

TILL DEATH DO US PART: VERNACULAR POET JIBANANANDA DAS'S NOTION OF DEATH CONSCIOUSNESS AND INFLUENCE ON LATER POETS

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ABSTRACT

The paper tries to establish a connection between an inherent death-Consciousness in Vernacular poet Jibanananda Das's poem AatBochorAagerEk Din/One Day Eight Years Ago and the great influence of the poet on his successors. The imagery, style and themes, so unique to Bengali poetry have haunted future generations- celebrated Bengali 'Kriitibashi' poet Utpalkumar Basu (1937-2015) observes of Jibanananda- "To contemporaries other than a few, he was a person of ridicule. But in only 162 poems published during his lifetime, Jibanananda can be easily compared to Bidyapati, Chandidas, Bharatchandra, Madhusudan and Rabindranath. Maybe even this praise is not enough. Against the contemporary backdrop of quarrel, envy and nepotism, we hear his quiet peaceful voice – "There is no burden on poetry. There is no call for the poetic sensibility to follow any directions.

KEYWORDS: Vernacular Poet Jibanananda Das's Poem

"Dying is a very dull, dreary affair. And my advice to you is to have nothing whatever to do with it." – W. Somerset Maugham (Wicks 110).

INTRODUCTION

Our fascination with death is as old as life itself. We live amid death and die as everyone dies. But does every witness to death teach us something about our death that we didn't already know? In history, an obsession with death and the afterlife can be observed as early as the Egyptian civilization. "Your body (after death) will be anointed for seventy days...we will chant holy verses during your anointment ...we will pour milk on the path of your journey to your grave. O flesh does rot as you will soon be in the presence of Osiris who will deliver his final judgement".(ancient Egyptian papyrus) Elsewhere "let your body be stronger as you live to continue your life eternally in the city of the Dead". As early as the Third century, BC Herodotus writes of the Necropolis – "the city of the dead where corpses are hung up to be studied by young priests who learn the processes of embalment and temples and gardens being constructed for the use of the dead"...The Katha Upanishad alludes to the immortality of the soul or the atman "without beginning eternal everlasting and ever recurrent."

In Biblical terms, Christ's atonement frees Mankind from his Fall and prepares the ground for his redemption. To master our death and thus free mankind, God has to experience the excruciating agony of death. Incidentally, this is also the foundation of what Michel Foucault considers a specifically modern form of power i.e. pastoral power which he elaborates with the help of the Biblical metaphor of shepherd/flock. From the epic deaths of the Greek tragedies which allude to conflicts of predestination and free-will to centuries later the British War poets where the face of the dead is marked by an uncanny generality, "I am the enemy you killed my friend"(Owen), and death is marked by the "I", the common "I" which is also the singular "I", the radical point of singularity as collectivity'. Are we then in our final predicament subject to the whims of destiny or the gods who "kill us

for their sport"? Suicide is a voluntary action, a sudden act – fascination for which exceeds the life which was terminated. Sylvia Plath and the noted Indian filmmaker Guru Dutt's legendary suicides made sure that nothing that we subsequently say about them and their art can escape their end. Suicide is infinitely narrated for it is never narratable, never containable. In literature, suicide is a theme, a conscious choice of the self. holds infinite promises in the realm of cause and effect. From Cassius in Julius Caesar to Keats's conscious death wish, the ending of a life or a natural cycle arbitrarily imparts to the protagonist a halo of victory, of possessing the power to break the cycle of life on an impulse. Even more, pregnant possibilities manifest themselves when the cause-effect cycle is consciously kept a mystery by the poet. For one it opens up new vistas in the participation of the readers who ask three fundamental questions – why does the protagonist die? Does the narrator know the cause? Do I know as a reader or can I guess the cause? This brings into play discourses on Reader-Response Theory and the Death of the Author.

Jibanananda Das's classic poem "One Day Eight Years Ago" is about the suicide of an order for which there is no apparent reason. It indicates an unnamed psychological crisis far beyond the realm of cause and effect-

The wife lying next to him – so was his child.

Home and hope-filled the Moonwash and yet what spook

did he see to startle out of sleep?

