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EUROPEAN POETS AS REFLECTED IN HIS BENGALI  
TREATISE ON POETRY ENTITLED *KOBITAR KOTHA***

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**Abstract**

Creativity is the soul of art. Imagination is a medium for the cultivation of creativity; it serves as an agent to create and recreate. Matter and form find their expressions in the act of creativity. Poetry is the epitome of creativity. Jibanananda Das is a representative of poetry – a great modernist Bengali poet. He belonged to a period which was still marked by the towering impact of great Tagore. His kind of poetry could not conform to Tagore's poetry of romanticism and spiritualism. His unorthodox and experimental approach to creativity had to negotiate with the contemporary modernist trend of poetry of Europe. He made an intellectual proximity with French symbolists and European poets. He had to take refuge to the surrealist thought to explore into dream which found its unfoldment outside the familiar reality of sensation. In the process his poetic self came to terms with the layers of the supra-reality. His treatise on poetry entitled *Kobitar Kotha* reflects his creative insight into things and matters. His profound understanding of the subtlety of poetry is manifested in the treatise. The treatise demonstrates the threads into the weaving of poetry with references to European poets and

literary critics. Importance is laid on the creative imagination for the birth of poetry. The paper in question seeks the kind of integrating force of imagination that brings about a judicious fusion of the solidity of experience and the essence of thought. Poetry, aided by this imaginative faculty, discovers the cosmic force of human universe. The paper offers a glance at how *Kobitar Kotha* explores the nuances and the matrix of poetry in general.

Keywords: *poetry, verse, imagination, fancy, history, time, myth.*

Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) is a modernist Bengali poet par excellence. His poetic credo is built on his subtle awareness of poetic textures of Bengali poetry as well as English poetry. His deep knowledge of poetic subtlety inherits from his study of the growth and the evolution of poetry as a whole. His knowledge of the creative works of European poets is obvious. He keeps himself updated with contemporary Bengali poetry simultaneously. His Bengali treatise on poetry named *Kobitar Kotha* written in 1938 bears witness to his intimacy with the poetic cosmos of European poets. His literary attitudes towards such poets are reflected in *Kobitar Kotha*, which epitomizes his poetic credo too. In the treatise, poet Das reiterates that all are not poets; some are poets; they are poets as they most importantly possess the kind of imagination integrating judiciously experience with the solidity and essence of thoughts which together enable them to get enlightened by poetic visions both newer and centuries old; they by virtue of this specific imagination tend to be creative and then compose poems after coming to terms with the discovery of subtleties and complexities of human universe.

Das lay emphasis on experience along with imagination for the birth of poetry. This experience has its source in wisdom and intellect. Wordsworth also thinks in the same line. He is of view that the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time; the objects of the poet's thoughts are everywhere; though the eyes and senses of man are, it is true, his favourite guides, yet he will follow wherever he can find an atmosphere of sensation which allows his wings to move. Das too gives importance to wisdom sprung from experience of intricacies of human

society; when imagination is aided by this wisdom of experience, poetry is evolved. Eliot too in other way round values this wisdom in the form of tradition. It is not a mere tradition of daily affairs. It is perceived by wisdom hidden in history. This sense of tradition gives birth to the sense of history. Eliot argues that tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It procures the historical sense that involves a perception, not only of the pristine of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence. This historical sense, which embodies a sense of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. Eliot further adds that the poet must develop the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career. Eliot's idea of tradition conforms to Das' idea of the sense of history. Das maintains that a poet must possess the sense of time and history. This sense ensures the growth of a poet.

Das isolates poetry from verse. Generally, verse is a metrical composition whereas poetry is an elevated thought and impassioned feeling expressed in specific words. Das elaborates in the treatise the marked difference between poetry and verse not in terms of form and structure but in terms of the treatment and the application of imagination. He believes that poetry is not a deliberate composition charged with the consciousness of all barriers and ethos of versification. He feels within the arrival of a time when all conscious efforts and humility appear to stop functioning in this universe of animate and inanimate matters and the heart kindles like a candle at the backdrop of stillness and darkness which preconditions and stimulates the birth of poetry; when this peculiar moment of experience evaporates, what is born is not the birth of poetry but that of verse. Thus poetry is something of lofty ideas appealing to heart unlike verse which otherwise demands appeal to intellect. According to Das, poetry only upholds beauty divorced from the complexities of community and society; but these elements cannot be the precondition and

requirement of poetry. Such elements, of course, lie hidden in veins of poetry; true readers feel their existence without dampening the scope of relishing creative joy.

