



Jibanananda Das's "Aat Bochor Ager Ekdin" ("A Day Before Eight Years"): A Reportage on an Alienated Soul

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Abstract

Jibanananda Das is arguably the greatest modern poet and one of the leading poets of Bangla literature. His oeuvre of poetry ranges from documenting the diminishing nature to decadence and alienation emanating from modernist practices adopted from Europe. Despite being one of the greatest poets of Bangla literature he is not so well known in the academia as well as to the international arena as is supposed to be. His "Aat Bochor Ager Ekdin", a representative poem, narrates the story of a man having no dearth and deficiency in life, still, he chooses to commit suicide. Following reportage style, the poet relates the story alternatively by inserting the voice of a reporter and converging his personality with that of the protagonist. This paper demonstrates how Jibanananda Das through reportage has portrayed a modern man and unveiled his personality making the poem an attempt at autobiographical exploration. The present paper is also intended to reveal his extraordinary contribution to Bangla literature in the international arena. Hopefully, through this paper, the academicians, especially those from a literature background, will be interested to know about his life and literary works.

Keywords: *Reportage; Alienation; Autobiographical; Personality; Exploration; Suicide*

Introduction

Jibanananda Das: A Life Dragging to Death

Jibanananda Das was born in 1909 and died in 1954. In between, he silently served Bangla literature and emerged as "the major poet in the post-Rabindranath modern era" (Rafiq, 2020). Initially, he was influenced by Kazi Nazrul Islam but soon he found his space, voice, language, and a style never

seen before in Bangla literature. He started getting published without much fuss in the literary circle, but continued contributing till his death carving an immortal place for him (Mondol, 2019). His poems have immense appeal to the modern minds. He, however, finds himself enrooted in the indigenous elements. His poetry has got an unmistakably self-styled lyricism and imagism, and this earns him the title “The Purest Poet”, the most defining phrase for Jibanananda Das, coined by Annadashankar Roy and fitly used by Abdul Mannan Syed (2011). His poetry has got frequent references to the crises faced by modern men and thus he can be easily identified with existentialism. In his works, Jibanananda Das seems to be “a water body full of stars reflected on it where varied feelings and thoughts are at ripple inside deep darkness” (Sibnarayan Ray cited in Kamrul Islam, 2014). He has cemented a position in Bangla poetry with such distinctions and craftsmanship that the poets till date are under his influence in some way or other. The poets like Shamsur Rahman, Shankha Ghosh, Utpal Kumar Basu and those writing in 1950s and 1960s, “almost all of them carved their path following Jibanananda’s world, and still many are incessantly trying in that way” (Islam, 2014) and poets today are struggling to be freed from his influences.

His life was not a stable one and his death too is often considered a suicide. Before partition in 1946, he migrated to Calcutta and settled there permanently. But the struggle in real life continued. His conjugal life with Labanyaprabha Das was not a happy one and his love at adolescence for his cousin Shovona, daughter of his uncle Atulchandra Das, never ceased. Again, in practical life, he was hardly successful. He was sacked from the first job place, Calcutta City College, for alleged obscenity in his poem “Campe” (Basu, as cited in Syed, 2009). Then he served only five months in Bagerhat College, Khulna in 1929 and joined Ramjas Colleg, Delhi later in the same year and served till his marriage in 1930. The marriage was followed by a long unemployed life. In the meantime, he continued his failed efforts in insurance company and some petty business. The bad days ended when he got a job in Brojmohun College, Barishal in 1935. He served there till his migration in 1946. He was again sacked from his job in a newspaper in 1947. The next job he got was in Kharagpur College in 1950, but resigned from the post in 1951. After a break, he got a job in Bodisha College and was again sacked in four months. Finally, he was settled as the head of the English department at Howrah Girl’s College for one year and a few months. And here he “got that much peace, serenity, affection that he never got in life” (Syed, 2009). On 14 October 1954, an extremely secluded man, Das, he was crossing a road near Calcutta’s Deshapriya Park. A tram hit him while he was returning home after his evening walk. He died at hospital on 22 October 1954 eight days after the accident at 55 leaving behind his wife, a son and a daughter. Just before the death day, he acted abnormal and was inquiring of poet Premendra Mitra. On the fateful day, he went to his sister’s house and asked if anyone faced accident (Syed, 2009, p. 11-24). He came by a completion at that stage of life and got unsettled for no manifest reason and supposedly threw himself to death. His life chose to put an end to life when he was finally settled like the man in the poem “A Day Before Eight Years”.

