



Storying Self in Fiction: A Study of Jibanananda Das's Short Fiction Purnima

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Abstract

Literary works that a writer produces in one way or another are indomitably connected to his individual experiences; these experiences, through storying self in literature, a process of narrating one's own experiences (representing self and others) in a literary form, can be represented in the expression of fact and fiction. Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) is a modern Bengali poet, novelist, and storyteller; his writings are not exclusions. Das's short fictions reflect his literary career and private life, thus representing a distinct narrative technique in Bengali literature. His characters cry loudly in a claustrophobic voice, which merges with the writer's suffering, absurdity, vagueness, and meaninglessness. Hence, there is a tendency to understand Das's literature with references to his personal life and biographical history. His short fiction Purnima (1931) is a true testimonial of his identical narrative technique-storying self, fiction as a private exercise. The current research paper primarily focuses on decoding Das's narrative technique through a comprehensive study of his text as his 'personal impression of life.' The study also intends to understand the interconnection between reality and fiction through Das's narrative identity.

Keywords: *Bengali Literature, Narrative Identity, Text as 'Personal Impression,' Biographical Criticism.*

Introduction

Any piece of human creation from an individual's memory, psyche, thought, feeling, or opinion is the fruit, irrespective of acquired knowledge or experiences. Literary works that a writer produces in one way or another are closely connected to his individual experiences and, therefore, are *narrative identity*, which can be defined as "a person's internalised and evolving life story" (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233). Henry James, in the book *The Art of Fiction*, writes, "A novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the

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impression” (Besant, 1885, pp. 60-61). Here, ‘a personal impression of life’ suggests the writer’s experience and knowledge. James keeps writing, “If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions are experience, just as (have we not seen it?) they are the very air we breathe” (Besant, 1885, p. 66). Fiction reflects a particular author’s *narrative identity* and deals with his autobiographical memory in different ways, representing his ‘personal impression of life,’ which can be called *storying self* in fiction- fiction as a private exercise. Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) is a modern Bengali poet, essayist, novelist, and short fiction writer; his writings, especially his novels and short stories, are not exclusions from the *storying self*. Rather, Das’s prose masterpieces can be seen as accurate reflections of his personal impressions. The *narrative identity* is a key aspect of Das's work, as it is the lens through which he presents his ‘personal impression of life.’ Most of his prose writings cry loud, a claustrophobic voice identically parallel to his struggle and suffering. Manjubhasha Mitra writes:

Fictions written by Jibanananda Das may be placed in the of postwar experimental fiction which presents a search for ways to deal with anguish, meaninglessness and fragmentation of life. His modernist hero is shaped by humanistic ethos of politics, religion, anthropology and psychology; he is influenced by the invisible presence of scientific technology and psycho-analysis. Virtually, experimental fiction of Jibanananda is concerned with the inner depth of the individual's mind and life- the protagonist often becomes one with the author- hence these writings bear a strong mark of subjective and autobiographical element. (2010, p. 140)

A text concerning an author’s representation of self (experience) is known as autobiographical interpretation- an autobiography is “one form among many in which a writer speaks of himself and the incidents of his personal experience” (Pascal, 2016, p. 2). However, an author’s narration in an autobiographical text is not always self-centred because “Authors often refer to their life-stories indiscriminately as autobiography, memoir, or reminiscence.” (Pascal, 2016, p. 2); they deal with other related/corresponding lives instead of being merely subjective. Therefore, an autobiography can be a *biography* (of other lives) written by the author, including the other lives in contact with him. While writing fiction, authors intentionally or unintentionally substitute self-identity and others with imaginary characters, keeping partially the essence of their personal experience and knowledge. This whole technique of representing the self (autobiographical narration) and narrating others (biographical interpretation) is again *storying self*. Here, the critical inclusion of biographical or historical criticism is significant to understanding the technique of *storying self*. Because, like a biographical text, the *storying self* also deals with the author’s experience, knowledge, and diversified connection with the text. In Biographical criticism, “It is the job, then, of the biographical critic to draw connections, to bring words into experience- a messy and risky endeavor- to search for the experience the author has intended to communicate and to relate it to both the experience and imagination of the reader” (Benson, 1989, p. 112). In literary criticism, there has been tremendous debate on whether a text should be decoded based on the textual meaning without interfering with the biographical history of the author or whether the

reader should understand the author's biographical context and his literary career to extract the approximate sense of the respective text.

