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Beauty, Balance, and Blessings: A Study of W. B. Yeats's “A Prayer for My Daughter”

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Abstract

W. B. Yeats's “*A Prayer for My Daughter*” (1919) is not merely a paternal meditation, but a profound philosophical reflection that harmonizes Western poetic vision with Eastern spiritual ideals. Set against the backdrop of post-war Ireland, the poem juxtaposes the external storm with an inner yearning for stability, innocence, and virtue. This paper explores the literary devices, structure, and themes of the poem while aligning its philosophical concerns with the teachings of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gītā, the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, and the Vachanāmṛut. Yeats's prayer for his daughter reveals deep affinities with Vedantic ideals such as detachment, humility, self-realization, and inner peace. The poet's critique of intellectual arrogance, advocacy for rootedness, and call for harmony resonate with the Sanātana Dharma's vision of a life led by dharma and spiritual clarity. By bridging Irish poetics and Indian metaphysics, this study sheds new light on Yeats's verse as a trans-cultural spiritual document.

Preface

In “*A Prayer for My Daughter*,” W. B. Yeats reveals his deep anxieties and spiritual aspirations as a father during a time of social and political upheaval. Written shortly after World War I, the poem channels his desire for his infant daughter to grow into a life of balance, virtue, and protection from the stormy world. While often studied for its literary qualities and historical context, this poem also invites a deeper reading through the lens of Vedantic and Upanishadic philosophy.

This paper seeks to explore how Yeats's poetic concerns align with timeless Indian spiritual wisdom found in the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gītā, Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, and the Vachanāmṛut of the Swaminarayan tradition. Yeats's appeal for beauty tempered by humility, wisdom untainted by ego, and joy derived from spiritual rootedness echoes the call of ancient rishis for an inward journey anchored in dharma. The poet's meditative tone, ethical clarity, and philosophical yearning make this poem a worthy subject for comparative spiritual analysis, revealing surprising intersections between Irish mysticism and Indian metaphysics.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Yeats's poem is replete with poetic devices that heighten its emotional depth and aesthetic grace.

- **Metaphor:** The daughter is compared to a “hidden tree” and “green laurel,” symbolizing natural growth, constancy, and rootedness.
- **Personification:** The storm “howls” and the sea-wind “screams,” imbuing nature with threatening human qualities, mirroring Yeats's inner turmoil.
- **Alliteration:** Repetitions like “hearts are had,” “crazy salad,” and “self-delighting, self-appeasing, self-affrighting” give musicality and emphasis.
- **Imagery:** Vivid scenes emerge — the storm, the cradle, the sea, Helen and Aphrodite— painting both outer and inner landscapes.
- **Irony:** Beauty, usually seen as a blessing, is treated with caution. Helen's tragic story is referenced to show beauty can lead to suffering.

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- **Symbolism:** The storm represents political turmoil (post-WWI Ireland), and the laurel tree symbolizes rooted tradition and lasting virtue.
- **Oxymoron:** “Murderous innocence of the sea” presents the sea as paradoxically pure and violent.
- **Assonance & Consonance:** Gentle vowel repetitions (“quiet natures understood”) soften tone; consonance sharpens critique.

Yeats’s refined use of these devices weaves a powerful emotional, aesthetic, and moral prayer.

2. Structure and Form

The poem consists of ten stanzas, each of eight lines, using **iambic pentameter** with occasional variations to reflect emotional shifts.

- **Rhyme Scheme:** ABABCD — a consistent and balanced structure echoing the poet’s wish for stability.
- **Meter and Rhythm:** The iambic base gives a formal, ceremonial tone, appropriate for a solemn blessing.
- **Enjambment:** Frequent use (e.g., “That chooses right, and never find a friend”) carries thoughts across lines, mimicking the flow of prayer and contemplation.
- **Line Breaks:** Emphasis is created at crucial thematic turns (e.g., shifts from beauty to courtesy, from hatred to innocence).

The form reinforces Yeats’s longing for order in a chaotic world.

3. Theme and Subject Matter

The poem is a **meditative blessing** and philosophical musing on Yeats’s desires for his daughter amidst a world of instability.

• Primary Themes:

- *Innocence and Virtue:* Yeats prays for moral depth over physical beauty.
- *Order vs. Chaos:* The storm contrasts the desired peaceful domestic world.
- *Wisdom over Vanity:* A critique of opinionated minds and intellectual arrogance.

• Deeper Message:

- Real beauty lies in rootedness, custom, and spiritual clarity—not in outward glamour or intellectual pride.
- A plea for a return to natural and ceremonial values in a morally disoriented age.

