

Reading Jibanananda Das's "Banalata Sen" from a surrealist perspective

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Abstract

Surrealism expresses the working of the subconscious, as manifested in dreams and uncontrolled by reason and characterized by the incongruous and startling arrangement and presentation of subject matter. The theme of Jibanananda's poem 'Banalata Sen' is straightforward. However, because of the style of presentation, it appeared to be subtle, mysterious and bizarre even to the native readers and critics of his time. The poet's wizardry of image and metaphor makes an ordinary Banalata Sen beyond touch as she transcends to a higher space, surpassing all worldly affairs. The poet presents her beauty in entirely different imagery infrequent in our literature before his utterance. Throughout the poem, he creates a sense of wonder and dreamlike progression from the flow of time expressed by ancient civilizations and illusory natural beauty to the contemplation of the end of earthly affairs. With a view to establishing Jibanananda's 'Banalata Sen' as a surrealist poem, this article aims at exploring the images and metaphors that has unfolded his subliminal working of the mind.

Keywords Surrealism, Bizarre images, Roaming, Reverie, Darkness, Dream, Rest and respite

Paper type Literature review

André Breton (1896-1966) and Louis Aragon (1897-1982), the two French poets were the harbingers of the surrealist movement. In 1924 Louis Aragon published "Manifest du Surrealism". Before that poet, Geom Apollonian coined the term "Surrealist" in 1917. Between 1922 and 1924 surrealism emerged from the ashes of Dadaism. Traditional word order and grammatical congruity were replaced by Irrationality, dream, flights of the imagination, and abnormality. Breaking the chain of logic and discovering the symbolic features of words, it unfolds thought-process of the unconscious and creates a flow of this process. Atheism, destructiveness, and sense of nothingness turn to irrationality and subconscious. Applying bizarre imagery, it discloses incredibility and sheds light on the subliminal. According to Sigmund Freud, the subconscious is suspended by the repression of the



unconscious. Like Freud surrealist believes that rationality, intelligence and spirit are the customary systems of thinking that creates a breach between appearance and nature. Revealing the self, surrealism minimizes that gap. This exposure is not destructive or negative like Dadaism. It approaches the subconscious and appealing sense of wonder within life. As rationality blunders latent talent, Andrew Breton emphasizes the intense experiences comprising trepidation, dream, inhibition, foreboding, reverie, sleep, love, intuition and so on (Hopkins 2004:20).

In the post-Tagore era, Jibanananda Das was much discussed, and his new kind of poetry written in the tradition of Eurocentric modernism engrossed the attention of a good number of critics. Even Tagore called him 'chitrorupmoy' (Basu 2004:146). Several books and articles have been written regarding western influences on him, his use of image and metaphor, his sense of pathos and agony of modern man and so on. He was the pioneer of modernism in Bangla poetry. The American scholar, Clinton Booth Seely has regarded him as Bengali's most cherished poet since Rabindranath (Basu 2004:146). A researcher, Audity Falguni wrote in her article, "Jibanananda Das: Poet of Autumnal dew" about Das's contribution in internalizing the changed worldview and expressing the new paradigm with suitable poetic language in Bangla poetry. In another article, "Surrealism: From French to Bangla literature" published in the Daily Star, Abid Anwar claimed that in Bangla poetry, Jibanananda Das used surrealistic imagery for the first time. Arunima Ray in her article, "Understanding Jibanananda's different Poetic sensibility" discussed Das's adopting different Eurocentric modernist traditions and presenting them in different dimensions.

Dipti Tripathi, a renowned critic of West Bengal, has considered Jibanananda to be the first surrealist and impressionist. She has taken references from different poems to demonstrate his surrealistic approach. She has also discussed that Jibanananda, being influenced by Western literary movement, wrote surrealist poems as well as expressionist and impressionist poems. Besides, Saikat Habib has edited a book titled *Banalata Sen: Shat Bochorer Path* that contains a good number of essays written by some prominent writers like Fokhrul Alam, Shamsur Rahman, Abu Taher Majumdar, Abdul mannan Sayeed, Buddadev Basu, Klinton Booth Seely, Humayan Ajad, Shunil Gongo Paddhay and others. All these great writers shed light on the popularity of the poem, aesthetic value and higher poetic truth and beauty and western influence on this poem.

