

book review

A Fresh Look at the "Rhinoceros-Poet" Jibanananda Das

Jibanananda Das: Selected Poems with an Introduction, Chronology, and Glossary.

Translated by Fakrul Alam
Published by UPL 1999
by Shamsad Mortuza

JIBANANANDA Das has been translated before. Fakrul Alam's translation of Jibanananda Das's poems into English adds one more to the total, therefore brings one more fresh perspective.

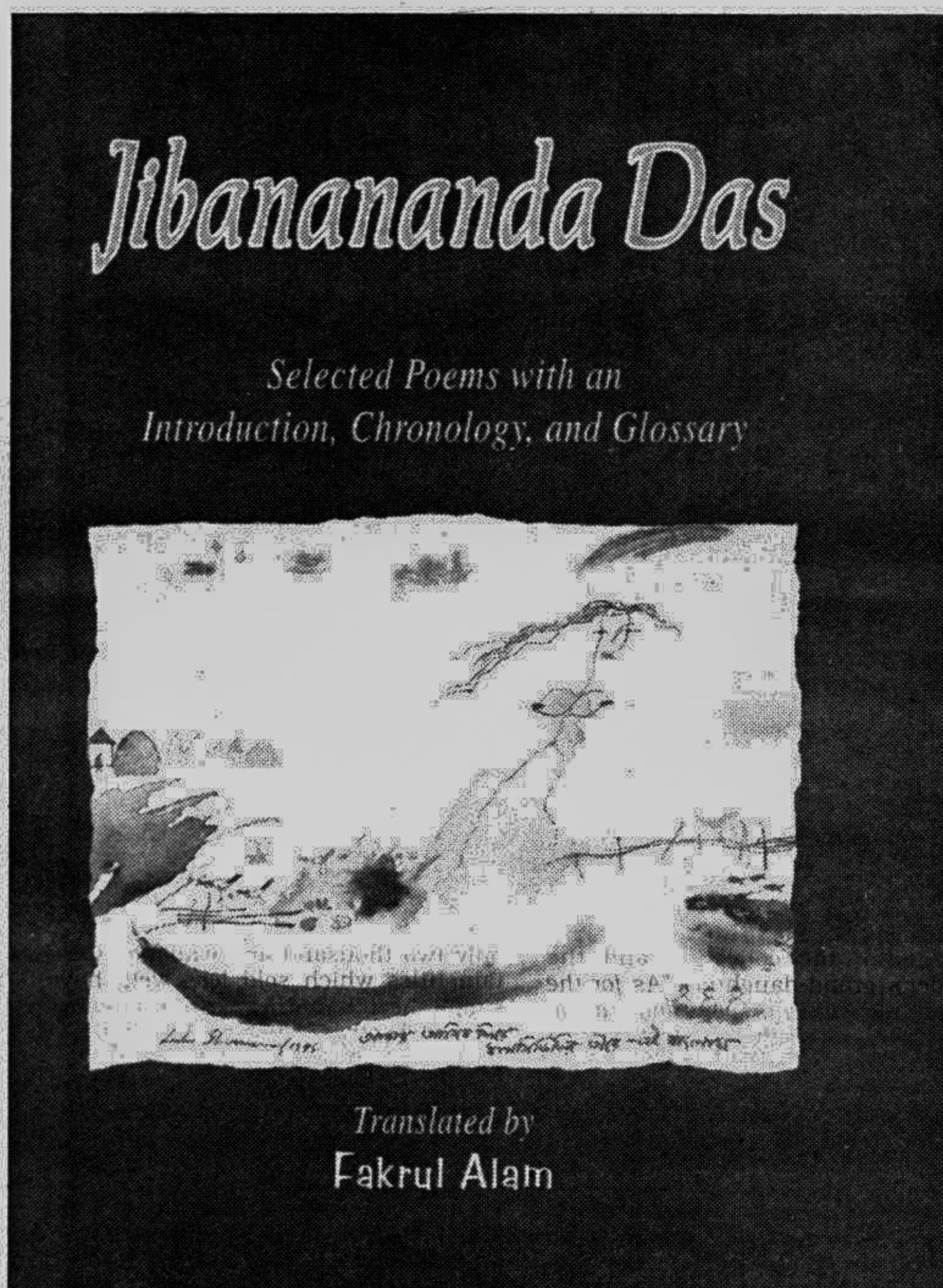
In principle translation is a subjective interpretive act, and all translations must position themselves in terms of identity and difference (sameness and otherness, likeness and unlikeness, ours and theirs) as they attempt to cross boundaries of language. What could be more pertinent than to keep this notion in mind while approaching the translation of Jibanananda Das, the poet who has always treaded the realms of familiar and unfamiliar?

