

A Common Tune of Melancholy Resonated throughout Some Poems of Gray and Jibanananda

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Abstract

Thomas Gray, though born about two centuries ahead of Jibanananda Das who has already been regarded as a poet of different vision in Bengali literature, may be regarded as a poet of melancholia on the same platform on which Jibanananda Das did imprint his footsteps with his poetic insight and intellect. Both of the poets having the nature of nurturing common melancholic aspects in their thoughts have been skillfully able to observe the life even through trifling animate and inanimate objects like cat, owl, fish, grass, vase, etc characterized in different poems. But in this article along with a common melancholic tune prevailing in different poems of these two poets, the philosophical depth of some feline messages stirring up the human soul entrapped in some state of melancholia would be deciphered. To do this, the author has taken, into his consideration, few poems of Gray such as 'On the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes', 'Hymn to Adversity', 'Sonnet on the Death of Mr. Richard West', 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' and few poems of Das translated from Bengali such as 'The Cat', 'Ah Kite' from Banalata Sen; 'Go Where You will', 'I Have Seen Bengal's Face', 'Again I'll come back' from Rupashi Bangla (Beautiful Bengal); 'One Day Eight Years Ago', 'Subinoy Mustafi' from Mahaprithibi (Great Universe), 'In a roadside' from Jibanananda Dasher Kabita Samagra (Complete collection of Jibanananda Das's poems), etc.

Keywords: melancholy, human feeling, feline feeling, trauma, remorse, inevitability of death, emptiness

Amazingly spending similar life-span of about fifty-five years, both Jibanananda Das (1899—1954) of Bengali literature and Thomas Gray (1716—1771) of English literature did uphold their position pioneering a new viewpoint as well as breaking through their contemporary trends by their subtle observation over trifling matters—animates or inanimates—from their own synthesis of deep thoughts based on pensive sadness, silent pains and emotional impulses originated from their respective surroundings and cultures. Although a two centuries' gulf has caused these two pioneers to be poles apart physically, their ways of being engrossed in thinking of every event happening around have brought them closer in the realm of world literature. Of course, their feelings towards what they both perceive and conceive have been exposed differently through their poems. But it is true that the subject-matters echo a melancholic tune somewhere in the depth of their readers' hearts. Some inherent messages resonated through the lines of their poems lead somehow their readers to the point of depressed and aching melancholia from where nothing but deep-drawn sighs exhale. Both Gray and Das have shown their abilities to rouse emotional outburst gushed like a cascade from the source of human feeling saturated now and then with the

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death of some dear one, unfulfilled desire, agony of suspense, solitude terrorized with darkness. Although these varieties of painful causes may lead anyone to a state of melancholy, their natures have been visualized from different angles through their different poems.

As far as melancholy is concerned, it is usually without basis, a general depression which results in pensive and introspective contemplation that are to be taken into consideration as the causes which may lead such kinds of poets as Thomas Gray and Jibanananda Das to perceptive conclusions. Though the roots of melancholy in English literature are extended to the Middle Ages, Shirley Laird states, “the Romantics and Pre-Romantics are probably the most famous for their love of melancholy” (370). One of the pioneers of the Romantics, Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” is a poem which, as Shirley Laird considers, is “probably the best example of poetic melancholy” (370). In the very beginning of the poem, an ominous atmosphere full of solitude and darkness that raises a pensive sadness starts inculcating a melancholic lassitude into our hearts through the use of symbolic words like “curfew”, “the knell of parting day”, “the lowing herd”, “weary way” (Lines:1-3). Sitting at twilight in a small country churchyard when others go home, the poet, left alone in “darkness”, contemplates on melancholy as quoted by Editor Reverend Robert Aris Willmott in the book entitled *‘The Poetical Works of Thomas Gray, Thomas Parnell, William Collins, Matthew Green and Thomas Warton’*:

“When he returned home late in the evening”, writes Jacob Bryant, “he was obliged to pass by the churchyard, which was almost close to the house, and he would sometimes deviate into it, and there spend a melancholy moment. The stillness and solemnity of the scene after sunset, and the numerous dead deposited before his eyes, afforded room to a person of his turn for much contemplation.” (64)

Moreover, Gray reminds us, in the same way as in the gloomy surroundings, of the ringing of our own death-bell. Truly such melancholic reminiscence puts pressure upon slighted soul. Even melancholy can not be overlooked in the Epitaph of the poem:

“Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown
Fair science frowned not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy marked him for her own.” (Lines: 117-120)

Gray has actually shown here how painful destiny does await the lowly villagers in their lives before death and even after death. It is also to be observed that even after their death, they have been neglected in the humble grave for their failure to overcome their extreme poverty:

“For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her evening care:
No children run to lisp their sire’s return,
Or to share climb his knees the envied kiss.” (Lines: 21-24)

Now let's turn to Jibanananda Das's poems which present also the same sort of death-like emptiness felt into our heart engulfed in much more frustration, as we observe the following lines of 'One Day Eight Years Ago':

"Is this the sleep he'd longed for!
Like a plagued rat, mouth filled with crimson froth
Now asleep in the nook of darkness;
And will not ever awake anymore." (Lines: 11-14)

Such remorseful sigh may naturally be exhaled from someone's melancholic bosom when he/she has to observe the suicide committed by somebody of his or her own kind having been incapable of bearing the burden of his or her melancholic life. Thus, some sort of tiresome gloominess in this poem drives us to such a state of melancholia that we better choose lying dead on a dissection table in any post mortem cell than living a painful frustrated life in this world when the poet feels: "There is some other baffling surprise/ That whirls in our veins;/ It tires and tires,/ And tires us out;/ But there is no tiring/ In the post mortem cell/ And so,/ There he rests, in the post mortem cell/ Flat on the dissection table" (Lines:75-83). Indeed, Das has really been successful to raise traumas accumulated days after days into our mundane life by reminding us of our being destined to the state of melancholia.

Such melancholia cannot go unnoticed even in some feline messages the philosophical insights of which are decoded in some of the poems of both Gray and Das. These feline messages indicating literally pathetic and inevitable death of cats remind actually us of our own helplessness towards the inevitableness of death. Although both of them have shown their respective mode of feline expressions, their poetic intention is to make the human being be able to figure out that they may embrace melancholic touch of the very feline fate.

Therefore, an echo of feline melancholy is to be realized in Gray's feline poem "On the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes", though written in a mock-heroic manner with trifling subject-matters, stating that fate was laughing at the cat and not helping it as fate knew what was going to happen— "Malignant Fate sat by, and smiled" (Line 28). The destined death of Selima (the name of Robert Walpole's favourite cat whom the poem refers to) reminds that we have no choice to avoid our own death. What can be more melancholic than this cruel reality!

Likewise this sort of melancholic reminiscence is prevalent in Jibanananda's feline poems. In the poem 'The Cat', the poet himself acts as if he is alone like a cat tottering aimlessly. Through the simple act of that cat's catching hold of tiny balls and spreading them throughout the world visualized in the following last two lines, it is realized that the human beings are getting submerged into that melancholic darkness.

"Then he nets up the tiny balls of darkness with his paw
And spreads them throughout the world." (Lines: 17-18)

Even in Das's 'Subinoy Mustafi', a true insight latent in the life-death game played by the cat and the mouse is picturized into the following lines:

“This all-knowing young man had the amazing power of making the cat and the mouse
Held between its jaws laugh all at once.” (Lines: 2-3)

While Subinoy Mustafi crosses the poet's mind, he (the poet) gets amazed with his capability of making the state of ultimate melancholia enjoyable. But the helpless life like the mouse trying to laugh is being smashed every moment between the jaws of melancholic death in the guise of a cruel cat.

Now let's look into some other important poems of both Gray and Das to explore further and feel the gloominess and pensive sadness prevalent in a state of melancholia. In the poem 'On the death of Richard West' by Gray the first two lines bearing these images— shining “smiling mornings”, “reddening Phoebus” signifying bright reddened sun, “golden fire” (Lines:1-2) —are used as a contrast to their depressing mood. Here the poet is exposed to beauty but is depressed and engrossed in a painful state of melancholy where he has been unable to appreciate the jolly and heart-felt surroundings. Again in the same poem, the tune of melancholy has been resonated through the lines below:

“My lonely anguish melts no heart but mine;
And in my breast the imperfect joys expire.” (Lines: 7-8)

In this stanza, Thomas Gray feels the pains and pangs his pensive sadness bestows upon his own body, saying that his ears and eyes long to hear and see something else than what he perceives. He states that he is the only one who realizes this melancholic state and is unable to feel joy. In another of his poems “Hymn to Adversity”, the title itself echoes a melancholic tune for the individuals who would be graced by her (adversity) retinue—“Wisdom”, “Melancholy”, “Charity”, “Justice” and “Pity” (Lines: 25-32) —that can only be achieved by experiencing Adversity first. Through this stanza, the poet suggests that enduring hardships and pensive sadness at one's will through the path of melancholia, one may be able to reach the ultimate point of purgation. Even he has composed a hymn to the honour of Adversity.

