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Jibanananda Das's "Banalata Sen": An Utter Mystery

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Abstract:

Jibanananda Das in "Banalata Sen" (1934) sketches an image of a mysterious identity, Banalata Sen-the mystery yet to explore, and ubiquitously this mystery blooms from the bud and reaches its intensity. The poet, with inveterate hands, blends the natural elements and the occult beauty of Banalata Sen as well as seeks all the ancient historical elements and all the beauties of the world within her. The use of hyperbolic imageries in the poem makes her mystery more intensive. These imageries create confusion- may be Banalata Sen is the beloved of the poet or may be the aeon. Banalata Sen appears before the poet in dark weather, her hair is piquant dark and she gives solace to the tormenting soul of the poet sitting face to face when darkness arises and so, she appears as the dream beloved of the poet. However, she has all the healing powers of the world, and in this way, she exceeds the identity of an ordinary woman and appears to be the beloved of all human beings in the long run of their life. This paper will problematize the mysterious identity of Banalata Sen and reinforcing the idea that "Banalata Sen" is the embryonic creation of Jibanananda Das, not influenced by "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" by John Keats or "To Helen" by Edger Allan Poe.

Keywords: Aeon, Banalata Sen, beloved, identity, mystery, poet.

Introduction:

"Banalata Sen" by Jibanananda Das is about a mysterious identity. In this poem Banalata Sen appears both in abstemious and veiled, distant and close, eternal and ephemeral, real as well as unreal form in front the languid poet--a wayfarer of thousand years, and a pursuer of tranquility. The poet first describes his long journey in quest for peace from the antique places of Sinhala's sea, Malaya's bay Vimbisar, grey world of Ashok, the city of Vidarba and then finds shelter in Banalata's beautiful eyes. The darkly weather when the two meet, makes Banalata's mystery more adorable as the poet can perceive her pulchritude even in that darkness. Again, the poet sits face to face with Banalata when all the lights of the world go down, all birds come back to their nests, and all the rivers return back to their hove. All these images plunge readers into the realm of mystery and secrecy that lead to a series of questions- being a woman how can she hold all the elegance of ancient time? How can she charm the poet through her eyes even in opaque situation? How can her eyes play the role of abode like bird's nest? How can she wait eagerly for the poet who is unknown? How can she yammer for not meeting her for a long period of time? All these questions confute the identity of Banalata Sen--either she is the dream beloved of the poet or the very blissful eternity who knows every human being and always waits for them to provide ultimate shelter and eternal tranquility. The aim of this paper is to focus on the mysterious identity of Banalata Sen and to show that her mystery is created only through the archetypal thinking of Jibanananda Das.

Banalata Sen--the Beloved of the Poet:

Jibanananda Das in "Banalata Sen," shows his intense love towards his dream girl Banalata Sen as if he waited for her for a long time. He is in quest of peace in the restless and chaotic world--the world full of obstacles and thorny paths. As the poet faces hindrances in his way, so, as a peace seeker and as a passionate lover, he wants to break all the obstacles and weed out thorns of his way. To do so, he needs a companion who can accompany him and together they can end all the sufferings of post war world. In search of this companion, he has made a tiresome journey in the world. His journey through out the turbulent world is so much arduous that it seems to him a journey of thousand years. The poet is afflicted and agonized. Hence, he searches for true love in the greater space of history and geography. He says, "হাজার বছর ধরে

আমি পথ হাঁটিতেছি পৃথিবীর পথে” (Das 1) (“For thousands of years I walked the ways of the world”; Alam 1).

Roaming around the world for the sake of his cherished beloved, the poet is tired. He is aware that only Banalata can give him solace. In the past he got moments peace in Banalata. Then there is the passage of time. Now the poet is in ardent pursuit of Banalata, “আমি ক্লান্ত প্রাণ এক, চারিদিকে জীবনের সমুদ্র সফেন,/ আমারে দু- দণ্ড শান্তি দিয়েছিল নাটোরের বনলতা সেন।” (Das 5-6) (“I, a tired soul, around me, life’s turbulent, foaming ocean,/ Finally found some bliss with Natore’s Banalata Sen”; Alam 5-6). The motive of this long tedious journey is to find out the soul mate for whom he is waiting for a long period, who can pacify him through a moment’s presence. This desire of the poet finally comes true when Banalata Sen of Natore appears before him and provides him peace with her “পাখির নীড়ের মতো চোখ” (Das 12) (“bird’s nest eyes”; Alam 12). Her presence occludes the tiresome peregrination of the poet surrounded by “জীবনের সমুদ্র সফেন” (Das 5) (“life’s turbulent, foaming ocean”; Alam 5). Though the mitigation of Banalata is too short, the poet finds some soothing moments within this period.

