

# Postmodern Bangla Short Stories: the arrival of the departure (Part III)

## Premodern Kalikshetra to Postmodern Kolkata

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Modernist discourse and discursive practices, irrespective of whether they arrived with the British rulers or through glossy Soviet despatches, legitimised Occidental canons and hegemony. Canons, aesthetic or military, imply legitimization. Destruction of the Bamian Buddhas is legitimization of homocentric canon. It is against nature. It thinks that the rainbow does not have so many colours. Rabindra Guha, who does not have any roots permanently like an arborescent, has articulated the dangerous consequences of a peculiar cow-belt hegemony in his micro-narrative *Contactile*. The little magazine explosion I have been talking of was postmodernist rupture from modernist discourse and encirclement of the centre by periphery. Two thousand fiction writers are sustained by six hundred periodicals within and outside West Bengal. This excludes magazines published in Bangladesh as well as Web little magazines. In an epoch having two thousand living fiction writers—several of them write postmodern poems—proliferation of new forms, diction, semiotic and syntactic practices, wordplay, spaces and experiences, is bound to push the Bangla short story beyond any conceivable frame. Canonical disarray was inevitable. It is not possible to bind some texts within academically-defined genres.

It would be interesting to note that when the Indian nationalist leaders in their anti-imperialist discourse gave a call for Civil Disobedience (1932) and Quit India (1942) movements, they did not advise writers to disobey and quit colonial canons. It took three earth-moving literary movements, lives of thousands of Naxal intellectual youth, jails of Indira Gandhi's Emergency and pretrescence of Establishment Marxists to get rid of them. Thereafter it was plenitude of the multivocal, unprecedented freedom for the author, subversion of academic dictats. And propensities of parataxis, nonlinearity, hybridity, rhizomatic, syncreticity, heterogeneity, openness, playfulness, irony, aptativeness, disjunction, displacement, immanence, fragmentation, disorientation, disruption, hagiographical, indigeneous, talkative folk forms, subaltern, eco-feminism etc. became widespread in the fictions published

in little magazines. This phenomena has drawn the wrath of modernist critics who have been selectively castigating authors. However, they are aware that postmodernism is the only umbrella beneath which such a diverse discourse may be brought together for a unifying congregation.

Despite such subversive and multivocal texts of the literary movements being eventually subsumed into the mainstream, even if selectively, based on political, media-centric, upper caste or post-Partition diasporic inclinations, the challenge has permanently affected the way the postgeneric has impacted the present, and will impact the future, discourse, as has already been experienced in the case of certain *Hungryalist* and *Shastravirodhi* fiction writers like Basudeb Dasgupta and Ramanath Ray. Any literary defiance embodies the provocation of a literary code into socio-cultural, or tangentially, political code. Understanding of a postmodern text's interpellated and intertextual designs definitely entails active collaboration on readers' part. The reader, the reader-as-critic, cannot afford to take his own position as granted, since certain problems will always remain unresolved at his own level. Any interpretation of a text will depend on the reader's understanding of the macro and micro cultural constructions and the socio-political givenness it was written from.

The postmodern Bangla short story generally aspires to resist memory's appropriation technique of vernacular newspaper literature or of textbook history, as the narrative proceeds mapping out counter-hegemonic strategies and obeys a memory-triggered structure in which textual swings develop ethnic elasticity. Postmodern short stories are worlds away from the metafictional self-consciousness of *Parichoi-Kallol-Pragati* and *Notun Reeti* authors, who gave primacy to the one single voice. Certain postmodern stories are a polyphonic mélange which need not be seen as productive of meaning but necessarily reflective or expressive. There are still some academicians who humiliate their graduate and post-graduate students if they are unable to locate the produced meaning of a text. Evidently, the discourses are basically plural, and there can never be a monocentric correctness as demanded by modernist critics.

It is pertinent to note that during the Emergency when Indira Gandhi suspended fundamental rights of the individual, and texts were subjected to censorship, several authors adopted a secret slyness in their fictions to enable the narrative to speak in different voices from behind textual masks in order to de-structure and deconstruct the centre of power. During the last decade of the 20 th century, in certain semi-urban and rural areas of West Bengal, ravaged by political violence, authors are forced to employ this technique to rescue language and literature from the terrorizing stasis around them.