Poetry has its own way and role to play. It is conditioned by imagination creative and productive imparting essential pleasure to readers. Imagination is a faculty which transforms the external world in a creative manner. It is a power that enables the poet to overcome the barrier between the particular and the eternal. Wordsworth associates imagination with the creative power. He selects incidents from humble and rustic life for themes of his poetry. He transports a tinge of imagination to make them appear in an unusual light. Imagination is thus a transforming power. It can change the usual and the ordinary in an unusual and uncommon way. Poetry is for Wordsworth the modified image of man and nature; it is the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (Wordsworth 263). The poet seeks to impart the glory and freshness of a dream to ordinary things of nature through the creative faculty of imagination. It serves as an active power of bringing out the images drawn from the lap of nature. To Wordsworth, the mind has two faculties in the form of the passive fancy and the active imagination. Fancy merely reflects the external world. Imagination has the poetic power to construct things anew and invest the natural impressions with a fresh significance. Wordsworth relates truth and poetry through imagination. It is the mental power that transforms the literal to the figurative.

Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) enunciates that poetry brings the whole soul of man into activity, with each faculty playing its proper part according to its relative worth and dignity. Like Das, Coleridge too laid emphasis upon the role of imagination in poetry. He maintains that the integrating power of imagination enables the poet to bring all aspects of a subject into a complex unity. Das differentiates poetry and verse; Coleridge differentiates fancy and imagination. According to Coleridge, fancy is a combinatory power and imagination is a unifying power that possesses creative faculty. Das' idea of imagination conforms to Coleridge's concept of imagination. In this context, Pradyumna Mitra

affirms that Jibanananda gives a higher place to the poetic truth realized by creative power of imagination. Both believe in the creative power of imagination for the birth of poetry.

Das values the creative role of imagination which not too many poets are credited with. To him, W.B. Yeats is not a mere verse-writer. Most importantly poetry in his hand turns the medium of exploring inherent beauty regardless of matter and form. Poetry for Yeats is an elevated dream, not divorced from the vision of an ideal Ireland. It is noteworthy to quote Suheil Bushrui, "Yeats's poetic dream was always uppermost in his outlook on Ireland. The dream was not petrified, but possessed the living quality of change" (Taneja 21). His poetry is the testimony to the creative function of imagination. His poem, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' is the result of the play of creative imagination:

"I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the  
shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements  
grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core."

Yeats' poetic persona finds himself on the grey pavement where the madding crowd tends to tread on. But his yearning heart can hear the lapping sound of the lake, far away from the hue and cry of the gathering people. The creative imagination is at work. It narrows the distances and enables 'the deep heart's core' to give a realistic touch. Thus, Yeats' imaginative faculty integrates real and unreal. In 'The Second Coming' Yeats' imaginative insight can see what disaster is stored for the contemporary modern world:

"A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds."

The modern predicament is drawn in the wake of the 'blank and pitiless' sun to dawn. The 'indignant desert birds' shadow the glow of all human virtues and conviction. Yeats' powerful imagination visualizes the portent

to befall upon mankind in the form of the 'lion body and the head of a man'. His poem, 'The Circus Animals' Desertion' conveys his sense of frustration stimulated by the myth:

“And then a counter-truth filled out its play,  
“The Countess Cathleen” was the name I gave it,  
She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away,  
But masterful Heaven had intervened to save it.  
I thought my dear must her own soul destroy,  
So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,  
And this brought forth a dream and soon enough  
This dream itself had all my thought and love.”

Yeats' nostalgia brings back the memory of his play entitled 'The Countess Cathleen'. Yeats wrote the play for Maud Gonne. The titular character sells her soul to the devil in order to buy food for the starving Irish poor during a famine. She symbolizes Ireland. Yeats' creative faculty integrates myth and history by virtue of play of imagination. It is apt to quote, "Yeats' view of history links it inextricably with myth and legend. History is treated by Yeats as a symbolic expression of the inner conflicts of men and their resolutions" (Bhargava 45). The creative role of imagination plays its part effectively in the poem. Yeats' creative genius exhibits in his poetry the integrating power of imagination at various levels. Yeats in the process is found to be bestowed with Das' kind of creative imagination.

