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# NEW LITERARIA

## CONTENT

### August-September 2024

Sl. No.	Name of the Contributors	Articles	Page No.
1.	Ramit Das	<b>Playing the Pirate, Playing the Jew: Refiguring the Other(s) on the Early Modern English Stage</b>	01-09
2.	Sadia Afreen	<b>The Complexities of Transnational Identity and Nazneen's Concept of Agency in Monica Ali's <i>Brick Lane</i></b>	10-18
3.	Li Chunyi	<b>Metaphors and the Integration of Faith and Reason in Ang Lee's <i>Life of Pi</i></b>	19-25
4.	Manjari Johri	<b>Examining the Impact of Cinema on the Normalization of Queer and Sexual Minorities Through Kundalkar's <i>Cobalt Blue</i></b>	26-36
5.	J.R. Sackett	<b>The Celtic Other in the Regionalist Poems of John Hewitt</b>	37-46
6.	Partha Sarathi Mondal	<b>'Dalit Aesthetics' through Poetic Rendering of Experience: A Study on Bengali Dalit Poetry</b>	47-56
7.	Tapas Sarkar	<b>Re-writing History and Myth as Re-creating Identities: A Study of Jibanananda Das's Narrative Technique</b>	57-63
8.	Alankrita Bhattacharya	<b>The Post-millennial Dalit Woman in Documentary: Traversing the Journey from Abasement to Agency in the Documentary <i>Daughters of Destiny</i> (2017)</b>	64-73
9.	Kavya Nair K.S	<b>Navigating Adolescent Liminality: A Critical Exploration of the Threshold Experiences in Abha Dawesar's <i>Babyji</i></b>	74-81
10.	Adithya P and Lal Surya S	<b>Shape of Water: A Critical Analysis of Transcorporeal Existence in the Movie <i>Aavasavyuham</i></b>	82-89
11.	Aditi Bandyopadhyay	<b>"Dead Paper": A Study of the Trauma of Therapeutic Fallacy in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"</b>	90-98
12.	Mujaffar Hossain	<b>Femininity Through the Lens: Narrating Sexual Politics and Women's Emancipation in <i>Parched</i> and <i>Lipstick Under my Burkha</i></b>	99-103
13.	Srestha Bhattacharya	<b>Affect, Subjectivity and Everyday Resistance in Hasan Azizul Haque's <i>The Bird of Fire</i></b>	104-112
14.	Sahabuddin Ahamed	<b>History and Narrative: A Postmodern Scrutiny of Salman Rushdie's <i>Midnight's Children</i></b>	113-121

15.	<b>Shivani Rana &amp; Dr. Anupriya Roy Srivastava</b>	<b>Unveiling Trauma in the Life Narrative of Transgender: A Study of Manobi Bandhopadhyay's <i>A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi</i></b>	<b>122-128</b>
16.	<b>Abhinandan Bag</b>	<b>Ghosts of Yesterday: Exploring the Intersections of Memory and Trauma in select children's writings of Sudha Murty</b>	<b>129-140</b>
		<b>Book Review</b>	
17.	<b>Pragya Goswami</b>	<b><i>Anger in the Long Nineteenth Century: Critical Perspectives:</i> Edited by Ritushree Sengupta and Shouvik Narayan Hore</b>	<b>R01-R02</b>
		<b>Translation</b>	
18.	<b>Albrecht Classen</b>	<b>Der Stricker, <i>Der Pfaffe Amîs</i> – <i>The Priest Amîs</i></b>	<b>T01-T33</b>



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## **Re-writing History and Myth as Re-creating Identities: A Study of Jibanananda Das's Narrative Technique**