Now how far has Fakrul Alam made the familiar Bengali poet unfamiliar in this process of translation? Or is it the other way round? In a postmodern world, the skeptic gaze of a critic is always busy to (borrowing a phrase from Jibanananda Das) "find a rat or two." The immediate questions that readily pop up regarding any translation involve issues of "accessibility" and "authenticity": Who is it for? Has it been true to the original? Answers to such questions are attempted in the introduction provided by the translator.

Alam makes it clear that his projected audience includes the "lovers of poetry outside the Bengali-speaking world" and his objective is to share with his audience about the grandeur and range of Jibanananda Das (5). About the second issue of authenticity, Alam refers to Jibanananda Das's correspondence with his publishers and friends to point out the poet's "insistence on retaining the flavor of the original, for example, by preserving the Bengali names wherever possible, by avoiding the pitfalls of being overly 'logical' or clear or literal in English renderings of his poetry, and by honoring his desire of being represented by translations" (13). Alam has certainly been true to his purpose. And the timing of the publication could not have been better!

In this year of the birth centenary of the "rhinoceros-poet," Alam's desire to present Jibanananda Das before a larger audience is appreciable. Born in 1899, Jibanananda Das appeared in the Bengali literary scene that was abso-

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lutely mesmerized by Rabindranath Tagore. No wonder, writing in a style contrary to Tagore, Jibanananda was soon to be compared to the *gandaar* (rhino) by his contemporaries who feared that their canonical *china-house* was in jeopardy.

This century, however, has been extremely enterprising of this *gandaar*-poet who has found his niche in the minds of Bengali readers. Jibanananda Das's poems are alive with the poetics of oral magic in modern forms. His poems brim with the imagery drawn from familiar Bengali landscapes. Conversely, the sensuousness of imagery reminds one of Keats. Then again the hybrid nature of his pictorial detail calls to mind of Donne, Shelley, the pre-Raphaelites, Edgar Allan Poe Yeats, Eliot and so many others. After all, no poet stands alone. The genius of a poet lies in his or her ability to include and exclude others in order to locate himself or herself in the confluence of best minds.

Alam has taken care to point out some of these allusions used by Jibanananda Das. The footnotes and glossary of Alam's volume is designed to meet the curiosity of an average reader. Concurrently, these critical annotations invite and challenge serious readers to be more engaged with the text. A serious reader, for that matter, is expected to ponder over the relationship between Helen in Edgar Allan Poe's "To Helen," and Jibanananda Das's title-character in "Banalata Sen." While Poe draws his allusion from Greek classics, Jibanananda Das drafts his own classic by identifying Banalata Sen in Nature and then immediately distancing her with the use of a far-fetched imagery of the ancient city, Vidisha in India. By providing clues like these Alam incites his readers to simultaneously inject and reject a possible relationship.

On quite a few occasions, Alam even provides parallel texts that are said to

have influenced Jibanananda Das's writings. For example, he cites Keats's sonnet, "Happy is England" as a potential source for "Go Wherever You Want to" (49) and "He Reproves of Curlew of Yeats for "Ah, Kite" (69). In some other cases, Alam just adds a footnote to the title to suggest a source for the poem: "Ode to a Nightingale" of Keats is mentioned for "The Sea Stork" (87), "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock" for "Loken Bose's Journal" (117).

Since Alam's introduction deals mainly with issues of translation, one feels that these references should have been a little more detailed and specific. For instance, in "Loken Bose's Journal" "One wants to roll up the universe into a ball" (1.35, p.118) alludes to Eliot's "To have squeezed the universe into a ball" (Prufrock, 1.94). Then again this particular line echoes Donne in his "Good Morrow." The indecisive lover, the silent sea of sands, the reference to great artists in the poems contribute to the possibility of a relationship between Eliot and Jibanananda. On the flip side of the coin Loken Bose's realisation that love is not love has a different connotation for Prufrock. Additional notes on the allusions and imagery of Jibanananda Das would certainly enrich the volume.