The eighteenth-century author cum critic Samuel Johnson claims, "To judge rightly of an author, we must transport ourselves to his time, and examine what were the wants of his contemporaries, and what were his means of supplying them. That which is easy at one time was difficult at another" (Lonsdale, 2006, p. 167). On the other hand, postmodern critic Roland Barthes, neglecting biographical criticism, claims that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (1977, p. 148). The debate continues. However, the current study intends to look into Das's text through the lens of biographical criticism to justify the *storying self* technique, i.e. of Das; therefore, the chief motive of this study is to decode and interpret Das's narrative technique in parallel to his struggling life, relationships, and literary career in particular. Das's prose fiction is full of absurdity, vagueness, and meaninglessness, reflecting his own life. Hence, studying Das's private life and critical literary career is essential. Without knowing Das and his contemporary, his texts cannot be decoded. Likewise, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* cannot be understood without knowing Beckett and his contemporary postmodern atrocities, despair, values, and senses of life. In this context, Das's short fiction *Purnima* (1931) is a true testimonial of his identical narrative technique- *storying self*.

Das and *Purnima*

Das began writing short stories and novels in the early 1930s. The writing of his prose fiction continued for the following two decades. Among the prose fictions, two early prose fictions (long stories) are *Purnima* (1931) and *Nirupam Yatra* (1933). The other fictions (short stories) are "Chhaya Nat" (1931), "Bibahito Jibon" (1931), "Gram o Shaharer Kotha" (1936), and others. Many of his earlier novels are like *Kalyani* (1932), *Bibha* (1933), *Mrinal* (1933), *Jiban Pronali* (1933), *Karubasana* (1933), *Biraj* (1933), and *Pretinir Rupkotha* (1933). Each work of Das's fiction is distinctive in that it represents Das's '(a) personal impression of life' and the contemporary age.

The 1930s was the age of turmoil in contemporary colonial British India. The continuous struggle of the anti-government movement produced an unstable situation in the everyday lives of Bengal. On the other hand, it was the period of the Great Depression in the USA that influenced Western countries and Eastern countries like India politically, economically, and culturally. The age of turmoil also affected contemporary Bengali literature. Das and his characters could not escape from that. In most of his characters, he inculcated several characteristics of the depression era, the contemporary socio-political conflict, and the socio-economic crisis. It was also the period of the aftermath of the First World War. Like other literature, Bengali literature was also influenced drastically. *Purnima*, representing Das and the contemporary time, is a true example of a self-narrative text.

Das wrote *Purnima* in 1931; Pratikshan Publishers, in the 1980s, from the manuscript note of 1933, printed 36 stories written in 1932 and 10 stories written in 1931. Among the 10 stories, *Purnima* was published as a *boro golpo* (long story) (Bandyopadhyaya, 1999, p. 10). Later, in

several edited collections, this text was published as a novel, such as Debiprasad Bandyopadhyaya, in *Jibanananda Rachanabali Vol. 3*, published *Purnima* as a novel. Gautam Chakravarty translates it as a short fiction in *Jibanananda Das: Short Fiction, 1931-33* (2001). Keeping the essence of the original text, Chakravarty's translation reflects the in-depth literary meaning of the primary text. At the same time, the researcher also read the original Bengali text thoroughly. There is an excellent transference of literariness in Chakravarty's *Purnima*. Hence, the researcher in the present study has referred to Chakravarty's translation as the primary text and cited excerpts from it.