As a result of the culture of political violence, villagers affiliated to one political party are hounded out of their ancestral hearth and farmland forever, or till the balance tilts, by villagers affiliated to the locally powerful or ruling political party, something unimaginable during premodern/precolonial and modern/colonial days. Such values are completely alien to West Bengal where Muslim farmers never fought with each other. However, the postmodern feature is that such violence and terror have got nothing to do with Marxist and Gandhian ideologies that the parties brag about. All ideologies, commitment and virtue have withered away. Loyalties can be switched at will, one's own or someone else's. Though in their youth in 1950s they had shouted *Yeh azadi juthua hai* (Frantz Fanon in 1961 called it "the force of national independence") on the streets, the now-bloated top bosses of political outfits do not appear to be seriously bothered about present smithereening of West Bengal's ethnic life/world, of people who have lived together since thousands of years. As a result of political violence, the subject (just a digit to the State) is territorially deappropriated; his forefather's land has become a recognizable locus for incessantly unresolved problems. And this is one of the subject-positions where postmodern Bangla textual reality develops as a complexity. In Tripura the division is between tribals and non-tribals where the violence is defined by ruthless firepower.

Certain dominating media networks have their maximum security prisons of authorial world of customer-friendly consumerist language, which have been subverted by the micro-narratives of such authors as Udayan Ghosh,

Atindriya Pathak, Barin Ghoshal, Subimal Basak, Ajit Ray, Kamal Chakraborty, Mrinal Banik, Samir Basu, Tarak Rej, Nabarun Bhattacharya, Manab Chakraborty, Bhagirath Mishra, Abhijit Sen, Subimal Mishra, Prasun Bandhopadhyaya. Arupratan Basu, Subhas Ghosh and Abani Dhar. Fluidity of their micro-narratives undermine the logic of power; the reader is forced to unravel the intertextuality and the power-structure that weave subject-positions within societal complexities. The subject refuses to be a digit. Their texts undermine the readers' search for a fixed subject-identity through semantic, semiotic and syntactical flux. The texts function as filter as well as amplifier of suppressed voices and fragmented undefinable subjectivities. The narrative involves the reader in the textual problems of the story which resist creating modernist stereotypes. As a result the identities, instead of getting lost in the quagmire of fixity, engage themselves in perpetual remaking.

Titles of postmodern Bangla short story go beyond logocentric modernist norms to metonyms of plurality. It may be intentional or unconscious. Instead of calling them 'titles', it would be ontologically and historically proper to call them 'rubric'. Prior to the invasion of colonialism, nature could never be owned by a native of West Bengal, be it land, water surface or forests. There were no concepts of title, title holder, deed, registration, rights, will, probate, affidavit, advocate, *daili*, *sastavej*, *wakil*, *wakalatnama*, *tauji*, *mauja*, *jameendari*, *shariq*, *munim*, *mukhtar*, *peshkar*, etc. pertaining to ownership of nature or dispute relating thereto. All these words were alien to Bangla ethos and ethnos; they did not and do not have Bangla synonyms. These concepts were aimed at containing land, flora and fauna, subordinating them to human will, and rendering nature's infinitude into computable minims. It was settlement and seizure of Bangla territory through language.

Bangla nature represented, in innumerable forms, gods and goddesses. Even Buddhism was forced to have gods and goddesses. Today, most of the political violence in villages erupt out of disputes relating to ownership of farmland, orchards or water surfaces. Land reforms have reached a dead end as fragmentation of land has crossed

limits. There is now no scope to absorb the surplus farmers in cultivation. No industries have come up to absorb them either. Rather, the majority of those that already existed, especially those owned by indigenous people of West Bengal, have either been struck off through alien ontology or locked off by disgusted entrepreneurs. Rural areas swarm with illiterate, unemployed farmhands while urban and semi-urban areas swarm with educated unemployed, fifty years after Independence and twenty-five years of quasi-Marxist rule. Several of the authors have been groomed in this postmodern condition. A strange post-Industrial scenario indeed! Time packaged in a coffin!

In premodern Bangla, oral or written narrative was nature's gift to mankind of this specific geography. The text was not the private property of the writer. In fact, the concept of author itself arrived with Occidental poetics. The premodern writer did not have authority over the text prepared by him. In case of some *Mangalkavyas*, the writer claimed that a particular god directed him in his dreams. Even as late as 1970, Komol Kumar Majumdar has written almost all his stories after obeisance to his personal deities in the first sentence of his texts, which he ethnicised in an incomparable discourse based on premodern semantic, semiotic and syntactic nuances.

In case of premodern writers, any subsequent writer was free to add his own contribution to anybody else's texts, or change the entire structure of the earlier narrative. Valmiki's epic Ramayana has hundreds of versions in various Indian languages. All of them are accepted at all levels of the particular language-society. Nabaneeta Dev Sen in her essay *The Hero's Feet of Clay* (2000) has cited women's retellings of the epic, dating from 16th century to the present day.

