Chapter 3

FATE-AWARENESS IN JAGADISH GUPTA'S STORIES

"Jagadish Gupta freed the Bengali short story of the romantic emotionalism of the Kallolites, and took it to dry Fate-ridden land filled with the cry of helpless anguish of the suffering man." This embarrassed the readers and the critics, but none, not even Rabindranath could write him off.

The history of literature shows that whenever a writer swims against the current and yet attracts the notice of other powerful writers, his worth cannot but be acknowledged. The originality of his ideas or techniques transcends the traditional without altogether dispensing with it. This is borne out by the life story of all great writers of the world.

Let us not now try to determine if Jagadish Gupta was a great writer. The fact remains that he makes relevant reading even to-day unquestionably for the originality of his creation. Where exactly does this originality lie? The chief component of literature is man. The writer deals with man's life with its smiles and tears and apparently inconsequential feelings and sentiments, and unravels the mystery that is man.

The post Rabindranath and the post Saratchandra eras in Bengali literature saw the emergence of the Kallolites, a
group of writers confused with doubts. Inspired by Freud and Marx, and influenced by the political movements of the day, their fire-spitting writings created quite a stir. But Jagadish Gupta stayed out of this turmoil. He was alone and alienated like an island, humming a tune not in consonance with the general spirit of the time. The Kallolites started writing with the avowed purpose of striking out of existence the weakening, belittling prejudices of life. Jagadish had no such aim; he wanted neither to change things, nor to destroy them.

However realistic his portrayal of family life in the villages of Bengal, it cannot be called very original. However living his characters in their greed, envy and selfishness, they were not quite novel in Bengali literature. They were only different in degree, not in kind. Still, none of Jagadish Gupta's stories or novels is a mere echo of Saratchandra's. Each one instils into the readers mind an irremediable sense of sadness. This is caused by the expression of Jagadish's Fate-awareness. We discover the originality of his attitude and art the moment the cruel curse of Fate comes down upon the men and women, our literary counterparts, in his unadorned stories.

We have seen the role played by Fate in Greek literature, in Shakespeare and in Bankimchandra. But in Bengali literature none else displayed Jagadish Gupta's courage and conviction in asserting the supremacy of Fate.
His Fate-awareness bred sorrow, not joy. Yet he achieved unique artistic success by pitting the small and ordinary hopes and despairs in the daily life of man against his cruel Nemesis. In most of his stories Fate strikes hard. His philosophy of life sprang from the firm realization that in the face of cruel Fate every human effort was doomed to fail.

To the educated, such a view may appear superstitious, but the convincing naturalness of his presentation forces a willing suspension of disbelief. Prof. N.R. Teitel of the New York University, while discussing 'Nana' by Emile Zola made the following comment: "Man was a victim of his heredity and environment, and no matter how he writhed or struggled in his chains, there was no escape . . . . All designed to flesh the canvas against which 'Nana' is indelibly etched. This is her world. A world she never made. But a world from which she can never escape. Zola underlined his thesis again and again. (The twenty volumes of his Fournon-Macquart series attest to it). Determination was his philosophic credo. And he almost proved it."²

Mohitlal Majumdar wrote: "What might be called primitive superstition or perverse delusion of the sickly mind and what to the civilised and educated appear as anti-rational and even inconceivable, looks so possible and real through bizarre in Jagadish Gupta's stories."³ However, he also wrote: "This is not the right artistic attitude because it is not normal and healthy."⁴ Still he admitted: "Yet, it is
not outside the purview of art. His originality in this regard marks him unquestionably out as a powerful writer.  

Fatalism has played a significant role in Greek literature. This had its genesis in the national ethos of the Greeks. It coloured the attitude of some Bengali writers as well. The characters in Bankimchandra's 'Kapālkundalā', a novel with an epic design are mere toys in the hand of Fate. Mohitlal called this attitude sick as he found so much of pessimism in it. But to consider this attitude this way is to deny Greek literature its worth and glory. It is also difficult to accept that 'Kapālkundalā' is inartistic. However, fatalism is not an absolute principle. Jaçadish Gupta's fatalism should not be confused with the fatalism as conceived nationally by the Greeks or with the fatalism emerging out of Bankim's healthy outlook on life.

How did Jaçadish Gupta come to have such a vision. His characters belonged principally to the poor section of the society, and on rare occasions to the lower middle-class. These poor, illiterate villagers are ever tormented with despair. But, surprisingly enough, they are least bothered about economic and social disparities. They have no grievances against the society. They take their condition as natural and just try to subsist. That is why the poor peasant in the story "Char Paisai Ek Ana" could waste the money.

