



Jibanananda Das's *Malloban* vis-à-vis Heritage of Memory, Love and Unlove: "A Racket of a Hundred Consciousnesses"

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ABSTRACT

Bengali poet and novelist Jibanananda Das's (1899-1954) posthumously published novel *Malloban* examines how exactly the very confounding yet the very crucial heritage of human memory runs, works and operates not just within the rigours of the human world but even beyond. This paper, with particular reference to Das's *Malloban*, seeks to argue that memory is not just a human prerogative. Nor is memory a wishy-washy wheeling back to the past; rather, memory is a constant itinerary or a wealthy heritage with which the human entities and the corresponding nonhuman ones have got to sustain a dialogue, or, in other words, a lifelong discourse. A dispassionate examination of what exactly memory is or does, may vivify, for us, the intensely paradoxical "willing-unwillingness to wake up, to stay alive" beyond the cliched boundary of "love" and "unlove". In the entire narrative, memory is not just a frame of reference against which *Malloban*, the protagonist, endeavours to feel "if nature's compass-heart is stirring" but he perceives memory to be "a racket of a hundred consciousnesses". It is only in the multifold embrace of such "hundred consciousnesses" that human beings acquire the ability of identifying their languages with those of the nonhuman, more precisely, "the light, the bird, the sky". Memory comes as a dawn of disillusionment to *Malloban*, catapulting him to a never-to-be-snuffed "fight of the subconscious and the unconscious". The lofty prospect of *Malloban*'s illumination by dint of surrendering to the fabulous "totality of time" continues to remain a fallacy, a mirage in a desert.

Keywords: Memory; place; consciousness; love; unlove

Introduction

Contemporary memory studies have already gone a long way to accommodate into its fold the disciplines of various origins and perspectives. Till quite a long time, the subject of memory had only been a subject of human psychology, or, a little more elastically speaking, that of advanced human psychology¹. Contemporary memory studies discipline², however, has broken itself free from any unilinear genre-specific hegemony. Its range of operations has crisscrossed across science, technology, social studies and even humanities, thus assimilating within its tapestry the critical considerations of space, place, environment, sustainability and consciousness. A re-reading of Jibanananda Das's (1899-1954) posthumously published Bengali novel *Malloban* offers us some extremely important observations about the life around us (both the human and the nonhuman), the time into the river of which our life is flowing and a flash of consciousness after and towards which we are all, more or less, hankering and gravitating. In Will Durant's critical estimation of *Creative Evolution* (1907) by Henri Bergson, the interrelatedness of memory, time and consciousness has come this way: In ourselves, memory is the vehicle of duration, the handmaiden of time; and through it so much of our past is actively retained that rich alternatives present themselves for every situation. As life grows richer in its scope, its heritage and its memories, the field of choice widens, and at last the variety of possible responses generates consciousnesses, . . . (*The Story of Philosophy* 588).

The question is whether for Malloban, an ordinary individual of 1929 Kolkata during the turbulent times of the Swadeshi movement, the life has anyway grown “richer in its scope, its heritage and its memories”. He may be a common man but his name³ is not. Usually, such a name is a rarity and, to a large extent, out of place. All that transpires through the narrative is that Malloban is forty-two; his wife is Utpala and the nine-year old daughter Monu is their only child. The family of three lives in a cloistered part of a two-storied rented house in College Street, Kolkata.

The trajectory of Malloban’s life, work, ambition is too limited to be a suitable stock-in-trade for a novel proper. From the beginning to the end, the setting for the narrative, like the one in a one-act play, is the same College Street house of Kolkata in a chilling winter month. Except for some very slight interventions, the characters who predominate the narrative are the same Malloban, Utpala and little Monu. As the story proceeds, one feels like delicately turning the pages of Malloban’s personal diary, full of the melancholy vignettes of his quotidian, everyday journey. Malloban works as a petty clerk⁴ in a foreign company; he is neither a man of strong academic background nor a steadfast careerist. His going to and coming back from office have been given such an insistent coverage in the narrative that no reader, by the wildest of his or her imagination, can expect any slice of epiphany⁵ anywhere.

