

# The Mona Lisa of Bengali Poetry: Jibanananda's "Banalata Sen" (Part II)

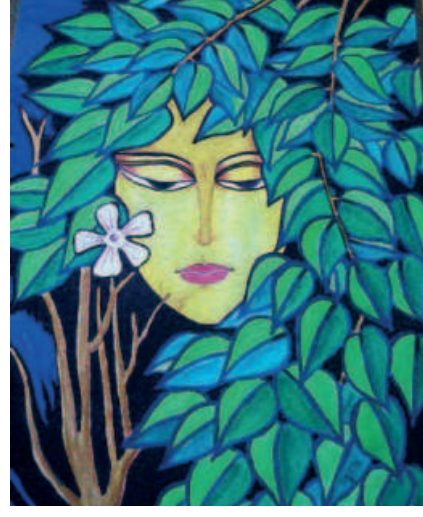
KAISER HAQ

Ms Banalata Sen is mentioned thrice, at the end of each 6-line stanza, and each time the effect, in the context of the stanza's affective and ideational development, is climactic. The first time we are told that in the midst of life's turbulence she has afforded the speaker a couple of moments' peace. The relationship between the turbulence and the peace, however, does not seem to be one of simple opposition. At least to this reader the image of the frothy sea ("samudra safen") has distinct sexual connotations, suggesting the complex turbulence of libidinal involvement. This is a necessary prelude to the peace ("santi"), rather like post-coital calm, noted in the next line.

At the climax of the next stanza, the question with which Ms Sen greets the speaker ("eto din kothay chhillen?": "Where have you been all these days?") has—at least to my ear—a distinctly coquettish ring. The famously enigmatic image that follows, likening her eyes to a birds' nest, as Sumita Chakrabarty perspicaciously suggests, isn't all that innocent either. A bird's nest is a temporary affair (pun intended), built to lay and hatch eggs, after which the partners in the project go their separate ways; it therefore reinforces the idea of a sexual liaison. The speaker discovers Banalata Sen with the ecstatic amazement of a shipwrecked sailor who comes upon verdant fields in a cinnamon-isle, which is an image that confers on her something of the aura of a vegetation goddess, who would automatically convey an impression of fecundity.

The final mention of Ms Sen occurs in the context of varied images of endings, plangently evoking death, which finally reigns over everything ("Thakey shudhu andhakar"). The image of the river returning home may be derived from Indian mysticism, which often describes the *atman's* merger with the cosmic spirit of *Brahman* in the image of a river debouching into the ocean. The juxtaposition of the libidinal and death instincts, of eros and thanatos, will not surprise the modern reader, nor should the information that Jibanananda was very much a self-conscious artist in his handling of the theme. He told Bhumendra Guha in unambiguous terms that death was the obverse of the life-force, and could even manifest itself quite aggressively ("mrityu thik jiban-lalashar ulto pith. Mrityu jathesho agrashiyo hotey parey hoito"). This is an accurate and pithy expression of the Freudian theory of the death instinct, which, we now know, was inspired by the Buddhist notion of nirvana.

Ms Banalata Sen, then, far from



being a demure and passive damsel beloved of Bengali mothers on the lookout for brides for their sons (I fear she is mistaken to be such by many) is one of those complex, smoldering females beloved of the Post-Romantic imagination. And so before the poem ends there appears the manuscript wherein she is to be memorialized.

Now for the big question: what inspired this portrait of Ms Sen? Was it someone in real life, something he had read or a combination of both? The last answer is the safest bet of course, and is the correct one. Of the two components of the combination let's take the autobiographical aspect first. What evidence do we have that Jibanananda knew and was attracted to someone who became the model for the famous portrait? Basing herself on the reasonable assumption that his posthumously published fiction is basically disguised autobiography, Sumita Chakrabarty draws attention to "Karubashana" ("Artistic Longings"), a novel written in 1933 (a year before the poem was written) in which the narrator is haunted by memories of Banalata, a neighbour's daughter, whom he had loved in boyhood, twenty or so years ago. Revived in his imagination, she is described in a way that points up her kinship to her namesake in the poem. It is also perhaps worth mentioning here that when asked (by Gopalchandra Roy) if he had known anyone called Banalata Sen he only smiled in pregnant silence.

But the other component—the inspiration from reading? It comes, I think, not from another poem but from an influential Post-Romantic prose work, Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* (1873). Two brief sections of this book may be regarded as the loci classici of Decadent Aestheticism. One is the bravura passage in the Conclusion highlighting the significance of intensity of experience amidst inexorable transience and

incertitude: "To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy is success in life." Such was the sway of Pater's influence that, ironically enough, even those possessed of an earnest Victorian sensibility, like Jibanananda's near-coeval Mr Nirad C. Chaudhuri, adopted this as a motto.

The other section is the extraordinary impressionistic account of Leonardo da Vinci's enigmatic masterpiece, the Mona Lisa or La Gioconda, whose vehicle is a prose of such poetic exuberance that W.B. Yeats printed a chunk of it, chopped up into vers libre, in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936). "The presence that rose thus strangely beside the waters," declares Pater, referring to

of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all "the ends of the world are come," and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by all this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed! All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and molded there...She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned

of thought and life. Certainly, Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea."

The opening of the passage might indicate an influence on the phrasing of "Banalata Sen," but of greater moment is the underlying ontological kinship between Mona Lisa and Ms Sen. A point by point comparison would be merely pedantic. We should rather try to grasp how the experience of reading Pater shaped Jibanananda's sensibility and reshaped the body of his experiences pertaining to a certain lady he had known and admired.