**Tapas Sarkar**

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### **Abstract**

Both history and myth are perceptive creations of human imagination. History often retains the source of mythological narratives. Similarly, the narratives of myth represent history, tradition, culture and, of course, the knowledge of a particular language, region, and country; therefore, akin to history, myth can be considered a source of knowledge as well as a systematic form of art- narrative technique and an essential element in the formulation of native knowledge system. Jibanananda Das, in his writings, rewrites regional history and myths that show the cultural affinities and cognizant values of Bengal and India in general. With this perception, based on historical and mythological significance, representing identical values, Das's poems "I have Seen the Face of Bengal" (1934), "The Chariot of History" (1946), and "Banalata Sen" (1935) are the most authentic manifestation of mythological as well as historical values of Bengali people. At the same time, Das's prose fiction and mythological references provide precise historical documentation, such as *Sutirtha* (1948), representing the contemporary Partition crisis. The quintessential mythological narratives in each poem of Das and the references to the contemporary historical contexts in his prose fiction provide readers with magnificent sources of knowledge and perspectives to internalise the self-history narrative, culture, and tradition (of Bengal). This research paper aims to study Das's re-interpretation of history and myth in his selected poems and a novel, adding a new path to look into the existing mythological sense and historical discourse in academia. The study also intends to explore Das's re-interpretation of history and myth as a distinctive literary technique.

**Keywords:** Literature, History, Myth, Culture, Identity, Native Cognisance.

### **Introduction**

Identity is a space that consists of unified affinities. In another sense, identity is a set of distinctive characteristics, symbols, values, and beliefs of an individual, a cultural community, or a nation. In a society, identity is significantly connected to its history, where "Like the meaning of any other object in our sociocultural context, the human individual is defined within the symbols and meanings available in our historical time" (Weigert, 2006, pp. IX-X). Consequently, re-writing the 'historical time' redefines a particular identity, and therefore, the history of a civilisation is an extensively valuable discourse where the cognisance of identities is a core objective. From a psychological perspective, Erik H. Erikson states, "Indeed, in the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity" (1980, p. 95). Literature is an elaborative mirror of society,

## Re-writing History and Myth as Re-creating Identities: A Study of Jibanananda Das's Narrative Technique

which speaks in diversified genres and languages; therefore, through diversified monologue, dialogue, and soliloquy, literary creation, through facts and fiction, reflects different identities- the identities based on gender, class, caste, culture, religion, tradition, geography, history, and myth. More specifically, history and myth demonstrate the events from the past identity and merge them with the present existing people, culture, tradition, and literature. Jibanananda Das, in his writings, rewrites regional history and myths that show the cultural affinities and cognizant values of Bengal and India in general.

Almost all the works of literature in the world are directly or indirectly based on contemporary history, culture, religion, and mythological interpretation. While studying history, literature cannot be separated. Likewise, without mythological stories, there is hardly a base of actual literature. Hence, literature and history (or myth) complement each other. Whether it is Greek literature, English literature, French literature, German literature, Indian literature or others. Literature is incomplete without historical contexts; there is an incomplete beginning without mythological stories. In this context, the Sanskrit word *itihasa* can be interpreted with its different connotative meanings and sense; the word *itihasa* is derived from the Sanskrit phrase *iti ha āsa* (इति ह आस) means 'so it has been' (Apte, 1890, p. 276). *Itihasa* refers to 'historical evidence, tradition (which is recognised as a proof by the Pauranikas)' (Apte, 1890, p. 276); a tradition is an amalgamation of historical story, legendary, and cultural practices. Therefore, containing history and myth, *itihasa* is history based on chronological facts and myth based on philosophical truth. Alternatively, *itihasa* is neither history nor mythology; it simply means "ancient story" or "traditional accounts of past events" (Pattanaik). However, the purpose of this research article is not merely to debate between history and myth nor to create distance between history and *itihasa*. Instead, there will be a critical interpretation regarding how re-writing history and myth is re-creating identity through literature and why it is essential in literature. Moreover, for these objectives, three poems by Jibanananda Das (1899-1954), "Banalata Sen" (1935), "I have Seen the Face of Bengal" (1934), and "The Chariot of History" (1946) and a novel *Sutirtha* (1948) will critically be studied.

