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The Interplay of Power, Love, and Freedom in Jibanananda Das's “Tale of City and Village”

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Abstract

Aim: *This paper examines the intricate interplay of power, love, and freedom in Jibanananda Das's 1930s short story “Tale of City and Village.” Moving beyond a reductive gendered binary of oppressor and oppressed, the study argues that Das presents power as a diffuse and pervasive force shaping all individuals.*

Methodology and Approaches: *The study adopts a close textual and theoretical approach informed by feminist criticism, socio-historical reading, and Foucauldian concepts of power and biopolitics. Character analysis is used to examine how personal relationships intersect with institutional and ideological forces, revealing the tensions between liberal agency and structural constraint.*

Outcome: *The findings reveal that while the character's exercise limited autonomy in intimate spaces, they remain deeply constrained by broader social systems. Shachi demonstrates a degree of agency within marriage yet remains bound to domestic identity. Prakash, though emotionally supportive, becomes a “docile body” within capitalist office hierarchies.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The study concludes that Das offers a nuanced critique of modern subjectivity in which freedom is fragile, partial, and constantly negotiated. True liberation exists only fleetingly between personal desire and social conformity, ultimately compromised by the socio-political panopticon. Future research may further explore Das's fiction through biopolitical or affective frameworks to deepen understanding of power, memory, and human vulnerability in modern Bengali literature.*

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The story “Tale of City and Village,” written in the 1930s as “Gram o Shohorer Galpo” by Jibanananda Das (1899-1954), stands as a penetrating exploration of the intricate and often contradictory human quest for autonomy within entrenched social structures. Set against the backdrop of emerging modern Bengal, the narrative moves beyond a simplistic critique of patriarchy to unveil a complex web where power, love, and freedom are inextricably linked. Das, a modern Bengali poet, essayist, novelist, and short story writer, although he is mostly known as a poet in current academia, his prose writing, comprising 19 novels, 127 short stories, 79 essays, and diaries totalling 4002 pages (Mitra 20), is also significant. Das’s prose fiction, especially his novels and short stories, is replete with various contemporary social issues and consequences. His “Tale of City and Village” is such a story through which Das masterfully demonstrates how systems of power, specifically patriarchal norms of “dominator culture” (hooks, “Understanding Patriarchy”) and Foucauldian ‘biopower’ - “a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 138), permeate both the public and private spheres, subjugating individuals regardless of their gender or conscious liberal ideals, therefore exposing vital social issues of the time. The story compellingly reveals that power in any practice is not a monolithic force wielded by one gender over another but a diffuse network that shapes and confines all human existence.

The central characters of the story embody distinct yet interconnected facets of their struggle. Shachi practices a notable autonomy within her marriage, challenging traditional gender roles, yet her identity remains circumscribed by the domestic sphere and the psychological burden of her freedom. Her husband, Prakash, is a supportive partner at home but becomes a “docile body” which is “subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 136) within the system of the society; he is enslaved by the hierarchical boss culture of his office, illustrating the emasculating pressures of capitalist economics. In contrast, Somen represents a form of anarchic resistance to all systemic power, yet his freedom is compromised by his psychological hauntings and his status as a failed man in a society that privileges economic success. Through this nuanced character study, Das interrogates the very meaning of freedom in a modernising world, suggesting that the pursuit of self-determination

is perpetually fraught with contradiction, isolation, and the inescapable weight of societal expectations. The analysis of this study will delve into these dynamics, examining how the protagonists' interrelationships and internal conflicts expose the multifaceted nature of power, the dynamics of love, and the elusive ideal of true emancipation.

A close reading of the text reveals its intricate examination of the interrelated dynamics of power, love, and freedom. Though the protagonists in the story are free minds, they are not free from the system of power, whether it is from patriarchy or Foucault's 'biopower.' The story's narrative is clearer with a vivid voice of pangs, anxiety, and suffering of man and woman, respectively. The aspects of patriarchal expectations are exposed; at the same time, the suffering of bodies beyond gendered identities makes the plots of the story more intricate, exposing different levels of human conditions. There are three main characters (Prakash, Shachi, and Somen) throughout the story. These three characters surround all happenings. There are aspects of relationships, such as friendship, departed love, and family, that expose issues like social bonding, the existence of patriarchal contexts, and the socio-political and economic power of the capitalist society.