It is pertinent to ask why Jaçadish Gupta did not hit back in anger. We must not forget that his characters
are unique. They have their longings and desires, but they
do not have any intelligence. They cannot even dream of
changing their social set-up. They believe that they are
fated to be what they are, and it is this belief which
enables them to get reconciled to the blows and losses in
life.

Saratchandra held man's society responsible for his
sufferings. Jagadish Gupta did not believe that the society
could be changed, and, therefore, did not blame it. He was
convinced on the strength of his own experiences, that the
society or the individual did not have the power to save man
from the clutches of Fate. As Sukumar Sen has put it, "he
did hold social or individual difference, hatred and greed
responsible (for human suffering) ... He did not look
for the cause in the world of men and things." Görikanath
Roy Chaudhuri also said the same thing: "Jagadish Chandra
was moved into pessimism and pain by man's failures and
frustrations, but he did not particularly blame any society
or individual. The cruelty of Fate was the root-cause; man
was a helpless victim of this Fate." Jagadish defined the
first and principal cause of human suffering as an autocratic
cruel power, in his story 'Dibaser Shesha' in the collection
of stories entitled 'Binodini'.

Jagadish Gupta was convinced that all human efforts
were doomed to fail in the place of cruel, blind Fate, and
yet he never undermined these efforts. He found man
ceaselessly fighting for life. Said Saroj Sandhyopadhyay: "But he never undermined human efforts. Had he looked down upon man's immortal struggle, he could not have had artistic success. Fortunately his best works unfailingly show life's relentless fight for existence ... ... He found man ever taking all pains in his stride and ever fighting." But man's efforts could not overcome Fate. Pati failed to overthrow Fate in "Dibaser Shesha", so failed Sanatan in 'Harp': Shibapriya in 'Bibar Loke Thik Balo': and Krishnakanta in 'Nayanakham': though each one had tried his best to succeed. Jagadish Gupta's outlook was shaped by his knowledge of the cruel tragedy in the daily life of man, and it was this that made him different from the traditional writers.

He could not explain, as Manik Sandhyopadhyay did, human sufferings in the light of Marxism. He found in Fate "an autocratic, cruel ruler" ever directed towards frustrating man's life. "Jagadish Gupta coming of a bourgeois family, developed his analytical attitude on his own. In that he had much in common with the early Manik Sandhyopadhyay. But neither his circumstances nor his friends could lead him anywhere. To quote Ashoke Guha, "he was like a chrysalis, ever turning but never succeeding in breaking out of the shell."10

"The mysterious, blind Fate so ostensibly present in Zola's stories is also noticeably there in Jagadish Gupta's writings. Man's lust for life ensues him in ceaseless struggles, but all his efforts are easily rendered futile by
the irresistible powers of Fate.\textsuperscript{11}

Gopikanath Roy Chaudhuri said: 'According to Jayadish Gupta, all the noble efforts made by man throughout his life ultimately come to nought. He felt the hand of an autocratic cruel and blind power behind such frustration.'\textsuperscript{12}

Perhaps it was Mohitlal who first drew the readers attention to this special note in the writings of Jayadish Gupta. He wrote: 'The oppression of the cruel and mysterious fate on human life is becoming increasingly sharper. It seems that on the other side of the lighted stage of life there is an area of darkness. There ever lies in wait a nameless, formless ferocity for its helpless victim - man.'\textsuperscript{13}

We must now try to see how far Jayadish Gupta succeeded in expressing in his short stories what he felt so deeply in his heart. We shall, for this purpose, examine two of his stories of a different nature - 'Dibaser Sheshe' and 'Jāhā Ghatila Tāhāl Satya'. However, some other stories may be referred to first. Almost all his writings had been shaped by his outlook, and all the characters derived their life from it.

Let us consider the story 'Pallishāshān'. The dead body of a villager is taken to the crematory, but all the efforts of cremating it fail. It may seem that the failure is due to human meanness and narrowness, but the writer finds
in it the cruel hand of an unholy, mysterious power. Had it been otherwise, the dead man’s body would not have been floating, of all places to the cot adjacent to his own house.

Man’s individualism tries at times to break out of the bonds of circumstances, but he ultimately fails to reach the desired end, for the simple reason that his circumstance is but the expression of that mysterious omniscient power called Fate. Shibpuribhul fails to free himself from his circumstance in the story ‘Fibār Loe Thik Bīl’. In the story, *Upalbhya*, a rich widow, Annapurna arranged early marriage for his only son Ashoke, in order to obviate the fearful astrological predictions about him. Ashoke beget two children in a few years time. But Fate could not decide. Ashoke died at the age of twenty-four.

