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Research Article:

A Thousand Tiny Deaths:

Schizoanalyzing Jībanānanda's Death Instinct

*Subashish Bhattacharjee*

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A Thousand Tiny Deaths:  
Schizoanalyzing Jibanānanda's Death Instinct

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Once I am dead,  
Shall I ever come back to earth again?

If so be it that I do,  
Let me come back, on a wintry night,  
As the frail, cold flesh of a half-eaten orange  
Set on a table, by the dying one's bed.

— Jibanānanda Dās, "The Orange"

Jibanānanda Dās is widely considered to be one of the best Bengali poets of the post-Tagorean era. Dās's poetry is replete with brilliant imagery intermixed with philosophical appendages, a lineage which he shares with Rabīndranāth Tagore himself. The noted Indic studies scholar Edward C. Dimock refers to the philosophical strain in Jibanānanda's poetry when he states: "Jibanānanda Dās is among the first of the modern Bengali poets, as Rabīndranāth is among the last of the classical ones at least insofar as his ties with the mainstream of Indian philosophical thought are concerned" (605). Although Jibanānanda was significantly influenced by Tagore, he chose largely to write in opposition to the latter. The 'imprecision' of the younger poet's images would not be congenial to Tagore's poetic sensibilities. However, Jibanānanda was not merely a poet of imprecise imagery; his poetry was recalcitrant towards customary assumptions; it was picturesque, image-driven, and insistent upon establishing a comparison of life and death. The nature of the many deaths that his poetic subjects undergo qualifies his poetry to not endorse

death but celebrate life through its many 'dyings' — "not [processes that take place in things or] meanings that extend over the past and future [...] but which are never physically present in bodies and things, even though the death of a body effectuates or actualises this dying" (Baugh 64).

The experience of death ranges from the grandiose and mythical to the commonplace in Jībanānanda's poetry. However, the deaths in the poetry of Jībanānanda are solely of humans. One rarely, if ever, witnesses the decay or dying of the surroundings of the human who is on the verge of or is already dead. Death takes the form of almost a philosophical interrogation in Jībanānanda's poetry, with similarities to the concept of death of several continental philosophers. The ambiguity surrounding death that is found in Jībanānanda's poetry is similar to that of Deleuze and Blanchot. For Blanchot, the event of death is both 'accomplished and realized' (personal death) and vice versa (impersonal death) at the same time, allowing for multiplicity to be affected: "Blanchot had shown that death is not only personal [...] it is not only a, so to speak, 'big death.' But also, death is impersonal, without a relation to me, with me being too weak for life which as it exceeds limits is like a series of 'little deaths'" (Lawlor 118). Jībanānanda is largely affected by impersonal death which is incessant and recurring, and also does not necessitate a physical extinction for the event to occur, as Deleuze too states: "they never finish up with dying" ("on n'en finit pas de mourir") (152). Dying is a fixture across Jībanānanda's poetry as it is philosophically featured in the thoughts of Blanchot and Deleuze—not a complete absolution from the fate of recurrence, but one of constant regeneration. Consequently, Agamben's notion of 'bare life' could be applicable to Jībanānanda's poetry as well. Life, or the 'bare life' of the poetic subject here would be contiguous to death instinct, dying and 'Thanatos-politics', and the validity of the biological subject ("zoe"—non-human or pre-individual life) is identified with its perishability—life is consequently defined as "extreme ontological vulnerability" (Genosko 171). Agamben's concept of "bare life," i.e. life at the verge of extinction (of the "bios") as well as exposed to 'sovereign violence', is also analogous to Jībanānanda's poetry if one addresses the threat of extinction by self-inflicted or natural death as containing the negation of both the 'zoe' and the 'bios'. One may also find similarities between the concept of death in Jībanānanda poetry with that of Derrida's, for whom "death is a form of transforming continuity, rather than a simple end (or the continuity of part of an identity)" (Williams, *Understanding Poststructuralism* 42).