Das believes that every great personality has a specific genius and talent in him; he is well-skilled in his respective field; a poet possesses expertise in the realm of poetry. One should not go to a poet like Yeats or any other poet to solve a thought or a query, rather go to Patanjali or the Vedanta. Similarly one can take shelter of Radhakrishnan, Mahatma Gandhi or Nehru to enquire of a social problem without necessarily taking refuge to the poetry of Tagore. A genius can offer his greatest gift of pure or original form to mankind out of the talent he is endowed with. He should not be expected to contribute something outside the realm of his genius. A poet thus can offer his greatest gift only through his poetry by gratifying the sense of beauty with the application of imagination. Das in

this context refers to Shakespeare; the way each of his plays penetrates into the provinces of human psyche bringing out the essence of human truth is unlike the method of a psychologist; this truth sparks like pearls as if emitting from the ocean of poetry; this truth is like the discovery of stars in another sky cutting across the familiar sky. This speaks of the genius of Shakespeare; here his genius comes from the realm of poetry or plays; but the same Shakespeare if placed on the platform to deliver speeches on Elizabethan society might not have appealed to the listeners like a politician could. The same can be spoken of Tagore.

However, Das indicates that a poet is not forbidden to do different activities other than doing his creative works; there is a subtle border between a creative world and an actual world. A true poet traverses across the said border successfully. Das emphasizes that there is, of course, a thin layer of nexus between poetry and life. Both originate in the same sphere; but life is what reality pertains to; reality is a province wherein chaos and disorder rule; a poet's imagination cannot be applied and gratified fully in the midst of chaos and disorder of reality; his imagination rather creates a newer reality -- a new region which is the embodiment of a new water, a new climate, a new light and a new hope; however, a hidden relation connects both life and poetry; at times life offers some peculiar kind of sound, colour and smell which are otherwise the rarest of the rare to come across; when this uniqueness comes to play under the creative spell of imagination, nothing but poetry dawns.

Das thinks that reading poetry has a distinguished flavour. It has no connection with impartation of mass education. Unlike Arnold, Das never espouses that poetry should essentially be criticism of life. Das thinks that poetry has its own function to play. The aim of poetry cannot altogether be the reformation of society. Das has taken instances of 'King Lear' and the *Balaka* of Tagore, both of which bear no such goal of mass education. However, according to Das, poetry is attached to man and society in two ways; first, great poetry often gives to mankind an indication of creating afresh a newer society or civilization breaking the clot of all incongruities

of this world. The impact of this indication always offers a new lease of life enhancing the scope of vision and progress of all spheres. The more a great poetry gratifies a human mind, the better the civilization. Again poetry is not meant for all; unless people avail themselves of the instinct of gratifying the sense of beauty, they cannot go into the realm of poetry; they cannot enjoy and appreciate the value of poetry; their minds will be preoccupied only with volumes of third-grade poets; to them poetry of greater quality appears to be something out of figments of mere imagination; they are unaware of lasting impact of creative imagination; once they are endowed with this awareness, they will be qualified to glimpse the beauty flowing through the panorama of this universe. In a way, Das implies to mean by great poetry as an art of highest order by virtue of its all-inclusive attributes. Das' such masterly articulation of what poetry is, in some ways, draws it to Philip Sidney's high assumption of the nature of poetry. Sidney's 'Apology for Poetry' was designed to reply to the condemnation of poetry made by Stephen Gosson in his treatise, 'School of Abuse'. In the 'Apology', Sidney argues in favour of poetry that it is the oldest of all branches of learning, being superior to philosophy by its charm, to history by its universality, to science by its moral end, to law by its encouragement of human rather than civic goodness. Great men think alike. Great poets like Sidney and Das endorse the uniqueness and superiority of poetry as a piece of art in an emphasizing manner.

Das is a great modernist poet. He has in him all what attributes to a modernist poet. He acknowledges that Rabindranath Tagore is the most dominating and influencing figure in the domain of Bengali poetry or literature. His impact and influence in literature are hard to evade for any poet and writer. His poetry embodies spiritual, mystic, aesthetic chords upholding universal humanistic values. His poetry is lyrical and pure; diction is often formal; treatment is romantic. However, modernist poetry at large scale does not conform to his kind of poetry. Tagore's long shadow was still casting over the surface of Bengali poetry. However, Das' contemporary poets including Das himself paying tributes to Tagore looked away to contemporary English literature and French symbolists for



their models for poetry. It is observed about his poetry, "It may seem reasonable to summarise here that it also reveals the emerging new patterns as the artistic expressions of a deep tension when the social structure of Bengal was changing and eroding as well as the traditional beliefs of the cultural milieu were in the process of rapid disintegration" (Bhattacharjee 21). Das states in the treatise that contemporary Bengali poets take the path tracked by French symbolists like Stephane Mallarme, Paul Verlaine and great modernist English poets such as Yeats and Eliot.

