodroffe's preface and Shriyukta Baradā Kānta Majumdār's extensive introduction to *Principles of Tantra* (1914)" (Soud 61).

Also, all references to Guha in the study, are from his book, *W B Yeats: An Indian Approach*, unless indicated otherwise.

the preface to *Yeats the Initiate*, makes a compelling point regarding the reading interests of creative writers, and the problem of non-inclusion of the same in ‘serious’ and critical academic considerations:

The books that poets study may be far other than those scholars think worthy of notice. Much that for Yeats was ‘knowledge’ finds no acceptance as such within academic definitions and some in its nature can never do so—I think of the excluded fields of magic and cabbala, of psychical research, where a written text is only an indication towards the attainment of certain states of mind (xv).

However, one can lately find relief in the opening up of the academic arena to such studies under the rubric of ‘new religions.’³⁴ Yeats, one can maintain with a fair degree of certainty, was very much a product of his readings and associations, and so was his creative output.

Before proceeding further, one must undertake a brief survey of the critical reception of the tantric influence on Yeats in the Western academy. This inquiry, one believes, is vital to an understanding of the gap in Western scholarship regarding the Eastern influences and sources—particularly Indian and tantric—on Yeats, and can pave the way towards finer researches on Yeats in the future.

The Tantric Influence on Yeats and Western Criticism

It is indeed disheartening to discover that many of the earlier critical works on Yeats, especially those on the Eastern inspiration and sources of Yeats, fail to address complex questions regarding the manner in which the tantric teachings offered at the Golden Dawn shaped Yeats’s creative yield, the socio-political context in which Yeats used tantric philosophy, his choice of bringing to fore the diverse aspects of tantric philosophy which had generally been confined to the ‘exotic’ and/or the ‘erotic,’ his conceptualization and realization of tantric ideas/symbols in his creative work such concepts which were fundamentally alien to the Western mind, among others. For instance, it surprises one to

³⁴ Because of this relatively new shift in the study of religions, occultism and mysticism in academic circles, this research probably comes at an opportune time.

find that no one has attempted to offer a tantric reading of Yeats's last major play in verse, *The Herne's Egg* in the light of the concept of *kundalini*.³⁵

There have, no doubt, been umpteen attempts to read the Eastern and/or Indian influence on Yeats, but one can, at best, consider them as insufficient readings of the Eastern influences on Yeats. Snežana Dabić in her book *W. B. Yeats and Indian Thought* (2015) has employed tantric philosophy from an Upanishadic perspective to critically analyse Yeats's select poetry and the play *The Herne's Egg*, but admits to the limitations of her research: "It would be difficult to argue that Yeats had a unique philosophical framework for *The Herne's Egg* or that it derived from the *Upanishads* alone. It would be even more difficult to prove the exact source of some of the so-called Indian symbols and images he used. . . ." (100).

As the discussion in the chapter on Yeats and *kundalini yoga* will illustrate, tantric philosophy when applied from the perspective of *kundalini* furnishes a fuller picture of Yeats's symbolism and philosophy in the play, which is considered to be one of the most baffling plays of Yeats.³⁶ Again, W. David Soud in his *Divine Cartography* (2016) has used theoretical as well as philosophical perspectives to analyze Yeats's work through tantric and yogic philosophy. But as has already been pointed out above, most of his research is based on 'popular' secondary sources on 'Yeats and the East' emerging from the Western world, which is why his otherwise thoroughly researched book misses the mark.³⁷ Both these works clumsily superimpose 'popular' western discourses related to Tantra on Yeats's work, failing to realize that Tantra had far-reaching connotations for Yeats, and was not merely an esoteric religion or mysterious cult for him.

³⁵ Although some critics have attempted to read the play in the light of Tantric philosophy, their readings, in their own opinions, are not complete or satisfactory, and most of them conclude that the play is a lot more enigmatic than they initially thought it to be. However, when the play is read in the light of *kundalini*, Yeats's philosophical scheme behind the play becomes quite lucid and illuminating. A detailed discussion of the latter will be offered in the chapter on *kundalini yoga*.

³⁶ A number of critics who have attempted to study Yeats's *The Herne's Egg* find the play extremely enigmatic and puzzling. See, for instance, F. A. C. Wilson (1958), Peter Ure (1963), R. F. Foster (2003), and Snežana Dabić (2015).

³⁷ Soud even resorts to use of pejoratives and blatant, unthinking generalizations in his discussions of India. For instance, while commenting on the existence of Tantra in late nineteenth and early twentieth century India, he refers to Swami Vivekananda as the "global marketer of spirituality" (60).

One must be wary of the such assertions of critics who claim that Yeats was drawn to a version of Tantra philosophy which was devoid of rituals and was purely theoretical or/and philosophical: “It seems that Tantra as Yeats encountered it was mostly, but not completely, stripped of ritual superstructure and geared towards the achievement of liberating gnosis” (Soud 60). It is clear that Soud has not paid attention to Yeats’s intense involvement in the Golden Dawn and the manner in which he synthesizes them in his creative pursuit. While there is enough evidence which can be brought to bear upon the fact that Tantra significantly influenced Yeats’s creative imagination, it has always been considered as a tangential source of inspiration for him by Western scholars and researchers.³⁸

In the Western academy, the Eastern roots of Yeats’s magical and mystical sources of inspiration have not been given the critical attention they deserve. As has been discussed at the beginning of this chapter, among the myriad reasons behind this shortcoming may be the prevailing scientism in humanities and the lack of familiarity of Westerners with Eastern/Indian sources. While George Mills Harper in *The Making of Yeats’s A Vision* lists out these sources, he does not offer an extensive study of these sources.³⁹ Other renowned critics and biographers of Yeats, namely T. R. Henn, Richard Ellmann, George Mills Harper, A. Norman Jeffares, Terence Brown and R. F. Foster have dealt with these sources, but in most cases, merely as passing references.⁴⁰ Although they acknowledge the impact that Indian philosophy had on Yeats’s creative oeuvre, they have not gone into the depths of the same. Hence, an insight into how Yeats put his tantric interests to literary use becomes imperative at this juncture.

³⁸ The section below is a deliberation along this line of thought.

³⁹ In any case, George Mills Harper’s contribution to the study of Yeats, especially *A Vision*, is unprecedented and without doubt, a great resource for scholars working on Yeats. The present research, particularly the section on *A Vision*, is also greatly indebted to Harper’s towering work. His research on the manuscripts of *A Vision* and “Vision Papers,” and further studies into Yeats’s occult philosophy, one can imagine, might have been monumental indeed, leaving very little room for going into the details of each of Yeats’s sources. In retrospect, one can only look back at his work in awe and with gratitude.

⁴⁰ One would like to put on record the brilliant study done by Ellmann on the Indian (as well as Tantric) sources of Yeats when there might have been limited scholarship on Yeats’s Eastern connects; Brown’s impressive and comforting account of Yeats’s Eastern philosophical inspiration scattered over merely a few pages; and Foster’s very recent and cogent reading of Yeats’s Tantric (and other Indian philosophical) sources in “Supernatural Songs” and *A Vision* in his prodigious two-volume biography of Yeats.

Yeats, Tantra and Creativity

Yeats attempted to find in Tantra a deep, profound philosophy, which would seamlessly tie up with his creative output. His vast reading of books related to oriental occult philosophy helped him realize that Tantra was not a religion, but an admixture of yoga, philosophy and esoteric rituals.⁴¹ One must remember, however, that Yeats was never formally trained or schooled in Tantra philosophy by any individual or organization. It is only because Yeats was an ardent student of metaphysics and an assiduous learner of new knowledge systems that he did serious work and undertook formidable research in a philosophy that was culturally alien to him.

Yeats, as has already been examined above, was introduced to Tantra by A. P. Sinnet's *Esoteric Buddhism*. He later joined the Theosophical Society, but not as a complete novice—he had his background reading to accompany him. It was here that Yeats was introduced to such concepts as *tattva* (elemental symbols), the merits of dreams and visions, the primary ideas in the Indian philosophy of mind, the aura of the astral body, among others. These ideas fascinated the young Yeats, and as a creative artist, he might have realized the potential of the concepts he had discovered. But there were certain limitations at the society because of which he could not put his new-found knowledge to artistic use: he could not pragmatically practice the magical and esoteric rituals he was learning there, as a result of which he could not witness their metamorphoses into symbols and imageries that he could employ to artistic ends.⁴²

This led Yeats to the Golden Dawn, an esoteric circle where he could practice the knowledge and techniques he had acquired. The Golden Dawn encouraged its initiates to meditate on the ideas and realize the methods they were made familiar with. Quite systematically, Ellmann charts out the years and the phases of influence of the two societies on Yeats's highly thought-over patterns of symbolism, as well as the impressions of other literary predecessors Yeats had before him, all of them combining to provide him with a manual of creative writing:

⁴¹ Some of the books which Yeats read on Eastern philosophy in general and the Indian Tantra philosophy in particular, have already been mentioned above. One must also bear in mind that as he kept reading more on the aforementioned subjects, and meeting people who cleared his doubts and added to his conviction in Eastern occult philosophy, his belief in Tantra and Eastern philosophy grew stronger.

⁴² Yeats's extensive system and methodology of symbolism will be delineated upon in fair detail in the two chapters on symbols.

In articulating the pattern of his own symbolism, Yeats relied heavily upon what he learned in the Theosophical Society from 1887-1890, in the Golden Dawn from 1890-1901, and in the process of editing a three-volume edition of Blake's poetry from 1889-1892. The theosophists, who drew their theories from every quarter, were much concerned with correspondences between the natural and spiritual worlds, which they conceived of as parallel and interlocked. . . .

To know the genuine correspondences is to be master of the switches that control life and poetry. . . .

But the example of Blake was perhaps most important in keeping the poetic usefulness of this collection of correspondences always before his mind. . . .

The three years' study of Blake's symbolism helped Yeats to develop his own. As he wrote to Katharine Tynan, 'It has done my own mind a great deal of good in liberating me from formulas and theories of several kinds. You will find it a difficult book, this Blake interpretation, but one that will open up for you as it has for me new kinds of poetic felling and thought.' (*Identity of Yeats* 26-28, emphasis added)

The numerous symbols and images that presented themselves to Yeats from the tantric teachings of the Theosophical Society and the Golden Dawn, and the modus operandi in creating an elaborate personal design of symbolism which Yeats familiarized himself with after Blake's fashion, paved the way for Yeats's incorporation of the technique as well and its manifestations in his poetry and plays. For example, several symbols in Yeats's later poetry and especially in *A Vision*, viz. the movement of the gyre, the triangle, the *Thirteenth Cone* and the feminine and masculine principles of the universe, to name a few, can be traced back to tantric sources. The modes of invocation of these mystical symbols that Yeats further improvised, and the resultant motifs, tokens and hieroglyphs which are scattered throughout his oeuvre, deserve an exhaustive study.⁴³ Suffice it to mention here, that these images and symbols, until now, have been interpreted from the perspective of European knowledge systems. However, Yeats, a fine mythmaker, used symbols from different cultures, civilizations, and philosophies, and developed his own philosophy by synthesizing them into a nonpareil blend. Harbans Rai Bachchan also sheds some light upon this tendency of Yeats:

[E]ven when we have traced the sources of the various elements of Yeats' 'system' we shall have to accept the fact that he exercised a good deal of his

⁴³ This will form the subject of inquiry in the chapter on Yeats's symbolism in the later part of the study.

own imagination in working out the details. Whatever, his sources, he always put his own interpretation on them, and therefore in spite of his indebtedness to all these in different degrees, his system remains virtually his own; and he is solely responsible for it as it stands. (257)

Yeats first refers to Tantra philosophy in an unpublished letter that he wrote to Maud Mann on October 30, 1915: “I have thought a great deal over what you have told me & am looking up in my books on Tantra evocation of the Devas. The woman friend I propose to bring is Mrs. Shakespeare, a fine musician & herself a most remarkable clairvoyant. I think some of her visions can only be explained by looking upon them as from the Deva world” (sic).⁴⁴ As one can clearly discern, this letter highlights Yeats’s explicit inclination towards tantric philosophy, and that Yeats took recourse to the same for understanding human personality in depth, as well as to connect it the myriad aspects of visions and individual imagination.⁴⁵ The letter also bears testimony to Yeats’s unshaken, growing faith in the innumerable prospects of Tantra as well as Indian philosophy.

Yeats’s earnest enthusiasm in Tantra philosophy, especially because of the literary and artistic fodder it provided him with, grew with his reading of Woodroffe’s translations of texts on Tantra. Resultantly, his interpretations of Tantra philosophy started getting concretized. Incidentally, this was also the time when he had started working on *A Vision*.⁴⁶ After the year 1917, Yeats’s esoteric philosophy started to take shape in the form of ‘automatic writing.’⁴⁷ Later, in 1931, when Yeats first met Purohit Swami, his undeterred conviction in the possibilities of Indian occult philosophy were testified to by

⁴⁴ The reference to “the evocation of the Devas” might be read as a hint of the cosmic union of Śiva and Śakti, the ultimate Deva and Devi in the Hindu panteon.

⁴⁵ An inquiry into how Yeats used his visions to evoke symbols, and then put them to literary and artistic use, will follow in the chapter on Evocative Symbols.

⁴⁶ Yeats started writing *A Vision* four days after his marriage to George Hyde Lees in 1917, the first version of which he published in 1925.

⁴⁷ Bachchan writes: “By 1920s great changes had taken place in the life and outlook of Yeats. In 1917 he had married a woman who by her gifts of automatic writing and astrological knowledge, by her interest in psychical research, and by her association with the Rudolf Steiner Theosophists and the Order of the Golden Dawn had more ‘spiritual’ affinity with him than any woman he had met so far. . . .

More important was the fact that, with the help of his newly married wife, he had succeeded in putting into a pseudomathematical ‘system’ all the metaphysics, cosmology, psychology and sociology that he had garnered from all sources since his youth” (55).

Swami, with whom he was to enter into a long literary and philosophical association.⁴⁸ Soud emphatically notes, “Though Yeats also apparently studied Tantra with Purohit, no definitive trace survives of the content of that instruction. But Tantric tradition and practice were clearly important to Purohit. He incorporates Tantric principles into *An Indian Monk*, one chapter of which is titled ‘The Kundalini’” (62). However, Bachchan clarifies that “[t]he esoteric phase of Indian life of which the Swami spoke was not new to Yeats. The latter was familiar with it through his early acquaintance with Mohini Chatterji and the Theosophical Society” (140). Writing about this association and the effect it had on Yeats, Guha concludes:

If even then he wrote those essays [the introductions and a preface that Yeats wrote for Swami’s books and translations of ancient Indian texts], it was certainly not to humour a Swami, but to clarify his own position in relation to India, a position he had reached through years of close association and study. And it is because of this continued preoccupation that in his last general introduction (1937) written for a contemplated complete edition of his works, he refers at length to India and her traditional ideas. (101)⁴⁹

Guha reminds readers, critics and scholars of Yeats alike that simplistic interpretations of Yeats’s vigorous and protracted involvement with Eastern philosophy can turn out to be erroneous in one’s understanding of Yeats, nor should Yeats’s life-long love and pursuit of Indian philosophy be subjected to humble, nondescript accounts and dismissals. Yeats’s cogitation on Indian philosophical abstractions forms a significant force behind the aesthetical and metaphysical purport.

⁴⁸ Writing about Yeats’s first meeting with Swami, Bachchan holds: “Yeats met Purohit Swami at the house of Sturge Moore . . . [his] sentiments towards India were once more aroused. The friendship that was formed that day lasted till the end of Yeats’ life. . . . For quite long periods the poet and the saint even lived together” (140). One must note here that, in his long association with Swami, Yeats wrote the introductions to Swami’s *An Indian Monk* (1932), *The Holy Mountain* (1934), *Mandukya Upanishad* (1935), and *Aphorisms of Yōga* (1938); and also translated and wrote the preface to *The Ten Principal Upanishads* (1937) with Swami.

⁴⁹ Additionally, it must be pointed out that when Yeats wrote a General Introduction to his works in the year 1937 (long after Swami left for India), he added quotations from Chandogya Upanishad and Prashna Upanishad in the same, thus calling attention to the influence of Indian scriptures on his life, especially during the later phase (*Later Essays* 204). Moreover, Swami was not the only source of Yeats’s knowledge of the Indian scriptures and knowledge systems. He was in possession of Radhakrishnan’s *Indian Philosophy* (2 Vols.), which might have added to his reservoir of knowledge about Indian philosophy.

Also, all references to Guha in this chapter, unless indicated otherwise, are from his book, *W B Yeats: An Indian Approach*.

Yeats was drawn towards Tantra because of its unique combination of mystical and the magical aspects. Writing about the difference between magic and mysticism, Underhill postulates: “Both magic and mysticism in their full development bring the whole mental machinery, conscious and unconscious, to bear on their undertaking: both claim that they give their initiates powers unknown to the ordinary men. But . . . ends to which those powers are applied differ enormously” (71). She also simplifies the fundamental difference between magic and mysticism in a maxim: “[M]agic wants to get, mysticism wants to give. . .” (Underhill 70). As a creative writer and artist, Yeats always looked for a system which could furnish a philosophy deeply ingrained in the supernatural and mystical symbols, and strove hard to make his experiences tangible for his readers (and probably for himself too) by giving his inexplicable experiences new shapes in the form of poetry and plays.

In the words of Harbans Rai Bachchan, “He [Yeats] did not simply use the occult for his poetry; he looked to it for all the explanation that he needed of the mystery of soul and God, life and death, and the world and the world beyond”(1). Furthermore, Tantra also lent him geometrical structures through which he could explain his philosophy and his pursuit of the supernatural, especially in his magnum opus, *A Vision*.⁵⁰ In addition to his poetry and plays, in *A Vision*, Yeats formulates his concepts of the different phases of the moon, the gyres, the historical cones, and his larger symbolic philosophy by borrowing and synthesizing ideas from the Tantra philosophy with other Irish and Western sources. Writing about his interest in esoteric traditions and his expectations from his pursuit of these traditions, Yeats makes his objective clear: “Some were looking for spiritual happiness or for some form of unknown power, but I had a practical object. *I wished for a system of thought that would leave my imagination free to create as it chose and yet make all that it created, or could create, part of the one history, and that the soul’s*” (*Vision Revised* liv-lv, emphasis added).

Tantra, in the hands of Yeats, was rendered into a psycho-philosophical discourse, rather than a ritualistic act aimed at achieving *paravidya* (knowledge beyond the perceptible world), which it might have been for a lot of initiates who might not have had

⁵⁰ Naresh Guha has aptly pointed out that “the first edition of *A Vision* contain[ed] his personal philosophy, though initially meant only for private circulation. . . . Many of the ideas of *A Vision* were obviously taken from Indian sources. Some were even deduced from the Upaniṣads . . . These are the ideas, expressed in powerful geometrical symbols, which form the background of his works” (102).

larger ends in view, in their pursuit of ancient Indian mystical and occult philosophy. While analyzing any influences on Yeats, one must firmly bear in mind the fact that he was a creative writer, and might have gravitated towards a philosophy that gave him a breath of fresh air and activated his imaginative faculties anew.

When analyzing the Eastern sources of Yeats's interest, Tantra philosophy occupies a distinct position. Tantra, unlike any other philosophy, transcended the domain of the fixed, the bounded and the finite, and presented to Yeats a world of infinite imageries, symbols, experiments and a sea of knowledge. The added advantages with Tantra philosophy was its stance regarding sexuality and sexual union vested with transcendental powers, and the feasibility of the accomplishment of a spiritual/divine union through the medium of one's own body. Yeats's sustained interest in Tantra philosophy—partly emanating from, but not solely because of its take on sexuality—will form the subject of elucidation in the following chapter, which will then pave the way for readings of select works of Yeats—"Supernatural Songs" and *The Herne's Egg*—in the light of Tantra and *kundalini yoga*.⁵¹

⁵¹ The textual study will be undertaken in the second and the third chapter of the present study.

CHAPTER TWO

Yeats, Sexuality and Tantra

Sexual love becomes the most important event in life, for the opposite sex is nature chosen and fated. Personality seeks personality. Every emotion begins to be related to every other as musical notes are related. It is as though we touched a musical string that set other strings vibrating.

--W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* (1937 edition)¹

When any part of human life has been left unexpressed, there is a hunger for its expression in large numbers of men, and if this expression is prevented artificially, the hunger becomes morbid, and if the educated do not become its voice, the ignorant will.

--W. B. Yeats's Journal Entry dated May 18, 1912²

Much has been written about the esoteric leanings of W. B. Yeats, but most of the scholarly studies to date trace down these sources to Western esoteric cults, orders and societies. Additionally, the number of researches conducted on the Eastern arcane and mystical sources of Yeats are not aplenty, not to mention the depths of these apparently 'impenetrable' sources of Yeats's Eastern inspiration that such investigations seek to fathom. What makes matters worse is that a sizeable number of the inquiries into Yeats's strong interest in the Eastern mystical, psychic and philosophical sources are quite reductive in their approaches, narrowing down Yeats's preoccupation with Tantra philosophy merely to its approach to sexuality that it promulgated among its practitioners. It therefore becomes imperative to intervene and approach the subject of Yeats's immersion in Tantra and its tenets with respect to sexuality with a fair degree of objectivity and positivity.

The preceding chapter has already laid a conducive ground for the disquisition that is to follow in the current chapter as well as the next. It is quite clear by now that Yeats was passionately involved in a sustained study of Tantric and yogic concepts throughout his

¹ Yeats, *Vision Revised* 65

² Yeats, *Memoirs* 265

life, especially in his later years. The range of ideas encompassed in Indian philosophy, especially in Tantra, is quite impressive. Tantra philosophy, in terms of its contemplation on physical and cosmic existence, undertakes musing on such metaphysical conundrums as the symbolic matrix of the human mind and the different layers of human consciousness, the view of the human body as the astral body and its division into *chakras* (centres of spiritual power), the movement of the self towards the Supreme Being and the technique which can propel a human being towards this aim, the mystical uses of feminine and masculine energies for a realization of the higher self. In a nutshell, Tantra philosophy explores the connections between the macrocosmic and the microcosmic planes of existence, and works its methodology around the same.

The present chapter will deliberate upon the role of sexuality in Tantra philosophy and how Yeats's learning in Tantra and its views on sexuality significantly influenced Yeats's life and literary works. The chapter will begin with an introduction to the primacy accorded to desire and sexuality in ancient Indian philosophy and literature, followed by an evaluation of the import of sexuality in Tantra philosophy in particular. The subsequent section will examine the discourse on the relevance of Tantric sexuality for Yeats, and trace the trajectory of his evolving opinions on sexuality over the course of his life, and also cast light upon Yeats's views on sexual union leading to cosmic union being largely, if not wholly, determined by his training and readings in Tantric sexuality. The section will also review a few opinions held by Western critics on the usage of sexual symbolism in Yeats's literary opus. The chapter will close with a compendious deliberation on how Yeats associated the usage of sexual symbols with the growth and maturity of a poet and/or artist. Needless to mention, examples from Yeats's works abounding in sexual symbols (embedded with Tantric meanings) will be incorporated wherever necessary, in a bid to unearth the larger philosophy of Yeats, which, as the chapter will argue, comprised of, among elements from other Western and Eastern philosophies, tenets of Tantric philosophy.

***Kama* (Desire) in Indian Philosophy**

A short discussion of the role of *kāma* (desire), sex and sexuality in the Indian tradition becomes germane to the analysis of the role of sexuality in Tantra. At the very outset, it should be noted that in ancient Indian philosophy was coined the theory of the *puruṣārthas*, that is, the end or goal/destination that should ideally be aimed at by

humans. The *puruṣārthas* or aims of humans in their mortal life are four in number: *artha* (wealth), *kāma* (desire), *dharma* (duty or morality) and *moṣka* (liberation from the cycle of birth and death).³ Explaining the theory of *puruṣārthas*, Dandekar gives details of how the system functions, and how all the values are interlinked and inter-dependent:

The Hindu thinkers have recognised that man possesses a complex personality which seeks expression mainly through four outlets — his craving for power and property, his sensuous and aesthetic urge, his social aims and his spiritual impulse. They have related these four outlets respectively to the four *puruṣārthas* or ends of man, namely, *artha*, *kāma*, *dharma* and *moṣka*. The first three ends have relevance so far as his empirical life is concerned, while the last refers to his spiritual life. According to the most common view, these four *puruṣārthas* do not operate to the exclusion of one another. (Dandekar 663-64)

Moreover, an individual is supposed to pursue all the three *puruṣārthas* “conjointly and in a balanced way, for the achievement of an integrated human personality and the fulfillment of human life in this world” (Dandekar 664). Furthermore, the *puruṣārtha*-theory is “not influenced by any consideration of class, caste, or sex” (Dandekar 664).

From the aforementioned particulars about the Indian theory of *puruṣārthas*, it becomes very clear that *kāma* or desire is not looked down upon, but is considered to be one of the primary goals that individuals should work towards in their lifetime, of course, along with the other aims. Additionally, *kāma* is generally taken to mean only sexual desire, which, one must understand, is only a misnomer.

One must concede that *kāma* in the Indian philosophical framework has always included within its gamut all possible worldly desires, which includes, and is not limited to sexual desire. Mulk Raj Anand maintains: “The union of male and female . . . became the symbol, from the earliest times, for the union of all forces, and the pleasure of the body in mating became, under accepted religious and social forms, linked with the sanctity of procreation and an end in itself. The concept of original sin and sexual secretiveness never formed any part of the intense phases of Indian culture” (*Kamakala*

³ *Dharma*, however, assumes various meanings in the Indian philosophical system. Bilimoria explains that it can variously mean “‘ordinance, usage, duty, right, justice, morality, virtue, religion, good works, function or characteristics’ to ‘norm’, ‘righteousness’, ‘truth’” (37).

5).⁴ Thus, one can readily grasp that sexuality was not just limited to the libidinous propensity in the Hindu tradition.

The dialecticians and seers of ancient India handed down myriad texts carrying perspicacious wisdom, both on asceticism and sexuality. In *Kāmasutra*, the classical Hindu text on eroticism and sexuality, Vātsyāyana expounds on sex as the art of love-making.⁵ Devadatta Shastri in his commentary on *Kamasutra* explains how the nature of the universe is “essentially sexual”:

On reflection, it appears that all of human life is permeated by sexuality. That is why the Vedas and the Upanishads, too, give examples of sex between man and woman. . . . the universe in all its variety is essentially sexual. The chief component of sex is attraction and of attraction, sex. . . . That is why the *Brihadranayaka Upanishad* says, ‘Man is sexual.’ Sexuality is the semen of the mind. (qtd. in Mallanaga 173)⁶

Thus, the view of the desire for sex as a basic human instinct and the process of love-making as an “art” is testimony to the place of prestige that sex and sexuality held in ancient Hindu texts and philosophy, as opposed to the classical Christian outlook towards sexuality (within matrimony) as a means of procreation.⁷ Such was the premium laid on

⁴ All references to Mulk Raj Anand in this chapter, unless indicated otherwise, are from his work *Kamakala: Some Notes on the Philosophical Basis of Hindu Erotic Sculpture*.

⁵ Scholars believe the dates of composition of the text to be anywhere between the beginning of the common era to the seventh century. Again, to set matters straight, one needs to reiterate that *Kamassutra* is incorrectly believed to be a manual of sex, which it is definitely not. As explained above, the treatise is on desiring and love making, and “ascribes a deep, positive value to sex: it isn’t simply for reproduction, sexual happiness matters, and it’s important for one’s physical and mental health . . . [and it] also gives a fascinating account of human psychology” (Fosse xv).

⁶ Gavin Flood explains in the *Brahadranyaka Upanisad*, the “mystical union with the absolute” has been equated with “the joy of sexual union” (*Hinduism* 190).

⁷ Anand categorically denounces how Christianity disregarded sexual intercourse, also highlighting the subtle protests launched by the Romantic artists and poets against the Church on this matter: “[Th]e prejudice against love, particularly in its sexual form, was more deeply rooted from the Christian puritanism, based on the doctrine of original sin: and . . . many of the romantic intelligentsia protested violently, in verse and prose, against hypocrisy and called for the frank acceptance of sex and the return to the more wholesome pagan outlook of an earlier ‘Merrie England’. . .” (*Kamakala* 7, italics removed).

desire and sexuality that *Kamasutra* was a text regarded highly, and definitely not one to be abhorred or to be hidden away.⁸

Abhinavagupta, a renowned polymath—a philosopher, poet, aesthete and mystic—of the tenth-eleventh century, writes in his monumental twelve volume *Śrī tantrālokaḥ*, which can be dated to roughly the tenth century: “The mystery of the fullness of sexual art is felt in copulation and the enormous essence of *amṛta* (is felt) when the divergence of the individual soul destroys” (108).⁹ Furthermore, Abhinavagupta also discusses the ritual involving sex and the relationship between creativity and sexuality in the twenty-ninth chapter of *Śrī Tantrālokaḥ*. Flood also emphasizes that “[s]ex in a ritual setting and the transformation of desire for a spiritual purpose is an ancient practice in Indian religion” (*Hinduism* 190). Thus, one can discern how love, desire, sexuality, ritual, art, aesthetics, transcendence and the Ultimate Knowledge were all interdependent and interlinked in the classical Indian philosophical worldview. Dasgupta also highlights the ennobling nature of desire, when he suggests that “sex-passions, which generally drag a man down to the level of the beasts, may also raise him to the level of the gods, if, however, these passions are reformed and purified with the knowledge of Prajñā and Upāya” (*Tāntric Buddhism* 191)

Mulk Raj Anand also sheds light on the social and metaphysical functions of love and sexuality in the Indian society, also hinting at the esoteric proportions that love and sex can acquire in given circumstances. Anand explains:

[I]n the agrarian and pastoral forms of Indian civilisation and culture, love, in all its spiritual and sexual connotations, was frankly accepted and

⁸ Interestingly enough, one would like to posit that Yeats might have been referring to *The Kamasutra* and its cultural significance in the Indian society, in his review of Arthur Symons’s “London Nights” titled “That Subtle Shade.” Yeats starts the review with a description about erotic Sanskrit verse, “A famous Hindu philosopher once told me that one day, when he was a very young man, he walked on the bank of a great Indian river, reading a volume of erotic Sanskrit verse. He met a Hindu priest, and showed him the book with the remark, ‘A book like this must be very bad for the world.’ It is an excellent book, a wonderful book’, said the priest, taking it from him, ‘but your calling it bad for the world shows it is bad for you’, and thereupon dropped the book into the great river” (*Early Articles* 277).

⁹ This is a translation of *śloka* (verse) 170: “*kāmasya pūrṇatā tattvaṃ saṅghaṭṭe pravibhāvyaṭe viṣaya cāmṛtaṃ tattvaṃ chhādyatve noścyute sati.*” Also, *amṛta* may mean the ultimate bliss or the Ultimate Reality. One should also take note of the fact that Abhinavagupta does not mince words in describing the act or sexual union as leading to the dissolution of individual differences and the union with the Oneness or the Ultimate Reality.

clothed in the beautiful imagery of exalted poetry, in words, colours and stones. The life-principle was worshipped through the subtle doctrine of the Hindus (Kaula) (noble) cult as well as through magical beliefs, rituals and practices, intended to release the unconscious through the play function of sex. (5, emphasis removed).¹⁰

In fact, such was the recognition for amorous love that numerous murals and sculptures of couples making love in different postures were carved onto temple walls and caves, places of public footfall or open display. Anand, writing about the tradition of carving erotic sculptures, their sources of human and divine inspiration, and sexual energy pervading the creation, is quite on point:

[I]n Indian plastic arts, the human form became the expression of the sculptor's vision of the life force. The abstract values of religion were always realised in the concrete imagery of the human body, exaggerated and dramatised to the supernatural proportions of gods and goddesses, but instinct with the sap of life. And, in the imagery of the yakshas, nymphs, fauns, dryads, celestial dancers, demi-gods and urges, the inner tensions of nature are rendered with conviction and mastery.

In such an atmosphere, it is not surprising that the Mithuna (loving) couples abound, from the earliest cave temples through the medieval period down till the 18th century, as the very consecration of the drama of sex energy, flowing in myriads of forms. And, almost always, they are carved without any suggestion of pornography, but with the utmost tenderness and sensuous beauty. (6)

Arguably, the larger agenda behind displaying couples engaged in love-making on the *gopurams* (the ornate gates or doors which lead to a temple-compound) or the external walls of temples was to let the people entering the temples leave their desires and sexual passions outside before entering the inner courtyard housing the sanctum sanctorum, which did not have any such erotic or sensual architectural expression on the inside. This should not be taken to mean that sexuality was frowned upon, but rather, that the devotee was supposed to proceed towards dharma, through the path of *artha* and *kāma*, having fulfilled the two basic goals, enroute *mokṣa*. Another belief explains the erotic sculptures

¹⁰ The use of rituals and magic in love making will be discussed with respect to Tantra philosophy in the following section.

as guides for the Tantric initiates, and yet another sees the murals and sculptures as a union of the cosmic forces, *Śiva* and *Śakti*.¹¹

Sexuality in Tantra

The frankness with which sexuality is dealt with in Tantra, is an extended echo of the place of dignity it has acquired all along in classical Hindu philosophy; only, their expressions and practices related to sexuality are quite divergent. In his introduction to *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga*, Sonu Samdasani writes, “Tantrism was anti-ascetic and anti-speculative, and represented a transgressive countercurrent to mainstream Hinduism. It rejected the prevalent caste system and represented a transvaluation of values. *In tantrism there was a celebration of the body, which was seen as the microcosm of the universe*” (Introduction xxii, emphasis added).

The seventh book of the *Kamasutra* is a discourse on the secret art of attracting others. Numerous techniques suggested in this book are esoteric in nature, quite akin to the methods employed in Tantric sex. In their translation of *Kamasutra*, Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar have chosen to title the seventh book as “Erotic Esoterica,” detailing (through their translation) the esoteric aspects of sex and some ‘bizarre’ methods that could be employed to attract the desired partner for love-making.¹² A number of these

¹¹ The Khajuraho temples in Madhya Pradesh abound in such erotic depictions, and similar, but not so extensive sculptures are also found on the walls of the Sun Temple in Orissa, Ellora Cave Temple in Maharashtra, and several other temples in Karnataka, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Uttarakhand.

¹² One has deliberately chosen the term ‘bizarre’ because it best describes most of the topics covered in the seventh chapter of the *Kamasutra*. Seen from a socio-cultural or theoretical vantage point, they will appear absurd, even flabbergasting to the uninitiated common reader. Before making unnecessary generalizations, one must understand that esoteric and tantric rituals are not designed for everyone. The shock value does not rest so much with the individual/folk/cultural act per se, but with the association of the action with right and wrong, in most cases, by an outsider (another individual, from a different folk or cultural tradition). Dasgupta’s use of Nāgārjuna’s thoughts might provide better clarity in the matter at hand: “[T]he value of morality is always provisional . . . The whole universe of good and bad, right and wrong, being a mere creation of the *citta* [consciousness], the world of morality has only subjective value and as such is always provisional . . . The *citta* or mind being the ultimate ground of all creation, the nature of the *citta* will determine the nature of all appearances in the form of actions; and so, all actions done with a pure mind cannot but be pure even if sex-relation is involved in them” (*Tāntric Buddhism* 182). Dasgupta further says, “All the right and wrong are created by the *citta* and it is through the *citta* again that they are all destroyed (*hitā-rtham yad bhavet karma sarvaṃ sac-caritaṃ bhavet I viparyayāt apuṇyam tat pravādanti jino-ttamāḥ II*)” (*Tāntric Buddhism* 183). Anand provides further impetus to Dasgupta’s suggestion. He is of the opinion that “[t]antric rights were called *Kaula* rights because of their supposed *Kaula* or noble nature. And one of the main aims of these rights was to raise the devotee above all sense of right and wrong” (*Kamakala* 40).

methods delineated in the aforementioned section of the *Kamasutra* are also employed in some Tantric rituals and practices. However, it is also necessary to reiterate that there are different Tantric schools with vastly contrasting ritualistic practices and dicta. Hence, *maithuna* (sex) is not an essential feature of the tantric-yogic practices in all the schools.¹³

However, in the Tantric traditions that do employ the ritual of sexual union as one of the requirements, even the ritual undergoes transformations in meanings. Gavin Flood furnishes an explanation in this regard, “Sexual union (*maithuna*) becomes important in Tantrism as both symbol and event. The earlier tantric literature seems to emphasize sexual rites as offerings to the deity, whereas later texts indicate that semen should be held back in order to facilitate a yogic transformation to a higher state of awareness” (*Hinduism* 190).¹⁴

Another significant misnomer that has recently caught up with Tantric sexuality is the identification of the concepts of Tantric sexuality and Tantric body, which are not necessarily interchangeable terms. As the section below, primarily drawing on the argument of Gavin Flood on the tantric body will illustrate further, the tantric body, among one of its many performative acts, engages in highly ritualistic procedures of sexuality, representing as well as living out the tantric tradition it emanates from. Tantra sexuality, as most people would like to believe, is *not* synonymous with tantric sexuality. As Gray puts it, “In the last two centuries, there is a diverse range of attitudes toward the tantric traditions, ranging from their emic understandings as paths to liberation to the relatively widespread associations of the tantric traditions with sorcery and libertine sexuality.” Unfortunately, the intellectuals and the enlightened ones would believe in the former, while the common masses generally sway towards the latter understanding of tantric traditions, though it might not be always so.