Prior to invasion of modernity, there was *personal possession* in Bangla life/world, and no idea of private property existed. The concept of ownership of text created violence in native philosophy, society and culture. No text had a title in premodern Bangla literature, and the writer was not at all a title-holder author. Title meant seizure and fixity. Title identified the center of power. Titles of narratives arrived with Occidental poetics, and became in-

separable from the center of power of the content during *Porichoi-Kollol-Notun Reeti* span. The title identified the core of the subject matter. Since the title-holder or the author owned the text, the entry and the exit of the text had to be securely closed. Hence the twist of the key in the last para or thereabouts of a story became essential to keep the exit-door of the story carefully clicked shut. The close-endedness of a text was perfected with imperialism's foray into indigenous unowned cultures.

Political internecine violence may also be interpreted as emergence of a tool to reopen indigenous cultures, be it in West Bengal, Tripura or African countries. Naxal violence in West Bengal, and fragmentation of this school of thought into thirty-six warring camps, had gone beyond political domain. In fact, the efforts of *Hungryalist*, *Shastravirodhi* and *Neem Sahitya* fiction writers to dismantle the single core of the subject matter, were carried further by writers who emerged after the above fragmentation. The *gol gappo* syndrome became limited to newspaper literature. The postmodern fiction writer employs rubric instead of title, as an external unifier of his narrative thoughts, as a measure of decentring, and for the purpose of highlighting the periphery. With emphasis on the periphery, the focus of the text shifts to micro-territory of characters. However, the micro-territory remains increasingly plagued by neo-colonial ills: economic disorder, social malaise, political scams, criminal as politician, government corruption, influx of famished Bangladeshi Muslim families, repression by state and political party apparatuses, digitalisation of individuals as voters, indifference and apathy of public sector institutions. The progressive time of modernity has evaporated in thick polluted air. Amid this hypochondria, the postmodern texts are forced to probe their own narrative ways out of the disillusion. There are authors who have declared in print that they do not own copyright of their books.

Not having a title and title-holder, the postmodern text has evolved ability to be both of specific micro-territory and yet also peregrinated. In its tension between the micro and the macro, local and non-local, particular and general, between domestic and public environs of charac-



ters, there is constant rubricification of identity. The alterity of the text is constructed on the principle of self-difference rather than as a self-identical whole. A postmodern mixture has taken place after the indigenous communes of West Bengal were overrun by influx of displaced persons from East Pakistan, leading to titlelessness of micro-cultures, micro-rituals, micro-customs, etc., and interweaving thereof in pluralistic discourses. A rubric emancipates postmodern Bangla short story from the major colonial anchorage of history. Titlelessness attacks ossification of text as art, and avoids commodification. Since postmodernism is mobile and on the random nomadic move, title of the text is an impossibility, superimposed and artificial.

From premodern to postmodern Bangla literature has moved quite fast, much faster than Europeans. Language development, however, has not been able to keep same pace. The geographical space called *Kalikshetra*, spanning from Behala in the north to Dakshineshwar in the south, was handed over to Rai Majumdar Lakshmikanta Choudhury for raising revenue from the produce of the area vide a 1608 order of Emperor Nooruddin Muhammed Jehangir. Only people of subaltern castes viz. *heley kaivarta*, *jeley kaivarta*, *namashudra*,

*mahishya*, *sadgop*, *rajvangshi*, *poundra-kshatriya*, etc., lived and toiled in the villages of the area. Not a single upper-caste family lived in Kalikshetra. Lakshmikanta, a Brahmin, built his residence on the outskirts of Behala. Kalikshetra became Calcutta when the descendants of Lakshmikanta, better known as Sabono Choudhury, were forced by the then Nawab of Bengal to transfer intermediacy and revenue rights to the East India Company in 1698. Premodern Kalikshetra became modern Calcutta. The original subaltern inhabitants were driven out, and in came hordes of middle-caste business families to seize upon new business opportunities. And with the transfer of Diwani Rights in Bengal to the Englishmen in 1765 and establishment of Fort William College in 1800, the entry of upper-caste families to the area became unstoppable. Modern Calcutta became postmodern Kolkata in 2001, as all original inhabitants, both premodern and modern, have been hounded out of the hub of the metropolis.

