

Rereading Jibanananda Das

by Azfar Hussain

Instrumental in shifting decisively the centre of gravity of Bengali poetry in the post-Tagorean period and in engineering what has come to be known as the modernist movement in Bengali literature, Jibanananda Das was born on February 17, 1899 (Falgun 6, 1305), and died on October 14, 1954 at the age of 55. Today is the 96th birth-anniversary of the poet, remembering whom *The Daily Star* takes this opportunity to present the following piece which aims at rereading Das's poetry.

GIVEN the enormous scale and space of his poetic experiences vulnerable to an almost infinite number of interpretations, it is virtually impossible to characterize Jibanananda Das in terms of mere epithets and labels, some of which, however, have kept circulating with increasing frequency ever since he started writing poetry. Tagore himself, for example, labelled Das as a 'new poet'; Sudhin Dutta called him a poet of 'intense lyricism', while Buddhadev Bose somewhat naively went on to characterize Jibanananda Das as one unwaveringly 'loyal to sensuous experiences'. Later on, during the period following the thirties with which Jibanananda Das is commonly associated, the penchant for pigeon-holing Das into so-called critical epithets has not diminished at all, but has increased with a new force — and at times, with a new fury. Existentialist, impressionist, dadaist, surrealist, abstract expressionist, constructivist, acmeist, imagist, cubist, neo-romanticist, futurist, symbolist — all these labels, apart from many others, have been used to describe the poetry of Jibanananda Das from time to time, indicating in a way the potentials and possibilities of a critical industry built around Das, and also clinching the point that Das's poetry is capable of accommodating the required space for all possible elements of what is called modernism.

Indeed, a host of Das-critics have unfailingly singled him out as a high modernist shown to traverse a broad range of modernist experiences from epistemological angst and anxiety accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and alienation, and deep depression nurtured by a sense of linguistic inadequacy down to nightmares wheeling and reeling out of life and history. On the other hand, comparatists have characteristically detected whatever resemblances they have happened to find between Jibanananda Das and Anglo-French-American modernists particularly including poets like Poe, Mallarmé, Valéry, Yeats, Williams. Responses of such nature may remind one of what Roland Barthes once commented, "automatic reflexes develop on the very spot where first there was freedom; a network of hardened forms constricts the primal freshness of the discourse... the writer, attaining the status of a classic, becomes the imitator of his early creation; society makes him a mannerism of his writing and returns him a prisoner of his own formal myths." Indeed, in the face of mounting critical

enterprises on Das, one is certainly left with this impression, a rather popular and abiding one, that Jibanananda Das is more than anything else a modernist in the Yeatsian-Poundian-Eliotesque tradition. My purpose here is not to provide a comprehensive critical evaluation of Das's poetry, nor is it to explode all formal myths of which Das has become a prisoner in the Barthesian sense indicated earlier. What I intend to do is to make a few points indicating the textual possibilities of Das's poetry for breaking the cage of Eurocentric modernism somewhat reflexively attributed to Das under a critical pressure mostly inherited from the past. Such an undertaking may, in turn, invite some epithets and terms which, as I have mentioned, are irresistible, given the enormous complexity of Das's poetry, and which then may serve certain purposes better than otherwise. Here, I have chosen only a couple of short poems by Das for my reading.

2

I should mention clearly that Das's work resists translation, and that his discourse often oblique. In fact, to translate him into a language other than his is certainly one of the potentials and possibilities of a critical industry built around Das, and also clinching the point that Das's poetry is capable of accommodating the required space for all possible elements of what is called modernism. Indeed, a host of Das-critics have unfailingly singled him out as a high modernist shown to traverse a broad range of modernist experiences from epistemological angst and anxiety accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and alienation, and deep depression nurtured by a sense of linguistic inadequacy down to nightmares wheeling and reeling out of life and history. On the other hand, comparatists have characteristically detected whatever resemblances they have happened to find between Jibanananda Das and Anglo-French-American modernists particularly including poets like Poe, Mallarmé, Valéry, Yeats, Williams. Responses of such nature may remind one of what Roland Barthes once commented, "automatic reflexes develop on the very spot where first there was freedom; a network of hardened forms constricts the primal freshness of the discourse... the writer, attaining the status of a classic, becomes the imitator of his early creation; society makes him a mannerism of his writing and returns him a prisoner of his own formal myths." Indeed, in the face of mounting critical