Of late, at least in the last two centuries, claims Gray, “[t]he tantric traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism have been simultaneously infamous . . . [and] poorly understood. Due to the strong association of tantric traditions with magical practices, and of the . . . “left-handed” (*vāmācāra*) tantric traditions with sexuality and violent ritual

¹³ For a detailed explanation, refer to footnote number 16 of the previous chapter.

¹⁴ Yeats makes a reference to the holding of the semen in his introduction to Swami’s translation of the *Mandukya Upanishad* (1935), which will be discussed later in the chapter.

practices, the tantric traditions have, . . . been associated with black magic in India.” Thus, the aspect of sexuality in Tantra, which is, as pointed out earlier, not integrated in all the Tantric traditions, is largely seen viewed either as sensational or immoral, and generally feared or dismissed as black magic.

This possibility of this narrative undergoing a change is not close in sight. However, the brighter side of the picture can probably take over and prove to be a popular counter-narrative to such denigration, only when passionate scholars and traditional practitioners of Tantra come out in the open to work upon and disseminate knowledge about the metaphysical aspects of sexuality and the composite idea of the tantric text and tantric body (so well illustrated by Flood) among the common populace.

The Tantric Body and the Cosmic Body

Before proceeding to the argument about the tantric body, it will be useful to look into the definition of ‘tantric tradition.’ Flood defines “tantric tradition” as “those religions . . . that claimed to develop from textual sources referring to themselves as ‘tantras’, regarded as revelation, the word of God, by their followers. This diverse tantric revelation must be seen in contrast to the ancient, orthodox Brahmanical revelation of the Veda. . .” (*Tantric Body* 8).¹⁵ Thus, the tantric body is deeply seeped in the ‘tantric tradition’ that Flood defines as the revealed, orthodox word of God. Eliade noted that “tantric texts are often composed in an ‘intentional language’ (*sandhā-bhāṣā*), a secret, dark and ambiguous language in which a state of consciousness is expressed by an erotic term and the vocabulary of mythology or cosmology is charged with Hatha-yogic or sexual meanings” (qtd. in Shamdasani, “Introduction” xliii). The texts comprising the ‘tantric tradition,’ maintains Flood, “were intended to be read and heard by those with the requisite authority, to be brought to life, and to be performed” (13).

With the introduction of the idea of performance into the discourse on a tantric body, some allied debates also make way into one’s discussion—subjectivity and improvisation,

¹⁵ Flood is also quick to distinguish the Buddhist Tantras from the Hindu Tantras, which, he claims, “do not respond to the vedic tradition but rather look to Mahāyāna Buddhism and see themselves as a development of it” (*Tantric* 8). However, he also warns that “much Buddhist tantric material, the Yoginī Tantras, was probably derived from Śaiva prototypes” (*Tantric Body* 8).

Henceforth, all references to Gavin Flood in this chapter, are from his work *The Tantric Body*, unless indicated otherwise.

tradition and compliance, modernity and the resultant reification, to name a few. Abandoning the “reified tantric body” projected as the “free-flowing individual” by modernity for the better, Flood chooses to base his study on and expounds upon the “traditional tantric body of medieval India,” which he claims is “more fluid in terms of its lack of reification and . . . more conservative in being deeply embedded in traditional understandings and categories. The tantric body is formed in accordance with received tradition, . . . scriptural revelation, and . . . the somatology of the wider culture” (7). Thus, the tantric body, to simplify Flood’s explanation, is not the modern, free, and revolting body that it is generally thought to be, but the traditional one instead, which is deeply embedded in, and dances to the tune of the revealed knowledge in the form of texts and ritual practices systematically taught by the “master (*guru, ācharyā*)” who initiated the particular tantric subject (Flood 63).

Additionally, what makes the debate about the traditional and modern tantric body particularly gripping is the simultaneous coexistence of tradition and transcendence, confinement and release, objectivity and subjectivity, involvement and withdrawal, passion and impersonality, to name a few. In his landmark study, *The Tantric Body*, Flood argues, “*the tantric body becomes inscribed by the text. What we might call an entextualisation of the body occurs in tantric traditions that is specific yet allows a divergence of views and practices. The body is moulded within the constraints of historical tradition, even in its attempt to transcend those constraints*” (4, emphasis mine). Developing his argument further, Gavin Flood makes a groundbreaking estimation of the several roles performed by the tantric body connecting the ideas of the cosmos, rituals, performance, and the human:

On the one hand the tantric body is a metaphor that maps the cosmos, particularly in ritual activity; on the other hand the tantric body is a lived body that performs that mapping, a performance that had and has existential force in the lives of tantric practitioners. The tantric body is both a metaphor of tantric ideas about the cosmos and the human person and the lived body of the practitioner who performs or enacts those ideas.
(21)

One must understand that the emphasis on the body is intended towards the visualization of the tantric body as the road to the divine, not necessarily through a sexual ritual, but also sometimes, through asceticism. Flood explicates further: “The practitioner inscribes

the [tantric] body through ritual and forms of interiority or asceticism, and so writes the tradition on to the body. Such transformative practices are *intended to create the body as divine*. This inscribing the body is also a reading of text and tradition” (13, emphasis added). The feature of the tantric body becoming one with the divine through its identification with the cosmic body will be delineated upon at length later in the same section.

However, before one begins an examination of the cosmic body, another fascinating feature of the tantric body is the two-pronged role that it performs: it ‘represents,’ and is simultaneously also ‘represented’:

[Th]e body, functioning as the root metaphor or topos of the tantric traditions, operates at different levels of practice and discourse. The body is the vehicle for imagining and conceptualising tradition and cosmos. . . . Representations of the body occur in texts and in the techniques of the body such as ritual and asceticism; the body itself functions as a representation of tradition, text and cosmos. (Flood 4-5)

So much for the functions and the implications of the tantric body. The union of the male and female tantric body through sexual rituals and their ultimate merger with the cosmic body, or the union of the tantric body through asceticism with the divine, are both ways of attaining the cosmic synthesis, which is the ultimate goal of a tantric initiate. Julius Lipner explains this gradual progression of a Tantric practitioner to attain a union with the divine in terms of the etymology of Tantra:

Tantra focuses on rituals of worship of a deity (male or female) by a practitioner, involving disciplines of visualization of the deity, as well as progressive identification with and ‘possession’—spiritually and bodily—by that deity. This process may include, in certain extreme forms, esoteric practices . . . (such as . . . practising ritual sexual intercourse with a woman who is not one’s wife). In other words, the body is a ‘loom’ (*tantra*) whose ‘strings’ of mental and physical being become the basis for weaving a tapestry of liberative experience that creates union with the deity (62)¹⁶

The point that comes out of this account is basically this: the tantric body is, after all, the *nimitta* (means) to attain a commingling with the divine, and to experience *ānanda* or bliss, the highest form of happiness. The spiritual experience in Tantra is gradually and

¹⁶ For other possible meanings of the term ‘Tantra,’ refer to the first chapter.

necessarily charted through the medium of the tantric body—be it the ascetic or the sexual body, as pointed out above.

However, when the union with the divine is sought to be achieved through the path of ritualistic sexual union, the tantric body becomes a microcosmic representation of the cosmic union between the primordial couple, *Śiva* and *Sakti*. Gavin Flood offers a succinct account of the cosmic union and its aftermath in Tantra:

[W]hether sexual congress is performed, as in left-handed ritual, or is substituted [in the ascetic mode of Tatrism], as in right-handed ritual, erotic worship taps into a rich and powerful symbolism. The actual or represented union of the tantric practitioners symbolizes the union of *Śiva* and *Śakti*, of the male and female polarity in the cosmos, and their joy reflects the joy (*ananda*) of that ultimate condition. (*Hinduism* 190)

Not only have *Śiva* and *Śakti* been seen as the male and female principles of the universe/cosmos, but have also been frequently represented as the *Ardhanarīśvara*, and are by far the most popular icon of androgyny in Hinduism and in modern India.¹⁷

Having said that, the interpretation of *Śiva* and *Śakti* as the apogee of the masculine and feminine principles sustaining the universe is the most basic set of associations one makes to the ideal couple. In the Indian philosophical framework, as well as in Tantric philosophy, *Śiva* and *Śakti* have also been read beyond the principle of dualism, as a “biunity.” Coomaraswamy in his article “The Tantric Doctrine of Divine Biunity” spells out the opinion that the notion of a bisexual polarity in Deity is something that is exclusive in Hindu and Buddhist Tantric systems. He writes:

All tradition speaks in the last analysis of God as an innumerable and perfectly simple Infinity, but also of this Supreme Identity as an identity *of* two contrasted principles, distinguishable in all composite things, but coincident without composition in the One who is no thing. The identity is of Essence and Non-being, God and Godhead,—as it were masculine and

¹⁷ The symbolism of the *Ardhanarīśvara* in the iconography of *Śiva* and *Śakti* also became quite popular in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe, as pointed out in the first chapter. This significant symbol can also be read in conjunction with Yeats’s later works, especially the idea of “self-begetting” in the “Supernatural Songs,” and his thoughts about the male and female principles inherent in all human beings—a philosophy he strongly came to believe in, in the later phase of his life, especially after his long association with Purohit Swami—which will be taken up for analysis in the section on Yeats below.

feminine. *Natura naturans, Creatrix universalis est Deus.*¹⁸ (173, emphasis in original)

Arthur Avalon also explains the biunity inherent in Śiva and Śakti as the imminence of Śiva, the “*Jñāna-śakti*” or the knowledge principle in Śakti, the *Kṛyā-Śakti* or the action principle, and vice-versa, and the creation of the universe being brought about by “She” (i.e., Śakti or Devī, the ruling deity in the Śākta tradition) through “*Jñāna* and *Kṛyā*” (*Kāmakaḷāvilāsa* 9).¹⁹ Avalon, in his book titled *The Serpent Power*, describes “She” as “the Shabdabrahman or ‘Word’ in bodies” (16). Thus, the ultimate creative principle—understandably feminine in the Śākta tradition—is both the embodied and the formless, the describable as well as beyond words, the experienced as well as the one aspired to.²⁰

Avalon also casts light on the alternating cycles of annihilation and creation, and the first birth of activity after annihilation in terms of the *kāma* (desire) of the “She” (Devī), summing up the link between *kāma* (desire) and ‘sexuality’ of the cosmic body and that of the tantric body:

The Kāmakaḷā is the first display of activity in the Brahman Substance after Pralaya [complete annihilation of the Universe/cosmos] when the Devī holds absorbed in Herself all the Thirty-six Tattvas of which the Universe in all its variety is composed. . . . She remains for some time in this state holding within Herself all the Tattvas until rest is disturbed by the

¹⁸ A Latin phrase ascribed to St. Thomas’s, meaning “Art imitates nature . . . in her manner of operation” (Coomaraswamy, *Door in the Sky* 147).

¹⁹ Dasgupta explains the aforementioned concept commented upon by Avalon: “[W]e find that *Siva* is *prakasa*, pure illumination or abstract self-shining thought and *Sakti* is *vimarsa* or the inherent activity of thought. Thought and its inherent activity cannot be viewed as distinct from one another as one is involved in the notion of the other. The conception of the nature of thought involves its own activity. That which appears in its abstractions as pure *prakasa* in one aspect or moment appears in its other aspect as *vimarsa* in the other moment” (*Philosophical Essays* 159, emphasis in original). Elsewhere, Avalon writes: “Behind all activity there is a static background. Shiva represents the static aspect of Reality and Shakti the moving aspect. The two, as they are in themselves, are one. All is Real, both Changeless and Changeful. Māyā is not in this system “illusion”, but . . . ‘the Form of the Formless’. . . . The world is *its* form and these forms are therefore Real” (*Serpent Power* 24).

²⁰ Avalon elucidates further: “*Power is Shakti*, the Great Mother of the Universe. There is no Shiva without Shakti, or Shakti without Shiva. The two as they are in themselves are one. They are each *Being, Consciousness and Bliss* . . . These three terms stand for *the ultimate creative Reality* as it is in itself. By the imposition upon these terms of Name (Nāma) and Form (Rūpa) or Mind and Matter, we have the limited Being-Consciousness and Bliss which is the Universe” (*Serpent Power* 23, emphasis added).

desire or will (Kāma) to create. The movement or stress of this Desire manifests as the Kāmakalā. (Preface, *Kāmaklāvīlāsa* vi)

However, one would like to conclude with the caution that Coomaraswamy foregrounds with respect to sexuality in Tantra. He warns that “[in a] literal sense these sexual phraseology is not a rhetoric but a matter of analogy and symbolism” (“Divine Biunity” 183).

While one cannot affirm with any degree of certainty if Tantra philosophy, traditional concepts of sexuality in Tantra and the congruence between the tantric body and the cosmic body reached the West the manner in which they were intended to be understood with all their nuances. However, the very fact that Tantra made a significant mark on the Western Theosophists, mystics, writers and artists deserves attention, and also calls for a serious study.²¹ For now, one will launch into a brief discussion of how sexuality in Tantra was viewed by western critics and scholars.

Tantra, Sex-Magic and the West

Sexuality in Tantra has often been taken with a pinch of salt, to say the least. Sometimes, however, the sexual metaphors and rituals involved in Tantra have been grossly misunderstood, misjudged, and sometimes even demonised. Tantra has become a word, which, “instantly conjures up images of exotic eroticism, mystical ecstasy and Oriental intrigue” (“Omnipotent”). “For most American readers today,” writes Urban, “Tantra has come to be defined basically as ‘spiritual sex’ or the use of sexuality as a religious experience; as the ‘exotic art of prolonging your passion play’ to achieve ‘nooky nirvana,’ it is praised as much a needed liberation of sexuality for a repressive Western world” (“Omnipotent”).²²

Elsewhere, Urban traces the trajectory of the linkage of sexuality with occult as an ancient practice, down to its metamorphosis into a new system of “sex-magick” around the mid-nineteenth century upon incorporation of half-baked knowledge of Indian Tantra:

²¹ Some aspects of this inquiry figure in the first chapter.

²² Although Urban refers to American readers, the statement by him is equally applicable to European/English readers, especially in the popular cultural circle. More so, as Urban has also done extensive studies of Aleister Crowley and the Indian Tantra philosophy.

Sexuality and the occult arts had . . . long been associated in the western imagination. Since at least the time of the Gnostic heresies, . . . the persecution of the Templars and the witch hunts of the late Middle Ages, *illicit sexuality was often believed to go hand in hand with secret ritual and the black arts*. . . . But it was really not until the middle of the nineteenth century, with figures like the American Spiritualist Paschal Beverly Randolph and his European followers, that we see the birth of a detailed and sophisticated system of sexual magic” (“Magica Sexualis” 696)²³

Urban traces the (somewhat ill-fated) journey of the Indian philosophy of Tantra to the West in his article titled “The Omnipotent Oom: Tantra and Its Impact on Modern Western Esotericism.”²⁴ As pointed out in the last chapter, William Jones and H. T. Colebrook were the first Orientalists to work on Indian knowledge systems, but they had “relatively little to say about the Tantras.” In the early nineteenth century, “Tantras became objects of intense interest and morbid fascination” with the coming of Christian missionaries to India. However, it proved to be a rather unfortunate development as the missionaries “singled out the sexual element particularly transgressive and illicit sexuality as the most horrific aspect of the Tantras and the clearest evidence of their complete depravity.”²⁵ What ushered next was a phase of the “larger Orientalist narrative of Indo-European history,” spearheaded by Englishmen like H. H. Wilson and Sir Monier Williams, among many others, the aim of which was to associate any glorious feature of Indian culture, history and civilization to “the decadence of modern India.”²⁶ Tantra

²³ Urban credits the birth of the concept of “sex magick” to both the American Paschal Beverly Randolph as well as the Englishman Aleister Crowley in his works on Tantra and the West. He is careful to point out how the contribution of Randolph is relatively lesser-known, while the mention of sex-magic is associated to “Crowley-ian sex magick” (Urban, “Unleashing” 138).

²⁴ Most of the information in this portion (this paragraph and the next) has been borrowed from Urban’s aforementioned article. One is indeed indebted to Urban for his succinct and careful encyclopaedic account of the traversing of Tantra to the Western world.

²⁵ Urban writes, “The Tantras, as Ward put it, involve ‘a most shocking mode of worship’ centered around the worship of a naked woman (preferably a prostitute or outcast) and rites ‘too abominable to enter the ears of man and impossible to be revealed to a Christian public’ (“Omnipotent”).

²⁶ Monier Monier-Williams, informs Flood, “was able to say that the Tantras are ‘mere manuals of mystics, magic and superstition of the worst and most silly kind’ and that with these texts and their traditions ‘we are confronted with the worst results of the worst superstitious ideas that have ever disgraced and degraded the human race’ (Flood 3).

philosophy also had to bear the brunt as being representative of “a modern era of licentiousness and superstition” (“Omnipotent”).²⁷

Although *Kamasutra* was translated and privately published into English by Sir Richard Francis Burton in 1883, it did more harm to the reputation of Tantra in the West than good.²⁸ “This equation of Tantra with sex was only compounded with the Western discovery of the *Kama Sutra* and other erotic manuals,” informs Urban, adding that “[f]rom Burton’s time on, . . . Tantra came to be increasingly associated and often hopelessly confused with the sexual positions of the *Kama Sutra*.” This image of Tantra would persist—and probably still does—until the beginning of the twentieth century, when a handful of scholars made efforts to “defend and re-valorize the Tantras.” Sir John Woodroffe (who wrote under the pen name Arthur Avalon) solely deserves the credit for the “moralizing reform of Tantra” on the European literary front.²⁹ He took it upon himself to learn Sanskrit, get himself initiated into Tantra, translate Tantric texts and write extensive commentaries and books on Tantra in spite of being a barrister by profession and Irish by descent.³⁰ He did not leave any stone unturned in projecting

²⁷ “Repeatedly throughout nineteenth century Orientalist literature,” writes Urban, “we find the Tantras described in the most vivid language as ‘lust mummery and black magic’ (Brian Hodgson), ‘nonsensical extravagance and absurd gesticulation’ (H. H. Wilson), and ‘black art of the crudest and filthiest kind’ in which ‘a veritable devil’s mass is purveyed in various forms’ (D. L. Barnett)” (“Omnipotent”).

²⁸ It has been documented everywhere that *Kamasutra* was first translated into English in 1883 by Sir Richard Francis Burton. However, the efforts of two Indian scholars of Sanskrit who helped him with the translations, namely, Bhagavanlal Indrajit and Shivaram Parashuram Bhinded, has never been mentioned in the dominant discourse (Dasgupta, *Tāntric Buddhism* li)

²⁹ As the section on Yeats’s perception of sexuality in Tantra will illustrate, Yeats, very much like Woodroffe, worked towards changing the ‘popular’ perception of Tantra in Ireland through his conscious choice of keeping himself away from Crowley and his circle, as well as through the employment of Tantric meditational and sexual rituals of Tantra to arrive at the elaborate and intricate symbolic structures of his creative works (Saddlemeyr *Becoming George*). Harper also lends support to the view that Yeats disapproved of the Crowley-ian sex-magic: “He [Yeats] cited ‘one rather terrible case’ in which the resulting union had become ‘so close that those who use it share not only emotions, but sicknesses and follies’, and he doubted ‘very much if these meditations should ever be used without certain ceremonial precautions of a rather elaborate kind’. He is, I suppose, thinking of the kind of black magic, including the emphasis on sexual abnormality, which Aleister Crowley and his followers had practised . . .” (*Golden Dawn* 82)

³⁰ Kathleen Taylor has done commendable work on the significance of Tantra in Woodroffe’s life and works. See, Taylor’s article titled “Arthur Avalon: The Creation of a Legendary Orientalist” in Julia Leslie (1996), and Taylor’s *Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra and Bengal: ‘An Indian Soul in a European Body’?* (2001).

Tantra as “a noble philosophical tradition, basically in line with the Vedas, and even comparable in its symbolism to the liturgy of the Catholic Church.” Woodroffe’s efforts did not go in vain, but Tantra could not dive out of the stigmatic associations it had been mired in for centuries in the West. Soon, Tantra got reincarnated as “sex-magic” upon getting incorporated into “Western sexual-magical traditions, such as the . . . Rosicrucian and [those of] Paschal Beverly Randolph, and . . . Aleister Crowley” (Urban, “Omnipotent”). Another disappointing fact about Crowley’s understanding of Tantra, which led to the birth of “sex-magick” in Europe, is that although Crowley had read some Indian philosophies, but his knowledge about Tantra was largely second-hand. One can only imagine the horror that was created as a result of the wedding of the (UnTantric) Tantra to Western occult and magical rituals, and the credit for bringing the “rough beast” into the world should be shared between Crowley and Randolph in the European and American contexts respectively.³¹

Urban argues that “[m]ost modern forms of sexual magic . . . are largely the complex fusion of Indian Tantric techniques, as re-interpreted by figures like Bernard, and Western occult movements emerging from the Masonic, Rosicrucian and magical traditions” (“Omnipotent”). Susan Johnston Graf explains the intricacies of the act of sex-magic: “Simply put, sexual magic is accomplishing the sexual act with the conscious intention of achieving spiritual ecstasy. Before the sex act occurs, a special space is prepared by the magicians, who cleanse it of negative influences and decorate it with symbolic artifacts that will aid them in their concentration as well as create an atmosphere . . . [which is] charged and potent” (106). However, the inclination to take to sexual magic was usually seen as sexual experimentation and profligacy. Moreover, the intended goals from the act of involving oneself in the same were also not purely spiritual in all cases. Graf further elaborates:

During the sexual act, the couple might concentrate on certain thoughts or certain deities. Often the act is prolonged and breathing techniques might be used. If the couple wishes to have a child, the magic becomes very potent and focused. Then the object is to call a highly evolved being to incarnate, and the sexual magic is trained on that object. Sexual magic uses the act of sex to call down higher powers (Graf 106).

³¹ A phrase picked up from Yeats’s iconic poem “The Second Coming” (written 1919, published 1920 and 1921) seems the most fitting description of the dreadful monster called “sex-magick.”

The practitioners of sex magic believed that “particularly in its transgressive, non-reproductive forms, [sex magic] can . . . unleash the supreme creative power: the power to create not an ordinary fetus, but a magical child of messianic potential” (Urban, “Unleashing” 166) (sic). Suffice it to say that no one has, to date, proven the efficacy of the belief about bringing into the world an incarnated progeny or a magical child who could change the face of the world!

In the light of the foregoing discussion on sexuality, body and cosmic union in Tantra, it is almost inessential to reiterate that sexuality in Tantra does not bear any resemblance to sex-magic. Urban also emphasizes: “Most traditions, moreover, insist that the semen must absolutely *not* be released in the act of intercourse, but instead *retained and withdrawn* back into the body of the male practitioner. Far from hedonistic abandon, Tantric *maithuna* is in a sense sex in reverse, in which the goal is not orgasmic release, but on the contrary, controlled withdrawal and sublimation” (“Omnipotent”). To hammer home the point, sexuality in Tantra was never used by a tantrik to derive sensual pleasure or to bring about a ‘gifted’ progeny, but was designed as a ritual to practice abstinence (in the prescription of the holding of the semen). In its more philosophical rendering, the use of sexual rituals, as has been pointed out earlier, was done to attain a spiritual or mystical union with the ultimate truth, the cosmic whole.

However, Urban argues that Crowley particularly “found in deliberate acts of transgression [such as masturbation and homosexual intercourse] a radical form of super-human power that promised to explode the narrow boundaries of Western Christian society and open the way for a whole new era of human history” (“Unleashing” 140). Bogdan and Starr, in their introduction to the book *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, also attest to Urban’s views: “Crowley saw sexual magic as a simple and direct method of achieving the talismanic ends of the operator without the material trappings of ceremonial magic; the power is in the mind of the practitioner. . . .” (3). The reality, however, is that none of his expectations from sex-magic came true, and instead his pseudo-science of spirituality earned him the epithet of “the wickedest man in the world” in media, both during his times and after (“Unleashing”).

Ithell Colquhoun has explained why the spiritual and philosophical aspects of Tantra shrivel when European scholars strive to engage with it from their own socio-cultural positioning: “While sex-magic of various kind is common to all cultures especially at the

level of folk-practice, I doubt if one can find Tantra properly so called in Europe unless as an importation from the East. Those writers who profess to discover it tend to stress one of Tantra's 'Five M's'—*Maithuna*, sex-intercourse—at the expense of its other four” (287). This, as it has been illustrated in the earlier discussions too, has remained a persistent prejudice in the comprehension of Tantra and ritual sexuality in the West.

More recently, Zimmer, Eliade, and Evola have identified Tantra “as the most *transgressive* and *violent* path to the sacred—beyond good and evil, in violation of conventional law” (Urban, *Tantra* 67). So the tide finally seems to be turning away from Western misconception of Indian Tantra, though not towards a completely positive and clean image, but somewhat better than how it had been misconstrued.

And before one can move on to a discussion of Yeats and sexuality in Tantra, just a brief rebuttal of ‘contemporary Orientalist scholars,’ who would have, if they had had their way, seen the ancient East as a mirror reflection or a reduced copy of the West.³² David Soud believes that “[t]he emphasis in various strains of Tantra on such devices as mantras, sacred diagrams, and visualization of or even possession by deities recalls the Western occultist techniques of visualization, symbolism, and mediumship. . .” (63). After all the arguments laid bare above, one does not feel the inclination to remind Soud to set the mirror in the right direction and investigate into the antiquity of the two civilizations and philosophies before making such an anachronistic claim.

Yeats, Sexuality and Tantra

One can clearly mark the influence of Tantra on Yeats, and a discerning reader will also be able to connect the same to Yeats's literary output. Several of W. B. Yeats's works, especially his later works, abound in tantric sexual symbols. “Yeats studied occultism from 1885 until his death in 1939. His knowledge included Golden Dawn magic, Vedanta, Theosophy, and some Celtic bardic practices,” writes Graf (104). One among the many statements sloppily made by most scholars and critics of Yeats, Graf's otherwise well-researched assertion set one musing: why is it that Yeatsian scholars shy away from proclaiming, seriously studying or even admitting the influence of Tantra

³² They are somewhat reminiscent of Wilson and Monier William from yesteryears in terms of their agenda today.

philosophy on Yeats?³³ Did it have to do with Tantra's position regarding sexuality and sexual rituals, which, because of their lack of comprehension, held extreme shock-value for the Westerners? Or does it have to do with the concern to project Yeats as an Irishman who worked extensively in the field of Irish folklore, and/or as the last Romantic English/European poet with the most distinct Celtic voice, and/or as a poet-artist-senator whose image could have far-reaching effects in terms of the politico-socio-aesthetic dynamics of Ireland, Britain and Europe and hence should not bear any associations to an Eastern occult philosophy (though it was bearable to acknowledge the influence of Vedanta, a high Indian philosophy on Yeats)?

All these questions are momentous ones, each demanding a separate book-length study. Leaving such interrogations for another time, let us proceed into the subject matter of the present study. As this section will illustrate in-depth, Yeats's views on sexuality underwent constant conflicts and changes throughout his life, but they can broadly be divided into three distinct phases: the first one marked by the discord in the matter of sexuality that Yeats faced as a teenager and young adult, and his subsequent abstinence from regular sex till his marriage (except for casual sexual encounters and the sexual rituals he engaged in at the Golden Dawn); the second phase which saw Yeats changing his views on the intellectual potential of sex after his marriage to Georgie Hyde-Lees and the subsequent birth of his children, a period during which he began making direct references to women and using sexual metaphors in his work in abundance, and also undertook the writing of *A Vision* with his wife (started in 1917 and published in 1925); and the third phase into which Yeats ushered approximately after his meeting with Purohit Swami, after which Yeats increasingly started associating sexuality to the power of creativity in Tantric mystical terms, a period in which Yeats also underwent the Steinach operation, and a time of prolific creativity for Yeats in terms of several poetry collections and plays, and also the significant revisions which he made in the 1937 edition of *A Vision*. In a nutshell, the changes in Yeats's opinions on sexuality went from abstinence to the idea of sexual magic, and finally to the mystical and liberating use of sexuality. Coincidentally, Yeats has met and has associations (short or lasting) with four significant Easterners who can also be associated to the first and the last phases of Yeats's

³³ Interestingly, Graf's otherwise commendable study makes references to sex-magic to explain Yeats's views on and experiments with sexuality. Graf completely evades the prevalent discourse—which has also been the subject of numerous studies—that sex-magic was an import of Tantra from the West, and comprised bewildering sexual rituals in a Western understanding of Tantra.

personal and creative life as demarcated above: Yeats met the Indian Theosophist Mohini Chatterjee, the Indian poet and musician Rabindranath Tagore and the Ceylonese Tamil philosopher and metaphysicist Coomaraswamy in the year 1885, 1912 and 1913 respectively, all of whom influenced his outlook towards mysticism, philosophy, spirituality, art and life significantly, and the Hindu teacher and mendicant Purohit Swami who he met in 1931, and with whom he continued to read, discuss and collaborate on Indian philosophy till about 1935.³⁴ It is not as if Yeats got acquainted with most of the concepts about sexuality, spirituality, magic, mysticism, art and life through his interaction with scholars and mystics, but as has been deliberated upon in the preceding pages, Yeats's readings in Indian philosophy and his affiliations to and memberships of several occult societies of his times from his early years also made a significant effect in his understanding of and opinions on sexuality throughout his life.

The subsequent disquisition will focus on the aforementioned three distinct phases of Yeats's sexual and creative life, with more emphasis on the last, which clearly displays apparent signs of Yeats's mature understanding of the significant connections between mysticism, sexuality and creativity in Tantra, clearly aided by his companionship with Purohit Swami and his increased readings of Indian philosophy in this part of his life. The section will also take into account the critical opinions and debates of critics (mostly Western) on Yeats's take on sexuality, and discuss some sexual metaphors used by Yeats which clearly bear Tantric connects, proceeding to conclude that Yeats's fascination for sexuality in Tantra should not be read in terms of the prevalent Western notion of sex-magic only, but instead be understood as the trigger behind the clarity he had been waiting for all his life, about the connections between physical sexual force and its psychological manifestations and endowment of creative powers in a writer or artist.

Although a number of scholars and critics have written on how Yeats was always in a perpetual conflict about the idea of sexuality from the early years of his life down to the fourth and fifth decade of his life, very few have paid attention to Yeats's sexual experiences and involvements during this period. "The great event of a boy's life is the awakening of sex," writes Yeats (*Autobiographies* 79). The same experience has been

³⁴ All these associations have been discussed in the introduction of this work. However, only the effect of the literary and philosophical companionship of Swami on Yeats will be elaborated upon in this chapter, in order to highlight how it coincides with Yeats's mystical and transcendental understanding of sexuality in the last decade of his life.

narrated in a fair detail in the first version of his autobiography. Recounts his first sexual experience, Yeats writes:

I was tortured by the sexual desire and had been for many years It began when I was fifteen years old. I had been bathing, and lay down in the sun on the sand on the Third Rosses and covered my body with sand. Presently the weight of the sand began to affect the organ of sex, though at first I did not know what the strange growing sensation was. It was only at the orgasm that I knew . . . It was many days before I discovered how to renew that wonderful sensation. From then on it was a continual struggle against an experience that almost invariably left me with exhausted nerves. (O'Donnell and Archibald 429)

Soon afterwards, Yeats started studying at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin where Yeats met George Russell, a poet, dramatist, and painter, together with whom he became a founding member of the Dublin Hermetic Society in 1885 (McDonagh). He also met Madame Helena Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society in 1887 and by the end of 1888, he joined the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society. Upon listening to the lectures of Mohini Chatterjee on Vedanta philosophy in 1885 and observing the ascetic life of his friend Russell, whose visions and their expressions in art impressed the young Yeats beyond description, Yeats started considering abstinence from sexuality the real force behind creative power. Abstinence from sexual desires was also fiercely propagated by Blavatsky. Till the time Yeats joined the Golden Dawn, all these people were significant influences in Yeats's life, and it comes as no surprise that Yeats followed into their footsteps. In his reading of this phase of Yeats's life, Guha suggests that "Yeats dreaded the subject of sex in his youth and tried his best to live the life of ascetic abstinence. . . . In maturer years he consciously fought against this duality in his nature, and made an entry in his diary of 1910 that sexual abstinence was responsible for the sterility of Irish writing" (122).³⁵

However, the "duality" had started taking shape in Yeats's mind when he joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in the year 1890. The society, as mentioned before, was quite known and appealed to young men and women in Ireland because of its practice of magical and sexual rituals. Additionally, the society had no prohibitions for membership of women. Graf underscores the encouragement that the Golden Dawn

³⁵ All referenes to Guha in this chapter, unless indicated otherwise, are from his book, *W B Yeats: An Indian Approach*.

provided to womenfolk to join in, with or without their partners: “Many couples were members, and the idea of sexual polarity and its potential for magical working was part of the Golden Dawn teachings. Understandably, such teachings were not publicized. Only in documents that have been published in the last twenty years do we find references to . . . ‘Western Tantra’” (104).³⁶

Simone de Beauvoir makes a powerful observation with respect to women who are on the fringes of the society, and the powers they are endowed with, which come to the fore when men approach them to gain knowledge of things which they believe to be beyond their purview: “Because of woman’s marginal position in the world, men will turn to her when they strive through culture to go beyond the boundaries of their universe and gain access to something other than what they have known” (152). This seems to hold true as an apt explanation behind women joining the magical and occult societies at the turn of the twentieth century. In his insightful study, Brown writes, “Spiritualism and occultism offered a mode of behaviour for women which signalled that they would no longer accept the prescribed roles that [the Victorian] society had determined for them in suburban isolation from political and social power” (*Life of Yeats* 39).³⁷ Most importantly, Brown asserts: “Yeats understood that *the occult was a feminized spirituality*. In the revised and enlarged edition of *The Celtic Twilight* (1902) he averred that ‘women come more easily than men to that wisdom which ancient peoples . . . think the only wisdom’” (40-41, emphasis mine). Yeats came in close associations with such “spirited women,” to borrow

³⁶ This is the only reference that Graf makes to Tantra in her article. Clearly enough, she has not taken the pain to research further into “Tantra,” and not “Western Tantra,” as a result of which she ends up conflating “Tantra” with “sexual magic.”

³⁷ Terence Brown, in a brilliant study of the prevalence of women mediumship in the last phase of the Victorian society, writes: “The great majority of the mediums who had made Spiritualism a fashionable craze and something of a religious cult in Britain since the 1840s were women. A historian comments of the period: ‘the typical spiritualist experience involves a female medium and a male spirit or control’ . . . A census of hallucinations by the Society for Psychological Research in the years 1889-92 confirmed this gender difference when it found that women were twice as prone as men to mediumistic experiences . . . although the image of female medium and male spirit control might appear to replicate in the supernatural world the social relations of the actual one, the feminized spirituality vested in mediumship gave to women a symbolic power as desire, insecurity, religious doubt and sexual ambivalence circulated in the foggy late Victorian cultural atmosphere. Woman, as Alex Owen has argued in *The Darkened Room*, became a site of divinatory, almost priestly energy, at the point in Victorian culture where medicine, law, and science vied with religion for authority over the human body . . .” (Brown, *Life of Yeats* 38-39).

Also, all references to Terence Brown in this chapter, unless otherwise indicated, are from his *The Life of W. B. Yeats*.

Brown's term, as Annie Horniman, Mina Bergson (Mina Mathers), Florence Farr and Maud Gonne at the Golden Dawn (40).³⁸ In fact, it is at the Golden Dawn that he met his future wife, Georgie Hyde-Lees. As the discussions below will serve to illustrate, Yeats wrote some of his most significant prophesies, verses and plays upon utilizing the feminine spiritual energy of Georgie and his own understanding of and propensity for the mystical and the occult after his wedding.

Yeats's attitude towards women as well as his thoughts on establishing into sexual relations with women, however, has remained a subject of many investigations and heated debates. Although Yeats practiced sexual rituals with his women counterparts at the Golden Dawn, his repeatedly thwarted love for Maud Gonne and his several anxieties regarding women and sexual intercourse other than that at the Golden Dawn contributed to his choice to remain unmarried well into his early fifties. Regarding this facet of Yeats's sexual life and associations with women, Foster opines:

Adolescent insecurities . . . were exacerbated by the underlying tension of sex. . . . Intellectual knowledge and psychological consciousness remained divorced from experience, and would continue so for many years. Classically, this incongruence was overcome by idealizing unattainable and uninterested women, while remaining resolutely unconscious of the interest indicated by those closer to hand. (*Apprentice Mage* 33-34)

In a somewhat similar strain, Terence Brown drives home the point that for Yeats, sexual desire was transmuted into "a quest romance," thereby according Yeats the status of "a Shelleyan figure":

Images of women . . . had their direct effect on the young Yeats, as he confessed in 1915: 'women filled me with curiosity and my mind seemed never long to escape from the disturbance of my senses, I was a romantic, my head full of the mysterious women of Rossetti . . .' In the poetry he composed in the 1880s Yeats was willing to represent himself as just such a Shelleyan figure, in thrall to an ideal of female beauty that represented sexual desire as a quest romance. The intensity of sexual longing finds expression in an erotically inspired dedication. (42)

³⁸ Mary K. Greer undertakes a fascinating study of the lives of these women in her *Women of the Golden Dawn: Rebels and Priestesses: Maud Gonne, Moina Bergson Mathers, Annie Horniman, Florence Farr* (1996).