The triangle of the main characters, Prakash, Shachi, and Somen, shows different existential issues, sometimes based on gender identity, psychological complexity, the socio-political patriarchal system, and power over bodies. The characters are liberal and unrestricted within the social phenomenon. By claiming this statement, it does not mean there is no power crisis, patriarchal gender roles, or social inequality. The female protagonist, Sanchi, is happily married to Prakash; her husband never orders her, and she never feels subjugated by him; she never complains against him, and she is entirely free in the household, rather bound within the household which concerns her value of self being a woman beyond her household duties; therefore, represents her awareness of self being a woman, which is a challenge to the traditional norms. She is not crying for freedom but rather practising freedom to choose. On the other hand, Prakash is a free man at home, but in his office, he is merely a slave, whereas Somen, a friend of the couple and Sanchi's lover earlier, is an "incorrigible" character who "looks at life in an extremely vulgar manner-" (Das, "Tale of City and Village" 17) not

following any system or rule; he believes in living a life with the least possibilities- as far as meaningless against any form of power; he has the feeling of love, yet failing in relationship does not make him wretched, rather realising the practicality of society and life he is a free man on his own as shown towards the end of the story. However, Somen cannot deny his 'docile body' within the power structure of the society.

Throughout the story, there is an omnipresent voice of the patriarchal system, which sets gender roles in order that a woman must stay at home and a man must go out to earn money. There are also voices of resistance in the story itself. Shachi, along with the story's development, is seen to be aware of herself, of freedom and identity as a woman in society. She also speaks out for women's rights. At the same time, the two male characters represent two complex existence of men in the society: Prakash, who is secured with a job and economically established yet suffers from the bondage or pressure of the boss culture capitalist society, Somen is an unsuccessful man who has no job and security of future but free with all the power struggles of life, except his love relation with Sanchi. The complexities of the past, memory, nostalgia, and psyche keep haunting them all.

The relationship between the three individuals is sometimes strange in the story; Shachi is married to Prakash, Somen is a friend to both, and was Shachi's lover nearly eight years back. Shachi's love for Prakash in marriage is more socially recognised. On the other hand, her relationship with Somen is merely obvious and complex, which remains unresolved towards the end of the story.

While talking of inequality based on gender, there are the characters of the counter genders who are not speaking in contrast to the opposite genders. Whether it is Prakash or Somen, both characters treat the female character Shachi equally as a common human being, not as "other" (159) as demonstrated in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Rather, they are aware of their social roles at a human level. The narrator says, "But how can he (Prakash) ask Shachi to heat it (tea) up again?" (Das 11). This question can be referred to as a man's voice for a woman's rights. In private life, at individual levels, they are all equal, as narrated in the story, but in the public space, they face a system of power, the patriarchal panopticon eye, power over bodies; therefore, directly or indirectly, all are subjugated.

All the characters of Das are free at individual levels, yet in many contexts, they are bound to the power structures- Sanchi's life in domesticity or the conditions of Prakash in office or Somen's joblessness in the power privilege system. Prakash, as a man, like other men in society, follows the lifestyle that is defined by the patriarchal power, which he himself does not enjoy; it is slavery. As the narrator states, "... men – especially of the officer rank, they need these things. They have the right to smoke strong cigars throughout the day. They should be given enough leeway in life – it is their right, rightly earned" (Das 15). In society, men must follow the rules meant for them. Otherwise, they will be excluded if they do not follow the model of a "real man" (Johnson, *The Trouble We're In* 99)- who must follow the patriarchal definition of man. Therefore, Prakash is a product of society. Prakash has initially been shown an emotionally blank identity, but Sanchi never unloves him; rather, Sanchi praises him for being such a humble and successful man. When Somen criticises Prakash's love for Sanchi, Sanchi strongly replies:

What's the use of just rousing curiosity? A person we think is worth laughing at- we become curious even about him. But the fact of the matter is, your friend is not at all the *bore* you think him to be. Consider this with me he is the most *popular*- such words are not uttered by a wife about her husband very often, Somen- man's life is so *wretched*-. (Das 30-31)

This excerpt hints at Sanchi's position in their relationship and her identity as a strong, independent woman. Sanchi's statement: "I'm the one who's somewhat at ease; I was thinking of your distressed meaningless life" (Das 31), suggests her free relationship with men. Where Somen is a wretched man, being irresponsible to any of the authorities in power, Sanchi's husband, Prakash, is a practical and humble man of a free mind who is neither "emotionally crippling" as claimed by hooks in *The Will to Change* (66) nor psychologically patriarchal; his struggle is in the office against the authority's 'biopower'; as Prakash proclaims, "Useless, my holding such a high post, Sanchi-" (Das 22). Prakash, thus, defines a new definition of man in this context.