Das is the second most-read poet of Bengal, just after Tagore and Nazrul Islam (Murshid, 2016, p. 316). He is distinctive in his writing. Buddhadev Bose called Das's literary creation 'সেই পথ নির্জন' (that loneliest path) (1943, p. 39). In his writings, Das re-writes regional history and mythology, which show the cultural and cognizant values of Bengal. The quintessential mythological narratives in each poem of Das and the references to the contemporary historical contexts in his prose fiction provide the reader with a magnificent source of knowledge and perspectives to internalise self-history, culture, and tradition.

In literature, re-writing history and myth is re-creating cognizant identities and a distinctive art representation technique. Though "myth and history are often considered antithetical modes of explanation" (Heehs, 1994, p. 1) in the studies of the modern age, there has always been an intricate relationship between these two narratives.

The term *history* comes from the Greek root word 'historia', which means gaining knowledge through enquiry and investigation. History studies the past world, civilisations, and human existence in ancient times. John J. Anderson, in his book *A Manual of General History* (1870), states that "History is a narration of the events which have happened among mankind, including an account of the rise and fall of nations, as well as of other great changes which have affected the political and social condition of the human race" (1870, p. 9). The study of history is termed 'historiography', and the study of human society, culture, politics, tradition, religion, and development is mainly known as 'anthropology'; therefore, without the anthropological study of literature or history narrated in literature, cultural history cannot be understood. Similarly, within the umbrella term history or with independent connotative meanings, *myth* is a significant part of culture to study human anthropology and society. Myth through storytelling represents a particular society, culture, religion, human behaviour,

and an individual's story or saga. Pattanaik writes, "Myth is truth which is subjective, intuitive, cultural and grounded in faith" because it "gave purpose, meaning and validation of existence (2006, p. XVI); the study of myths is called 'mythology' or 'mythography'. Significantly, both history and myth are integral parts of literature.

### History and Myth in Das's Poems

Poetry is the best medium of expression in literature. Through poetic language (metaphor, rhetoric, and conceit), with references to history and myth, poetry creates new sense and meaning. From early writers like Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, and Wordsworth in English literature to the present English world, from early Bengali writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh, and Jibanananda Das to the present age, history and myth they had been a significant element in their narratives. History and myth have been essential elements in expressing a poet's sense and meanings of society. Das's poetic representation can be seen as the archival testimonies of history and mythology. Especially his poetry collections, such as *Rupashi Bangla* (1957), *Bela Abela Kalbela* (1946), and *Jhora Palok* (1928). Most of the poems in these collections show ample historical and mythological interpretations, which identify Das's literary style as a new and distinctive canon in Bengali literature.

The poem "Banalata Sen" was published in 1935 in the poetry collection *Banalata Sen*; Das, in this poem, praises the beauty of Bengal and connects the history of ancient India to the contemporary literary vision. Das says:

I have walked the roads across the earth's breast for a thousand years.  
 In the darkness of night, I have ranged far- from Ceylon waters  
 To the Malay Sea; in Vimbisar and Ashoka's grey world  
 Have I been, and the still more distant darkness of Vidarbha.  
 A tired being am I, round me life's foaming seas.

Banalata Sen of Natore gave me a moment's peace. (lines 1-6)

Das's 'Banalata Sen' may be a village woman or the feminine beauty of Bengal. The poet is ever peaceful with her company. However, the first line suggests human history's continuous evolution and the ancestors' journey. The speaker's travel from 'Ceylon waters' (Sri Lanka) to 'the Malay Seas' (Malaysia) refers to the Bay of Bengal, which significantly impacts the geographical location of Bengal. Das's references to 'Vimbisar' and 'Ashoka' represent the glorious ancient history of India. Not only these, Das also mentions the ruined cities 'Vidarbha', 'Vidisa', and 'Sravasti' to where Banalata Sen (beautiful Bengal) can be found. The continents of India are historically connected with those ruined cities, which are historically significant in accepting India as one nation. There is no ancestral difference between Bengal and Vidisa, Bengal and India; therefore, Banalata Sen's face is identical to the carvings of Shravasti. This interpretation signifies India's unified cultural identity, which makes Das proud. He is contemplating this conscious sense of the history of ancient India.