However, there is a lingering eeriness about this apparent unperturbability of Malloban and this eeriness sets Malloban apart from all others. Unlike other people of his age, temperament and time, Malloban does not think that he lives solely for his family consisting of Monu and Utpala. The constituting components of his identity are not just confined to his being Utpala’s husband, Monu’s father or a merchant office’s worker. It might seem from the novel that the bruises of “unlove”, the discords of the marital life and the Andrea del Sarto like fiascos are basically responsible for the unmitigated drudgery in Malloban’s life. The crux of the story, however, is that Malloban does not grope for an escape from what the common man describes as drudgery since every single microsecond he wants to understand why everyone tries to traverse the river of life, although each of them knows that the river is untraversable: “The name of the river of our lives—uncrossing, Malloban was thinking: nowhere can anyone cross over, never, anywhere in the course of this river; but still, so many people traverse it every day on the strength of pain, danger, failure, death” (Das, *Malloban* 122).

Transcending the Binary of “Love” and “Unlove”

It may be said that Malloban’s intensely fissured marital life has turned out to be the sine-qua-non of the narrative. There is nothing very easygoing about what Malloban and Utpala feel about each other. Even the mildest of wind or the tiniest of flicker brings them at loggerheads; once they start throwing tantrums at each other, they do not withdraw immediately. What exactly has stood out as a monumental barrier between them is something that even the most cavalier-sort-of-reader would love to ponder over in tandem with Malloban. They have spent as many as some twelve autumns of their conjugal life but it seems that a premature winter has long set in, stilting what is not-to-be-stilted, denuding what is not-to-be-denuded and dismantling what is not-to-be-dismantled. Anyone would readily agree to what Jibanananda Das postulates at some hairpin-bend of the novel: “Ninety per cent of the husbands and wives of Bengal bear this very fruitlessness in their lives, but, in most circumstances, these husbands and wives are not able to appreciate this fact the way Malloban has. Those who do have no choice but to gather up the shards of a broken water glass and piece them back together so that they can drink; this male-female bond, this husband-wife business, this marriage thing, it’s like a finely crafted glass, fragile and hard—it’s bound to break, they’re bound to drink water, no one will be given more than one glass” (22).

Utpala and Malloban are sharing the same rooftop but they seem to be poles apart from each other. That their relation is fragile will count as a gross understatement. Utpala won’t just let Malloban stay and sleep with her in her first-floor room. She even cares a straw about whether Malloban has been served tea or lunch punctually. Malloban is welcome to live all alone, lagoon like, in his own ground-floor dingy room in his own dingy manner. Except when once Malloban is abundantly ill-at-ease with several rounds of vomiting, Utpala has hardly ever been seen wending her way towards Malloban’s unkempt shelter. If ever Malloban has, despite himself, come all the way to Utpala’s room to while away some fragrant moments with the sleeping duo, he cannot just do it the way he likes. Utpala’s ire, even when she is in deep sleep, doesn’t spare him. If Malloban wants to take Monu downstairs with him, he can do so but, under no condition, Utpala would allow her husband to continue his sojourn in the room of her own. The railings they hurl at each other are just anything and everything, more significantly, from the nonhuman surroundings around. Sometimes, the vegetables of the everyday world, the birds of different species, the sickening pool of reptiles and, even sometimes, the “silk-cotton broken off from the stem, floating in the ineffableness of village afternoons and evenings as spring turns to summer” (148) happen to be the epithets they pick up for each other as cusswords. The bickering is often reduced to a bland frivolity, especially when Utpala, irritated and indignant as she always is, calls Malloban a “sacrificial pumpkin”: “I’m telling you, sacrificial pumpkin, do you want to be split in two or are you staying here?” (15).