In the story ‘Bherā-sukhe’ in deference to the mothers wish her children arrange a feast with all care, but they cannot foresee that their mother can never partake of it. In *Pralayankari Sasthi*, Jasim sent his beautiful wife to Sadu Khan’s house, but she would never again came back to him.

‘Daibadhan’ a story closely resembling ‘Joe’s ‘Monkey’s Paw’, tries to fulfil three wishes with the help of the magical power of a monkey’s paw given him by a friend. First he wishes for five thousand rupees. But his wish is fulfilled at the cost of the life of his son.
In 'Harh' Sanatan is shown as free from superstitious beliefs. He pays no heed to Rasi's curse and goes out fishing. But his self-confidence proves to be of no avail. By the time he triumphantly comes back home with his booty, Fate has realised its cruel design. In 'Sabēr Sheshe Gayā' Gayamani pins all her hopes on her son after her husband's death. But Fate cuts short all such hopes at a stroke.

In 'Satyashiber Biye o Bou' the mother gets her son married and starts dreaming of rest and comfort. But the dream is crushed by Fate in no time.

All that is noble and holy in man degenerates into infinite despair ('Kalankita Samparka') and man becomes necessarily lonely ('Putra o Putrabadhu'). In many other stories also - 'Adhrubam Nastameba Hi', 'Asanlaona Bhabishyat', 'Kāpālik o Mahākāli', 'Nityadhan Chātujyey Aparādh', to name some of them, Fate plays the most important role.

Let us now discuss in detail the two stories mentioned earlier - the two stories which especially embody Jacadish Gupta's philosophy of life. We begin with a restatement of the story told in 'Dibaser Sheshe'.

Panchu, aged five, is the only surviving son of Rati the barber. Three other sons born earlier had died in the labour-room. Naturally Panchu is the apple of his parents eye. They take all care to prevent his premature death. Panchu is made to carry on his person a sacred amulet
symbolising the blessings of 'Pānchugopāl'. One morning, after waking up, Panchu accompanies his mother to the field. While walking by her side, he looks at her and says:

'The crocodile shall take me today'.

Narani gets startled, 'what do you mean'?

'Yes, mother, the crocodile shall take me today'.

'How do you know that'?

'That I don't know'.

Though startled at first, Narani shrug off her apprehensions after she had deliberated a little over the matter. Panchu has said many such things earlier. Once he said that he had found an owl laughing from their roof in the evening. On another day he said that he had seen a tortoise with its children dancing in their courtyard.

The river Kamta flows by the village. Nobody has never been even a hearsay to the effect. On hearing from Pati, what his son has said, the landlord, Mr. Chaudhuri and his minions burst out laughing. 'Crocodile in the Kamta? How ridiculous?'

But this initial note of humour soon dissipates. It is replaced by a suggestive profundity as the writer comes to talk of the popular conviction of the villagers. 'They have always known intimately this river Kamta, its water and its banks. This river is no man-eating monster; it is as
kind and loving as the mother who breast-feeds her child. It has ever been carrying cool, tasty water from mountain caves to their doors. This river should not be feared.

This statement has been preceded by the disappearance of Adhar Bakshi and his boat. In the evening before the day of immersion of the deity Adhar Bakshi had seen his own reflection in the courtyard and shouted: 'Who is he? Who is he?' 'This river should not be feared' is an assuring statement. It assures us that Panchu's apprehension is groundless. But we do not remember that Panchu has not yet had its bath. Rati tells Panchu: 'Let's go for our bath'. But both involves water, and water, to Panchu, means crocodile. So he is scared of bathing. But Rati takes him to the river.

'He suddenly stop at the edge of the water and begins to feel scared. The wide expanse of the still waters is sparkling in ominous silence like a sharp weapon in the midday Sun. He has never before seen this cruel face of the dear river. If the exterior is so formidable then in its invisible fathomless depths there must be moving awful ferocities with their bared fangs. Rati shivers'. But this is only the baseless fear of one blinded by parental love. As Rati looks around after a while, he finds no cause for apprehension. Not even a bubble can be seen on the still water of the river. But an occasional glow takes the father and the son by surprise. Rati says: 'Dolphins are chasing
fish'. They return home after their bath. Panchu happily eats his meal. And our mind is relieved of the fear which has been intensifying so long. But the relief is of a short duration, lasting as long as Rati has his siesta. Narani wakes Rati up. Panchu is covered with the dust in the courtyard and smeared with jack-fruit juice. Rati gets cross as his wife shouts, 'Don't shout any more'. He says, 'I shall clean him up'. He gets down to the courtyard and gives Panchu his toy-pitcher. 'With that pitcher in hand, the guilty Panchu goes weeping, with his father at his back, towards the river.'

