

Cubism and Jibanananda's *Rupasi Bangla*

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[The poetry of Jibanananda is remarkable for aesthetic beauty and technical excellence of his imagery. Even Rabindranath was amazed by his images and appreciated his poetry saying that it 'offers the pleasure of looking at'. These poetically powerful images deserve serious critical analysis from various angles and in various lights. This essay aims to analyse some images of Jibanananda's in *Rupasi Bangla* in the light of Cubism, a well-known critical concept in the field of art and literature.]

Cubism, like many other theoretical concepts of literature, originated in the field of art and painting. 'In 1908, Picasso showed a few paintings in which there were some simply and firmly drawn houses that gave the public the illusion of some cubes' (Apollinaire, qtd. in *Art in Theory* 185). Cubism drew its name from the cubes of these paintings and gradually it appeared as a critical term in the field of art and painting. The painters of the early nineteenth century found it so suitable as a guiding critical concept that a huge number of them chose it as a mode of their expression. Soon cubism became a catchword in the European painting world.

It should be made clear in the beginning that cubism at present does not refer to any compulsory use of cubes or cubic forms in painting. However, historically cubic forms were once important for a cubistic painting. A different thing is now more important. Now a cubistic painting essentially involves the presence of more than one viewpoints from which the object of the painting is to be viewed. More than one viewpoints give the object more than one perspectives. Every new viewpoint will create a new perspective for the object in the painting.

This practice of allowing an observer more than one viewpoints to see an object in painting charmed the writers, especially the fiction-writers and the fiction-critics. They took the idea from the world of art, and thought of applying it in literature. In literature, fiction essentially involves a narrator, and usually the narrator presents their story from their own point of view. Here is the scope of cubism in literature. If the story can be narrated from more than one points of view, we can safely call it cubistic. The fictionists found it possible and practicable without hard labour. In the mid-twentieth century, many novels and stories were written around the world in this cubistic mode of narration. Pedro Paramo by Juan Rulfo is a good example in Mexican literature in this regard. In this

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novel, the death of Pedro and the death of his son Miguel are presented from several viewpoints creating numerous perspectives for the same story.

This aspect of cubism in literature basically concerns certain critical aspects of the *point of view* in narratology. This sharply narrows the scope and area of cubism in literature. This fixes cubism in literature to the area of fiction only and thus denies poetry the right to fall in the purview of cubism. But critics have not allowed it to happen so. They have opened new ways to explain and apply the idea of cubism in literature. In their explanation, they have pointed to the fact that ‘the Salon cubists used the faceted treatment of solid and space and effects of multiple viewpoints to convey a physical and psychological sense of the fluidity of consciousness; blurring the distinction between past, present and future (Wikipedia)’. This feature of cubism that it gathers its strength of expression from the multifacetedness of solid and space it uses, and from the effects of the plurality of viewpoints, theoretically accepts the possibility of poetic images to be cubistic.

Modern poems inexhaustively explore the power and potentiality of images in poetic expression. A poet’s effort to present an object or scene in various images so that every image might serve as a new viewpoint to look at the presented object or scene resembles the effort of the cubist artist who paints an object to allow it views from several viewpoints. When numerous images present a particular object, the object tends to get free from the definiteness of the object. The differences between the images provide ‘space’ for the object or the scene to assume new shapes and new ‘facets’. When images in a poem provide the delineated objects and scenes with such plurality of facets and viewpoints, they theoretically fall in the purview of cubism and naturally the poem becomes cubistic.

There is another aspect of cubism which draws it close to the realm of poetry. Jean Metzinger in his essay ‘Note on Painting’ discusses Pablo Picasso as a cubist and indirectly describes the features of cubism. At one point he writes “He [a cubist, here Picasso] tests, understands, organises: the picture is not to be a transposition or a diagram, in it we are to contemplate the sensible and living equivalent of an idea, the total image (qtd. in *Art in Theory* 185). This aspect of cubism transforms an idea into a ‘living’ object inviting perception by all senses. A poet can assign his images the same task.