Jibanananda Das belonged to the group of poets who successfully created post-Rabindranath era shaking off Tagore's poetic tradition replaced by western modernism. Jibanananda integrates Bangla poetry with the Euro-centric modernist movement of the twentieth century. His poetry explores the gradually sprouting 20th-century modern mind, sensitive and reactive, full of anxiety and tension. He is highly

individualistic and a modernist having idiosyncrasies--- far-fetched comparisons, abundant use of apparently incoherent imagery, sense of fragmentation and wizardry of images. However, his work is shot through with the celebration of natural beauty. Instead of reflecting a shift away from Tagore's idealism and approaching urban life like other modernists, Jibanananda skillfully applies modern approaches like surrealism or impressionism, with natural beauty and phenomenon. With his self-styled lyricism and imagery, he creates an appealing and unfamiliar world as we see in his well-read poem 'Banalata Sen' where a sense of time and history is mingled with nature and beauty.

In the early 20th century a new poetic movement called imagist movement led by Ezra Pound, emerged with the publication of Literary Essays of Ezra Pound. Nature and characteristics of this new movements were given in the preface "A Retrospect". He for the first time used and defined the term Imagist—an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (qtd in Mitro 1986:46). This abrupt presentation of merging intellect and emotion applies poetic beauty and pleasure. Influenced by this movement, Jibanananda and other post-Tagorian poets skillfully employed juxtaposition, comparison and other aspects of this movement in Bangla language.

Jibanananda successfully merged intellectuality with imagination as he depicted the beauty of nature or woman. Das himself considered his poetry in this way: "Someone has termed my poetry or the poet of this poetry as silent or most silent; some have said the poems relate predominantly to Nature and resurrect historical and social conscience. Someone has judged the pieces as solely symbolic, completely subconscious and surrealistic. I have also noticed some other explanations of my poems. Almost all the comments are partially true" (qtd in Alom, 2013).

In 'Banalata Sen' we encounter a 'tired' soul of a journeying poet looking for tranquillity and breathing space. At once he comes across 'Banalata Sen', and merges her beauty with classical antiquity and on the other hand, makes her illustrative of Bengal, Bengal's nature, its deep solace and shelter as he says::

হাজার বছর ধরে আমি পথ হাঁটিতেছি পৃথিবীর পথে,
সিংহল সমুদ্র থেকে নিশীথের অন্ধকারে মালয় সাগরে
অনেক ঘুরেছি আমি; বিশ্বিসার অশোকের ধূসর জগতে
সেখানে ছিলাম আমি; আরো দূর অন্ধকারে বিদর্ভ নগরে;
আমি ক্লান্ত প্রাণ এক, চারিদিকে জীবনের সমুদ্র সফন,
আমারে দুদণ্ড শান্তি দিয়েছিলো নাটোরের বনলতা সেন।

(Das 2014:141)

For a thousand years I have walked the ways of the world,
From Sinhala's Sea to Malaya's in night's darkness,
Far did I roam. In *Vimbisar* and *Ashok's* ash-grey world

Was I present; Farther off, in distant *Vidarba* city's darkness,
I, a tired soul, around me, life's turbulent, foaming ocean,
Finally, found some bliss with *Natore's Banalata Sen*.

(Alam 2004:22)

The writer, as we find in the lyric, has gone far and wide, yet nothing could vanish his exhaustion. It is just when he encounters Banalata Sen, he feels peace. Jibanananda gives open chain to his creative energy represented by his movements to antiquated and remote spots of incredible excellence and fascination. After his mission, he finds only 'life's frothy ocean' (Das 2014:141). This perception ultimately brings him back to Bengal, especially, to Banalata Sen; then the poet makes it specific and real, adding the name of Natore. Soon after this rootedness that instils into him the memories of Bengal is replaced with otherworldly feelings and striking sensation. When he portrays Banalata Sen, he draws comparison utilizing pictures which offer an overwhelming impression of the individual. As the speaker encounters her, she says, "Where have you been so long? And raised her bird's-nest-like eyes—Banalata Sen from Natore" (Das 2014:141). This image comes out brilliant and suggestive. Jibanananda's drawing parallel of Banalata Sen's 'bird's-nest-eye' image is a mingling of imagination and intellectualism. It has opened a gateway to the surrealistic domain where an exotic touch to the commonplace things makes us perceive the unexpectedness and weirdness in the ordinary.