Yes, this Lalolian sense of play one cannot miss in the poem called "A Thousand Years Play" which appears to be one of the most semiotically playful poems of Jibanananda Das in the sense that it is virtually impossible to have any fixed modernist vision of the order of things in the poem, though thematic interpretations of the poem have tried to detect a dominant poetic consciousness of the flux of time and of the indivisibility of time past, time present, and time future. Fusion is what some critics have also tried to establish as a poetic activity in the poem; but, then, this fusion at a particular point of time cannot occupy any space frozen by Scottusian haecceitas or thiness, as the poet seems to indicate that a thousand years play in the "dark like fireflies"; that a thousand years likened to 'fireflies' are and are not, and that thus, either temporal divisibility or indivisibility is something impossible to grasp. The poem, right at the start, introduces fissures in any epistemic structure of reality that one can possibly envisage, and that this he does so fairly easily be sensed in his temporal playfulness which is nothing but verbal playfulness itself.

A number of critics have gone on to point out that in this poem, Das characteristically deploys the image of darkness with which he is in love. True, the image of darkness recurs in his poetry right from *Banalata Sen* down to his later poetry. Darkness has then been interpreted as a potential symbol of a great number of so-called modernist experiences. But, as it happens in the poem in question, darkness is not only darkness; it is crossed out, put under erasure of sorts, intensifying the nebulous identity of this darkness itself. The poet's oxymoronic playfulness is what one at this point can barely miss: darkness crossed out is also light crossed out.

It may be somewhat convenient to see that the mention of the "night" in the second line of the poem reinforces the effect of "darkness" mentioned earlier; but, then, the poet speaks of "eternal days" and also of "the moon over the islands", all of which, in fact, challenge the possible hegemony of the night whose "command eternal" thus appears to be more rhetorical than real in that an allusion to *Darka*, a mythical place to which Krishna returned triumphant from a war he had fought and a place which was lost in the depth of the sea, when made in the fifth line of the poem, points to the futility and ineffectivity of any command, be it imperial or regal or poetic or semantic or what-

ever. One also begins to see that the shadows of *Deblaru*, as the poet further plays with this image in the poem, are not ones that 'stand still' in any discernible time-space continuum, but ones that are torn into shreds, that are scattered across the moonlit sands, or that stand at best like a "broken column". Here, the poet's constant semiotic interplay between shadow and substance, light and darkness, and even between life and death does not merely bring to the fore a series of binaries which can be detected in many modernist works, but this interplay also stands opposed to the categories of these binaries themselves. Indeed, the notion of fixity at any level is impossible in the poem; so is that of an undisturbed, uninterrupted flux. One may go on to argue the case that this poem provides a space for this flux-dialectic; but, then, a couple of questions apparently glibly asked in the concluding line of the poem dilute any possible form of dialectic: "Do you remember? asked she — I asked in turn, *Banalata Sen*? Short-circuiting, sudden breaks in the sequence, binaries, erasures, oxymoronic violence, syntactic and semantic recalcitrance — these are some of the modernist stylistic features (these are the features the postmodernists also tend to appropriate in a way that James Joyce, for example, becomes a "textual object" of controversy between the modernist and the postmodernist) one can certainly identify at length in the poem "A Thousand Years Play"; but, then, such features, when identified with any certainty, get defeated by the very Lalolian sense of playfulness that Das never ceases to exhibit. While the poet says that "a thousand years play in the dark like fireflies", our reading of the poem tends to say, "a thousand signs play in the dark like fireflies". This phenomenon of a thousand signs playing, a thousand signs flitting, slipping, sliding in and out is not just a Derridean experience as it is claimed today; this phenomenon was also lyricised by Lalou more than a century ago in this part of the world. Indeed, Lalou's lyrics tend to animate a kind of semiotic mysticism whereby he makes us feel that it is virtually impossible to freeze signs which are at play in a world replete with nothing but signs.

