

A Review of Snežana Dabić's Book *W.B. Yeats and Indian Thought: A Man Engaged in that Endless Research into Life, Death, God*

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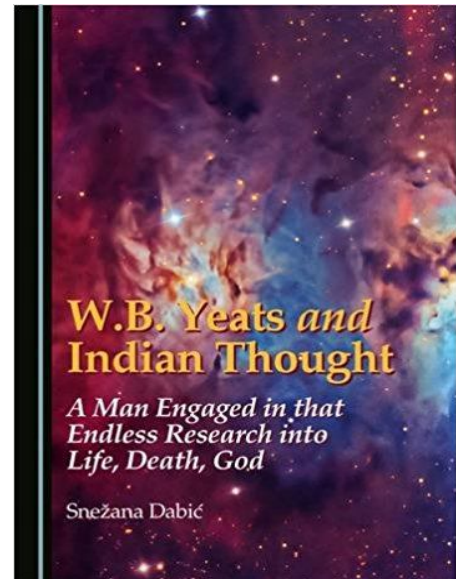
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Last year while conducting archival research for my doctoral thesis on W. B. Yeats at the National Library of Ireland, Dublin, I was in search of a newly published book by a non-Indian author to investigate contemporary views on Yeats and India, when I chanced upon Snežana Dabić's *W.B. Yeats and Indian Thought: A Man Engaged in that Endless Research into Life, Death, God*. There has been a history of critical engagement with the Indian and Eastern connections in Yeats's writing. After Yeats's death in 1939, extensive researches were conducted on Yeats by noteworthy European scholars and biographers. However, one can readily notice a commonality in the works of all these scholars: they seem to be reading India or the East as a tangential source of inspiration for Yeats. However, the attempt by Dabić, the latest in this long tradition of scholarly interest in Yeats and his Indian sources, revisits some of these discourses and tries to address poignant questions hitherto left untouched, some of them being, how exactly did W. B. Yeats use Indian thoughts to formulate and synthesize his ideas, why do we need to reanalyze Yeats's work and existing critical interpretations from Indian perspective, does the subtlety and potentiality of Indian symbols have the power to shed new light on Yeats's own philosophy and symbols, and, most importantly, is it even possible to demarcate Celtic and Indian mythology in Yeats's works and philosophy?



There is no doubt that the influence of Indian thought on Yeats's creative output has both fascinated and posed a challenge to Yeatsian scholars and researchers. After a long critical apposition, Dabić's work provides significant information about the various academic researches

done by Indian critics/authors on Yeats and India thought, thus trying to paint a clearer, fuller picture of the often romanticised notion of Yeats and India and the East.

In the book, Dabić makes a diligent attempt to carve out a space for oriental discourse within the purview of euro-centric critical heritage. Writing from an alternative standpoint, yet well-aware of the vastness of Indian philosophical thoughts which she does not claim to be an expert in, Dabić honestly proclaims, “Being aware of the dangers of focusing on a solely extrinsic method, I do not offer a finite Eastern conceptual framework for investigating Yeats’s poetic canon” (x). Nevertheless, in this ground breaking book, the author makes a strong case for the literary and philosophical values of Indian thoughts for analyzing Yeats’s work.

The author meticulously tracks Yeats journey through the Eastern knowledge systems and his interaction with Indian spiritualists/philosophers and writers, like Mohini Chatterji, Rabindranath Tagore, and Purohit Swamy, to name a few. The author brilliantly points out, in the preface to the book, that this association earned him [Yeats] conflicting names, “orientalist, colonialist, anti-colonialist, modernist, nationalist, revivalist and even traditionalist in his attitude and writing” (x). This in turn lands the author herself in troubled waters because by saying so, she has taken upon the challenge of dealing with conflicting interpretations and arguments related to Yeats’s work and his personality. And that, I must say, is a really daring thing to do!