The language of translation flows well. Alam has been cautious about his word-choice and diction. His review of other translators' shows that he has been benefited from whatever he finds amiss in the translation of others. Alam has discreetly selected 80 poems from a wide range of Jibanananda Das's writings including some of his uncollected poems. The poems are well representative of a poet who has been known as a nature poet, a surrealist poet, a turbulent soul, and a true poet.

However, Alam's decision to exclude the first publication of Jibanananda Das, *Fallen Feathers* (Jhora Palok) is

intriguing (30). A representative poem from the jubilant writings of young Jibanananda could have been included in the volume to add to the other objective of the translator: to trace the growth of the poet's mind.

Fakrul Alam's capacity as a student and teacher of literature has certainly honed his critical perspectives. Admittedly, he is not a poet but he has tried his best to capture "the poet's literary sensibility and the poet's signature" (22). He has decided to leave some of the plant and animal names in their original form. Understandably, the connotation carried by the *Shankhachil* or *Shalik* is not to be reproduced in their translation. But when the translator translates the *Chil* for the *Kite*, one wonders why!

The Bengali words transcribed in the book could have been depicted in International Phonetic Alphabet to give non-Bengali speaking poetry lover a more precise taste of Bengali pronunciation. For example, writing "bat" to suggest bat (the banyan tree) or "rat" to be read as rat (night) is confusing. A pronunciation guide at the end of the glossary would certainly help non-Bengali speakers for whom this translation is primarily designed.

The introductory note also makes a case for the idiosyncratic use of punctuation mark of the poet, and their relevance in conveying the emotion. While the translator prescribes the use of punctuation, e.g. long dashes, he is left to his own devices while translating. "Because I have Seen Bengal's Face." In this poem, he lists the names of the trees without the en-dashes found in the original.

One of the major attractions of the book is the *faux-naif* motif of the illustration. Laila Sharmeen's childlike simplicity creates an unfamiliar mysterious landscape in which Jibanananda Das's poems are set. Thanks are also due to the publishers, UPL, for the neat production of the book. However, for the local market, Tk 290 seems pricey for this 156-page offset print book. To wind up, one cannot agree more with Sudeep Sen, who appears on the back flap of the book, who adds: "It is evident through Fakrul Alam's new translations that there is great generosity in his endeavor. This book will be invaluable to both scholars and general lovers of poetry — and how can one possibly not recommend Jibanananda Das's genius."

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profile

Patrick White: Nobel Laureate for Literature in 1973

By A S M Nurunnabi

PATRICK White came from a pioneering Australian family, although he was born in London. He travelled widely in Europe and the US before World War II, and also in London where he was much involved with the theatre his life-long passion. Part of the depth and intensity of his view of the world comes from his experience of its never and older civilisations.

His first novel, 'Happy Valley' was highly praised by some of the eminent contemporary English critics and writers. The immaturity of the novel shows in the strong stylistic influence of Joyce, its maturity in its characteristic searching assessment of the causes of human failure.

His next novel, 'The Living and the Dead' is a harsh judgement of a society more dead than living, softened by the refusal of some of the characters, especially female, to behave in the convention of a clever age that encouraged corrosiveness, destruction. "It is also the first of White's many onslaughts on the disgusting, the nauseating aspect of the human ego." White's deepest and most consistent purpose in all his work is the offering of signposts on the road to humility. He was a profoundly religious writer, not bound to any creed.

White's original genius appeared unmistakably in his next novel, 'The Aunt's Story'. The aunt is a spinster, who, although lonely and "leathery," has an extraordinarily rich understanding of life and people. Her story moves from reality to illusion, in Australia, Europe and the US; she is broken by her longing, but inability, to reconcile the two.

The 'Tree of Man' is White's tribute to the ability of ordinary men and women to survive against the elemental and inhuman forces of nature in Australia.

'The Tree of Man' and the other important novel, 'Voss', White secured his international reputation. In 'The Tree of Man' he attempted to explain the ordinary. In 'Voss' he took and extraordinary hero into an extraordinary country, with the Aborigines leading Voss on to further mysteries of magic and death. But the explorer's real journey is in the purification of his soul through torments of both agony and joy.

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work should be exclusively with the spiritual. White was also a master of social comedy, with a classical eye and ear for pretension and vulgarity, and an equally classical, if perhaps surprising, love of knockabout farce and bawdy.