As an ardent admirer, the poet finds all the paramount beauties of the world within Banalata Sen. It seems that all the stunning objects of the world are inadequate for the poet to describe the Hellenic beauty of this long-awaited beloved. Banalata is the nebula who lulls the poet for a while from the sufferings of the world. She is the most expected and most awaited one to the poet. Banalata’s pulchritude contains the craftsmanship of Sravasti which is commonly known for its sculptures of Buddha. Again, the hair of Banalata is dark like the darkling history of Vidisha, where tyrant ruler Ashok killed his brother for the crown and also killed people whimsically for asserting his power. The poets says, “চুল তার কবেকার অন্ধকার বিদিশার নিশা,/ মুখ তার শ্রাবস্তীর কারুকার্য ;” (Das 7-8) (“His hair is full of the darkness of a distant Vidisha night,/ Her face was filigreed with Sravasti’s artwork”; Alam 7-8).

The poet describes his pre-meeting state using the metaphor of a ship wrecked sailor. In a distressed situation where nothing is left for survival, if the sailor finds a green grassed Cinnamon island, what will be his mind state? The same peace is felt by the poet after meeting Banalata in the darky countryside. The heavy wave of the ocean which breaks the rudder of the sailor symbolizes the poet’s tiresome journey which is almost going to be shattered after coming

closer to Banalata. The green grassed cinnamon island is the evergreen desire of all lovers who are in search of their soul mates for attaining heavenly bliss through their love. As the poet is a human being, he is not free from this desire and only Banalata can impart hope what the green cinnamon island does for the rudderless sailor.

অতিদূর সমুদ্রের 'পর
হাল ভেঙে যে নাবিক হারিয়েছে দিশা
সবুজ ঘাসের দেশ যখন সে চোখে দেখে দারুচিনি -দ্বীপের ভিতর ,
তেমনি দেখেছি তারে অন্ধকারে; . . . (Das 8-12)

As in a far-off sea,
The ship-wrecked mariner, lonely, and no relief in sight,
Sees in a cinnamon isle sings of a lush grass-green valley,
Did I see her in darkness; (Alam 8-12)

The evidence that Banalata Sen is the beloved of the poet becomes more luminous when he says that Banalata is the eventual harbor to this pathless, aimless, exhausted and fatigue poet. Here one may question about the relationship between the poet and Banalata Sen, that is, as a shelter provider she can be anyone--may be a mother or a sister, not always a beloved. Banalata's question, "এতদিন কোথায় ছিলেন?" (Das 11) ("Where had you been?"; Alam 11) towards the poet abolishes all the ambivalence and shows her passionate love for him. Only a passionate lover can long for his beloved till the ending of the world. As the lover and beloved waited for a long time, the intensity of such strong feeling is quite natural. The poet finds Banalata after a long period, their passion is expressed as "শিশিরের শব্দের মতন" (Das 13) ("the soft sound of dew"; Alam 13), the sound which is heard after a long-awaited session and can only be heard by those persons who really wait for it. After a long separation, when the two lovers meet, what can be more suitable ambience than "জোনাকির রঙে ঝিলমিল;" (Das 16) ("fireflies light up the world anew"; Alam 16). The passionate lovers are eager to sit face to face. Now it is time for gossiping and singing. The worldly matters are now meaningless to them.

পৃথিবীর সব রঙ নিভে গেলে পান্ডুলিপি করে আয়োজন
তখন গল্পের তরে জোনাকির রঙে ঝিলমিল;
সব পাখি ঘরে আসে---সব নদী---ফুরায় এ -জীবনের সব লেনদেন;

থাকে শুধু অন্ধকার, মুখোমুখি বসিবার বনলতা সেন। (Das 15-18)

The world's clors fade; fireflies light up the world anew;

Time to wrap up the work and get set for the telling of tales;

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

What remains in darkness and facing me---Banalata Sen! (Alam 15-18)

The two lovers are quenching their thirst for love delightfully and silently in complete darkness of the world where no worldly matter can hinder their chat of love.