The narrative technique of *Purnima* is third-person narration. Das uses metaphorical language, irony, and philosophical ideas in the fiction. At the same time, absurdity and obscure thoughts are also used, which are common in all his fiction writings. However, the language of the original Bengali version of *Purnima* is also a perfect example of a unique representation of Das's quintessential language, which can only be sensed by a Bengali language reader.

The story of *Purnima* deals with failure and poverty, despair and social identity crisis, and nonstop struggle and death. The story demonstrates an educated youth from a lower-middle-class family. His name is Santosh. The protagonist, Santosh, is neither successful with a secure job nor happy with his conjugal life. Poverty and responsibilities have surrounded him in such a way that everywhere he looks at the world, it is always contradictory. Still, he never wants to be hopeless, but that cannot last long. His wife, Purnima, blames him for not being capable of a manly attitude toward the family. When Santosh learns about the marriage of his wife's elder sister Chameli to a higher class wealthy medical servant, he is more terrific at thinking of his wife's wretched condition. In Chameli's marriage ceremony, Santosh feels like an uninvited trivial guest; his dress, attitude, and sense of life make him an identity-less man in the party crowd. The world falls apart. Santosh defines love and compassion between a man and woman relationship as only a futile man's worthless words. Instead of all of his struggles, he wants his wife to be happy; he promises, but at the same time, on the contrary, he wants her to die in childbirth. Santosh himself is the devil to self. At the end of the story, Purnima dies in childbirth. Contradictorily, Santosh finds the world tenderer, tranquil, and glad in the absence of his wife Purnima; ironically, with her death, Purnima's identity becomes ever existential on earth.

Throughout the outline of *Purnima*, Das shows various issues and complications in the characters' lives. The themes are so realistic and full of tragic tone that reading such a masterpiece simultaneously reminds the reader of the writer's personal life and struggle. In particular, two characters, Santosh and Purnima, can be seen as reflections of Das and his wife, Labanyamayi, respectively.

While writing his fiction, Das already became controversial for his unconventional poetic taste and lost his job. As Dr. Sukumar Sen writes, "After passing M. A. in English, Jibanananda was appointed as a professor in a large private college in Calcutta (1922). According to the college authorities, some of his poems violated the moral code of conduct

and led to his dismissal from the college (1928)” (qtd. in Ray, 2019, p. 14; my trans.). Das’s literary career was already defamed, though he was praised for his poems such as “Deshbandhu Prayane” (1925) and “Nilima” (1926); later, his poems such as “Abasarer Gaan” (1929) and “Kyampe” (At the Camp; 1932) made him a poet of harsh controversy, it was a crux time to Das. Roy says:

Jibanananda, from the beginning to the middle part of his life as a poet, is harassed by jealousy, condemnation, silly and unintelligible accusations of obscenity about his poetry- etc. Buddhadevbabu most likely targeted the editor of the *Shanibarar Chithi* (Saturday Letter), Sajnikant Das. Because, Jibanananda's poetry in *Shanibarar Chithi* has been much discussed and criticised for being eloquent and sometimes obscene. (2019, p. 15; my trans.)

During this period, Das remained jobless and went through a harsh economic crisis. “Jibanananda was unemployed for five years after his marriage in 1930” (2019, p. 39; my trans.), which can be seen in the character of Santosh as a reflection of the writer, thus representing partial elements of the autobiographical narrative.

Like Das, the protagonist, Santosh, is a simple, ordinary man who wishes to manage the ordinary needs of a simple life. The brutality of poverty and the failure in ordinary responsibilities have made him selfless, a man with no desire for independence. Das describes, “No longer in love with his independence, his opinions or his fantasies, Santosh does not want anything that will profit him alone” (2001, p. 118). In the period of writing this fiction, Das, like his character, was going through such challenging situations.

