

## A Comparison of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" and Jibananda Das's "Banalata Sen"

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**Abstract:** This paper compares Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" and Jibananda Das's "Banalata Sen" keeping in mind the issue of some critics' branding both poems as quest and escape poems. Both as travel poems portray the eternal thirst for knowing the unknown. In these poems, both poets express their dissatisfaction with the mundane life and their desire to find solace in their creative pursuit. The 'desire of oblivion' runs through every poetic vein of these poems. I attempt to analyze and establish both poems as escape and quest poems, which undergo transformation.

**Key words:** Banalata Sen, Sailing to Byzantium, quest, solace, transformation

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**제목:** 예이츠의 「비잔티움으로의 항해」와 지바난다 다스의 「바날라타 센」의 비교  
**우리말 요약:** 이 논문은 비평가들이 이 두 시를 추구 혹은 도피시라 칭하는 점을 염두에 두고 예이츠의 「비잔티움으로의 항해」와 지바난다 다스의 「바날라타 센」을 비교한다. 여행시로서 이 두 시는 불가해한 것을 알고자 하는 영원한 갈망을 그리고 있다. 이 시에서 두 시인은 속세에 만족하지 못하고 창조적 추구에서 위안을 찾고자 한다. “망각의 욕구”는 이 두 시의 모든 시적 혈관에 흐른다. 이 논문은 변화를 겪는 도피 및 추구시로 읽고 정의하려 한다.

**주제어:** 바날라타 센, 비잔티움으로의 항해, 추구, 위안, 변화

**저자:** 아미타 로이는 인도 알리푸르두알 마힐라 마하비디얌의 영문과 부교수로서 예이츠와 사회적문제에 관심이 많다. 그의 2권의 저서 『작은 사물의 신: 사회참여 소설』과 『사시 테슈관테의 전통에서 현대로의 여행』은 사회문제를 다룬다.

3번째 저서는 『보들레르 (재)구성하기: 빅토리아조의 메피스토펠레스에서 현대의 성인으로』이다.

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## I

Yeats wrote “Sailing to Byzantium” in 1926, which was included in his mature collection, *The Tower*. In 1930, he wrote “Byzantium.” Though the titles look similar, they are separate in their choice of subject matter and philosophical overtone. They are in general branded as Yeats’s desperate expression of his old age, by which he got very much upset. The dichotomy of a dying body and young mind disturbed the poet who, like a sage, could foresee the onslaught of time ahead.

Though some critics label the poem as an escape poem, it is not. From the very title we get the impression that it is a quest for something different or new, because it is *Sailing to Byzantium*, not *from Byzantium*. The ever-present sense of journey or action philosophically establishes the poet’s intention for an eternal quest in the poem. Here, we are reminded of a Buddhist philosophical term *charaibeti* (march ahead) with which Lord Buddha used to conclude his sermons and discourses. *Charaibeti* means ‘Oh! Traveler, march along!’ The sense of never-ending action or search for something, a continuum, is strongly felt throughout the poem. This poem could be compared with a great quest poem in Bengali literature, Jibananda Das’s “Banalata Sen.”

## II

A poet is different from the commoners in many respects; especially his emotional needs are somewhat different from others. A poet always finds

some means, which could satisfy his own inner needs. But as he is a man of this world everyday life seems to be a barrier to him. Some bindings, obstacles, come in the way of the poet's tranquil and solitary world. Naturally, the poet feels tired and wants desperately to escape from the surroundings that suffocate him, and he only prefers to dwell in his own world. This world he may find in a particular maiden, or in nature, or in art, in anything except the material world and the humdrum of life. This is an essential romantic quality which haunts W. B. Yeats (1865-1939), and he finally finds his archetype, his emotional heaven and spiritual Kingdom, Byzantium. This desperate search reminds us of a Bengali poet, Jibananda Das (1899-1954), and his quest poem "Banalata Sen" in which the poet getting depressed or bored with daily life finds his solace in a particular maiden, Banalata Sen of Natore. Towards the end of the second stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats's journey ends, "... And therefore I have sailed the seas ..." which echoes through Jibananda's first line, "I have been treading along the world for a thousand years / From the sea of the Ceylon to the sea of Malaya." Then the first poet finds his end, "... and come / To the holy city of Byzantium" (*VP* 408) which again reminds us of the memorable lines of Banalata Sen: "I found solace form Banalata Sen of Natore for a while."

