

“The Last Tram Has Gone”: The Sense of Belongingness and Transcendental Homelessness in the Literary Works of Jibanananda Das

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Abstract

Jibanananda Das remains one of the major post-Tagore literary personas whose works are still open to interpretation. Torn between nurturing literary aestheticism and the responsibility to be a bread-earner, the complex dichotomy of Das' life has shaped his writings significantly. The fictional writings also guide towards the complex labyrinth Das himself is. Like a mysterious kaleidoscope, he reflects light in the unexplored regions, and his writings bear the paradox a modern man faces when he is homeless. Likewise, according to György Lukács, the philosophical term “transcendental homelessness” expresses the yearning for a soulful and emotional home that is no longer available in this world. Nonetheless, Das' oeuvre carries a fervent longing to be at home everywhere, and the yearning to find roots in a time of restlessness has left a permanent mark on his personal life as well. The identity crisis and alienation from society have forced him to continuously search for belongingness in a world full of fragmentation. Das' alienation and innate desire to belong somewhere in Bengal portray the finest example of transcendental homelessness, which is evident in his collection of poems and stories. This research aims to study the inherent urge of Das to be at home everywhere and the sense of belongingness illustrated in his poems and stories.

Keywords: Bengali literature, isolation, migration, home, rootlessness

Home.

A word that, in English or Danish, is spoken with a final clamping down of the lips, like windows shutting, as if what was contained was nothing but space. (Khair 195)

Jibanananda Das (1899-1954), who is considered as an avant-garde by his contemporaries, has been appropriately called “the lonely poet of the loneliest of poets” (qtd. in Al-Mahmud). Das has effectively illustrated the beauty of Bengal and various other themes through unconventional uses of imageries, motifs, symbols, and punctuation marks in the light of geographical, environmental, and mythological zones in his writings. He transcends time and culture altogether by expressing the longing to belong and be at home wherever he resides, from both conscious and unconscious senses, which is inseparable from his writings. The urge to belong wherever he goes but the failure to achieve this are consequently reflected in his writings through the use of nostalgia, alienation, and transcendental homelessness. This research paper will study this inherent sense of transcendental homelessness and



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belongingness in the literary works of Jibanananda Das. Before characterizing Das’s sense of belongings, however, it is important to offer a theoretical frame of home and homelessness.

Home represents the place a person lives in – the place in which he/she is most at ease. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud states that the house can be compared with the “genitals of the dreamer’s mother” (435) as a dream symbol, and Oliver Marc further stresses the idea of the mother’s womb as the foundational point of the house (Talu 129). Thus, it can be assumed that each person nourishes an inborn sense of home in childhood, which blossoms into a yearning for shelter in adulthood.

In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin classify linguistic “homelessness” as “the defining feature of the fiction of the margins, the colonial and postcolonial peripheries, the fiction of the outsider and the exile” (qtd. in Moir 7). In the same line, György Lukács, in *The Theory of the Novel*, proposes the idea of transcendental homelessness, which articulates the craving for the transcendental home that is no longer accessible in the modern fragmented world.

According to Etoroma, home is “a physical or nonphysical place or situation with which one identifies and where one is and feels *unconditionally accepted*” (qtd. in Simonis 16; emphasis added). Since the innate sense of home comes with motherhood, the home is “Heimlich” or familiar in our sense when it is related to nature and harmony. On the other hand, an urban home can be defined as “unheimlich” or otherworldly, as this kind of home is detached from the symbolic nature of the mother’s womb. As a result, the contemporary human being longs to return to “the home” even if he is at home, which is displeasing. Nilüfer Talu argues that this in-betweenness produces a “paradoxical homelessness,” which is transcendental in both the metaphorical and philosophical sense (7). Nostalgia, belongingness, homesickness, homelessness, memory – several terms flood uninterruptedly with the idea of home, overlapping but quite related to each other. Homesickness is more about location or space, where nostalgia is more about time, especially a moment in the past that is viewed as perfect and ideal. Homesickness is defined as “the conscious or subconscious longing for the home” (Ismail 88), and it “captures the hauntedness of space in a dislocated self” (Ismail 87).