Such bouts of quarrel are not uncommon or, in other words, happiness is an occasional episode in the general drama of this ceaseless tug-of-war of theirs. When on one such uncouth occasion, the tiff reaches its crescendo,

Utpala minces no words to declare her affinity for one Anupam Mahlanbish, a man of versatile possibilities, at least to her. Utpala sees in Malloban not the slightest streak of resemblance with her own self. Anupam befits Utpala's love since Anupam has not chosen to shut himself up within the thralldom of a clerk's duty. Anupam has rather entwined his life with all sorts of precarity in the interest of the motherland under bondage. He has been bandied a terrorist, thrown behind prison bars, charged with treason and even awarded death-sentence. It is Anupam's love that Utpala so religiously craves for. It is somewhat bizarre that Malloban does not resent this open testament of his wife's love for somebody else. Though aware of this utter distancing between him and Utpala, for these twelve years, "in the densely woven boinchi-thorn, rattan-spine, moonfish-bone jungle of Utpala's disinclination and distaste, Malloban has flown his own deeds and desires like a blind bird on its dying breath" (56-57). Depiction of a complex amorous relation, though not exactly of this type, gave Rabindranath Tagore's 1916 novel *The Home and the World* a high acclaim and an equally caustic criticism. The characters were Nikhilesh, Sandip and Bimala. Here, in *Malloban*, Utpala, Malloban and Anupam are almost the epitomes of "post-Tagorean modernism" (Seely, *The Scent of Sunlight* 118).

To Malloban, Utpala's love is as empty as a "huge empty basket of sunlight" or as squalid as "porcupine-impertinence, cockatoo-mischief, civet-aggrievedness, cat-grimaces, cobra-fangs, and tigress-paws" (57). Still, Malloban accepts Utpala without demur, all the while sitting like a "shamkol stork"⁶. Utpala's discontents and disgusts are not unknown to Malloban. The tortures, though Malloban does not deem them tortures, keep on coming in a spate but Malloban does not evaluate them in the stereotypical scales of "love" and "unlove". Whatever it is, what frightens him the deepest is that, if at all confronted, Utpala will fly away like "a peahen from branch to branch in some magic jungle." The paradox is that Malloban perceives too well what it all means by "flying away". In fact, the desire of flying away from this claustrophobic urban setting is exclusively that of Malloban. The suffocating, sulking life of his menial job is far too removed from his care-free childhood which he has long abandoned in the dusty roads of his village. When the night deepens in the incorrigibly throbbing city-streets, he often feels that he is incapable of sleeping even after the day's ordeal. In those wee hours when the nastily honking lorries pass his house, he derives a special pleasure in the fancy that the "sound of wheels and tires" has turned into "the torrential voice of a clouded night" (8). In fact, "the torrential voice of a clouded night" is very much an integral part of his childhood memory. His job is his means of subsistence and it is for this job that he has chosen all this sordidness of the urbanity. Ostensible it is that he takes interest in his work, his work being his means of livelihood but then, at the end of the day, it is the "unlove" that best characterizes his interest. In the novel *Karubasona* (1933), which Jibanananda was writing some fifteen years prior to the writing of *Malloban*, Jibanananda used the word "unlove", paradoxically in conjunction with the hundred other obligations of life. For Hem, the protagonist of *Karubasona*, life "was, perhaps, . . . the work of unlove" (Das, *Jibanananda Samagra* 44).

If the work or the workplace is an indispensable component of Malloban's living, the marriage with Utpala is no less an insubstantial issue. The desire for gratification is crucial just as it is crucial for all living beings on earth irrespective of their status in the social hierarchy. The "strange outburst of blood and lust", for Malloban, serves as an equalizer. The consideration that humankind indulge in what we understand as carnal only due to a hearty love for each other does not make any sense for Malloban. As another sleepless winter night comes and passes like the imperceptible sounds of dewdrops, his sleepless ears hearken the "deadly mischiefs of cats in heat" and he sees love not as a weltanschauung of essentially cardiac feelings but as a "great synthesis at which one arrives after analyzing all baser life forms" (9). The crudely physical and the crudely marital, as Malloban sees them, are now synonymous with one another. Naturally, if a marriage takes place and continues due to something other than love, it is not at all surprising. It is not always that Malloban engages himself into identifying what exactly Utpala feels about him—"indifference" or "unlove". But these questions are not as intriguing to him as the "magnanimous magic in the chatter of birds" in the pre-marital times: "Those days before marriage, late fall before winter, early fall before late fall, the surprisingly transient possibility of fall in the fields, in the sunshine, in the faces of people, in the chatter of birds, the magnanimous magic in the imminent winter night, just so they seemed to him" (102). For Malloban, the "magnanimous magic" will only sustain if he can hold on to all these precious memories of his boyhood through the constant sways of ambivalence. Had there been no eeriness, no strangeness, no unpleasantness, no ambivalence in the myriad and multiple responses from others including the human and the nonhuman, this wonderful consciousness about memory would not have shone upon Malloban's psyche. The only consciousness is time and only by transcending the dichotomy of "love" and "unlove", can one reach the acme of a hundred consciousnesses: "but there's no end to time; after all, we dwell within time; the hand of time comes and wipes away this thing here—wakes up that thing there; [. . .] But Malloban has sub-imagination [. . .] As a result, instead of a sun of consciousness, he had found endless stars of subconsciousness" (134).

