

# Between the Village and the Void: Spatiality of (Non)Being in Jibanananda Das's 'Tale of City and Village'

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the topological psychodynamics of spatiality vis-à-vis the myriad and complex configurations of subjectivity underpinned by the unconscious dynamics of psychosexuality operative and observable amongst the protagonists in the great modern Bengali poet and author Jibanananda Das's short story 'Tale of City and Village' who find themselves in an impossibly triangulated situation attendant upon the trope of a visit(ation) of/from the past. It concisely and closely examines the unconscious dynamics of fantasy, desire and drive mapped onto the daseinal displacement from the country to the city which answer to the existential void or originary lack in being deploying the theoretico-critical framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis, semiotics, narratology, Russian Formalism, Bakhtinian dialogism, and continental philosophy.

**Keywords:** Being, subjectivity, fantasy, desire, drive, jouissance, displacement, anxiety, pastoral, sublime.

Being-in-the-world<sup>1</sup> is consequent upon being in time and in place. This constitutes the essential chronotope<sup>2</sup> of human existence as well as the (literary) representation of such existence. The being-in-place of an existent very often takes the form of displacement. This paper looks at the destiny of the displaced (urban) being of characters uprooted from the village of their early life in Jibanananda Das's Bengali short story 'Graam o Sohorer Golpo'

translated by Chandak Chattarji as 'Tale of City and Village.'

Prakash and Sachi are a married couple. Both of them used to know Somen when they lived in a village. The village is unnamed in the story, which is perhaps significant. The setting of the story is colonial Calcutta. One winter evening of wind and rain Prakash and Somen run into each other after eight or nine years. Somen accompanies Prakash home, and meets Sachi. Somen flings his mackintosh off 'any which way' and settles down and lights a cheroot. Perhaps this action shows an ability to make himself feel at home anywhere? Or, on the contrary, perhaps a disregard for the sanctity, sociality of homes? 'He's puffing on the cheroot, his eyes closed. He has no intention whatsoever of paying any heed to anything happening anywhere else in the world.' (Das, 9) They don't talk much. At Prakash's gentle nudge, Somen leaves. Prakash falls asleep.

The story is focalized<sup>3</sup> through Sachi's subjectivity. The use of free indirect discourse<sup>4</sup> makes it difficult to decide whether the third-person narrator reports Sachi's perceptions or whether it offers its own independent Olympian view. The sudden meeting after so many years 'makes no difference to Sachi.' (Das, 9). The three sit quietly. Then, at Prakash's signal, Somen leaves. Soon Prakash falls asleep. Sachi opens all the doors and windows. Coming to the window opening on the main road, she takes a look at the Calcutta of the night. '[T]he tramlines lay empty—it's bedtime

for those enormous whales of the road.’<sup>5</sup> (Das, 12) The comparison defamiliarizes<sup>6</sup> the city, turning it into an ocean of wilderness. ‘Two taxis went by like the wind, racing each other—compared to them the bullock cart’s leisure is limitless; in some house a sky-lamp is still on; suddenly the mist in the village [...]—so many things from eight or ten years ago come back to her [...] village nights are so quiet [...]—but there’s no end to such thoughts standing here so late at night clutching the railing of the veranda—thinking destroys their cohesion.’ (Das, 12) It is as if the village enters parting the mist of the past through the doors and windows Sachi has opened and throws her thoughts into disarray.

Sachi is eating. ‘Tonight she feels such a thrill of joy thinking of herself as a completely Bengali girl! Prakash had lived with her in Lucknow all these days—it’s under her constant pressure over the last two or three months that Prakash managed, with great difficulty, to get transferred to Calcutta; she loves Calcutta the most, just because it belongs to Bengal; she probably loves the villages of Bengal even more. She is sitting in the dining room of a flat in Ballygunge; but is it just a dining room? Just Ballygunge? This too is under a Bengali sky—among Bengali streets stars breathing—what vastness inside it! Prakash does not understand any of this.’ (Das, 13). For Sachi, then, the authentic form of being-in-the-world is being-in-Bengal. The imagination of a vast Bengal seems to become a metonym for the whole universe. Prakash, on the other hand, is disdainful towards Bengal and all things Bengali, including Bengali newspapers. Somen supposedly works for such a newspaper.