However, Terence Brown also reads the transfiguration of the sexual desire Yeats had for women (mostly during his association with the Golden Dawn spanning three decades) into literary productivity of a higher order, which released Yeats's creative energies as aesthetically appealing poetry and plays, visionary prophesies and an unforeseen and incredible system. Brown can read transcendental meaning into the larger force at work. He opines, "Yeats sought to tap into the powers generated by an esoteric order, the Golden Dawn, in which complex gender exchanges and collaborations were at work. . . . In order to resacralise the world, to recreate what he thought of as a magical personality, a living community" (*Literature of Ireland* 21). McDonagh also underlines the tight bond between Yeats's women and his occultism, both of which strongly pulled him towards themselves, "As Foster points out, his involvement in the occult was intimately bound up in his complex relationships with a series of women who shared these beliefs and almost all the women who inspired his poems were involved in the occult." It is as if in the maze of Yeats's verses and plays, if the audience could correctly arrive at the significance of occult symbols and femininity, the piecing together of the puzzle might be taken to be half complete.

Elsewhere, Brown firmly asserts that "Yeats . . . found it easier to make intimate intellectual contact with women, since in a man he always found 'some competing thought' For him, however, sexual desire was strikingly modulated by a sense of female beauty which art had stimulated, for all its urgent, bodily imperatives and frustrations" (Brown 41). Thus, Yeats always associated sexuality and sexual rituals involving women with art and aesthetics, and later in his life, with transcendence. By any means, this was not an easy thing to do, considering the highly chaotic and volatile times that Yeats lived in, and the anchoring in terms of personal and/or professional lives that writers and artist who were his contemporaries usually sought.

Yeats's firm position on sexuality and marriage undergoes a significant shift when he was approaching his fiftieth year. In a very careful observation, Susan Johnston Graf reads Yeats's disappointment at his approaching his old age, the absence of love or matrimony in his life, and "his longing to have a wise woman for a wife" in his verse "On Woman," a poem about Solomon and Sheba, which he wrote in May 1914. Graf notes that the poem "intimates that Solomon's wisdom came from contact with Sheba": "It's plain the Bible means / That Solomon grew wise / While talking with his queens" (Graf 104). Yeats's lament at his own state of affairs is also quite apparent in the poem. Graf

writes, “Later in the poem, the speaker thinks about the ‘Shudder that made them one’—orgasm—as part of the interaction that brought wisdom to Solomon. The poem’s speaker fears that he hopes in vain for such a wise-woman wife because he is too old to attract one. He comforts himself with the thought that perhaps in the next life he will have such a wife” (Graf 105). Up until now, he had only viewed Maud Gonne as the woman with whom he sought to achieve a divine union, a mystical commingling, but his relationship with her had always remained unfulfilled in spite of the sporadic sexual encounters and the “spiritual marriage” they had had (Brown 102).³⁹

However, fate and chance had Georgie waiting for Yeats. Saddlemeyr conjectures that “[i]t may have been Lennox who introduced George to Dermott MacManus . . . a Mayo man greatly interested in magic and Hinduism, he would later be Willy’s [William Butler Yeats’s] confidant and Tantric teacher” (265).⁴⁰ After confirming from the medium whether or not he should enter into a wedlock with Hyde-Lees (which, by now, Yeats had become accustomed to doing, before taking all major decisions in his life), he decided to marry her.

The marriage of Yeats and George was to usher into the most exciting and creative phase of Yeats’s life and career. In his “Introduction to ‘A Vision’ from ‘A Packet for Ezra Pound’ (1937), Yeats recounts:

On the afternoon of October 24th 1917, four days after my marriage, my wife surprised me by attempting automatic writing. What came in disjointed sentences, in almost illegible writing, was so exciting, sometimes so profound, that I persuaded her to give an hour or two day after day to the unknown writer, and after some half-dozen such hours offered to spend what remained of life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences. ‘No,’ was the answer, ‘we have come to give you metaphors for poetry.’ (AVB 7)⁴¹

³⁹ For a detailed account of the same, refer to Brown 102-04.

⁴⁰ Pointing out that Georgie Hyde-Lees was no ordinary woman, Graf writes, “Georgie Hyde-Lees had been in Stella Matutina—Yeats’s branch of the Golden Dawn—for several years before marrying Yeats. In fact, Yeats himself was Ms. Hyde-Lees’s sponsor when she was initiated into Stella Matutina on July 24, 1914. In 1916, more than a year before Ms. Hyde-Lees and W. B. Yeats married, she had advanced to Zelator Adeptus Minor, becoming Yeats’s colleague in the Inner Order of Stella Matutina. George was an advanced, practicing ritual magician in her own right” (105).

⁴¹ The references to *AVA* are meant to indicate the 1925 publication of *A Vision*, while those marked as *AVB* refer to the 1937 revised edition of *A Vision*.

The automatic writing attempted by George gifted Yeats a refreshingly new template for his creative output, a narrative technique for his dense philosophy and prophecies, as well as a complex design for his later poetry and plays. McDonagh has rightly pointed out that “George’s hand and pen served as unconscious instruments for the spirit world to send information.” In fact the automatic writing was a kind of psychical-experiment (and one which would go on for years) that Yeats conducted together with his wife and then the two sat together and systematically connected all the fragments resulting out of the same in a bid to express Yeats’s mystical knowledge and philosophy, in pursuit of which he had been for nearly two decades. Richard Ellmann in *Yeats, the Man and the Masks*, has rightly pointed out that had Yeats died and not married in 1917, “he would have been remembered as a remarkable minor poet,” but fatefully, his marriage “released his energies like a spring” (223-24). Ellmann’s phrase may very well serve as a Tantric metaphor: from the perspective of tantric rituals, one can even view the relationship of Yeats and George as that of *bhairav* and *bhairvi*, the mortal representatives of the cosmic union of Shiva and Shakti leading to a mystical transcendence for the tantric couple, brought about by the arousal of the *kundalini shakti* reaching the *sahasrārtha* (the apex of the spring of the latent serpent power, which is also the zenith of cosmic union).

Graf is perhaps right in pointing out that “[l]ike most occultists practicing in the Western Mystery Tradition, Yeats knew that sexual heat was powerful magic, both for procreation and for poetry-making” (106). She also suggests that Yeats and George engaged in “practices that can only be construed as sexual magic” (105).⁴² However, that Graf has perhaps overlooked the fine distinction between what sex-magic meant for the practitioners of the same, and how was it employed by Yeats and George, becomes clear in Colquhoun’s observation: “With W. B. Yeats, however, one is on firmer ground; one knows at least that he spent the greater part of his adult life as a member of a secret fraternity. Though never closely associated with either Waite or Crowley . . . *Yeats set a high metaphysical value on sex, both in his personal life and in his work*” (296, italics inserted). Be that as it may, now that Yeats was married, he wanted to have children extraordinaire, nothing less than an incarnation, an avatar who would change the face of the suffering humanity:

⁴² The misplaced conflation of Tantra with sexual magic, or the identification sexual magic with “Western Tantra” on the part of Graf has already been pointed out above. One would not have so much cause for disagreement if only she had taken the cudgels of delving deeper into the Indian philosophy of Tantra.

W. B. and George Yeats engaged in sexual magic for the purpose of conceiving high-order offspring. They both hoped to facilitate the incarnation of an avatar, such as Christ, Buddha, or Krishna, who would facilitate human evolution and usher in the New Age. Yeats and his Stella Matutina sorors and fraters believed that the time had come for a new divine incarnation. . . . W. B. and George Yeats were consumed with the idea (Graf 106).

George Mills Harper also makes suggestions towards this end in his *The Making of Yeats's A Vision*. Harper makes it quite lucid that not only did George consider herself to be the connect between the 'instructors' and Yeats, she, together with Yeats, believed that they were destined to bring in the Avatar, who they were certain would be Irish, and would be brought into the world by them:

George was ultimately . . . convinced that she was the instrument (Medium or Interpreter, in Yeats's words) of daimonic forces to convey supernatural truths to the poet-prophet chosen to transmit them to a declining civilization. In time, . . . the two of them (medium and seer) became convinced that they had been selected to give birth to the New Master or Avatar of the historical cycle soon to begin (*Making of Vision Vol. I 5*)⁴³

The secret desire that Yeats and George harboured could obviously not be fulfilled.⁴⁴ However, the marriage to George positively affected Yeats's writings as well. Many Yeatsian scholars have noted that after 1914, and especially after his wedding, Yeats started using a lot of sexual metaphors in his work. Writing about Yeats's increased literary output, Saddlemeyr maintains, "But at least the 'mythology' he then constructed had led to deeper poetry; and it had a ground bass of their shared wisdom" (472). Guha

⁴³ Yeats was quite a sceptic, and even before the conception of George, he posed several questions to the Medium about the possibility of himself and George bringing the Avatar into the world and many allied questions. However, it is another story that they could not keep up to the astrological predictions of date and time, and conceived Ann, their daughter hastily. Ann was born in 1919, and was clearly not the Avatar they thought she will turn out to be. They were, however, careful enough to not repeat their mistake when George conceived Michael, who was born in 1921. For a long time, they believed that Michael was one of the many 'Avatars.'

⁴⁴ Terence Brown writes, "The Yeatses had in fact been disappointed in 1919 when the birth of their first child, Anne, on 26 February, had revealed that she could not be the long-awaited avatar. Thomas as spirit communicator admitted about three weeks later that '*we cannot influence sex*' – a moment in the overheated, sexually charged, self-immersed emotional transactions (similar in kind to those recorded in the annals of Freudian and Jungian analysis) of these years that suggests to what degree Yeats and his partner were risking in protracted psychic experiment, a credulous *folie à deux*" (269).

points out that “[i]n spite of this sceptical attitude to the mysticism of sexual love Yeats triumphantly used the idea in his poetry and knew its prevalence at one time in various parts of the world” (123). Ellmann holds, “By chance rather than decorum, Yeats . . . waited almost until his marriage to write directly of sexual intercourse. It became a more and more constant subject in his work as he realized its symbolic possibilities. He wanted a symbol immanent in experience, expressing the most intense physical action, and yet transcending it” (*Identity of Yeats* 182). McDonagh also makes a significant suggestion: “To his delight, George’s ‘instructors’ revealed to him that *the moment of sexual union was a portal to knowledge of the spiritual world - a knowledge that carried with it a metaphorical language* rooted in a belief system of stunning power and richness” (emphasis added). Clearly, McDonagh’s statement, unwittingly though, bears strong Tantric underpinnings, which, as the succeeding discussion will suggest, will only become more venerated in Yeats’s life.

The phase between 1917 and 1931, before Yeats met Purohit Swami, only served as a precursor to a philosophy Yeats would strongly come to believe in after 1931: his belief in the significance and creative power of sexuality, which would, of course, veer more towards the mystical after 1931. If we bear in mind the fact that among the many rituals Yeats performed at the Golden dawn, because of the practice of sexual rituals, the transcendental nature of sexuality was at least philosophically known to him. Hence, the shift in the representation of sexuality in the later phase of his literary produce can easily be related to his understanding of Tantric union beyond the dimensions of physical experience. Guha draws attention to how “in 1927 he [Yeats] could emphatically write to his friend Olivia Shakespeare that ‘only two topics can be of slightest interest to a serious and studios mind—sex and the dead’” (124). In fact, in his dedication of *A Vision* (1925), Yeats emphatically writes:

I could I daresay make the book richer, perhaps immeasurably so, if I were to keep it by me for another year, and I have not even dealt with the whole of my subject, perhaps not even with what is most important, writing nothing about *the Beatific Vision*, little of *sexual love*; but I am longing to put it out of reach that I may write the poetry it seems to have made possible (*AVA* lv, emphasis added).

Yeats gives clear signs of his two major preoccupations at this stage of his life: “the Beatific Vision” and “sexual love,” the former referring to the ‘Unity of Being,’ or the

point of transcendence in mysticism, and the latter referring to the methodology to achieve the former, a belief which will get its much needed life-force and impetus through the philosophy of Swami in the next stage of his sexual and creative life.

Roughly ten days before Yeats first met Purohit Swami, on May 26, 1931, Yeats had a two-hour conversation with John Sparrow at Oxford.⁴⁵ Sparrow recounts what Yeats said to him:

The finest description of sexual intercourse ever written was in Dryden's translation of Lucretius, and it was justified; it was introduced to illustrate *the difficulty of two becoming a unity: 'The tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul.'* *Sexual intercourse is an attempt to solve the eternal antinomy, doomed to failure* because it takes place only on one side of the gulf. The gulf is that which separates the one and the many, or . . . god and man" (Jeffares, *Man and Poet* 243, emphasis added).

Nowhere does Yeats's deep interest in and diligent reading of Tantra philosophy become as clear. Yeats had many of Woodroffe's translations of Tantric texts in his library collection, and had been acquainted with the relationship between sexuality and creativity from his years at the Theosophical Society and the Golden Dawn. Only, that he took the idea way too seriously to continue to look for more evidence and confirmation of his belief!

Yeats's search for the person who could confirm his belief in the creative aspects of sexuality probably ended with Purohit Swami. In Swami, Yeats readily found the 'Indian' mystic he had been waiting for all his life, a teacher who could teach him to swim in the vast ocean of ancient Indian knowledge, and most importantly, a representative/knower of the purest and the noblest schools of Indian philosophy who could act like his guiding light on matters of mysticism, philosophy, sexuality, art and aesthetics, and transcendence. Ann Saddlemeyr writes:

The Swami . . . was leading him away from her [George]. And in her opinion he was no substitute for Tagore. Soon Yeats introduced MacManus to the Swami, explaining that 'He is interested in Indian thought, more perhaps in Hatha yogi than Raja yogi but is learned and sympathetic'; together under the Swami's tutelage they [Yeats and MacManus] studied the Yoga-sutras and Tantra or the 'Higher Hinduism'. (472)

⁴⁵ Yeats was conferred with an Honorary D. Litt at University of Oxford on this day (Ross 273).

Although George might have been mightily displeased with Yeats's latest association because she saw Swami and his dull lessons in Indian philosophy as an obstacle to Yeats's penning of poetic verses, she nevertheless had to give in to her husband's enthusiastic pursuit of "Higher Hinduism." Terence Brown is also of the opinion that "Yeats's collaboration with Shri Purohit Swami was the stimulus for his late investigation of Hindu mysticism" (Brown 352). In a letter to Dorothy Wellesley dated August 11, 1935, Yeats expresses his secret desire to be reborn through a knowledge of Indian philosophy: "I plan to spend the winter with the Indian monk, Purohit Swami, working on the *Upanishads*, that I might be reborn in imagination" (Wellesley 20-21).

Behind Yeats's euphoria on meeting Swami and collaborating with him in the study and translations of Indian philosophy was Swami testifying to Tantra as "a mode of spirituality that had its own version of theologically sanctioned supernatural sex. For he [Yeats] had learnt that 'An Indian devotee may recognise that he approaches the Self through a transfiguration of sexual desire'. . ." (Brown 353). Cullingford also calls attention to the uniqueness of Tantra, which might have been the thrust behind Yeats's resolute gravitation towards Tantra:

Although Tantra does permit penetration, Yeats emphasizes the non-orgasmic nature of caress: "the man must not finish." For a man able neither to penetrate nor to finish, the idea must have been attractive. The acceptance of sex as a road to divinity in Tantra satisfied Yeats's desire for a philosophy that would affirm "an alliance between body and soul our theology rejects."

In Tantric sex the goal of losing self in union with the Godhead is not abandoned but postponed. (253)

Foster also adds to the views held by Cullingford and Brown regarding the cardinal motivation behind Yeats's explicit oscillation towards Tantra. Additionally, he also lists the reason why Tantra seemed to emit the charisma for Yeats in his later years, in sheer contrast to the Indian philosophy of Vedanta, which largely determined Yeats's credo in his younger days:

[T]he Tantric system emphasised the mystical and symbolical use of sex, through the transfiguring power of desire and the possibility of externally realizing ecstasy. These ideas had found their way into WBY's recent changes to *A Vision* (where both the Swami and Bhagwan Shri Hamsa were also belatedly inserted into the Great Wheel). Tantric philosophy

advocated the integration of a physical dimension with spiritual insight—which was, at this stage of his life, more exciting to WBY than the Vedantic philosophy of transcendent calm suggested long ago by Chatterjee. Much of what he studied with Swami taught the allowance for human passions included in Puranic Hinduism, and expressed by Patanjali's Yogic discipline. (*Arch Poet* 537-38)

In his introduction to *Mandukya Upanishad* (1935), Yeats's displays his growing maturity and understanding of the cosmic union of Shiva and Sakti in Tantra. He writes:

Tantric philosophy, where[in] a man and a woman, when in sexual union, transfigure each other's images into the masculine and feminine characters of God, but the man must not finish, vitality must not pass beyond his body, beyond his being. There are married people who, though they do not forbid the passage of the seed, practise, not necessarily at the moment of union, a meditation, wherein the man seeks the divine Self as present in his wife, the wife the divine Self as present in the man. There may be trance, and the presence of one with another though a great distance separates. (162-63)⁴⁶

This knowledge of the mystical union from Indian Tantra is also reflected in Yeats's significant revisions of *A Vision* in 1937. In "The Great Wheel," Yeats writes about sexual love leading to a divine cosmological formation, which is visibly reminiscent of the union of the divine forces in Tantra:

At Phases 11 and 12 occurs what is called the *opening of the tinctures*. . . . Hitherto we have been part of something else, but now discover everything within our own nature. Sexual love becomes the most important event in life, for the opposite sex is nature chosen and fated. Personality seeks personality. Every emotion begins to be related to every other as musical notes are related. It is as though we touched a musical string that set other strings vibrating. (*AVB* 65)

The beautiful analogy of the vibrating strings leading to the production of music is also a commonly used metaphor for the interlinking of people and roles, or even a shared bond

⁴⁶ Guha explains the difference between the actual realization of the cosmic union through the withholding of vitality, and the materialistic reality of a sexual union, "But whereas Tantra claims that through Yogic practices the moment of resolution can be boundlessly prolonged, Yeats admits human inadequacy, and concedes that the marriage bed 'were more than symbol could a man there lose and keep his identity, but he falls asleep. That sleep is the same as the sleep of death.' The suggestion is that we can only have a momentary glimpse of the solved antinomy, but the satisfaction of attaining it permanently is always to remain a dream" (123).

between a human and a divine (through *bhakti*).⁴⁷ It is also used to suggest the feeling of a mystical union between a mortal and an immortal.

Yeats incorporated his notions on the wisdom and freedom of the East, sexuality, both mortal and cosmic, and the theory of mystical union and transcendence in his verse and other literary works as well. The hero of Yeats's unfinished autobiographical novel *The Speckled Bird*, for example, seeks to "improve Christianity by reconciling it with natural emotions and particularly with sexual love" by looking for the roots of the philosophy of sexual love featuring as a symbol of divine love in poetry:

He was going to the East now to Arabia and Persia, where he would find among the common people . . . some lost doctrine of reconciliation; the philosophic poets had made sexual love their principal symbol of a divine love . . . surely he would find somewhere in the East a doctrine that would reconcile religion with the natural emotions, and at the same time explain these emotions. All the arts sprang from sexual love and there they could only come again, the garb of the religion when that reconciliation had taken place. (qtd. in Ellmann, *Identity of Yeats* 52)

As has already been demonstrated, Yeats took keen interest in the aspect of Tantra where man and woman merge together and transform into a single body in the moment of ecstasy. Roy Foster reads this Tantric sexual ritualistic practice in Yeats's "Supernatural Songs" (1934). He writes: "[T]he force of the 'Supernatural Songs' resided in their sexual charge. Tantric images, lovers coiled and circled together, orgasmic metaphors (shivering, sweetness, crying) express the confluence of divine inspiration and carnal erotics: the soul penetrated by the Godhead. At stroke of midnight . . . How can she live till in her blood He live!" (*Arch Poet* 503). Amidst a galaxy of critics and biographers who choose not to read too much of Tantra into Yeats's works, Foster's interpretation comes as a relief!

More significantly, perhaps, the force of sexual union leading to the creation of life and history is nowhere better expressed than in Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" (1924), though Yeats uses the metaphor of "the white rush" in some other verses. Yeats emphasizes that the feminine and the masculine principles (Shiva and Shakti) of the

⁴⁷ *Bhakti* literally means complete devotion or surrender to a personal deity. The Bhakti movement grew as an alternative movement in Hinduism in medieval India, providing an individual an alternative path to spirituality and salvation, irrespective of gender or caste. Some popular figures associated with Bhakti movement are Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallabhacharya, Chaitanya, Mirabai, Kabir and Tulsidas and Surdas, to name a few.

universe govern our civilizational movement. In *A Vision*, Yeats places the poem “Leda and the Swan” to symbolise the sexual (here, also violent) turn that takes place when the history of human civilization changes. Armstrong draws attention to the sexual energy involved in the “divine rape” of Leda leading to the birth of Helen, which connects with the point of ‘annunciation,’ and hence ‘creation,’ in *A Vision*: “As a metaphor for a divine influx, incarnation appears in his theories of both individual creativity and of history. In *A Vision*, ‘annunciation’ is one term for the point which marks a shift in historical cycles. . . . The mechanism which triggers such cycle is usually sexual—a fact reflected . . . in the divine rape in ‘Leda and the Swan’” . . . (43).⁴⁸ In her comparative study of Yeats and Blake, Kathleen Raine also makes a similar observation: “To both poets [Yeats and Blake] the mystery of sex lies in its being a meeting-point with the ‘other’, timeless world from which the souls descend into the time-world. In the ‘Leda and the Swan’ Yeats presents the overwhelming realization that through ‘a shudder in the loins’ all history with its tragic events comes into being” (*Blake to Vision* 50). To see the underlying philosophy at work, one will have to trace the journey of Yeats’s views on sexuality and creativity backwards from here. And the signs will become obvious: Yeats’s outlook is that of Tantric sexuality leading to mystical union; mortal love coalescing with transcendence; sexuality breeding life, beauty and creativity; and sex being intimately tied up with history.

Yeats’s repertoire of knowledge in Tantra and Indian philosophy growing, and so was his knowledge of mystical and esoteric symbols, metaphors and iconography. One example that can be taken up for an incisive deliberation here is that of the *ardhanarishvara/ ardhanarishwar* (the androgynous image of Shiva and Shakti). From his time at the Golden Dawn, Yeats was familiar with the Indian icon of the *ardhanarishvara*. In the automatic session held between March 20-May 6, 1919, Yeats had asked of the Medium questions related to sixth sense, the reply to which was “sexual,” “sexual sense” and “visual desire.” In her note, George Yeats write: “Every normal sexual image is bisexual because there is the thinker as well as the thing thought on – it is purely emotional” (Harper, *Making of Vision Vol. II* 255).

Later, in a letter written on November 28, 1936 to Dorothy Wellesley, Yeats wrote, “My dear, my dear—when you crossed the room with that boyish movement, it was no

⁴⁸ All references to Armstrong in this chapter are to Tim Armstrong’s article “Giving Birth to Oneself: Yeats’s Late Sexuality.”

man who looked at you, it was the woman in me. It seems that I can make a woman express herself as never before. I have looked out of her eyes. I have shared her desire” (Wellesley 118). Yeats is clearly referring to the male and female propensities inherent in all human beings. However, this clear expression, one must remember, is an outcome of his protracted readings of Indian philosophy for the past four to five years, with Swami.

Again, in his section titled “The Soul in Judgement” of *A Vision* (1937), Yeats gives a clearly mystical description of the possibility of union between mortals and immortals, human and divine, quite akin to the idea of cosmic union:

So closely do all the bonds resemble each other that in the most ascetic schools of India the novice tortured by his passion will pray to the God to come to him as a woman and have with him sexual intercourse; nor is the symbol subjective, for in the morning his pillow will be saturated with temple incense, his breast yellow with the saffron dust of some temple offering. Such experience is said, however, to wear itself out swiftly giving place to the supernatural union. Sometimes the God may select some living symbol of himself. If the ascetic is a woman, some wandering priest perhaps, if a man, some wandering priestess, but such loves are brief” (AVB 174-75)

One can clearly read some possibilities working out here: the description of a brief mystical union was possibly a result of Yeats’s readings in Indian mysticism and philosophy and might have been attested to by Purohit Swami himself; or it might be an account of an experience of *bhakti*, of which he might have known from books of Indian philosophy or poetry, particularly Vidyapati’s *Bangiya Padabali: Songs of the Love of Radha and Krishna*, and/or Swami; or it may be an amalgamation of medieval mystical accounts of Indian *Bhakti* movement and his reading of St. Teresa of Avila, whose books are also to be found on the shelves of Yeats’s personal library.

The metaphor of androgyny in *Ardhanarishvara*, the symbol of the phallus (representative of Shiva as the *shivalingam* in India), and Shiva’s drum: all associated to Shiva, a supreme force of Shakti in Tantra, found their way into Yeats’s “Supernatural Songs.” Cullingford writes, “If ‘Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillinn’ abolishes the prominence of the phallus in the androgynous intercourse of angels, ‘What Magic Drum’ imagines an androgynous maternal male. Yeats found his metaphor in Swami’s account of Bhagwan Shri Hamsa” (256-57). Writing about the image of “self-begetting” in the “Supernatural Songs,” Armstrong suggests, “In sexual terms, ‘Self-begetting’ implies a

reintegration of the feminine and the masculine within the self. That energy which had flowed through the female, and was released in sexuality, is held within the self, and releases energy to the self. Yeats seeks to beget or bear himself on the model of the God of the ‘Supernatural Songs’ . . .” (47).

However, the complexities inherent in Yeats’s use of tantric symbols, especially those related to sexuality, have given rise to numerous hypotheses and arguments. For instance, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford believes that Yeats was drawn towards Tantra because of his “personal struggle with impotence” and Margret Mills Harper, confirming Cullingford’s argument but approaching the subject with caution and subtlety, maintains that “Tantrism . . . [emphasizes] on sensuality and eroticism as a pathway to emancipation and rebirth. The spirituality of non-orgasmic sex, an essential affirmation of the connection between body and soul, and the eternal nature of desire (as opposed to the fatality of the satisfaction) are themes in the late works [of Yeats] that are traceable to this [Tantric] influence” (“Yeats’s Religion” 62-63); David Soud believes that Tantra for Yeats, “affirmed the passions as a means to liberation, the phenomenal universe as divine, and history as self-revelation of an eternal Self” and goes a step further to make another hypothetical assumption that “he [Yeats] partly intended the Steinach procedure to enable him to pursue Tantric sexual practices” (57, 68); while R. F. Foster, as has also been pointed out earlier, is of the view that Yeats incorporated Tantric sexual symbols in his work owing to the fact that the “Tantric system emphasized the mystical and symbolic use of sex, through the transfiguring power of desire and the possibility of externally realizing ecstasy” (*Arch Poet* 537).⁴⁹

Western scholars have, time and again, critiqued the references to Tantra in Yeats’s work, especially, and sometimes exclusively, with reference to the usage of sexual

⁴⁹ Soud writes, “As Cullingford has argued, Yeats’s interest in the Tantric spiritualization of sex may have been connected with his ongoing concern over sexual impotence. Tantric practice may have seemed to Yeats the metaphysical analogue of the Steinach operation he underwent physically in 1934; given his interests at the time, it is not out of the question that he partly intended the Steinach procedure to enable him to pursue Tantric sexual practices” (67-68). One cannot help but notice how flawed Soud’s take on Cullingford’s argument is. Yeats knew about the Steinach procedure much before 1934, and his decision to undergo the surgery at the age of 69 was clearly not a decision he had taken “to enable him to pursue Tantric sexual practices.” It has been pointed out innumerable times, both by critics and in the present study, that for Yeats, Tantra became synonymous with a metaphysical, transcendental, liberating philosophy in at least the last decade of his life, or, after he met Swami. Yeats was clearly not looking to rekindle physical or sexual potency, but literary and creative powers.

symbols. Nonetheless, one is of the opinion that in order to be able to understand the connotative meanings of Yeats's symbols and philosophy, oscillating between the sacred and the profane, one needs to look into the personal motivations of Yeats as well as analyse his sexual symbols against the backdrop of the socio-cultural context of the early twentieth century in which orientalism and the subject of sexuality led to the creation of a new intellectual discourse in Europe. Moreover, the use of sexual symbols in Yeats's work has far-reaching significances, and should not be taken as blatant or sensational representations of sexual energies and copulation in his poetic or dramatic landscape, assuming wrongly that Yeats possibly resorted to doing in his writings what he could not in reality owing to his old age and impotence. The general assumption that Yeats's impotence was the driving force behind his pursuit of tantric knowledge, which later also led him to undergo the steinach operation in 1934, again amount to a gross underestimation of the Tantric readings Yeats had been indulging in since the time he was a teen. We have already examined how after his first introduction to Tantric philosophy at the occult societies, as the years went by, Yeats's enchantment with and readings in Tantra only grew stronger. It was a mere coincidence that as his pursuit of Tantra got stronger, he met Purohit Swami who was to train him better in Indian philosophy and clear out his doubts and suspicions regarding the philosophical and Tantric axioms he might have encountered in their readings together.

Before one arrives at any hasty conclusion, it is absolutely imperative to single out why Yeats's keen pursuit of Tantra philosophy, especially in the last few years of his life, should be read more in terms of aesthetics and mysticism rather than sexuality and his personal struggle with his sexual inadequacies. One would rather side with Armstrong's beautifully expressed position in this regard: "The impotency he feared was both physical and creative, cutting across the boundaries of life and art" (39). In fact, even Ellmann makes a very mature critical observation when he describes "the late period which followed Yeats's Steinach operation in 1934" as "Yeats's second Puberty" (qtd. in Armstrong 39). She further writes: "The operation, Ellmann argues, 'symbolized for Yeats his attempt to impose potency upon impotency' and produced an influx of startling new material, 'salted' by a resurgence of sexual energy" (39). Perhaps the very metaphor of renewed sexual energy also, in Brown's interpretation, takes on the garb of asceticism and "Self-denial." Brown observes: "Late Yeatsian orientalism is not just a matter of sexual theology and technique, gender exchanges and enhancing, comparativist

perspectives. Oriental supernaturalism in late Yeats has its ascetic aspect, its extremism of self-denial. . .” (354).

Additionally, one needs to be reminded of the other dimensions of Tantra philosophy which get subsumed under the hullabaloo of sexuality. According to Philip S. Rawson, organiser and cataloguer of the Arts Council’s exhibition of Tantrik Art in 1971, “Tantra is . . . a cult of ecstasy focused on a division of cosmic sexuality. Life-styles, ritual, magic, myth, philosophy and a complex of signs and emotive symbols converge upon that vision. The basic texts in which these are conveyed are also called Tantras” (qtd. in Colquhoun 287). Needless to say, Yeats submerged in the whirlpool of Tantric knowledge because of some of the aforementioned attributes of Tantra. One can safely argue that it was not just the sexual and magical aspect of Tantra that appealed to Yeats; sexuality in Tantra probably gave him a new philosophy which could explain the ongoing psycho-philosophical debate over the relationship between sexuality and creativity in the early twentieth century. Foster’s reading might also lend support to this view: “The reflection on spiritual and erotic ecstasy intertwined suggest his Indian reading, and found constant reflection in his poetry. . . . In some ways his interest in Indian philosophy has replaced the Freudian intonations of George’s well-read ‘Instructors’, and the analysis at certain points *owes more to philosophy than to psychology*” (*Arch Poet* 602-03, emphasis added).

Ellmann has made a fitting reflection on Yeats’s treatment of sexuality in the last phase of his literary career:

But it would be a mistake to suppose that Yeats’s last poems are the product merely of lustihood. His sexuality remains stylized and expressly symbolic. In old age he related it to another interest which, in a different poet, might have been purely intellectual, the attempt to establish the characters of Europe and Asia, and to bring together those elements that were reconcilable, while holding firmly apart those elements that were not. (*Identity of Yeats* 182)

This may said to hold true as much of Yeat’s last few poems, as of the comparison Yeats strikes in his Introduction to Mandukya Upanishad, in which Yeats went so far as to claim “that Tantric philosophy might have created European romance” (Cullingford 252). Even Guha foregrounds this unusual analogy: “Yeats connects the Tāntric ‘transfiguration of sexual desire’ with the mystical love lore of Northern Europe of twelfth century” (Guha

124). In his Introduction to Mandukya Upanishad (1935), Yeats remarks: “Did this worship, this meditation, establish among us romantic love, was it prevalent in Northern Europe during the twelfth century? In the German epic *Parsifal* Gawain drives a dagger through his hand without knowing it during his love-trance, Parsifal falls into such a trance when a drop of blood upon snow recalls to his mind a tear upon his wife’s cheek . . .” (163). One cannot help but notice uncanny similarities between the metaphor in *Parsifal* and Tantric sexual rituals and practices which lead to the evocation of a state of trance, in which gender/social/cultural identities and prejudices (*purvagraha*-s) melt down in the ecstasy of spiritual union.

In a final analysis, the two ends of the ‘biunity’ of Yeats’s creativity which come to the fore are these: while on the one hand, “[f]rank acceptance and mystical use of sex in Tantra may have shown him [Yeats] the symbolic uses to which sexuality might be put in poetry,” the larger picture of which the former only forms a subset is that “[i]n Yeats’s late poetry the way of the East can indeed seem the way of terrifying negation that leads to the knowledge that reality has its basis in non-being” (Guha 122; Brown 354).

One can also irrefutably distinguish how Yeats is trying to give birth to a novel understanding of the folk and epic narratives, literature, philosophies, and even the peoples and cultures of two spatially and temporally disparate communities, ethnic groups, countries and continents. One can only end up noticing how grand and profound his sight and vision have become, how beautifully he can see the European and Asian cultures dovetailing into each other, and be amazed at how majestic this vision of “the wild and wicked old man” turned out to be! (Harper, *Wisdom of Two* 30)

CHAPTER THREE

Yeats, Tantric Philosophy and *Kundalini*: A Study of Yeats's

The Herne's Egg

The simile of an egg also expresses the fact taught in Occultism that the primordial form of everything manifested, from atom to globe, from man to angel, is spheroidal, the sphere having been with all nations the emblem of eternity and infinity — a serpent swallowing its tail.

-- H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine Vol. I*¹

Instinct creates the recurring and the beautiful, all the winding of the serpent; but reason, the most ugly man, as Blake called it, is a drawer of the straight line, the maker of the arbitrary and the impermanent, for no recurring spring will ever bring again yesterday's clock.

-- W. B. Yeats, "Discoveries"²

Leerssen in the section on W. B. Yeats as a playwright in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, adjudicates Yeats's position in the larger discourse of twentieth century theatre as "less marked" precisely because of "[h]is attempt to create a poetic theatre of stillness and ritual," which "made him an idiosyncratic side-product of Symbolism and the *fin-de-siècle*" (59). One assumes Leerssen has Yeats's last few plays in mind while writing this, but *The Herne's Egg* more than any other. W. B. Yeats's play *The Herne's Egg* (1938) is possibly his most intriguing play, with numerous layers of symbolic meanings, most of them emerging directly out of Yeats's esoteric pursuits throughout his life. Because of its overt portrayal of a sexual act between mortals and an immortal, the play immediately slipped into controversy and was turned down by the

¹ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine Vol. I* 65.

² Yeats, "Discoveries," *Early Essays* 209.

Abbey Theatre on charges of being obscene and blasphemous.³ However, from the vantage point of Yeats's well-pondered idea of theatre and his philosophical take on sexuality, *The Herne's Egg* occupies a significant position in Yeats's oeuvre, and should not be readily dismissed.

V. Y. Katak opines that Yeats's absorption in Indian philosophy "was persistent, and it lasted till the end and it was not based on personal encounters only" (Macwan 88). As the foregoing inquiry has illustrated at length, Yeats, especially in the later years of his life, started reposing unflinching faith in the concept of mystical union of mortals and immortals, of the corporeal with the divine. While he had employed this idea in his earlier works as well, the myth of the communion of the human and the divine came full circle in *The Herne's Egg*.⁴ Though this thought had held the attention of Yeats from his youthful days at the Hermetic Society and the Golden Dawn, when he was exploring and experimenting with different systems of esoteric knowledge, the unusual allegory was employed to bewildering effects by him in the last verse play, which, predictably enough, could never be staged in Yeats's lifetime.⁵ As Yeats himself pointed out in the preface to *The Herne's Egg and Other Plays* (1938): "'The Herne's Egg' was written in the happier moments of a long illness that had so separated me from life that I felt irresponsible; the plot echoes that of Samuel Ferguson's 'Congal,' and in one form or another had been in my head since my early twenties" (qtd. in *Collected Plays*, 915). Richard Taylor argues that the play "is very private and esoteric. The various themes and images which have been explored one at a time in earlier works are now being integrated into a single dramatic unity. . . ." (*Reader's Guide* 153).

The play *The Herne's Egg* has invoked mixed, often sarcastic remarks from puzzled audience and critics alike: while some, like Parkin, labelled the play as a "metaphysical comedy" while Brown saw it as a "black-comedic farce" (Parkin 112; Brown, *Life of Yeats* 356). Some, like Ruth Nevo found it "burlesque and unreadable," while some

³ Foster quotes Yeats's letter to Mannin after the rejection of his play by Abbey: "[I]n Majorca, *The Herne's Egg*, was finally printed. It had remained unperformed. 'It disturbed the Abbey board until I withdrew it. . . . An admiring member had decided that [the] seven ravishers of the heroine are the 'seven sacraments'" (*Arch Poet* 612).

