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READING CREATIVE TRANSLATIONS OF JIBANANANDA DAS'S BENGALI POETRY INTO ENGLISH: A JOURNEY ACROSS THE FRONTIERS OF EXPERIENCES

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Abstract:

Indian English literature generally refers to that body of writing, which is produced in the English language by the litterateurs of an Indian origin. It is however, understandable that creative translations should also be located into the corpus of Indian English literature. Historically speaking, what gave the first solid footing to Indian English poetry was Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*, and this came in the form of creative translation. After Rabindranath we find another accomplished poet of twentieth century Bengal to practice creative translation of his Bengali poetry into English. This poet is Jibanananda Das, whose English-language poetry in the form of creative translation is yet to receive a broader audience. The present paper seeks to study three of these creative translations titled *Meditations* (*Manosarani* in Bengali), *Darkness* (*Andhakarini* Bengali) and *Sailor* (*Nabik* in Bengali), which seem to form a complex sequel in respect of Jibanananda's deep concern for the socio-cultural unrest that characterized the general fabrics of life in Bengal after the Partition of 1947. Moreover, these poems appear equally contemporary in the twenty first century, when the disruptive forces of corruption, falsehood, debauchery, political coercion and cultural denigration are more severely at work to corrode and annihilate the cultural roots of Bengal. So, the purpose of the present study is two-fold: first, to show how the creative translations of Jibanananda continue to strike the note of a universal humanity in the present times, and second, to voice for their inclusion in forthcoming anthologies of Indian English poetry. For, these poems composed by one of the greatest poets of modern Bengal would make room for readers from all over India to savour the taste of a fine artistry that transcends the limits of every ideological bias.

Keywords: Indian, Literature, Contemporary, Socio-cultural unrest, modern, Partition, Sensibility, Twentieth century

1.0 A poet with an idiom of his own:

In an exquisitely poetical lecture on the poetry of twentieth century Bengal, delivered at a seminar in the University of Calcutta, Alokeranjan Dasgupta (b. 1933), the well-known modern Bengali poet, gave an insightful analysis of modern Bengali poetry since Rabindranath. He compared Rabindranath to a mountain peak glowing with the calm radiance of the setting sun. In that quiet hue, as Alokeranjan said further, a number of small birds were born and took shelter in the shrubs that grew on the mountain. These birds having obtained maturity, tried to fly above the peak, but their flight never surpassed the mountain's wide expanse. Only one of the flock succeeded in making its way beyond that mount's stretch, and this single bird, Alokeranjan observed, was Jibanananda Das (1899-1954), a singular figure among an entire generation of post-Rabindranath

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Bengali poets, who could look beyond the whirlwind that Tagore left behind after the close of his life. Jibanananda introduced a more complex dimension into the urban, Europeanized, post-Renaissance poetry of twentieth-century Bengal. This poetry was already enriched by the Tagore an legacy. The experimental poetry of twentieth century Europe also had some share in the making of this poetry. But above all, this poetry represents the subtlety and complexity of an argumentative mind that never accepted the limits of space and time, and searched for meaning in a crowd of chaotic and clamorous worldviews. This search for meaning does not strictly refer to a longing for practical wisdom; rather, it implies a yearning for a sort of poetic meaning which pleases the writer as well as the readers of poetry. Rabindranath undoubtedly represents the advent of modernity in Bengal's poetry; but Jibanananda introduced a new quest in post-Rabindranath poetry: the quest for a more refined sensibility.

2.0 Early English-language poetry and the creative translations:

During his career as a poet that span over twenty-five years (1927-1954), Jibanananda carefully restrained himself from writing poetry in English. His output in the vernacular was enormous, but his English poetry was confined to a few pages of a worm-eaten diary that contained few original writings and some creative translations of his own Bengali poetry into English. This seems to be strange, because Jibanananda was himself a student of English literature and later he became a professor of the same. One reason might be that he was never satisfied with what he wrote in English, and so, he chose not to write in English any more. This artistic dissatisfaction proved indeed to be a blessing for Bengali poetry, for, leaving English poetry Jibanananda concentrated solely on writing poems in the vernacular. Still, his English-language poetry in the form of creative translations cannot be ignored chiefly because these poems are characterized by an urge for experimentation which was an integral part of modernity in Bengal's English-language literature. Jibanananda's English poetry begins where Rabindranath's English poetry ends, and then takes up a new track of experimentation. Rabindranath introduced abstract philosophical imagery to the English-language poetry of twentieth century Bengal; Jibanananda added to it a subtler fervour. He introduced philosophically complex themes and experimented with characters and situations in his own unconventional way. He showed how a poet could arrange and rearrange words and images with perfect ease to weave a complex verbal as well as imagistic web. In a word, modern English-language poetry in Bengal emerged with Rabindranath, and it graduated to maturity under the guardianship of Jibanananda Das.