The methodology adopted by the author makes the book expository in nature. While analyzing Yeats’s creative mind, the author has structured the book like a biography with a twist: she juxtaposes competing viewpoints from both sides of the globe throughout her work. Her effort in fusing two halves to form a complete whole translates into the bringing together of two distinct aspects of Yeats on one platform to give one a fuller understanding of the poet-playwright-philosopher Yeats. The introduction of the book also highlights the various challenges that her research has to face upfront, posed by the linguistic and cultural differences. Her quasi-Heideggerian style of representing *atman* and *Brahmana*, as *the self/the Self* respectively particularly fascinated me, although comprehending such Sanskrit words which have deep philosophical connotations requires a thorough study of ancient Indian philosophy and intense deliberation. My own research on Yeats has ushered into the understanding that these ideas for Yeats embodied a philosophical system which could make the metaphysical world commensurable: his use of the Upanishadic concept of the self and the way he related it to the ideas of reincarnation, *karma*, *Maya*, dreaming back, different phases of the Moon etc. reflects his deep understanding of the various nuances of these ideas. Dabić also sheds light on the difficulties involved in decoding Yeats’s use of Eastern philosophy and symbols because he himself had left no written comment on his understanding of Indian philosophical texts which he read as a young man, except few “Indian” essays, introductions and prefaces to Indian texts that he wrote, mostly in the 1930s.

In the first chapter, “The Encounter with the East”, Dabić traces the influence of Indian thoughts on Yeats’s early work and builds her argument around the meetings that took place between Yeats and Mohini Chatterji, the intellectual-cum-spiritual association between Yeats and George Russell (A.E), his interest in theosophical ideas, and the different oriental texts which acquainted him with the Eastern knowledge systems. On the one hand, the book constructs a cogent explanation for the Eastern influence on Yeats, and on the other, ends up substantiating the existing biographies written on Yeats by providing the much-needed information regarding Yeats and India thought. According to the author, Yeats’s search for a tradition, and his interest in folk cultures and supernatural/mystical pursuits prompted his interest in the Eastern thoughts. In addition to this, she also discusses the influence of *Shankaras’s* philosophy and other Indian

thoughts on Yeats, and she argues that they have been used in “a merely decorative way” by Yeats in his writings. However, I tend to disagree with her argument that Yeats made “decorative” use of Indian lore or philosophy in his early poems. Various Indian critics like Harbans Rai Bachchan, Naresh Guha, and Sankaran Ravinderan, to name a few, have analyzed Yeats’s poetry from the Eastern philosophical and aesthetic perspectives and surmised that Yeats might have acquainted himself with the primary concepts of Indian philosophy through his interactions with Indian mystics and other European friends working on Indian and Eastern knowledge systems. The young Yeats might not have had access to the right resources or prolonged contact with the Indian mystics and scholars to develop a fuller understanding of Indian philosophical and esoteric practices in his times. In fact, what seems like a passing reference to ornament his works (to Dabić) was sometimes a very conscious choice on the part of Yeats to carve new myths out of older Celtic and Indian myths in his literary works, as documented in his letters and interactions with members of the Theosophical society. However, as is well known by now, Yeats did make greater efforts to study Indian philosophy in the later stages of his life, which is clearly reflected in his later works too.

In the second chapter, “The East in the Poetry of Yeats’s Middle Period”, the author highlights Yeats’s silence about the East from 1890s to 1914, and how Yeats’s relationship with Tagore after this period of lull fostered the renewal of Yeats’s interest in Indian philosophical traditions and knowledge systems. What I found interesting about the handling of the Yeats and Tagore relationship is her highlighting of how the West viewed Tagore (on the basis of selective reading of his work) merely as a colonial subject, while Yeats was one amongst the very few who markedly differed from the prevailing western opinion. She also discusses Yeats’s aesthetic appreciation of Tagore’s work within the matrix of the dichotomy of the colonizer and the colonized (England and Ireland respectively). Dabić also tries in this chapter to answer the long debated question of why Yeats eventually got disenchanted with Tagore. Additionally, the fundamental idea of this chapter is the discursive use of Gérard Genette’s concept of “transtextuality” by the author to describe the use of Indian concepts in Yeats’s poetry. Dabić discusses at length the influence of Tagore’s *Gitanjali* (*Song Offering*) on Yeats and the mystical ideas that the two shared. According to the author, “Yeats also saw in Tagore a man, not unlike himself, striving to revive a tradition and reinstate Bengal, which was exactly what he wanted to do with Ireland” (62). She efficiently highlights how Tagore’s influence made Yeats’s approach to the East more philosophical in nature, with the incorporation of Indian ideas related to reincarnation and karma in Yeats’s later poetry and plays.