The character who appears before the poet with all the soothing elements is the beloved of the poet and we find the description of this character in other poems and also in a novel named *কারুবাসনা* (*Karubasona*). Here the author utters –“কিশোরবেলায় যে কাল মেয়েটিকে ভালবেসেছিলাম কোন এক বসন্তের ভোরে, বিশ বছর আগে যে আমাদেরই আঙিনার নিকটবর্তিনী ছিল..... সেই বনলতা” (qtd in Habib 2014: 31) (“In my adolescence, the black girl I loved in a spring dawn who lived near our house before twenty years . . . that Banalata”; my trans.). This indication regarding Banalata clarifies that she is not a stranger to the poet but a well-known person who possesses a share in the heart of the poet. Banalata is adolescent love of the poet, unfortunately an unfulfilled one. Losing his love, he has visited different corners of the world to forget the face of Banalata. When all his attempts go in vain, he returns. On his way towards home, he meets his dream girl from whom he was very far for a long period of time. This time the poet finds his true tranquility and true halt of his weary journey. The beloved of the poet soothes him and starts a long-awaited conversation with him in the darkling environment, “থাকে শুধু অন্ধকার, মুখোমুখি বসিবার বনলতা সেন।” (Das 18) (“[w]hat remains in darkness and facing me---Banalata Sen!”; Alam 18).

Banalata Sen, the Aeon:

In “Banalata Sen” the speaker at the beginning exposes that he has been roaming through the world for a thousand years. The speaker seems to be a story teller telling his story on the progress of his journey and his search for his blissful beloved—his sanctuary to his listeners. However in reality, it is quite impossible for any human being to live for a thousand years as the nature doesn't permit any individual to live for this long period of time; in real world the speaker and Banalata Sen both are victims of time, and so, thousand years travelling is nothing but an

imagination. Hence the speaker of the poem certainly is an imaginary character representing the whole human race. We know, the journey of human civilization starts with the beginning of the world and the journey is going on and will continue till the end of the world. So, the first human being, who started his journey in the paths of the world, left space to his next generation, then the next to his next and the process is ongoing. In this way, the journey of the human being does never come to an end, only changes its shapes and wayfarers time to time. Hence the journey of the human being is running “হাজার বছর ধরে” (Das 1) (“[f]or a thousand years”; Alam 1).

Though in this poem “আমি” (Das 1) (“I”; Alam 1) personification is used, there is ample scope to consider the fact that if we all come from Adam, same blood is running in our vein. Subsequently, the journey once he started is in progress through us and will be continued by the human beings who are in the world, who will be in the world. All the human beings are the wayfarers and are in quest for the Aeon. The human beings may have the quest for money, wealth, name, fame, respect etc. For this they travel from one place to another, do tiresome works, make impossible things possible. However, their ultimate goal is to meet that blissful aeon, who can soothe them in their tiredness. Here Banalata is the symbol of unfathomable beauty of the world who has no death, no sufferings, no distress, no harrowing rather has a divine motherly approach who imparts shelter like bird's nest to her fatigue children. Her passionate concern for the speaker implies her existence as a motherly figure who inspires her children in distress and shelters them in her arms. Like the Grecian Urn, Banalata Sen has passed countless centuries; she is free from the destruction of time—she does not die, she does not age—she is above all such worldly concepts. In Keat's “Ode on a Grecian Urn” the speaker describes the Grecian urn as a “Sylvan historian” (Keats 3) that tells the stories of centuries. The pictures depicted in the urn are immortal—the young man playing a pipe, the lover in pursuit of giving a kiss to the beloved, the trees surrounding the lovers, the people going for sacrifice will be “forever warm” (26). Therefore, the lines,

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal--yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (17-20)

Like the eternal objects on the Grecian urn, Banalata is not subject to “breathing human passion” (28), or “A burning forehead, and a parching tongue” (30). She will exist as a symbol of

eternal beauty and teach future generations the enigmatic lesson, “[b]eauty is truth, truth beauty,”—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (49-50). Therefore, this “I” is not the speaker himself rather the human beings in general who have given the eyes to see and hearts to feel different objects through the eyes of the previous ancestors who had seen and observed the affluent cities. Banalata Sen is the symbol of eternal love—a myth. It is not the destructive love of La Belle Dame Sans Merci. Like Yeats’s holy city Byzantium, Banalata Sen is the symbol of peace, tranquility and eternity. She can excel the limit of “[w]hat is past, passing or to come” (Yeats 32).