‘When [Sachi] thinks of Prakash she is reminded of many stations outside Bengal—in winter in rain in the dark a huge overcoat on his body a hat on his head he roamed around with Sachi. [...] That’s when Sachi has liked him the most.’ Sachi likes her husband most when he is outside of, and

standing for something of, Bengal. This apparent contradiction suggests a contradiction within Sachi’s own sense of belonging to the world, that is, her identity. ‘Her husband has given Sachi a lot of freedom.’ (Das 16). Is her attachment to the vastness of Bengal an expression of or a restriction on such freedom?

Somen drops in. He has read a letter written by Sachi to *The Statesman* protesting ‘against the injustice of forcing Bengali girls to marry Sindhi or Gujarati men.’ (Das, 17). Does Sachi’s love for Bengal bear a provincial streak? Somen finds the letter ‘sensuous, sensual,’ which irks Sachi. Somen leaves. After having complained about his remark in a letter to a woman friend, Sachi writes ‘Somen is Bengali forever; he has never gone anywhere beyond this land of Padma and Madhumati.’ (Das, 19). The reader learns that Somen is a poet and has a deep love for Bengal. Belonging to Bengal, thus, seems to bring out the creative self. Sachi thinks that Somen will remain alone. Is being alone the other side of a sense of belonging to Bengal?

‘Somen has come at night.’ (Das, 20) He has come to plead for a job at Prakash’s office. Not finding Prakash home he has gone straight to Sachi’s bedroom. Does Somen violate, intrude upon, Sachi and Prakash’s conjugal space? Prakash comes and takes in the situation. ‘Entering the room Prakash saw Somen on the sofa, his legs spread out, dragging at his cheroot—Sachi standing by the bed with a doleful face.’

‘What did it mean? It could mean anything.’ ‘It doesn’t matter much to Prakash either way.’

‘He has witnessed such scenes involving Sachi very late at night with many other men many other times. But ultimately, nothing goes very far: everything blows away like smoke; Prakash remains Sachi’s husband.’ (Das, 21). It is curious that the conjugal space seems to be built more on

indifference than on trust. 'Not in the bedroom—come, let's talk in the drawing room,' Prakash tells Somen. Eventually, Prakash is unable to get Somen the job. Sachi is surprised and hurt that Somen would plead her husband for a clerk's job in the first place. Prakash tries to get Somen the job but fails. He 'is not the be-all-and-end-all of the office—nor were his immediate bosses—there are sahibs above them—and above everyone was the Bengal government.' (Das, 22) Prakash's feeling of being ineffectual brings out the hierarchical power structure of urban life but also the reality of colonial rule. It is a moot question whether life in the villages is exempt from this reality or whether that is only a pastoral dream.<sup>7</sup>

Sachi is thinking of Prakash and Somen. Somen had done better than Prakash in college, but the latter had gone to England on his uncle's money. Prakash has a knack for winning in the business of life while what Somen wants is not the business of life but life itself. Prakash has gotten around the world while Somen has stayed put in Bengal, for which Prakash has only contempt. Sachi is thinking. 'What her husband really is, what Somen is—in fact what even our life is, thinking of all this makes her feel somewhat entertained—she feels a bit unhappy—a bit happy—some people seem like shuttlecocks—' (Das, 26). Thinking, for Sachi, effects a sense of radical displacement where individuals seem like shuttlecocks, and a radical dislocation of sensibility, where the vision of one's own life becomes an object of grotesque entertainment. '[D]eep in the winter night—Sachi does not understand at all.' She wants Prakash to 'take her to some field in Bengal beside a paddy field inside the drip-drop of dew on the banks of some [...] river, entomb her—oh God, keep her entombed.' (Das, 26) Desire for the village turns into desire for rest, which turns into a desire for cessation of life, a desire for death.<sup>8</sup>