Das writes, "I saw her through the darkness. She asked, 'Where were you so long?'/ Raising her eyes like bird's nests, Banalata Sen of Natore" (lines 11-12). The question 'Where were you so long?' indicates that even if a man is separated from his/her national identity (with self-history and mythology), a nation calls each individual to make a deep connection between them.

Here, Das is successful with his literary world, which is Bengal's historical and mythological identity. Das says, "All the birds come home, all the rivers- all life's trade ends. / Only the dark abides; and to sit face to face, Banalata Sen" (lines 17-18). Like the birds, individuals return to their roots (nation). This return to their nation or motherland signifies the value of native cognisance. This return is also a shelter for all destitute and despairing men. Hence, Das is enthusiastic about sitting face-to-face with 'Banalata Sen'.

Das rightly announces that the relationship between him and his beautiful Bengal is like 'All the birds come home'. The expanse of Bengal is his permanent shelter. No nation or identity can substitute that place where Das wishes 'to sit face to face, Banalata Sen'. History

## Re-writing History and Myth as Re-creating Identities: A Study of Jibanananda Das's Narrative Technique

and myths have been the tools that Das uses to represent them in different contexts and narratives to make the Bengalis feel congregant and conscious of their own historical, cultural, and geographical identities.

The poem "I Have Seen the Face of Bengal" (1934), initially published in *Rupashi Bangla*, where Das enthusiastically announces the beautiful Bengal- its nature, history, and myths, which bound Bengal with the idea of a nation, culturally united Bengal (both Bangladesh and West Bengal) and India. Das is mesmerised by the natural beauty of Bengal, which has been the same as in the ancient past; to him, there is no beauty in the world once the beautiful Bengal is seen. Here, the phrase 'the face of Bengal' (line 01) is not only the geographical identity of Bengal; this can be referred to as Bengal's sociocultural and historical identity. Therefore, Das proudly claims, 'I have seen the face of Bengal' (line 01), and later expresses the mythical references and historical aspects of the very land in the following stanzas. In Bengal's expanse, the poet is circumscribed with the beauty of 'the daybreak's magpie-robin' (line 04) sitting 'under the great umbrella-leaf of the fig tree' (03). He also observes the silent beauty of jam and banyan, hijal, peepul and jackfruit trees; there are 'the thorn-bush' (line 06) and 'the clump of arrowroot' (line 06) under the shadows of those trees make the natural beauty of Bengal more distinctively unique within the Indian subcontinent and out in the world. The beauty of Bengal is bound not only to her present natural geography but also to a historical and mythological past to which Das is mesmerised. Distinctively, he continues referring to the mythological past of Bengal.

The mythological interpretation of the beautiful nature of Bengal is a great artistic technique of Das that represents the sense of native cognizant values and cultural nationalism. Das says, "So Chand the Merchant long ago, from his honey-bee boat, / Sailing past Champa, saw the same blue shadows float/ Of hijal, tamal, banyan- Bengal's beauty beyond form (lines 7- 9). He is not the only one who is bound by Bengal's beauty. The mythical character *Chand* also saw the same Kaleidoscopic Bengal. Such mythological interpretation is found in the earliest texts of Bijayupta (1484-5 A.D.). "Among the numerous later authors of *Manasa- Mangala Kavyas* mention may be made of Bipradas Pipilai (1495-6), Narayanadeva, and Ketakadas Kshemendra, probably the best of all, who flourished in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century" (Majumdar, 2007, p. 558). Purushottam, Jagajjiban Ghoshal, and Jibankrishna Maitra are other well-known contributors to this literary genre. In Hindu Mythology, Chand Sadagar was a wealthy merchant in ancient India's mythical city of Champak in Bengal. According to the mythology, Chand was an ebullient worshipper of lord Shiva. Initially, he was unwilling to worship *Manasa* (the goddess of snakes and the daughter of Shiva). After several suffering and destruction, he is forced to worship *Manasa*. Das writes:

So Behula saw from her raft on the Gangura, when the light  
Of the moon's twelfth dark phase died on the sandbank, countless peepuls  
And banyans, golden paddy; heard the shama's soft song.  
When she danced like reft wagtail in Indra's heavenly halls,  
Bengal's fields, streams flowers wept at her feet like ankle-bells. (lines 10-14)

Even *Behula*, the daughter-in-law of Chand, experienced the same in her journey to heaven for the sake of retrieving her husband's life. She danced in 'Indra's heavenly halls' (line 13), with her pain 'Bengal's fields, streams flowers wept at her feet like ankle-bells' (line 14). Such vivid illustrations of mythical characters with Bengal's natural beauty represent a unified cultural identity of Bengal.

The poem "The Chariot of History" was first published in *Bela Abela Kalbela* (1946). It begins with the significant essence of the past generation, which the poet narrates this way, "Leaving all selfish ties behind, our ancestors/ Moving into the past: standing one last time beside old trees/ Like creatures of kindred spirit, in autumn sunlight, day, darkness" (lines, 10-12). Das hints that not only does the present generation return to the past, but our ancestors did the same, and we will continue the same. Here, Das again indicates how history



and myth also change in times with new interpretations; he writes:

Or else sometimes the sun, I remember, knowingly  
Stalls and stays in the middle of the blue sky-  
Quite round-  
Scared, serene- no presage of devouring Rahu. (lines 29- 32)

As the Hindu texts describe, *Rahu* is one of the nine *navagrahas* and the king of meteors (Dalal, 2010, p. 324). According to the scriptures, Rahu and Ketu are a “shadow planet” which causes *grahan* (eclipse). Rahu has no physical body, yet (it is believed that) it has an influential effect on human astrology. Here, the poet’s reference to Rahu gives different connotative meanings, creating a change of sense regarding the mythical character.

Das’s reference of the ancient Indian texts to represent the crux of the contemporary society can be found in the stanza:

We want to merge, merge in the Brahmaic cosmic sound.  
That is our wisdom of two thousand years.  
When Nachiketa starves with the wealth of Dharma,  
It pleases Yama. Yet to merge in Brahma  
Is also hard. We have not yet been merged. (lines 102-106)

*Nachiketa* is a well-known character from Hindu scriptures (Rigveda, Taittiriya Brahmana, Katha Upanishad, and Mahabharata) (Satyamayananda, 2019, p. 195); being a son of the sage Vajashravasa, or Uddalaki, Nachiketa understood the word *Om*, followed the experience of a journey from body to the *Atman* (soul). He got *moksha* (salvation), but this journey was entirely of toil. Similarly, today, the present generation suffers from anger and self-destruction, which divides the self into fragments. There is hardly unity or harmony in society with humanism. Here, the mythological character Nachiketa, as a metaphor for the present time, creates a new sense in the reader’s mind.

### **History and Myth in Das’s Prose**

Not only in his poems, Das also gives multiple references from mythical stories and historical contexts while narrating his prose fiction. Das’s use of mythical stories in his prose makes his characters more quintessential with native identities and thus reflects a strong bond between the native land and the characters.

Das’s novels are unlike his poetry, complete with anxious and contradictory stances. Unfortunately, Das, as a prose writer, was discovered much later. Like poetry, his prose fiction, such as novels and short stories, are abundant in numbers, but thematically, they differ from the trend of his poetical works. The most dominant themes in prose fiction are poverty, middle-class family crises, disturbed conjugal life, complex relationships, complex co-existence in nature, the influence of partition, and so on. Representations of Bengali culture, nature, myth, and history reflect the soft sense of political nationalism, especially in his novels. The prime example is *Sutirtha*.