In Jibanananda's "Banalata Sen" the influence of surrealism and impressionism is revealed very clearly at the very beginning of the poem. Surrealism is vigorous spontaneity with which thoughts are free from all restrictions, such as preoccupation with rationality. It reaches the centre point of the mind where past and present, death and life, real and imaginary—all opposing forces drop their antipathy. In 'Banalata Sen' the Poet's hyperbolic expression of roaming the world for thousands of years or entering ancient India during the reign of Ashoka releases the readers' mind from rationality. Being influenced by Freud, the poet suspends the conscious self that makes known all abstract aspirations and sense of wonder. The poet combines several techniques depicting various aspects of life and civilizations. He steps forward to the end of life after passing over the history and heritage of thousands of years. During his journey, he encounters mystery, exhaustion, relief and fatigue. The poet as we see in the poem has travelled ancient and remote places of great splendour and magnificence. However, with the passage of time, he perceives the entrenched emptiness that is filled with an overwhelming and undiscovered truth. After passing various prairies, the enthusiasm of ocean and mountain, beauty and truth of the heritage, he has got a sigh of relief in Banalata. The poet abolishes all the barriers between consciousness and the subconscious, inner self and outer reality.

After passing Malayan ocean, Oshoka, the ancient Indian king and Bimbisera as well as the ancient city Bidharva, all of a sudden, the poet becomes surrealist; he combined the beauty of thick black hair of Banalata incoherently with the images from old and lost civilization, and this bizarre and far-fetched comparison creates surrealistic vibes. Association of the beauty of hair and face with "Vidisha city's night" and "art work of sravasti" surpasses everyday commonplace reality and usual timeframe. Exhaustion and dreamlike atmosphere are inter-related. Sense of nuisance and inertia bring about a tendency to escape in an ideal land. On the one hand, comparing himself with "ship-wrecked mariner who has lost of land", the poet emphasizes his weariness, and on the other, he creates a sense of wonder and beauty of a dark and ancient civilization.

Here the languid and trancelike situation is created after colossal exhaustion and fatigue as the speaker says "the sea of life is lathered". Worn-out with the maddening crowd he is now a "weary spirit" that finds transitory peace in Banalata Sen. He creates a surrealistic tone with the sense of wonder and beauty of dark ancient civilization. This beauty is enhanced with the natural image of "green grass in Cinnamon Island". Then there is a turn from surrealistic world to reality as a conversational note appears "That way I saw her in darkness, said she "Where've you been?".(Das 2014:141)

Though all these happened in reverie, the poem seems at the point indistinct as the poet adds a title to Banalata along with the name of her birthplace, Natore. Ambiguity occurs, as he adds the title and the name of the place, as well as he creates a dreamy land of natural beauty with some sprawling images. Combining bizarre image with a conversational tone, he mystifies the reader. At this point Reader's mind keeps swinging and wavering for the quest of unfathomable Banalata.

In his poem "Banalata Sen" the impact of surrealism and impressionism is clear as throughout the poem its spontaneous flow of poet's subconscious and the use of weird imagery make the reader free from logic. Quietude, tranquility and dreamlike ambience characterize the whole poem. In 'Banalata Sen' being fed up with fret and fever of the outside world, the poet escapes into the dream world by the power of the subconscious mind. After journeying and roaming ancient and remote places, his tired soul is craving for Banalata Sen. He employs unconventional images and dreamlike metaphor to illustrate his imaginative journey and beauty of Banalata that exert ethereal and surrealistic feeling and exotic sensation. However, the poem quickly turns from surrealism to real and mundane world as Banalata Sen is identified with Bangel and more specifically she belongs to Natore of Bengal. In the final stanza, his brilliant use of bizarre and evocative images again takes us to a surrealistic domain where melancholy hovers as the speaker substantiates the end of the day with hallucinatory and tangible images. Throughout the poem, his use of

the image is very significant: especially in the first and second stanza the visual images like 'the grey world of Ashoka', 'life's frothy ocean', 'srabostir karukarja' or "bird nest like eyes". In the third stanza, we find a synesthetic image, a kind of experience of one's senses being cross-wired or it is the kind of imagery in which the sensory aspects are atypical and somewhat cross-sensory. For example, the image 'the scent of sunlight' is cross-wired; sense of touch can feel the heat of sunlight and its brightness is visual. But here we feel it through our sense of smell. The presentation of the image becomes complex as the poet says, "A hawk wipes the scent of sunlight from its wings". The scent is airy; like the color, it cannot be wiped out. But the poet has presented it in such a way the images are visual. Another example of synesthesia is when the poet says, 'prithibir shob rong nibhe gele....' Here colour has been attributed the quality of light that can be out. Colour can be faded, washed away or wiped out, but cannot be put out like the light. In the final stanza, the poet creates such synesthetic atmosphere where all the senses surpass their limits and able to experience something new. Irrationality and novelties replenish our mind as the usual role of five senses alternates. At the end of the poem when the poet describes darkness as it descends on the Earth, he returns to Banalata Sen, his sanctuary.