Irving Babbit, in his "Rousseau and Romanticism," says that one of the main features of Romanticism resides in the conflict between the real and the ideal. Yeats is definitely this kind of Romantic, and this conflict is well expressed in "Sailing to Byzantium." The real world of organic growth and decay is poised against the ever youthful "artifice of eternity." The ageing body tied to an indomitable green mind presents before us the contradictions of life. In the same way, we find in Banalata Sen a thirst for poetic refuge set against the tiresome years of everyday life. In the Romantic portrayal of the 'artifice of eternity' do we find a lovable human form, a beautiful lady,

almost like Greek Goddess. That lady is the last refuge for the poet, apart from all worldly affairs.

Thus, a quest poem reveals the poet's agony, a poem in which his tired soul wants a dependable shelter. "Sailing to Byzantium" is not the only quest poem of Yeats; his archetype has been found earlier in *Innisfree*. But "Sailing to Byzantium" is his finest quest poem which reveals his agonized soul and his emotional cravings. It establishes him as a poet of profound romantic quality.

### III

A poetic heart always searches some recipe, the recipe of the knowledge for his soul. The poet sets sail for Byzantium for this purpose. He has seen life and found that everything in this life is subject to decay. Even the birds, lovers, their sensual desires have an end, "... The young / In one another's arms, birds in the trees, /—Those dying generations—at their song," Thus in quest of performance and wisdom, the speaker of this poem takes refuge in the world of art, which reminds us of Shakespeare's memorable Sonnet Nos. 30 and 65. In Sonnet No. 30, the speaker ignores all material losses only thinking about his friend, "But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, All losses are restored and sorrows end." In Sonnet No. 65, the speaker says only art (in the form of a poem) can immortalize his love: "in black ink my love may still shine bright."

Yeats goes to Byzantium, an ancient Greek city, the modern Istanbul, for its unity of being. Byzantium's life was a balanced one between religious, aesthetic, and practical values of life. T. R. Henn in *The Lonely Tower* suggests that Byzantium "has a multiple symbolic value" (page?) and he adds, "it stands for the unity of all aspects of life, for perhaps the last time in history" (page?).

The brilliant integrated Byzantine art has captivated Yeats's mind, and the tower of the city becomes the symbol of the ascent of man for Yeats, the last romantic. For Yeats, Byzantium is a symbol of synthesis between the subjective and the objective: in other words, body and soul. It is that place where the resolution of worldly conflicts can be achieved successfully.

Yeats surveys life from the tower of Byzantium, as Browning did in his poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra" from the vantage ground of experience. Yeats's vision of life is complete; he sees life as a whole. Down the ages, good many writers and poets have craved for performance, so they turned from life and sought refuge in art. For example, Thoreau also searches wisdom and knowledge in *Walden* and he looks at nature. As Keats in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" finds permanence in art, Yeats is also attracted to Hellenic art. The Greeks have sought the wholeness of being, wishing that their own life would be complete. Like most of the Romantic poets, Yeats also creates myth. Wordsworth creates myth out of nature; Keats finds his myth in the world of beauty. Art and beauty have been Yeats's myth.

Yeats was dissatisfied with the emotional and spiritual inertia of his days. It was like a modern wasteland to him. Young people of his day indulged only in sensual pleasure. Yeats realized the impermanence of these things. He criticized the dying generations and in order to get the panacea sails to Byzantium, the world of harmony and beauty. Byzantium is for Yeats the "monuments of unageing intellect" (407), which cannot be produced in this chaotic world. This is the point from which his quest begins. A.N. Jeffares has praised the first stage of the poem for its "peculiar powerful suggestion of natural life, the life of generation." The second stanza reminds us the temporariness of life, "[a]n aged man is but a paltry thing ... A tattered coat upon a stick," (407). In order to make living successful, he listens to the voice of soul and sails to the "holy city of Byzantium" (408). He prays the sages to come and purify his heart of all sensual passions and wishes to

become a part of the immortal products of art. Like Phoenix, he wants to be purified through the holy fire, and after the metamorphoses he will be a perfect object of art. He no more wants to be a man, sick with desire. This quest is like that of Ulysses: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