The notion of homesickness is connected to the concept of transcendental homelessness. The main distinction between the two is that the latter transcends the former. György Lukács stresses the urgency of the soul as “blind impetuousness” (*The Theory of the Novel* 87) to be at home everywhere. Hence, transcendental homelessness enunciates the true longing for the Edenic moment after exile, banishment, or migration. According to Kun, this homelessness constructs an “artificial whole” (79) to cope with this fragmented world, but the desired organic totality cannot be achieved in this illusory sense of wholeness.

Das’ home can be located across the political divide. Das was born in 1899 in Barishal (which later became part of East Pakistan and then Bangladesh) and died in 1954 in Kolkata, India. Barishal is embraced by the Bay of Bengal, various rivers and canals, and the great Sundarban forest, which make it a nourished land of natural resources. As a

student of English Literature, he was aware of the style of world literature and applied new form and essence in his writings which have been ridiculed and taunted massively by the contemporary writers and poets. Das' early published poetry portray his unconditional love for the undivided Bengal, which he adores as a lover his beloved, and his later poems assemble the fragmented and broken states of divided Bengal. However, Das' unpublished stories and novels, which bear an autobiographical touch, are little known. All the writings of Das carry the inner nostalgia and loneliness of their creator, which he had not been able to escape in his lifetime. He expressed his desperation and yearning to find his true home to have a perpetual presence amidst the nature of Bengal through the poem "Go Wherever You Please": "Go wherever you please – I'll stay on in Bengal" (J. Das, *The Beauteous Bengal*, trans. Majumder 18). Lukacs claims that all and sundry have an innate sense of belonging somewhere that is lost, and the ultimate resolution of human life lies in the fact of finding this place all over again (Young 4). The Freudian idea of the mother's womb being the innate home for everyone can be signified in this sense.

Besides, in the poem named "Beautiful Bengal," Das expresses explicitly the desire to find his roots again at the banks of the Dhanshiri river through these lines,

Perhaps not as a human – maybe as a white-breasted
Shankachil or a yellow-beaked *shalik*. (trans. Alam 51)

Das, throughout his life, kept searching for the place where he belongs, and his literary works represent his search. The innate sense of belongingness continuously pulls Das towards the nature of Bengal, which is why Das wants to return, even if as a reincarnated soul in various regional and natural figures.

At his childhood home, Das has been accepted and loved unconditionally, and he has endured from a sense of transcendental homelessness even when he has been at home in Bengal which he illustrates in his "A Day Eight Years Ago" poem. In this poem, despite having his wife and children beside him, the protagonist longs for death and commits suicide. In an unpublished poem, Das articulates his fascination with Buddha and his home-leaving,

As if new Buddha is being born anywhere
– having this thought in mind, I am walking (qtd. in Zaman 134; trans. mine).

Here, the desire to leave his home yet his constant yearning for affection create disharmony in his life. The contradiction between modern man's crisis about the desire to return home and the feeling of dissatisfaction at home has haunted Das till his last breath. The scattered use of punctuation marks, dash after dash, perhaps indicates Das' perpetual journey. Salman Rushdie pinpoints the people as Das as "semi-detached" (Rushdie, *The Ground* 72) who have no strong feelings for family and consider home from a "scattered, damaged" viewpoint (Rushdie, *East West* 93). In this regard, Sumita Chakrabarti reasons that, with the "silence-camel" imagery, Das presents the protagonist's sense of homelessness, which is peeking through the windows of the home (trans. in Dangar 19). He has remained semi-detached, yet he desires dearly to be united with nature which can only quench his thirst