সব পাখি ঘরে আসে—সব নদী—ফুরায় এ-জীবনের সব লেনদেন;

থাকে শুধু অন্ধকার, মুখোমুখি বসিবার বনলতা সেন।

(Das 2014:141)

All birds home- rivers too, life's mart close again;

What remains is darkness and facing me – Banalata Sen! (Alam 2004:22)

There is a hidden conflict amongst life and death, movement and immobility, activity and inaction, real and surreal. The artist says that it has been a thousand of years since he has begun trekking the Earth. He depicts it as a long excursion in night's obscurity from Cylon's water to the Malayan oceans. However, the reason for his roaming around the world is not clearly stated in the poem. But the image 'sea of life' is suggestive of a worldly affair. But this worldly affair is given an extra flavour of exaggeration. From this land spread, he goes ahead to the extent of time alluding to his meandering, he has navigated the blurring universe of Vimbisara and Asoka and then to the forgotten city of Vidharbha. Here the reference to the lost ancient city and image of darkness and grey colour take us to the surreal domain. The image of darkness recurs when he compares her hair with long-lost Vidisha and when he sees her in Cinnamon Island. In the last stanza, darkness is approaching and at the end of the day evening crawls like the sound of dew, and all colours take leave from the world except for the glimmer of the hovering fireflies. The recurrent image of darkness is congruous with the line "When all the colours of world fade, those Manuscripts/Prepare for the stories". Manuscript of life prepares the whole story, and then, the

transaction of worldly affair terminates. The poem that starts with the poet's continuous roaming ends with a note of stillness. Though the last part of the poem is suggestive of the end of life, the poet implies nothing beyond death. But a death like stillness is prevailing when all activities with the impending tranquil evening come to an end, and all the colours are wiped out due to the impending darkness. This is a world apart that reminds us of Robert Frost's yearning for last sleep stated in his poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening". Frost expresses his desire for sleep after finishing the worldly affairs whereas Jibananada has already reached a dreamlike respite completing all the transactions of life.

Darkness and weariness are prevailing in the last stanza of the poem where the poet makes an incoherent and surrealist world that is evocative of the end of life. However, beneath the apparent incoherence and inconsistency, meaning lies. His sense of fatigue and craving for rest turn to inebriated obsession. Now he seems to be under the spell of delirium, at what time he feels she is approaching silently like dew-drop falling. It is a motionless world where remain only prevailing darkness, appalling silence and sitting passionately face to face.

In his poem, the colourful natural beauty connecting subtle perceptions creates a thread of thought that is given fullest expression. Skillfully applying the words and combination of various colours of natural beauty creates artistic emotion with sensory perception. Impressionism poles apart from realism and is based on intellect and common emotion. Impressionism, however, in its sensuousness keeps itself aloof from reality creating a new atmosphere with the mental impression and subtle perception about the beauty of the material. To the impressionists, the word twilight is very significant. This transitional period between day and night when mingling of light and darkness prevails, the poet paints a domain of his own where realism is suspended, and the mental impression is invigorated with all powerful perceptions displaying darkness and colour image:

সমস্ত দিনের শেষে শিশিরের শব্দের মতন
সন্ধ্যা আসে; ডানার রৌদ্রের গন্ধ মুছে ফেলে চিল;
পৃথিবীর সব রঙ নিভে গেলে পাণ্ডুলিপি করে আয়োজন
তখন গল্পের তরে জোনাকির রঙে ঝিলমিল; (Das 2014:141)

At the end of the day, with soft sound of dew,
Night falls; the kite wipes the sun's smell from its wings;
The world's colour fade; fireflies light up the world a new;
(Alam 2004:22)

With the darkness and colour image like grey and green, the poet creates a visual description of his imaginary domain. Darkness throughout

the poem evokes subjective and sensory impression rather than objective reality. Darkness prompting and mystifying the reader's imagination, calls for individual and subjective interpretation. The poet has roamed much "the dark seas of Malaya". Then he has been in "darkness of Vidarbha". He "remembers her hair dark as night at Vidisha". Even the poet sees her in the midst of "Cinnamon island" that is also dark. Eventually, only darkness remains, and Banalata sen appears visible through the darkness. The poet takes the reference of "light of fireflies" that only deepens the darkness. The poet gives impressionistic touch by aesthetic experience comprising some visual beauty inherent in things. Subjectivity is the way the mind looks at the combination of things in the viewer's perspective. His artistic vision captures the light inherent in the things. An impression is a complex feeling created by a thing of beauty that is unique to the individual experience and subjective interpretation.