The Avian Gaze: The Blurring Boundaries of the Human and the Post-Human

The pursuit of these "endless stars of subconsciousness" has often provided Malloban the temperament of withdrawing into the most fruitful of imagination. Such gift of faculty being at work, Malloban sees no dividing walls between human and the more-than-human world. Once again, what comes uppermost is his sheer ability to feel uncommonly place-connected even amid the most unintelligible of situations. When upon torrential

rains, the city-gutters overflow the city-streets, Malloban thinks not just of a cadaverous reality out there but he thinks of a different sort of consciousness, in the light of which even the gutter and the gutter-water can get into a mutual talk of their own. Thus, this conversation with one's own self or the act of soliloquizing is not just the privilege and prerogative of the anthropocene. Rather, the more-than-human realities around are equally fluent and equally effective in constituting the world of the "endless stars of subconsciousness". It is the time when Malloban is almost under a delirium due to his sudden bout of illness. The subconscious is the most poignant and the most fertilizing this time. The everyday world of consciousness has ceased to work; what is working instead is the unfiltered ebbs and flows of memory which are deeply embedded with the protagonist's subconscious or "sub-imagination". The human and the more-than-human world, at this point of time, have so overlapped with each other that Malloban's ceaseless talks and the ceaseless gurgles of the gutters do appear to be the same and indistinguishable: "Malloban went on talking, the way that when a deep rainy night is free of rain for a few minutes, in village gutters, tanks, and channels, water goes babbling along as if talking to itself" (135).

The post-anthropocene becomes apparent to Malloban only when he duly feels that he is place-connected. The space around Malloban is his two-storied dwelling place in College Street—a typically value-neutral site for his regular correspondence with office and relations with family. A space, however, is never associated with a place⁷. Only when meaning, values and sentiments are ascribed to a space, a space becomes a place. The memory, place and one's subconscious are not just three isolated entities but given the right gaze, right perspective and the right time, they act as one neat unit through which we can try to measure out the boundary lines between the human and the post-human. The quality of being place-connected is one major issue here. The space is only a superficial projection of a reality which is necessarily palimpsestic and it is only natural that against the façade of the spatial territories, no authentic search for the subconscious is possible. Hence, all what Malloban grapples for is a place to which he can safely acknowledge his belongingness. Figuring out such a place is important for him. Else, it is difficult to get a control over what we usually consider as human-centric viewpoints. It is necessary that Malloban should gradually discipline himself into taking a stance which is not exclusively human. Only by shifting his own gaze from within to without he can initiate the searches for places of his subconscious self.