A Day Before Eight Years: A Reportage on an Alienation Soul

The poem is portrayed as reportage, a term used by Joseph North in 1935 and he terms reportage as ‘three-dimensional reporting’ and adds, “The writer not only condenses reality, he helps the reader feel the fact” (2020, p. 121). An accident was heard to have taken place, and the poem is a report on that whole incident along with detailed reflection on the situations, locations and attempt at excavating the probable reasons behind it as well as coming to a decisive conclusion about life. In the poem, Das has employed what Rees (2018) calls, “a multi-sensorial approach to representing the real” (p.312). The narrative technique showcases an autobiographical touch with personal attachment of the poet’s life which is another way of writing autobiography as Ashplant (2018) observes, ‘literary scholars have come to recognize, beyond traditional autobiographies, a much wider range of texts which narrate the self’ (p.18).

The poet tells us a story of a man who killed himself hanging from a tree with ropes eight years ago and the story is presented in flashback. When the story starts, the unnamed man was heard to have taken to the morgue where he is perhaps sleeping deeply on the dissection table and it would never be disturbed as he would never wake up. The poet then tells us of the man's temporal and spatial locations at the time of his suicide. It was moonlit night in the sweet month of Falgun, a month of the spring season. That time he had his wife lying beside him. The season, time and moonlight and the wife beside him clearly have erotic overtones. Still he felt a strong urge to go out and hang himself emphasizing a sense of alienation the dimensions of which Seeman (1989) explores as powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, cultural estrangement, and self-estrangement (p.60).

In reportage, there remains different variables in play as Kate McLoughlin (2007) marks, presence; priority; proximity; perspective; dress and comportment' in the field; 'tone, voice, "objectivity" or "subjectivity"' in the text (p.2). The baby of the couple was also sleeping beside him implying fruitfulness and fulfillment of their conjugal life. He had love at heart, hope in his life but had a sudden disruption of sleep that night. So, he was passing the night in a state of anxiety and thoughtlessness. It also might be that he couldn't sleep for a long time and that state of sleeplessness deepened that night and engulfed his existence beyond worldly dreams and desires. The fifth daylong moon sank down, darkness fell and he grew a preference for death in a state of being possessed by a specter. So he decided to go out with rope and hang himself in the jungle. This suicidal measure is influenced by several interacting factors - personal, social, psychological, cultural, biological and environmental - depression is the most common psychiatric disorder in people who die by suicide (Cavanagh et al., 2003, p.397). His sudden realization resonates closely to the final realization by Macbeth of William Shakespeare,

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 5, lines 17-28)

This sense of nothingness overpowered the man, and he found no alternative to suicide as life narrowed down to sheer nothing to him. After committing suicide, he was having a deep eternal sleep restfully with a lolling neck on the dissection table like a plagued rat with blood froth in his mouth. Thus, the story goes and Luke Seaber (2017) prefers to call this subgenre of literature "incognito social investigation" and comments, "these are texts wherein authors' lives are written under the guise of describing the lives of others; these are texts wherein authors record themselves changing without their realizing it, and record other lives" (p.2).

This description follows a tone of lamentations for the protagonist that he would never again wake up from his sleep, and also the poet tells us that waking up was for him not easeful and peaceful, rather it was like facing a fresh deep affliction and bearing that burden of pain and sufferings.

Never again will you wake
The relentless -relentless weight
Of waking, its all-deep ache
Never again will you take.

This realization of life was being conveyed to him that night by some silence that stretched itself towards him like the neck of an elephant by his window rim in darkness after the moon had sunk. Thus, the protagonist is alienated from all around only to be engulfed by silence dipped in darkness. He had his

own calculation of life, and that failed to provide him any solace or solution. The scenario reminds us of Shamsur Rahman's protagonist in the poem "Before Suicide" where the speaker finds himself ensnared in the circle of life and the common ordinary activities of day today life which clamp down life like rats seeking shelter in a whole. The waiting never ends, and no meaning gets formed out of his existence,

I keep waiting with a shivering heart all the time
I keep dreaming of tomorrow all the time
I have craned forward to see many tomorrows
Yet other tomorrows reserved forward.

The same realization of life is recurring from time immemorial, and we get the echo of this in Macbeth when he can see the last, and that is surely all about death affirming the fact life and nothing else,

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.

(Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 5, lines 17-28)

In the poem, the poet captures nature as bountiful and beautiful, then he focuses on the other side which is ruthless, unforgiving, where predator and prey occupy the whole landscape showing harshness and cruelty. The owl stays awake and the decrepit frog makes fervent appeal for few minutes' grace with the faintest hope of a dawn with warmth. This very predatory nature goes well with the suicide of the protagonist thus providing him a precept from nature. Thus, the poet weaves a tapestry with sharply contrasted designs of cruelty and kindness.

