Yeats’ ambivalence towards Irish nationalism in “September 1913” and “Easter 1916”

Hale Kıyıcı a *

* Bulent Ecevit University, Zonguldak, Turkey

Abstract

William Butler Yeats, who is accepted both in English and Irish Canons, is one of the outstanding figures of the twentieth century literature. His differing ideas on various subjects have always attracted the attention of the readers of his time and today. One of the themes that has great influence on his poetry is Irish nationalism. However, there have always been contradictory ideas about the understanding of Yeats’ nationalism. While some people regard him as the greatest poet of his country, he is labelled as a British supporter by the others. One of the reasons is his Anglo-Irish origin; Yeats has always been close to both sides. In addition to this, Yeats describes his nationalism as an intellectual act rather than political. Therefore, he has always been against the use of violence in Irish nationalism. The aim of this paper is to depict Yeats’ reflection of ambivalence towards Irish nationalism in “September 1913” and “Easter 1916”.

1. Introduction

It is difficult to categorize William Butler Yeats in a single group as he is a versatile figure of his time. He is regarded as a late-romantic poet, a modernist poet, a successful dramatist, an essayist, a symbolist, an occultist and a nationalist. Though he is put into different categories, these are not enough to define Yeats and his art completely. Throughout his life, Yeats had always improved his art. One of the themes in his poetry is Irish nationalism. However, there have always been contradictory ideas about the understanding of Yeats’ nationalism. While some people regard him as one of the greatest poets of his country, [...] he was criticized harshly and accused periodically of being pro-British rather than true nationalist” by the others (Williams 69). These differing ideas may stem from his Anglo-Irish origin, because throughout his life Yeats was always in an ambiguous status about the political issues between Britain and Ireland. Another reason is his understanding of nationalism, which
he defined as an intellectual act free from violence and brutal acts. These cause Yeats to be labelled as a hybrid because a hybrid figure is one who is “simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs” in his works (Bhabha 132). The aim of this paper is to depict Yeats’ reflection of ambivalence against British colonialism and Irish nationalism in “September 1913” and “Easter 1916”.

Yeats’ nationalism was never one-sided and extreme. In fact, Yeats aimed to revive the Irish cultural heritage as a nationalistic act. Jalal Uddin Khan states that “his [Yeats’] first priority was to have a rich and rejuvenated Irish culture rather than political freedom” (43). He was against the use of violence while struggling for freedom because “his was an idea of literary nationalism and spiritual philosophy to be effected through what he repeatedly called […] an intellectual movement expressed in his arts and in those of the like-minded such as Lady Gregory, Synge, Douglas Hyde, and others” (Khan 43). Therefore, he always had a faltering attitude towards both Irish nationalism and the nationalists. Besides this, middle-class people “seemed to him to be too small to write any heroic chapter of history” (Stock 169). Yeats’ negative ideas about the middle-class people are seen in “September 1913” as he starts the poem directly criticizing ignorant attitudes of these people towards their country and their people. Yeats thinks that the only concern of the middle-class is money: “And add the halfpence to the pence / And prayer to shivering prayer, until / You have dripped the marrow from the bone? (lines 3-5). Yeats ends this stanza with the refrain “Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone, / It’s with O’Leary in the grave” (lines 7-8). He associates O’Leary with his ideal Ireland because except him “the patriots Yeats worked with were not legendary heroes and did not illustrate his vision of Ireland” (Stock 167). Like Yeats, O’Leary was also critical about Irish middle-class and defines them as “minds without culture” as they were inconsiderate to art, aesthetic and cultural developments (Dalsimer 6). Therefore, Yeats stars O’Leary in his poem as “a symbol for the lost ideal of aesthetic excellence in Ireland” while criticizing middle-class values (Dalsimer 7).

In the third stanza, Yeats expresses his disappointment about modern Ireland and people. He thinks that the new Ireland is totally different from his ideal Ireland, and it is just a “visionary illusion” (Dalsimer 11). He says:

Was it for this the wild geese spread  
The grey wing upon every tide;  
For this that all that blood was shed,  
For this Edward Fitzgerald died,  
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone, (lines 17-21)

Yeats is so disappointed with the present situation that he questions the necessity of sacrifices of the patriots. These people fought for their country, but the present atmosphere shows that it was futile. All these heroic people are ignored by the modern society, worse still, Yeats claims by saying “delirium of the brave” (line 22) that these patriots are seen as crazy people because of devoting themselves to their country.

In “September 1913” while Yeats is expressing his contemptuous ideas on the present situation of the country and the middle-class people, he wants to strengthen the effect of the poem by using the ballad form. In fact, this traditional form is especially used for nationalistic purposes, for glorifying nationalism. However, Yeats “turns the conventions to ironic ends” (Dalsimer 4). He is doubtful about the sincerity of the poems written in this form and as Dalsimer states Yeats believes that “they [ballads] attracted only one portion of the population […]—the half-educated mob. Indeed, the poems of Young Ireland were of value neither to the peasant living in his traditional world nor to the educated man” (3). They were only favourable for middle-class people towards whom Yeats had negative feelings. Therefore, Yeats uses this form not to glorify nationalism but to question it and to criticize the attitudes of Irish middle-class towards nationalism.