3

Das's flair for introducing fissures in epistemic structures of realities one can envisage is further detectable in yet another short but marvelous poem called "Horse". A translation of this poem into



English may prompt one to put a definite article — "the", for example — before "horse"; but, "horse", as it is semiotically treated in the poem, tends to break the spell of fixity imposed by a definite article; for, this horse, throughout the poem, remains as nebulous as anything else. True, at one point of time, it appears as "Mahin's horse" which shows up "in the moonlit field"; but, soon after, it disappears into the womb of time — time being an indeterminate, endlessly playful sign in the world of human experiences. The poet also speaks of horses belonging to the neolithic age; but, soon after, the poet crosses out this neolithic age by having sprinkled signs across his textual space commensurate with the presence of the urban ambience — for example, "strange dynamo", "tea cups" sleeping like cats either in the drawing room or in the restaurant, etc; but, then, such signs are also extinguished in "the breath of time" as soon as we reach the end of this twelve-line poem.

The poem begins with a significant statement that "we are not yet dead", and in the beginning line, the poet also says that "yet only scenes are born". As one goes through the poem, one may feel that scenes are nothing but signs which are endlessly born. The relationship between 'our stay against death' and the 'birth of scenes or signs' gives us at least an inkling that to live is to live signs surrounding us, even inhabiting us. But, then, this mode of living is one that is full of epistemological unease, as one cannot fix or freeze signs to come to any complacent terms with them. Thus, to read this poem is to feel time and again that strange scenes and signs like Lalou's strange bird flit in and out of the cage called 'poetic construct'. Even the cage does not remain a cage in the conventional sense, as this twelve-line poem of Jibanananda Das exhibits the possibilities for being turned into an open-

ended discourse.

It is also interesting to observe that sounds, silences, feebly uttered syllables of the grass and the straw, floating fragrances, cat-sleeping tea-cups, "the indistinct grip of a dog", among other images in the poem, tend to construct a sequence of images only to deconstruct it; even when a certain amount of linearity in the semantic progression can be identified, at the next moment, this progression seems to be an illusion only. One is indeed left with the impression that the poem is not an inaccessible puzzle as such, but a fairly accessible game which can keep one busy evolving certain rules of the game only to break them. One may wonder if Jibanananda Das, or rather this reading of Das, invites linguistic anarchy and semantic nihilism in the name of open-ended discourses. No, nihilism is crossed out as soon as our reading generates feelings, ideas, questions to the extent that they can be further questioned, further probed into.

4

These two poems, so far only incompletely read (reading is always incomplete, full of voids waiting to be filled in, as Leo Spitzer rightly points out), tend to tell us frankly that there is more than Eurocentric modernism, there is more than darkness or light, melancholy or loneliness, time-consciousness or death-consciousness, existential crisis or surreal dream-world, nausea or alienation, to look for in the poetry of Jibanananda Das. In my opinion, no Bengali poet in the so-called modernist tradition has been more textually, semiotically, endlessly playful than Jibanananda Das. And it is because of his playfulness, that both modernism and postmodernism tend to appropriate him as a suitable, acceptable 'test-case' in their discourses.

in any culture, in any country.

And when in a hungering voice, these tourists or pilgrims, ask what to see, where to go, or what my favourite things in Rome are, I, in equally throbbing tones rattle off, like a trained waiter reading from a kaleidoscopic menu, some of what this magical city offers and part of what it means to me; the chapels and churches, the loggias and frescoes, the panels and ceilings, the portals and pillars, the cathedrals and cloisters, the altars and arches, monuments, museums, the villas and castles, the balustrades and battlements, the columns and colonnades, palazzos and piazzas, towers and domes, the gardens and parks, the walls, the walks, the basilicas and baptistry, the paintings and tapestry, mosaics and stained glass, water and stone, the fountains and gargoyles, the statues and sculpture, the bronzes, the equestrian, the broken, the brazen, the sensual, spiritual, amphitheaters and arenas, the operas, the arias, Baths and bridges, ruined steps and staircases, obelisks and crypts, the tombs and the temples, the votive, the erotic, the masks, the Madonnas, the Vestal Virgins, the Passion, the *Agony*, the oils and the temperas, the gilded, the stucco, terracotta, porcelain, crystals and marble, Apollo and Daphne, the tarnished or glazed, the draped and the vaulted the Gothic, Baroque, papal, Etruscan, Bernini, Borromini, Michaelangelo's "Last Judgement", Verri, Cellini, Canova's Pauline, Raphaelo, Caravaggio, Garibaldi, Mussolini, the commanding, cascading, the winged, the adoring, the perfect, the decaying, the pine and the cypress, oleanders, pomegranates, the cafes, and cobblestones, the classical, medieval, the rooted, the fleeting, resounding but silent, romantic, Romanesque, changing, evolving and yet... ever Eternal.