Our attention is then directed towards several scenes where flies glide away to the sun from their savoring in the blood and filth. The dragonfly shudders in the hands of the playing wanton boys for life. In that background, the protagonist came to know that "the dragonfly's, the doyel-bird's life with a man's has no comparison". Being informed of this truth, he approached the ashwattha tree with a noose of rope. In that moment of hanging himself, the branch of the ashwattha protested his act, the fireflies flocked there in the play of the golden flowers. Even the senile blind owl started celebrating the moonless time and playfully declared to catch rats to feed on. The owl even passed news of that cherished affair to him. The tang of life emanating from the fragrance of ripe barley in the autumn afternoon he couldn't bear or feel. So, he showed a sense of self sufficiency in conducting suicide, and thus, no attempt succeeded in thwarting his task. He rather went along with his steps leading to the conclusion, reminding us, "Suicidal behaviors are a multifaceted phenomenon and include a wide range of behaviors, such as suicide ideation, planning, attempting, and completing suicide" (De Berardis et al., 2018, 12). Resultantly he then found himself in the morgue in the condition of a plagued rat with battered mouth. The poet feels it a responsibility to tell us about the details of his life. So, he invites us to listen to him reminding us of the old speaker of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge,

He holds him with his glittering eye
The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years' child:
The Mariner hath his will.

In the same tone, the poet invites us uttering, 'Listen to me then' and then he relates to us the life story and social assets, status and surroundings of the man. The man was not a failure in winning women's hearts. His conjugal life offered him all expected amenities, warmth, love and affection. No deficiency was found in the whole proceedings of his family life. He was financially well off and never had difficulty in eking out his livelihood. He had a comfortable life in all the seasons protected from cold and heat. So, he had a life enriched with worldly requirements and protected from threats and free from challenges. A life full of all fulfilled expectations fed him up. After dealing with his worldly life, the poet takes one rational position, the man killed himself for all these above mentioned reasons, the fulfillment failed to fulfill his life which Geyer (2001) terms as a new type of powerlessness, "where the core problem is no longer being unfree but rather being unable to select from among an overchoice of alternatives for action, whose consequences one often cannot even fathom". Consequently, he was lying on the table in deep sleep. This very realization makes the poet go for further study of the case and life in general. He shares his findings with the readers that,

Wealth, achievement, affluence apart
there is some other baffling surprise
that whirls in our veins;

These psychic workings of human beings beyond calculations and assessments in terms of the visible conditions and physical and mental involvements may give clue to our mental world which is often stronger than the physical one. These baffling whirls work vibrantly inside ripping our whole existence and redirecting our psychic formation. Despite being provided with everything, this very psychological working sets us adrift, carries us away from being contented and happy. It wearies us with no remission. People want to get free from this tiredness. In the morgue, this tiredness seeping out of a worldly life is no more. So, the poet concludes that, to get rid of this tiredness, the man killed himself and lay sleeping in the morgue. But the poet doesn't advocate this annihilation of human life. He brings the tottering blind owl perched in the branch of the ashwattha swiveling eyes and says about the gone moon and proposes playfully to catch mouse. The poem ends with an optimistic note. The poet addresses the old decrepit owl as grandmother, wishes to be aged like her, passes full time fasting and feasting, and only then, takes leave after having the fulfillment as Ulysses desired, 'I will drink life to the lees'. The poet too has expressed his desire opposite to the man, who hanged himself and proposed,

The poet thus embarks on reportage and informs us of the whole incident. But with progress, we find him like an investigation officer who is trying to sort out the reasons behind the incident in a logical manner. To do so, he is informed of the details of the personal and social life of the man as well as his economic condition. The man had everything he could desire. He had money and assets, name and fame in his own arena. He succeeded in winning opposite hearts. He had a wife and a child to fulfill his family life. In short, the man had no dearth in his worldly affairs and achievements. This desire of the speaker expresses his disapproval of the action of the protagonist. But this also reaffirms the nihilism of the character. But the man had a type of tiredness about his life, and so he wanted to be freed of the constant weight of extreme pain he incurred from waking up till time to sleep. The man perhaps had intimation from silence after the moonset that came through darkness like the trunk of an elephant. But the poet finds that life goes on and on through pains, trials and tribulations of time, age and life.

The way the poet has the report presented takes us close to his life. It is not impossible that the poet is himself present here and explores his psyche through this character as reportage is "interactive, intersubjective, and heavily informed by the standpoint of the writer ... it involves portraying, and speaking for, other, often unfamiliar people, and in the ways that it makes them representative" (Boyd, 2020, p.43).

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