This brings back fear to our heart. As long as Panchu bathes in the river, we remain apprehensive: Was that really a dolphin and not a crocodile? - we ask ourselves. However, Rati washes Panchu clean and sends him to the bank of the river. But before he completes the climb, he says, 'Father, where is my pitcher?' (We are then reminded of the pitcher which has either gone out of our mind, or has remained there as something totally irrelevant). Both find it lying on the bank. Rati laughs at Panchu's anxiety.

'Just when, after picking up the pitcher, Panchu turns around, a pair of very large eyes emerge out of the water and observe him from close quarters, and a tail springs up with the speed of lightning, and within the twinkling of an eye Panchu disappears into the river'. What remains is the impression of cruelty which had earlier been intuitively
apprehended by Panchu. Against the cruelty the individual man is helpless ("Rati is scared, tongue-tied, incapable of opening his eyes"); even many men, put together cannot fight it out ("Oh God! exclaims the crowd"). We are made to understand that Panchu, Rati, Narani, the crowd, in other words, ourselves, are of no consequence: what matters is the deception of the crocodile or of the waters. The 'pitcher' is just a material prop.

There is death sharpening its nails even behind the beauties of nature. The Sun, the river, and the crocodile are all agents of death, though they possess deceptive looks. The river, for example, looks as calm and kind as a mother, but when Jadadish writes - 'It greedily licks the earth by the banks' or when he says - 'There is darkness under the waters' (The crocodile as a messenger of death is perhaps a manifestation of Fate), we know what he is hinting at. The sea appeared, just before Rakhal's death, equally ominous to Rabindranath in the poem 'Debatār Grēs'.

Of course, the poem has little else in common with Jadadish's story.

At day break 'when the sun peeps over the horizon, its intense red light kisses the top of Rati's house'. This
Sun carries no suggestion of fear. But the same Sun looks different in the concluding part of the story. 'The last ray of the setting sun shines on the pale face of dead Pandu'. In other words, Jagadish Gupta pressed Nature's duality into the service of Fate. Pandu is as much a victim of Fate as of Nature. 'Dibaser Sheeshe' points to the darkness of life. In this story Jagadish proved his point. The phrase 'offering of God to the Sun' is charged with intense violecy. The primitive man used to worship Nature and the Sun. The crocodile by offering food to the Sun before satisfying its own hunger symbolises life's object inferiority.

Let us now turn to 'Jahala Ghatila Tahai Satya,' 16

Radhamadhababhu has profound faith in astrology. He has studied it at home. His younger brothers enthusiastically bring it to the knowledge of their friends, but none has ever approached him horoscope - study or astrological prediction. As a matter of fact, he is not too sure of the correctness of his astrological calculations. Only Premnibas Bhattacharyya, the great astrologer, is infalliable in this respect. Radhamadhab comes into contact with Premnibas and develops great respect for the latter's wisdom.

Radhamadhab's first child saw the light of the day as per astrological predictions. So did the second child. Three very dependable watches were consulted to record the exact time of his birth. As on the earlier occasion, this time also the great astrologer was there. On the earlier occasion
after having gone through various complicated calculations, he read the future of the newly born child and gave out his findings through long-winding sentences . . . What he said can be simply stated thus: the child would grow into a various, mild-mannered, moneyed man . . .

'How long shall he live?'

'He shall live long. For more than eighty years.'

Ghantu, however, does not turn out to be 'mild mannered', but then he is just a child. In any case, the reader feels a bit uneasy about it, specially because he is reading Jagadish Gupta.

So many details about the eighteen month old Ghantu appear somewhat odd in the context of the art of the short story, for the short story is supposed to deal not with childlike simplicity, but with complex human psychology. But it is certainly not irrelevant in as much as it rivets the reader's attention on Ghantu.

A good many inquisitive people come when the horoscope of the youngest son is being studied. The mother Chandrika place Ghantu by the new-born's side. 'Don't allow flies to sit on your brother's face'.

The astrologer makes his predictions. 'This one is a very lucky child. I tell you, he shall live long and become a gem of a man in his scholarship, kindness and purity of heart'. The grand-mother is elated. 'The thought of making
her journey towards heaven after having lived a life in the
company of her grandsons and grand-daughters filled her heart
with great joy.'