Perhaps the poem of Jībanānanda that best portrays death in the sense which Blanchot would have viewed it is the former's "Death at the Turn of the Century". The poem describes the episode of Duryodhana's death from the epic *Mahabharata*. While the poem is mythological in its origins, the poetic narrative of the brief episode discusses the inevitability of death and the points of convergence of personal and impersonal death. The personal or 'big death' of the epical character stretches to an impersonal death that infuses a commonplace identity to the death of Duryodhana, a human. It is evident that Jībanānanda does not accord much leverage to the elimination of the human as a biological entity, investing rather significantly on philosophical contemplation of life and dying:

One disconnected day we were born  
 And now we die on a day more fevered.  
 Far and near, shadows on high and low walls  
 Instil fear in us which, when ruminated upon,  
 Leads us from knowledge to sorrow  
 Or, having taken leave of knowledge  
 Hides behind the crystal door [...]  
 Where hell fails to bring death and heaven compassion  
 And on earth sages spread tired disbelief in that dispensation.

("Death at the Turn of the Century," 82)

However, the involvement of Jībanānanda with the concept of death in his poems is not limited to the mythological. In his poem "One Day Eight Years Ago," Jībanānanda writes about the suicide of a father, a common man. The poem contains a juxtaposition of the images of life and death that Jībanānanda attempts to connect, although it is the morbidity of death that is dominant in this poem unlike the mythological grandeur he conjures in "Death at the Turn of the Century":

He had been taken to the morgue, they said.  
 The moon had set, the darkness had arisen  
 Last night, the fifth night of the moon, when he felt  
 A rush of affection for death.  
 [...]  
 This feel of life, the smell of ripe corn this autumn afternoon

You spurned, to be dead as the trampled rat  
 With the blood-smearred mouth, seeking refuge  
 From the agonies of your soul?

(“One Day Eight Years Ago,” 54-56)

The allure of the everyday is forfeited by the person who commits suicide by hanging himself. Although any apparent cause for the suicide is unavailable, rational reasons for a desire to live are found aplenty:

No failures in love; life in matrimony  
 Left no yawning gaps;  
 The churning of time turned up  
 The right trace of honey in the everyday, in the mind;  
 A life unshaken ever by the fevers of the have-not.  
 Dead nevertheless.  
 Spreadeagled on the table, in the morgue.

(ibid)

The experiences are commonplace, everyday events that one is familiarised through recurrences—matrimony and conjugal life with fulfilment. It is unlikely that even the most grotesque imagination could posit this fulfilment, accomplishment and general contentment with life to be morbid enough for a desire for death. But Jībanānanda is perhaps immersed in the sense that the experience of life and death are not merely physiological, or even entirely psychological; the presence of death in life and life in death make for an effective case on behalf of the poet’s notion of dying: “Death is thus felt in every feeling, experienced ‘in life and for life’” (Baugh 64). The spectre of death, or dying, is perennially present despite the apparent contradictions through the picturesque description of an idyllic family life which proves insufficient:

We know, do we not,  
 That neither love nor the heart of woman  
 Or the touch of the child, the warmth of home

Suffice unto man; that beyond all glory  
 And achievement, there lies in our blood  
 That which drains us of all,  
 Empties us from within.  
 The morgue, we know, puts an end to it all.  
 Spreadeagled on the table, that is where you lie.

("One Day Eight Years Ago," 54-56)

As Edward Dimock writes with reference to the poem:

The suicide itself teems with life; the dead man wakes to realize death, the tree from which the body hangs is live, the fireflies swarm with golden lights, and even, in the darkness when the moon has set, the old owl, herself death, seeks sustenance. It was this very life that the suicide, and perhaps that poet too, could not bear, for in the life phase of existence is individuality and exhaustion.