(to be continued)

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## Still Haunting Us After All These Years: Jibanananda in the New Millennium

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Consider the following poem by the West Bengali poet Tarapada Roy on the way Jibanananda Das has entered our consciousness (my translation):

*Jibanananda Das 1962*

*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!*

But Jibanananda Das won't be denied his place in the room of our collective memory and will continue to break into our thoughts forever insisting that we learn from him about life and death and our sad but beautiful Bengal. As if to make up for all the neglect he suffered in his lifetime, poets and critics throughout the Bangla-speaking world have been writing steadily about his unique achievement in a stream of articles, essays, and books ever since the poet died after being run over by a tram in Kolkata in 1954.

*Jibanananda Das: Janmasatabarshik Smarak Gantha* (Dhaka: Abosar, 2001), a collection of essays by various hands, is a centenary tribute edited by Abdul Mannan Syed, the accomplished poet-critic and doyen of Jibanananda scholars of Bangladesh, and Abul Hasnat, the distinguished journalist. It is a book that can be recommended

as a very useful record of Jibanananda's impact on Bangladeshi literature as well as the extent of his achievement as a writer. Containing essays by eminent poets/critics such as Abul Hasan, Abul Fazal, Ranesh Dasgupta, Shamsur Rahman, and Hayat Mahmud, and Jibanananda scholars such as Clinton B. Seely, Abu Taher Mojumder, and Faizul Latif Chowdhury, and including a useful chronology, a fairly comprehensive bibliography, and a very readable account of the reception of the poet's work, and 14 illustrations based on his verse by leading artists of Bangladesh, this is a volume that can be read with profit and pleasure by anyone interested in tracing the impact of Jibanananda Das on our consciousness.

Among the essays collected in *Jibanananda Das: Janmasatabarshik Smarak Gantha* especially valuable is the one by Abul Hasan on Jibanananda's unique use of words, distinctive images, hypnotic rhythms, and enchanting dream world. Hasan also describes his one memorable encounter with the poet. Ranesh Dasgupta's even briefer piece emphasizes the wide-eyed wonder with which the poet captures the beauty of Barisal and his delicate delineation of our rural world. Ataur Rahman reminds us in his essay that Jibanananda was essentially a humanist who agonized over real problems and no ordinary escapist into a pastoral world, as is magnificently evident in his long poem on the Kolkata Riots, "1946". Shamsur Rahman, the leading poet of our time, writes how Jibanananda possessed him

and influenced his early verse. Like Hasan, Rahman writes interestingly of an encounter with the poet, remembering how unimpressive he was in person, except for his sparkling big eyes and unpredictable laugh. Anisuzzaman, one of our leading critics, describes the "inevitable spell" cast by the poet on anyone who encounters his verse and on how his imagination and even the very names he sprinkles throughout his books keep enchanting us endlessly.

Other essays, such as Abul Fazal's comparison of the poet with his famous contemporary, Sudhindranath Datta, Abdul Hafiz's attempt to affiliate him with English verse traditions, Ahmed Rafiq's comparative study of Yeats (his favorite English poet) and Jibanananda, Jatin Sarker's attempt to situate Jibanananda in a poetic world dominated for a long time by Rabindranath, Omar Shams's note on how Jibanananda bought to Bangla poetry a special music and symbolist devices derived from European poetry, and Abdul Mannan Syed's succinct summary of his status and achievement are all well worth reading. But especially noteworthy among the essays of the collection because of the way it brings recent theory into an analysis of the poet's work is the one by Syed Manzoorul Islam which treats Jibanananda as the quintessential outsider and which emphasizes his fascination with subaltern figures. Islam's essay is, in fact, a reminder that it is time that we now begin to analyze Jibanananda Das's fiction as well as his verse with the help of insights derived from recent theory since he is the kind of writer

whose works can be reinterpreted again and again. To put it somewhat differently, Jibanananda, like all great writers, will always be our contemporary no matter when we read him.

But *Jibanananda Das: Janmasatabarshik Smarak Gantha* is a useful reminder of other dimensions of the man's work too. After all, we are still coming to grips with Jibanananda's often experimental fiction, and it is



therefore good to have some pieces on his short stories and essays. Borhanuddin Khan Jehangir thus comments insightfully on the differences between the poet and the novelist. Biswajit Ghosh traces the theme of alienation in the fiction. In one of the longer essays collected in the volume, Salahuddin Ayub discusses Jibanananda's standing as a writer of fiction, prefacing his essay with these memorable lines from Allen Ginsberg's *City Light Journal*: "One poet dead, killed near his fiftieth year on Rashbehari Avenue run over by a tramcar...did introduce what

for India would be 'the modern spirit' bitterness, self-doubt, sex, street diction, personal confession, frankness, Calcutta beggars etc into Bengali letters." In a short note on *Jibanananda's* posthumously published novel *Malyaban*, Ahmed Mazhar argues plausibly that had the book been published when it was written in 1948, the history of the novel in Bangla would have been different because it is so innovative in

theme and technique.

