

## Short Communication

# A mythical interpretation of Yeats' The Second Coming

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**W. B. Yeats' poetry is rich in mythical symbols and imagery. He gleans the religion and philosophy of different cultures and traditions to give his poetic oeuvre an aura of profundity. His seminal poetic work, The Second Coming, can be read in the light of the ancient Indian myth of Narasimha avatar, the hum-animal hybrid incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The idea of the second coming of Christ sounds very much like the concept of reincarnation, which lies at the heart of Hinduism. The ferocity of the anti-Christ as envisioned by Yeats stands close to Narasimha's brutality in quelling the head of a horrendous demon. Yeats' vision emanates from the shared consciousness, which among other things could invariably have a place for the ancient Indian myth and traditions. The Second Coming of Christ, thus, could be seen in an altogether new perspective through the concept of re-incarnation myth.**

**Key words:** Nar-simha, myth, religion, Yeats, Second Coming, re-incarnation.

## INTRODUCTION

Yeats' The Second Coming exhibits the coming on of an anti-Christ that will shake humanity out of its stony sleep from twenty centuries. The figure is that of a sphinx: "with lion body and the head of a man." This ferocious creature will incarnate to set the things right in a chaotic world where "things are falling apart" as "the centre cannot hold" them together. This second coming of God or of Christ sounds similar to Lord Vishnu's Narasimha *avatar*, the "hum-animal hybrid" (Saniotis, 2007). Though in this case, the head is of lion and body is of man, but the idea hinges upon the similar premise, that is, the hybrid creature combines the ferocity of a beast and wit of a man. The Sanskrit word *avatar* "represents the descent of God into the human world by becoming a human being or one of the other creatures of this world" (Philips, 2007). Giving the literal meaning of *avatar*, Mathew writes that it "signifies the descent or condescension of God, from the high celestial realm to the lower terrestrial regions" (2005). In Bhagvad Gita Lord Krishna, who is also one of the ten *avatar* of Lord Vishnu, says that whenever there is loss of religion and evil increases in the world he incarnates to re-establish religion and faith into the world (Chapter 4, Verse 7). In the poem, however, Yeats is talking about the second coming of Christ himself, not of a different God, though the second coming is diametrically opposite from the first. In fact, the concept

of avatar in Hindu religion is different from Christianity; in Hindu thought many an *Avatara* of One and the Same Lord is acknowledged. This is a point of contrast with Christianity, which accepts the only one and the unique incarnation in the person of Jesus, the Christ, who is said to be the only begotten Son of his Father (Mathew, 2005). In the story of Narasimha avatar, the demon king Hiranyakashipu was ruling over the earth and was persecuting the worshippers of Lord Vishnu in all the worst possible ways. He was blessed with "inviolability from all beings, and immortality" by the lord Brahma that made him invulnerable in day and night, on earth and in sky, inside of his house and outside; he could not be killed neither by man nor by beast nor by any weapon (Soifer, 1991). Incidentally, Hiranyakashipu's own son Prahalada was the biggest devotee of Lord Vishnu, and bears the brunt of his father's wrath. In order to save the life of Prahalada, Lord Vishnu incarnates in the shape of Narasimha -body of man and the head of lion-and sitting at the threshold of Hiranyakashipu's palace, putting him on his lap, he tears him to pieces through his nails.

## ANALYSIS

The story of Narasimha avatar finds echo in "The Second

Coming". Yeats' poem paints a grim picture of the modern society where "the ceremony of innocence is drowned"; similarly an innocent devotee of God like Prahalada is also tortured by his father. Further, in the kingdom of Hiranyakashipu "the best lack all conviction" as all the sages and holy men were made to suffer, whereas "the worst" people like Hiranyakashipu and his followers were full of "passionate intensity." In a rough world like that of Hiranyakashipu and that of the twentieth century, a beastly figure and a ferocious Anti-Christ is required to put things right. A ruthless creature with "a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun" can only bring back the order in the chaotic world.

"The Second Coming" is not the only poem that reverberates the influence of Hindu mythology on W. B. Yeats. There are other instances of his indebtedness to Indian myths and tradition. Ajay Kumar writes about the influence of Hindu mythology on Yeats. The myth of re-incarnation, a characteristic feature of the ancient wisdom literature has been poetized as well as dramatized by Yeats (2011). Kumar points out that Yeats' poem "Leda and the Swan" as well as his play *The Hearne's Egg* pay tribute to ancient Indian myths by alluding to the Indian concepts of Godhead, re-incarnation and Samadhi. The recourse to ancient culture and myth is taken "in reaction to the emergence of spiritual and religious crisis in life" (Kumar, 2010). With his encyclopedic range of knowledge, Yeats was able to perceive his idea of "The Second Coming" of God in sync with the ancient Greek myth of sphinx, Christian beliefs regarding the birth of Christ—"the image of the rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem with which "The Second Coming" concludes . . . is quite plainly an association of the idea of the beast, the Anti-Christ, with the birthplace of Jesus" (Weeks, 1948)—and ancient Indian myth of re-incarnation. In fact, in "The Second Coming", Yeats employs "images from many religions and theories to convey his personal belief in the cycles of history" (Fletcher, 2008).

The image of Yeats' anti-Christ can be comprehended by looking at it through the concept of Chimera found in Greek mythology—"a monster which was part lion, part snake and part goat and breathed fire" (Saniotis, 2007). Commenting on the mythical and symbolical significance of Chimera, Saniotis writes, "The plethora of chimera found throughout the world testifies to their imaginative power and our primal connection to the non-human world. In addition, their unnatural forms personified the capricious and ambiguous power of nature (2007)." Yeats' ferocious anti-Christ possesses the demeanor and disposition of a rough beast which is also incidentally the characteristic features of Vishnu's *Nar-Simha* avatar. The

chaos and mayhem of the modern world or the anarchy of Hiranyakashipu's reign could have been overcome only by an omnipotent power acquiring the spirit of not just the human world but also of the non-human.

## CONCLUSION

Yeats' poetic oeuvre is rich in symbolism, something which Yeats himself defines as coming out of the Great Mind and the Great Memory. The symbols, according to Yeats, originate in a poet's mind through divine inspiration. But Yeats asserts, "When a man writes any work of genius, or invents some creative action, is it not because some knowledge or power has come into his mind from beyond his mind? It is called up by an image, as I think; . . . but our images must be given to us; we cannot choose them deliberately" (Stauffer, 1948). The image of the anti-Christ has also come out of the Spiritus Mundi that embodies the collective intelligence of the whole universe shared by the individual mind—a fact that also reinforces the amalgamation of the Western and Eastern myth and tradition. Whether it is the Yeatsian idea of "The Second Coming" of God or an ancient Hindu myth of re-incarnation, the underlying notion is the same; the struggle between good and evil is eternal and the order is definitely restored after a brief span of chaos.

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