4. Tone and Mood

- **Tone:** Reflective, paternal, philosophical, and occasionally admonitory. The tone deepens from fear to hope, and from critique to calm wisdom.
- **Mood:** Begins with anxiety (the storm) and shifts to serenity and prayerfulness. A deep sense of yearning and concern pervades the piece.

Yeats’s emotional palette guides the reader through fear, hope, and ultimate spiritual repose.

5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

Yeats’s poem resonates with **Vedantic and Upanishadic ideas**, as well as classical mysticism:

- **Vairāgya (Detachment):** The wish that his daughter may avoid being consumed by beauty echoes Gītā’s teachings on non-attachment (BG 2.47).ⁱ
- **Sattvic Nature:** The “flourishing hidden tree” and “quiet nature” reflect a Sattvic disposition (pure, wise, peaceful).

- **Self-realization:** “Self-delighting, self-appeasing, self-affrighting” aligns with the Upanishadic idea that the Atman is autonomous and blissful (Ānandam Brahma).
- **Critique of Intellectual Pride:** Like the Bhagavad Gīta warns against ego and delusion, Yeats condemns “opinionated minds” that lose touch with inner harmony.
- **Value of Ceremony and Custom:** Echoing the Vedic importance of *samskāras* (rituals) and dharma, Yeats upholds tradition as a vessel for innocence and order.

His spirituality is subtle yet potent, aligned with mystical traditions that seek balance between self and society.

W. B. Yeats’s “*A Prayer for My Daughter*” reveals profound resonances with **Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom**, especially in its emphasis on **inner virtue over external appearance, detachment, self-realization, and a life of harmony grounded in dharma**. Though Yeats was not a Vedantin himself, his spiritual inclinations often align with the **essential teachings of Sanātana Dharma**. Below is a detailed comparison with references from the **Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gītā, Vachanāmṛt, and the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam**:

1. Detachment from External Beauty

Poem Reference:

“May she be granted beauty and yet not / Beauty to make a stranger’s eye distraught... / Consider beauty a sufficient end.”

Yeats warns against attachment to external beauty, fearing it leads to pride and superficiality.

Vedantic Alignment:

- **Bhagavad Gītā (2.54–2.55):**ⁱⁱ “When a man gives up all desires of the mind, O Pārtha, and is satisfied in the Self alone by the Self, then he is said to be of steady wisdom.”
- **Kena Upanishad (II.3):**ⁱⁱⁱ “Not by sight is the Self grasped... It is known by the one whom It chooses.” → Outer beauty is impermanent; realization of the inner Self is the highest aim.

Vachanāmṛt (Gadhadā I-38):

Bhagwan Swaminarayan warns that pride in bodily beauty or skills leads to downfall. True greatness lies in **bhakti, humility, and inner purity**.

2. Cultivation of Courtesy and Humility

Poem Reference:

“In courtesy I’d have her chiefly learned... / Hearts are not had as a gift but hearts are earned.”

Yeats desires that his daughter cultivate humility and lovingkindness.

Scriptural Parallels:

- **Bhagavad Gītā (13.7–11):**^{iv} “Humility, unpretentiousness, non-violence, patience, uprightness...” are listed as **jnāna** (true knowledge).
- **Mundaka Upanishad (I.2.11):**^v The seeker of truth must approach the Guru with *śama* (calm), *dama* (self-restraint), and humility.
- **Śrīmad Bhāgavatam (1.19.36):**^{vi} King Parīkṣit is praised for his humility and courtesy even in the face of death.

Vachanāmṛt (Gadhadā II-63):

True devotees never display arrogance. Courtesy is a

reflection of **sāttvic nature**, which is pleasing to God and saints.

3. Desire for a Rooted and Centered Life

Poem Reference:

“O may she live like some green laurel / Rooted in one dear perpetual place.”

This wish symbolizes emotional and spiritual **rootedness**, akin to the Vedantic call for **stability in the Self (Ātman)**.

Upanishadic Connection:

- **Chāndogya Upanishad (6.8.7):**^{vii} “*Tat tvam asi*” (Thou art That) — realization of one’s Self as eternal, unchanging reality.
- **Kathopanishad (II.3.14):**^{viii} “*Just as a tree with its roots above and branches below...*” — a symbol of rootedness in the divine.

Bhagavad Gītā (15.1):^{ix} “*There is an imperishable Peepul tree with roots above and branches below... one must cut it with the axe of detachment.*”

Yeats’s metaphor aligns with this desire to live a **centered and dharmic life**, away from scattered distractions.