Two Poems by Jibanananda Das Before Death

We have strolled in a field of straw lonely
range in the Poush evening, and have watched
a meek river-girl sprinkle the flowers
of fog on the fringe of a field; oh! they,
they all look like country-girls of the past.
We have seen the sun-plant and the *Dhurdul*
lit with fireflies in the dark. At the end
of the field that has no crops, stands the moon
motionless; no harvest does it desire to reap;

We have loved the long winter night
in the dark, have listened to the music
of flapping wings across a thatched roof,
on a magic night; the smell of an ancient
owl: where then has it been lost in the dark?
We have felt the winter night's form and beauty
replete with the deep delight of winging across
the field; the twigs of the *Ashatla* on which
the cranes cry, and we have felt these solitary spells of life;

We have watched a wild goose vanish,
away from the gun-shot of a strange hunter,
into the meek blue of the horizon; we have
laid our hands with love on the sheaves of paddy,
have home-come with hopes like evening crowflights;
the smell of a child's mouth, grass,
sunlight, kingfishers, stars, skies —
they all have left their signs sprinkled
in our year-long wanderings.

We have watched green leaves turn yellow
in the autumnal darkness, beside the window
of the *Hijal*; the light and the *Bulbuli*
together have played; a mouse under the spell
of a winter night smears its silken body
with the dusts of rice; the waves fall down
in the grey smell of rice like the flashes
of beauty in the eyes of a solitary fish;
a pond-side duck in the dusky dark smells
the fragrance of sleep — the touch of a woman's
hand has taken it away;

The pinaret-like cloud beckons a golden kite
to its window; beneath those rattan plants
the sparrow's eggs have shaded off into a blue,
the river touches its bank again and again
with the soft smell of its water; the shadow
of a thatched roof falls on the courtyard
of a moonlit night deep and dense;
the breeze smells crickets — in the green wind
of the summer-field, the dense juice in desires
deep trickles down from the depth of a bluish apple;

We have watched red fruits lie strewn
under a huge Banyan tree; the crowd
in the solitary field when faces reflect in the water,
all the blue skies go on to seek the bluer ones;
we have watched from way to way the bedimmed eyes
cast their shadows on the earth; we have watched
the evening tracking down the rows
of area-nuts everyday; every day the dawn
descends like the green ease of the sheaves of paddy.

We have known the women of the earth
who have told the tales of our rivers,
edging close to us in the dark after many months
seasons and years; we have felt there is yet another
light along the path, inside meadows and fields;
there is the grey of a dusk in her body;
the light lies still, slipping out of a vision;
the *Kankabali* of this earth goes there floating,
touching the body of the lurid incense;

Before we die, what more do we need to know?
Don't we know that against all our many-splendoured
desires stands but the grizzled phantom of death
like a wall? There was once in this world
a dream; there was once gold which enjoyed peace
answerless; as if a magic-woman satisfied
her needs. What more do we need to know?
When the sunlight goes off, don't we listen
to birds twittering? Don't we see a crow
soaring across the field's fog!

Translated by Azfar Hussain

The Dance of Twilight-juncture

The wreckage of structures — where they lie
At the end of the earth — shattered
There, at the backdrop of Haritaki trees, tall and lanky
The sun of autumn evening — round and red
Sinks down, stealthily — In the moonlight
The owl alone looks on
Nestled on a Pipul twig;
the great look of the gold-ball-like sun and
the moon like a silver pot.

Under the Haritaki-twigs — ecstasy of water like
the sparkle of diamond
and — crystal-white
The shade of human skull — Silence —
Flavour of faded leaves — Madhukupi grass.

A few women like heaven's goddess:
Their men: accomplished and young;
Deep in the hair: hell's new-born cloud,
Grass of Hong Kong under the dancing feet.

Here an unknown spring dims and redeems the dazzle of
diamond,
Leaves come out without being heard;
Yet they sense from the dull sound of firing cannons
the destruction of falling Shanghai.