The speaker in this poem represents each and every human being who is suffering from loneliness, anguish and pain. He does not know where the touchstone is hidden. Accordingly, he starts his journey in the ways of the world. He steps in history, geography, and past. He has travelled from Ceylon water to the Malaya’s sea. He describes that he was in the ancient cities like Vimbisar, Vidisha, and Vidarba. He uses past tense to clarify his past life in the paths of the worlds. He was in the city of Ashoka’s which is now a grey world. He also was in the distant Vidarba, which is now overcast with darkness. These adjectives; grey and darkness, symbolize the conflict between the present time and the ancient time. Here, if the speaker talks about only his own story, it will be a lie. Because it is incredible that a person can go back to the towns which had ruined already. He undoubtedly talks about his ancestors, who were once in those cities and towns and now as a torch bearer of them, the speaker is holding the obligation for them.

Finally, when the speaker meets Banalata, he describes her beauty by recalling his ancestors’ memories who were once lured by different beautiful places of the world. While describing the beauty of Banalata, he brings about the ancestors’ sagacity in her appreciation. By endowing Banalata with all-natural imageries, the speaker universalizes her as the symbol of eternity. Now the question is, if Banalata Sen is a universal figure, why is the use of the geographical location “নাটোর” (Natore) along with the title “সেন” (Sen)? These two words make Banalata’s identity more specific. Hence the readers as well as the researchers spend much time to understand the identity of Banalata--whether real or imaginary. However, another issue should be considered, that is, if Banalata Sen is limited within the geographical location of Natore, will there be ever cherished attraction for her? Definitely, the answer is negative. Because, as long as Banalata belongs to Natore, she has connection with mundane world.

However, the speaker discards this association decorating her beauty with the ornaments of history and past. These imageries used for showing her beauty delimit her from Natore and lead her to infinity.

Banalata appears when all the lights of the world disappear and the sun goes down. The termination of the light of the world symbolizes the termination of life--death. The ancestors of this speaker had to relinquish death. The speaker, just like his ancestors, finds that the sun is setting, all lights of the world are going to be dim, all birds are returning to their nests, all rivers are also returning to sea. Consequently, he is on the verge of finishing his life task and is very close to surrender to the impending death, to the ultimate shelter provider—Banalata Sen, the aeon of all time and of all ages. This Banalata Sen is an ancient sanctuary for all human beings.

Comparative Study:

“Banalata Sen” is an archetypal creation of Jibanananda Das and here, Banalata Sen is the symbol of temporal as well timeless. The poet in the poem reflects Indianness, the extreme passion of the lover and the beloved, and the intense quest of human race for divinity. However, critics sometimes show allegation towards the poet that he was influenced by “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” (1816) by John Keats and “To Helen” (1831) by Edger Allan Poe while writing the poem. Certainly, in case of romantic quest for love, for beauty and in the description of the beauty of Helen and Banalata Sen, there remain some similarities between “To Hellen” and “Banalata Sen.” In “To Helen” the poet discusses the beauty of Jane Stanard in the guise of Helen. In this poem the woman’s beauty is compared with “Nicéan barks of yore,” (Poe 2), the ancient city of Turkey (present name is Iznik). This beauty transports “way-worn wanderer. . . / To his own native shore” (4-5). Likewise, Banalata Sen’s beauty speaks of all the ancient beauties of the world.