When Ghantu, who has been left alone to keep watch
over his brother, comes down, every one becomes apprehensive.
The child is all alone upstairs, and may be bitten by cats.
Chandrika rushes up only to witness a heart breaking
spectacle. The child dead and the white sheet on which it
lies bears the imprint of two very small feet. Thus is
proved wrong: Radhamadhhab's faith in astrology; thus is
rendered futile the great astrologer's prediction. Fate, in
the form of a little child has taken away the life of the
child's own younger brother.

Some might think that here Jagadish Gupta's irony is
directed against the unscientific nature of astrological
calculations. However, the title of the story makes it clear
that only whatever happens is true. The characters can do
little in the given situation. No doubt, not even the
child's mother, has been present at the time of its murder,
and the brother has not deliberately done what it has done.
Fate has got done what it has wanted done.

Needless to say, both the stories - 'Dibaser Sheshe'
and 'Jahā Ghatila Tāhāī Satya' - have been governed by one
single attitude towards life. The sacred amulets could not
protect Panchu; the astrologer's prediction fail to keep the
child alive. Fate laughed at these human efforts and cruelly
rendered them futile.

The Makhans of Jagadish Gupta's world are forced to return to the hell of darkness. The people like Krishnakanta, Shibapriya and Sanatan cannot but submit to the Devil. This, according to Jagadish Gupta, is the inevitable fate of man. And this vision informed all of Jagadish's writings as his early short story, 'Dibaser Sheshe' and the story 'Jahā Ghatila Tāhāī Satya', written quite late in his life, illustrate. His conviction that man stood no chance against Fate never wavered.

His philosophy of nothingness evolved out of this conviction. He saw a cruel power at work even under the beauties of nature. He felt its presence in the sun, the rivers, and also in the insignificant happenings in man's life. Man's struggle for existence, he believed, was doomed to achieve nothing. Through his short stories he gradually built up his philosophy of nothingness. Rati's sharp cry of anguish in 'Dibaser Sheshe' is echoed in Chandrika's anguished keening in 'Jahā Ghatila Tāhāī Satya': both result from a sense which finds no sense in life.

Jagadish Gupta was not fully an absurdist, but he had much in common with the writers of the absurd. He did not lose all faith in the current literary tradition. He did not have the satirist's mission of reforming the society. Nor did he believe like the tragic writers that despite man's failure and fall, universal order remained over unimpaired.
He considered man's individuality as impenetrably mysterious as the human world, and for that very reason he came to think of life not as a tragic affair but as a grotesque business. Reason failed in this absurd world. Everything here was incomprehensible. Had it been a tragic world, man could have taken his own measure. But the world being what he thought it was, only a comic vision was the only adoptable vision expressing itself humorously and satirically. He did not hate, as Camus did, the frustrating human situation. He did not look the other way; on the contrary, he artistically tried to devise the means with which to withstand it.

Ja
dish was close to the American absurdists than to the French. Coppit and Alby never said that life was wholly absurd. They did not lose all faith in man. Jadish Gupta also did not lose all faith in man. He said 'no' to life, and yet he was not blind to its inexorable forward march. This is borne out by such stories as 'Anand DAr Abhishipe', 'Palk Shree Mihir Pramanik', 'Karnadhar Piler Gaman O Agaman', 'Jvarshanir Grahapuddhi' etc.

The existentialists - from Nietzsche to Camus - held that since there was no God to rely on, man must rely upon himself. Nietzsche's 'superman' was born of this conviction. Sisyphus tried to glean the meaning of human struggle out of his tireless, endless and painful effort of pushing a lump of stone up to the top of the mountain. Sartre loudly declared: 'Existentialism is humanism.'
The absurdists thought that man could never achieve such self-dependence. However, the American absurdists found in love a temporary escape from the pains of life. Jagadish Gupta chose to depict ceaseless human struggle a'la Sisyphus in place of love. This struggle lent meaning to man's life.

However, a writer's merit lies more in the artistic presentation of his philosophy than in the validity and acceptability of philosophy itself. Jagadish Gupta did not impose anything on his art. His stories developed naturally and consistently. In the two stories we have discussed in detail, he seems to be an out and out pessimist. In 'Annadar Abhishap' however, he seems to have betrayed some faith in man. Here he shows men engaged in a relentless struggle, painfully and slowly inching forward. So when ultimately success comes, it does not look like an imposition.
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