Maybe long he never slept – now he sleeps restfully

On the dissection table (Self-Translation from Saiyad 258)

For Camus life bereft of all dimensions save the prospect of endless repetition is too draconian to live. As he describes it "Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar from the house of work, meal, sleep and Monday Tuesday Wednesday..."(Camus 5) this path is followed most of the time. But one day the entire pattern is upset by the single question "why"? For Camus, the final view at the end of "The Myth Of Sisyphus" is that the very struggle towards the summit is sufficient to fill the heart of Man with joy. But the same question, a critic observes, had lead Goutam Buddha to renounce the splendours of the palace to seek the answer that epitomizes eastern wisdom, a journey in the quest of Enlightenment to overcome the miseries that plague humanity. The journey of the protagonist of Jibanananda is a reverse one, a journey to the immense, unfathomable existentialist darkness of infinity-

Perhaps he wishes to sleep so

Like a plague rat, blood sodden mouth turned in its neck

To sleep seeking darkness

Never to wake again.

(Self-Translation from Saiyed 365)

Leaving behind the sleeping wife and child he sets out in the middle of the night and hangs himself to an unyielding branch an ashwatta tree. Why did he not sleep for long? The poem offers very little as effective clues but several voices abound the narrator who reports the incident, the ancient owl who delights in the necrological feast, the voice of nature almost foretells doom. Amiya Chakraborty refers to him as a poet "whose parallel we do not find in Bengali Poetry"(Roy 6). To Bengali Poetry he brings Polyphony - a crisscross of voices where each voice is like a witness. The

poem describes the condition that instigated the man to commit suicide, which is no condition.

The abrupt voluntary death marks the mystery and doubt that is inherent to Jibanananda's poetry – "There sleeps Sarojini / I do not know whether she is asleep"(Saptak, Self-Translation from Sayeed 396). But what happens to the protagonist in One day....after death? Does he escape into the world of peace and fulfilment? A sense of alienation pervades not unlike the poem "Bodh" (Sensation) where Jibanananda narrates his alienation amid everyone due to his incommunicable idiosyncrasies (mudradosh). This alienation in which we all block us from one another. But unlike Matthew Arnold who admits that "we mortal millions live alone..yet reminds us that" we were Parts of a single continent"(To Marguerite) for Jibanananda there is no presupposition of there once existing a unified collective existence in terms of faith nor hope of future reunion.

The acclaimed Bengali critic Sibaji Bandyopadhyay in his book *Prosanga Jibanananda* (On the subject of Jibanananda) has sought reasons for this haunting alienation in the collective crisis of Bengali life. He reads the poet's repetitive death wish as a result of the complex unconscious documentary of his time. This opens up new possibilities in the interpretation of the "why" question raised elsewhere – is it a direct echo of the socio-political crisis of riots and partition. The Earth tortured by the rays of the sun almost celebrates in the screams of innumerable pigs.

I want to sleep beside the Dhansidhi river ...knowing I will never wake up again... (Andhokar, Darkness)

Lines which are directly attributed to Jibanananda's response to horrors of riots in Bengal or a reflection of the personal crisis faced by him in his contemporary appraisal as a poet during his lifetime. He was labelled as both "vulgar" (asli) and "not understandable" (durbodho). And that final controversial question that still tingles the Bengali intelligentsia was this own death (run over by a tram) an accident or a suicide.

His poetry as an inscription of contemporary crisis is not without a touch of pessimism either.

The many vultures at the listless corner of a minaret flypast to what death / Forgetting the birds of the world? (Shakun, "Vulture")

Forgetting the saga of the state, triumph and empire / I shall extract the coldness of the wine stored deep inside the earth." (AbosharerGaan, "Song at the end of Work")

I have called out for death in the many names of my beloved. (Jiban/Life)

In the last two instances, there is a direct allusion to Keats. "O, for a draught of vintage, that hath been / Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth" (Allott 258) and "I have been half in love with easeful Death, / Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme" (Allott 258) mentioned in the context of death-wish elsewhere in this discussion. A teacher of English literature by profession, Jibanananda Das's poetic consciousness often bears a close affinity to the English Romantic poets in his responses to Death and Nature. But whereas of Tagore, it has been observed that his commitment to Romanticism – ideals, imagery et al was unwavering, Jibanananda's poetry marks an encapsulation of Western Romantic, Modern and Post-Modern canons which are interspersed in his poetic endeavour. To consider his two most lyrical and widely circulated poems *BanglarMukhAami*..(I Have Seen the Face Of Bengal) and *Banalata Sen* to be typically representative would be to trivialize the poet's horizon. The poet who constructs the highly melodic-

I have seen the face of Bengal / Therefore I do not search for the face of the world conjures violent and disturbing imagery-

Like the deer hunted in the moonlit spring night / We too play on the ground with our flesh (Campe / In the Camp). The last instance aptly illustrates the inherent contradiction in Jibanananda's poems- amid the moonlit spring night when their time of love has arrived the deer is killed. It is to be noted that the word he uses here to register the fusion of eros and thanatosis "bismoy" /dismay will be used again in "One Day Eight Years Ago".