(606)

While discussing the poem Dimock also refers to a passage from the *Taittirīya-upaniṣad* 3: 10: 6: "I am food, I am food, I am food. I am an eater of food, I am an eater of food, I am an eater of food . . . I who am food eat the eater of food. I have overcome the whole world" (qtd. in Dimock 605). R.C. Zachner remarks on the above passage, saying: "Eating and being eaten represent life in death and death in life, the abolition of the individuality in the unending life of the Primeval Man in the *Puruṣasūkta*, who, though sacrificed, continues to live as the All" (30). The destruction of one biotic form of life also sustains other allied forms of life and the death, or the desire of it, does not remain an isolated or distant ideal: "desire is both life and death, for at a quite literal level, the death of this or that body is not at all negative. Without the death of organisms there would be no change, evolution or life in its radical sense" (Colebrook 2). Life ensconces the dead as if the dying form is a part of its biorhythm. The frenzy of organic activity around the corpse attests to the notion of 'life in death and death in life'.

The circularity of the present anomaly is akin to Paul Tillich's paradox of faith through which Tillich argued the incongruity of faith without God—here the trajectory is driven towards a paradox of the "conquering of existence through the conditions of existence" (Dimock 605-6). To emphasise the presence of a Deleuzian immanence in Jībanānanda's thought where life and death coexist on the similar

plane instead of being antinomies. Unlike the aeolotropical distinction between living and dying which several other poets have insisted upon, Jībanānanda presents a synarthrosis between the two states of existence while considering neither to be negative. This is further attested to by Edward Dimock with reference to "One Day Eight Years Ago":

If one makes an analysis of the Manasā myth, one can come out with an interesting result which shows life and death on one side of a binary opposition, and zero on the other. What this suggests is that in some Indian perception at least, both life and death are categories of existence, as opposed to total extinction. This is also, it seems to me, what Jībanānanda is telling us. The owl, the poet, death, implacable, feed on life, the mouse; mosquitoes seeking to drink the blood of life swarm with life; the dead man, the suicide of the poem, has his immortality in providing food for death, and is at rest, in a positive state of existence.

(606)

Notably, animals prefigure quite distinctly in adjunct to death in Jībanānanda's poetry, emphasising the presence of life in the vicinity of death. In the present poem itself, Jībanānanda makes references to "the plague rat/the trampled rat," "camel's neck," "the owl/the blind owl/the decrepit owl," "aged frogs," "the mosquito," "the fly," "the grasshopper," and "the fireflies". Although the juxtaposition could be said to highlight a distinction between the living and the dead, Jībanānanda may also likely have referred to the mortal status and the perishability of the insects and animals which he describes. This is resonant with Derrida's references to the death of animals: "animals have a very significant relation to death ... even if they have neither a relation to death nor to the 'name' of death as such, nor, by the same token, to the other as such, to the purity as such of the alterity of the other as such. But neither does man, that is precisely the point!" (76) Both Jībanānanda and Derrida, however, seem to accord little importance to death that is merely biological, as is also attested to by the 'transformed continuity' of death noted earlier.

The process of living is conceived of by Jībanānanda to be a recurrent and repetitive one, moving in circles and alternating between the states of living and dying, but not of declining productivity in either state. A decreasingly productive life would be overwrought with intensities which Jībanānanda would construe as puerile; but the death instinct on which he models his life is productive essentially because it creates the necessary urge for dying incessantly while sustaining both

biotic and transcendental life forms rather than being merely biologically dead. The notion of life and death for Jībanānanda is modelled on “two sets of *gunas*, qualities, exactly superimposed upon one another” (Dimock 607)—one material and one immaterial. The temporal definition afforded by ‘eight years’ in the title is diffused with the progression of the poem, and the growing realization that “every moment of all time is pregnant with both life and death” (ibid). And corresponding to the poet’s vision of multiplicities, death and dying too achieve a state of indefiniteness: “the eater and the eaten, the slayer and the slain, be the same. They look different, but when individualities are abolished, then can peace, or *rasa*, or the sleep of the poem, be attained” (ibid).