for belongingness. Home is the Foucauldian heterotopia for Das, where he once belonged, but it turned into an "unreal real" place for him. Nature has replaced the place of his family and, accordingly, turned it into his true home, which will embrace him lovingly with all of his scars and distresses. Nature, thus, turns into the artificial whole, which consoles him in his broken state, but ultimately Das cannot reach the totality he has aimed for. Belonging neither here nor there, he roams like a modern man in a fragmented world, wishing frantically for homeliness. His desperation for homeliness is articulated in the much-loved and -discussed poem "Banalata Sen," about a mysterious woman figure whose eyes are compared with a bird's nest. Here, the nest is the literal translation of what Das originally meant by transcendental homeliness. This suggestive metaphor emphasizes his ecofeminist sense where nature and woman, idiosyncratically, harbor the shelter for a homeless person. The eyes of Banalata are the mid-point where reality and unreality, possibility and impossibility, the sense of home and unhome, belongingness and estrangement blend. But it is a matter of great irony that he has failed to receive the shelter of a bird's nest in his marital life. Just as "all birds come home" (Seely 130), Das has returned to Banalata, the imaginary soothing persona, to get the comfort of home. As home misses its inhabitants, Banalata has longed for Das and enigmatically asks, "Where have you been so long?" (Seely 130). From ancient Asoka to current Natore, his journey can be compared with the journey of Buddha who has been looking for "a moment's peace" (Seely 130) and the urge to embrace peacefulness has made him tiresome. The damaged concept of home has prevented him from terminating his journey, yet he cannot shake off the desire for a home where he belongs and pens, "There remain only darkness and, sitting face to face with me, Banalata Sen" (Seely 130). The sense of home and belongingness are also portrayed in the "If I were" poem, where the poet craves to reside inside "a solitary nest" (Alam 69), by forming the figure of a wild gander, with a wild goose. The repeated mention of the word "nest" in several poems suggests Das' perpetual longing for home, where he belongs.

On the other hand, Fakrul Alam notes that by the time Das published his *The Darkness of Seven Stars* (1948), the Second World War, Partition, the Great Depression, violence, riots, and catastrophic events had taken place and his poems also transform into different layers. A sub-continent that was falling apart has been illustrated in the different poems of Das with a bitter tone. In the poem named "1946-47," he writes about the chaos, riots, and diaspora after the Partition of Bengal. Alam further notes that Das himself has been forced to migrate from Barishal to Kolkata, which halts his physical attachment to his childhood home (115). Das expresses his viewpoint:

They still blend with darkness,
Hoping to savor sunlight again. (Alam 115)

The sufferings due to the diaspora and the devastating aftermath become alive in Das' writing as he is a victim also. The rootlessness, diaspora, poverty, and the ongoing communal riots in Kolkata are enough to make a person feel homeless, and Das has been greatly affected due to his obsession with nature. He laments for the home to which he once belonged but cannot touch in the present time. As a result, "a thirdspace, and a third

phase, a dimension” is formed where Das fights, struggles, and fumbles only to create a “hyphenated” self (Ahmed 107). He portrays his numbness in his “path to endless pain”, where there is “nothing to look forward to” (Alam 105).

Unlike Das’ poems, his fictional works mainly tell the story of his personal life in disguise. Even from the recollection of various editors of Das’ manuscript, Labonno Das, Jibanananda Das’ wife, flatly refused to publish his first novel *Malyoban* after his death (L. Das 11). Their marital life was a failure and it is one of the main reasons for Das’ anguished experiences at home. In his poems, he repeatedly articulates his desire to be united with nature and his fictional works carry the hidden answer of his obsession with a non-physical entity as a defense mechanism.