The novel *Sutirtha* was written in 1948 and published posthumously in 1975 by ‘*Desh*’ Patrika. The background of the novel is the independent struggle of 1947; the setting is in contemporary Kolkata. *Sutirtha*, a middle-aged lonely man, is the protagonist who lives in North Kolkata and works at a commercial firm with a good salary. When he joins the factory workers to get them helped, his life becomes a disaster. *Sutirtha*’s association with the workers is not a good sign for his company and the factory owner; he becomes a victim of an aristocratic conspiracy. He is accused of a murder. There are talks on contemporary society, the Indian Independence struggle, problems of partition, and so on. Like Das’s other characters, *Sutirtha* suffers his life so much. At the end of the novel, with all his failures and deserted heart, though hopeful, *Sutirtha* leaves the city for an unknown village. This unknown village symbolises the complex identity of a Bengali entity because of the Indian partition in 1947. *Sutirtha*’s identity becomes contradictory. His identity as a Bengali becomes borderless between two divided nations, India and East Pakistan.

In the novel, Das describes Gandhi’s influence on the Satyagrah Movement and how

## Re-writing History and Myth as Re-creating Identities: A Study of Jibanananda Das's Narrative Technique

Bengali people seemed to be freedom fighters by birth. As Sutirtha says, “Not school, neither college- there is no work for Bengali young boys except participating in the freedom fighting of India” (self-translation) (Bandopdhaya, 2000, p. 759). This statement of Sutirtha indicates that Bengalis are nationalist by birth. At the same time, by portraying such a character, Das wants to show the contemporary political struggle of Bengal and the enthusiastic sacrifice of Bengali people for their motherland, colonial India, with plentiful historical values.

Literature is the mirror of society. What is re-written in literature is re-created for re-creating identities. The representation of the history and myths of India in Das's poems and novels is a unique narrative technique. As K. Ayyappan Paniker states, “Assuredly, to a reader of different providence (outside Bengal) in India, Jibanananda Das's poetry is the accreditation or acknowledgement of the transformation of the modern tradition of Indian culture and stability” (self-translation) (Guha, 2013, p. 145).

Through generations, literature re-writes history and myths of its preceding generation to re-create new stories and interpretations for the succeeding ones, thus representing history and myth with new form and sense and consequently re-creating identities. In this context, W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, in the Preface of their book *1066 and All That* (1930), state that “History is not what you thought. It is what you remember. All other history defeats itself” (Sellar & Yeatman, 1930, VII). History teaches the present generation to learn from the past, solve contemporary problems, and produce a better, comprehensive future. Not only history but also narratives from myths are essential. J.R.R. Tolkien, in the book *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (1981), states that “After all, I believe that legends and myths are largely made of ‘truth’, and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode; and long ago certain truths and modes of this kind were discovered and must always reappear” (Carpenter, 1981, p. 147). Myth is equally significant and needs to be rewritten and re-interpreted through literature to re-discover new knowledge and archive it for the upcoming age.

Literature owes to history and myth, admittedly; therefore, it is the archive of society. At the same time, with the help of literature, history is re-created, myth is re-written, and thus, re-writing identities. Jibanananda Das's literary imagination through re-writing history and myth not only gives new identities but scholarly critical reading of Das adds new knowledge and sense to the existing interpretation of history and myth. This re-writing and reinterpretation of history and myth are significant not only in Bengali literature. All languages and literatures preserve them for the same objectives. The representations of history and myth have a significant role in formulating literature, or it can be claimed that the literary re-presentation of history and myth brings new identities and knowledge. Das's literary representation technique, whether his poem or prose, reflects the same.

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