4. Warning Against Intellectual Pride and Hatred

Poem Reference:

“An intellectual hatred is the worst, / So let her think opinions are accursed.”

Yeats critiques intellectual arrogance, equating it with divisiveness and internal chaos.

Scriptural Resonance:

- **Bhagavad Gītā (16.4):**^x Pride, harshness, and arrogance belong to **āsuric (demonic)** qualities.
- **Mundaka Upanishad (I.2.10):**^{xi} “*Those who are ignorant and yet believe themselves wise, go round and round in ignorance.*”
- **Śrīmad Bhāgavatam (11.3.25):**^{xii} One should avoid bad company and prideful debates that lead away from bhakti.

Vachanāmṛt (Gadhā I-54):

A person obsessed with their own opinions can never surrender to God or Guru. Intellectual humility is essential for liberation.

5. Desire for Radical Innocence and Inner Peace

Poem Reference:

“Considering that, all hatred driven hence, / The soul recovers radical innocence...”

Yeats aspires for his daughter’s soul to remain innocent, untouched by the turmoil of the world — reminiscent of the **Vedantic notion of purity of the Self**.

Upanishadic Ideal:

- **Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad (IV.4.22):**^{xiii} “*He who sees all beings in his own Self and his own Self in all beings... is free from delusion.*”
- **Bhagavad Gītā (2.70):**^{xiv} “*He attains peace into whom all desires enter as rivers flow into the ocean...*”
- **Śrīmad Bhāgavatam (4.22.24):**^{xv} Innocence and simplicity are the ornaments of a pure devotee.

Vachanāmṛt (Kāriyānī-5):

Bhagwan Swaminarayan teaches that the soul is by nature

nirmal (pure), and retaining that childlike innocence is the key to divine happiness.

6. Value of Custom and Ceremony

Poem Reference:

“How but in custom and in ceremony / Are innocence and beauty born?”

Yeats affirms that meaningful **rituals preserve moral and aesthetic order**, echoing the **Vedic emphasis on dharma and samskāra**.

Vedic Parallels:

- **Ṛg Veda (10.191.2):**^{xvi} “*Let your aims be common, your hearts be one...*” — communal ceremony binds society in harmony.
- **Taittirīya Upanishad (I.11):**^{xvii} “*Never neglect your duties to the ancestors, the gods, the guests, and the Vedas.*”
- **Bhagavad Gītā (3.15–16):**^{xviii} “*All beings are born of food, food is born of rain, rain is born of sacrifice...*” — indicating the cosmic role of rituals.

Vachanāmṛt (Vartāl-5):

Swaminarayan affirms that dharma, when supported by **ritual (vidhi)** and **bhakti**, leads to liberation.

7. Inner Joy Independent of Circumstances

Poem Reference:

“She can, though every face should scowl... be happy still.”

This echoes the **jivanmukta** state in Vedanta — **freedom amidst chaos**.

Bhagavad Gītā (6.7):

^{xix}

“*The yogi who is self-controlled, and who is serene, remains unaffected by cold, heat, pleasure, and pain.*”

Katha Upanishad (II.3.10–11):

^{xx}

The wise person is not shaken by external changes. Joy is derived from the Self, not the world.

Conclusion: Synthesis of Yeats with Vedantic Vision

Though W. B. Yeats wrote from a Western, Christian context, his poem “*A Prayer for My Daughter*” expresses aspirations that deeply resonate with **Vedantic and Upanishadic ideals**:

- The desire for **inner purity over outer show**.
- A life rooted in **tradition, humility, and grace**.
- Detachment from pride, opinions, and worldly agitation.
- A soul at peace with itself, untouched by hatred or chaos.

In this way, Yeats’s paternal prayer aligns with the **eternal dharma** of the **Upanishads**, the **Bhagavad Gītā**, the **Śrīmad Bhāgavatam**, and the **Vachanāmṛt** — advocating a spiritual life of **wisdom, harmony, and devotion**.

6. Historical and Cultural Context

- **Post-War and Irish Civil Unrest:** Written in 1919, after WWI and during Irish conflict, the “storm” symbolizes political violence and moral disintegration.
- **Yeats’s Irish Identity:** A traditionalist, Yeats feared modernity’s effect on Irish culture and family life.
- **Anti-Modernism:** The poem critiques modern obsessions—feminine beauty, radical opinions, loss of customs—common in post-WWI disillusionment.