⁴ Yeats exploited the familiar myth of the metaphysical union of the human and the divine figures, most noticeably in "The Wanderings of Oisín," (1889), "Leda and the Swan" (1923), to name a few.

⁵ The play was first staged in 1945 in Dublin.

others, like Joseph Hone found it “too ribald to be produced” (qtd. in Dabić 102). Harold Bloom makes a blithe assertion about the play: “Yeats seems to be attempting a cure for some of his obsessions by ridiculing them. Only tone-deaf scholars could read . . . the play as serious testament to Yeats’s esoteric preoccupation” (329).

However, Yeats’s interests in creating such a play might come in handy to explain away such negative criticisms of one of Yeats’s most philosophical plays/works. As Yeats himself proclaimed: “I want to create for myself an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many” (“People’s Theatre” 131). Although Yeats possibly did not mean this when he wrote the same to Lady Gregory in 1919, but his later plays, especially *The Herne’s Egg*, were clearly written with a view to draw mature, philosophically inclined, active audience to the theatres.⁶

One is tempted to stop and ponder: why such enigmatic theatre? The answer might possibly be arrived at by looking deeper into the philosophy and symbolism of Yeats. Trench makes a poignant observation about the theatre of Yeats, how is it different from realist theatre, and why is it supposed to be unique and appear to be an irrational departure from the sensibility of modernism and realism: “In seeking *an alternative reality* to the colonialist tradition, to the onslaught of the modern age, to realist theatre, *Yeats sought a theatre that would promote and enable the imagination on stage and in the minds of the audience*. Yeats’s one-act dramas hark back to a pre-modern world, to one that *celebrates a more spiritual life* and which might be *interpreted by symbol*” (91, emphasis added).

Peter Ure alluding to Yeats as “an image maker *par excellence*” best describes Yeats’s most distinct characteristic as a creative writer (*Mythology* 93). Yeats, hailing from an aesthetically inclined family—his father and brother were professional painters, Yeats was formally schooled in painting and the arts, and his sisters too painted—had been surrounded by images as a child and a teenager. During his youthful years, as has been mentioned earlier, he joined various esoteric societies which primarily worked with various philosophies of the world, especially symbols from different cultural and temporal zones. One of the most peculiar features of the Golden Dawn, for instance, was

⁶ “Perhaps I shall never create it, . . .” writes Yeats in the next line of the essay (“People’s Theatre” 131).

the intelligent engrafting of Western images, symbols and concepts over analogous Eastern counterparts.⁷

One such significant concept was that of *Kundalini*, a psycho-spiritual power, which was intertwined with the Cabbalah symbol of *Sephiroth* (The Tree of Life, a mystical symbol similar to *kundalini*) and extensively used in the meditation technique of the Golden Dawn. They were both techniques used in two different cultural contexts as esoteric methods of meditation to arouse the ultimate power within an individual and attain a mystical union with the Ultimate Unity. Thematically, these two symbols are analogous, with difference in the number of stages and pictorial representations. Yeats had always been an avid learner and astute observer of symbols, metaphors, techniques and rituals. Moreover, the techniques involved arousal of the feminine aspect within one's self to reach a mystical union with the masculine Unity/Self in an esoteric and occult worldview. These meditational procedures and philosophies, as well as the binary of the sexual discourse involved in the same, might have caught Yeats's attention, and become a part of his reservoir of symbols and rituals which he would put to use later in life.

The long gestation period of the play (almost three years) also reflects on Yeats's personal struggle with his sexual impulses (after the steinach operation) and his creative potency. From the viewpoint of Yeats's later belief in mystical sexual union leading to creative potency, his belief in the impregnation of Western ideas and symbols with Eastern concepts and images leading to the creation of new metaphors, Yeats's favoured admiration of Indian and Eastern traditions, and his quest to write a verse play for the world stage, *The Herne's Egg* becomes a very significant subject of study.

Having set the tone for the deliberation that is going to ensue, this chapter undertakes a critical study of Yeats's *The Herne's Egg*, specifically, but also other works by way of a comparative methodology, through the prism of a specific aspect of Tantra philosophy: the use of sexuality for the awakening of *kundalini*. The chapter will begin with a brief introduction to *kundalini*; which will be followed by a discussion of Yeats and *kundalini*; followed by a brief survey of the opinions held by various critics on the Indian/Upanishadic/Eastern aspects of his last verse play *The Herne's Egg*, eventually leading to a detailed analysis of the play through the lens of *kundalini* which will include

⁷ One must bear in mind that Yeats came to Golden Dawn after his brief experience at the Theosophical Society, and was associated to the Golden Dawn for more than thirty years.

insights into the plot, characters, stage directions and the title of the play; and finally conclude with an exploration of how Yeats metamorphosed esoteric knowledge into an exoteric form of art, especially when read in the light of *kundalini* in Tantric philosophy.

The Significance of *Kundalini* in Tantra Philosophy

To understand the concept of *kundalini*, one will have to take a brief detour and explain the premises from which the idea of *kundalini* emanates. According to the Hindu view of the creation of the world in Tantra, Siva is “the efficient cause and primary principle of creation,” while Sakti is “the operative principle which activates her causal matrix” when Siva so desires and affords her the opportunity to do so (Fig 28). However, Siva and Sakti, one must understand, are not two separate principles; they exist as a biunity. The Universe is designed when “Siva awakes his Sakti to transform himself through her, from his undifferentiated and unmanifested state of cosmic consciousness, into differentiated and manifest consciousness in the form of Sakti-Tattva created beings” (Fig 28).

Having laid its foundation in the broad theory of creation based on the primal principles of Siva and Sakti, Tantra also describes the method, “Yoga or Sadhana,” through which an individual can evolve and “transform its consciousness to awareness of its inner divinity and merge in Siva’s consciousness” and hence become “eternal” (Fig 34). “The method,” writes Fig, consists of “Mantra, Tantra and Kundalini” and is referred to as the “Tantra Yoga” (Fig 34). The concept of *Kundalini* (*Kuṇḍalinī*) lies at the heart of Tantra Yoga, the practical aspect of Hindu Tantric philosophy. In a detailed explanation of the facets of Tantra Yoga, Fig offers the following information:

Tantra Yoga is mystical approach towards realization of Truth, which cannot be attained by rational processes because it is transcendental, but only as a result of psychic and mystical experience. The central aspect of the Tantra Yoga is the application of techniques by a seeker (he/Yogin, she/Yogini or Sadhaka/Sadhaki), which awake the Kundalini power residing in their bodies, Kundalini being an intuitive power of dormant divinity in human body. (34, emphasis added)

Urban elaborates that “the task for the Tantric is to arouse and channel the flow of *shakti* or creative energy that circulates throughout the universe, the human body and the social order” (“Omnipotent”). The Hindu Tantra philosophy identifies seven vital *Chakras* (centres of spiritual energy) in the subtle body of an individual, which can be located on the spinal column of the human body. Each of these *chakras* serve the purpose

of linking the physical body of an individual with the subtle or astral body, namely, *Muladhara*, *Svadhithana*, *Manipura*, *Anahata*, *Visudha*, *Ajna* and *Sahasrara*.⁸ The seventh and final *Chakra*, *Sahasrāra*, is supposed to be located at the crown of the head in the physical body, and is taken to be the place where the union of *Śiva*, the masculine principle, and *Śakti*, the feminine principle, occurs.⁹ In Buddhist Tantric philosophy, states Dasgupta, there exist only four *chakras* (plexus) for meditation, namely the lumbar plexus, the cardiac plexus, the laryngeal and the pharyngeal plexus, and the final *chakra* is the cerebral plexus called the “*Uṣṇīṣa-kamala* (the lotus in the head)” (*Tāntric Buddhism* 147). The concept of *kundalini* can also be found in other mystical sects (possibly under different names), but Woodroffe asserts that other religious or mystical cults borrowed the concept from the Hindu tradition and adapted it to suit their own postulations.¹⁰

Many scholars and practitioners of philosophy have elucidated the significance of *kundalini* in the Hindu philosophy of Tantra.¹¹ In his work *Śakti and Sākta*, Woodroffe expounds on the import of *kundalini*: “Kuṇḍalinī Śakti . . . [is] a subject of the highest importance in the Tantra Śāstra, and without some knowledge of which much of its ritual will not be understood” (624). Sri Aurobindo’s also contrasts the virtue of *kundalini* as opposed to Yoga philosophy. He writes, “The process of the Kundalini awakened rising through the centres as also the purification of the centres is a Tantrik knowledge. In our Yoga there is no willed process of the purification and opening of the centres, no raising

⁸ Sri Aurobindo describes the connection between the physical and the subtle body: “The Muladhara from which the Kundalini rises is not in the physical body, but in the subtle body (the subtle body is that in which the being goes out in deep trance or more radically, at the time of death); so also are all the centres. But as the subtle body penetrates and is interfused with the gross body, there is a certain correspondence between these chakras and certain centres in the physical proper” (*Yoga-I* 232).

⁹ According to Fic, “The philosophical foundations upon which Tantrism rests is the Sivadvaita School of Hinduism, which maintains that the Supreme Reality is Siva himself, being a pure consciousness, which is self-illuminous, all-pervading, eternal and absolute. Siva is endowed with a Sakti (a female principle), which is part of him, and eternally coexisting in him” (Fic 27).

¹⁰ Woodroffe, in *The Serpent Power*, sheds light on the fact that “some of the Sufi fraternities (as the Naqshbandi) are said to have devised, or rather borrowed, from the Indian Yogis the Kundalinī method as a means to realization” (2).

¹¹ Most noteworthy among the early writers is the contribution of Woodroffe, who, as mentioned earlier, was initiated into Tantra himself, and extensively translated books on Tantra from Sanskrit and also penned down several detailed and short introductions to Tantra in his lifetime.

up of the Kundalini by a set process either” (*Yoga-II* 460). In revealing the power of the Tantric yoga, Jung is of the opinion that it “produces the light of a higher suprapersonal consciousness” (qtd. in Shamdasani, “Introduction” xxiii).

Kundalini is best understood as the latent energy of humans coiled in the form of a serpent. “Kundalinī is the static form of the creative energy in bodies which is the source of all energies, including Prāna [life breath],” writes Woodroffe (*Serpent Power* 15). The Kundalini Yoga theory postulates that “when the seeker (Yogin) awakes the Kundalini and drives her upward through the spinal cord, in a process called sublimation and transmutation from raw to sublime, she pierces the individual Cakras on its way and by doing so swallows up all . . . instincts and impulses . . . expanding and transforming Yogin’s consciousness” (Fic 35).¹² In his article titled “The Tantra and the Spirit of the West,” Massimo Scaligero explains that in Tantra “begins the unification of his [the seeker’s] soul with the very soul of the world, . . . [and the] union which is realised in all its degrees by virtue of the *Kundalinī-Sakti*, is the final consummation of the *sadhana*” (293). In the aftermath of this unification lies a transformation of the consciousness of the seeker, which leads to the release of creative energies.

One realizes, on a closer examination of the particulars stated above, that it is from the *kundalini* that Tantra fundamentally derives its significance as a practical philosophy (though meant only for an esoteric circle of initiates). Reiterating the importance of Tantra, Dasgupta explains: “[T]he importance of the Tantras, as a science of religious methodology, consists in its analysis of the body and the discovery of all *tattvas* in the nervous system and in the plexus and thus making the body, with the whole physiological and biological process, a perfect medium (*yantra*) for realising the ultimate truth” (*Tāntric Buddhism* 146). Thus, the body of the seeker becomes the vehicle for the mystical union with the Ultimate principle, which can only be attained upon arousal of the *kundalini*.

¹² Describing the “physic-psycho-spiritual process” of the awakening of the Kundalini power, Fic outlines three aspects/stages: the first step is to “generate an intense desire to attain the Cosmic Consciousness,” the second being “chanting a Mantra to generate vibrations of appropriate wavelength to awaken the Kundalini to which she is attuned,” and the last step is “meditation upon a Yantra to attain an inner visualization of the process to guide it through its successive stages” (Fic 35-36).

Yeats and *Kundalini* Yoga

Yeats first encountered the concept of *kundalini* from the Tantric tradition and the analogous concept of *sephiroth* from the Cabbalistic tradition during his brief association with the Theosophical society as a young man. Later, during his involvement with the Golden Dawn, the significance of *kundalini* yoga was duly emphasized upon, especially in the Golden Dawn side lectures.¹³ One can take, for instance, the topic of “Tattva,” under which the different aspects of the *chakras* were duly discussed.¹⁴ As pointed out in the introductory section of this chapter, a synthesis of Western and Eastern symbolism was also well documented and executed at the Golden Dawn. For example, in the ritual of the “Stolistes and Dadouchos”—a ritual meant for purification—the masculine and the feminine powers were evoked following which a *yantra*, i.e., a symbol of the Tantric sacred geometry was prepared and meditated upon. The Stolistes and the Dadouchos were identified thus: “[B]eing thus Water and Fire, Passive and Active, the offices are usually taken by a woman as Stolistes, and by a man as Dadouchos” (MS. 36, 276/6/4, 2).¹⁵ Additionally, the philosophus were asked to meditate on the Cross, while, one must pay attention, the method of meditation resorted to was the *kundalini* yoga. Thus, quite intelligently, the aforementioned esoteric societies, especially the Golden Dawn, fused together Eastern and Western symbols, images, metaphors, techniques and rituals, to offer a completely new object and process of meditation to their subscribers and members.

It is necessary to delve into these sources of Yeats’s knowledge about Tantra, albeit briefly, because it is through such provenance that Yeats became familiar with the existence, as also the creative potential of Tantra philosophy and *kundalini* yoga. Unlike what the critics of Yeats generally believe—generally associating Yeats’s *kundalini* symbolism with a crass interpretation of the erotic and the supernatural—the truth of the matter is that Yeats’s understanding of *kundalini* was very subjective and psychological in approach. David Soud, for example, has described the *kundalini* as “a Tantric name for both the Goddess and the liberating spiritual energy within each human being,” basing his

¹³ The lectures which were given to senior adeptus in the Golden Dawn.

¹⁴ “Tattva” in Sanskrit may mean “principle,” “thatness,” “truth,” or “reality.” Many schools of Indian philosophy consider a *tattva* to be an element or an aspect of reality.

¹⁵ Yeats, George. “*The Elephant File.*”

reading of *kundalini* almost exclusively on the book by Purohit Swami (62). Soud also describes at length the explanation of *kundalini* offered by Purohit Swami in his book *An Indian Monk*, without realizing that Yeats had known about *kundalini* much before he came in contact with Swami. The meeting and friendship with Swami only rekindled his interest in *kundalini*.¹⁶ Soud, like most Western critics, fails to delve into the philosophical and psychological seriousness that Yeats attached to *kundalini* and Tantra Yoga.

Moreover, many of Yeats's friends and acquaintances were working on similar ideas around this time. One of Yeats's acquaintance, G. S. Arundale, came out with *Kundalini: An Occult Experience* in the year 1934, which describes the various aspect of the subtle serpent-fire that has forever been shrouded in mystery. He describes the movement of the Kundalini in a poem titled "There is a Hush of the Silence of Eternity": In the Silence the clarion call of a pure Note of Forthgoing causing the Silence to vibrate in the rhythm of its own perfection . . . / Again begins an evolution. / And all are knowers in the Becoming" (106).

Additionally, Yeats's approach towards Tantra, and especially the concept of *kundalini*, is also markedly different from that of psychoanalysts like Jung. Clarke explains how Jung found in the explanation of *kundalini* yoga an affirmation for his own psychoanalytical researches and postulations on the role of the unconscious, which was also at variance with that of Freud:

Jung was seeking to emphasise 'the purposiveness of unconscious tendencies with respect to personality development.' . . . [I]n contrast with Freud [whose method was too "analytical and reductive"], he was developing his own idea of the libido as a general, non-specific psychic energy, and some of the main ideas of Hindu philosophy struck him as demonstrating a remarkable parallel with his own. It was in the context of this search for an alternative way of thinking about the psyche that 'important parallels with yoga have come to light, especially with

¹⁶ In his autobiography which Yeats had read, Swami narrates his experience of *kundalini* awakening thus: "I wept and wept. I could not longer bear the pangs of separation from the Divine Master, and slept very little. The flesh was an agony; the senses, coals of fire; with bones shattered to pieces, blood boiling, and tears that never ceased, my whole frame received electric shocks difficult to sustain. I refused to speak. My legs refused to carry my weight; hunger became a torment; the fire of the mystic Kundalini, the serpentine fire, was mounting within me" (79-80). It seems from Swami's writing that he did not leave any stone unturned in playing up to the tunes of Yeats. He wrote and spoke what Yeats liked to hear from him, in the process sometimes—one has reasons to believe—also cooking up stories and mystical experiences.

Kundalini yoga and the symbolism of Tantric yoga. These forms of yoga', he went on, 'with their rich symbolism afford me value comparative material for interpreting the collective unconscious. (104)

One has to bear in mind that one of the primary reasons behind the dissimilarities in their approaches lay in the fact that Yeats, being a creative writer, always sought to venture into far eastern concepts for his metaphors and symbols, while Jung's goal was purely psychoanalytical. However, both Yeats and Jung, in their recourse to a comparative philosophy and mythology towards their respective ends, zeroed in on the Indian Tantric philosophy. And rewarded they were, in the rich symbolism of the *kundalini*.

The concept of *kundalini* based on the interplay of the feminine and the masculine, the lunar and the solar cycles, detached-sexual union leading to a state of trance and mystical union, the realization of the Ultimate Self through meditation, and the release of the creative spring as a result of the mystical union with the divine: all these facets of the *kundalini* in Tantric Yogic system gave Yeats a sound philosophical foundation for his system. The knowledge about *kundalini* yoga was a manifestation of Yeats's life-long pursuit of a philosophy which would be at the core of his life and works. Ravindran elaborates on the noteworthiness of the philosophical foundations of *kundalini*, i.e. the Yogic and Tantric belief in the idea of bipolarity, which formed the pivot of Yeats's own system and philosophy:

Although slowly, Yeats learned the most central concept in Indian tradition which wove life, religion, philosophy and art of ancient India into a unified whole: the concept of the Self, which created a bipolar vision—one that centered around the idea of the individual self and the other around that of the Supreme Self. . . . Most of the other Indian ideas, like the four stages of the self, the Karma and rebirth, which were pleasing to Yeats, were generated and sustained in the context of the bipolarity of the idea of the self ("Preface" vii).

The fundamental explanation and methodology behind *kundalini* beautifully ties up with T. McAlindon's postulation in his essay "Divine Unrest," who has correctly pointed out that Yeats wanted to form his own religion which would be flexible and unorthodox. Furthermore, posits McAlindon, Yeats's proposed religion "would have to be mystical, unconventional and sensuous, for Yeats was all these . . . it was an eclectic fusion of whatsoever appealed to him in mystic or poetic doctrines" (153). Against his Father's scepticism for the supernatural mired in a Victorian interpretation of religion and society,

the ideas associated to the union of Śiva and Śakti provided Yeats with a folk-mythological narrative which would bring together all his ideas, speculation and imagination into a single coherent system.

The impact of Eastern esoteric Kundalini yoga on Yeats's consciousness was much more than critics like David Soud have attempted to read in their works. In critically analysing the esoteric aspect of Yeats's mind, one must understand that his creative imagination was an outcome of his training at the esoteric and mystical groups like the Theosophical society, the Golden Dawn and other esoteric organisations. While delving into the 'murky' water of Eastern esotericism, Western critics tend to sweep the myriad Eastern interests of Yeats under the carpet, projecting, as an alternative, a Western counter-narrative for all possible myths, symbols and philosophy. Frequently, they also try to cast the poetic-artistic persona of Yeats into one hopelessly bewildered by the psychical powers that Eastern mystical and occult philosophy offers to its followers, also sometimes 'tormented' by Eastern occult philosophy, rituals and practices.

Critics' Eastern Readings of *The Herne's Egg*

An insight into the variegated readings by critics on the Indian/Eastern elements in *The Herne's Egg* is critical towards an appreciation of the appositeness of the Indian elements in the play. The multiplicity of opinions held by critics will also be germane to an understanding of one's own reading of the play in the light of Tantric Yoga, especially the significance of *kundalini*, which will be offered in the next section.

It cannot be a coincidence that an Indian poet and scholar not only detected, but thoroughly studied the Indian influences on Yeats much before any Western critic did. Haribans Rai Bachchan conducted an extensive research on Yeats's Eastern sources in relation to his occult philosophy between 1952 and 1954 at Cambridge University, the finding of which were also published later as *W. B. Yeats and Occultism* (1965).¹⁷ In his study, Bachchan locates the elements of the philosophy of Karma, transmigration and reincarnation, the philosophy of the Upanishads and some symbols from ancient Indian

¹⁷ Bachchan completed his dissertation on Yeats and Occultism under Prof. T. R. Henn and Prof. G. G. Hough in 1954. Bachchan, however, furnishes another piece of information in the "Author's Preface" to his book, which is quite noteworthy. He writes: "I started working on 'W. B. Yeats and Indian Lore' as early as 1939 at the University of Allahabad ; but the material that I required for my study was not available there, and after two years or so I had to leave the task unfinished" (xiii).

scriptures (194-203).¹⁸ He categorically states (and elucidates the claim in his work by establishing parallels between the Upanishads and the play): “What is philosophical and abstract in *The Upanishads* has been made poetic and concrete in *The Herne’s Egg*. . .” (196).

However, Bachchan also acknowledges intellectual debt to A. Norman Jeffares and Richard Ellmann for spotting the Indian influence on the later phase of Yeats’s literary journey, primarily owing to their access to and/or possession of some of Yeats’s unpublished personal correspondence. Renowned critics and biographers of Yeats like Peter Ure and Richard Ellmann have attempted to analyse the play from a western theoretical perspective while also taking into account some of the oriental ideas that influenced Yeats. F. A. C. Wilson in his work *W. B. Yeats and Tradition* (1958) also reflects on the various literary and philosophical influences in the play, including, among other Western and Irish ones, that of the Upanishads and Patanjali’s *Aphorisms of Yoga*.

Naresh Guha also worked on Yeats from an Indian perspective in the 1960s.¹⁹ In his book, *W B Yeats: An Indian Approach*, Guha identifies *The Herne’s Egg* as Yeats’s response to Tagore’s *The King of the Dark Chamber*. Guha notes that Yeats had been instrumental in the first production of the play in London in 1913, and claims: “Yeats was consciously writing a variation on Tagore’s theme, and was encouraged in this by the doctrinal position of Shri Purohit, whose concepts were less abstract than Tagore’s” (*Indian Approach* 135).²⁰ Kantak writes of its complexity of symbols and finds it “the clearest embodiment of distinctively Indian conceptions about the idea of Godhead, the attitude to sex, the theme of re-incarnation and Samadhi” (Dabić 103).²¹

¹⁸ However, Bachchan is careful to draw out the fundamental difference between the concept of transmigration and reincarnation. He writes: “The traditional Hindu view is that the soul, after death, according to its *Karma*—and there are loop-holes providing escape from *Karma*, the Buddhist conception being more rigid—may take animal or human form, or may even attain freedom from the ‘crime of death and birth’. The Theosophists believed in transmigration, but they held that, once human form had been assumed it was no longer possible to assume animal form” (54).

¹⁹ Guha completed his doctoral dissertation in 1962 at the Northwestern University, and subsequently published the same in the year 1965.

²⁰ All references to Guha in this chapter, unless otherwise indicated, are from *W B Yeats: An Indian Approach*.

²¹ Kantak, V.Y. “Yeats’s Indian Experience.” *Indian Journal of English Studies* VI, 1965: 80-101.

After a gap of almost a decade, Narayan Hegde reiterated that the “change in Yeats’s theoretical ideas about reality which are reflected in the play might have come from ‘his intense Indian phase in his last years,’” also adding that the play does not only employ concepts from Indian philosophy, but also from the Hindu epic *the Ramayana* and the Bhakti movement (Dabić 101).²² Krishna Ponnuswamy (1983) reads “Bridal Mysticism” in the play as a path to realisation of god and Bhakti influences in the play (Dabić 102).²³ Sankaran Ravindran follows in the list of Indians working on the Indian sources of Yeats’s works, especially during his later years. He highlights the Upanishadic influence on the play, as also that of the *Bhagavad Gita* and Tantra philosophy (primarily in the meanings associated with ‘the egg’) in his doctoral dissertation published as *W. B. Yeats and Indian Tradition* (1990).²⁴

In the study of Yeats and India, the period of the eighties was indeed an interesting one. While Indian scholars were repeatedly trying to establish the strong Indian connections of Yeats and busy offering Indian readings of Yeats’s literary oeuvre, critics in the West were trying to paint a converse, or at best, a blurry picture about the Indian sources of Yeats. Heather Martin (1986) opines that Yeats “integrated Eastern thought into his own philosophy, just as he did other religious systems, in order to give him metaphors for an incomprehensible truth” while Ashley E. Myles (1981) suggests that “critics have exaggerated the Indian influence on *The Herne’s Egg* and denies all the Upanishadic overtones in the plot of this ‘highly metaphysical play’ except the similarity to Brahma’s Egg” (Dabić 103).²⁵ While most critics have denounced or covered up the Eastern/Indian Yeats, Richard Taylor (1984), possibly relying on F. A. C. Wilson’s earlier study, points out the possibility of an Indian philosophic reading of the seven ravishers of *Attracta*. He writes:

²² Hegde, Narayan. “W. B. Yeats and Shri Purohit Swami: A Study of Yeats’s Last Indian Phase.” Diss. State University of New York, 1980. (qtd. in Dabić 101)

²³ Ponnuswamy, Krishna. “Yeats and Tagore: A Comparative Study of their Plays.” Diss. Madurai Kamaraj University, 1983. (qtd. in Dabić 101)

²⁴ Ravindran also draws attention to Yeats’s symbiotic relationship with Swami, after meeting whom Yeats could bring his knowledge of the Upanishads, his spiritual experiences and the Tantra system to bear upon his creative writings, both poetic and prose.

²⁵ Myles, A. E. *Theatre of Aristocracy, A Study of W. B. Yeats as a Dramatist*. Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1981. (qtd. in Dabić 103)

The symbolism of the seven men is vexing, but the early interpretation of Congal as *irajas* (passion) and the others as the six attendant vices of Hindu tradition (vanity, jealousy, sloth, anger, greed, and lust) is much more convincing than that of Christianity's seven deadly sins. . . . Their various characters and speeches, however, are not altogether compatible with some of the Hindu vices and another interpretation is required.”
(*Reader's Guide* 155)

Nonetheless, the plurality of perspectives about the Indian elements of the play, however, has only opened the floodgates for newer Indian interpretations of Yeats's works, especially one of his most significant plays, *The Herne's Egg*. More recently, Yeats's biographer, R. F. Foster, has elaborated upon the possibility of a Tantric and Indian mystical reading of *The Herne's Egg*:

The allegorical meaning of the mythic farce, where a priestess in charge of a magical bird's shrine is raped by a group of knights on a quest, remains obscure. Though it echoes the world of Irish sagas (as meditated through Ferguson's *Congal*), it also reflects readings in *Indian mysticism and Tantric wisdom*, as well as WBY's [W. B. Yeats's] eternal belief in the expression of oracular wisdom through unlikely mediums. (Foster, *Arch Poet* 612, italics mine)

Although Foster drops hints about the influence of “Indian Mysticism” and “Tantric Wisdom,” but he did not delve deep into it. The most recent study of *The Herne's Egg*—and also the most detailed and largely convincing—has been undertaken by Dabić, who reads the play by applying the concept of the *trigunas* to the structure and characterisation of the play.²⁶ Besides, Margot Wilson has very recently published an article titled “Yeats Considered as the Archetypal Fool: A Tantric Reading of ‘The Herne's Egg (1938),”” which is a Tantric reading of the play in the framework of Tarot.²⁷ While one was pleasantly surprised to read both the works, one would like to establish at the very outset that though both the writers hint at the idea of *kundalini* in their respective works, none offers a full-length interpretation of the play from the perspective of *kundalini*. In the following pages, one will make a humble attempt to read the play *The Herne's Egg* as Yeats's exposition of the power of *kundalini*.

²⁶ Many references to the works of critics on the Eastern study of Yeats, to which one did not have access, have also been borrowed from Dabić's astounding study.

²⁷ Margot herself claims that her essay considers “Yeats's *The Herne's Egg* (1938) as the journey of the archetypal Fool of Tarot from Indian Vedic and Tantric perspectives” (“Archetypal Fool 1).

The Paradigm of *Kundalini* in *The Herne's Egg*

In the play *The Herne's Egg* Yeats has created a complex philosophy about life, death, reincarnation on the one hand, and the possibility of a mystical union with the Ultimate Unity/One/Self/Soul and the release of an individual's creative energies on the other, by assimilating ideas from Indian mystical and tantric traditions.²⁸ Yeats wrote this play when he was with Purohit Swami in Majorca, and in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley dated November 28, 1935, he wrote: "I have a three-act tragi-comedy in my head to write in Majorca, not in blank verse but in short line like 'Fire' but a large number of four stress lines—as wild a play as 'Player Queen', as amusing but *more tragedy and philosophic depth*" (Wellesley 43, emphasis added).²⁹ A few days later, he writes to Wellesley again. In a letter dated December 16, 1935, he wrote:

I work in my bed till noon at a verse play, . . . very wild but I think well constructed. I think of writing for the first time in sprung verse (four stresses) with a certain amount of rhyme, part may be in the verse of your 'Fire.' Shri Purohit Swami is with me, and the play is his philosophy in a fable, or mine confirmed by him. Every afternoon I go through his translation of the *Upanishads* (Wellesley 46).

Thus, in so writing about his play, Yeats was also drawing attention to the fact that his literary experiment was not only an outcome of his ongoing literary and philosophical collaboration with Swami, but beyond; the play was a literary, artistic and philosophical confirmation of his life-long pursuit of the meaning of life and death, reincarnation and transmigration, art in life and life in art, meditation and creation, sexual and ascetic energies, among other concerns.

Yeats had a deep faith in the idea of the contraries, and the resultant joy that the blending of antinomies could bring to a poet/artist, or even to a discerning reader and critic. In his essay titled, "Poetry and Tradition," Yeats writes unequivocally:

That shaping joy has kept the sorrow pure, as it had kept it were the emotion love or hate, for the nobleness of the arts is in the mingling of

²⁸ Ravindran notes: "The idea reincarnation always pleased Yeats. However, in the last phase of his career, he was unusually enthusiastic about that idea. In 1932, Yeats wrote: "Our moral indignation, our uniform law perhaps even our public spirit, may come from the Christian conviction that the soul has but one life to find or lose salvation in : the Asiatic courtesy from the conviction that there are many lives" (108).

²⁹ The play was later written in one act with six scenes, and not in three acts as Yeats initially anticipated.

contraries, the extremity of sorrow, the extremity of joy, perfection of personality, the perfection of its surrender, overflowing turbulent energy, and marmorean stillness; and its red rose opens at the meeting of the two beams of the cross, and at the trysting-place of mortal and immortal, time and eternity. (*Early Essays* 186).

The theme of the union of contrary forces was to remain a favourite with Yeats, and figures significantly throughout his writing. Peter Ure notes, “In *The Herne's Egg* Yeats invents a myth which expresses in partial form his favourite antithesis of subjective and objective forces” (*Towards a Mythology* 91). The idea of antithesis or antinomies is indeed at the heart of the play, which will be discussed at length later.

There is no doubt that *The Herne's Egg* has a “philosophic depth” embedded within its structure, imageries, myths and symbols, which seem to have been borrowed from various sources, aspects which can look obscure, but cannot go unnoticed. Yeats also claimed that the play is “his [Swami's] philosophy in a fable.” Now, in his introduction to W. T. Horton's *A Book of Images* (1898), a selection of which was also published as a separate essay titled “Symbolism in Painting,” Yeats quotes Blake's idea of a fable: “Fable or Allegory is formed by the daughters of memory” (*Early Essays* 108). On trying to locate the memories of Yeats, one walks down the lanes of his intermittent periods of youthful days of sexual adventure and others of observance of the theosophical advocacy of sexual abstinence, the esoteric teachings related to Tantric cosmic union of the feminine and the masculine powers at the Golden Dawn: possibly an amalgamation of all these gave birth to the fable in the play. However, the play which was written in the last few years of Yeats's life, also proves to be an exceptional trajectory of his spiritual maturity, and presents a picture of what called be called, to use Jung's phrase, the “psychic psychology” of Yeats.³⁰

Richard Taylor also reads the play as a culmination of the long philosophical and literary voyage of Yeats. He writes: “[A]ll this is very private and esoteric. The various themes and images which have been explored one at a time in earlier works are now being integrated into a single dramatic unity whose variety and multiplicity make it a wild

³⁰ “Psychical psychology,” according to Jung, is that which “would express the science of psychical things. The reality we reach there is a psychical reality; it is a world of psychical substance, if we can apply such a term.” Jung further connects the idea to that of kundalini. He writes, “So another point of view to explain the series of the cakras would be a climbing up from gross matter to the subtle, psychical matter” (42-43).

and bewildering departure from Yeats's characteristic minimalism" (*Reader's Guide* 153). What several critics found to be "wild and bewildering" was, however, in Yeats's eyes, "a masterpiece."

Yeats had written another letter about the play, to Wellesley again, on July 2, 1936, which tells us that Yeats took about six months to finish the play and that he considered it to be his masterpiece: "Here however is the emotional diary of my week. Saturday night sleepless; thought I fell asleep for only a few minutes. . . . Rest of the night tried vainly to sleep. Next morning *finish my play*. Triumphant; *believe I have written a masterpiece*. Twelve verses, six lines each" (Wellesley 76). If for nothing else, then solely for Yeats's proclamation about his play, one believes, *The Herne's Egg* deserves to be read in all earnestness.

The Herne's Egg has a distinctly Irish setting. This should not deter one from the resounding Eastern philosophical elements in the play. Sankaran Ravindran rightly notes in the "Preface" to his work:

Even in *The Herne's Egg*, where the ideas dramatized are Indian, he preferred Irish setting and characters. But it was not his loss of interest in Indian tradition that led to Yeats's indirect using of elements of Indian tradition in his later poetry. It has to be remembered that Yeats was pioneering modern poetry in Europe and, therefore, stylistic and technical reasons might have demanded *more subtle and indirect use of Indian elements*. (viii, emphasis added)³¹

Yeats being a symbolist and modernist on the one hand, and a mythologist and a philosopher on the other end of the spectrum, resorted to subtleties of the highest and the most philosophical order. Moreover, there is no denying the fact that Yeats wanted for himself an active audience and readership, and not a passive one. In a review of the play, Yeats's contemporary, Janet Adam Smith skilfully notes that "Mr. Yeats has always made it quite clear for what audience he would like to write his plays, and for what audience he does actually write them" (398). Smith quotes Yeats on this matter: "'They should be written,' he said in his note to 'The Only Jealousy of Emer' (1919), 'for some country where all classes share in a *half-mythological, half-philosophical folk-belief which the*

³¹ Additionally, as has already been discussed in the introduction to this work, Yeats was also a senator and had to keep up to his image of being an Irishman working on Irish myths and folklore. This factor might also have contributed towards his density of language and oblique references to myths and symbols from other cultures, especially the Eastern sources.

writer and his small audience lift into a new subtlety” (398, emphasis added). Smith, however, adds a note of caution when dealing with Yeats’s mythology and the symbolism therein:

Mr. Yeats has all the technique for writing public plays. . . . Yet *his plays remain private and difficult*, for Mr. Yeats is a proud and solitary man. . . . His subjects come from a mythology which is not common even to the friendly audiences which see his plays acted in the Abbey Theatre. They come from *his own private Celtic-classical-cabbalistic-Buddhist amalgam*; and anyone who is not of Mr. Yeats’s circle must be prepared to work hard, not only to enjoy the plays, but even to discover what they are all about. (399, italics mine)

Many critics have, in the past, attempted an Eastern, Indian, Upanishadic, and even Tantric interpretation of *The Herne’s Egg*. However, a Tantric interpretation of *The Herne’s Egg* with the concept of *kundalini* yoga as the point of departure will shed new light on Yeats extension and engrafting of Tantric philosophy on to his plays and poetry.

Despite being Yeats’s last full length play in verse, *The Herne’s Egg* is adjudged a philosophical enigma because of its dream like structure and the liberal sprinkling of mystical and esoteric symbols on the dramatic landscape of the play. “The fantastic element which Mr. Yeats has managed to hold in check for many years has returned with full force in much of his recent work. His new play [*The Herne’s Egg*] . . . is well calculated to displease the reverend and to delight the irreverent because of its extravagant and audacious fancies,” wrote a critic/reviewer in an unnamed article published in 1938 (“Yeatsian Fantasy” 394). This review aptly encapsulated the varied reactions of Yeats’s readers and audience to *The Herne’s Egg*: while some would appreciate the unrealism and irrationality in the portrayals on stage, others would find the very same elements implausible and baffling.

Before analysing Yeats’s incorporation of the Tantric philosophy and *kundalini* in *The Herne’s Egg*, one must take into cognizance the fact that Yeats was very specific in his selection of symbols and images. He always looked for congruence of an oriental symbol or concept he had decided upon in another familiar symbol or concept in Occidental texts and philosophy: “Yeats was borrowing from Indian sources what he could approve of from his own cultural perspective. What he borrowed from his Indian sources depended upon what he liked at a particular phase of his career” (Ravindran 6). Ravindran’s

observation is on mark, as had been demonstrated earlier, in the consonance of the *kundalini* and the *sephiroth* from Tantric and Cabbalistic traditions.