Das in the treatise has referred to Auden's observation of poetry as a 'memorable speech' dated back in 1935. Auden concludes that poetry is memorable; readers must surrender to the stimulus of the audible spoken word and cadence in all its power of suggestion and incantation; in other words, poetry is something that works its potent effects deep within the reader's psyche. Auden states that similes, metaphors of image or idea and auditory metaphors such as rhyme, assonance and alliteration help further to clarify and strengthen the pattern and internal relations of the experiences described. Das thinks that by this definition of poetry by Auden made in 1935 many memorable prose pieces can also be termed as poetry. He does not acknowledge this definition which does not emphasize on the consciousness of history and time underlying the surface of the poem and the perception of the society by a poet. But these consciousness and perception can only be applied to poetry when it is steered by the creative imagination based on practical wisdom. Das informs that a prose may also be a memorable speech; at times what memorable is all about, cannot be understood and then all that is memorable may not altogether be imprinted on mind. Das rather goes on to say that to perceive the right spirit of poetry, poetry may be defined as an unforgettable speech.

Das then points out that 'cleverness' is often misjudged as an authentic device contributing to stanzas or poetry. Cleverness is indeed the pitfall of New Poetry. Of course, there is the regular flow of images, symbols and varying moods in such poetry. But the missing point is the lack of steady current of ideas behind such moods and emotions; the spirit

of beauty, the foremost essence of poetry, is dimly visible. Das finds out this cleverness frequently manipulated in contemporary Bengali as well as English poetry. He urges that even a good number of compositions of Auden, Spender, MacNeice is manufactured by the way of cleverness. He then refers to 'The Waste Land' of Eliot as a great poem which is far away of any kind of manipulation of cleverness in it.

In essay *Ki Hisabe Shashwato* (How Immortal), Das has talked about Dante and Shakespeare and the kind of their impact on literature and people of generations of readers as well. A poet is involved in creativity with full consciousness of his contemporary period. But the time reflected in poetry often transcends its contemporaneity. Dryden or Johnson used to pay added importance to their time while dealing with creative writings. But they even did not realize the scope of the universal time in a creative composition cutting across its relative contemporaneity. Johnson in his critical treatise, 'Preface to Shakespeare', laid stress on the universality of poetry. He regards Shakespeare as the greatest poet who holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life representing the universal truth. Das too acknowledges the universal appeal of Shakespeare who can successfully respond to universal truth transcending the barrier of his own time.

According to Das, Coleridge was the first critic who first realised the value of an absolute time that could be brought into a meditation encompassing his own age and its preceding ages extracted from poetry of different ages. To Coleridge, the synthesizing power of imagination gives birth to poetry. He maintains that imagination is creative, while fancy is not; imagination is of two kinds: primary and secondary; the primary imagination is simply the power of perceiving the object of sense, while the secondary imagination is a shaping and modifying power that can dissolve, diffuse and dissipate in order to recreate. Das is aware of Coleridge's potentials as a critic who makes psychological approach to literary problems.

In the essay *Adhunik Kobita* (Modern poetry) Das reiterates that it is possible, a poem can be modern in any given period. Unlike Thomas Moore, Arnold and Eliot, Das thinks that Shelley's poetry exhibits the potential to survive two decades or even a century; his poetry upholds the spirit of the early phase of the nineteenth century. Most critics and scholars espouse his poetry to be modern even today. Critics are different in their ways of thinking; their tastes are different. Likewise, poets too are different and so are readers. Again Coleridge, Eliot and Pound are not too different as critics when it comes to the attitude and experience. Das believes that many poems fail to uphold and realize even its own time; on the other hand, compared to the preceding and former poets with the exception of Tagore, Valery and Yeats, some modernist poets have succeeded to exhibit the contemporary time distinctly and truly. *Kobitar Kotha* thus serves as a testimony to the uniqueness and the solidity of Das' creative vein. His profound understanding of the art of poetry is manifested. The treatise brings to light Das' updated awareness of the creativity of European writers and his intellectual attitude towards them as well.

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