A poet can build images capable of inviting perception by all senses. One such image will simultaneously engage several or all of the five senses of the reader together. The ‘sensible’ and the ‘living’ object is itself then there in the image. The image of the poet then does what a cubistic painting does and enables a poem to embrace cubism.

This is how cubism in poetry basically concerns the images. However, some critics have given hints that cubism is possible in poetry on other grounds too. Gertrude Stein’s employment of ‘repetition and repetitive phrases as building blocks’ and the technique of ‘conscious, deliberate dissociation and recombination of elements’ (wikipedia) used by poets like Guillaume Apollinaire and Max Jacob are examples in this regard.

Nonetheless, the present essay attempts an analysis of cubism in Jibanananda's *Rupasi Bangla* in terms of cubistic images only, the major area of cubism in poetry. The attempted analysis will focus two aspects of the images: (i) plurality of viewpoints and perspectives that the images create, and (ii) capability of the images to engage several senses at a time. Let us see, to what extent the imagery in Jibanananda's *Rupasi Bangla* fulfill these aspects of cubism.

Jibanananda is widely known as a poet whose poetic aesthetics is marked by his belief in the beauty of images. A Bangla phrase 'চিত্ররূপময় কবি' is a common epithet for him. All his poetic works - especially *Rupasi Bangla* - strongly justify this epithet. Amalendu Bose observes 'the visual consciousness, both in simplicity and in plenty, is present in *Rupasi Bangla* much more than in any other poetical work of Jibanananda' (Bose 60). This quality of *Rupasi Bangla* makes it special in the use of cubism too. This is because an image cannot be cubistic unless it stimulates the visual consciousness to the effect that the object or the idea conveyed by the image is visualised in several perspectives. *Rupasi Bangla* is special with the visual consciousness, as Amalendu Bose says, and consequently it is also special in the field of cubistic poetry.

In the close analysis of this proposition, we are going to use the manuscript edition of *Rupasi Bangla* edited by Debes Ray for all necessary references. It was published by 'Pratikshan' in Kolkata. This book is a poetic picture of Bangladesh, especially the southern part of Bangladesh, where land means grass, river means a running waterbody, and sky means flying birds. The book presents not only these objects of beauty but also a person, rather a poetic self, who perceives this beauty against the morbid sense that he himself is destined with an unavoidable journey through this land of beauty to Death, the devourer of everything ugly or beautiful. Almost all of the 73 poems of the book present the same picture of beauty against the same backdrop of the consciousness of Death. When the reader finds the same picture repeating itself again and again it is natural that he will feel bored. But nobody will admit that the poems of *Rupasi Bangla* bore the readers. Here arises the question: what magic is in *Rupasi Bangla* that allows repetitions not to bore? The answer is cubism.

It is cubism that creates plurality of perspectives for the same picture. Then the same picture in a new perspective virtually becomes a new picture. This is what the cubistic images in a poem work out. In almost every poem of *Rupasi Bangla*, in other words, in all pictures drawn in *Rupasi Bangla*, we find some lines serving as the base of the picture or the painting. Literally these are the lines of the poem containing words, and figuratively they are the objects constituting the picture presented by the 73 poems of the book. These basic lines of the picture gather around them more lines of light and shade and assume the cylindrical shapes and cubic forms, the primary elements of a cubistic picture.

If the metaphor is made plain, in all poems there are some common objects and elements serving as the base of the grand image that pervades over the whole book, *Rupasi Bangla*. Images after images are woven around the grand image and they continue working out newer perspectives for the grand image. In *Rupasi Bangla* the base of the grand image invariably includes three things from three spheres of the nature of the beautiful Bangla: grass from the land or the landscape, some Dhansiri or Jalsiri from the sphere of water, and some flying beings – kingfisher, *pencha* or *sudarshan* – from the firmament. These three objects representing the three spheres time and again refer to the sameness of the nature and also the totality of nature and thus the grand image pervading the whole book is built up.