In the Golden Dawn, Philosophus were asked to mediate upon the symbol of fire and the Planet Venus, until the “the expression of universal love” and “conceiving of the Christ.” Interestingly, the last vision in the meditation is described thus: “[T]he sixteen-petalled Lotus should now awaken, and the Fire of Kundalini” (MS. 36, 276/6/4).³² This “sixteen-petalled” *cakra* in *kundalini* yoga represents *Visudha*, further represented by *Ardhanarishwar*, symbolises purification and is represented by the colour white.³³ If one closely analyses this synthesis of symbols, one will find that it is chosen to represent Christ in white attire, a state of purity. The art of synthesising and moulding symbols in the literary furnace of the mind in deep meditation was learnt by Yeats at the Golden Dawn, because it provided him the Tantric techniques and offered the vast reservoir of Eastern symbols and images, but was perfected by him through practice, literary and creative uses.

Yeats’s use of Tantric symbols and metaphors in his poetry and plays clearly reflects upon his struggle against the Freudian idea of sexuality and Victorian morality. Yeats began with incorporating Tantric sexual symbols, and *kundalini*, to be more precise, in his poetry as early as 1918. In the poem titled “Under the Round Tower,” for instance, Yeats expresses the esoteric beauty of love-making:

³² Yeats, George. “*The Elephant File*.”

Also, one cannot ignore the fact that *The Herne’s Egg* has a total of sixteen significant characters (the two kings Congal and Aedh, Congal’s seven associates, Attracta, Attracta’s three female friends, Corney the servant of Attracta, the Fool, and the Great Herne himself or the character of the life-size donkey (the reason why one is pitting the Great Herne against the donkey is this: the Great Herne is never seen, while the donkey is referred to as an important character by Yeats himself in a letter which will be quoted below. However, both do not figure in the list of persons in the play. So there are three possibilities that arise with regards to their counting as characters in the play: both of them can be taken as independent characters, neither of them were intended as characters, or one of them should be considered a character and not both. Clearly, in the first and second case, the possibility of a total of sixteen characters in the play does not hold, while in the third case, it might hold the ground). One cannot, however, at this moment, probe further into this resemblance. Furthermore, with regard to the confusion between whether Congal had six associates or seven, Guha categorically explains that “Yeats’s list of characters . . . shows six and not seven associates of Congal which is misleading. In the actual play a seventh man appears without warning, and one of these seven characters, Peter, finally dissociates himself from the ritual revolt against the Great Herne” (134).

³³ For further details, see Woodroffe *Introduction to Tantra Śāstra* (55).

Of golden king and silver lady,
 Bellowing up and bellowing round,
 Till toes mastered a sweet measure,
 Mouth mastered a sweet sound,
 Prancing round and prancing up
 Until they pranced upon the top (*Collected Poems* 186).

According Kathleen Raine “The movement—up and round—is spiral” (*Yeats the Initiate* 154). The poetic image of the moving *kundalini*, “Prancing round and prancing up,” and then reaching the “top” captures the tantric sexual ritual in which *Śakti* in the form of *kundalini* reaches the *sahasrāra cakra* and unites with the supreme power *Śiva* in a divine and mystical union.³⁴ Even for Saddlemeyr, the poem “is an obvious use of terms from alchemy and astrology to celebrate both sexual and psychic revelations” (121).

The plot of *The Herne's Egg* revolves around the ravishment of Attracta, the high priestess of the Great Herne—who does not figure as a tangible, perceivable character, and only issues signs of his presence in the form of music or thunder—by Congal, the King of Connaught, and his six soldiers to teach Attracta a lesson, when she replaces the Herne's egg served to Congal with an ordinary egg (Congal has forcefully taken away the eggs of Henre, even after Attracta warns him that no one can access or possess them other than women betrothed to the Great Herne). Congal and his men are eventually punished by Attracta, their punishment attested to by the Great Herne. They are all doomed to be born as lesser animals in their next births, and Congal is doomed: he will both to be changed into a fool and die at the hands of a fool. In a dramatic turn of events, the prophecy comes true in such a manner that an injured Congal kills himself, “though not until he has had almost hysterical doubts that he himself may be the Fool who gives effect to the Herne's curse” (Rajan 163-64) and Congal is slated to be reborn as a donkey even though Attracta tries to make a failed attempt to save him from being born into a lesser birth.

³⁴ Kathleen Raine in *Yeats the Initiate* also offers a similar interpretation of the poem. She suggests that this image might have a connection with the symbol of ‘Caduceus of Hermes.’ She points out that in his personal copy of Mead's *Orpheus*, Yeats underlined the description of Caduceus of Hermes as, “a symbolic wand, consisting of a male and female serpent twisted round a central wand. . . . In treatise on Yoga, the male force is called Pingala (the sun force), and the female Idā (the moon force) and the centre tract is dominated Sushumnā, whose locus is man is said to be the spinal cord, for the symbolism applies to man as well as to the universe” (158). She adds that “Mead was a Theosophist and interpreted the Caduceus in accordance with that system, known also to Yeats. This passage . . . might also be understood as an account of the technique of raising the serpent power of kundalini from the base of the spine to the head.” (158).

The play opens with somewhat outlandish stage directions: “*Mist and rocks; high up on backcloth a rock, its base hidden in mist; on this rock stands a great herne. All should be suggested, not painted realistically. Many men fighting with swords and shields, but sword and shield, shield and sword, never meet. The men move rhythmically as if in a dance . . .*” (*Plays* 509, italics in original). The scene opens with two warring kings “motionless,” facing each other: Congal, King of Connaught and Aedh, King of Tara.

That Yeats intended to have a specifically misty stage setting become clear in the instructions, where “*a great herne*” stands on a rock whose “*base [is] hidden in mist,*” “*men fighting with swords and shields*” which never meet, and, most importantly, a stage where everything “*should be suggested, not painted realistically.*” Dabić has also rightly pointed out that “all is ‘*suggested, not painted realistically*’, because realism may cause attachment and, as Knowland notes, it would reduce symbolic interpretation” (109).

The setting of the play, as one believes, also invokes Tantric images through three suggestive symbols: firstly, “*its [the stone’s] base hidden in mist*” suggests the base *cakra*, i.e. the *muladhara*; secondly, the instruction that “[*a*]ll should be suggested, not painted realistically” hints at the subtlety inherent in the universe and the astral human body; and thirdly, “[*t*]he men move rhythmically as if in a dance” brings in the image of men swaying in trance or even the idea of the cosmic dance. When read closely, the description invokes the images from *kundalini yoga*, thereby foregrounding the philosophy that Yeats is going to propound through his dramaturgy.

The characters Congal and Aedh can be taken to represent the two warring forces within the human mind, *kama* (desire, also sexual desire) and *tapas* (asceticism) respectively. One is also informed that these two kings are equal in strength and power and have fought fifty battles, and “all were perfect battles”:

CONGAL. No need to ask my losses.
 AEDH. Your losses equal mine.
 CONGAL. They always have and must.
 AEDH. Skill, strength, arms matched.

 AEDH. Yet we have fought all day.
 CONGAL. This is our fiftieth battle.
 AEDH. And all were perfect battles. (*Plays* 510)

One learns at the very outset that the two kings are existentially interconnected but separate on the physical plane. The beginning of the play, when read in Tantric framework, represents the cessation of outward fight, both between the kings and the soldiers, as well as between the two mental forces or two *puruṣārtha-s* (the goals of human life according to Indian philosophy, generally three in number in the *trivarga* and four in the *caturvarga* worldview). Such a mental landscape ought to be attained by a seeker in Tantra, before she/he can initiate the process of the awakening of the power of *kundalini*.

One must also remember that the play was written after the First World War, and shortly before the Second World War was in the offing. The absurdity of a long war bears some resemblance to the ongoing war between Congal and Aedh, which is characteristically not a long one, but recurrent.³⁵ In any case, readers are never informed why they frequently enter into wars, leading to the assumption that they were altogether absurd and unnecessary. From a Jungian point of view, a physical war always emanates from the psyche, and can be viewed from the vantage point of the psychology of *kundalini*. Jung believes that mankind as a whole cannot proceed beyond the *anāhata*—a *cakra* below the *viśuddha* in the hierarchy of *cakras* in *kundalini*—because of the lack of realization of the futility of war, a psychical point from which all movements of humanity originate:³⁶

[T]he great war has taught practically everybody that the things that have the greatest weight are the *imponderabilia*, the things you cannot possibly weigh, like public opinion or psychical infection. The whole war was a psychical phenomenon. If you are looking for the causal root of it, it could not possibly be explained as arising out of the reason of man or out of economic necessity. . . . It was simply the time when that thing had to happen from unknown psychical reasons. Any great movement of man has always started from psychical reasons; so it is our experience that has taught us to believe in the psychical. (*Psychology of Kundalini* 46)

³⁵ However, a war of any sort would seem equally absurd and futile to a creative writer or artist as any other.

³⁶ In the context of the development of the human psyche, Jung explains *anāhata* as “the center where psychical things begin, the recognition of values and ideas” (*Psychology of Kundalini* 45).

On a metaphorical plane, however, Yeats conveys a philosophically dense idea in the scheme of Indian philosophy as well as Tantric philosophy.³⁷ The play fundamentally seems to revolve around the idea of *kama*, epitomized in the ravishment of Attracta—and that is how most critics have viewed the play, but the connotative meaning of the play emanates from the psychology of *kundalini*, that is, the Jungian “psychical force” which determines every movement and action of mankind. Hence, Congal and Aedh seem to monotonously wage wars after wars to no end. The strife is really in their heads, and no material, credible or tangible reason of the war is ever stated in the play. Both of them, engaged as they are in such meaningless wars, need to stop and rethink to attempt an escape from this vicious cycle of wars, and move towards an arousal of the hidden power of *kundalini*, in a bid to proceed towards a mystical union with the godhead, who, in the play, is the Great Herne. “Neil Mann,” writes Dabić “likens the Great Herne to a symbol for the *Thirteenth Cone* in *A Vision*, which, he believes, stands for the final release” (133). Thus, Mann’s assertion lends support to the ideas expressed below.

The opening of the second scene is quite intriguing, as Corney, a servant of Attracta, enters with “*a donkey on wheels like a child’s toy, but life size*” (*Plays* 511). In a letter dated December 7, 1935, Yeats wrote, “All I think *amusing and strange*. There is a donkey, like a child’s toy, on wheels but life size, *an important character*” (sic) (Yeats and Yeats, *The Letters* 410, emphasis added). The ‘inert’ donkey “*on wheels*” can hence not be dismissed in the light of Yeats’s own emphasis. Moreover, the significance of the donkey to the plot of the play will be expounded upon by Yeats only in the last scene of the play, when it will not only symbolise and seal the fate of Congal, but also becomes representative of Congal’s “psychic force/consciousness” in his sudden and ‘thoughtless’ act of mating with another donkey, which is reminiscent of Congal’s ravishment of Attracta. Additionally, the wheels on which the donkey is brought on stage is symptomatic of the rolling loop of time on which a soul floats, flows and travels until it reincarnates in some other form. The loop of time is the invisible hand behind one’s fate,

³⁷ Terence Brown offers the following assessment of the play: “Where these familiar themes of incarnation and female empowerment in a sexualized supernaturalism were formerly expressed in Yeats’s *oeuvre* in tones of elevated portentousness, ecstatic revelation, sublimity, and more recently in blasphemous, profane zest, in this subversive play they are explored in a dramatic context which admits a scarifying vision of cruel absurdity at the heart of things” (*Life of Yeats* 357). While Brown is not wrong in his interpretation, one will realize that the “cruel absurdity” that he identifies in the play will actually cease to be, when the play is interpreted from a Tantric viewpoint.

which makes one falsely believe that one is in control of one's fate/destiny, when one really is not!

At the opening of Scene II, Corney, who enters with the donkey, utters the following lines, which should be taken due note of:

CORNEY. A tough, rough mane, a tougher skin,
 Strong legs though somewhat thin,
 A strong body, a level line
 Up to the neck along the spine.
 All good points and all are spoilt

 What if before your present shape
 You could slit purses and break hearts,
 You are a donkey now, a chattel,
 A taker of blows, not a giver of blows. (*Plays* 511)

Again, it is hard to miss out the obvious references to the alignment (“a level line”) of the *cakras* (“All good points”) along the spinal column (“Up to the neck along the spine”) in these lines, all of them being clear allusions to the astral body. Since “all [good points/*cakras*] are spoilt,” it signifies the tragedy of a person whose astral body has been deformed, “spoilt” by either excessive physical desire (“A tough, rough mane, a tougher skin, / Strong legs though somewhat thin, . . .”), or by virtue of being thrown into this form/birth (“present shape”) as a punishment for being someone who could “slit purses” and “break hearts” and is hence “a donkey now, a chattel.” What can be worse, the donkey in this birth is “[a] taker of blows, not a giver of blows.” This might also be a suggestion that the donkey was a “giver of blows” in the past birth, and because of his *karma*, was reborn as one who will have to become “[a] taker of blows,” suggesting, essentially, a reversal of the victimizer-victim relationship owing to one's choice of actions. At this juncture, the play already foreshadows the fate of Congal in his next birth, though the audience/readers might not be able to discern this connection at this juncture.

Additionally, a donkey, by virtue of being born as one, is doomed to be “on wheels,” i.e. constantly be used as a replacement for the menial work of transportation, and as an everyday slang, in at least the Indian society, used to refer to a person who is not aware of his qualities or inner strength and is often misused and maltreated. The symbol of the wheels may also be a reference to the ‘great wheel of existence’ in the Buddhist

epistemology, which proposes two contradictory tenets: “[We] are, in fact, bound, as the Buddhists tell us we are, to the ‘great wheel of existence’ and *shall reappear on this stage*, in various roles, again and again; . . . the Buddhists also tell us, *we can escape ultimately from ‘the great wheel’*—but not to none-being, . . . but to some kind of finite timeless perfection (Fraser 22, emphasis added).

Congal enquires from Corney about the procedure to procure the Great Herne’s eggs. Congal, maintains Guha, “has become the ‘eater,’ and . . . wants only to enjoy the whole universe, which is the great Herne’s Egg. Vision of anything higher and greater than the visible universe represented by his seven associates has faded from him” (136). Corney’s reply is quite bemusing, but thought-provoking:

CORNEY. A flute lies there upon the rock
 Carved out of a herne’s thigh.
 Go pick it up and play the tune
 My mother calls ‘The Great Herne’s Feather’.
 If she has a mind to come, she will come. (*Plays* 511)

Ravindran points out that the flute is “a symbol of spiritual quality” (104). It serves as a symbol for the production of music or chanting meant for Tantric meditation, and the mystical union with the Great Herne, the embodiment of Śiva in the play, can only be achieved when “the tune,” meaning a specific song/chant, is played on the flute. The flute made out of “a herne’s thigh” might also have bearings to Tibetan Buddhism, where a similar trumpet made out of a dead person’s thigh bone, called a *kangling*, is used for ritualistic purposes.³⁸ Moreover, numerous critics have read the symbol of the flute as having significant bearing to Krishna, the Indian deity, as well as to the Bhakti

³⁸ A *kangling* is “a trumpet made from a human thigh-bone” which is played in “tantric Buddhist rituals, particularly *chöd*” (“Kangling for Chöd”). Further, and more importantly, “[t]he function of *chöd* is to cut your emotional attachment to your body. Putting a dead person’s leg bone to your mouth—to blow the *kangling* while practicing—is an intimate reminder of your own mortality” (“Kangling for Chöd”). If we look at the meaning inherent in the use of the *kangling*, probably Yeats tried to weave a similar signification into the play. Anyone playing a specific tune on the flute made out of a herne’s bone is supposed to be reminded of his/her mortality, or the futility of corporeality, but as one will see, Congal is so full of himself that he will not undergo any such realization. Moreover, if we equate the song to the chants and *mantras* used in Tantric meditation to arouse the serpent power, then the role of the flute is to initiate one into the process of awakening. So, Yeats probably had the symbolism of Tibetan Buddhism in mind while incorporating the same into his theme of the arousal of *kundalini*.

movement. Guha, for instance, writes, “In Yeats, this music flows out from some mysterious flute which is a clever reference to the famous flute of Kṛṣṇa. We are told that one should play on it with ritual propriety if the priestess is to be lured out from her cave. The analogy of the story of Rādhā’s enticement can hardly be missed” (134).

Attracta, in the Tantric interpretation of the play, would stand to represent the power of the *kundalini*, the serpentine power in its dormant state coiled around the *muladhara chakra*, the feminine *śakti* (power, strength, force), and the Śakti whose nature it is to attain a mystical union with the Śiva (or the Greta Herne in the play). In any case, the fact that Attracta comes out on hearing the music can again be read as Śakti springing into motion in a state of trance on the invocation of the ritual music/chant/rhythm. And lastly, critics often tend to overlook a very significant detail about Attracta, that she is a feminine power endowed with choice and agency: “If she has a mind to come, she will come.” Most critics, readers and audience are taken aback at the ravishment of Attracta, but seldom notice that she is not a flat character in the play, but an individual in her own right. In the Tantric scheme of things, Attracta, the Śakti, will be aroused only when the process of *kundalini* meditation has been executed correctly.

Attracta, however, does come out when Corney plays on the flute for Congal. When Congal expresses his desire to have the eggs of the Great Herne for a feast in the city of Tara, Attracta warns him:

ATTRACTA. Custom forbids:
 Only the women of these rocks,
 Betrothed or married to the Herne,
 The god or ancestor of hernes,
 Can eat, handle, or look upon those eggs. (*Plays* 512)

Attracta’s prohibition is well-meant, but Congal cannot believe his ears! Attracta lays emphasis on “[c]ustom,” and the fact that only women/femininity “[b]ethrothed or married” to the Herne have any kind of access to the Herne’s eggs. Both these references point to the importance of tradition and ritual in the process of *kundalini* meditation. Moreover, the role that only a woman (who herself wants to attain a mystical union with the Supreme, the Śiva) can play by offering herself sexually to a *sadhaka* (seeker) is also underlined in Attracta’s words.

That I may lie in a blazing bed
And a bird take my maidenhead,
To the unbegotten I return, (Plays 513)

This brief dialogue between Congal and Attracta serve well to characterize them: while Congal is a rationalist, deeply seeped in worldly affairs, Attracta is a devotional lady, waiting for her mystical union with her godhead, “a bird,” ready to renounce the world by becoming one with the Great Herne. Congal, a brutal rationalist who would not believe in things and phenomena if they do not exist, identifies the problem with Attracta being “youth that has not yet known pleasure,” and offers to set things right for her in commanding: “pick / Or be picked by seven men, . . .” (Plays 513).

Critics have endlessly wondered and pondered over the number seven: “Their suggestions vary from ‘a Christian’s seven deadly sins’ to ‘seven vices of the Hindu Tradition’ to ‘Madame Blavatsky’s scheme of the septenary nature of man’” (Sato 62). Alternatively, in the Tantric scheme of the plot, the seven men might be read as personifications of the seven *cakras* that need to undergo a mandatory “penetration” by the *kundalini*, for the coiled serpent power to climb up to the seventh and the last *cakra*, the *sahasrāra*. This view is testified to by Wilson, also, though she uses a different interpretive framework with Tantra, that of Tarot: “When read as a metaphor for the *Unity of Being*, the rape of Attracta portrays the coming together of all seven chakras by means of Tantric unified orgasm, initially sexual and eventually leading to the human partaking in the perfection of God . . .” (“Archetypal Fool 13).

Dabić has accurately surmised that “Congal will have to go through a painful process of acquiring spiritual knowledge, mainly about his own self. . . . By denying the existence of the God, . . . [Congal] denies his ‘divine Selfhood’” (116). Even so, this is not the case with Attracta. She is already the enlightened one out of the two: she already *knows* “what may be known,” and “burn[s] / Not in the flesh but in the mind.” She is already treading on the righteous path of self-realization, which entails lying “in a blazing bed” and letting “a bird” take “her maidenhead,” i.e. passing through the path of the ‘ritual’ sexual encounter, to ultimately “return” to “the unbegotten,” the Great Herne.³⁹ Again, the words

³⁹ In his Introduction to “Mandukya Upanishad,” Yeats describes the “sleepless Self,” with whom a union is attained at the highest (fourth) level of meditation, i.e., in the state of *turīya*, as the “creator of all, source of all, unknowable, unthinkable, ungraspable, a union with it [is] sole proof of its existence” (*Later Essays* 157-58).

of Attracta hark back to the philosophy of Tantric *kundalini* yoga, where the female seeker, the one who is “[c]hosen out of all . . . [her] kind,” and who is “betrothed” to the Ultimate Principle, the Śiva, in full knowledge and preparation for the process of the awakening of the *kundalini*, enters into a sexual union with a male seeker.

This sort of a sexual union, as discussed above, transcends the limitations of “the flesh” as it is directed towards a larger goal. The female “burn[ing]” in the mind might also be related to the eagerness and impatience of the mind of the female seeker, the *śakti*, to attain the divine Selfhood.⁴⁰ The symbols of the “bird” may serve as a reminder of how the male seeker is only a representative ‘bird’ of the Great Bird, the ‘self’ who is, after all, only an image of the Self. The return to “the unbegotten” will also lead to the union of the male and the female seeker, the two will become one, the biunity of Śiva and Śakti will ultimately be united, leading to a higher knowledge, an experience of bliss.⁴¹ Clearly, Attracta does not need the help of Congal; it may, however, be the other way round.⁴² If anyone, it is Congal who needs to change his quotidian, unenlightened perception, but it is difficult for him to do so until he lets go of his hard-headed pragmatism.

There are numerous indications of the *kundalini* moving through the *nāḍī* (subtle nerves), penetrating the *cakras*, to reach her Śiva. For instance, Mary describes the movement of Attracta at the “[s]ound of a flute, playing ‘The Great Herne’s Feather’:

⁴⁰ Daniel Albright believes that “‘Attracta has special access to the world beyond the grave, and her flute can summon the god; but she conceives the immanence of the Great Herne almost completely in terms of orgasm’” (qtd. in Wilson, “Archetypal Fool 14-15). One can see how the play would seem absurd, when it is not interpreted in a Tantric framework, or, even for that matter, Indian philosophical framework.

⁴¹ S. B. Dasgupta writes about a similar strain present in Buddhist Tantrism as well: “[Th]e common feature in the Hindu and Buddhist Tantra is ‘a theological principle of duality in non-duality.’ Both the schools hold that the ultimate non-dual reality possesses two aspects in its fundamental nature—the negative (*nivṛtti*) and the positive (*pravṛtti*), the static and the dynamic,—and these two aspects of the reality are represented in Hinduism by Śiva and Śakti and in Buddhism by *Prajñā* and *Upāya*. . .” (*Tāntric Buddhism* 3-4).

⁴² Congal can possibly help Attracta only when he is ready for the enlightenment of the mystical union, which, in the play, he is clearly not.

MARY. Who plays upon that flute?

AGNES. Her god is calling her.

.....

MARY. Her eyes grow glassy, she moves
According to the notes of the flute.

AGNES. Her limbs grow rigid, she seems
A doll upon a wire.

MARY. Her human life is gone
And that is why she seems
A doll upon a wire.

.....

AGNES. She has moved. She has moved away.

KATE. Travelling fast asleep
In long loops like a dancer.

MARY. Like a dancer, like a hare. (*Plays* 517-18)

The movement of *Attracta*, described through her “eyes grow[ing] glassy,” her “limbs grow[ing] rigid,” the fact that “she seems / A doll upon a wire,” who has “moved away” and is “[t]ravelling fast asleep / In long loops like a dancer,” “like a hare,” together form the vocabulary of a trance, wherein a seeker is usually described as one whose eyes are rolling or shining; whose limbs either grow rigid or too loose, as if under someone else’s control; someone who makes puppet-like movements; or movements as if walking in sleep; or moving like a dancer to someone else’s tune, having lost complete control of oneself; or sometimes running “like a hare,” as if to chase someone, run away from someone or running towards someone. Undoubtedly, Yeats had a Tantric state of trance in his mind while penning down this description of *Attracta* reacting to the sound of the flute. F. A. C. Wilson explains *Attracta*’s deep trance as “the mystical state of *Samadhi*” (Dabić 123).⁴³ This description brings out Yeats’s coded message about the subtle energy of the *kundalini*, which can be directed to move upwards only if the inner realization

⁴³ Patañjali explains *samadhi* as “the condition of illumination where union as union disappears, only the meaning of the object on which the attention is fixed being present” (Dabić 123). This is specifically true in the case of *Attracta*, who can only think of the Great Herne, her “object,” to the exclusion of everything else.

takes place. Even the three characters Kate, Agnes and Mary symbolically represent the interplay of the three subtle nerves *iḍā*, *piṅgalā* and *suṣumnā*, through which the Śakti (here, Attracta) reaches the abode of her beloved Śiva (The Great Herne in the play).⁴⁴

The tantric cosmology in the play has been skilfully synthesised with the Promethean myth (represented in the exchange of the thunderbolt) in the image of Attracta lying with her beloved:

MARY. she
 Shall lie there in his bed,
 Nor shall it end until
 She lies there full of his might
 His thunderbolt in her hand. (*Plays* 518)

Later, there is a dramatic turn of events, in Scene IV, when Congal realizes that Attracta had replaced the Herne's egg with a hen's egg, he, along with six other men, decides to ravish Attracta in his attempt to avenge himself upon the Great Herne (who is a formless and intangible god, and hence cannot be hurt or fought directly): "we seven in the name of the law / Must handle, penetrate, and possess her, . . ." (*Plays* 523). When the seven men are standing in a row, waiting for their respective turns to "take" Attracta, Attracta, instead of getting disturbed, agitated, howling or even running away to save herself, instead sings a song in the honour of the Great Herne, anticipating the upcoming 'acts' of the seven men purely in terms of a union with the Great Herne:

ATTRACTA. When I take a beast to my joyful breast,
 Though beak and claw I must endure,
Sang the bride of the Herne, and the Great Herne's bride,
 No lesser life, man, bird or beast,
 Can make unblessed what a beast made blessed,
 Can make impure what a beast made pure.

Where is he gone, where is that other,
 He that shall take my maidenhead?
Sang the bride of the Herne, and the Great Herne's bride, . . . (*Plays* 525)

⁴⁴ Dasgupta writes, "The *Iḍā* is also called the moon, it is of white colour, and is the Śakti; the *Piṅgalā* is the sun, it is of red colour and is the *puruṣa*; *Suṣumnā* is of the nature and of the nature and of the colour of fire" (*Tāntric Buddhism* 154-55).

It is quite interesting to note that *Attracta* is ‘looking forward’ to the ‘act’ in her song. While Helen Vendler is of the opinion that “at this point Yeats introduced a familiar paradox, ‘cruelty descending upon ignorance, purity and blessedness arising out of the impure and unblessed substratum of existence,’” Dabić makes another pointed observation, that “with her [*Attracta*’s] song, implying what is to come, the act of rape as such is nullified, even before it occurs, and the Great Herne’s reign established” (Dabić 123).

The realization that gives her strength and fortitude in this hour is that “[w]hen I take a beast to my joyful breast, / Though beak and claw I must endure,” and she is very sure, “[n]o lesser life, man, bird or beast, / Can make unblessed what a beast made blessed, / Can make impure what a beast made pure.” There is no realistic, plausible explanation that can explain away *Attracta*’s inconceivable reaction to the impending act of her ravishment, except a Tantric interpretation of her reaction as that of a female seeker, who willingly takes a lesser “beast” to her “joyful breast” so as to attain a state “made blessed” and “pure” by another, higher “beast.” *Attracta* clearly has her husband, the Great Herne in mind, and the possibility of attaining a mystical union with him, again, through the act of “endur[ing]” “beak and claw” of another, mortal “beast.” *Attracta* also makes poignant observations about “pur[ity]” and “impur[ity],” about “blessed[ness]” and “unblessed[ness]” through her remarks, driving home the point that these are, after all, man-made concepts, limited to the corporeal existence and the tangible world, and such notions cease to have any existence in a Tantric worldview.

Tantra philosophy perceives the material reality of the world as *avidya* (ignorance) of the real nature of the universe, which is also shrouded in *maya* (illusion). The difference between *maya* and *avidya*, according to Woodroffe, is that *maya* presents unreality as reality, but in *avidya* (ignorance) is inherent the possibility that it can be replaced by *vidya* (knowledge), thus suggesting that it is difficult to transcend the web of *maya*, but not impossible to dispel *avidya* (*Principles of Tantra Vol. I* 311).⁴⁵ However, the only escape possible from this webbed quagmire is the respite one can attain in the macrocosmic reality, that is, Śiva, who is the only reality that can ever exist, but is beyond a form, language, expression, space or even time. The attainment of Śiva becomes

⁴⁵ However, in the context of the play, Congal is just not ready to wear the cap of knowledge, is shrouded in ignorance, and is hence doomed to fall/die.

difficult because one has to let go of *avidya*, but a union with him is made possible because he is outside the periphery of *maya*.

The ravishment by the seven men is alluded to in retrospect in the fifth Act. Or, as Dabić would put it, “The rape takes place, but *Attracta* emerges ‘untainted by it’” (123). Yeats’s use of the sexual metaphor of the ravishment of the semi-divine *Attracta* in the play by Congal and his six accomplices, has invited a lot of flak from readers and critics. The most debated and discussed part of the play is the ravishment of Herne’s bride by the seven soldiers. Interestingly, Yeats did not use “rape” in his play, but most critics have analyzed this play from the perspective of sexual violence. Terence Brown writes: “A black-comedic farce it offers as extremist a vision of sexual excess and religious heterodox as anything in the Yeatsian canon. Risk in the poet’s personal affairs had its correlative in daringly outrageous dramatic experiment” (*Life of Yeats* 356). Claire Nally in *Envisioning Ireland* has compared the act of ravishment with “the hybrid couplings similar to that in ‘Leda and the Swan’” (114). However, once someone gets into the Tantric interpretation of the play, one will realize that the ravishment is, after all, to use Dabić’s phrase, only a “ritual rape” (122). However, even after the act of ravishment having been committed on her, *Attracta* does not seem to be perturbed in the least:

CONGAL.

The seven that held you in their arms last night
Wish you good luck.

ATTRACTA. What do you say?
My husband came to me in the night.

CONGAL. Seven men lay with you in the night.
Go home desiring and desirable,
And look for a man.

ATTRACTA. The Herne is my husband.
I lay beside him, his pure bride.

CONGAL. Pure in the embrace of seven men? (*Plays* 526)

Attracta’s only refrain is that she, the Herne’s bride, lay with the Great Herne, her husband last night (the night of the ravishment according to Congal). Congal fails to comprehend her words, because he does not look at the ‘act’ the way *Attracta* does; because he does not have the initiation, knowledge, or enlightenment that *Attracta* is

blessed with; because she is seeker while Congal is not; because she is the Śakti awaiting the mystical union while Congal has no realization of his identification with the Great Herne, or Śiva. From the perspective of Congal, all his actions are mired in desire, sexuality and materiality; while in the eyes of Attracta, everything is spiritual and other-worldly. “Attracta’s conviction” opines Dabić, “is inconceivable to his ego, causing a crisis of Congal’s royal, male authority” (126). “Besides,” writes Dabić, “by denying the rape she [Attracta] renders the male weapon useless and turns the punishment into a vehicle of joyful alliance with the Godhead. There could be no greater shame and punishment for the king (who questioned her sanctity) than Attracta’s act of subversion in which the victim takes control and strikes back, choosing God . . . over man” (127). Terence Brown also makes a very valid observation about the same (though not from a Tantric perspective). He opines:

In fact, Attracta, in a divinely inspired trance knows herself possessed of the god in a night of mysterious passion. As we see in her authoritative exchange with Congal the following day, she is a Leda who has put on Zeus’s knowledge with his power. For a moment she is no longer merely the priestess but the bride of a god. The male chauvinism of Congal and his men is shown to be ridiculous in face of woman as priestess and goddess (Brown, *Life of Yeats* 357)

As one might notice, Attracta is the actual hero and protagonist of the play, who not only stands bravely in the face of violence, but also commands Herne in the play. In Jeffares’s and Knowland’s reflection on Ure’s reading of the main characters, Congal’s “assertion of freedom and selfhood . . . are . . . foolish”, for he is merely a puppet, while the heroine “represents the reality of the mystical life” (qtd. in Dabić 101). Being a priestess, she is endowed with the fine eye to see beyond the obvious, the mundane world, which is transient. Being a representative of the feminine principle of Śakti, she orders the world around her, and is also the vehicle to attain a union with the Ultimate masculine principle, Śiva.

In the tantric cosmological myth, the union between Śiva and Śakti represents the dynamics of the feminine and the masculine energy. As Woodroffe explains, “[B]ehind all activity there is a static background. Shiva represents the static aspect of Reality and Shakti the moving aspect. The two, as they are in themselves, are one. All is Real, both

Changeless and Changeful” (*Serpent Power* 24). To dispel the disbelief of Congal and his men, Attracta calls upon the Great Herne to prove her purity:

ATTRACTA. Great Herne, Great Herne, Great Herne,
 Your darling is crying out,
 Great Herne, declare her pure,

 Let the round heaven declare it.
 [*Silence. Then low thunder growing louder. All except Attracta and
 Congal kneel.*]

 ATTRACTA. I lay in the bride-bed,
 His thunderbolts in my hand,
 But gave them back, for he,
 My lover, the Great Herne,
 Knows everything that is said
 And every man’s intent,
 And every man’s deed; and he
 Shall give these seven that say
 That they upon me lay
 A most memorable punishment. (*Plays* 527-28)

The Great Herne fulfils the wish of Attracta: she is proven to be pious and has the protection of the divine Herne. All the six offenders of Attracta, with the exception of Congal, bow down and deny any involvement in the offence committed by them, asking for forgiveness.

In this connection, Richard Taylor asserts that the seven men may in fact be taken to symbolise one man, that is, Congal in a microcosmic view of the world, and the Great Herne, in the macrocosmic view of the universe:

Madame Blavatsky held that there were seven individual elements or fundamental essences upon which and of which all things are constructed. Together they constitute the one universal reality both in the cosmos and in man. Their seven manifestations in human beings are characterised as divine, spiritual, psychic, emotional, astral, psychological, and physical. . . . When the thunder asserts that it was not the seven men, but rather the god itself, who coupled with Attracta, the paradox makes sense if the seven men are the fundamental essences which together make up the one universal reality in perfected man (Congal) and in the cosmos (the great herne). (*Reader’s Guide* 155)

Little did Taylor realize that the same argument holds true in the Tantric conception of the universe: Congal is a mirror-image of the Great Herne on earth, but he does not realize his position in the scheme of the world, and hence cannot attain a union with the Great god/Herne because of his arrogance, pride, and most importantly, because of his ignorance about the real nature of the universe. Even Guha's otherwise scholarly study falls short of a convincing argument when he claims that "Yeats puts the final responsibility for [the] vulgar change in society on Attracta, who as the priestess originally converted the conception of godhead into such an abstraction that the heroes among men lost all interest in any higher reality" (136). When interpreted from a Tantric perspective, Attracta is nowhere to be blamed, but the men who cannot perceive the "higher reality."

The symbolism of the thunder is also unique. Throughout the play, Attracta is an active principle, while Herne is portrayed as an externalized agent who is outside the periphery of the stage. One knows about Herne only through other characters, or when Attracta calls upon him to prove her chastity. The Great Herne's deeds are not visible, and are reflected in other people's actions. Moreover, Attracta reinforces the fact that the Great Herne is the all-knower, as well as the fact that he will decide the punishment for her seven offenders. And Attracta also becomes the medium who communicates the punishment. She pronounces a "degrading punishment for the six men," such that "[i]n their next incarnation they will be pushed one step back in the dignity of being, '[i]nto a cat or rat or bat, / Into dog or wolf or goose'" (Dabić 127). Congal's fate has not been completely sealed yet, though it has already been decided that he will die at the hands of a Fool on a full moon night, "[u]pon the holy mountain" (*Plays* 528).

Yeats makes a subtle remark about the seven men save one (Congal), through the character of Attracta; when six men deny their involvement in the act of sexual ravishment, the fact that 'they will be stepped down' as a punishment becomes a suitable analogy for the cooling down of the *kundalini cakras*, and that since Congal or the men could not aim for a mystical union in this birth, they will be reborn as baser animals in their next birth, with no possibility of getting an opportunity to do what they could not in their current birth as humans.

Congal reaches the place where he is supposed to meet his end at the hands of a fool. At this juncture, Attracta's last few words in the play are laden with dense meanings. She

describes her relationship with Herne in the same light as that of Śiva and Śakti in Indian mythology, especially in Tantric philosophy of the *kundalini*:

ATTRACTA. I lay with the Great Herne, and he,
Being all a spirit, but begot
His image in the mirror of my spirit,
Being all sufficient to himself
Begot himself; but there's a work
That should be done, and that work needs
No bird's beak nor claw, but a man,
The imperfection of a man. (*Plays* 534)

The image of the Herne being “all a spirit,” who is “self-begotten,” and “mirror[ed]” in Attracta, all these parallelisms exist in Tantra, in the images of Śiva and Śakti. Another remarkable analogy drawn by Yeats about the relationship between Herne and earthly human beings at the end of the play also completes the circle of reason in Tantra philosophy, when the microcosmic and macrocosmic worldviews get united through the body of a seeker. Attracta, who now wants to give Congal a second chance as a human, tells Corney:

ATTRACTA. Lie and beget,
If you are afraid of the Great Herne,
Put that away, for if I do his will,
You are his instrument or himself. (*Plays* 534).