In an article named “My Mother,” Das articulates the pleasant childhood memories associated with homeliness and nostalgia. The sense of home and motherhood are blended in his mind as his mother renders security and shelter like home. As the mother was the initial home for Das, his comfort zone also circles around the mother-figure and nature. His mother used to work till midnight and Das conveys his sleepy excitement on his mother’s return thus: “When my mother comes, I will sleep” (Das, *Samagra* 399; trans. mine). The dreamy and surreal moment of Das’ drowsy state is mingled with the lullaby of birds, his mother’s taking care of him, and asking about his well-being in the dim light of the lantern. Home, therefore, turns into the emblem of “peacefulness” in that hazy light and many years later, an adult Das wonders “if any peace conference can bring back the magnificent gatherings” (Das, *Samagra* 399; trans. mine), which his mother and other women have in need. Das recalls the memories of those comfortable days in the “Oghraner Sheeth” story, “Mother calls to the kitchen after returning home. Warm rice awaits at that time” (Das, *Collection of Fifty Short Stories* 469; trans. mine). He fantasizes about his ideal home which will be adorned with “wildwood, different kinds of *jhumko lota*, *kunja lota* and *aparajita*” (qtd. in Zaman 229; trans. mine) in his novel *Karubashana*. Another story “Kobita aar Kobita, Tarporo Kobita” articulates the dream of possessing a warm home, “a one-storey house in the remote area of Kolkata, reading space, some wooden chairs and table, carpet and numerous books – will write, read and smoke a cigar ...” (qtd. in Zaman 102, trans. mine). Similarly, the stories “Paliye Jete” and “Jamrultola” also express the dream of a happy sleepy evening at home. Das longs for the simplistic rural life where his wife will adore and love her husband unconditionally and the home will be decorated with “playfulness, amusement, sleep, elegiac dedication, woeful tears, and satisfaction” (Das, *Fifty Short Stories* 549, trans. mine). But it is a matter of great regret that Das only gets woeful tears and sadness from his apparent home, without any feeling of satisfaction. He had been searching for the life of an artist in every sphere where he could nourish his aesthetic soul by writing and reading. But poverty and dissatisfied marital experiences snatched away his lifelong dream of leading a content domestic life. Thus, the physical sense of home has been replaced by the non-physical entity, “nature,” by Das. The protagonist of *Karubashana* has grieved about this nourishment of the aesthetic soul: “always the eagerness to create art ... is an inherent sin” (qtd. in Zaman 103, trans. mine). Das has labeled the artist as abnormal and illegal in this novel, who neither savors nor can

run the domestic life, indicating his discontentment with life. Despite being an educated being, he suffers greatly from an identity crisis greatly because of poverty and misery. In the same way, the protagonist of another novel, *Pretinir Rupkotha*, laments that he should have been at least an electric mechanic but passed his MA in English Literature instead and "has lost the homely life by doing these" (qtd. in Zaman 104, trans. mine).

In the short story "Kinnorloke," neither Das nor his alter ego, the protagonist Subodh, achieve domestic affection. Das has expressed his desire through Subodh to live a lovable life as "the life of a cricket near the breast of a she-cricket!" (Bandyopadhyay 29). The feelings of "unhomeliness" have gradually pushed Das from his home towards nature, but it does not erase the desperation to be at home everywhere. Das has searched for his home till his last breath, for which he has wanted to be reincarnated even after death, taking the forms of a glow-worm, an orange, a white hawk, a *shalik* bird, a crow, a white heron, a young girl's pet duck, and many other regional and natural figures in his writings. According to Hinduism, one person can emerge as reincarnated souls in various forms after death, which Das has illustrated in his various writings. He accepted reincarnation as a way to return to the banks of Bengal, as only this replaced notion of home can attain "moksha" or the ultimate bliss. Though moksha liberates one soul from the cycle of rebirth and death, the true happiness of Das lies in his joining with the natural world, even as a reincarnated soul. This desperation indicates the sense of belongingness of Das to his home, which is the natural world of Bengal. In the "Oshwather Daale" story, the protagonist fantasizes himself again as an unmarried person who lives by himself in a book-adorned secluded room but again misses the affection by imagining two owls as a couple. Das' married life had continuously hurt him, made him hate his home life, but the bitter marital years could not erase the longing for "the great, holy simplicity" of life, in Lukács' words (Lukács, *Soul and Form* 74). Poverty, unemployment, and a loveless life gradually squished all the essence of Das' artistic soul. The passing days of hunger at boarding have become alive through Das' pen as he ate distasteful and cheap food day after day. He collected those miserable moments in his diary, "Literary Notes": "Heat, little sleep at noon ... can't spend more than 3 pice" (qtd. in Zaman 69). These depressed days have been outlined in the novel *Biva* where the protagonist fantasizes being a swallow to eat the cake and cookie from the neighbor's home. Gradually, Das reaches the absolute point of life at the time of his death while searching for soothing homely circumstances and failing to achieve them.