The cultural backdrop strengthens the urgency and sincerity of Yeats’s prayer.

7. Poet's Perspective and Emotional Mindset

- **Father's Anxiety:** The poem emerges from Yeats's deep concern for his newborn daughter, Anne, amid a world he perceives as dangerous and unstable.
- **Personal Disillusionment:** Yeats had experienced personal rejection (e.g., from Maud Gonne), and political betrayal. These likely influenced his appeal for emotional detachment and constancy.
- **Romantic Idealism Meets Realism:** Once a Romantic, Yeats's later work reflects a stoic realism — his dream for his daughter is spiritual, not sensual.

This personal voice adds poignancy and depth to the work.

8. Target Audience and Purpose

- **Primary Audience:** His daughter, Anne Yeats.
- **Secondary Audience:** Society at large — particularly modern readers facing a moral and spiritual vacuum.
- **Purpose:**

- To express paternal care.
- To critique shallow modern values.
- To promote a life grounded in inner virtue, rooted tradition, and spiritual independence.

The poem's message is as much for the world as for his child.

9. Conclusion and Personal Interpretation

Yeats's "A Prayer for My Daughter" is a **lyric of love, fear, and foresight**, blending the personal with the political, the spiritual with the practical.

- The **final takeaway** is that happiness lies not in beauty or opinion, but in courtesy, rootedness, and peace of mind.
- Yeats seeks not worldly success for his daughter, but a harmonious soul — untouched by hatred or societal tumult.
- **Personal Resonance:** For modern readers, especially parents, the poem offers a powerful blueprint for raising children with depth and dignity amid chaos.

It is a timeless reminder that innocence, virtue, and spiritual clarity are the greatest inheritances we can pass on.

Conclusion

Yeats's "A Prayer for My Daughter" emerges as a timeless invocation that blends poetic sensitivity with spiritual insight. Through rich literary expression and personal emotion, Yeats conveys a universal longing—for a life untouched by vanity, pride, or chaos, and instead rooted in innocence, courtesy, and contentment. This aspiration is profoundly consonant with the teachings of Vedanta and the Upanishads, which guide seekers to transcend superficiality and dwell in the serene clarity of the Self.

By praying for his daughter's detachment from external distractions and alignment with inner virtue, Yeats articulates a vision of life that echoes the Bhagavad Gītā's path of equanimity, the Upanishadic ideal of self-realization, and the Bhāgavatam's praise for simplicity and devotion. The poet's wisdom affirms that true happiness lies not in appearances or opinions, but in living a life attuned to harmony, humility, and spiritual truth. In this way, "A Prayer for My Daughter" becomes not just a poem of parental care, but a lyrical expression of Vedantic consciousness and moral vision for humanity.