The reader is likely to demand direct evidence of Jibanananda's response to Pater. We have such evidence in his novel "Pretinir Rupkatha" ("A Ghoulish Fairy Tale"), written—and the significance should be obvious—in 1933. It features two sisters called Binata and Charulata, whose names, it has been pointed out, bear a kinship with Banalata. The narrator is clearly the author's persona, an M.A. in English, Vaidya by caste, like Jibanananda's Hindu forebears. At one point he embarks on a journey with a copy of Pater's *The Renaissance*.

That is not all. Early on in the novel, as the narrator leaves home by steamer to seek employment in Calcutta, the clouds in the sky induce a reverie in which he imagines they are mountains—not Indian ones, though, but Greek, Roman or Baltic heights, or those in Murillo's land (Spain), or peaks that registered on the consciousness of da Vinci and Rafael. But as the steamer gets under way it seems that Spain and Greece, the Renaissance, Angelo, Murillo, all have suddenly dispersed, leaving a heightened awareness of the Bengal landscape, its flora and fauna, its myths and folk tales, and all its creatures, natural and preternatural, draw close in a crowd and ask him, "You know us, don't you?"

I think we have here a parable of the creative process whereby diverse impressions and ideas assimilated from his wide reading in world literature enabled Jibanananda to see his own particular corner of the world with fresh eyes. He must have been transported by his reading of Pater's critical appreciation of da Vinci's masterpiece, but was soon back where he felt he really belonged, where his imagination could now shape "Banalata Sen," his very own, unique Mona Lisa.

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the concatenation of a likely youthful admiration reflected in obsessive apprentice drawings of a faintly sinister smile, and the presence of a kindred quirk of appearance in the sitter of a commissioned portrait, "is expressive

the secrets of the grave...The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up itself, all modes



FICTION |

## Play Dough

SAMIA ALIF ESHA

"And brown for my hair," muttered Mustafa to himself. He was engaged in his favorite pastime surrounded by a splendid array of multi-colored play dough. His father had just bought him yet another bucket of the toy he loved best. As he finished his masterpiece, which happened to be a miniature model of himself, he placed it between two dolls, each of which represented one of his parents. The dough family reflected an odd mixture of the finesse of an artist and the innocence of a child. The serenity of this scenario broke with the sound of shattering glass. This sound perfectly represented Mustafa's shattered dream of a happy family.

Seven-year old Mustafa was the sole product of a broken marriage. A relationship that began with unconditional love, over the years had turned into bitter hatred. During the last few years of routine quarrels and noisy fights, they literally ignored the presence of their only child. Mr. Rahman attempted in vain to keep his son busy with play-dough, as little Mustafa was more than just aware of his family's volatility. The verbal war came to an end last year, when the couple finally parted ways.

Mustafa's first day at his new school came fairly early. After the pupils



assembled in the classroom the teacher began an introductory session with the children. "What does your father do?" was the first question young Mustafa was asked on the first day of his school. In reply to this, Mustafa said in a stony voice, "I don't have a father." The teacher eyed him with boredom as she came across tens of children everyday who made up bits and pieces about their lives to make themselves seem more interesting. Nonetheless, she called

up Aysha, Mustafa's mother, to report her son's behavior to her. That night, for the first time in eight years, Aysha slapped her son. "You are not to disclose personal information to outsiders," she snapped. Both mother and son cried themselves to sleep that night.

Being a divorcee in a socially backward country, Aysha was finding it difficult to find herself a stable, secure job. She often vented out her frustration and anger on Mustafa unknowingly. As

Aysha became more and more noisy with frustration, her son became quieter still. Every time she began shouting, Mustafa slammed the door of his room shut and continued with his wondrous creations with his play dough.

Mustafa's obsession with play dough did not go unnoticed by those around him. He was often found tugging at red clay during class time, and sent outside the class as punishment. He was also bullied as a result of this: for instance, once he was forced by a gang of seniors to swallow dough. But none of this ever seemed to bother Mustafa much. In the midst of his mother's incessant anger, his loneliness and social torture, play dough became Mustafa's only medium of expressing himself.

A year had passed by the end of which Mustafa became completely isolated from everybody at school. He never responded to the admonitions of teachers or the taunts of bullies. At home, he did not talk to his mother much. Aysha noticed very little of this change. For all she saw, her son was merely becoming more disobedient. Hence, she just got stricter.

It took Aysha two years to finally notice Mustafa's unusually quiet nature. The perseverance led her to inspect her

son's room one evening. She stepped on something sticky as she pushed open the door. It was dough. The sight of the room struck her with utter horror. Why hadn't she noticed before? Mustafa had neatly decorated each corner of his room with twisted models of red, blue and black clay. His dolls no longer reflected the innocence of a child, but appeared to be the creation of a contorted mind. Each clay monster was made with blood-curdling details. On Jamie's bed, Aysha found the latest piece he was making. The model of a little brown-haired boy with his hand slit. Suddenly, it occurred to Aysha that her son was nowhere to be seen...

She searched feverishly for Mustafa throughout the small flat. For a moment, she felt as if she was losing her senses. Finally, as she stumbled onto the rooftop, she found Mustafa leaning close to the railing and gazing calmly at the distant sky. She pulled him into a tight hug and sobbed. Mustafa's expressions betrayed no emotions.

"Mom, I've run out of play dough. Would you get me some more?" his voice was strangely distant and almost robotic.

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