Through the character Purnima, Das’s wife, Labanyamayi (Labanya Devi), can be found- thus representing a partial biographical narrative of Das’s known individual. In the real world, Das’s wife, “Labanya Devi, lost her father when she was only eight years old. A few months after her father's death, she lost her mother again. Thus, Labanya Devi lost her parents at an early age and moved to her paternal uncle, Amritlal Gupta” (Ray, 2019, p. 37; my trans.). The familiar context is seen in the fiction *Purnima*. Purnima loses her parents in her unknown childhood days- “Since the death of their parents, Chameli (Purnima’s sister) and her younger sister had lived with their maternal uncle” (Das, 2001, p. 117).

There are two plot locations in the fictional world of *Purnima*; one is the ancestral homeland, which is Barishal somewhere in East Bengal (currently Bangladesh), and the second one is the workplace, which is Calcutta (currently Kolkata, West Bengal, India). The plotline of the story moves between these two identical places. Barishal was Das’s homeland, where he lived for a considerable period of his life; at the same time, for the sake of livelihood, he explored and lived in several places across India. In particular, Kolkata and its boarding life were his second home. Later, Das moved to Kolkata in 1947 during Partition and died there in 1954.

To both Purnima and Santosh, their marriage is a mistake. However, Purnima accepts her fortune, as the narrator says, “She has tortured herself for in marrying Santosh she has wasted her life- with all her extraordinary gifts- for an absurd, cankered marriage where each day and every hour-” (Das, 2001, p. 130). Throughout the story, women are passive entities; they have nothing but to accept the situations; as the lines say, “Nonetheless, today she did not want to trouble Santosh with bitter words about her unhappy womb. She had forgiven him” (Das, 2001, p. 130). Das’s marriage life was also not happy. Regarding his marriage life, Bhumendra Guha refers:

His first child, Manjushree, was born (in 1931). Now, the relationship with his wife is not becoming very encouraging, and he is not thinking of sheltering anyone except one Manjushree. Meanwhile, in the streets of Calcutta, a couple of small girls are catching his eye with their distinctive features, he is reminded of a village girl he knew a long time ago. [‘Diaries of Jeevananda Das,’ Editor: Bhumendra Guha] (qtd. in Jaladas, 2014, p. 77; my trans.)

From the excerpt, it can be assumed that Purnima reflects Das’s wife, Labanyamayi, in the fictional story, *Purnima*. Labanyamayi’s voice is echoed in Purnima’s complaints, which can be heard more clearly in her writing when Guha, in *Alekhyā: Jibanānanda* (1999), mentions, “And, once Jibananda’s wife Labanya Das called me to the hanging balcony. She said Achintyababu has come, Buddhadev has come, Sajnikanta has come, then your brother (Das) must have been a great literary man. Maybe he left a lot for Bengali literature; what did he leave for me, tell me!” (1999, p. 28) Santosh’s struggles, like those of author Das’s own, make *Purnima* more autobiographical, a text of ‘personal impression,’ and fiction as a private exercise. Purnima’s suffering as an unsuccessful man’s wife reflects Labanyamayi’s voice, which makes the text more autobiographical, self-narrative, and partially biographical- thus, *storying self*.

The relationship in *Purnima* is hardly a relationship of pleasure, desire, or love. Santosh does not know of love; what he knows is compassion, which has bound their relationship, and this compassion is mightier than love. However, the situation has made him lonely and a walker in nothingness; as the narrator says, “Santosh does not know if he will ever have any companions on this path; a path that offered nothing but a deep and lasting anguish” (Das, 2001, p. 144). Santosh’s loneliness and the meaninglessness of life are more pathetic than his suffering from hunger. His loneliness and decline of self are extreme when the narrator expresses his inner conflict of existence and identity of the writer himself. Manjubhasha Mitra (2010, p. 140) claims that Das’s fictions are ‘influenced by the invisible presence of scientific technology and psycho-analysis,’ which ‘bear a strong mark of the subjective and autobiographical element.’ Therefore, *Purnima* is the writer’s *narrative identity*. Besides, in *Janmasatabarshē Jibanānanda* (2013), Bhumendra Guha writes regarding Das’s voice, “It is more like this: what I am not is not the subject of my literature. Towards the end of his life, he told many, at least Sanjay Bhattacharya, that if he is given a little opportunity if his health

is more cured, he will write an autobiography, as if he had left some autobiographical writing in his poems- stories- novels!” (2013, p. 249-250; my trans.)