In the story named "Mangsher Klanti," the husband creates a new washroom for his displeased wife, who looks at the house, disgusted, and says, "Look at the style and appearance of the home! Thatched roof, ghastly walls, without the strength of cement" (Das, *Fifty Short Stories* 38; trans. mine). All of Das' novels and short stories carry the personal trace of the author, which may be labeled as "diversified autobiography" (Mitra 70) where he repeatedly and deliberately arranges his plots in the same edifice. The protagonists are usually male and are trapped in unhappy marriages indicating, the life of Das, and the wives are usually full of cynicism and bitterness. The wife laments to her husband in "Paliye Jete" that they do not have a gramophone, wooden table, chairs, or other luxurious items in their home while the husband silently agrees to this accusation. In addition, through

his protagonist, Das claims his passing domestic life as “cremation” (qtd. in Mitra 37) in *Malyoban*. Life has long been dead to him; the sense of a soothing, homely life has been replaced by the spiraling tongue of resentment and pessimism.

Likewise, Das keeps searching for the blurred sense of home from Barishal to Kolkata, that he articulates in his novel *Jalpaihati*. The protagonist, Nishit Babu, has no idea that he is now in India, not Pakistan, after the division of Bengal. The feelings of migration which Das felt has been expressed through his characters.

Das’ protagonist questions hauntingly, “What is there for me in the home?” (qtd. in Salekeen 200, trans. mine). Yet the desire to belong in the shelter of nature remains eternally in Das. The transcendental homelessness and the constant craving for belongingness create at the end an enormous void in Das from which he cannot escape. The overwhelming effort to form the fragmented simplicity into wholeness ultimately carries the signature tone of Das’ magical yet enigmatic writing.

As Gomez-Peña reasons, “Home is both ‘here’ and ‘there’ or somewhere in between. Sometimes it is nowhere” (qtd. in Simonis 15). There is an enormous gap between the imaginary and real existence of Das’ home. His imaginary home, nature with its soothing shelter, always remains “somewhere” in his mind, although the supposedly real home evaporates from his mind gradually. The duality in his desire to belong to the natural world of his beloved Bengal and the inability to be happy in the alleged home forced Das to suffer from alienation, rootlessness, and identity crisis. His diversified autobiographical writings are the testament of his perpetual melancholy for being in a marginalized position where he finds himself in the state of “not-belonging” anywhere. Just like attaining “Nirvana,” according to Buddhism, will eradicate earthly sufferings, it seems that Das will also receive the highest state of enlightenment by coming back all over again to the shores of Bengal. The spiritual home where his soul belongs eternally dwells in the greenery of nature, and Das nourishes “the wish to sit calmly somewhere” (qtd. in Salekeen 139; trans. mine) and remains as the modern transcendental homeless person who belongs truly to nature.

“Terrible suffocating prison” (Mitra 184) is how Jibanananda Das has perceived his homely life in his diary. The struggle for identity, disorientation, and rootlessness in a time of fragmentation tires Das so much that his death remains itself an enigmatic event. Whether it is self-destruction or an accident, the mystery is not resolved even after many years. As Clinton B. Seely observes, Das wants to come back again and again “in person and poetry” (J. Das, *The Scent of Sunlight* xii) in Bengal, where the bottle green hues and the darkness of nature and the singing of birds construct the ambience of the land into something beautiful and enigmatic. As Das states, “I move towards *a twilight world* – in my head” (Alam 29; emphasis added). This twilight world is nothing but his desired home where he will not be a stranger anymore. The sense of not belonging haunts him until his last breath. “The last tram has gone” (Alam 132) and Jibanananda Das has left his readers to reach his final destination where his heart resides peacefully. The desire to be at home everywhere he goes haunts him significantly and that is where his inspiration came from. “The overwhelming sensation” (Alam 29) to belong with loved ones, which

he cannot evade, and the frustration to achieve it – this dualism ultimately makes Das a modern transcendental homeless person. Looking for his roots in a broken world, Das truly belongs to nature, the birds, and the flowers of Bengal in the long run. For him, home means a soothing, solitary rural room full of numerous books where the singing of birds would always accompany him. At the end of the day, Das yearns to be united again and again with nature, even embracing it as his own home, as the world cannot offer him anything more beautiful and soothing other than the face of Bengal.

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