Attracta, as Dabić puts it, “is fully aware of her human-divine identity, and her task is to fulfil God’s will, from which we can infer that the God is omnipotent, realising itself through its priestess” (137). The act of copulation between Attracta and Corney should also be understood as “beyond good and evil,” as “[t]hey are acting as instruments of the God” (Dabić 138). Moreover, as Attracta emphasizes, “[y]ou are his instrument or himself,” meaning the godhead might be mirrored in Corney too, or Corney might be the godhead himself. As Woodroffe writes, “Bhagavān, it is Thou who dividest Thyself into the two forms of Śiva and Śakti, and, like a spider in play, dost create, preserve and destroy the universe” (*Principles of Tantra Vol I* 306). Hence, everything created, preserved and destroyed even within the landscape of the play is actually the command of Śiva himself.

Before Attracta and Corney’s attempt can bear fruits, two donkeys have already mated, and it is too late for Attracta to step in and save the day for Congal. It has been

settled now that Congal will take the form of a donkey in his next birth. Smith points out a very interesting fact about this point in the play:

I doubt if all the point of the ending to ‘The Herne’s Egg’—the death of the king and conception of a donkey—would be grasped by anyone who had not heard of the belief held by certain Lamaists that the living can influence the shape into which the dead are re-born, and had not read such an account of it as Mrs. David-Neel gives in ‘With Mystics and Magicians of Tibet’, where a Lama is reborn as a donkey. This is not a question of pedantically ‘explaining’ a myth, but of knowing that the myth exists, and has been believed by thousands of people, and is not only a bright idea of the poet’s. Without that knowledge, the story can be understood, but the tension of the situation cannot be felt. It is hard to judge of this from a reading only; the priestess in ‘The Herne’s Egg’ appears ‘walking in her sleep’, and the whole play might be made so dream-like on the stage that we should accept anything as right. (400)⁴⁶

Bachchan’s reading of the play is indeed befitting. He writes, “Yeats . . . never ceased to be concerned with the idea of re-birth. He was juggling with the idea to the last days of his life. His last full-length play *The Herne’s Egg*, cannot be explained satisfactorily otherwise (55). However, the death of Congal and Attracta’s futile effort to liberate his soul has a subtle message: there is a possibility of resolving the antinomies, which can only be done through the Jungian process of ‘depersonalization.’”⁴⁷ In the Indian as well as in Buddhist Tantrism, *kama* is considered to be the strongest impulse that comes in the way of self-realization. Congal’s *kama* comprised of his false pride in himself. He makes “‘an error of judgement.’ He identifies his individual self with the world without recognising that he too is a part of the Universal Self, here personified by the Great Herne” (Dabić 133).⁴⁸ Therefore, despite Attracta’s effort to rescue his soul, he is again caught in the web of life: on the one hand, in the *kama* represented by the copulation of

⁴⁶ Alison Armstrong, in her “Introduction” to *The Herne’s Egg Manuscript Materials by W. B. Yeats* (Ithaca & London: Cornell U P, 1993) also traces the possible source of this story of the reincarnated donkey, to Alexander David-Neel’s book *Mystiques et magiciens du Thibet*, translated in 1932, which she claims, Yeats might have read (Dabić 109).

⁴⁷ Jung explains depersonalization as ‘detachment from *māyā*’ (*Psychology of Kundalini* 29).

⁴⁸ Martin’s postulation, that in some of Yeats’s plays, “the conflict is between a human being and his . . . true opposite, that other self, . . . or daimon, which exists outside the confines of time and space,” does not really hold true in the case of *The Herne’s Egg*, as the character of Congal is not in opposition to that of the Great Herne. They are only pitted against each other because of Conga’s ignorance about the true nature of his existence (Martin 59).

the donkeys, and on the other, in the detached sexual union of Attracta and Corney. In either case, he would not have been freed from the result of his *karma*: he would have to be born again, either as a human or as a donkey.⁴⁹

The play ends with Corney's cynical laughter": "All that trouble and nothing to show for it, / Nothing but just another donkey" (535). The final laughter is not only directed at Congal, but all others like him, who tend to forget the illusory nature of their worldly existence and fail to realize their ultimate aim in life. While some critics have read this as Yeats's deft handling of humour on stage, some others consider the play to be highly philosophical. One can also read the character of Congal as a caricature of Aleister Crowley, Yeats's contemporary from the Golden Dawn, who misunderstood Tantra and brought in the idea of "sex-magic," an act which was in complete contradistinction to the deep and profound philosophy of Tantra. Through Congal and Crowley, in this interpretation, Yeats is possibly critiquing such esoteric societies of his times which did not care to study the profound philosophies embedded in the mystical and esoteric orders of the world, and instead proceeded to misuse whatever they could lay their hands on, especially such societies where Tantric sex was used merely to bring in the element of sensationalism.

The title of the play has also generated numerous debates and discussions among critics. Regarding Yeats's choice of Herne in the title of the play, one can find the clue in Yeats's "Notes" to *Calvary*, where he considers the heron and swan as "the natural symbols of subjectivity," or in his Introduction to "The Holy Mountain," where he writes of Swami's master, who was named Hamsa (swan, *Brahman*) "which means 'soul'" (qtd. in Dabić 142). Guha observes that "[w]hile his [Yeats's] personal emblem was the swan in the midst of Time, in *The Herne's Egg*, . . . he makes the Great Herne an emblem of the Self standing beyond the reaches of time" (132).⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ravindran interprets this from the vantage point of the theory of reincarnation and *karma*: "From within the framework of this system of belief, Congal's wrong actions result from his ignorance. Those actions have to put him in a state of further ignorance from which, through many rebirths, he has to reach progressively human shape again. The donkey, an appropriate symbol of ignorance, is the shape that may fit Congal" (109).

⁵⁰ Guha offers an apt explanation of the bird symbolism in Yeats, here, in the context of the play at hand: "*The Herne's Egg* is a clever translation of the Sanskrit term *Brahmānda*, the egg of Brahma, the world, and Yeats's intention will be clear if one remembers what the herne stands for in his symbology. It is a variation of the Indian image of the Swan symbolizing a solitary soul separated from everything that is not

More interesting information can be extracted from critics' opinion of Yeats's usage of the symbolism of the 'Egg' in the title of his play. Ravindran writes, "The idea that the Universe came out of Cosmic Egg was familiar to Yeats" (103).⁵¹ Madame Blavatsky wrote a chapter on "The Mundane Egg" in *The Secret Doctrine*, wherein she explains the spiritual meanings of the egg in different cultures, including the Kabbalah, Christianity, and in the Hindu scriptures.⁵² Cosmology in the *Bhagwat Purana* begins with the cosmic egg, the Hiranyagarbha.⁵³ Alternatively, Hiranyagarbha was also one of the many names of Brahmā, the creator of the universe.⁵⁴ Ravindran also draws attention to the significance of the cosmic egg in Tantras:

These ideas of the Egg might have suggested to Yeats the potential creative power that is dormant. Indian Tantric system also has the concept of Egg. Ajit Mookerji has observed in *The Tantric Way*: "In the Rig Veda,

itself. In a note on *Calvary*, Yeats wrote in 1920: 'Certain birds especially as I see things, such lovely birds as the herne, hawk, eagle, and swan, are natural symbols of subjectivity, especially when floating upon the wind alone, or alighting upon some pool or river'" ("Herne's Egg" 110).

⁵¹ Melchiori elaborates: "In the 'eighties Yeats learnt from Madame Blavatsky that the Egg of Leda was connected with 'that group of cosmic allegories in which the world is described as 'born from an Egg', and more specifically with the Egg of Brahma, the Divine Swan, and the Auric Egg. . . . Madame Blavatsky, with her typical syncretic method, is quick to relate the Egg symbol to the primeval Egg of the Universe in the Orphic religion: the egg of Night impregnated by the wind and dropped on Chaos, from which Eros-Phanes sprang out and gave origin to the existing world" (sic) (165).

⁵² Blavatsky writes: "The simile of an egg also expresses the fact taught in Occultism that the primordial form of everything manifested, from atom to globe, from man to angel, is spheroidal, . . . It is the symbolical circle of Pascal and the Kabalists, 'whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere,' a conception which enters into the compound idea of this emblem.

The 'Mundane Egg' is, perhaps, one of the most universally adopted symbols, highly suggestive as it is, equally in the spiritual, physiological, and cosmological sense. . . . The mystery of apparent self-generation and evolution through its own creative power repeating in miniature the process of Cosmic evolution in the egg, The "Virgin Egg" is the microcosmic symbol of the macrocosmic proto-type — the "Virgin Mother". . . . Cosmos as receptive Nature is an Egg fructified The Golden Egg . . . in Vishnu Purāna. . ." (*Secret Doctrine* 65-66).

⁵³ Hiranyagarbha is "the lordly Puruṣa who is unborn, who is the first creator of subjects, who is the most excellent one, through whom the Kalpa has been competent to have its characteristics; through whom the fire has been capable of being a purifying factor; and who is the self-born Brahmā administering all the worlds" (*Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* 28). Also, "seven worlds are well established" within the cosmic egg: "[T]he whole earth along with seven continents, the seven oceans, the great mountains and thousands of rivers are established in the very same cosmic egg" (*Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* 31).

⁵⁴ "Brahma, the creator of the universe, has been described in the Vedas as 'Vishvakarma' (motive and power of the world), 'Brihaspati' (the great teacher), 'Hiranyagarbha' (the precious womb of the universe), 'Prajapati' (the benefactor of his subjects) and 'Brahma' (the ultimate being)" (Jit 21).

the creative principle of life is conceived as a 'golden embryo' or Hiranyagarbha, the womb of energy from which the universe develops. The same symbol is crystallized in the conception of . . . Cosmic Egg in the Tantras." (103)

One would also like to add one more interpretation of the title of the play here. When one utters or hears the title of the play, *The Herne's Egg*, one's attention tends to oscillate more towards the "Egg" in the title than towards the "Herne." This was the mistake that Congal committed, and was doomed to a degrading punishment. The very same mistake is repeated by the readers/audience, when they are more mindful of the mundane idea of the "Egg" than on the grandeur of the Great "Herne." The play's title was probably intended by Yeats to set his audience/readers sailing towards profound thought and meditation.

Thus, the play *The Herne's Egg* indeed has a 'deep philosophy' and not a reflection of Yeats's 'confused mind' as understood by Bloom. Katherine Worth offers a fine account of the play when she says that it is "near-Brechtian in its aggressively cool, comic control of tumultuous material", which enables the poet "to set a self-conscious perspective on the unconscious without damaging its plausibility" (Dabić 108). The seriousness hidden in the play has also been observed by Brown, who writes, "For the biographical critic the play . . . is of special interest, for it self-consciously restates in radically new terms some of the poet's key imaginative concerns and interrogates the nature of theatre itself. At its heart is the vision of life in the control of supernatural agencies and of destinies shaped by acts of divine impregnation" (*Life of Yeats* 357). This is indeed a new chapter in the criticism and reception of the play, when audience, readers and critics have begun to notice and become comfortable with the coexistence of humour and philosophy, the natural and the supernatural, and the mundane and the profound on stage, or at least in the pages of the play.

Finally, looking back, one believes that one can only offer myriad interpretations of Yeats's work, and the play at hand. What Yeats sought to achieve by refashioning an esoteric philosophy into an exoteric theatrical production is a question we might never be able to answer satisfactorily. However, one can only conclude with the reassurance that Declan Kiberd provides about "Leda and the Swan," which can be said to hold true for *The Herne's Egg* as well: "The famous question which closes 'Leda and the Swan' assumes that the price of full knowledge is indifference; and this is entirely in keeping

with Yeats's long-standing conviction that *to poets, the half-said thing is most attractive*" (312, emphasis added). The preceding pages should only be considered as a humble attempt to pick the pearls from the ocean of Yeatsian half-said truths, closing with the conviction that "all that trouble" has something "to show for it."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Hermeneutics of Symbolism and Yeats's Philosophy

A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle, and belongs to fancy and not to imagination: the one is a revelation, the other an amusement.

-- W. B. Yeats, "Blake Illustrations"¹

It is not in doubt that those who made use of the symbols . . . as means of communication expected from their audiences something more than an appreciation of rhetorical ornaments, and something more than a recognition of meanings literally expressed.

-- Coomaraswamy, "The Interpretation of Symbols"²

A symbol, as I understand it, is the form on one plane that represents a truth of another.

-- Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga* Vol. III³

In every culture or civilization, there are culture-specific as well as universal symbols which owe their origin to both human imagination and observance of the nature and sometimes to experiences which are beyond the periphery of the perceptible. If there is one trait of Yeats's works that stands out, it has to be his elaborate and well-thought over symbolism. W. B. Yeats's philosophy of symbolism develops from both his literary inquisition and his painstaking inquiries into the working of the human mind, which has power to perceive, incorporate and synthesise symbols to express the ineffable in creatively. Yeats's hermeneutics of mystical and esoteric symbolism pitted the ancient

¹ Yeats, "Blake Illustrations" 88.

² Coomaraswamy, *Essential Coomaraswamy* 103.

³ Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga-III* 137.

connotative meanings of symbols against the modern interpretation of the very same symbols by writers and critics, sometimes to arrive at a knowledge of the long lost systems, and at others to create still newer meanings out of the symbols. In his 1889 essay titled “Symbolism in Painting,” Yeats examines this modernist interpretative rupture by exploring the role of symbols in art (painting, sculpture and to some extent, also in poetry), and makes a poignant observation that “no symbol tells all its meaning to any generation” (*Early Essays*, 109). Yeats’s oeuvre, especially his magnum-opus *A Vision* reinforce the fact that the ancient and/or obscure/forgotten symbols of a culture do not lose their meaning with time, and instead acquire newer and newer meanings over time, through memory, repeated narrations and recurring interpretations.

In the context of Yeats, disciplines and sciences such as mythology, mysticism, alchemy, occult, magic, esotericism, intuition, meditation, vision and astrology—all of these were instrumental in shaping Yeats’s symbolism and his aesthetic sensibility. Throughout his literary career, Yeats searched for ancient meanings of symbols in different cultures and civilizations, sometimes in Occidental, but many a times, in Oriental sources. As Kathleen Raine observes: “Yeats’s lifelong labour was to rest, to discard or to retain, *a great range of symbol and terms drawn from many traditions*, Rosicrucian, neo-Platonic, Far Eastern. To recreate a common language for the communication of knowledge of spiritual realities, and of the invisible order of the psyche, is the problem now for any serious artist or poet. . .” (*Inner Journey* 13, emphasis added).

Yeats was quite successful in creating a cross-cultural discourse that there exists a common origin of many universal symbols, and in addition to literary meanings bestowed upon them from time to time, they have also held metaphysical and mystical meanings in antiquity. Daniel Albright describes this storehouse of symbols: “As he [Yeats] contemplated these multifarious sources of transcendental images, he came to the conclusion that there was in fact one source, a universal warehouse of images . . . Anima Mundi, the Soul of the World” (*Collected Poems* xxi). And perhaps Yeats was right in making the assertion, as psychoanalytical theories which developed in the later years went on to demonstrate.

The symbolist movement in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries accentuated the debate about the role of symbols in articulating human experiences, its

power to describe mystical encounters and its inextricable relationship to creativity. René Wellek in his article titled “Symbol and Symbolism in Literature” charts the history of the symbolist movement across different countries in Europe and the United States of America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The roots of the movement can be found in German Romanticism, after which the movement spread to France. It is noteworthy that the Frenchman Pierre Leroux, an early utopian socialist, “exalted poetry as the language of symbols, as a system of correspondences, a network of ‘vibrations’” (Wellek 2). Wellek also charts the journey of the term ‘symbol,’ which “shifts from a rhetorical category to an element in a mystical view of nature,” in its journey through the German world to the French (3).⁴

The next big development in the history of the symbolist movement was its spread to other countries in Europe, especially in England and Ireland. Arthur Symons’s landmark book, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), “made the decisive breakthrough for England and Ireland” (Wellek 4). Interestingly enough, the book was dedicated to the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, “proclaiming him ‘the chief representative of that movement in our country.’ The edition of Blake, which Yeats had prepared with Edwin Ellis in 1893, was introduced by an essay on ‘The Necessity of Symbolism,’ and the essay ‘The Symbolism of Poetry’ (1900) was Yeats’s full statement of his symbolist creed” (Wellek 4).

Wellek also summarizes the four basic meanings that symbolism has held in literary history, calling them “four concentric circles defining its scope” (8). In the narrowest sense, “symbolism” refers to the French group which referred to itself as a group of symbolists in 1886, whose theory was “rather rudimentary” (Wellek 8). “Symbolism” in a still wider sense refers to “the broad movement in France from Nerval and Baudelaire to Claudel and Valéry. We can characterize it by saying that in symbolist poetry the image becomes “thing.” The relation of tenor and vehicle in the metaphor is reversed. The

⁴ Wellek succinctly traces the trajectory of the development of the symbolist movement in France. He writes, French “André Barre's *Le symbolisme* (1911) and particularly Guy Michaud's *Message poétique du symbolisme* (1947) as well as many other books of French literary scholarship have with the hindsight of literary historians, traced the different phases of a vast French symbolist movement: the precursorship of Baudelaire who died in 1867, the second phase when Verlaine and Mallarmé were at the height of their power before the 1886 group, the third phase when the name became established, and then in the twentieth century what Michaud calls Néo-symbolisme represented by ‘La Jeune Parque’ of Valéry and *L'annonce faite à la Marie* of Claudel, both dating from 1915” (4).

utterance is divorced from the situation: time and place, history and society are played down” (Wellek 9). In the third wider “circle of abstraction,” the term can be used as a label for the whole period roughly between 1885 and 1914., wherein symbolism can be seen as “an international movement which radiated originally from France but produced great writers and great poetry also elsewhere” (Wellek 9).⁵ Finally, there is “the highest abstraction, the largest circle, the use of ‘symbolism’ in all literature, of all ages. Here the term, broken loose from its historical moorings, lacks concrete content and remains merely the name for a phenomenon which is almost universal in all art” (10).

Although symbolists like Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé provided a new thrust to art and literature by establishing symbols as quintessential parts of the artistic imagination, Yeats however, accorded a uniquely different role to symbols. Yeats quite dissociated himself from French symbolists to bring to fore a different form of literary experiment, which is also the chief characteristic of his philosophy. In his 1898 essay “The Autumn of the Body,” Yeats makes a poignant observation about the role of symbols:

It was only with the modern poets, with Goethe and Wordsworth and Browning, that poetry gave up the right to consider all things in the world as a dictionary of types and symbols and began to call itself a critic of life and an interpreter of things as they are. . . . The arts are, I believe, about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests, and to lead us back upon our journey by *filling our thoughts with the essence of things, and not with things*. (*Early Essays* 141-42, emphasis added)

“Essences” and elements, in contradistinction to other symbolist poets and artists, were of primal importance for Yeats. “Symbolism,” writes Thurley, “assumed that there was a world lying beyond the wheel of things, and that this world was the real world, the world of Truth with which the poet must be concerned” (5). He also explains that this belief is “an ancient metaphysical belief . . . stemming from Plato in the western tradition and from the Vedic scriptures in the eastern. The *fin-de-siècle* was characterized by a resurgence of philosophical Idealism . . . [and] a new interest in ‘the mystic east’” (5). Yeats, and singularly so amongst the European poets—with the exception of T. S. Eliot,

⁵ Wellek writes: “In English, Yeats and Eliot; in the United States, Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane; in Germany, George, Rilke, and Hofmannsthal; in Russia, Blok, Ivanov, and Bely; in Spain and South America, Darío, Machado, and Guillén” (9).

who stayed briefly in Europe—was the flag-bearer among the poets and artists who dug into the reservoir of images and symbols from the East.

Again, during the last phase of his artistic life, Yeats writes to Maurice Bowra in 1934, looking back at his creative journey, and admitting how he was never really moved to believe in the symbolist theories of the French symbolists:

I don't think I was really much influenced by French Symbolists. My development was different, but that development was of such a nature that I felt I could not explain it. . . . *My symbolism came from actual experiments in vision*, made by my friends or myself, in the society which called itself "The Hermetic Students" . . . I felt that *these investigations were private*, and felt also, and indeed still feel that one can only explain oneself if one draws one's illustrations from accepted schools of thoughts. (qtd. O'Driscoll 9, emphasis added)

This assertion of Yeats calls for a close scrutiny because it does not merely shed light on his interest in the Oriental philosophy of symbols, but also testifies to his relentless journey into the world of Eastern mysticism. Yeats emphasizes squarely that his symbolism developed out of "actual experiment in vision." As one has already discussed in the preceding pages, one of the aims of the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn was to study Oriental symbolism and mystical and esoteric techniques. Tantric philosophy also played a very significant role in the methods of meditation adopted by the Golden Dawn. In the Golden Dawn, various Eastern symbols and meditation processes were resorted to, and variegated experiments were conducted to unravel the mystery of the human mind.⁶ One of the most outstanding examples of the same is Yeats's creation of his own set of Tatwa Cards, which is closely based on the Indian philosophy of symbols.⁷

⁶ For instance, in the Golden Dawn, extensive lectures were delivered on 'Buddhist Meditation technique' (Ms. 36, 276/6/4, 4); The Swastike (Ms. 36, 276/6/4, 5); the Kundalini (Ms. 36, 276/6/4); the Tattwa (36, 276/6/5, 1), to name a few (Yeats, George "*The Elephant File*"). In addition to these meditation techniques, Patañjali's Yoga Sutra was also taught to the Adeptus. In order to understand Yeats's source of Eastern symbols and especially esoteric symbols, the role of Golden Dawn needs to be critically analyzed. MacGregor Mathers not only borrowed the philosophical ideas and the symbols from the East but also synthesised them to form his Golden Dawn rituals, especially the ones related to symbolic teachings. There are other references to such synthesizations.

⁷ In the Golden Dawn lectures, V. H. Soror describes the Tatwas thus: "Consider then first the process by which the Mula-prakriti or 'Worldstuff' is moulded into a Planet. At first it is inert, at rest as it were, a formless cloud of finely distributed matter, having in itself only the potentialities of form and substance; this is the condition called Akasa. Then motion begins, the mass is whirled into a spherical form, and becomes a Nebula. This condition is called Vayu. Now imagine that the infinitesimally small particles

Yeats's critics and biographers hold contrary views on the Oriental aspects of the Hermetic Society. For instance, Yeats's biographer, A. Norman Jeffares is of the view that "Yeats's main desire, . . . was to explore the supernatural, and he and Charles Johnson, with five other youths, formed the Dublin Hermetic Society in June 1885; they rented a room in York Street and met there to discuss Oriental religion and theosophy" (*New Biography* 20). Contrary to this opinion, Richard Ellmann emphasizes that, "[i]n their procedure, however, the Hermetic Students emphasized the European tradition of Kabbalistic magic rather than the wisdom of the East" (*Man and Masks* 89). These two critical positions, which seem to be polar opposites of each other, taken together, shed light upon the possible reasons as to why Yeats thought that his developing a symbolic system in the Hermetic Society might turn people against him. This fear could also be one of the grounds why Yeats did not openly express his fascination towards Eastern symbols and knowledge systems, at least in the initial years.

It is difficult to ascertain Yeats's state of mind regarding his sources and influences at any particular juncture of his life. For example, in a letter written to Ernest Boyd in the year 1915, Yeats states: "I have been a student of the medieval mystics since 1887. . . . My chief mystical authorities have been Boehme, Blake, and Swedenborg" (*Collected Letters Vol. II* 592). However, in the year 1917, in his *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1918), a prototype of *A Vision*, Yeats writes about his "Anima Mundi" without mincing words: "I have always sought to bring my mind close to the mind of Indian and Japanese poets, old woman in Connaught . . . I imagine dreaming in some mediaeval monastery the dream of their village, learned authors who refer all to antiquity. . ." (*Mythologies* 343, emphasis added).⁸ Yeats undoubtedly borrowed ideas from other traditions, but one of his primary

whirled around and continually colliding with each other gradually grow hot, and incandescent, till the nebula becomes a fiery mass. This condition is called Tejas. Gradually it cools but remain fluid; this condition is called Apas. Further as time goes on, the fluid mass solidifies and becomes a Globe or Planet. In this condition it is termed Prithivi" (MS. 36, 276/6/5, 2). This explanation of Tatwas is very close to the theosophical definition of the creation of the universe by H. P. Blavatsky, under the title "Mahat-tattwa creation": "[I]t was the primordial self-evolution of that which had to become *Mahat* — the "divine Mind, conscious and intelligent"; esoterically, "the *spirit* of the Universal soul." (*Secret Doctrine Vol. I* 450). Interestingly, in her dextrously written book, Blavatsky has juxtaposed the Hindu creation myth with the Kabbalistic myth, but Mathers further appropriated it to form a separate esoteric cult of his own. It is noteworthy that Yeats was a member of both the societies, and hence, one can conclude, had an ocean of information, symbols, images, rituals, and techniques at his disposal.

⁸ During this period, one must note, the Yeatses were deeply involved in the process of writing *A Vision*. They had begun the task of writing *A Vision* in 1917, and the literary and mystical experiment lasted seven years, before they could finally publish it in 1925.

aims was to create a symbolic 'poetic tradition.' His aforementioned views reveal his tendency of keeping things clandestine, and eventually metamorphosing cross-cultural ideas and symbols into an altogether new literary and philosophical symbols or systems.

Yeats got readily fascinated towards ideas and symbols from different cultures and traditions, but he always proceeded with caution and tended to test the similitude between disparate ideas before putting them to his use. For instance, in many of Yeats's early poems, the resemblance between the figures of Christ and Brahma, and between the rose and the lotus, to name a few, foreground Yeats's juxtaposition of the Eastern and the Western symbols and philosophy. Thus, the dichotomy for Yeats was two-fold: he would first demarcate the parallels and differences between Occidental and Oriental symbols, and the next step was to sublimate Eastern ideas into the Western discourse, before they could be incorporated in his poetry and plays. One could also infer from this tendency of Yeats that he, unlike other Orientalists of his times, was not interested in the exoticization of the East. In fact, this was doubly advantageous for Yeats: firstly, this borrowing and synthesization acted as a catalyst for his creative output, since he gave poetical and theatrical afterlife to various Eastern philosophical ideas, like the binary between the physical and the metaphysical, that between the microcosm and the macrocosm, between human consciousness and the supreme/ultimate consciousness, between the real and the ephemeral, to name a few; and secondly, it created a counter-cultural discourse against the twin forces of the intellectual supremacy of the colonial power and that of rationality and logic superimposed on the emotional and the intuitional by the then modern science.

Edward Said, in his essay titled "Yeats and Decolonization," observes:

For Yeats the overlappings he knew existed between his Irish nationalism and the English cultural heritage that both dominated and empowered him as a writer were bound to cause an overheated tension, and it is the pressure of this urgently political and secular tension that one may speculate caused him to try to resolve it on a "higher," that is, nonpolitical level. Thus the deeply eccentric and aestheticized histories he produced in *A Vision* and the later quasi-religious poems are elevations of the tension to an extrawordly level. (80)

Joseph Lennon, in *Irish Orientalism: A Literary and Intellectual History*, building up on the argument of Edward Said, has rightly pointed out: "Oriental borrowings provided a partial resolution for Yeats's colonial tension, so his extrawordly and nonpolitical art

sought to blend together opposing cultures. Positing ‘East’ as a neutral party enabled Yeats to work out cultural tension without overtly staging them” (283).

Interestingly, this “non political level” and “extraworldly level” in Yeats’s writings was mostly, if not exclusively achieved with the consolidation of Eastern mysticism and spirituality. Alternatively, it also provided Yeats with a counter-colonial lens through which he could view the soul of Ireland as a free spirit, harking back to an ancient pagan tradition and an antiquarian mythology of its own. Moreover, Yeats’s struggle to establish a national theatre, the opening of the Abbey Theatre and his impassioned involvement in the Gaelic revival were also direct results of his counter-colonial discourse against Britain.⁹ One must not forget that this was the era of colonialism, and any form of knowledge or philosophy from the East percolated into the quintessential Western mind as necessarily mysterious and exotic in nature.¹⁰ Yeats’s embracement of Eastern wisdom and knowledge system can also be viewed as an instrument of ‘decolonization,’ a literary and artistic requirement for the modernist poet, as well as a cross-cultural dialogue.

In his pursuit of an Indo-Celtic origin of human civilization, Yeats saw the East, and particularly India, not as a colonial subject but as a seat of ancient wisdom. In *The Trembling of the Veil* (1921), Yeats elucidates:

I was unlike of my others of my generation in one thing only. I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall . . . of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters. . . . I wished for a world where I could discover this tradition. . . . (*Autobiographies* 115)

⁹ It is interesting to note that Yeats was instrumental in the production of Tagore’s plays *The Post Office* and *The King of the Dark Chamber* in Dublin.

¹⁰ Ananda Coomaraswamy in his essay “The Significance of Oriental Art” (1919) writes: “Those who look upon the East as mysterious and romantic have only themselves to thank for the creation of a novel unreality. What is romantic and mysterious to a foreigner is classic and self-evident to a native; and no one can be said to understand the art of the East or any other art so long as it remains to him a curiosity-only when he sees that it must have been as it is, does he begin to understand” (17). In the context of Yeats, one can assert that his critical engagement with the East was definitely much more than just “curiosity;” being a modernist, Yeats looked for new artistic techniques, images, symbols, and mythology in the Eastern culture and civilization, in addition to finding the same in other ‘lesser-known’ cultures and civilizations of the world.

Now, one can surmise that the creation of a “poetic tradition” would necessarily require symbols and images, narratives and anecdotes for any chance of its establishment as a ‘religion.’ Yeats was in search of an ancient, unbroken chain of mystical and spiritual philosophy to give his “new religion” a mystic aura, and bring it at par with the aura of the ancient religions. Thus began Yeats’s metaphorical journey to the East, which yielded ample amount of raw material for his creative imagination. Being a modernist poet, this act of assimilating symbols and images from different cultures into his own could also be viewed as a process of “self-actualization” in Yeats.¹¹ Bachchan makes pertinent observations in this regard:

In his search for a religion for himself *he was also searching for a tradition for his age*. And this is what he had to offer. It is old and new, it is Eastern and Western, it is dogmatic and personal, and it is logical and illogical. But before it is accepted as a tradition, it has to be asked : Is it an organic whole? Is it in harmony with the tradition that has prevailed in Europe for the last two thousand years? Is it going to uphold the values that the greatest literature and the highest art of this continent have upheld in its long history? If not, then what is it? The vagary of a genius? A symptom of the times? Or *is it a valuable experiment*, which, whether in its success or in its failure, *has a lesson for the future?* (12, emphasis added)

From the depth and the expanse of Yeats’s oeuvre, one is brought to take a look at his vivid interests, from which one can, in turn, infer that Yeats’s symbol is the key to his creative mind. For instance, ‘the soul’ figures as a symbol in his early poems, namely “Falling of Leaves,” “Ephemera,” “The Cap and Bells,” “King and No King.” In all these poems, and in many others, it represents the dichotomy between the physical and the metaphysical existence. But in Yeats’s later poems like “Upon a Dying Lady,” it acquires a mystical shade. In the sixth section of this poem titled “Her Courage,” the journey of the soul in its after-life has been represented in a distinctly Eastern tone: “When her soul flies to the predestined dancing-place,” Yeats adds the following lines to the poem, “(I have no

¹¹ “Self-actualization,” in the study of Abraham Maslow, “represents growth of an individual toward fulfillment of the highest needs; those for meaning in life, in particular.” Maslow created “a psychological hierarchy of needs, the fulfillment of which theoretically leads to a culmination of fulfillment of ‘being values’, or the needs that are on the highest level of this hierarchy, representing meaning. . . . Moreover, he [Maslow] states that self-actualizing individuals are able to resolve dichotomies such as that reflected in the ultimate contrary of free-will and determinism. He also contends that self-actualizers are highly creative, psychologically robust individuals” (Olson). For further details, refer to Maslow.

speech but symbol, the pagan speech I made / Amid the dreams of youth)" (*Collected Poems* 209).

In his oft-celebrated poem "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927), Yeats portrays an old man who is garbed in a tattered cloth (of the body), but whose soul is young and rejuvenated:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress, . . . (*Collected Poem* 239)

This description of the immortal soul resonates with Krishna's preaching in the *Bhagavadgita* about the impermanence of the soul, which only changes the body just as we change clothes. The message that Krishna gives to Arjun right in the middle of a war because he is reluctant to fight his own brethren, is also the central message of the *Bhagavadgita*:

As a man discards
worn-out clothes
to put on new
and different ones,
so the embodied self
discards
its worn-out bodies
to take on other new ones.

--Chapter 2. Verse 22 (Miller, *The Bhagavad-Gita* 35)

Yeats develops the mystical place, which he also refers to as the "dancing-place," later in his poem "Upon a Dying Lady," which is the place to which the soul goes after departure from earthly life. Even in the poem, "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats brings in the mystical elements of "God's holy fire," "gold mosaic" and the "gyre":

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul. (*Collected Poems* 239)

One can easily infer that Yeats constantly worked on a symbol to develop a mystical aura around it, so as to elevate and enable human mind to a level of transcendence. The development is such that in the poem "The Tower," the poet declares: "Now shall I make

my soul, / Compelling it to study / In a learned school” (*Collected Poems* 245). Clearly, Yeats is not only referring to the learnings with age and time, but learning metaphysical and spiritual lessons from the time-tested Eastern and other ancient traditions.

In the last phase of his life, Yeats wrote in a personal correspondence to Mannin in the year 1936:

I have had to make an important decision. Have I written all the good poetry I can expect to write? . . . I am about to cut myself adrift, as far as I can, from all external circumstances (the Abbey Theatre will soon be able to go its own road), I want to plunge myself into impersonal poetry, to get rid of the bitterness, irritation & hatred my work in Ireland has brought into my soul. I want to make the last song, sweet & exultant, a sort of European *Geeta*, or rather my *Geeta*, not doctrine but song. (qtd. in Foster, *Arch Poet* 525)

Such a loaded and ambitious statement at the zenith of his literary achievements points to the great admiration Yeats, now a Noble Laureate, had for the Hindu ancient wisdom. The letter underscores Yeats’s long-nurtured desire to create an Europeanised *Bhagavad Gita*, or alternatively, to bring to fruition the unfinished task of Blake.¹² This long journey of Yeats’s desire to write his own *Geeta* was ridden with scepticism, dichotomies, disillusionments, refutations and lastly, a realization that ‘doctrine’ had to give way to a “sweet . . . [and] exultant song.”

While critically engaging with Yeats’s Eastern literary symbols, Western critics tend to analyse them from the vantage point of their own culture, theory and philosophy. Even if they try to decode them by borrowing ideas from native traditions, they fall in the trap of the semantic loop, where the connotative meaning of the symbols is closely entangled with native cultural consciousness. Ananda Coomaraswamy, who was in Yeats’s close literary circle, writes in his iconic essay “Literary Symbolism”:

The study of the traditional language of symbols is not an easy discipline, primarily because we are no longer familiar with, or even interested in, the metaphysical content they are used to express; again, because the symbolic phrases, like individual words, can have

¹² David Weir writes, “Blake’s poetry is a contribution to a continuing canon of inspired works that include not only the Bible, but also the prose *Edda*, say, and the *Bhagavad Gita*, both of which Blake knew in the mythographic context in which they first appeared” (9). Yeats was greatly influenced by the philosophy of Blake, and there is a possibility that he wanted to give a European poetic voice to *Geeta* as his homage to Blake.

more than one meaning, according to the context in which they are employed, though this does not imply that they can be given any meaning at random or arbitrarily. (*Traditional Art* 329)

There are two noteworthy points that Coomaraswamy makes here: firstly, the “traditional language of symbols,” sometimes, has “metaphysical content” and secondly, “the context” of the usage of symbols may vary with a change in the spatial, temporal and cultural registers. Yeats fully understood the import of Coomaraswamy’s postulations even before he penned down the article. Yeats recognized that cultural and temporal gaps and fissures might impede our understanding of ancient and traditional symbols, and the recognition of the metaphysical aspect of symbols, which form the essence of the meanings latent in them. In “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry” (1900), in describing the contrast between outward and inward looking mind which accords the poem “mystery and shadow,” Yeats writes: “It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings besides the one or two the writer lays an emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the bareness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of nature” (*Early Essays* 66).¹³

The lines by Yeats quoted above serve to demonstrate his deep interest in the unconscious mind and his spirited belief in a hidden source of ancient, collective, shared symbols. In the terminology of Carl G. Jung, who formulated his theory after Yeats, they come to be known as “archetypes.” Yeats termed Jung’s “archetypes” before the latter formulated his theory of symbols emanating from one’s collective unconscious as “*anima mundi*.” Walter Andrae comments on the tendency of critics to interpret symbols on the basis of their external attributes in his essay, “The Life of Symbols”:

It is only when one has acquired the habit of this way of looking at things that symbols and images can be understood; not when we are habituated to the narrower way which always brings us back to an investigation of the outward and formal aspects of symbols and images and makes us value them the more, the more complicated or fully evolved they are. This formalistic method always leads into a vacuum. (227)

¹³ The outward and inward directed mind is referred to a *pravṛtti* (towards the perceptible world) and *nivṛtti* (towards the spiritual and mystical or imperceptible) in Yoga philosophy. Yeats might have come across these ideas through Mohini Chatterjee’s Dublin lecture in 1885, and later through Madame Blavatsky’s books and teachings at the Theosophical Society.