Somen has come after a few days, 'the vagabond of vagabonds.' (Das, 27) 'He keeps coming back to Sachi—preferring afternoons—when Sachi is alone.' (Das, *ibid.*) Sachi tells Somen that it is 'grotesque' to see someone so often after a gap of eight or ten years. Indeed, distance in time and space has an uncanny ability to alter the heart's affections—or not. Somen is lighting his cheroot—'For a moment Sachi felt like a bar girl [...] it was as if Sachi was flashing through Somen's heart for a second like a completely overpriced harlot—overpriced, but one who wants to endear herself, come close—but only for an instant.' (Das, 32) Sachi is overwhelmed by a desire to show herself as she had been, as she had dressed, in her village days. Somen reminds her of a rendezvous in the village, where she had lost her way in a jungle by a river and Somen had come down the river. 'That river—the smell of reeds—night—darkness—constellations—wet sand banks—your cold body ruled my heart for so long—' (Das, 33) Somen feels that repeating those events in words, let alone re-enacting them, 'is far from justified,' for 'You will never get back to that rustic village life [...]—never.' (Das, *ibid.*) Somen has neither taken the path back to village nor contemplated what village life might be like. 'We are not there—we are no longer what we were—.' (Das, *ibid.*) When taken over by 'village lust' by the sight of a leafless shimul tree in blossom he stifles it, in view of 'the needs of a new life—.' (Das, 34) This new life evinces itself as a life deracinated.

Sachi proposes a visit to the village, the village where they lived previously. Somen says 'impossible'. Sachi would want to come back. But Somen wouldn't be able to. '[T]he fact of the matter is, we are not what we were—neither you nor I,' he repeats. (Das, *ibid.*) 'Currently, you have a longing to go on an outing—the same greed that takes people to see the Taj Mahal, [...] maybe you will shed a few tears, embrace me, allow me to kiss you—maybe you will even

weep a little, resting your head on my shoulder—maybe you won't even want to go back again—maybe you will allow me to use you—but that will be for one afternoon Sachi; one somnolent afternoon in the village fields forest can be deadly—or one evening—or one night. The next day at dawn, with one stroke you will swim to the other side of twelve or fourteen years; who will be able to catch up with you? When women change nobody can comprehend them. I can bring about a transformation in myself—in a very permanent way; you, only for the fun of a trip.' (Das, 35)

This outburst is framed by the anaphoric punctuation of 'maybe'—it is Somen's fantasy<sup>9</sup>. The co-ordinates of this fantasy are instructive and partially coincides with Sachi's as well. The impossibility of a permanent return to the village is mapped onto not only the impossibility of sexual union but also in terms of sexual difference. 'This is the difference between men and women,' Somen says as he stands up. As he does so he absentmindedly lets the burning cheroot fall to the ground, an expensive Havana cheroot of Prakash's Sachi had given him to smoke. This little incident brings to the fore Somen's own symbolic castration qua detumescence, his impossible situation, his inability to be a metonymic place-holder for Prakash even as it underscores his anxiety and inhibition in the face of the quasi-perceived desire of the Other...<sup>10</sup>

However, '[f]or this afternoon this Sachi has become the other Sachi.' 'Today he can totally put Sachi to any use of his—Sachi is ready for that, even eager; [...]—the same things that had happened one day on the banks of the [...] river [...]' but '[e]ven to imagine it is pain—even to imagine it is pain.' 'Somen can't tolerate even one more second inside this room. Taking a Havana from the box, he was out on the road in a second.' (Das, 35). Somen is confronted with his castration anxiety in the very event of the

proximity of the object of desire, and lets himself be swept away by the displacing metonymy of his desire—his life—smoking another's cheroot, nursing an affection for another's wife, both beyond his means. The impossibility—or lack—of life in the village and of sexual union with a desired one are superimposed, suggesting an alienation from both life and love—inauthentic being staring down the void of 'a [grotesque?] new life.' The village, described as being deadly, is given a 'sensuous', a 'sensual' tinge, and is transposed off the beautiful pastoral to the more ominous and paradoxical register of the sublime,<sup>11</sup> all the while coterminous with the unimaginable—unsymbolizable—imago of Woman qua real while all the time being contrasted with the potentially grotesque character of urban life.<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES & REFERENCES

Martin Heidegger formulates *Dasein* (being-there) as being-in-the-world where the world worlds itself and makes for a possibly authentic being-with(in)-the world qua being-towards-death.