The association between impressionism and surrealism is that both are initiated from subjectivity and go beyond the edge of rationality. These two approaches mingling in the poem 'Banalata Sen' give it extra zest. The poet has reached a land of trance and obsessed himself in the grey domain of lost Indian civilization where Banalata turns to intangible and idyllic like history and lifeless like ancient sculpture. She is such a woman whom we cannot find in Nature or cannot have physically; she is such a woman with whom the poet can sit face to face in the darkness. She is a picture, not a physical being to be touched. Being exhausted by tiresome frequentation of reality, he escapes into an ideal land where he constitutes his dream.

In fact, all these happened in a reverie. Banalata is not a lifelike character; she can be found only in contemplation. Through the image and metaphor, Banalata appears to be sensuous and embodiment of romantic essence. The exhausted poet finds shelter in her "birds nest like eyes" (Das 2014:141). This enthralling image reflects the mood of the poet. The exhausted poet is craving for respite and silence. His passion for peace and serenity is expressed through an objective correlative, "birds nest like eyes". Though the comparison between eyes and birds nest is apparently far-fetched, a profound meaning can be traced as the bird's nest signifies peaceful shelter of a bird. This incoherent image of "bird's nest like eyes" captures the dominant tone of the poem: rest and respite. This image expresses modernist desire to escape. The mood is gloomy and haunting. It is endowed with an alienated heart frequently seeking safe haven in the heart of a woman. He also introduces modern conversational speech pattern in his subject. However, immediately after his use of image, he makes an immaculate, and imaginary woman that substantiates the working of the subconscious mind and his voice seems as if he were whispering wistfully.

Though the modern poet shows interest in employing urban element in their poetry, Jibananda forms a close relation between his poetic

sensibility and nature which is sensuous, ordinary and surrealistic. Buddadev Bashu called him 'nature worshipper' who unlike Tagore does not have a quest for Jiban debota. Rather he searches for new sensibility comprising fragmentation, sensuous affluence and incoherent sequence as we find in the last stanza of the poem. Being tired of life and having a yearning for sleep, Jibanananda Das is certain that peace can be found nowhere and that it is useless to move to a distant land. The tone of the last stanza is characterized by hallucinatory fragmentation. Comparison between "hush of dew and the approaching evening marks the overpowering silence. He employs the very ordinary image of a hawk and gives surrealistic flavour with the weird image of 'scent of sunlight'. The surreal atmosphere is created with the sense of fragmentation: "when earth's colours fade and some pale design is sketched,/ then glimmering fireflies paint in the story". (পৃথিবীর সব রঙ মুছে গেলে পাণ্ডুলিপি করে আয়োজন,/তখন গল্পের তরে জোনাকির রঙে বিলম্বিত।) (Das 2014:141)

The surrealist believes that the notions of the outside world are overcome by invoking the powers of mind to emancipate and escape into the world of amazing possibilities. Jibanananda Das forges a new poetic speech to fulfil his endeavours to shape a world of his own. He was an inward-looking person and to escape the vagaries of the mundane reality, he forms an ideal world where his long-cherished Banalata Sen being emblematic of Bangal's nature is the ever source of comfort and shelter. However, a sense of inaction and melancholy pervades the end of the poem as "all birds come home, all rivers, all of/ life's task finished." All the images are not apparently comprehensible, and the connection between the subsequent lines is not obvious. A sense of fragmentation occurs as he breaks the logical sequence of words and lines.

In 'Banalata Sen', the poet is obsessed with the past enchantment and its abolished beauty and allurements. This preoccupation, comprising conscious and subconscious, past and present, makes the poem surrealistic. In the first and the second stanzas, the poet through historical and geographical descriptions surpasses the boundary of time and space. Using synesthetic and bizarre images, the poet suspends rational faculty and creates Banalata an abstract ideal. The surrealist using bizarre imagery and far-fetched ideas discards rationality and intelligence. Here the experience is centred on visual imagery. In the next stanza, the visual experience turns to the unworldly perception created by synesthetic use of an image. Silence and darkness are prevailing, and the poet can see her well penetrating the darkness as the senses exceeding their natural limits, attain different kinds of experiences. However, unlike Dadaism, surrealism instead of searching for the undesirable and destructive aspects of life, unfolds a sense of beauty, astonishment and wonder. In the background of his poems, distance and solitude tell us of an unknown environment away from this sky and this world in which the poet weaves

fantasy. Vigorous perception and intense appeal for beauty put forth surrealistic ambience and this way the poem "Banalata Sen" turns out to be an emblem of fantasy and sense of wonder.

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