Thus, from the above discussion it becomes clear that Yeats was not just interested in “the outward and formal aspect of symbols.” Yeats was busy conducting a life-long literary-cum-psychological experiment in order to understand the hidden meanings of symbols, tracing their meanings back to antiquity as far as possible. For example, in his essay “Symbolism of Poetry,” Yeats elucidates different forms of symbols on the basis of his personal experiences, like those formed or evoked during a trance, as a result of meditation, those formed on the basis of intuition and sense perceptions, to name a few. He broadly divides symbols into two categories: “emotional symbols” (symbols which evoke emotions and are subtle in their manifestation) and “intellectual symbols” (symbols which invoke ideas alone, and symbols which, according to Yeats, are generally given importance beyond the periphery of mysticism). He also lays premium on a sustained thought process to be used by creative writers and artists for the creation of symbols in order to ensure that the symbols continue to live long after the writer/artist is gone: “[F]or symbols, associated with ideas that are more than fragments of the shadows thrown upon the intellect by the emotions they evoke, are the playthings of the allegorist or the pedant, and soon pass away (*Early Essays* 118). Yeats further adds that symbols have innumerable meanings which are held together by “the subtle bond of suggestion” (*Early Essays* 118-19).¹⁴

Sri Aurobindo, Yeats’s contemporary and a close friend of James Cousins, and was well versed in both Eastern and Western philosophy, divides symbols into four broad categories: “conventional symbols,” “life symbols,” “symbols that have an inherent appositeness and power of their own” and “mental symbols” (*Letters to Yoga-III* 138).¹⁵ It is amusing that scholars and critics have not looked into this interesting parallel which

¹⁴ This immediately brings to mind the Indian theory of *dhvani* (suggestion) propounded by Ānandavardhana in *Dhvanyāloka* in the ninth century C.E. An exploration of the same, however, is beyond the scope of this research. However, for further delineation on the topic of Yeats and *dhvani*, one can consider referring to R. Anitha’s doctoral dissertation (refer to the bibliography for further details).

¹⁵ Conventional symbols are the ones which are based on the objects of the surrounding and are vitalised and realised by the Vedic Rishis, an example of which would be like a horse being representative of force and energy, life symbols are ones which are not artificially chosen or mentally interpreted in a conscious/deliberate manner, but are derived naturally from our day-to-day experience and grow out of our surroundings, like the example of a peak upon peak of mountain representing the path of yoga; *akasha* or etheric space is a symbol of the infinite all-pervading central Brahman, which would convey the same meaning in any nationality or culture, falls in the third category of symbols that have an inherent appositeness and power of their own; and mental symbols which are formed by association and analogy, an example of which could be numbers or alphabets, which become active and may be useful once accepted, like geometrical figures (*Letters to Yoga-III* 138).

brings to light the literary experiments in the Indian subcontinent being coeval with those conducted by Yeats with respect to his myths and symbols, amid the larger wave of modernist experimentation in Europe in the twentieth century. Since Aurobindo was a mystic and a poet, his philosophical ideas caught the attention of various writers and critics, and also influenced the Theosophical teachings of his time. It is not completely out of line to postulate that Yeats might have been aware of Aurobindo's work through Cousins, their common friend. Seeing a strong link between symbols, visions, dreams and human consciousness, Aurobindo suggested that the symbols in Yoga philosophy are invoked in a fashion akin to the invocation of images in mystic poetry" (*Letters to Yoga-III* 138-41). The uncanny similarity between the postulations of Aurobindo and those of Yeats regarding the evocation of mystic symbols makes it hard to believe that Aurobindo's literary and philosophical experiments escaped Yeats's incisive eyes, undoubtedly directed towards the East.¹⁶

This chapter will attempt a comparative analysis of Yeats's philosophy of symbols from an Eastern perspective by critically illuminating the different layers of meaning in Yeats's select work, and analysing them through the lens of the works of Eastern philosophers, mystics and writers like Ananda Coomaraswamy, Sri Aurobindo and Bimal Krishna Matilal. This attempt would shed new light on Yeats's creative mind and the unexplored aspects of his symbols and their Eastern sources and meanings. From an Eastern perspective, W. B. Yeats's symbols having Eastern bearings either in terms of the sources, meanings, and/or methodology, can broadly be divided into two categories: mystical symbols and evocative symbols. Yeats's extensive use of elemental symbols, esoteric symbols and geometrical symbols can conveniently be placed in either of the two categories, or in a bridge category between the two.¹⁷

¹⁶ Yeats's theory of evocative symbols bears a striking resemblance to the symbolism of colour elucidated upon by Aurobindo, and his improvisation of the Indian concept of *gunas* symbolically interpreted through the tattva/tattwa cards also has theoretical roots in India. Yeats's evocative symbols will be discussed at length in the later section of the chapter. Also, for an account of Aurobindo's colour symbolism, refer to *Letters to Yoga-III* (122-34).

¹⁷ Richard Ellmann has identified and elaborated upon Yeats's elemental symbols based on the *panchtattva* (the five essential elements) in his *Identity of Yeats* (29-38). Though Ellmann undertakes an intensive discussion of the same, he does not identify any Indian influence on Yeats in this matter. But the possibility of the Indian sources of Yeats's elemental symbols can also be traced to Yeats's possession of the texts on Tantra by Woodroffe, which discuss the concept of the *panchtattva* in establishing the philosophical foundations of Tantra.

Any understanding of the creative works of Yeats seems to be incomplete without an attempt to comprehend the theory and practice that went into the genesis of the symbols, images and metaphors used by Yeats. The following sections aspire to address this hiatus in the symbolic theory of Yeats.

The Mystical Symbols of Yeats

Mysticism is indeed a difficult term to grasp. S. N. Dasgupta, however, offers a lucid explanation: “Mysticism is not an intellectual theory; it is fundamentally an activity, formative, creative, elevating and ennobling principle of life. . . . Mysticism means a spiritual grasp of the aims and problems of life in a much more real and ultimate manner than is possible to mere reason” (*Hindu Mysticism* ix).¹⁸

In the *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* (1917), identifies the reason behind the re-emergence of interest in mysticism in the twentieth century:

It is as though the world were undergoing a spiritual revitalization, spurring it on to experience—even through destruction and death—a further measure of Reality and Truth. At such a time it is of interest to look back over the past and discover something of what has been already accomplished in the way of poetic expression of mystical themes and feelings. (vi)

The aforementioned book also included two poems of Yeats, “The Rose of Battle” (1892) and “The Secret Rose” (1896). Immediately after Yeats’s section, poems like “Indian Meditation” by Arthur Symons and “Krishna” by George Russell (Æ) have been included in the collection. The selection and omission of verses in the collection raises grave doubts about the intention of the editors, who chose to include poems on Indian themes by Symons and Russell, while choosing to drop out Yeats’s Indian Poems like “Anashuya and Vijay” (1887), “The Indian upon God” (1886) and “The Indian to His Love” (1886) which first appeared in the collection *Crossways*. At the time when these verses were composed, Yeats was deeply involved with the mystical and spiritual teachings of the Theosophical Society, and his poetry thus reflects Eastern mystical themes and philosophy. In *Yeats and Theosophy*, Ken Monteith provides a significant clue to an understanding of the inclusion of poems on Indian themes with respect to the title of the collection:

¹⁸ The title of the book should not mislead the readers to believe that Dasgupta is referring purely to Hindu mysticism. At least the excerpt reproduced here is a general definition of mysticism.

“Crossways” illustrates the mental and philosophical work Yeats performs while a member of the Theosophical Society. The title itself serves as a key to understanding the collection: themes and patterns “cross” in a symbolic order to create new meaning in a chaotic world. The “crossings” in “Crossways” leads Yeats to an aesthetic process grounded in his readings of theosophy. (29)

Thus, one is brought to understand that in the choice of the poems for *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*, Yeats’s Irish identity was being upheld, and not much space was given to his imaginative transgression, cross-cultural poetic inspiration, and the crossways of the East and the West. Writing about myths and symbols which were included in these poems, Yeats noted “In any case, I must leave my myths and symbols to explain themselves as the years go by and one poem light up another. . . .” (qtd. in Monteith 34). Thus, the selection of the poems from the “Rose” collection instead of *Crossways* in the anthology can be read as an attempt at the subversion of the theosophical and mystical themes that Yeats tried to highlight in the “Indian Poems.”

Despite being a remarkable example of Yeats’s initial cross-cultural literary experiments in mystical themes and motifs, the “Indian Poems” did not get the critical attention they deserved. Monteith reflects critically on this point:

Initially, Yeats seems to have arranged these poems so that they reflect the movement of his own interests at that age: written ‘as my [Yeats] reading led me . . . [from] Arcadia and the India of romance’ to his own Ireland. If we take Yeats at his word in our reading, the sixteen poems of “Crossways” do seem to travel from Arcadia, through India, and finally settle in Ireland’ however, the landscape does not change from poem to poem. (28)

All such mental and imaginative alliances serve to highlight the fact that Yeats drew a wide variety of themes, motifs and symbols from Eastern philosophy and mysticism and then fused them together with those from the West. Yeats had been interested in mystical and supernatural experiences as a child, and the very same experiences supplied a vast array of symbols for his poetry later. His quest for understanding the physical as well as the metaphysical existence led him to Eastern philosophical traditions and provided him a literary space in which he could develop his own philosophy. Being an intuitive poet, Yeats borrowed images and symbols from the *Upanishads*, Buddhism, Tantra, and Eastern philosophical and spiritual discourses, to name a few, and suggestively represented them in his poetry and plays.

In the opinion of Evelyn Underhill, poets have the intuitive power to portray the mystical and spiritual experiences through suggestions in their poetry. She remarks: “[Poets] intuitively recognizing their suggestive qualities, their links with truth, have borrowed and adapted them to their own business of translating Reality into terms of rhythm and speech. Ultimately, however, they owe their origin to the mystics, or to that mystical sense which is innate in all true poets. . .” (125-26). In the context of Yeats, Albright rightly suggests that in his choice of a distinct poetic language to “embody visions of the extraterrestrial,” what really mattered for Yeats was that “the mirror of his art must not merely reflect, but kindle, start to burn with images hitherto unseen” (*Collected Poems* xxi).¹⁹ The intuitive aspect of Yeats’s mind is reflected in the poem “The Stolen Child” (1886), in which Yeats poetically gives a new meaning to the Celtic folk-lore, also incorporating profound thoughts from Buddhist philosophy. For instance, in the refrain of the poem, the fairy says to the child:

Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world’s more full of weeping than you can understand” (*Collected Poems* 44).²⁰

If we read this poem from a Buddhist perspective, it suggests Buddha’s four noble teachings: “suffering, origin of suffering, the removal of suffering and of the path to the removal of suffering” (Dasgupta, *Indian Philosophy Vol. I* 237). In Buddhist philosophy, life is considered to be full of sorrows and the only way out is a renunciation of the physical and material world, and seeking refuge in the natural wilderness away from this world, “while the world is full of troubles / And is anxious in its sleep” (*Collected Poems* 45). Although, Yeats suggests that this poem is not about “insight and knowledge,” but about “longing and complaint,” one can deduce from the symbols and terminology used in the poem as well as in the title of the collection “Crossways,” that while writing this poem Yeats was meditating over issues like innocence and natural beauty, the world beyond, cosmology, birth and death cycle, the good and the evil, the existence of some supreme power, a relationship between divine inspiration and creative impulse, dreams

¹⁹ Daniel Albright opines, “Yeats’s poetry shows a lifelong search for such images, images that were not reflection but illumination” (*Collected Poems* xxi).

²⁰ On a different note, the poem immediately calls to mind Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” (composed 1802-1804, published 1807).

etc., which form the centre of Yeats's creative imagination.²¹ Symbolically, it also projects the fairy as the personification of the 'ancient knowledge' luring a poet, who is curious like a child to understand the existence before birth and after death.

The Eastern journey of Yeats started after his meeting with Mohini Chatterjee in 1886, whom Yeats described in his *Autobiographies* as a "handsome young man with the typical face of Christ" (98). Later, Yeats writes about his philosophy, "It was my first meeting with a philosophy that confirmed my vague speculations and seemed at once logical and boundless. Consciousness, he taught does not merely spread out its surface but has, in vision and in contemplation, another motion and can change in height and in depth" (98). Bachchan stretches this argument farther and opines:

It was only when Yeats read the Theosophical Manuals and *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) that his wavering mind found a definite direction . . . this book, which expounded what was really western occultism, was supposed to contain the wisdom of India, and Mohini Chatterji, a newly arrived Theosophist teacher in London, was requested to come to Dublin to explain it. But instead he preached to Yeats mainly the mystic nihilism of *Samkara*, which kept the poet under its spell for a long time. (11)

After this spiritual and mystical encounter with Mohini Chatterjee, Yeats wrote a series of Indian poems like the ones mentioned above, to give a poetic voice to the mystical philosophy of the East. For instance, in the poem "Anashuya and Vijay," originally titled "Jealousy," Yeats has portrayed a man, Vijay, who in love with the priestess Anashuya and the other lady Amrita, whom at one point in the poem he [Vijay] refers to as his mother. Bachchan suggests that Yeats borrowed his theme for the poem from Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, but on a closer analysis, one would like to humbly submit, the poem seems to reflect Shankara's philosophy, which Mohini Chatterjee lectured on during his stay in Dublin (65). Shankara's philosophy of *maya* (the world as illusion) has been beautifully woven into the symbolic characters of this poem. Amrita, as the mother and the lover represents the non-duality between the relative and the absolute truth. Vijay explains the illusion inherent in the perceptible dichotomy:

²¹ Yeats wrote in a letter to Katharine Tynan dated 14th March 1888, "[M]y poetry . . . is almost all a flight into fairy land, from the real world . . . That it is not the poetry of insight and knowledge but of the longing and complaint—the cry of the heart against necessity. I hope some day to alter that and write poetry of insight and knowledge" (qtd. in *Collected Poems* 424).

I loved another; now I love no other.
 Among the mouldering of ancient woods
 You live, and on the village border she,
 With her old father the blind wood-cutter
 I saw her standing in her door . . . (*Poems* 38).

The “another” here symbolically represents the physical world in contrast to “Mother Amrita,” who is an epitome of the Ultimate Truth. According to Śankara’s Vedanta, “the ultimate and absolute truth is the self, which is one, though appearing as many in different individuals” (Dasgupta, *Indian Philosophy Vol. I* 439).

Even invocation to Brahma in the poem harks back to Vedanta philosophy. Anashuya, in the last stanza of the poem, says, “O Brahma, guard in sleep,” every creature on this earth. This reflects Śankara’s philosophy that there is no distinction among different creatures and all are equal. Every difference is just an appearance, name and form (*nāmarūpa*). This image of Brahma is explored again in the poem “The Indian Upon God”:

I passed a little further on and heard a lotus talk:
 Who made the world and ruleth it, He hangeth on a stalk,
 For I am in His image made, and all this tinkling tide
 Is but a sliding drop of rain between His petals wide. (*Poems* 39)

Yeats further developed the mystical symbol of the ‘lotus,’ weaving it into his other poems, frequently also associating it with the occult symbol of the ‘rose.’

Later in life, in the poem “Meru” (1934), Yeats highlights, with greater maturity and aesthetic beauty, the illusionary aspect not only of the world, but of great civilizations: “Civilisation is hooped together, brought / under a rule, under the semblance of peace / By manifold illusion. . .” (*Collected Poems* 339). Again, the poem “Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest” evokes the image of the supreme power. Interestingly, in the poem “Meru” the supreme power is portrayed in the form of Shiva in place of Brahma, which is possibly a result of Yeats’s growing immersion in Tantra philosophy. If one compares these two phases of Yeats’s writings (the early and the later, during which he is explicitly writing poems on Indian themes), one will realize that Yeats has progressed from duality to non-duality, from an objective understanding to a subjective understanding of Vedanta, demonstrated in his blurring of boundaries between the natural and the supernatural, the

physical and the metaphysical, and mystical and political only in the later phase of his creativity. A mature and Vedantin Yeats reminds us:

but man's life is thought,
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
Ravaging through century after century,
Ravaging, raging, and uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality: (*Collected Poems* 339)

He laments the fact that men cannot break this endless cycle of centuries despite being aware of the illusionary and transient nature of the world, or the fact that men live in ignorance of the 'real' nature of the world and human existence.

R. F. Foster has mixed opinions on this issue, as he juxtaposes Yeats's world of fantasy with the mystical elements of the Indian philosophical discourses, in which mystical represents the Ultimate reality, the cosmic consciousness, or the all pervading power, or the Brahma. He writes:

[A]nd so is the 'sedative' effect which . . . [Yeats] himself gloomily discerned in his poetry as a whole: 'a flight into fairy land, from the real world, and a summons to that flight'. Some of the poems looked back to his Theosophist induction of 1885 to 1886, using the language of Indian mysticism: Mohini Chatterjee's Vedantic teachings were reproduced in quatrains . . . turned Mohini's injunctions straight into poetic form. (*Apprentice* 85)

Thus, Eastern mysticism provided Yeats with a source of knowledge through which he believed he could trace the primordial tradition of Ireland. It also helped Yeats in understanding Celtic myths, symbols and folk beliefs by illuminating them through an Eastern lens. Joseph Campbell in his book *The Power of Myths* explains the process of a cross-cultural reading of myths:

Read myths. They teach you that you can turn inward, and you begin to get the message of the symbols. Read other people's myths, not those of your own religion, because you tend to interpret your own religion in terms of facts—but if you read the other ones, you begin to get the message. Myth helps you to put your mind in touch with this experience of being alive. It tells you what the experience is. . . . The myth tells you what it is. It's the reunion of the separated duad. Originally you were one. (5)

The images of Brahma, Shiva and also Krishna (in some of his other works) forms integral nodes in the larger Hindu mythology, and thus, in the light of Campbell's assertion about "reading other people's myths," Yeats was exploring these myths to understand his own culture and mythology vis-à-vis Hindu/Indian mythology.²² The imaginative flight of Yeats, which, in Foster's estimation, might have been a "sedative effect," was, in fact, a state of contemplation over the world mired in illusion and a radical inversion of the rigid institutions which separate the West and the East, very much like the two tend to demarcate human civilization.

In poetry, mystical symbols are employed to represent experiences which are otherwise ineffable and beyond the purview of logic. There are numerous questions which are metaphysical in nature, and when a person gets a glimpse of that reality, he considers the experience to be mystical or supernatural in nature. Therefore, any experience or vision which heightens our sense perceptions and challenges our existing worldview can possibly be considered as mystical. Both Western and Indian philosophy have pondered over the issue of the body and soul, mortality and immortality, mind and matter, objectivity and subjectivity, spirit, God, creation myths, and the different layers of human consciousness, to name a few. Yeats has aptly expressed his mystical endeavour by exploring universal questions in the poem, "The Indian Upon God": "I passed a little further on and heard a peacock say: / *Who made the grass and made the worms and made my feathers / gay. . .*" (*Poems* 40, italics in original). The answer comes from a peacock, a bird of great mythical significance in Indian mythology, also bearing significant links to Krishna.

Amidst all these discussions, one must remember that Yeats was not a seer or a mystic. Therefore, it is important to constantly remind oneself that Yeats's interests in all psychedelic trips, parapsychology and transcendental experiences were primarily literary and artistic in nature. According to Bachchan, "Yeats was not a mystic. He himself told Ethel Mannin that he was too practical to be a mystic . . . Yeats sees no short cuts to salvation. He may not see God or heaven, but humanity is constantly before his eyes" (75). In Gould's view, Yeats collaborated with Dorothea Hunter and "confided [in her]

²² Yeats's most poignant representation of the power of annihilation vested in Krishna in the Hindu vision of cosmogenesis comes through in Yeats's *A Vision* (A reference to the same can be found in "The Soul in Judgement" section of *AVB* 173). In response to a question posed to the medium by Yeats, the reply that he receives is: "Christ begins a cycle – Krishna ends a cycle – the new ends a cycle – a long cycle" Harper, *Making of Vision Vol 2* (39)

his own imperfections as a seer” because Hunter herself admitted, Yeats “could not himself get the visions he so desired; he said his mind was too analytical & questioning. . .” (156). Kathleen Raine refers to a similar remark by Yeats’s wife, George: “She said to her husband that *Æ* was the nearest to a saint that they had known; her husband was indeed a great poet, she said, but no saint” (*Yeats the Initiate* 65).

Yeats’s moments of indirect, transcendental and supernatural experiences were moments interspersed with creativity, because Yeats minutely observed and recalled the content of his experiences. Even while working on *A Vision*, Yeats painstakingly took notes of every automatic session and tried to develop disjointed utterances into a system, which, to a lay man, would appear to be a collage of philosophy and symbols taken from different cultures and civilizations. When viewed through the lens of mystical experiences, *A Vision* gets converted into an imaginative landscape unprecedented, par excellence. There is a possibility that because of his excessively “analytical and questioning” mind, Yeats relied on ancient philosophical and symbolic systems to understand human existence in contrast to contemporary, lived experiences; the former was time-tested, the latter ephemeral. Yeats lays bare his innermost thoughts:

But I wished by my writings and those of the school I hoped to found to have a secret symbolical relation to these mysteries, for in that way, I thought, there will be a greater richness, a greater claim upon the love of the soul, doctrine without exhortation and rhetoric. Should not religion hide within the work of art as God is within His world, and how can the interpreter do more than whisper? I did not wish to compose rites as if for the theatre. They must in their main outline be the work of invisible hands. (*Memoirs* 124)

Thus, Yeats believed in the idea that mystical symbols have hidden powers working behind them. In order to understand this phenomenon, he attended numerous automatic writing sessions before his marriage, and continually experimented with them together with his wife George after 1917, participated in sessions of séances to communicate with deceased souls and read numerous books written on such issues.

Yeats’s curiosity about the mystical and the unexplained constantly urged him to move ahead in his journey towards the unknown. What started as a voyage to know the mystical forces later led him to command the unknown through the process of evocation. At the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Yeats came across the technique of Tattwa

meditation through which mystical symbols could be consciously invoked, explored, and eventually incorporated into creative media. Interestingly, Yeats brought his own improvisations to the theoretical ideas regarding the Tattwa cards and meditational techniques he learnt at the Golden Dawn, as well as subjected his improvisations to innovative and unique uses in his poetry, plays, and in his magnum opus, *A Vision*.

Yeats's Evocative Symbols

Certainly evocation with symbol has taught me that much that we think of as limited to certain obvious effects influences the whole being.

--W. B. Yeats, *Memoirs*²³

In his *Memoirs*, Yeats writes, “An obsession more constant than anything but my love itself was the need of mystical rites - a ritual system of evocation and meditation - to reunite the perception of the spirit, of the divine, with natural beauty” (123). Deeply interested in esoteric and mystical phenomena from a tender age, Yeats was intrigued by the hidden power of symbols which have psychosomatic effect on the human mind. At the Golden Dawn, Yeats acquired the Tattwa mediation technique and experimented with its subtle aspects throughout his life.²⁴ Yeats's symbolic experiments deploy a wide range of symbols in the form of different colours, images and geometrical forms from the Eastern tradition and philosophy. In Yeats's terms, evocative symbols are those symbols which are used to evoke images, dreams, emotions, ideas, spirits, and particular psychic states.

In his essay “Symbolism in Poetry,” Yeats broadly classifies symbols into two categories, “emotional symbols” and “intellectual symbols” (*Early Essays* 118-19). Through his unique psychological experiments, Yeats tried to understand and delineate symbols which act as catalysts for creative writers and symbols which are concretized and immortalized in the form of writing. Thus, Yeats first entered into the recesses of the unconscious mind through concentration on evocative symbols (Tattwa Cards) and then

²³ Yeats, *Memoirs* 176.

²⁴ In India philosophy, the word ‘tattva’ occurs in various contexts and is thus a complex term. It has been described as ‘reality,’ ‘truth,’ ‘thatness,’ ‘essence.’ It denotes a number of things like *bhasya* (commentaries on ancient classical texts), stages of consciousness, essence of a philosophical idea, to name a few. John Woodroffe in his book, *Śakti and Śākta*, describes that the symbols of ‘tattva’ “are not material articles or practices, but the symbols for Yogic processes” (154).

gave shape to his hazy imagination by connecting abstract images, symbols and events into a complete whole, which he could use in his writings. For instance, in *The Celtic Twilight* (1893), Yeats describes his encounter with a visionary poet and the creative fabric of his poems: “The poems were all endeavours to capture some high, impalpable mood in a net of obscure images. There were fine passages in all, but these were often embedded in thoughts which have evidently a special value to his mind, but are to other men the counters of an unknown coinage” (*Mythologies* 12).

In Yeats’s early novella, *John Sherman and Dhoya* (1891), there is a subtle reference to Yeats’s deep interest in Tattwa (Elemental) meditation. In an autobiographical tone, describes the mood of his character John Sherman gazing outside the window of Imperial Hotel: “He sat there meditating, meditating. Grey clouds covering the town with flying shadows rushed by like the old and dishevelled eagles that Maeldune saw hurrying towards the waters of life” (42-43). In this passage, words like “[g]rey clouds,” “flying shadows,” “dishevelled eagles” and “the water of life” are all associated with Yeats’s Tattwa cards through element, colour, and the unconscious drifting of mind into the abyss of abstract imagination.²⁵ Later, in the poem “All Soul’s Night” (1920), one can clearly observe the maturity in Yeats’s motifs and symbols, as he is almost describing MacGregor Mathers’s process of meditation in a philosophical tone, “For meditations upon unknown thought / Make human intercourse grow less and less; / They are neither paid nor praised” (Poems 281). Later in the poem, Yeats remarks:

Till meditation master all its parts,
 Nothing can stay my glance
 Until that glance run in the world’s despite
 To where the damned have howled away their hearts,
 And where the blessed dance;
 Such thought, that in it bound
 I need no other thing,
 Wound in mind’s wandering
 As mummies in the mummy-cloth are wound. (*Collected Poems* 282)

There is clear trajectory of Yeats’s use of meditation as a source of creative symbols and images, which often goes unnoticed. Unlike his early works, in this poem, Yeats uses the setup of séances, evocation of spirits and meditation on elements, also exploring the

²⁵ Some of these images also correspond to Ellmann’s discussion of elemental symbols in Yeats as mentioned above. See footnote 16.

minds of deceased friends like Horton, Florence Emery and MacGregor Mathers to explore the world of spirits. The reference to elements in “[s]o that his elements have grown so fine” clearly shows that Yeats is poetically recreating the entire process of Tattwa meditation.

During this period, Yeats was also passionately involved in automatic writing and exploration of the various nuances of evocation, meditation and Eastern philosophical concepts. Thus, with time, Yeats learnt a deeper philosophy of meditation and used it for the enhancement of his creative skills. George Mills Harper highlights the role of Tattwa cards used in the Golden Dawn in the context of Yeats, “As an Adept in the Golden Dawn Yeats had been taught the use and significance of colour symbolism by MacGregor Mathers, whose experiments to induce visions by meditation on coloured Tattwa cards were widely practised in the Order” (*Making of Vision Vol. I* 212). The poem cited above indicated that Yeats not only used symbols and colours associated with Tattwa, but also assimilated the process of meditation technique into the fabric of his poem, both literally (here in the poem) and methodologically, in the creation of the wider spectrum of his literary works.

Throughout his life, Yeats experimented with such symbols and tried to develop an explanation for the relationship between meditation and image, symbols and colours, symbols and sound, and the shamanistic and mystical aspects of symbols and metaphors. These subtle aspects of Yeats’s unique symbolic experiment gave a new force to his poetry, plays and other creative works. There is indeed a potent connection between Yeats’s prose work and creative pieces—his poetry and plays. On the one hand, in his prose works like “Symbolism in Poetry,” “Discoveries,” “Ideas of Good and Evil,” *A Vision*, and *Per Amica Silentiae Lunae*, for example, Yeats embarks on a journey to chart out his experience of the aforementioned evocative and meditative practices and experiences, and on the other, he gives infuse life into them through his creative articulation in the form of his poetry and plays. Yeats’s creative writing could indeed be seen as an outcome of his meditation and a practical demonstration of his literary criticism.

In almost every ancient tradition, like the Cabbala, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Tantra, to name a few, such mystical and evocative aspects of symbols have been explored in great depth. But in the early twentieth century, various esoteric and spiritual groups in the Western world tried to develop systematic explanations for the evocative

aspects of symbols. More so, even psychoanalysts like Jung, working on the inter linkages between memory, the unconscious and archetypes, offered to interpret these subtle aspects of symbols psychologically.

It will be rewarding to further explore the role of evocative symbols in Yeats's creative imagination, to unearth how Yeats developed his own theory of evocative symbols by borrowing ideas from Eastern and non-European traditions and also to interrogate if he was successful in giving a new rationale to the congruity between Western psychoanalysis and the Eastern Philosophy of mind.

Goethe, who had a great impact on Yeats's creative imagination, critically engages with different aspects of the evocation of symbols through colours, in his work *Theory of Colour*. The work acquires special significance from the fact that it explores the scientific, philosophical and psychological effects of colour symbolism. When describing the difference in the representation of colour by a painter and a poet, Goethe cites the example of the colour of the flesh represented by a combination of snow and vermillion in a painter's palette, and observes:

Similar instance without end might be quoted from poets: even a contrast can only be strongly conveyed in description by another contrast that resembles it. On the other hand it would be easy to show that whenever poets have attempted the painter's method of direct contrast, the image has failed to be striking, for the mind's eye cannot see the relation between the two colours. (19)

Goethe further explains that the poetic language which tries to capture and portray the colour perceived through the employment of imagination lacks exactness.

Yeats, a trained painter and a poet, made serious efforts to develop his own theory of colour. In his early years, Yeats even attempted to create, in his poetry, the effect of painting. For instance, in "The Wanderings of Oisín" (1889), the fairy is described in the following words:

And like a sunset were her lips,
A stormy sunset on doomed ships;
A citron colour gloomed in her hair,
But
down to her feet white vesture flowed,
And with the glimmering crimson glowed

Of many a figured embroidery;
 And it was bound with a pearl-pale shell
 That wavered like the summer streams,
 As her soft bosom rose and fell. (*Collected Poems 2*)

The colours that are evoked while describing the fairy lead the readers to imagine a painter's canvas—a painted word picture; the use of vivid colours like orange, citron, white, crimson, pale tint or off white/pearl-pale conjure a splash of myriad hues for the readers to visualize. Like Goethe, Yeats explored all the possible areas where he could find an explanation for his colour symbolism. After coming in contact with the Golden Dawn, the rituals practiced there, and Eastern philosophy, Yeats got intensely interested in the symbolism of colour, mostly owing to its use in esoteric rituals. He formulated a theory and philosophy of colours, and worked hard to bring it through in his poetry and dramaturgy.

Yeats, Tattva Cards and the Art of Meditation

The 'evocative symbols' which Yeats worked with have been referred to as "elemental symbols" by Ellmann.²⁶ However, Ellmann has not brought out the connection between Yeats's elemental symbols and Yeats's 'Tattva cards.' Yeats created his own Tattva cards based on the esoteric meditation rituals which he learnt and practiced at the Golden Dawn.²⁷ The Golden Dawn used Indian philosophy, particularly the Tantric philosophy of 'tattvas,' because of its resemblance with the Cabbala tradition.²⁸ For instance, there is a similarity between the different colours of the *cakras* and the *sephiroth* (the Cabbala Tree of Life). In addition to this, the elemental colours used in the western esoteric and occult tradition bear strong resemblances with the colours associated with the tattvas. Mathers developed a meditation technique based on the 'tattva' meditation and related it to *kundalini*, *swara/svara/mantra* (sound/chant/incantations), and Cabbala's Tree of Life.

Yeats came to know about Tattwas from different sources, and not only through the Theosophical Society and the Golden Dawn. For instance, Arthur Avalon's *Śakti and*

²⁶ Reer to footnotes 16 and 24.

²⁷ In Yeats's private collection, there are two sets of Tattwa cards. Information sourced from the NLI, Dublin during my archival research.

²⁸ It is important to note that Mathers, in his magnum opus *Kabbalah Unveiled*, has also referred to the legendary conversation between Krishna and Arjuna from the *Bhagavadgītā* (18). This serves to reinforce that Mathers was acquainted with Indian philosophy.

Śākta and *The Serpent Power*, Ram Prasad's *The Science of Breath and the Philosophy of the Tattvas: Nature's Finer Forces*, and James Haughton Woods's *The Yoga-System of Patañjali or the Ancient Hindu Doctrine of Concentration of Mind*. One has listed out some of these books to drive home the significance of yoga or meditation involved in the use of the tattva cards, sounds or incantations. Kathleen Raine, in her book *Yeats the Initiate*, writes about the meditative use of elemental symbols in the Golden Dawn:

These four [cup, wand, sword and pentacles] again recur in the ritual of the Golden Dawn as the *four elemental weapons of the magician*: the lotus-headed wand of fire, the sup of water, the dagger for air and the pentacle for earth. *Every adept had to make for himself, according to precise directions, these four weapons for the evocation and control of these elements* and aspects of the universe to which each corresponds. . . . (192, emphasis added)

The 'Tattva cards' are used in meditation to concentrate and channelize imagination and the resultant thoughts. According to Graham Hough, meditation on these elemental symbols enlarged the domain of the psychical realm, thus opening the doors of the mind towards an understanding of the subtle nuances of the human mind, "Meditation on one of the elemental symbols is supposed to lead not only along a mental, an imaginative track, but to a participation in the power of the actual element concerned. There is a vital link between the psychic and the physical realm" (47).

At this juncture, one needs to consider the question if there are any differences between the Western and the Eastern view of elements/tattvas. Jung ponders on the difference in the manner in which a Western and an Eastern mind visualizes tattva:

In the East, when anybody speaks of *tattva*, they conceive of it as already in existence, and, mind you, a complete existence—as if a *tattva* really could become visible to them. I don't know whether anybody has had a vision of *tattva*, but that might be, for they can visualize any concept, no matter how abstract. So the *tattva*, which is a concrete thing in the East, has with us a *sukṣma* aspect—It is an abstraction, an idea. (*Psychology of Kundalini* 8-9)

In his assertion that *tattva* has only been "an abstraction" or "an idea" for the Western mind, Jung probably suggests that in order to imagine existence in terms of "*tattva*," one has to first believe in the existence of the concept of "*tattva*" itself. The Western mind, he seems to suggest, doubts fundamentally, the very veracity of the existence of elements,

“*tattvas*,” and cannot think of them in concretized terms. Therein can be located the dichotomy between the Western mind and the Eastern mind.

In the ancient Hindu Vedic tradition, sacrifices were made to perform rituals and in the post-Vedic or Upanishadic period, these sacrifices were converted into symbolic representation and meditation (*Dhyâna*) over symbols. Surendranath Dasgupta describes these meditative symbols from Brâhmaṇa into Āraṇyaka thought: “These symbols were not only chosen from the external world as the sun, the wind, etc., from the body of man, his various vital functions and the senses, but even arbitrary alphabets were taken up and it was believed that the meditation of these as the highest and the greatest was productive of great beneficial result” (*Indian Philosophy Vol. I* 35). In Buddhism too, similar meditative techniques related to symbols are used.²⁹ In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky writes that it is through *Dhyâna* (meditation) that “the most unlimited powers are obtained, marvels and miracles are worked, the highest spiritual knowledge is acquired, and union with the great spirit of the universe is eventually gained” (613).

Aniela Jaffé in her essay “Symbolism in the Visual Arts” makes a thumping observation, “The history of symbolism shows that everything can assume symbolic significance: natural objects . . . man-made things . . . or even abstract forms (like numbers, or the triangle, the square, and the circle). In fact, the whole cosmos is a potential symbol” (*Man and his Symbols* 255). It can be argued that Yeats believed in a similar idea of the universe as a “potential symbol,” and he dedicated his life to uncover the mystery behind it, not through pure sciences, but through a series of symbolic images that he invoked through his sessions of mediation. Yeats recounts his first experience with the ‘Tattva Cards’ with S. L. MacGregor Mathers:

I was made to look at a coloured geometric form and then, closing my eyes, see it again in the mind's eye. I was then shown how to allow my reveries to drift, following the suggestion of the symbol. I saw a desert, and a gigantic Negro raising up his head and shoulders among great stones. There was nothing in the symbol, so far as I could judge, to have called up the result - if it was association of ideas, they were subtle and subconscious. As I watched the kabalist I discovered that his geometrical symbols were a series which I could classify according to the four

²⁹ For further information on Buddhist meditation, see *A History of Indian Philosophy Vol. I* by Surendranath Dasgupta (103-06).

elements and what the ancients called the fifth element, and the subdivisions of these. (*Memoirs* 27)³⁰

The complexity inherent in the working of symbols can easily be understood by the fact that they work through suggestions, almost like the set of tarot cards which Yeats used for predictions.

Ellmann also writes about Mathers's contribution in Yeats's life in this regard: "Mathers had taught to Yeats of concentrating on symbols and 'letting the will move of itself'. . . . Yeats called this method of meditation 'vision' . . ." (*Man and Masks* 126). Writing about Yeats earliest encounter with Tattwa through Olivia Shakespeare, Saddlemyer describes, "Olivia Shakespeare considered herself a firm agnostic inclining towards Buddhism, believed in reincarnation, psychometrized objects, was familiar with Tattwa and Tarot cards, and was often consulted by Yeats while in semi-trance" (27).