Jibanananda was a conscious artist, and as such, he was a keen observer of his times. He saw the denunciation of human values at the wake of thoughtless mechanization, limitless greed and selfishness, debauchery and massacre in twentieth century Bengal. He saw the suffering of a group of people who were unfortunate enough to be born amidst the waste of colonial exploitation. He also saw how with the turn of power, a newly independent nation got itself smothered under the burden of history. For, India received her coveted independence after almost two centuries of slavery and degradation, but this independence came with partition, with religious riots, with acute food crisis and swelling moral anarchy. In a word, India passed from one kind of degradation to another, and this time she fell victim to an inner rupture as her people steadily retreated to immorality and savagery. Historians denounced this independence, political parties blamed one another, promises ended in betrayals, and the hope of regeneration was buried deep into an abyss of frustration. Jibanananda perceived that history or politics did not have the power to deliver man from disintegration. Historical debates and political tracts therefore held no meaning for him. The freedom that they had promised already came to lead people nowhere, and Jibanananda as an artist aimed at recuperating his vision from the limits of objective realism. He endeavoured to translate into reality the "heaven of freedom" which Tagore, his predecessor in

poetry, had once dreamt of. His poetry digs deep to the root of all crises. He sorts out illusions irrespective of whether they are historical, ideological, political, economical or even intellectual, and lashes at them with equal severity. His poetry therefore, aims at freedom, or in other words, an escape from illusions that blind the mind's eye and agitate the senses. Freedom for him lay not in political deliverance, but in mental equilibrium - in absolute quietude and peace which free the mind from external agitations. This also explains what beauty meant to Jibanananda. Most critics of Jibanananda have called him a poet conscious of the senses, but unfortunately they have failed to understand that consciousness of the senses was required for the ultimate negation of illusions inherent in our sensory perceptions. In his own days he was also accused of importing obscenity to poetry, but very few could understand that poetry for Jibanananda was a kind of imagistic transfiguration of knowledge and truth. This knowledge is not meant to dazzle; rather, it acquires texture only by identifying itself with truth. Here we may quote Krishna Chandra Bhattacharyya (1875-1949), a noted philosopher and academician of twentieth century Bengal, whose deft philosophy hardly differs at this point from Jibanananda's idea of poetry (B.K. Lal, 2005):

Knowledge and truth have to be defined in terms of
each other, the former, as what alone is true and the
latter as what alone is known.

Such an elevated notion reminds us of the Wordsworthian concept of the poet as a man gifted with a superior genius. But unlike Wordsworth, Jibanananda thinks that the poet's task is not to impart learning. According to him, the poet's task is to please. He pleases his readers as well as himself, and for doing so, he has to primarily free himself from subjective prejudices. He must also remember that artistic pleasure is not obtainable by merely responding to sensory stimulations. It calls for complete submission of the 'self' to the contemplation of knowledge and truth. The poet's task is to convey this pleasure to his readers through poetry, which will create a feel of transcendence beyond all distinctions of the subjective and the objective interpretations of reality.

3.0 Meditations, darkness and sailor: A complex sequel

Among the poems, translated into English by Jibanananda himself, *Meditations* (*Manosarani* in Bengali) *Darkness* (*Andhakar* in Bengali) and *Sailor* (*Nabik* in Bengali) seem to me to form a complex sequel. The first two poems reveal the poet's despondency and despair at the growth of fragmentation and moral anarchy in the socio-cultural and political scenario of contemporary Bengal. The pain inflicted by the partition of Bengal and Hindu-Muslim riots pierced the poet's heart. His grief was aggravated because of the absence of unprejudiced knowledge in his own times. For Jibanananda, mere scientific progress did not mean qualitative development of human standards. In one of his Bengali poems, the poet labelled science as "a crowd of collected materials". Science might add material comforts and conveniences to everyday life, but science also gives birth to mechanization, fragmentation and deprivation. The poet concludes that the lack of true knowledge was at the root of the absence of love, tolerance, sympathy and compassion in his own times.