The avian gaze or the gaze of a bird is the most fitting for Malloban, for Malloban has spent a considerable part of his childhood amid the birds of various colours and various origins. Birds are bold mnemonics for him, that wheel him back delicately to the days of his yore. Their art of flight, the ceaseless chatter and, moreover, the distinguishing gesture of each of the species happen to be a great reservoir of meaning for Malloban. The haplessness of his marital life gets meaningful to him only if he can think of a bird "torn from her mate . . . in a shoreless, unfathomable void" (60). Moreover, the daily tiff with Utpala, in its deadliest pitch, is without any message or sharpness in the absence of the right bird-metaphor. Utpala doesn't mind chiming and flying off as a duty-bound parakeet, while she is sure that the rest of the world will play a second fiddle to Malloban, the hornbill: "But it is not up to the shamkol to give me one [. . .] The hornbill will keep sitting there flaunting his beak—waiting for the Marwari trader to come and take his oil—the parakeet will fly off to her own throne, . . ." (74). When after a stiff altercation both the contending sides give in, an all-passion spent kind of stillness lasts in the air, which only the right avian gaze can figure out in infallible wordings. Thus, a fatigued Utpala lying listlessly on the zoo's green grass is like a cold wet mollusk---unmoving yet unrelenting: ". . . she [Utpala] was lying there pathetically like a cold wet mollusk or parasite when the sea has slipped away, pulled back by the ebb tide" (74).

Malloban's predilection for a bird's gaze has not been an open secret. It is true that Utpala has used the shamkol bird image oftentimes to taunt Malloban's highly eccentric and eerily peripatetic behaviour but even she doesn't know why it is comfortable for Malloban to "mumble", "buzz" and "tingle" like a "lonely bamboo-bug on a late autumn afternoon—plaintive and pathetic, without heat, without warmth" (138). The avian image gives Malloban an objective tool for steering clear of this anthropocentrism of his immediate surroundings and see the world around him without the vantage-point of a conventional type. The gaze also enables him to appreciate the fact that the memories are nowhere static. There is a fantastic coming and going about all that we know as memories. If in the faceless anonymity of an urban living, Malloban has lost his precious childhood, there is no doubt that he will also lose his interfaces with the present surroundings as well, including the frequent tiffs with Utpala. The light of the stars and the spilt sombreness in the background will continue to pervade as the only anagnorisis of life for Malloban when birds will just fly away from him like a boshontobouri bird: "Like a boshontobouri bird in the small hours of the night, as he gazed at a heap of stars and darkness before falling asleep again, spilling over a bit, with a laugh, going beyond the willing-unwillingness to wake up, to stay alive, . . ." (140). Given the context, the concluding two lines of Jibanananda Das's poem "Banalata Sen" stand out to be an analogy of great relevance: "All birds come home, all rivers, all of life's tasks finished. / Only darkness remains, as I sit there face to face with Banalata Sen" (Seely, *The Scent of Sunlight* 47).

In the novel, therefore, the avian gaze shows that Malloban fervently wants to see what lies beyond this exclusively human-centric consciousness and exactly how the "nature's compass-heart is stirring." However,

just as the absence of language turns out to be the best piece of correspondence with Banalata Sen in the concluding section of the poem “Banalata Sen”, the same loss of language inculcates in Malloban a consciousness of a different order. Malloban now knows that the meaning of life lies in counting “the many unruly waves in the earth and sky, arranging them according to some mysterious direction . . .” (151).

Thus, reconciled to this type of consideration about time, place and consciousness, Malloban finds no puzzle in the choric flight of the cawing Kolkata crows from the dense fog towards a foggier place of no direction. The fog may have blurred the vision but the jarring and repeating cawing of the crows completely blurs the stereotypical boundary lines between the human-centric and the post-human realities. The seeming absence of language of the more-than-human world, or, in other words, the solitude, persists as the one essential signpost of life: “From the direction of the morning fog, they went flying far off in the other direction to draw out the very earth, those crows, to bring out the shining sun for everyone—even those who aren’t crows, aren’t birds—ko-ko-koko---what a racket of a hundred consciousnesses, arbitration, solitude” (159).