In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats compares the "black Titan" with Blavatsky's Masters who were presumed to be "trance personalities" (161). Yeats further writes about Mathers's symbols, "I had soon mastered Mather's symbolic system, and discovered that for a considerable minority . . . the visible world would completely vanish, and that world summoned by the symbol take its place" (*Autobiographies* 161-62). Based on this observation, one can surmise that the image of a bird with the head of a man or a woman in Yeats's *The Shadowy Water* seems to be an example of an evocative symbol.³¹

The Eastern concept of 'Tattvas,' and one can say with a fair degree of certainty, played a seminal role in Yeats's philosophy of symbolism. It provided a repertoire of innovative, unprecedented images and symbolic interpretations to Yeats's creative speculations, eventually giving them definitive shapes in his creative works. Ellmann also makes other observations with regard to the method of evoking symbols employed by Yeats: "Certain symbols evoked certain kinds of dream or 'vision'. Yeats made many experiments with his friends to see if similar dreams would result in many people from the same symbolic stimulus, for example, the Tantric symbol of the fire, and was gratified by his success. . . . The linking of qualities to the four elements in particular became habitual with him" (*Identity of Yeats* 27). Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux in her book *Yeats and Visual Arts* points out:

³⁰ Richard Ellmann also highlights this incident of Yeats's life in his biography (*Man and Masks* 96).

³¹ The verse play will be delineated upon in some detail below.

Yeats knew from his experiments in the occult that mental vision, in addition to being itself symbolic, is called forth by symbol. In the methods of invocation prescribed by the Order of the Golden Dawn . . . visual symbols played important roles. Symbols painted upon cards for divination and meditation, diagrams representing metaphysical and philosophical belief, and special accoutrements for ritual all possessed specific significance and power. (45)

In her book *Yeats and the Visual Arts*, Loizeaux does not directly mention the Tattva cards, but her critical analysis raises some momentous questions related to “divination and meditation diagrams.” For instance, she interrogates, in the context of Yeats, the representation of visions through poetry, the evocation of visions in the reader’s mind through symbols, and interconnections between vision and symbols (45).

A question that intrigued Yeats immensely was the one raised by great philosophers and writers before him—do symbols have some inherent power in addition to the visual effect they create? Probably the answer to this can be found in the most magnificent work Yeats ever created, his magnum opus, *A Vision*. Yeats’s interest in the ‘Tattwa’ cards percolated into the automatic writing of *A Vision*. During the long period of the composition of *A Vision*, the Yeatses were sometimes asked to meditate over the Tattwa cards to arrive at clarity of thought. For instance, George Mills Harper notes,

Disturbed at the failure of the past few days and eager to establish ‘a set from’ for continued work on the system, Yeats asked for ‘guidance in this.’ ‘I am not going to give you much for another month’, Aymor [Medium] warned; ‘you must meditate far more – meditate more on some spiritual image.’ He instructed Yeats to ‘use colours only’ as a symbolic focus for mediation in the ‘period of passivity.’ (*Making of Vision Vol. I* 212).

It is evident from this that the Mediums suggested to Yeats an esoteric pattern which could be invoked through the Tattwa cards, which until now, had only been a philosophical concept for Yeats. From a psychological point of view, each colour has a unique dynamism of thought transformation, and its intensity depends on the psychic state of the initiator. Thus, from the point of view of creativity, Tattwa cards played a significant role in the conceiving of ideas and symbols which later also took the shape of Yeats’s magnum opus *A Vision*.

Ram Prasad, whose book *Nature’s Finer Forces* probably provided the basic template for the evolution of the Tattva cards to Yeats, describes them in the following manner:

“The Tattvas are the five modifications of the Great Breath . . . The first outcome of the evolutionary state of Parabrah- man is the Âkâsha Tattva. After this come in order the Vâyu, the Tejas, the Apas and the Prithivi. They are variously known as Mahâbhûtas” (1). Further, these Tattvas are explained in terms of sound, touch, taste, colour and smell. In terms of colour, Tattvas are enumerated as follows: the Âkâsha (colourless); the Vâyu (The blue of cloud), the Tejas (Red), the Apas (White) and the Prithivi (Yellow) (Prasad 8). The Tattva cards developed by the Golden Dawn are most certainly based on the oriental concept of the five elements. V. H. Soror elucidates in the Golden Dawn side lectures, “Form and colour are symbolic therefore to each Tatwa is allotted as following, Prithivi-A Yellow Square; Apas-A Silver Crescent, horns upwards; Vayu-A Blue Sphere; Tejas-A Red equilateral Triangle; Akasa-An indigo egg” (Ms. 36, 276/6/5, 6).³² This broadly describes the various dimensions of the Tatwas because of which they were integrated into the teachings of the Golden Dawn. It emerges from the foregoing information that in the Eastern system, Tattvas played a significant role in the understanding of the psychical forces and cosmic existence, and had deeper connotative meanings than what a European mind could conceive of. It also explains the ready incorporation of the tattvas into the techniques of the Golden Dawn and Yeats’s firm belief in the power of evocation through tattvas.

Offering an insight into his experiments and their relation to his creative writing, Yeats narrates in his *Memoirs*:

I now began to experiment myself, finding that many people, after fixing their attention on the symbol, would pass not into reverie as I did but into a state of partial or complete hypnosis . . . I could discover occasionally among the symbols that came at my command some that I could never have heard of, though they had historical foundation and could not be the result of chance. I allowed my mind to drift from image to image, and these images began to affect my writing, making it more sensuous and more vivid. I believed that with the images would come at last more profound states of the soul, and so lived in vain hope. (27-28)

The evocative symbols became a vehicle for Yeats to know the “spiritual ground of things” and to re-present vision and ecstasy through poetic symbols. His interest in ‘evocation and meditation’ was not just limited to spirituality, mysticism and poetry.

³² Yeats *Occult Papers*. See bibliography for further details.

Yeats believed that the 'evocation method' even had the power to influence a nation's destiny, a belief he probably 'imported' from Mathers:

I began to write *The Land of Heart's Desire* . . . Before it was finished I went to Paris to stay with Mathers, now married to Bergson's sister . . . I noticed that his evocations were a dangerous strain. One day a week he and his wife were shut up together evoking, trying to influence the politics of the world, I believe now, rearranging nations according to his own grandiose phantasy. . . . (*Memoirs* 72-73).

In his preliminary years of the Golden Dawn, Yeats was fascinated by symbols to such an extent that he even accepted certain teachings of Mathers which were, one daresay, fabricated to impress disciples. But one must not forget that Yeats was also a sceptic who scrutinized every small detail till he was convinced that it bore some creative value. However, after coming in contact with Indian philosophers and scholars, Yeats reformulated these ideas by developing a philosophy of symbols in relation to mind, memory, and consciousness, among others. In his iconic essay "Magic" (1901), Yeats explains his views on the relationship between mind, memory, cosmic energy, and symbols as:

- 1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another . . . and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
 - 2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of nature herself.
 - 3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.
- (*Early Essays* 25)

According to William T. Gorski, "[D]ue to his [Yeats's] vows of secrecy to the Golden Dawn, Yeats suppressed any detailed account of this practice [evocation] in 'Magic' as well as in 'Rosa Alchemica'" (95). Interestingly, Yeats's views resonate with the twentieth century psychoanalytical experiments. Being a member of the Society for Psychical Research to which he was associated from 1913 to 1928, Yeats was aware of the thin boundary between esoteric and psychoanalytical explanations. For example, his view that "our memories are a part of one great memory" resonates with the experiments

with trance conducted at the SPR, Jung's idea of 'collective unconsciousness', and 'oceanic feeling', to name a few (*Mythologies* 345).³³

In Ellmann's view, "[s]ymbolism was for Yeats an effort to restore the unity of mind and nature which had existed until the seventeenth century" (*Identity of Yeats* 24). Yeats was of the opinion that symbols have the power to evoke ancient images and open the storehouse of memory when appropriately combined with sound, shape (geometrical structure made on cards) and colour.³⁴ In Yeats's experiments, sometimes, even an impression of the past incidents, smell/aroma, mood or particular mental state could induce a state of trance through which images, symbols and ideas could be evoked.³⁵ For example, in his essay "The Symbolism of Poetry," Yeats describes an incident in which, while writing a "symbolic and abstract poem," his pen fell on the ground and while lifting it up, he saw a vision, which appeared to him as having happened in a state of trance. On the first glance, it appears to be a psychedelic trip of a poet engrossed completely in his waging imagination, but when one reads it in the context of Yeats's meditative symbols and his trance-state theory, which play significant roles in his creative output, one realizes that the method of evocation of symbols is at the centre of Yeats's process of creative writing.³⁶ It follows that the symbols in Yeats's poetry are closely intertwined with his mystical and esoteric endeavours. Yeats writes:

³³ Jung developed this idea of "collective unconsciousness" to represent the part of unconscious mind which stores the ancient images and archetypal symbols and structures which are universal in nature.

Also, drawing on Freud, Bimal Krishna Matilal observes, "The first type of mystical experience is based on primitive and infantile memories and related to fantasies of a pre-verbal or non-verbal sensory experience. This type of experience is usually explained by psychoanalysts as the 'oceanic feeling'" (14).

³⁴ Yeats in "Symbolism of Poetry" observes, "All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion" (*Early Essays* 115-16).

³⁵ Gorski points out that "there is always some external, psychical catalyst affecting change in the narrator's psychic state." (97)

³⁶ These meditative symbols are Tattwa symbols.

Also, in Yeats's literary and psychological experiments, self-hypnotic techniques or those of inducing a trance played a significant role. Although it is difficult to demarcate clearly which symbols in his poetry are outcomes of these techniques, but in *A Vision*, these techniques have been elaborately used. Yeats himself acknowledged and expressed the same while describing the mediumistic communication, "*They say that*

Had my pen not fallen on the ground and so made me turn from the images that I was weaving into verse, I would never have known that meditation had become trance. . . . So I think in the making and in the understanding of a work of art, and the more easily if it is full of patterns and symbols and music, we are lured to the threshold of sleep, and it may be far beyond it, without knowing that we have ever set our feet upon the steps of horn or of ivory. (*Early Essays* 118)

The poem which Yeats mentions here is probably “The Shadowy Waters” and a close analysis of this poem from the perspective of evocative symbols reveals some important aspects of Yeats method of writing (*Early Essays* 394). The Shadowy Water is a verse play which appeared first as a poem in 1900 and then it was rewritten in the form of a verse play, which was first performed in 1904 and later given to Florence Farr for performance at the Theosophical convention.³⁷ R. F. Foster is of the view that *The Shadowy Waters* is an “eternal work in- progress” and it is an “attempt to reconcile spiritual search and actual existence” (*Apprentice* 174). But in view of Yeats’s life-long involvement with esoteric, mystical and spiritual experiments, this statement of Foster does not hold the argumentative ground. In fact, Yeats’s later works suggest that he did not strive for a reconciliation between the spiritual and the actual experience. The poem “Before the World was Made” aptly encapsulates Yeats mystical journey:

From mirror after mirror,
No vanity’s displayed:
I’m looking for the face I had
Before the world was made. (*Collected Poems* 321)

One can therefore suggest that Yeats’s aim was not to ‘reconcile’ but to understand the Vedantic Self, which is beyond the boundary of actual experience, time and space. Aibric in the play *The Shadowy Water*, represents the ‘actual/common/worldly experience’ when he suggests to Forgael to “[b]e satisfied to live like other men, / And drive impossible dreams away” (320). Forgael, however, is a man in search of spiritual or mystical knowledge. At one point, he says to Aibric:

*only the words spoken in trance or written in the automatic script assist them. They belong to the ‘unconscious’ and what comes from them alone serves. My interpretations do not concern them. In the mediumistic condition it sometimes seems as if dreams awoke and yet remained dreams” (AVB 170, italics mine). Later on, Yeats associated this state with the “dreamless sleep” explained in the *Mandookya Upanishad* and wrote, “[T]his fourth state, pure light to those that reach it, is that state wherein the soul, as much ancient symbolism testifies, is united to the blessed dead” (AVB 162).*

³⁷ Yeats *Variorum* 340.

It's not a dream,
 But the reality that makes our passion
 As a lamp shadow-no-no lamp, the sun.
 What the world's million lips are thirsting for
 Must be substantial somewhere. (*Collected Poems* 322)

Like Forgael, Yeats also believed that mystical experience must be true and real in some realm of human consciousness. The play *The Shadowy Water* is a case in point, which highlights Yeats's use of evocative symbols, especially Tattva cards, whose colour symbolism was developed on the basis of the Cabbala tradition. There are various images and symbols in the play which are probably outcomes of the experiment with Tattva cards. One can take for example "the souls of the dead transforming into man-headed birds," "the great golden net," "the burning string of the harp" as results of Yeats's evocation of images by employing the Tattva cards.

The history of the idea of *The Shadowy Water* before and after it was conceived and articulated in the form of a poem reflects on Yeats's struggle to channelize his creative imagination. During the period between 1897 to 1904, Yeats was deeply involved in his experiments with Tattwa Cards.³⁸ There are various references to colour, aroma, sound and esoteric symbols in the play. For instance, the second sailor in the play says about the mysterious queen, "We would not have noticed her but for the sweet smell through the air. Ambergris and sandalwood, and all the herbs the witches bring from the sunrise" and the first sailor replies, "No; but opoponax and cinnamon" (Yeats, *Variorum* 323). All the aromatic substances mentioned here also have esoteric associations, because they are generally used to sharpen the imagination or clear up the mind for acquiring of occult knowledge. In the Eastern tantric tradition, sandalwood is considered to carry some occult power, and is used to evoke the spirit of the dead. It is also used during Tattva meditation. Similarly in the Western tradition, opoponax is used to perform occult meditation.³⁹ This clearly shows that Yeats has worked very carefully on esoteric symbols to give a subtle meaning to his verse play by drawing symbols from different traditions. In fact, in this play, Yeats has directly borrowed esoteric symbols from the Golden Dawn teachings and theosophical ideas to create a mystical and esoteric ambience on stage.

³⁸ For detailed information, refer to *Becoming George* by Ann Saddlemyer (55).

³⁹ For more information, see "Opoponax Oil."

The main aim of the Tattva meditation is to puncture the hallucination created by the material world and move towards a realization of the real nature of the Self. Forgael in this play reflects on the dichotomy between the material and the spiritual world:

I can see nothing plain; all's mystery.
 Yet sometimes there's a torch inside my head
 That makes all clear, but when the light is gone
 I have but images, analogies,
 The mystic bread, the sacramental wine,
 The red rose where the two shafts of the cross,
 Body and soul, waking and sleep, death, life,
 Whatever meaning ancient allegorists
 Have settled on, are mixed into one joy.
 For what's the rose but that? miraculous cries,
 Old stories about mystic marriages,
 Impossible truths? But when the torch is lit
 All that is impossible is certain,
 I plunge in the abyss. (*Variorum* 323)

Forgael's statement highlights the aims and the ambience of the esoteric experiments in which Yeats was deeply interested. These experiments start with the idea of unravelling the mystery of nature and to discover its subtle reality. Then, the esoteric or occult process begins with meditation which is based on sacred geometry and colour combinations (in Yeats's context, it is through Tattva cards). After this, objects which are considered to have mystical power are used to evoke spirits or symbols along with other substances. At last, when the state of trance is achieved, it is generally explained as an "abyss" because of its ineffable experience. All these phenomena of esoteric rituals are explained above through the dialogues of Forgael quoted above.⁴⁰ He also refers to the same as "Impossible truths." The "Old stories about mystic marriage" probably hark back to the idea of the *kundalini* meditation (again, a concept related to Tantra as explained in the previous chapter) practiced at the Golden Dawn.⁴¹ Thematically, the play represents

⁴⁰ In Tantra there is a similar process of the 5M's.

⁴¹ In the Golden Dawn lectures, the Kundalini meditation involving Tattwa Cards has been explained thus: "To obtain magical power, learn to control thought, admit only those ideas that are in harmony with the end desired, and not every stray and contradictory ideas that presents itself. Fixed thought is a means to an end. Therefore pay attention to the power of silent thought and meditation . . . Therefore as has been already said, establish thy self firmly in the equilibrium of forces, in the centre of the Cross or of the Elements, that cross from whose centre the creative world issued in the birth of the dawning Universe" (Yeats, *Occult Papers* MS. 36, 276/6/4, 3).

the dichotomy between the material and the transcendental world. It is noteworthy that Yeats's poems written during this period also reflect similar threads of meditative thought. For instance, in the poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1890), the poet writes:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade. (*Collected Poems* 60)

Robert O' Driscoll comments on Yeats's view on the symbolist and materialist perception of the world:

The materialist, as we have seen, regards matter as the sole reality, and admits only the existence of a material world which we perceive with our senses and corroborate by analytic science. The symbolist posits the existence of two worlds, the material and the spiritual, the one manifest and visible, the other hidden and invisible, but the visible material world is seen as the way in which an invisible spiritual essence become manifest.
(12)

Yeats, in a note published in *The Arrow* on November 24, 1906, mentions the crucial aspects of the play and writes about its several revisions:

I began 'The Shadowy Waters' when I was a boy, and when I published a version of it six or seven years ago, the plot had been so often re-arranged and was so overgrown with symbolical ideas that the poem was obscure and vague . . . The present version is practically a new poem, and is, I believe, sufficiently simple, *appealing to no knowledge more esoteric than is necessary for the understanding of any of the more characteristic love poems of Shelley or of Petrarch*. If the audience will understand it as a fairy-tale, and not look too anxiously for a meaning, all will be well.
(*Variorun* 340, italics mine)

Daniel Albright considers *The Shadowy Water* to be "Yeats's most original acts of mythopoeia" (*Collected Poems* 493). According to Yeats, "'The Shadowy Waters' have a good deal of incidental Irish folklore and mythology but are not founded on any particular story" (*Variorum* 1283). Albright further adds, "*The Shadowy Water* is an attempt to write pure theatre, in the sense of pure poetry – that is, an attempt to eliminate from the dramatic experience every prosaic element, to present spiritual essence liberated from material consideration" (*Collected Poems* 493). Yeats supplied the following information about the play in a note: "[W]hen I was still working on an early version of *The Shadowy*

Waters, I saw one night with my bodily eyes, as it seemed, two beautiful persons, who would, I believe, have answered to their names. The plot of the play itself has, however, no definite old story for its foundation, but was woven to a very great extent out of certain visionary experiences" (*Variorum* 1284). According to Richard Taylor, "*The Shadowy Waters* occupies a very important place among Yeats's plays . . . Rather than rely on the authority and nationalistic associations of mythic incidents and characters, Yeats recreates them as vehicles for his private philosophy and endows them with esoteric and idealised significance" (*Reader's Guide* 47). Yeats himself maintained, "I had been writing during the day at the part of 'The Shadowy Waters' however its hero curses all visible things because they shut out the invisible peace. It seemed to me, that this medicine man repeated the curse and that he was the world which shuts out nature" (Foster, *Apprentice* 219).

A deeper study of Yeats' creativity and the different methodologies that he employed towards his imaginative and artistic designs leaves one partly amused, and partly spellbound. It is interesting to note that Yeats resorted to both tangible and metaphysical approaches to evoke symbols, which would be utilized further in his poetic art and dramaturgy. The most surprising, and hitherto unexplored creative technique of Yeats, is the unique relationship that he struck between symbols and sound, a meditative scheme he probably learnt from his days at the Golden Dawn, and improvised further for evoking and employing symbols, much to his artistic advantage.⁴²

This 'evocative' aspect of Yeats's poetic craft has not been given much attention by Yeatsian scholars and critics. They probably dismiss it as a topic which is not suitable for academic research. This supposition also arises from the fact that most of the scholars

⁴² A remarkable reference to the same can be found in the book *We Two Together* by James H. Cousins and Margaret E. Cousins. Recounting his chance discovery of Yeats' creative design on August 14, 1912, a day when the ladies of the house were out somewhere, while James H. Cousins and Yeats were home, James was taken by surprise. He writes, "After a while I became aware of a queer monotonous murmur somewhere in the house. It was Yeats' voice, and it seemed to be engaged in earnest prayer, which was impossible. His avowed paganism and his known dabbling in occult rituals came to mind, and I concluded he was engaged in some private ceremonial of worship or enchantment. The utterance, whatever it was, was not spontaneous, as it had some kind of vague architecture and design. Its constant repetition of the same sounds in similar order had the eeriness of the inaudible made audible. . . . Yeats was sitting on a chair in a corner of the kitchen with his head bent close into the corner. For three hours the sound went on, . . . Yeats came forth muttering in an undertone the same sounds as I had heard all morning . . . Then I began to understand and later ascertained that such was the Yeats method of composing verse, making a sound-scheme into which words were fitted after much trial and alteration" (Cousins and Cousins 160).

who have worked on such mystical aspects of Yeats have themselves never had direct experiences of such activity. Additionally, critics like George Mills Harper, who can boast of experience as well as expertise in these areas, did not make the effort to trace the Eastern source of Yeats's mysticism and symbols (probably owing to paucity of time or resources, one presumes).

Yeats's conception and understanding of symbols resonate with the Eastern psychological and philosophical discourses on symbols. This could be explained by drawing examples from Yeats's literary works and autobiography. Writing about the complexities inherent in the expression of symbolism, Yeats observes: "To hear a man talking, or to watch his gesture, is to study symbolism, and when we restate our impression in what are thought to be straightforward and scientific sentences, we are in reality giving a more limited, and therefore more graspable, symbolic statement of this impalpable reality" (Monteith 146). Ken Monteith in *Yeats and Theosophy* also suggests a Kantian reading of symbolism in expressing the reality of the phenomenal and the noumenal world: "As a component of mysticism, Yeats defines correspondence as symbolism itself, but as symbolism found in a realm of an ideal existence" (146). According to Monteith, Yeats brings together the manifestations of symbolism from both the material and the mystical realm.

There are numerous instances to elucidate the fact that in his search for the supernatural or mystical experiences, Yeats not only incorporated symbols from different cultures and civilizations, but also inter-bred symbols, which later became a quintessential feature of his poetry and plays. Thus, for the young Yeats, the inquiry into the mystical knowledge and symbols was a creative necessity and a medium to understand the cultural and national identity.⁴³ His interest in Eastern mysticism started with the Theosophical Society, was practiced and mastered in the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn, and finally culminated and perfected into a system in the form of *A Vision*.

⁴³ According to Naresh Guha, "His [Yeats's] method of symbolically reading the ancient Irish myths in terms of Theosophy and Indian systems was also backed by the writings of Celtic scholars like Sir John Rhys and Henry D'Arbois de Jubainville. Rhys had come to the conclusion that the Druids of ancient Ireland had a religion similar to that of other Aryans and had a comparable pantheon of gods . . . He had worked out a parallelism between the ancient Irish gods and their Hindu, Persian, Greek, and Norse counterparts. Celtic cosmogony and theogony, according to Rhys, formed part of a primordial myth" (*Indian Approach* 56).

In the poem “Ego Dominus Tuus,” Yeats proclaims: “By the help of an image / I call to my own opposite, summon all / That I have handled least, least looked upon” (*Collected Poems* 210). What Yeats learnt as an art of the evocation of symbols (in the Golden Dawn) was what he would later refer to as “emotional symbols.” In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats describes his teaching of the ‘evocative symbols’ to his grandfather George Pollexfen:

I without speaking, would imagine the symbol, and he would notice what passed before his mind’s eye, and in a short time he would practically never fail of the appropriate vision. In the symbols which are used certain colours are classified as ‘actives’, while certain other colours are ‘passive’, and I had soon discovered that if I used ‘actives’ George Pollexfen would see nothing (*Autobiographies* 207-08).

What Yeats himself refers to as “cabbalistic symbols” and claims that he learnt them from Mathers, are actually symbols created from an amalgamation of Eastern Tattva symbols, Eastern colour-scheme and Cabbalistic symbols. One can see this for oneself if one pits them against the esoteric teachings of the Golden Dawn. Elsewhere, Yeats describes his first meeting with Maud Gonne and the use of “the death symbol” to evoke in her mind the image “not of a human skull but of a dog’s skull” (*Memoirs* 124). This incident is a testimony to Yeats’s experiment with symbols and how he sometimes employed them to manipulate someone else’s mind.

There are numerous other incidents in Yeats’s life which bring to light his psychological experiments with symbols. Warwick Gould in the article “The Music of Heaven: Dorothea Hunter” critically elucidates various incidents and series of experiments which Yeats conducted with the help of Tattwa cards. For instance, Gould mentions a psychological experiment of January 1, 1898: “[T]he Hunters, Kirby, Mary Briggs, Yeats and Florence Emery gathered at Hunter’s place and a Vision was conducted with Tattwa symbols of four elements” (154). According to Gould all these psychological experiments were conducted to evoke individual spirits and Celtic mythological figures. Gould further explains the relationship between the Celtic connections of the Tattwa cards through an experiment carried out on December 29, 1897:

Yeats as “conductor” performed a Celtic ceremony of invocation, suggesting that the Celtic mysteries were already quite highly developed. Unlike in the second vision and in standard GD astral projection, where Tattwa symbols were used as a “door through which we desire to enter”

when setting out to “journey into the super physical world”, it appears that no symbols were used. Yeats did indeed manufacture a set of Celtic Tattva symbols, still in the family collection, which used the Celtic symbols of Cauldron, Whetstone, Sword and Spear which were later to mark the first four grades in his Celtic rituals. (155-56)

Gould’s assertion that “Yeats manufactured a set of Celtic Tattva symbols” clearly highlights the literary assimilation and Celticization of Eastern symbols. Another significant point that emerges is the relationship between tattva and astral projection. Yeats used these symbols for exploring the unconscious mind, but eventually got so immersed in this meditative process that he started to associate it with trance, dream, spirits, ineffable images, and aesthetics of ecstasy. On one occasion, while using symbols to invoke images in someone else’s mind, Yeats gave a wrong symbol and started pondering over some other symbol in his own mind, which in turn created a confusion. Yeats records his observation about the incident:

I made many curious observations. It was the symbol itself, or, at any rate, not my conscious intention that produced the effect, for if I made an error and told some one to gaze at the wrong symbol—they were painted upon cards—the vision would be suggested by the symbol, not by my thought, or two vision would appear side by side, one from the symbol and one from my thought (*Memoirs* 208).

Explaining the role of the Tattva cards in Yeats creative imagination, Dorothea Hunter wrote to Richard Ellmann, “[Yeats] found a source of interest in the study of certain fixed symbols, as described [in Prasad's book]. With these symbols he experimented in season and out of season. . . Later he used in the same way forms found in Celtic work & legend. . .” (qtd. in Gould 156). In the opinion of Dorothy Hunter, the Tattva cards were used for “training in the building and vivifying of thought forms such as Telesmanic figures; the concentrating an astral idea and image onto some symbol, and the energizing that idea so that it becomes a living force” (qtd. in Gould 155).

Israel Regardie, in his book *The Golden Dawn Vol. Four* refers to a transcription of August 1894, titled “Additional Lecture on the Tattwas of the Eastern School.” According to Regardie, this paper was withdrawn from circulation in the branch of the Order of which he was a member. According to him, this Hindu system of Tattwa symbols was considered to be “an alien system” (95). He traces the source of this paper to Ram

Prasad's book *Natures Finer Forces* and attempts to explain the different nuances of Tattwas and their relation to Swara, Kundalini, astrology, shamanism etc. He elucidates the various aspects related to Tattwick meditation like *gharis* (timings), colour, taste, distance of breath, natural principles, to name a few.⁴⁴ Despite being a detailed and valuable source of teaching in the Golden Dawn, Regardie's explanation about the Tattwa cards does not bring out the relationship between Tattwas and creativity at all. One has made it clear, by now that Yeats used exclusively, but not completely, to creative ends.

In conclusion, one would like to submit that Yeats's philosophy of Tattvas is very dense and loaded. It needs further research because it will shed new light on his poetry and plays, as well as explain his philosophy of symbolism, which was very different from the ongoing symbolist movement of his time, and also quite unique. It will also provide new insights into Yeats's relationship with the East, as well as that between the philosophy of mind in the East and Western psychoanalysis.

⁴⁴ For detailed information, refer to *The Golden Dawn: An Account of the Teachings, Rites and Ceremonies of the Order of the Golden Dawn, Vol. 4* by Israel Regardie (95-109).

CONCLUSION

After the foregoing discussion, there is no denying the fact that the trajectory of Yeats's creative imagination brings about a blending of the Eastern and the Western philosophical discourses and knowledge systems. Yeats remained an ardent follower of Eastern mysticism and esotericism throughout his life. By now, it is clear that Yeats looked to the East with philosophical and literary expectations. Although he was enamoured by the meditational practices and transformational rituals prevalent in the Eastern philosophical, mystical and esoteric systems, the reason why he put in all the labour to learn more about the East is because he wanted to infuse a new life breath into his literary works. Thus, the goal of Yeats's mystical, spiritual and esoteric pursuit of the Eastern elements was primarily literary and creative.

The opinions of critics and scholars of Yeats about his involvement in the esoteric and the mystical traditions of the East generally varies between two extremes, where a group of Yeatsian scholars try to completely brush Yeats's mystical, magical and supernatural elements under the carpet; while the other set of scholars, critics and biographers admit traces of influence of such systems from the East on Yeats, though generally, they do not study such influences in detail. However, the current has been slowly, but gradually shifting in favour of the latter opinion through works of critics and biographers who empathize with Yeats's interests. The contribution of Indian scholars working on Yeats and India/East for their doctoral degrees right from the 1950s is also noteworthy in this regard. They have served to draw parallels between the symbols in Yeats's literary works and the Indian philosophies of the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavadgita* and the *Puranas*. In the last three decades, western biographers of Yeats have also pointed out the influences of Indian philosophies and esoteric systems like Tantra on Yeats, but not gone into the details of these sources.

The events and people who played significant roles in fuelling the Eastern philosophical influences on Yeats have also been enumerated and discussed at length in the foregoing study. Yeats's founding of the Dublin Hermetic Society in 1885 (later, rechristened as the Dublin Theosophical Society in 1886), his meeting with Madame Blavatsky in 1886, the arrival of Mohini Chatterjee to Dublin in 1886 and his lecture on Vedanta, Yeats's joining of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1890, the synthesization of Eastern esoteric rituals

with the practices of the Western occult orders at the Golden Dawn, Yeats's readings of and knowledge of Boehme, Swedenborg, the Rosicrucian and the Cabbala, and, most importantly, Yeats's reading of John Woodroffe's translations of Tantric texts (1913 onwards): all of the factors contributed to Yeats's mounting interest in the mystical and the occult, and his fascination for the esoteric philosophies of the East grew by leaps and bounds.

Additionally, Yeats's meeting with the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore (1912), with the art and literary critic from Ceylon, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1913); his marriage with George Hyde-Lees, a fellow adept at the Golden Dawn in 1917; his discovery of George's capability to engage in automatic writing; his meeting with Purohit Swami (1931) and the prolonged literary association they had; and the lessons in Yoga and Tantra that Swami delivered to Yeats: the influence of all these people, taken together, honed the mystic, meditational and occult interest and skills of Yeats.

Because of the aforementioned mystics, saints and philosophers, as well as because of the above mentioned shaping events in his life, Yeats got a new driving force for his literary and philosophical pursuit, leading him to the exploration and recreation of symbols, myths, legends and other elements from both the Western and the Eastern esoteric and occult knowledge systems. The study also delved into what Yeats was possibly trying to achieve through his mystical and esoteric literary journey. Through an exploration of Tantra philosophy, Kundalini Yoga, Eastern symbols, and the methodology involved in creating symbols, and other philosophies of the East, the study tried to postulate that the aforementioned theories and rituals served Yeats in three ways: firstly, they helped him create his own "anima mundi" by blending of Esatern and Western esoteric symbols and rituals; two, Yeats's esoteric symbolism and mystical philosophy came to constitute his creative reality and visionary and prophetic works (like, for instance, *A Vision*); and three, the mystical symbols of Yeats helped him develop a subtle, literary and creative anti-colonial discourse, by means of which, having discovered the ancient roots of symbols, he attempted to understand and unearth ancient Celtic symbols. Through the medium of his psychedelic trip into the folk, the mystical and the occult, Yeats made an attempt to trace out the ancient, folk Irish history in his works—an alternative history which would be based on the ancient Celtic lore and folk Irish culture, and would be more authentic. However, one must remember that for Yeats, political engagement of any sort was necessarily through the medium of literature and the arts.

The first chapter, entitled “W. B. Yeats and Eastern Esoteric Philosophy” went into the debate between science and mysticism/esotericism, exploring, in detail, Yeats’s opinion in favour of a science which was not completely devoid of intuition and the supernatural. The chapter then took the readers through Yeats’s encounter with Tantra by means of various societies, people and literary works. The chapter also explored the reasons why Yeats got fascinated to Tantric philosophy and symbols in the first place. The reactions of scholars and critics in the West to Yeats’s engagement with Tantra philosophy was also attempted to expose the biases. The chapter then launched into a detailed study of how and why Yeats employed his knowledge of Tantra philosophy to his literary and creative works. One of the prime reasons that emerged from the study was that Tantra philosophy occupies a distinct position in Yeats’s interests because Tantra, unlike any other philosophy, transcends the domain of the rational and the fixed, and hence presented to Yeats a world of infinite imageries, symbols, literary possibilities, creative experiments and an ocean of undiscovered knowledge.

The second chapter entitled “Yeats, Sexuality and Tantra” closely looked into the role of sexuality in Tantra philosophy and investigated how Yeats’s knowledge of the position of Tantra in the matter of sexuality influenced Yeats’s life and literary and philosophical works. The chapter also went into an investigation of the significance of desire and sexuality in ancient Indian literature and philosophy, which was followed by an evaluation of the various postulations of Tantra on sexuality. The chapter then proceeded to trace the trajectory of Yeats’s changing opinions on sexuality throughout his life, especially his evolving views on the idea of sexual union being a microcosmic representation of the cosmic union of Shiva and Shakti, leading the couple to ultimate bliss. The chapter also reviewed the opinions of Western critics on sexual symbolism in Yeats’s later works. Since sexuality and sexual union are vested with transcendental powers in Tantra, the idea of the feasibility of the accomplishment of a spiritual/divine union through the medium of one’s own body is what drew Yeats to explore the potential of Tantric sexual union in his literary and prophetic works. Yeats might have found in the Tantric principle of divine biunity a cure for his constant strife with binaries and contraries throughout his life, which affected both his personal and creative lives. The chapter also read this argument in the light of Yeats’s marriage with George, his literary experiments with her in the composition of *A Vision*, the birth of their children, and later, the steinach operation that he underwent. The chapter investigated if one could strike any congruence between his own sexuality and personal

sexual life, and the sexual powers in Tantra that he admired and tried to explore through his writings, creative and prophetic endeavours.

The third chapter entitled “Yeats, Tantric Philosophy and *Kundalini*: A Study of Yeats’s *The Herne’s Egg*” launched into a critical study of Yeats’s play *The Herne’s Egg* (1938) through the lens of *kundalini* yoga and the principle of the use of sexuality for the awakening of *kundalini*. The chapter first introduced the readers to the concept of *kundalini* in Tantra; which was followed by a discussion of Yeats and *kundalini* yoga. The chapter also undertook a brief survey of the criticisms on the Indian/Upanishadic/Eastern elements in the play *The Herne’s Egg*. Finally, the chapter attempted an exhaustive investigation of the play through the lens of *kundalini*—studying the plot, characters, stage directions, props and the title of the play. The chapter concluded that the play, which had baffled critics, readers and audiences *ad infinitum* makes perfect sense when read in the light of the Tantric concept of *kundalini*. This explains why Yeats employed a tenet of esoteric knowledge (*kundalini* and Tantra) to create an exoteric form of art, i.e., a play. *The Herne’s Egg* has a ‘deep philosophy’ and should not be readily dismissed. The play exemplifies the coexistence of polar opposites: humour and philosophy, the natural and the supernatural, the mundane and the profound on stage, or at least in the pages of the play. The play is a literary manifestation of the possibilities of *kundalini* that Yeats sought to achieve in his own life.

The last chapter entitled “The Hermeneutics of Symbolism and Yeats’s Philosophy” primarily looked into the elaborate symbolism of Yeats, and his methodology to arrive at new symbols over the course of his literary life. The chapter conducted a detailed inquiry into the two kinds of symbols Yeats uses in abundance in his literary works: mystical symbols and evocative symbols, mostly achieved through the blending of Eastern and Western meditational techniques and rituals. The chapter also postulated how Yeats subtly indulges in an anti-colonial discourse, through the use of mystical symbols: in tracing the ancient roots of symbols of the East, he also unearths ancient Celtic symbols, thus turning the colonial logic on its head. The evocative symbols based on colours and geometrical structures have been given a novel interpretation by Yeats, in his act of creating a new set of tattwa cards, again by fusing his knowledge of the esoteric symbolism from the West as well as the East.

Finally, the study concluded that when one analyses Yeats’s work from an Eastern, especially Tantric perspectives, a new understanding of Yeats’s oeuvre comes to the fore. One is of the opinion that no understanding of Yeats as a poet, playwright and prophet would

be complete without fathoming the extent to which Tantra philosophy influence both the personal and the creative life of Yeats. One also hopes that the coming generations of Yeatsian scholars and enthusiasts will take up a serious study of Yeats in the light of his Eastern esoteric engagements.

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