Reference

- I. कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ ४७ ॥
- II. अर्जुन उवाच ।
स्थितप्रज्ञस्य का भाषा समाधिस्थस्य केशव ।
स्थितधीः किं प्रभाषेत किमासीत ब्रजेत किम् ॥ 54 ॥
- III. यस्यामतं तस्य मतं मतं यस्य न वेद सः ।
अविज्ञातं विज्ञानतां विज्ञातमविज्ञानताम् ॥ ३ ॥
- IV. इच्छा द्वेषः सुखं दुःखं सङ्घातश्चेतना धृतिः ।
एतत्क्षेत्रं समासेन सविकारमुदाहृतम् ॥ 7 ॥
- V. ब्रह्मैवेदममृतं पुरस्ताद्ब्रह्म पश्चाद्ब्रह्म दक्षिणतश्चोत्तरेण ।
अधश्चोर्ध्वं च प्रसृतं ब्रह्मैवेदं विश्वमिदं वरिष्ठम् ॥ ११ ॥
- VI. अन्यथा तेऽव्यक्तगतेर्दर्शनं नः कथं नृणाम् ।
नितरां म्रियमाणानां संसिद्धस्य वनीयसः ॥ ३६ ॥
- VII. स य एषोऽणिमैतदात्म्यमिदं सर्वं तत्सत्यं स आत्मा तत्त्वमसि श्वेतकेतो इति भूय
एव मा भगवान्विज्ञापयत्विति तथा सोम्येति होवाच ॥ ६.८.७ ॥
॥ इति अष्टमः खण्डः ॥
- VIII. यदा सर्वे प्रमुच्यन्ते कामा येऽस्य हृदि श्रिताः ।
अथ मर्त्योऽमृतो भवत्यत्र ब्रह्म समश्नुते ॥ १४ ॥
- IX. श्रीभगवानुवाच ।
ऊर्ध्वमूलमधःशाखमश्वत्थं प्राहुरव्ययम् ।
छन्दांसि यस्य पर्णानि यस्तं वेद स वेदवित् ॥ 1 ॥
- X. दम्भो दर्पोऽभिमानश्च क्रोधः पारुष्यमेव च ।
अज्ञानं चाभिजातस्य पार्थ सम्पदमासुरीम् ॥ 4 ॥
- XI. पुरुष एवेदं विश्वं कर्म तपो ब्रह्म परामृतम् ।
एतद्यो वेद निहितं गुहायां सोऽविद्याग्रन्थिं विकिरतीह सोम्य ॥ १० ॥
- XII. सर्वत्रात्मेश्वरान्वीक्षां कैवल्यमनिकेतताम् ।
विविक्तचौरवसनं सन्तोषं येन केनचित् ॥ २५ ॥
- XIII. स वा एष महानज आत्मा योज्यं विज्ञानमयः प्राणेषु य एषोऽन्तर्हृदय
आकाशस्तस्मिच्छेते, सर्वस्य वशी सर्वस्येशानः सर्वस्याधिपतिः; स न साधुना
कर्मणा भूयान्, नो एवासाधुना कनीयान्; एष सर्वेश्वरः; एष भूताधिपतिः, एष
भूतपालः; एष सेतुर्विधरण एषां लोकानामसंभेदाय; तमेतं वेदानुवचनेन
ब्राह्मणा विविदिषन्ति यजेन दानेन तपसाऽनाशकेन; एतमेव विदित्वा
मुनिर्भवति । एतमेव प्रव्राजिनो लोकमिच्छन्तः प्रव्रजन्ति । एतद्ब्रह्म वै तत् पूर्वं
विद्वांसः प्रजां न कामयन्ते, किं प्रजया करिष्यामो येषां नोऽयमात्मायं लोक
इति; ते ह स्म पुत्रैषणायाश्च वित्तैषणायाश्च लोकैषणायाश्च व्युत्थायाथ
भिक्षाचार्यं चरन्ति; या ह्येव पुत्रैषणा सा वित्तैषणा, या वित्तैषणा सा
लोकैषणा, उभे ह्येते एषणे एव भवतः । स एष नेति नेत्यात्मा, अगृह्यो नहि
गृह्यते, अशीर्यो नहि शीर्यते, असङ्गो नहि सज्यते, असितो न व्यथते, न
रिष्यति; एतमु ह्यैवैते न तरत इति—अतः पापमकरवमिति, अतः
कल्याणमकरवमिति; उभे उ ह्यैवै एते तरति, नैनं कृताकृते तपतः ॥ २२ ॥
- XIV. आपूर्यमाणमचलप्रतिष्ठं
समुद्रमपः प्रविशन्ति यद्भूत ।
तद्ब्रह्मकामा यं प्रविशन्ति सर्वे
स शान्तिमाप्नोति न कामकामी ॥ ७० ॥
- XV. अहिंसया पारमहंस्यचर्यया
स्मृत्या मुकुन्दाचरिताग्र्यसीधुना ।
यमैरकार्मैर्नियमैश्चाप्यनिन्दया
निरीहया द्वन्द्वतितिक्षया च ॥ २४ ॥
- XVI. सं गच्छध्वं सं वदध्वं सं वो मनांसि जानताम् । देवा भागं यथा पूर्वं संजानाना
उपासते ॥
सं गच्छध्वं सं वदध्वं सं वो मनांसि जानताम् । देवा भागं यथा पूर्वं संजानाना
उपासते ॥
- XVII. देवपितृकार्याभ्यां न प्रमदितव्यम् । मातृदेवो भव ।
पितृदेवो भव । आचार्यदेवो भव । अतिथिदेवो भव ।
- XVIII. कर्म ब्रह्मोद्भवं विद्धि ब्रह्माक्षरसमुद्भवम् ।
तस्मात्सर्वगतं ब्रह्म नित्यं यज्ञे प्रतिष्ठितम् ॥ 15 ॥
- XIX. जितात्मनः प्रशान्तस्य परमात्मा समाहितः ।
शीतोष्णसुखदुःखेषु तथा मानापमानयोः ॥ 7 ॥
- XX. इन्द्रियेभ्यः परा ह्यर्था अर्थेभ्यश्च परं मनः ।
मनसस्तु परा बुद्धिर्बुद्धेरात्मा महान्परः ॥ १० ॥