There is always a tendency to identify characters as simply human beings beyond gendered identity. Prakash is not a man; he is "- a human being- a discerning contented optimistic flesh-and-blood being" (Das 15). This human

identity is measured by a man's sacrifice for a woman as described as "nor does he advise or order her around. Her battle on alone – but he is ready to help Shachi even with the minutes of details" (Das 16) and by a woman's trust for a man as the narrator states that Shachi "has felt like trusting him the most" (Das 16). Ultimately, there is a sense of freedom, as the narrator states, "Her husband has given Shachi a whole lot of freedom" (Das 16). This line could only be politically interpreted as the suppression of the patriarchal social voice, where a woman is used for men's interest only if Sanchi had somehow been oppressed by Prakash, which is not the case. In fact, Shachi is neither given freedom nor is she crying for it from others; she is practising it and living in it. She asks herself questions along the lines, "But is life no more than making kashundi" (Das 16). This independent voice of Shachi is significant in this discourse, where Shachi is already an independent woman of free will.

In the private and public spheres, the meaning of freedom, relationships, and psychological complexes can be seen in Shachi's letter to her female friend, Nirmala. She has her voice to speak against the systems of societal norms. Being a part of society, she is concerned about social issues as she demonstrates, "- the way Sindhis, Gujratis, Marwaris are dragging Bengali girls into marriage, I don't like it; I want my Bengal to stay Bengali; I don't like seeing Bengal getting *disintegrated* in that way; I wrote against the *disintegration*" (Das 19). Shachi knows her rights. She is free, even in the extension of this statement; she says, "You may think whatever you wish – but I can't give up this habit of mine. This is my religion" (Das 19). Here, Shachi is free with her own decision, which can also be seen in the lines, "- he is the only man in the world with whom I get along; I have examined and understood many men – have racked my brains over many possibilities – for ages; I think this preference of mine is the right one-" (Das 19), exposing a woman's free will and independence.

However, not only does Shachi make her own decisions, but she also claims that "the way Prakashbabu can artistically transform himself ceaselessly" according to her needs, "no one else can" (Das 19). She also refers to her unsuccessful relationship with Somen; she says, "More than anyone, he wants to transform me according to his requirements. Such men are very dangerous" (Das 19); Shachi paradoxically criticises Somen's manly desire and his stubbornly

failed love. And the same freedom becomes a burden to her as the narrator states, “at times she feels - this is not just enough, it's more than enough; for if you cannot direct freedom the right way it troubles the heart terribly; one feels so alone” (Das 16). This is the reason she wishes to join Somen; she wants to go back to their past relationship, the same Sanchi who once chose the ‘real man’ of success, Prakash, instead of failed Somen. In this context, Sanchi is a free woman, but she falls in the relationships of love with either Prakash or Somen, which is rather complex or uncertain.

Prakash is a man who represents the identity of a fully supported and liberal individual. There have been differences between Prakash and Somen, even from the aristocratic social viewpoint. In one way, Prakash is bound to the power structure of the society as the narrator states, “Prakash is not the be-all-and-end-all of the office- nor were his immediate bosses- there are sahebs above them- and above everyone was the Bengal government” (Das 22); though Prakash is not happy with it, he has fit himself into the ‘real man.’ He is a free man at home only. In the institutionalised power of the society, Prakash is simply a man according to the system of power. He is controlled by the politics of power. His anguish can be heard in the lines – “I couldn’t give the job to Somen; killed myself trying” (Das 22). Prakash further says, “My hands and feet are absolutely tied” (Das 22-23). These excerpts reflect that in the politics of power, men are controlled and subjugated. They are not the master of their own; rather, society and its power structures are. As Prakash states, “In reality, we have no power; all we have is ineffectual servitude” (Das 23), becoming a ‘docile body.’ On the other hand, Somen is neither successful nor fits the definition of a ‘real man,’ he practices freedom on his own will, but still can be counted as a ‘docile body.’