In the case of Jibanananda's melancholic state, we feel much more frustration engulfed in obsession and sentimentalism, if our mind goes through the lines of such poem as 'Go Where You Will':

“In the grass, darkness—once, twice—and then suddenly
The forest's oak beckons it to its heart's side,
Shall see sad feminine hands—white conch-bangles
Crying like conch shells in the ash-grey wind:
She stands on the pond's side in the evening.” (Lines: 5-9)

The title of the poem shows the poet's intention to be left alone as he prefers loneliness to being accompanied. Such loneliness a melancholic mind prefers to observe the sad feminine hands, her loneliness in the evening, weeping conch-bangles, conch shell. Only loneliness can soothe a melancholic mind.

Same sort of remorseful crying in different scenario of Bengal can be traced in the poem 'I have seen Bengal's Face'. In the last two lines given below a tune of melancholy produces suppressed pains of crying somewhere in our universal human soul:

"When she danced like a torn wagtail in Indra's court
Bengal's river field, wild violets wept at her feet like anklet bells." (Lines: 14-15)

Here by using images of Behula's mournful dance, torn wagtail, weeping Bengal's river, field, wild violets the poet marks very artfully a melancholic atmosphere. Even such remorseful crying is not absent in the poem "Ah Kite". In this poem every line echoes the sound of crying creating a melancholic mood into our thoughts. The title itself heaves a sigh in the first two lines:

"Ah kite, golden-winged kite, stop crying this noon
Of tearful clouds, while flying around the Dhanshniri river." (Lines: 1-2)

Here the poet requests the mournful golden-winged kite to stop crying in such a state of melancholia already prevailing in this country of Dhanshniri river, signifying our country Bangladesh abounding in rivers. Such moribund river partakes naturally of Jibanananda's melancholy. A. K. Basu Majumdar in his book *The Beauteous Bengal of Jibanananda Das* has regarded Jibanananda to be a sad and solitary poet:

"His trek is often along the banks of a moribund river by the side of ruined temples with dilapidated steps into the river, closing the trek at the futility of human aspiration and endeavour and of the impermanence of human achievements, —thwarted, disturbed and decayed—compared with the tranquility of the starry heaven, is often the burden of his poems" (6).

The different philosophical mind-sets of Das and Gray— one's poetic philosophy tending always to invite melancholic human beings within the purview of pagan vision controlled with mysterious and spiritual consciousness while the other's poetic philosophy inviting melancholic human beings within the purview of religious vision controlled with objectivism and philosophical consciousness — have really been able to hypnotize the universal soul of any conscious individual into their ways of thinking of such a life which falls sometimes into the desuetude facing the most inhumane reality. Buddhadeva Bose in his book *An Acre of Green Grass* rightly says of Jibanananda:

"A nature-worshipper, but by no means a Platonist or pantheist; he is rather a pagan who loves the things of nature sensuously, not as tokens or symbols, nor as patterns of perfection, but simply because they are what they are" (58).

On the other hand, R. A. Willmott in his edited book of Gray's works says that "a shade rests upon his religious principles. We are assured, and readily believe, that the impulse of his mind was towards virtue, which he himself expressed by the Platonic phrase, "The exercise of right reason" (13).

However, both of Das and Gray have been seen to use some symbolic elements that build up an atmosphere of gloominess and ominous silence into the readers' minds. But creating some melancholic effect with such symbolic and ominous words as 'knell', 'moping owl', 'narrow cell', 'lowly bed', 'chill penury', 'woeful wan', 'crossed', etc Gray has been able to bind his readers' spiritual consciousness along with his own with the ground of reality; whereas, creating some melancholic effect engulfed in frustration and illusion with such symbolic and ominous words as loneliness, death, fog, dead cold butterfly, morgue, strange dark, weariness, etc Jibanananda has been able to lead his reader's spiritual consciousness along with his own from the reality to the unearthly emptiness.