After writing “September 1913”, Yeats was criticized by nationalists as he mainly emphasized the futility of nationalism. Therefore, in “Easter 1916”, which was written after the Easter Rising in Dublin, a more consentient tone is used. It can be said that Yeats used a softer language to criticize Irish nationalism in “Easter 1916”. The poem was written to praise the Irish nationalists that were executed after the Easter Rising, a bloodshed memory in history. In fact, while glorifying these people, Yeats is critical about nationalism and the use of violence for independence, so the poem portrays Yeats’ “sincerity and complexity” about the rising (Stock 171). Moreover, Yeats’s “strong opposition to the violent political struggle as a means for Irish independence made him uncertain
about the justice and success of the rebels’ cause” (Khan 47). Therefore, the whole poem reflects Yeats’ ambiguous feelings towards this rebellion. Seamus Deane claims that “Yeats began his career by inventing an Ireland amenable to his imagination. He ended by finding an Ireland recalcitrant to it” (38). As things did not go in accordance with his expectations, Yeats had conflicting thoughts about Irish nationalism.

Like the previous one, Yeats starts the poem by mentioning the so-called Paudeens, the middle-class people whom he regarded as “unreadable from the things of earth because of their fear of death” before the rising (Deane 41). He says: “Coming with vivid faces /From counter or desk among grey / Eighteenth-century houses” (lines 2-4). It is understood from the very beginning that though Yeats does not have a close friendship with these nationalistic people as he greets them with “polite meaningless words”, he knows them personally (line 6). In “September 1913” these people were criticized harshly, but in “Easter 1916” Yeats talks about them in a more favourable way by using “vivid faces” at the opening because they “went open-eyed to defeat and almost certain death to proclaim the Irish Republic” (Stock 169). The ending of the first stanza summarizes the bitter truth both for these people and for Ireland. Yeats concludes as

Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly
A terrible beauty is born” (Lines 13-6).

Upon the executions of these nationalists, Ireland has changed that it has a glorious but a bloody history. Though Yeats has always ignored these middle-class patriots before the rebellion, the present situation makes him change his idea about them. Yeats finishes the stanza with an oxymoron to reflect his opposing ideas, and describes the aftermath of the rising as a “terrible beauty”. Ljiljana Ina Gjurgjan claims “while Yeats was a cultural nationalist, he would have never wished events to go as far as they did” (323), so he has contradictory feelings about this uprising. Additionally Khan states that “as the poem is based on a historic political event, it inevitably invites conflict between the personal and public reactions of the poet to that event”, so the poem is full of clashing ideas (54). In the previous poem, Yeats clearly expresses his negative ideas about modern Irish people; in this poem he smoothens his ideas slightly. However, as Stock claims “Yeats denied nothing: he held his belief but set beside it the heroic action, no less real, and prepared himself to meet the new world it had created” (173). What makes the poem ambivalent is this situation; on one hand, Yeats is still critical about these patriots, on the other hand he cannot ignore their death for their country. Shortly, it is both a glorious and a disastrous act for Yeats.

Unlike the first stanza, in which Yeats talks about middle-class nationalists in general, in the second one Yeats mentions four specific Irish revolutionists. The first one is Countess Markiewicz, a member of aristocracy. Yeats describes her voice as “shrill” (line 20) while she talks about political issues to emphasize his disapproval of her ultra-nationalism. As Khan claims “Yeats regrets that Constance betrayed her aristocratic horse-riding tradition. He criticizes her argumentativeness” as she took part in this rebel (51). Yeats believes that women should not take part in political issues at that extreme. He mentions her in the poem not to emphasize “the courage of her exploit but the ruin of a beauty that should have been sufficient to itself” (Stock 174). The following figures Yeats talks about are Patrick Pearse, who is a schoolmaster, a poet; his friend, Thomas MacDonagh; and John MacBride, who is Maud Gonne’s ex-husband. The poet describes MacBride as “A drunken, vainglorious lout” (line 32) because he belongs to lower-class and Yeats was always displeased about their marriage as Maud Gonne is his life-long love. Yeats also shared his ideas with Maud Gonne, saying that her marriage with him would be “to fall into a lower order” as she “represent[s] a superior class, a class whose people are more independent, have a more beautiful life, a more refined life” (qtd. in Foster 285). Unfortunately, this relationship lasted only two years and they broke up. Yeats refers to this unsuccessful marriage in the poem saying “He had done most bitter wrong / To some who are near my heart, / Yet I number him in the song” (lines 33-5). Though he does not like MacBride for upsetting his beloved Gonne, Yeats commemorates him in this mournful song as everything is “transformed utterly” (line 39) after this bloody rising. Yeats “highly individualized and brought to life, with their virtues and faults. But they had left their mere personal life behind as they found themselves allied to and united under a common cause” (Khan 51). Though they have different
The backgrounds, they become “Hearts with one purpose alone” (line 41). Yeats ends this stanza with the refrain “A terrible beauty is born” to emphasize how his feelings about the rising has changed after many people died.