In Rupasi Bangla (Bengal, the Beautiful) we again for instance find a direct allusion to Keats' "Ode to Autumn". The familiar Jibanananda motifs – the mouse, the owl, the kite all recur but the poem is like one long mourning almost a suggestion of Nature brimming over and underlying menace reminiscent of Keats's Odes and Wordsworth's Lucy Poems. But unlike his predecessors in English Romantic Poetry, for whom the death would often symbolize an eternal fulfilment and union with Truth and Beauty, for him, death is almost existential in its passage into the void, into nothingness. Jibanananda's Romanticism is the product of an urbane transference with its disturbing psychological inheritance and his modern consciousness (not unlike Beckett, Osbourne and Pinter) is the reiteration of a Void. This void can be directly attributed to the contemporary socio-political crisis of famine and partition in Bengal. The poet's own life was distinctly divided into the village (Barisal) and the city (Kolkata). Therefore the theme of escape from the urban to the rural, from the city to the village is not alien. Seely maintains that "it is the discomfort that his environment-the human environment-gives him, which causes him to retreat within himself and seek the protective world of dreams".

Buddhadeb Bose, probably one of the most influential writers of the Post-Tagorean era famously described Jibanananda as 'our most solitary poet', 'most singular'. The motif of loneliness and solitary existence fashion his emergence as a muted social commentator. By his conscious passivity in response, Jibanananda Das breaks with a long tradition of Bengali poetry in which the voice of the poet was considered all-persuasive, all-powerful. Also, rather than selling an exotic East to the West he, very non-invasively, brings the entire Western discourse to Bengal. In creating a new lexicon he uses words like wrist-watch, dynamo and novel images of nognonirjonhaath (naked lonely hand) and saliker thang (the leg of the sparrow) which would encourage later poets like Sakti Chattopadhyay and Utpalkumar Basu to pen phrases such as 'loktakichukalo (the man is a little black/dark) and use words like Baulbag (the bag carried by a wandering baul). Tagore himself was initially sceptical of Jibanananda's poetic enterprise but later (in a letter to Buddhadeb Bose) praised Jibanananda's unique approach to language and pictorial quality. Chitrurupamoy (like a picture) is the word Tagore used. In poem after poem, the poet is much like the way Cezanne characterized his enterprise: "painter of perception and not the perceived."

Two subsequent important movements in Bengali Poetry-the Krittibas movement (the 1950s) and the Hungrealist movement (1961onwards) would owe much of the origins of their existentialist despair, the crisis of identity and death consciousness to JibananandaDas. Sakti Chattopadhyay and BinoyMazumder both Krittibasi and Hungrealist poets echo this consciousness though in their unique style-

There is a great clamour on the shore

Whose corpse comes floating down the water

Where was his home

The gush of the night only says I am an Anarchist'.

(Ami Swechachari" I am the Anarchist"-SaktiChattopadhyay.)

Such was the influence of Jibanananda das on subsequent Bengali poets that in 1962, Tarapada Roy, another Krittibasī poet, addresses the poet directly-

Sir, stay for a while in the verandah!
Let me linger a bit on the lines I'm writing.
Why do you keep bothering me? Why hassle me?
Every night, why do you keep coming to me
From that morgue, you'd entered eight years ago
With blood-smeared lips? Every night!
Although we never met and aren't related,
Why do you keep breaking into my room?
Sir, please stay outside in the verandah!

(Jibanananda Das, 1962)

But the all-encompassing feature of his poetry is his attachment to an undivided "Bangladesh". Notwithstanding the Bengali anthem of Rupashi Bangla (Bengal, the Beautiful) elsewhere he writes

As soon as I come back again to the familiar soil of Bengal / I see the morning spread out / A local peasant gives me directions incessantly .(Bhasito)

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