Jībanānanda was perhaps exhausted by the recurrence of what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as ‘striated’ instead of ‘smooth spaces’—his life is situated within determined locations, and is lacking in “intensities, forces and tactile qualities” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 479). The repetition of certain events is perceived by the poet to be a repressive cycle that he tries to narrate time and again in his poetry. The banality of existence is translucent for Jībanānanda, allowing for his perspective to penetrate the practices which would be definitive of existence for others. At times, through his manifest apathy towards life, appear Jībanānanda’s engagement with experiences and the futility thereof. The experiences range from the idyllic to the moribund, from the depressive to the inquisitive, but never incites the poet to envisage a life event that he could possibly be optimistic about. The grim interrogation of life by Jībanānanda is also poetically applied when he writes:

What else need we know before death? Do we not know  
 How at the edge of each red desire rises like a wall  
 The grey face of death? The dreams and the gold of the earth  
 Reach a tranquil equilibrium, ending a magic need.  
 What else need we know?  
 Have we not heard the cries of birds upon the dying sun?  
 Have we not seen the crow fly across the mist?

(“What Else, Before Death?” 74-75)

The status of death is intensely Deleuzoguattarian as “[death] is not desired, there is only death that desires” (*Anti-Oedipus* 329) in Jībanānanda’s poetry. Edward Dimock also refers to a convergence of life and death in Jībanānanda’s poetry, with nature as a catalyst and a poetic contrast offered by Tagore:

It does not seem to me that the most important distinction here is Jībanānanda's vision of death as violent and bloody, with creatures feeding upon one another to sustain a life of questionable worth [...] Nature (to Jībanānanda) is chaos. But it is chaos only insofar as it is full of seeming paradox—that the fullness of life is death. He is perhaps less certain than Tagore, but he senses that the resolution of the problem lies in the perception that life is death, as death is life, and perhaps that both are opposed to extinction or non-existence, and in this he too finds a degree of order.

(609)

In his poem, "The Corpse," Jībanānanda paints another image of death—the form of death, or dying, again. The possibility of suicide or euthanasia exists as a predominant feature throughout "One Day Eight Years Ago" where it is certain that the father has killed himself despite the lack of a plausible cause. Similarly, the death of 'Mrinalini Ghosal', the 'corpse' of the poem, is unexplained; there is no precedent of the issues of life or death in the poem either. The juxtaposition is of the morbid with the fecund—the corpse is floating in the very river that holds life and the placid source of sustenance of other life, quite similar to the surroundings of the corpse of the father hanging from the tree:

The world has other rivers; but this river

Is the red cloud, the yellow moonlight carved up in patches;

All other light and all other darkness has ended here,

Only the red and blue fish and the cloud remain;

Here, forever, floats the corpse of Mrinalini Ghosal

Red and blue, silvery and silent.

("The Corpse," 52)

There is present in the poem a hierarchy of appearances: the abiotic, the biotic, and the post-biotic, each represented by elements and appearances such as the cloud and the moonlight as abiotic, the fish as the biotic presence, and the corpse as the once living, pointing to the inevitability towards which all forms of life must lead to. However, not once does Jībanānanda attempt to portray this corpse or the death of Mrinalini Ghosal as negative. The presentation of this unexplained death is rather

within the course of natural events. Death is, again, immanent in a Deleuzian sense, “[emphasising] connections over forms of separation” (Williams, “Immanence” 129) to existence and nature instead of a transcendental occurrence that is separate to the identity of the natural, living or biologically existing. For Jībanānanda, “[nature] presents life in totality ... so that just like the yellowing of a leaf or a day coming to an end or the change of seasons, death too comes naturally. But what is important here is that death comes not without fulfilment” (Ray).

Death in Jībanānanda Das’s poetry is not a concept that could be codified or categorised as a pellucid idea. The imagination and depiction of death in Jībanānanda’s poetry evolves constantly, and the reader’s attempts to visualise a holistic referential plane for the event is thwarted consistently. It is discernible, however, that death in Jībanānanda’s poems does not act as an end but is a part of the circularity of existence, as is also referred to in Amit Chaudhuri’s following remark with which we shall also wind up the essay:

“Das's peculiar and relentless longing to escape the body—in effect, his longing for death—and then, characteristically, to revisit, almost helplessly ... existence—even a transitory and perishable existence [...]—is also an almost fatalistic enactment of the creative act. The art-work often seems to Das not so much the result of intention as of that inexplicable ‘bodh’, the unfathomable will that leads deathward, and then, as unfathomably, back towards birth.”

(Chaudhuri)

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