The politics of power create two types of men in the story: Prakash, a successful man and Somen, a failed man. Shachi compares them both from socio-economic perspectives. Prakash is more loyal to the system of society and is a successful man; therefore, he is closer to Shachi. On the other hand, Somen is ignorant, and he “is an unbeliever in the business of life” (Das 24), which can be seen as a voice of resistance against a power-run social structure.

Nevertheless, neither Prakash nor Somen is free from social bondage; Prakash is suffering, even accepting and fitting in most of the systems of the

economically driven patriarchal society of privilege. On the other hand, Somen does not fit into that system; therefore, he is being separated from relationships, jobs, and even a healthy life. Even Shachi is seen reflecting her opinion, saying, “He (Somen) is no less than any of you” (Das 25), which signifies that all are the upshot of society, controlled by its desire, norms, and expectations. The narrator, referring to Sanchi’s practice of freedom, states the issue more clearly when he says, “She was making a sincere effort to draw up a draft of loss and gain in the commerce of life – very clearly, so she had to think in an asocial, afamilial manner” (Das 25). Here, Shachi’s thinking in an ‘asocial’ and ‘afamilial’ manner hints at how power defines man’s identity, status, and value, encouraging the system of power privilege. Shachi’s comparison between the two men is also a display of patriarchy and its power, where she reflects as a part of that social system.

Considering Somen’s madness from society, its power, and politics, Shachi wonders, “- can Somen be measured in such terms?” (Das 27) without criticising her influence on Somen. Beyond the social existence of power, Somen has a psychological existence where he is free to roam. Along with men’s voices, there is a strong voice of the female counterpart, which is free from any boundaries. As Somen says, “When women change, nobody can comprehend them” (Das 35), which signifies the powerful position of women. Here, Somen’s statement is not merely misogynistic but rather a failed lover’s anguish and submission. As he continues, “I can bring a transformation in myself in my life-in a very permanent way; you, only for the fun of the trip” (Das 35) and “This is the difference between men and women” (Das 35). However, these two lines can be interpreted in two ways: first, Somen as a man is free to his will, and Sanchi being a woman and a married woman is bound to her family, a system; second, Somen is stuck in his failed love, where Sanchi is already free, she has moved on successfully, her company to Somen is therefore, a fun. Their love becomes more complex towards the end when the narrator says, “this Sanchi has become another Sanchi. Today he (Somen) can totally put Sanchi to any use of his- Sanchi is ready for that, eager” (Das 35). The complexity of love and desire becomes painful to Somen; he cannot tolerate it with his memories of the past; the only option is to escape to be free. Thus, towards the end of the story, there is a crux of

love, marriage, and relationships, which makes Das's literary creation more complex to understand from the perspectives of gender, power, and love.

The self-consciousness of the protagonists exposes the awareness of the crisis of power, complex social bonding, and love, whether that is based on gendered identity, physical inability, or the vulnerabilities of a man of a weaker socioeconomic position. Shachi's concern about Bengali girls highlights her voice against a social problem, as she claims, saying, "I have written against the injustice of forcing Bengali girls to marry Sindhi or Gujrati men: how does *sensuous* come into it, Somen? (Das 17). Somen's use of the word 'sensuous' may not be political; he is just taking it as humour, as he later repeats "sensuous—sensual—" (Das 17), as the narrator narrates "Somen is incorrigible! He makes the most unjustifiable statements – looks at life in an extremely vulgar manner –" (Das 17). Thus, Somen cannot merely be blamed as a man of patriarchal voice; rather, he is free from any power structure and has become a new definition of man. The narrator states:

He moves from victory to victory. Somen is an unbeliever in the business of life all he wants is life; as difficult as a dagger, he loves to keep his sharp sense of judgement dulled, entangled in a silken spider's web of imagination; he has remained purposeless in his maudlin emotionalism-sarcasm-passivism; lying somewhere like an undiscovered gold mine- (Das 24-25)