In fact, both Gray and Das using different modes of symbolic and feline allusions with their connate and susceptible poetic power are likely to produce some sort of ennui and suppressed pain driving continually any sensitive individual through a sultry suspension to a state of melancholia where someone may subconsciously rediscover himself or herself even as a lonely cat travelling with aimless vision as visualized in the following lines:

"All day I inevitably encounter a cat here and there
In the shadow of trees or out in the sun, around
The pile of fallen leaves;" (Das, 'The Cat', lines: 1-3)

Or a cruel cat playing with the life of a helpless rat awaiting death as observed in the following lines:

"The white cat playfully biting on the mouse
Or the anxious mouse being torn into pieces
Oblivious of how far they were from heaven or hell"
(Das, 'Subinoy Mustafi', lines: 4-6)

Or a greedy cat drowning without any help into the abyss of death as picturized tactfully in the lines of the poem 'On the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes' given below:

"No Dolphin came, no Nereid stirr'd:
Nor cruel Tom, nor Susan heard:
A fav'rite has no friend!" (Gray, Lines: 34-36)

Or a helpless cat getting ready for accepting death with such satisfaction as to be remembered through the poem as revealed in the following lines:

With all white and black colours of his lonely amazing body
 Encroached upon my poem;
 Said, 'I will never make any longer any claim more extraordinary than this.'ⁱ
 (Das, Lines: 9-11)

Not that these feline messages latent in these poems indicate merely the lives of few cats, rather through their (cats) lonely and disregarded survival these messages of both the poets with their melancholic philosophies remind us of our getting entrapped into such a state of melancholia where our human soul fighting every moment some thought of any ominous consequence awaiting us. Marvelously in a mocking tone Thomas Gray in his poem 'Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat' reminds us that any human being may fall into the helpless condition as have been the case into the life of a favourite cat of the poet's friend Walpole whom no one came to rescue. This poem contains a melancholy truth that a favourite has no friend. On the other hand, marvelously in a serious tone, Jibanananda Das in his two poems—'The Cat' and 'Subinoy Mustafi'—reminds us of some sort of loneliness haunting us every moment when we feel helpless like a rat getting crushed gradually into the mouth of a cruel cat and frustrated enough to forget the ultimate consequence even in Heaven or Hell.

'Thus, it is to be noted that sometimes Gray's pen supplied illustrative forms of birds and insects artistically with equal accuracy and grace. Different things around him like a picture, a cathedral, an old house, a ruin, alike engaged his curiosity. Sitting in the British Museum he could transcribe a pedigree or wander into the fields and gather the first violet under the hedge. He was really capable of valuing the smallest things in nature. In such nature a vast portion of his poetic charm latent in a state of melancholia emerges from his personal, sensitive approach to his surroundings. He loiters about in front of the churchyard observing the signs of approaching nightfall until his musing over the atmosphere of twilight gets fulfilled. Such accomplishment makes his reflections upon life and death have a tone of sad and intimate sincerity. The whole poem is pervaded by an atmosphere of melancholy. The irrevocable nature of death, the extinction of gifts and abilities which never found a chance to reveal themselves, the poet's anticipation of his own death are all full of pathos' (Khabir Uddin, 2018 : Vol. XV, No. 296, p-9).

Actually it is possible for such a genius like Thomas Gray to paint one's own pain with different colours saturated with deep sighs at one's losing favourite and dear ones. That's why he is seen saying in a sad tone: 'I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear/And weep the more because I weep in vain' (On The Death Of Mr. Richard West); being in a huff: 'A fav'rite has no friend!' (On The Death Of A Favourite Cat, Drowned In A Tub Of Gold Fishes); lamenting in a melancholy grace: 'With screaming Horror's funeral cry/Despair, and fell Disease, and ghastly poverty' (Hymn To Adversity); epitomizing a dead young's melancholic life through an epitaph: 'Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,/Heaven did a recompense as largely send:/He gave to Misery (all he had) a tear,/He gain'd from Heaven ('twas all he wished) a friend' (Elegy Written In A Country Churchyard).

As for Jibanananda Das, it is to say that his poetry is sometimes an outcome of profound feeling painted in imagery of a type not readily understandable. He conceived a poem and moulded it up in the way most natural for him. When a theme occurred to him, he shaped it with words, metaphors and imagery that distinguished him from all others. Jibanananda Das's poetry is to be felt, rather than merely read or heard.