Conclusion

In a poem, “Chorus”, Jibanananda Das has delineated how the perturbed pool of multitude constantly endeavour to master the skill of walking through the corridors of dazzling lights: “Aalor bhitor diye hente chole jabar koushal/ Keboli ayotto kore nite chay prithibir utkonthito bhir” (My trans: The strategy of walking through the flickers of light/ The worried mass of people all the world over want to master this skill alone) (73). Malloban is no exception. This paper in absolutely disillusioning terms shows how Malloban survives even in the most hostile of situations thanks only to memory and more evolving memories. The deterritorialization and reterritorialization of all what he considers to be his graceful or ghoulish memories continue to connect the dullness of his life to an edifying stratum of consciousness, giving him an idea of life in its totality. One more important finding of this paper is that time is the ultimate consciousness against which the apparent ironies of life need to be examined and evaluated. To Malloban, the shattered dream of a happy nuptial is as acceptable as the “endless stars of subconsciousness” instead of a “sun of consciousness”. The only roaring recognition is that “after all, we dwell within time” and this recognition takes us towards the one small but tremendously crucial observation of Malloban about life: “. . . if life’s ill winds, misfortune, misjudgment, unlove run dry, then there’s nowhere to go” (146).

Endnotes

¹ The term “memory”, to recount Prof. S. K. Mangal’s words, “cannot be viewed merely in terms of reproduction or revival of past experiences or learning. It is quite a complex process which involves factors like learning, retention, recall, and recognition” (257).

² Editors Anna Lisa Tota and Trevor Hagen have specified as many as six themes that encompass the contours of Memory Studies, thus signifying the multidisciplinary of this still-evolving approach: “(1) theories and perspectives of memory from sociological, psychological, historical and cultural perspectives that have come to make up the foundations of the field and subsequently point to its future; (2) diverse collective practices of commemorating, representing and forgetting the past; (3) memory’s relation to public discourse, examining how the past comes to be reconciled or memorialized; (4) technologies of memory, which considers how the past is mediated and mediating; (5) legacies of traumatic events related to violence, terror and disaster; (6) memory work that emerges from ecosystems and bodies” (*Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies* 2).

³ Rebecca Whittington, the one who has translated the Bengali text into English, has elaborated the meaning of the word “malloban” in her “Note on the Title and Character Names”: “Malloban literally means ‘the one wearing a garland,’ suggesting the exchange of garlands in a Hindu wedding ceremony; in mythology, exchanging of garlands itself constitutes a gandharva wedding—the short and sweet version for ancient ‘love marriages’” (Das xvii).

⁴ Malloban’s drudgery as a petty office-clerk may remind us of a typical city-clerk in a dingy cityscape in Rabindranath Tagore’s poem “Banshi” (*Flute*): “Salary a meagre twenty-five rupees, / junior-clerk of a merchant-office. / I manage my feeding somehow / by giving tuitions to a boy of the Duttas / My frequenting to Sealdah station / I allow the evenings to pass / I save on lights” (*Sanchayita* 642-643). However, more than anything else, the clerk’s image in Jibanananda’s novel is commensurate with the typical bank-clerk “Stetson”, reference to whom has immediately been followed by the dread-inspiring planting of corpses in some gardens in the opening section of the *The Waste Land* (1922): “‘Stetson! / ‘You who were with me in the ships at Mylae! / ‘That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / ‘Has it begun to sprout? . . .” (*T. S. Eliot Selected Poems* 45).

⁵ Epiphany has been explained as “. . . a manifestation or ‘revelation’ and is similar to ‘theophany’ or revelation of the divine. There are several instances of this in the OT, notably God’s revelation to Moses at the Burning Bush (Exod. 3: 2)” (*Oxford Dictionary of the Bible* 101). However, James Joyce uses the word in a subversive manner, far away from the familiar biblical discourses. Epiphany, as Umberto Eco traces its development from

Joyce's *Stephen Hero* (published posthumously) to his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), is an "existential experience" by which one can "identify a character": "Epiphany is thus a way of discovering reality and, at the same time, a way of defining reality through discourse. . . . Such experiences are represented in the sketches that the young Joyce gathers in his notebook *Epiphanies*—pieces of conversation that serve to identify a character, a tic, a typical vice, an existential experience" (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* 344).

⁶ "Shamkol stork" of the novel is actually the Asian openbill stork (*Anastomus oscitans*).

⁷ "Place" as opposed to "space" implies (among other connotations) "space to which meaning has been ascribed," assigned distinctness and value' (Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World* 59).

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