Jibanananda was also aggrieved to think how his poetry was being misread and misinterpreted. Critics and ordinary readers were clearly divided in their opinions about proper implications of Jibanananda's poems. One group canonized him as the first modern Bengali poet without properly understanding wherein his modernity lay. In fact, systematic criticism of Jibanananda's poetry came much later with Buddhadeva Bose and Sanjay Bhattacharya. On the other hand, there was another group of critics who savagely attacked his poetry. This group included critics like Sajani Kanta Das, Nani Bhowmick and Subhash Mukhopadhyay. Among them Sajani Kanta Das seemed to cross limits of civility in his almost senseless criticism of Jibanananda's poetry. Such uncritical

interpretations, whether they ended in applause or vilification, caused pain to the poet. He did not look for uncritical admiration, nor did his poetry deserve abuse in the name of criticism. Jibanananda seemed not to be bothered by the accusations which were being accumulated against him as a poet; but the way his vision was being misunderstood and misinterpreted, continued to torment him. Political crises were already acute in contemporary Bengal. Intellectual barrenness only served to suspend the possibility of redemption. The poet seemed to measure fathoms of despair, having lost for the time-being his faith in the transcendental aspect of human creativity. The poem titled *Meditations* bears out this pain in a way that is characteristically Jibanananda's own: it lacks the unrestrained buoyancy of Kazi Nazrul Islam, the sharp criticism of Sukanta Bhattacharya, but shines with a profounder polish, a deeper sophistication. Jibanananda carefully maintains indirectness in presenting his details. This not only helps him to keep artistic distance, but also adds accuracy to his assessment of contemporary issues. We may quote the opening section of the poem for a better understanding:

We are closed in, fouled by the numbness of this
concentration cell.
The honeybees on the upper wall know well enough
That the men below have been crossed by the stars
Turned on their uncertainty; they are lost
Treading upon the phantasy of their hearts. .
They should have been men...

The poet compares life to a concentration cell in which human beings are seen to be huddling together in apprehension of a moment of complete decomposition. The poet's use of the first person plural is interesting. This leads us to infer that at the initial stage the poet does not think of himself as an isolated figure. He considers himself as one among the innumerable men who have been crossed by the stars. But then begins the gradual distancing: the "we" becomes "they". The poet assumes a sort of anonymity and says that these men are not real men; they represent mere shadows of what should have signified manhood. They responded to the beckoning of illusions and lost themselves in a mirage of what seemed to be fulfilment. The poet searches for the root of the loss in a series of powerful lines that occur a little later in the poem:

As the love of Nature that is forsworn;
And the men who have played their parts to build
And were outwitted by- genius, love, common mistake
Or natural declension of the soul
To pull down what they created;...

Gifts of nature have been exploited and natural bonds have been forsworn in the name of advancement. Man, by virtue of his superior merit, had once moulded the world for the cultivation of knowledge. But, with the passage of time, knowledge itself came to be defiled by vanity of genius and materialistic attachment. Adultery made degeneration complete and man dug his own spiritual grave, irresponsive to the erosion of his glory. Such a complex metaphorical representation of the overwhelming crises of contemporary Bengal was probably possible only for Jibanananda. Other poets like Bishnu Dey and Sudhindranath Datta protested and exclaimed to greater or lesser degrees, but Jibanananda portrayed the loss with remarkable insight:

Outside the rage momentarily undoes
What were patterns of human hope and love.

In the sharp history of man, with his back turned
And neck craning onto some usable good...

Jibanananda's strong, yet, artistically controlled criticism brings to our mind echoes of two widely popular twentieth century English poems: Eliot's (1888-1965) *The Waste Land* (1922) and Yeats's (1865-1939) *The Second Coming* (1920). Yet, Jibanananda was unique in his own way. Eliot's "unreal city" in Jibanananda's poem *Darkness*, therefore, comes to receive conceptual expansion:

The sun from a red sky, in a dark level tone,
has called on me as a soldier
to range against foes I have never known.
The vast belt of the sun-bedevelled earth
Has shrieked and squealed like millions of pigs in merriment.

The red sky, the dark level tone, the foes the poet has never known, mirror the unreality of the contemporary age, and this unreality gets perhaps its strongest criticism in expressions like "the sun-bedevelled earth" and "shrieks of millions of pigs in merriment". The poet says that he is "no wanderer from another star", yet he admits his inability of understanding prevalent patterns of living. He regrets being born in a world in which he finds himself completely alienated. The sense of alienation deepens with the passage of every single moment:

O Man, O Woman,
I have never known your level;
Nor am I a wanderer from another star,
Only this I have known that wherever there is movement
desire, work and thought
there are divisions of friends, families, the whole
range of day-time madnesses.