But then in theme and in expression of love, these two poems are in polar difference. In “To Helen” we only find the beauty of Helen through some similes and metaphors but the poet’s anticipation for Helen is absent here. Here we can only find the description of the divine beauty of Helen but the passionate love of Poe towards Helen is totally absent. For describing the beauty of the woman, Poe uses mythological figure, Helen. But, Jibanananda Das uses historical, geographical and ancient elements to create a new myth and thus, he surpasses Elan Poe. The

dream lady created by Das is not simple and limited like Poe's Helen, rather she is symbol of solace, life, death, destination, as well as eternity. In this sense the subject matter of Jibanananda's poem is more elaborate and more vivid than that of Poe.

In comparison between these two poems, we find that the "hyacinth hair, thy classic face" (7) of Helen is found as "চুল তার কবেকার অন্ধকার বিদিশার নিশা, মুখ তার শ্রাবস্তীর কারুকার্য;" (Das 7) ("Her hair was full of the darkness of a distant Vidisha night,/ Her face was filigreed with Sravasti's artwork.;" Alam 7) in "Banalata Sen". A very close look will clarify the matter that neither the "hyacinth hair" (Poe 7) of Helen goes with the hair of Banalata which is just like the "অন্ধকার বিদিশার নিশা" ("the darkness of a distant Vidisha night,") nor the "classic face" (Poe 7) of Helen can be compared with the face of Banalata which is just like the "শ্রাবস্তীর কারুকার্য" ("Sravasti's artwork"). Again "অতিদূর সমুদ্রের 'পর/ হাল ভেঙে যে নাবিক হারায়েছে দিশা" (Das 7-8) ("As in a far-off sea,/The ship-wrecked mariner, lonely, and no relief in sight,;" Alam 7-8) of "Banalata Sen" can never be compared with the "weary, way-worn wanderer" (Poe 4) of "To Helen." In the third stanza, the poet beholds Helen or Jane Stanard as a statue holding an agate lamp what Psyche held once. The lamp Helen holds shows Poe the way to his home. But Banalata does not stand as the pole star for the poet rather she shows a way to find a moment of tranquility.

For versatile nature of Banalata Sen, she remains a mysterious figure in the reader's mind just like the dark lady of Shakespearean sonnets. Even now it is a matter of question whether Banalata is the beloved of the poet or the infinity that attracts all human being in the "জীবনের সমুদ্র সফোন" (Das 5) ("life's turbulent, foaming ocean"; Alam 5). This versatile nature is absent in Helen "To Helen."

"On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816) by John Keats is also considered an inspiration for "Banalata Sen" but the two poems have a lot of differences in content, form, structure and in expression of love. The beginning of Keats' poem is to some extent similar to "Banalata Sen." As Keats states;

Much I have travell'd in the realms of golds,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;

Round many western islands have I been

Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold. (Keats 1-4)

Keats writes the poem only to praise George Chapman who translated Homer from Greek to English. The discovery of Homer offers the similar excitement felt by an astronomer who becomes successful of discovering a new planet. The discovery of the astronomer can be compared to the discovery of the cinnamon island by the rudderless sailors of the sea of "Banalata Sen". However, the tiresome journey, the passionate longing for the beloved, the moment of reconciliation with the beloved, the ancient historical elements are absent in this poem "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." Another thing is, anticipation for lover or beloved, one of the notions evident in the literary pieces of Indian Sub-continent, makes love relationship stronger and more affectionate. We find this kind of anticipation in *Red Oleanders* by Rabindranath Tagore where the central character Nandini waits eagerly for the lover. Her statement towards Bishu proves how eagerly she is waiting for her expected soul mate or long-awaited lover. This longing prevalent in "Banalata Sen" is purely Sub-continental and assuredly different from the longing of the European lover or beloved that we find in "To Helen" by Edger Allan Poe and in John Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer."

Conclusion:

Mystery is something inexplicable, unexplainable or unsolvable. Banalata Sen sometimes appears as the beloved of the poet, sometimes as the beloved of the mass, sometimes as the aeon who gives ultimate lodging to all. She descends the readers into the realm of the unfathomable sensuousness where they can explore the beauty of Banalata Sen only by the abet of their sensory organs. All these make Banalata Sen as an utter mystery. This enigmatic identity of Banalata Sen always sinks the readers and will always sink the future readers into the domain of clandestine. She is an avatar like "[h]alf woman and rest is imagination" of Rabindranath Tagore.

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