Though Somen is jobless and 'purposeless' in his life, he is free to roam 'from victory to victory' from the perspective of his own accord. To Shachi and Prakash, Somen is a failure, jobless, and meaningless in society. However, Somen is not stressed by joblessness but rather strong enough to survive, as if he knows the power structure and the resistance. His statement on the tailor, "What I want to say is this, tailors exist only for you; if you don't support them how will they survive?" (Das 29). This line suggests that Somen is conscious of the practicality of life. Referring to his struggle and resistance, Somen answers Shachi, "If life were even slightly meaningless, who would have had the heart to plead for a sixty-rupee job? I would have been on the "suicide list", finished myself off ten years ago" (Das 31). Thus, this line also mirrors his "practice of liberty" (4)

within the power structure as Foucault explains it in “The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom”.

What Somen suffers most is from memories, past events, and past life; therefore, “Every song is old, every word, every person,” and he does not want anything new as no one can “ever transcend one’s oldest greyest innermost desires” (Das 18); there is no way to escape rather than continuing with the complex of life. However, towards the end, when Sanchi is ready to go with him, to Somen, it is “Impossible”; the narrator narrates, “Even to imagine it is pain—even to imagine it is pain” (Das 35). Somen is already awakened to the practicality of social life and individual freedom. Such is complex love, rather than a failed love Somen has had, or it can be articulated that Somen shows the complex existence of human relations, social bonding, and structure related to power, love, and freedom.

The characters in the story are intertwined with the crux of power and relationships (love), where Sanchi is quite a free woman towards her life, but her love is obscure to both men, as she says, “I love something— I loathe something—that’s all!” (Das 19). Prakash is a successful man with a good social position, but the power system of the office concerns him; he admits to his slavery in that. Somen is a jobless and meaningless man in society; though nothing matters to him about power positions, he survives with dignity. What makes him painful is the failure in love; in the end, he overcomes it by his sensible departure. There are hardly practices of gender bias in the voices of the protagonists; rather, there is a tendency of “will to change” (188) as hooks demands it in *The Will to Change*, and in the story to dismantle the gendered discrimination, the man and woman characters’ work together. Thus, all the characters are aware of their situations and try to pursue paths for emancipation in their individual paths, where only Somen, with his ignorance of individual desire and social power structure, is different; therefore, he is a freer voice. Regarding Das’s characters in his prose fiction, Hoskote rightly writes, “...their inscrutability, their unpredictability, their erratic refusal to conform to social expectations, their commitment to creating a small tear in a large fabric” (Ranjit Hoskote’s “Foreword” in Chattarji xiv). However, the characters’ self-awareness does not liberate them instead illuminates the intricate and often painful negotiation between the yearning for

individual self-determination and the inescapable pressures of the socio-political world. The story thus endures as a complex meditation on the fact that to be modern is to be perpetually caught between the mind's freedom and the body's subjugation.

Das's "Tale of City and Village" presents a sophisticated and nuanced exploration of how power, love, and freedom are inextricably intertwined within the fabric of 1930s Bengali society. The analysis of the story reveals that power is not a monolithic force but an omnipresent circumstance, encompassing patriarchy, capitalist economics, and Foucauldian biopower, that ensnares each character differently, regardless of their gender or conscious liberalism. Shachi's asserted autonomy within the domestic sphere challenges traditional norms, yet her identity remains circumscribed by that very domain, and her emotional complexities reveal the burdens of freedom. Prakash embodies the paradox of the modern bourgeois man, a supportive husband who is simultaneously a "docile body" enslaved within the hierarchical practice of his office. In contrast, Somen represents a form of anarchic resistance to all systemic power, yet his freedom is ultimately compromised by psychological hauntings of memory and failed love. Thus, the story argues that absolute freedom is an elusive ideal. Each character's struggle highlights a different facet of the human condition where personal desire perpetually conflicts with societal hegemony. Their paths to emancipation are individual and fraught with contradiction; Shachi practices freedom but feels its isolating weight; Prakash seeks dignity within the system that crushes him; and Somen attempts to flee all systems but is tethered by his past. In this way, throughout the story, Das moves beyond a simplistic critique of gendered oppression to offer a more profound commentary on the universal human experience of power structures, the dynamics of relationships, and the contexts of freedom.

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