In the early 1960s White's energies shifted temporarily to the theatre and the short story. An early, 'The Ham Funeral' was followed in rapid succession by 'The Season at Sarsaparilla', 'A Cheery Soul', and 'Night on Bald

Mountain'. These plays came from a deep and long-felt passion for the theatre, but White, disillusioned with intrigues of theatrical life, turned his back on the stage until 1976. Spurred on by contemporary Australian social and political corruption, he wrote 'Big Toys', which had a long run.

'The Solid Mandala' is perhaps the most tightly knit, difficult, yet rewarding of White's novels. The twin brothers, Waldo and Arther Brown, are in many ways the two halves of human nature, knowledge and intuition, fancy and imagination.

'The Vivisector's', a novel about an artist and the nature of art itself is the most unsparing and uncompromising of White's works. As the title suggests, no compromise is possible for a true artist, doomed to loneliness, uncomfortable by love or sex because both are in companion with art. It is a bleak philosophy, but, as so often with White, it must be emphasised that there is always comedy, from wit to bawdy, from irony to hilarity, which is present not for light relief but because White was always conscious of the human comedy beyond the individual tragedy.

White's genius showed no sign of slackening in its attack or invention. His intense individuality came in life from his depth and clarity of vision, and in literature from his unmistakable style, which is based on the widest expansion of metaphor; his style "cannot be regarded as a dress or alien covering, but it becomes the incarnation of his thoughts."

When Patrick White died in 1990, The Times wrote in tribute to him, "Patrick White did more than any other writer to put Australian literature on the international map... his tormented soul is that of a great and essentially modern writer."

poems

Three Poems by Jibanananda Das

Translated by Tito Choudhury

Rabindranath

'Since the human mind is shining
still the galaxy and the sun are pleasant everyday—
So we used to hear once upon a time.

But it seems that the speaker
has moved afar today;
As our history today is sunk into chilly cold
they think it is extinct totally.

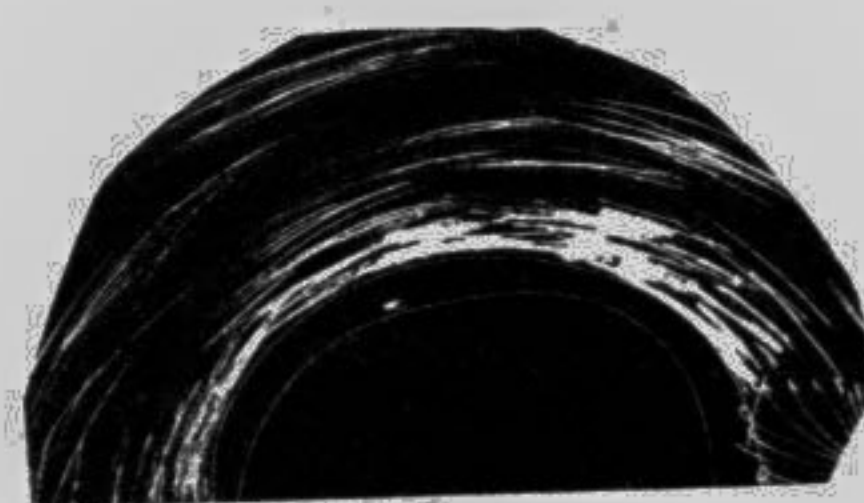
The first intonation of the Creation is of Benevolence and Beauty;
Yet the value returns
to the new coast of time like the sovereign truth
in man's aspirations, hopes and endeavours.



The World

It's only town near or far, demolishing homes:
There's sound of the falling village;
Men spent plenty of decades on this earth,
still their silhouettes on the wall
are of decay, death, fear
and bewilderment.

There's nothing left on the coast of time
except the void.
Even then around the plentiful deserts
of the shame of defeated men, wrong thinking and promises—
a serene country with sounds of spectacular trees
is the world, this love, wisdom and this asking of the heart.



A Strange Darkness

Today a strange darkness is fallen to this earth
Those who are blind see better than anyone else.
The hearts where there is no love-no affection-no caring kindness
the world stops today without their good counselling.
Those who have still cherish trust in men
to whom the lofty truth or style, art or perseverance
still look natural
today their hearts are the fodder for vulture and fox.