#### IV

Jibananda Das, a professor of English literature and a poet who did not belong to any particular school of thought or movement, was well aware of W. B. Yeats. He was also very much exposed to French poets like Mallarme and Baudelaire, and the rise of modernism. However, known as the loneliest poet of his time, Jibananda Das did not subscribe to any particular poetic movement. In a time when Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was literally reigning supreme in Bengali poetry, Jibananda came with his realistic portrayal of dark city life as well as romantic contradiction between the real and the ideal. Here, he becomes much like W. B. Yeats.

The pangs of partition and the worldwide war made him tired. First published in December, 1935 "Banalata Sen" is a poem in which the poet makes best and unique use of imagery, symbolism, and language. Against the backdrop of historical past, the poet talks about an eternal present and dares to go further. Time is taken as a tool to make his poetic voyage memorable. He talks about the ending of materialistic world and then only the ultimate solace can be reached in the form of his love Banalata Sen. The poet laments, "Who desired to discover pain ... By hammering own heart in vain?" Still, he knows that he has grown desperate in order to get some solace from his love who can lift him above this ordinary world. His poem, "Banalata Sen," seems to be almost an echo of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," "in which Yeats's poetic cravings find its final repose after an

eternal quest undertaken by the poet himself.

Yeats, in preparation for a BBC broadcast from Belfast on 8 September 1931, writes about his poem, "Now I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul and some of my thoughts upon that subject I put into a poem called 'Sailing to Byzantium' (Jeffares 213).

Byzantium was for Yeats the center of European civilization and the source of spiritual philosophy. And the poem, according to Yeats himself, symbolizes a search for a spiritual life in that city. And Byzantium symbolizes 'an ideal state,' or the 'unity of being,' a spiritual world where all antinomies are resolved; an ideal place for after life; the world of art opposed to organic life, a world in which artists and poets can reflect on 'the vision of whole people, etc.' T. R. Henn remarks, "... there is a correspondence between Ireland and Byzantium, that Byzantium might well symbolize a new Ireland breaking away from its masters so that it might develop its own philosophical, religious and artistic destiny." R. P. Blackmur has opined, "Byzantium is for Yeats the heaven of the man's mind ... there all things are possible because all things are known to the soul ... [it] represents both a dated epoch and a recurrent state of insight."

A contemporary of Yeats, R. N. Tagore in one of his poem says, "I am uneasy ... And thirsting for afar." In another poem he says, "Not here, not here, somewhere else, elsewhere." These words are expressive of his desperate search. Actually, this sailing to Byzantium is not only Yeats's quest, but also it is symbolic of the eternal quest of the poets. All these desperate quests—the supreme want of the poet, demand of his heart and soul—meet its end in Byzantium, while Jibananda Das's "Banalata Sen" says this: "Every bird returns to its nest, every river completes the course of its transactions. Only the darkness remains to sit face to face with Banalata Sen."

Byzantium covers that place in the poet's heart, in which every other reality loses significance. It is that great touchstone, with which the poet can fulfil his every desire, every spiritual necessity.

## V

Yeats's awareness of the basic contradiction of life and the tragic desperation of his old age makes a classic poem. This is a true travel poem in which the poet quenches his thirst through his refuge in the lap of an artistic world. The poem also establishes how Romanticism can be extended to include basic problems of human life and mortality. As the nightingale is a symbol of permanence to Keats, Byzantium becomes the symbol of eternity to Yeats. The most important point to note about the poems is not the quest or escape; it is rather a kind of transformation. Search for an artifice of eternity is not in vain; the spiritual transformation of the world is what is hinted. Yeats skillfully brings out the ontological question of human life and places it right against the aesthetic world of purification through art.

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