Now, the question is whether writings come only from the author’s experiences or all the writings of an author are reflections of his autobiographical interpretation. Though it is not very easy to answer the exact answer, the readers can logically interpret those fictions with a parallel study of the respective author of the texts. However, in those texts, they may find some elements of the autobiographical narrative of the author himself and some aspects of the biographical narrative of the author's close relations through imaginary characters. In the case of Das, his prose fiction, at a certain level, is seen as parallel to his contemporary personal life and his relations, as if Das is writing himself as an autobiographical narrative and others (close relations) as a biographical narrative- thus *storying self* in fiction. The short fiction *Purnima* interprets and represents Das’s real and fictional world as a space of his fiction as a private exercise. In another perspective, imagination (fiction) cannot be excluded from reality; in other words, it can be said that reality is the concrete reflection of imagination. When bodily existence is concrete, mental or psychic existence is imaginary-conscious, subconscious, and superconscious. Human beings are fundamentally made of body and mind. Therefore, the exclusive true existence is the blend of both these conditions complementarity. Where literature is the mirror of true reality. Das’s prose fictions archive the same intentions of literature. Das, in his essay “The Bengali Novel Today,” states:

The novels and short stories disappoint us not because they are, as I have felt, the nurslings of brief morality, but because they have conceived and written by authors, who, though talented and in many ways adequately equipped, lack nevertheless the substantial experience (and so the requisite material) and the surprising imagination that a great novelist brings to bear upon his subject. (Bandyopadhyaya, 2021, p. 123)

In fiction, the ‘substantial experience’ and ‘surprising imagination’ are essential. In *Purnima*, the writer's actual experiences and imaginary faculties are not separate; they are in a complementary relationship. In the same essay, Das also writes:

Nor can a novel hope to become outstanding or even significant in proportion to the quantity of important human experience that it hooks in. It is not the extent of experience that will tend to make a novel great, but the requisite vision and intellect of the novelist even though his experience is somewhat restricted and material at his command scarcely anything more than diversified autobiography.” (Bandyopadhyaya, 2021, p. 125)

Das himself was conscious ‘of important human experience.’ Therefore, ‘the requisite vision and intellect of the novelist’ are essential and are very much represented in *Purnima*. Here, the reflection of true existence is ‘the requisite vision and intellect’ in the language of Das himself; therefore, *Purnima* is the writer's ‘internalised and evolving life story’- through *storying self* in fiction.

Conclusion

The story of *Purnima* depicts the wretched consequences of poverty, suffering, and negation caused by society. The protagonist, Santosh, is the victim of that very social system that keeps him a failure, senseless, and incapable man of lost identity, representing the 'personal impression' of the writer. The fiction reflects the depression period of the 1930s, the writer's struggle in real life, his unstable abode, uncertain job, and unhappy marriage, thus demonstrating a similar situation of a tormented life of the writer himself. Clinton B. Seely, in his book, *A Poet Apart: A Literary Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibanananda Das (1899-1954)*, claims Das's later prose writings, *Malyaban* (1948) and *Jalpahiati* (1948), as "in many ways fashioned out of the truth of his own life" (Seely, 1990, p. 234). Likewise, *Purnima* is 'in many ways' an early autobiographical interpretation of the writer and, simultaneously, a biographical text depicting the detailed life of his close relations. The characters' voices in the fiction are the internal sense of the contemporary time, human Das, and his external outburst, therefore, represent a *narrative identity*- the fiction as a private exercise, a text of 'substantial experience' and 'surprising imagination' of Das, which manifests the interconnection between reality and fiction through the *storying self*.

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