To him, the world is weird and olden, and as a race, mankind has been a persistent "wanderer of this world" (Banalata Sen) that, according to him, has existed too long to know anything more (before death, walking alone) or experience anything fresh. "So (he) had slept by the Dhanshiri river or a cold December night, and had never thought of waking again" (Darkness). Jibanananda nurtures in his poetic vision an all-comprehensive spirit—the land and grasses, the rivers and paddy fields, the insects, birds and beasts, the shrubs, the plants and the trees.

Indeed, through the poems of Gray and Das saturated with melancholic tone it is easily realized: the desire to be remembered after death is very strong in the human breast. Everybody, while dying, casts a regretful look upon this world and feels a keen desire to be remembered after death. A dying man seeks comfort in the tears of sympathy and affection shed by some dear friend or relative by his bedside. Even after death, when everything turns into dust and ashes, this desire for loving remembrance is keenly felt.

Really is there any human being who, while being on the verge of death, does not have the desire to be remembered after death? This life goes on through its pleasures and pains. Was there ever any human being who, while being bound to forsake this life, wished to be utterly ignored and forgotten? The answer must be 'no!'. Nobody, while making his/her exit from this bright, sun-lit world, could ever reconcile himself/herself to being completely forgotten. Every dying man wishes to be remembered after his death in some form or the other as expressed by Gray himself in an interrogative tone in the poem 'Elegy Written In A Country Churchyard':

"For who, to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing ling'ring look behind?" (Lines: 85-88, p-69)

Whereas, undergoing even a process of metamorphosis Das intends to immortalize himself by returning to his lovely motherland as expressed in his visionary belief:

"Again I'll come back to the bank of Dhanshiri—to this Bangla
Perhaps not as a human—or possibly under the guise of a white breasted kite
or a shalik,
May be as a morning crow to this land of new grains' ceremony in Kartk

Floating in the bosom of the fogs I'll come one day under the shade of jack-fruit tree;"ⁱⁱ
(Lines:14,89p)

Thus, both Gray and Das are deservedly popular for their melancholic insight probing into the entities of both animates and inanimates. Their poetic insights, engulfed in visionary thoughts and sentiments, vie with reality to make the readers realize such a state of melancholia into which everything tends to be reshuffled into its own melancholic abode.

Even in referring to the dead in their respective poems both of them nurture aptly so melancholic a vision. Gray, referring to the dead lying buried in a country churchyard, says that they will never wake up to the twittering of swallows or the crowing of cocks. No housewife will ply her evening care for them and no children will run to greet them on their return home; whereas, Das, referring to the dead lying in the post-mortem cell, says in rather frustrating a tone that he will never wake up, never again bear the endless—endless burden of painful waking!

In whatever manner—mockingly or seriously—Gray and Das, two poets and connoisseurs of two different eras, possessing a mind-set latent in an artistic mélange of inner and superficial senses with their own philosophical views, have come closer inculcating into the readers' minds a tune of melancholy, an inherent characteristic of both the poets, through human and feline viewpoints towards life visualized in some of their selected poems. Actually when this world of human beings is harsh, uncongenial, and in dire need of reform, both of them are apt to seek consolation from their surroundings. Their sense of melancholy has been exposed poetically with artistic zeal through different and varied facets of manifestation garbed in such human and feline feelings of different mental stages as traumatic stage, remorseful stage, gloomy stage awaiting death-like emptiness, agonized and painful stage surrounded by frustration. Both of them have an extraordinary power to observe in a human and feline manner the melancholic side of any human being fallen into different psychic states through the eyes of other objects—animates and inanimates—like cat, fish, owl, graveyard, different personalities, mythological elements, etc. And this is how both Thomas Gray and Jibanananda Das of two different parts of the world—The Western and the Eastern, having different cultures and perspectives emerged therefrom, have really been successful to make the readers thereof feel from different viewpoints a common tune of melancholy, saturated with human and feline feelings, getting resonated throughout some of their poems.

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Endnote

- i Translated by the author from the original Bengali poem 'Pather kinare' included in the volume 'Aprozashito Kabita'. (See Das, 380p, 2008).
- ii Translated by the author from the original Bengali poem 'Abar ashibo phire' included in the volume 'Rupashi Bangla'. (See Das, 89p, 2008).