Let us take the first poem of the manuscript edition, sonnet 3, to illustrate the point. It duly holds the three things constituting the base of the grand image: the flying kingfisher in the fourth line, the grassy land of Bangladesh in the fifth line, and the river *Dhansisri* in the seventh line. The first object of the sky, the kingfisher, is described as an airy being which aspires with its wings to wring out all the blue from the sky. In connection to the theme of the poem, this image of a bird trying to gather all the blue from the sky is first an expression of simply a rare feeling of the beauty of the sky in the Autumn. As an expression of beauty, this image gathers its strength from the early images of the poem occurring in the first three lines: the airy blue sky flowing into skies, and the desire of the poet to fly along the sky into the blue. These images present the poetic perception of the beauty of the sky. These images serve as a perspective for the sky of the grand image. In the perspective we see the sky as an airy flow of the blue which a bird seems to be collecting when it flies in it.

The second object of the mentioned grand image is grass which represents the landscape, one of the three spheres of the nature of the Beautiful Bangla. In the 4th line of the poem, this grand image gathers around it a poetic vision of sitting on the grass with a divided soul: one half of the soul aesthetically stimulated by the beauty presented in the first image of the sky; the other half painfully burdened with the consciousness of the unavoidable drift on the river Dhansiri toward the final destination of the burning bier. The aesthetic stimulation of the soul is the effect of the first image occurring in the first four lines of the poem. The pathetic consciousness of the soul is the effect of the image of Dhansiri occurring in the last eight lines of the poem. These two images set the perspective of the central image of the sensitised poetic soul sitting on and identifying with the grass, the landscape of the Beautiful Bangla.

The third and last image of the poem, the image of Dhansisri, rather shockingly is not an image of a beautiful river of Bangladesh. Rather, it appears as an image of the eternal flow of a waterbody on which everything irresistibly drifts to Death, to the land of the dead. The third central image of the sphere of water is seen in this perspective in sonnet 3.

This is how, in sonnet 3, the central three images are presented in their respective three perspectives. The definiteness of these three perspectives is worked out by the supporting images that lie around the central ones. It is worthwhile to restate that these three central

images are not central merely in sonnet 3. They are central to all other poems and consequently they are central in the whole book *Rupasi Bangla*. So these three images, more precisely, the objects constituting these three images that represent the three spheres of nature of the beautiful Bangla recurrently occur in *Rupasi Bangla*. But the recurrence does not create an iota of boredom to the reader. The secret is that, though the central images do not vary from poem to poem, their supporting and associated images change incessantly almost like the colours of a kaleidoscope. The analysis of the next poem, sonnet 4, is expected to press the point home.

In sonnet 4 there are again three such spheres, three such objects to represent the spheres and resultantly three central or grand images. The first central image is that of the landscape involving invariably the grass. But the perspective of the image is different from that of sonnet 3. The grass is not here associated with the dichotomy of the poetic soul. Here is no divided soul presented in response to the stimulation of an object of beauty. Here the grass does not stimulate anybody to any pleasure. To the contrary, here the grass herself is lonely and gloomy. Her only companion is the sleepless gloomy moon who goes on crying the whole night. She is waiting to see who is coming to kindle the fire of the bier. So the picture of the grass in sonnet 3 becomes a different one in sonnet 4 in the new perspective.

The second central image in sonnet 4 involves the sphere of water represented by Jalsiri, a river rather fictitious and a poetic transformation of Dhansiri. Though the object is the same as in sonnet 3, the associated images create a new perspective to make the object a different poetic experience. In this poem the river is not a running waterbody to transport everything on it to the sad land of death. On the contrary, the associated images show that its stagnant water helps everything rot in it. The ugly airy elves find it as a fine place to cry out their sad hearts during the whole night. So it is a complete shift of the perspective to make the same thing quite new in a new light.

This act of shifting the perspectives of the central images magically strips the repetitive images of their capability to cause boredom. The perspective changes and the old thing becomes new. The same thing becomes a new thing. The change of perspectives allows the same object to be seen as hundreds of new objects. This is the gift of cubism in poetry. The poet, Jibanananda Das, applies this technique to present his Bangladesh in 73 poems in *Rupasi Bangla* and we see how Bangladesh looks when viewed from 73 different viewpoints.

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