Mikhail Bakhtin formulates the chronotope as the structuring, ordering principle and operation of time-space (or rather place) in narrative discourse.

Gérard Genette formulates focalization as narrative perspective, which can be internal, external or zero presented by homodiegetic or heterodiegetic narrators. Focalization is a semiotic sophistication of the traditional concept of fictional point-of-view.

Free indirect discourse combines the characteristics and strategies of third- and first-person narration.

'Whale' is a mistranslation of the Bengali word '*hangor*' which means 'shark', which lends an unusually menacing shade to the ostensibly innocuous, gently trundling trams.

The image can, in retrospect, become uncanny, if not quasi-proleptic, for the reader given Jibanananda's untimely, accidental death. He was run over by a tramcar.



Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky's influential thesis of literature (or rather literariness) as the agent of defamiliarization is as much ethico-ontological as formalist. According to Shklovsky the literary often, though not always, defamiliarizes and thus renews and revitalizes experience of habitual(ly) lived reality.

Raymond Williams's argument in *The Country and The City* adumbrating the construction of a utopian, idyllic pastoral imaginary in England as well as its critique by such poets as George Crabbe overlaying the complex and inexorable rise of capitalism not only in the wake of but also predating the Industrial Revolution can usefully be applied generally to colonial and post-colonial India and more specifically to Jibanananda Das's oeuvre which consistently negotiates the country-city dialectic.

Jacques Lacan formulates desire as being necessarily the desire of the Other, the preposition indexing both the subjective and the objective genitive, and as being metonymic vis-à-vis the object cause of desire qua the object *a*. Desire is articulated not only with love, which while also metonymic is at the same time metaphoric, but also with *jouissance* which entail the drives which ultimately entail the death drive which for Freud, among other things, was a desire for a return to an inorganic state of inertial and initial rest and for Lacan, among other things, is the insistence of the (mortifying) signifier within the symbolic order that a subject inhabits.

Lacan gives the following formula or *matheme* for fantasy:

$$\mathcal{S} \diamond a$$

Where the barred subject exists in a relationship of conjunction, disjunction, envelopment, development with the object *a*, i.e. the object (cause) of desire which yields *jouissance*.

Following Sigmund Freud, Lacan elaborates the manifestation of symptom, inhibition and anxiety in a subject along the co-

ordinates of desire and drive. Desire for the obsessional, usually men, is desire for the impossible while desire for the hysteric, usually, women, is desire for the unattainable. A subject's speech and actions are always already symptomatic; a subject's ego is inhibited when confronted with desire (articulated with fantasy) which can take the form of inaction, paralysis, or renunciation; a subject is anxious when the object of desire, possibly also as a desiring Other, comes too close for comfort, insofar as desire is a defence against *jouissance*. Both Sachi and Somen are caught in the inertia of their desire insofar as they are unwilling and unable to accept their symbolic castration qua originary lack in both subject and Other. The Enlightenment thinkers Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke make a distinction between the categories of the Beautiful and the Sublime. What is beautiful affords pleasure and comfort while manifestations of the sublime displace, disturb and dislocate subjectivity. Sublimity in nature at once diminishes and elevates a human, thus challenging, humbling and enlarging their sense of self as belonging with(in) nature. The pastoral is an old *topos* in Western culture, which idealizes and mythicizes life in the country, and is usually represented as a beautiful idyll in literature and the visual arts. Since Jibanananda Das's village in this story comprises not only fields but also a forest where one can get lost and which is felt to be 'deadly' in its influence over human affections and desires, it situates itself not in the register of the pastoral idyll but of the potentially dangerous, threatening, overpowering sublime.

Lacan situates the ek-sistence of the subject along the topologically imbricated coordinates of the real, symbolic and imaginary orders. Sexual difference is real difference and can never be adequately symbolized or imaginized by way of identification. The sexual relation cannot be logically written and therefore there is no such thing as sexual relationship. Woman with a capital W, i.e. as a unitary and universal category, does not exist, and qua

the real Other sex and object a can induce castration anxiety in man. In the story the imaginary categories of village and woman are metaphorically condensed—telescoped—and operate as infinitely displaced impossible objects of metonymic desire.

**Conflict of Interest:** None

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