In the following stanza, Yeats contrasts the unchanging determinism of nationalists with the changing life. He says, “Enchanted to a stone / To trouble the living stream” (lines 43-4). Yeats creates an ambivalent atmosphere in this stanza because after glorifying the union of the rebels under a common goal, he compares their extreme idealism to stone for criticism. According to Khan the stone “symbolizes not only the single-minded dedication of the rebels and the seriousness of their purpose but also the rigidity and inflexibility of their political intent” (52). For Yeats, these people are so enraptured with the idea of nationalism that, they do not question anything while acting. Their idealism is like a hard, unchanging “stone” and they never try to conform to the changing situations though life is like a “living stream”, and it “Changes minute by minute” (lines 44-50). The nationalists stand still in the middle of this altering world, but they are blind to the changes.

The stone imagery continues in the last stanza with a striking criticism about the nationalists that too much of a dedication to patriotism makes people senseless. Its consequences are so severe that he asks “O when may it suffice?” (line 59). Yeats uses a metaphor for the rebels, resembling them to children who “had run wild” to defend their country. In this part, Yeats also contributes a maternal feature to Ireland and Irish people as he tries to assert that their motherland and their people will always remember them by commemorating them like a mother who “names her child” (line 62).

In the following part of the fourth stanza, after praising these nationalists, Yeats is doubtful about the necessity of this rising, and he starts with a shocking questions, “Was it needless death after all?” (line 67). As Khan states Yeats wonders “if perhaps the sacrifice was unnecessary, referring to the possibility that England might have made good on its promise” (53) by saying “For England may keep faith / For all that is done and said” (lines 68-9). It is clear that Yeats is in a conflict as he is not one-sided about the event. He is curious about whether or not British Government would grant their independence without this uprising. In fact, he cannot decide where to stand; on the side of Irish nationalists or being against them. Bhabha states this hybrid situation by saying that it is “a neat division; it is a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once [...] It is not the Colonialist Self or the Colonized Other, but the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness” (xxviii). As it is stated, Yeats is in a dilemma owing to his hybrid situation.

Although he honours these patriots, he does not fully approve the rising because he is sceptical about the necessity of it. He goes on stating that the nationalists’ dream of a free country caused their deaths by saying; “We know their dream; enough / To know they dreamed and are dead” (lines 70-1). After these lines, Yeats again questions these rebels’ extreme nationalism and says; “And what if excess love / Bewildered them till they die?” (lines 72-3). By defining their nationalism as “excessive”, he is critical about it because while their aim was to have a better country, free from the British rule, this rising turned out to be a bloodshed in Irish history. In addition to this, he uses “bewildered” to emphasize that these nationalists were blinded with their extreme ideas until their bloody end. They were so obsessed with this idea that they lacked reason and they did not question anything while acting.

Yeats ends his poem in commemoration of the nationalists by naming them one by one. He does not mention Constance as she was not executed and was released after a year. He glorifies them “turning to the theme of transformation of the heroes, granting them the immortality of verse. As if carving their name on a piece of stone and thereby placing them in the artifice of eternity” (Khan 53) by saying “I write in a verse / MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse” (lines 74-6). He states that Irish people will remember these martyrs “Wherever green is worn” (line 78) because they sacrificed themselves for their country, their people and their flag.

2. Conclusion

William Butler Yeats, who is accepted both in English and Irish canons, is one of the outstanding figures of twentieth century literature. His fame mainly stems from the continuous search for novelties in his art. Besides this, his differing ideas on various subjects have always attracted the attention of the readers of his time and
today. One of his popular themes is Irish nationalism, which causes opposing ideas among critics and reading population because while expressing his ideas on this subject, he has always been dubious about the acts. Therefore, his ideas on Irish nationalism have been reflected in an ambivalent manner. One of the reasons is his Anglo-Irish origin; Yeats has always been in both sides. Though he has accepted himself as an Irish man, he has never been fully detached from his British origins. In addition to this, Yeats describes his nationalism as an “intellectual act” rather than political. Therefore, he has always been against the use of violence in Irish nationalism. In his two poems, “September 1913” and “Easter 1916” his ambivalent attitude towards Irish nationalism and rebels is reflected. While he criticizes the middle-class nationalists harshly in the first poem, he softens his tone and glorifies the same people in the following one. Moreover, though he has declared the death of Romantic Ireland in “September 1913”, he mentions the revival of Ireland in “Easter 1916” by stating that “a terrible beauty is born”.

References