A thickening shadow of despair descends on the poet. The thought of escape seems to gain growing urgency. Like Eliot's *Gerontion*, the poet seeks deliverance in death, in absolute oblivion of the terrible knowledge of unbearable reality:

By the water of Dhanshiri
I shall go to bed with Darkness that never ends,
The sleep that never abates.

Yet, Jibanananda is no escapist. He knows that death also means the shunning of vitality, of action. Deliverance is not there in the realm of death. Death is but submission to despair; to the misgivings of a chaotic existence. The poet therefore, rejects death and all other means of escape. What he emphasizes on instead, is a refreshing stream of optimism and inspiration. The third poem titled *Sailor* is a product of this revitalized and resplendent poetic vision:

The sailor has a sense of defeat as he gets up with a start
And finds that instead of taking his post at the helm
He had dozed off hoping that his ship at mid sea
Would take care of itself
He pulls himself together, resumes his position of
watch and toil...

The image of the sailor afloat on the ocean metaphorically refers to the poet himself, lost apparently in the labyrinth of life. The poet seems to chide himself for his ignorance and carelessness by referring to the sailor's listless slumber. For, the poet, much like the sailor, should not be careless to his responsibilities. He must pull himself together and resume his watch. His status is not marked by temporal or spatial exclusiveness; Babylon, Alexandria, Vaishali, Byzantine are all alike to him. They are good only in their capacity of whetting his quest:

They are good, but whet the quest;
You want deeper knowledge, completer experience.

In these lines, the poet is found to distance himself once more from the situation for the sake of communicating the message of spiritual liberation to his readers. He asks them to remember that tragic mistakes cannot demolish man's essential goodness. Storms brew in the sky and do their worst to vex patterns of human hope and love. But all vexation finally ends in equilibrium. The mind regains its calm and perceives the world in the light of truth and unalloyed joy. The concluding section of the poem seems to have hardly any parallel in contemporary Indian poetry in English:

Man will not rest content;
Purged of follies, sin and tragic mistakes
His sailor-soul will fare forward
To move into a better discovery of life on this planet,
A greater joy - a deeper communion.

Even Buddhadeva Bose, who had been one of the greatest admirers of Jibanananda, and himself poet endowed with remarkable poetic powers, once criticized Jibanananda's poetry as tasteless. He did not like the intrusion of socio-political concerns in Jibanananda's meditative solitude. The problem seems to be that Buddhadeva was interested more in the stylistic polish of Jibanananda's poetry; its imagery, diction and rhythm. Later in his book *An Acre of Green Grass* he paid a glowing tribute to Jibanananda by saying that "... he has brought a new note to our poetry, a new tone of feeling", but at the same time he left it vague as to where its newness lay. Jibanananda's poetry was new in its contemporaneity, as also in its profound association with the past. The juxtaposition of the present and the past not only renders a contrapuntal splendour to Jibanananda's English-language poetry, but also valorizes the discourse of inclusiveness in the English-language literature of twentieth century Bengal.

4.0 Epilogue:

It is, however, still a pity that Jibanananda never received recognition for creative translation of his Bengali poetry into English. In a letter to Jibanananda, Bishnu Dey, who also won fame as a poet in contemporary Bengal, seemed to counsel the former not to send his English poems to be considered for publication. Jibanananda's reply points to the latter's disapproval. Let me translate into English apart of Jibanananda's reply to Bishnu Dey's letter (Syed, 2005):

Your letter disheartened me by making me know that my English poems
are not fit to be sent. I have already left writing in English. However, I do
not know what I shall do in future.

What Jibanananda did later, is unknown to us, for, we got no more English poems bearing Jibanananda's signature. This abrupt departure prompted Arunesh Ghosh, a notable Bengali critic of the 1990s to remark, "he who breaks away from convention, must be alone". A number of contemporary as well as later-generation poets set the breaking of convention as their own

convention, but Jibanananda hardly realized his due. It is perhaps for all this that Joe Winter said that Jibanananda's poetry represented to him an exquisite combination of beauty and agony. He further observed that were he to choose a single poet, whose poetry arrested the true tune of the twentieth century, he would have certainly named Jibanananda. It is really a pity that Jibanananda's English-language poetry failed to come to the attention of anthologists of Indian-English poetry. I strongly plead for reconsideration; for, inclusion of these poems in forthcoming anthologies will definitely enhance the glory of Indian-English poetry. They will also enable the readers to know by contrast what good poetry *is* and what often *passes for* good poetry because of ideological, provincial and even political bias.

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