There those women move in a flock
Under an intimate sky
Rich with mystic eyes and signalling hairs;
The men of home and abroad
Would no more be crazy for the blood of war and trade

Being spelled by an intimate kiss
Having lost the passion for human sleep
resting head on a cotton-pillow;
Here across the earth's undulated corridors
There, afloat in the air of shattered meadows
They are being led
Along an uphill route,
to the Haritaki grove — moonlight
The hay-days of war and trade
All being over; hell's speechless cloud nested now in those
women's braid
And zodiac signs lie beneath their dancing feet.

Translated by Faizul Latif Chowdhury



Ruminations from Rome

by Neeman A Sobhan

I have a long-standing affair with *Roma* — my home for the last 16 years, and I love showing off my *bella città* to any interested visitors. But in my experience as a self-styled guide of sort, I've become wary of two types of tourists: the reluctant or spurious kind and the overly erudite ones.

In the first category are those who come upon Rome incidentally or with a severe time constraint and then feel obliged to see the city, that too in a nutshell, preferably a peanut! They want to "do" the city quickly and painlessly, to be able to go back and say they had seen the major sights. One of these species once asked, "Where is this Fourteenth... or is it the Fifteenth chapel?" I mumbled faintly, "You mean the Sixteenth chapel?" Yes, yes the sixteenth chapel, might as well finish that. And so, it's with heavy steps that I often lead such slaughterers to the lamb, up to the newly restored glories of the Cupola Sistina

where the 'Creation of Man' meekly awaits the mercilessly dismissive eyes of the uncaring and insincere tourist already ready to slash it off his list and preparing to hit the next spot. I know I shouldn't take it personally, but I do.

In the other category are the History and Art buffs who come with an invisible but overflowing luggage of information and demand to be taken to inspect the navel of some obscure statue in the nave of some obfuscated church tucked in some obtuse corner of the city. One such asked to be taken to read "the dedicatory inscription near the twentieth hole of the ancient public lavatory in the Diocletian Baths" — glorified graffiti to me! Another asked to see the bust of St Bernard of Clairvaux by Meozzo da Forlì or perhaps it was the fresco of the "Apotheosis of S Cecilia" by Sebastiano Conca... surely I had seen that? Again, I know I shouldn't take this sort of

thing personally, but I do. I so hate to look the ignorant I am. So grinning recklessly I mutter, "But, of course," and at the earliest, most opportune moment, I dash to surreptitiously thumb through all my books on Roman History and Art. I have a predilection for exercise of all sorts and need less to say I prefer this latter kind of tourists for they keep me on my mental and physical toes. And through them I have amassed a copious and confusing mess of historical and art trivia which I regularly and unfailingly produce to impress the third category of tourists — my favourite kind.

This group comprises all the impressionable, gullible, wide eyed, romantic people, who like me, love Rome unconditionally, passionately and from the first moment. They love it for what it is and are ready to lap up whatever comes their way, both the poetic and the prosaic, the past and the present.

The Past, in Rome, is a permanent house guest in the home of the Present. The incongruities do not create disharmony; the admixture of the past and present continuous tenses helps rather than impedes the graceful flow of the city's historical syntax. Cars zip noisily around the Colosseum like playful children around a dozing grandmother. Ancient columns are embedded in the walls of a modern office-or-bank. Renovated and modern apartments in the Centro storico or historic centre, have kept their ancient facades and enormous doors. Huge buses and pullmans negotiate their way gingerly through the narrow, cobbled Appian Way, one of the earliest roads in Roman history, still strewn with bits and pieces of decorative pillars and statuary. The old palaces are now converted to offices, museums and galleries; one of the famous palaces to be put to functional use is the Palazzo Farnese whose ceilings are painted by Michaelangelo and which houses the French embassy. It is said that the French pay the Italians a token rent of one lira! But then the cost of maintenance is borne by the French too. In summer many public gardens, like the Villa Borghese, and monuments or ruins, like (until recently) the Baths of Caracalla become the venue for open air performances of ballets, operas and concerts, even film shows. The steps of Piazza Spagna have witnessed 'al fresco' fashion shows of famous designers like Valentino and Lanicetti. One of my favourite restaurants in Trastevere, "La Cisterna" or the well, is actually built on an ancient well which is preserved in the dank basement as testimony to the original street level that sank over the centuries.

Alongside this felicitous co-existence of the ancient and the modern, is the equally fascinating co-mingling of the different ages and temporal