Among the contributors to *Jibanananda Das: Janmasatabarshik Smarak Gantha* is Abu Taher Mojumder, a poet, critic, and professor of English at Jahangirnagar University, who writes at length on "Banalata Sen", undoubtedly the most famous love poem in Bangla literature. Like most of us, Mojumder seems to have fallen in love with the poem (as well as its titular character), but unlike most of us, he has delved deep into it. Jibanananda too, Mojumder implies, appeared to have been smitten by Banalata Sen forever.

The poet, in fact, wrote quite a few poems about her charms. Apparently, she was for him a fixed point in a world of fluxa permanent stay against despair.

Mojumder, it is easy to see in the longish essay, is also fascinated by the poet's obsession with Banalata Sen. He has expanded the essay even further for his recently published book *Jibanananda* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2002). Essentially a collection comprising this piece, and essays on the theme of alienation in Jibanananda, the mesmerizing poem "Mrityer Age", and the other women that he immortalized in his verse, the book is a testament to Majumder's absorption in Jibanananda and desire to account for the reasons why so many are spellbound by the poet.

Mojumder begins *Jibanananda* with an almost monograph-length study of alienation in Jibanananda's work. He claims that Keats as well as Yeats and Eliot were major influences on Jibanananda's adoption of this theme. He compares his treatment of it with Sudhindranath Datta's. Quoting extensively from Jibanananda Das's poems, fiction, and letters, referring occasionally to the poet's life, and tracing his affiliation with major modernist movements, he contextualizes Jibanananda the poet quite thoroughly. The essay on "Banalata Sen" displays Mojumder's mastery over his subject and his ability to bring his wide reading in illuminating his discussion. For instance, in commenting on the resonance of Banalata Sen's name and hometown Nature, Mojumder adopts R. M. Hewitt's phrase (made in another context) to underscore "the magic

carpet of two names". He also discusses the sources of the poem. Was there a real-life Banalata Sen? Mojumder thinks so, mainly because of a passage in Jibanananda's posthumously published autobiographical novel *Karubashona*. He also discusses literary sources such as Rabindranath's poem "Swapno", Keats's "Lamia" Yeats's "He Remembers Forgotten Beauty" and Poe's "To Helen" reminding us of how resonant the poem really is.

A special feature of Mojumder's *Jibanananda* is the interest he takes in translations of the poet's verse. Almost every extended discussion of a major poem is followed by a section where he compares and contrasts different translations. While I was gratified to read Mojumder's comments on my translation of "Banalata Sen", and while he is diligent in gauging the accuracy of the available translations, I hope he will not think me ungracious if I say that he does not seem to realize that translating verse means more than getting the meaning write. Undoubtedly, fidelity to the original is essential, but one must be sensitive to the rhythms and music too. Also, I found the procedure of checking the semantic accuracy of line after line of every translation too tedious. In general, this is the main problem I find in Mojumder's and other recent essays that I have read on Jibanananda's verse: there are not enough comments on his craftsmanship. Too much is also made of his themes and sources. No one, really, has bettered Abdul Mannan Syed's 1972 book *Shuddhotomo Kabi* (the most correct of poets). Also, one would like to see more critics take advan-

tage of recent theory to study Jibanananda: how about more post-structuralist, feminist, psychoanalytical readings of the poet?

In the end, though, one must conclude that just reading a Jibanananda poem, or even hearing someone recite his poems competently, will be enough to make one appreciate him. His evocative landscapes, enigmatic heroines, and enchanting rhythms are guarantees enough that he will attract readers, scholars, and translators perennially.

The most recent translation I have come across is Mushtaque Ahmed's *Gleanings from Jibanananda Das* (Cox's Bazar, 2002). Like all Jibanananda's translators Ahmed has taken on the task of rendering the poems into English clearly because of the irresistible nature of the poet's works. Ahmed's translations are competent and the 22 poems he has selected are among the poet's best. Reading the Bangla and English poems in this parallel-text version is a good way of being introduced to Jibanananda Das's poems and proof that wherever you are in the two Bengals—Ahmed is identified in the dust jacket of his book as Principal of Ramu College—he will continue to enthrall us permanently. After all, his best poems are things of beauty and were designed to give us joy and tease us into thought forever!

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