In the third chapter, “Eastern Philosophical Concepts in *The Herne’s Egg*,” the author draws together all the intellectual kindling that Yeats’s play *The Herne’s Egg* ignites. Starting with the framework of the play, examining whether it is solely *Upanishadic* in nature or not, Dabić has given a new direction to the existing discourse on Yeats by juxtaposing conflicting arguments, like Ashley E. Myles’s postulation that there is nothing related to Indian concept or upanishadic philosophy apart from *Brahma’s* egg in the above mentioned play, and Bachchan’s assertion that Yeats was inspired by numerous symbols and images from ancient Indian scriptures, namely those of the birds, the egg, thunder, and the Self. Furthermore, the author’s deft handling of the voices of other Indian critics on the play like that of Narayan Hegde, who opines that there is an uncanny resemblance between the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana* and Yeats’s play; Krishna Ponnuswamy’s reading of “Bridal Mysticism” in the play; Sankaran Ravindaran finding that the play is “a celebration of the physical and the spiritual:” all clearly elucidate the importance of the Indian framework to understand Yeats’s oeuvre. The author also brings in her own argument regarding the play by taking a cue from V.K. Katak’s suggestion about the applicability of the

concept of the Supreme Self, reincarnation, and Samadhi, to name a few, on Yeats's play. Some of the interesting aspects of this chapters are, Dabić's philosophical reading of this play in the light of the Hindu idea of *gunas*, her juxtaposition of Bhakti Yoga tradition and the attachment between Attracta and the Great Herne, influence of Zen philosophy etc. In addition, she also draws attention to the fact that during this phase, Yeats collaborated with Shri Purohit Swami for the translation of the *Upanishads*, he was deeply immersed into his reading of the *Bhagavadgita* and Patañjali's *Aphorisms of Yoga*, and was also influenced by vedantic philosophy, to name a few.

In chapter four titled "Greater Maturity of Understanding the East in Yeats's Later Poetry," the author discusses the poetry collection *The Tower* (1928) in the light of Indian philosophy and also brings in *A Vision* to discuss Yeats's complex ideas related to reincarnation, karma, the different phases of the moon and his philosophy embedded in the multifaceted gyre. Furthermore, the author has sourced a number of important critical discourses to explain and discuss Yeats's later poems. For instance, A. Davenport's critical analysis of the poem *Sailing to Byzantium* based on *Brihadaranyaka* and *Katha Upanishads*, the influence of Kabir's poetry on Yeats, and Tagorian influence on Yeats's poetry collection *The Tower* etc. In her conclusion, the author has rightly summarized: "His [Yeats] writing benefited from his association with the Eastern lore, maintaining its idiosyncrasy just as he himself upheld that unique Yeatsian individuality" (221).

A detailed glossary of all the key Indian Philosophical concepts used in the book will help readers and Yeatsian scholars. The accomplishment of this book rests on the critical space given to Indian critics and crediting them for expanding the horizon of studies on Yeats. To conclude, this book offer an exhaustive overview of Eastern influence and thus paves the way for further research and critical engagement with Yeats's oeuvre. It is a well thought out and thoroughly researched book and charting the unexplored aspect of Yeats's creative mind, his literary output and his personality.

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