



Research article

Essencelessness, Lack of Self and the Abject Human Condition: Rethinking Jibanananda Das's "Bodh"

Biswarup Das

Department of English, Jamaladaha TDH School, Coochbehar, West Bengal, India.

Abstract

The present article strives to explore the "nausea" that emerges in an individual from the sense of the lack of *a priori* meaning in the world and the non-existence of the self through the development of the persona's thoughts in Jibanananda Das's 1930 poem "Bodh." The persona is found perturbed by a flummoxing "sense" right at the outset. His striving to comprehend what the sense is about and reflection on the enterprises of his past and the probable future eventually lead him to realize that whatever he encounters around or action he can get involved in is devoid of essence. He also finds the existence of his self unsubstantiated. His realization proves anguishing and alienates him from the rest of humanity by evoking in him feelings of forlornness and life's absurdity. The whole argument concerning the persona's development of thought and his final apprehension and agony will be carried out by taking into account Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas of essencelessness and nausea.

Keywords: Essencelessness, existence, meaning, nausea, self, sense, world.

Introduction

"... we remained within the compass of 'dominating ideas'."

– Sartre, *The Problem* (20).

"I wonder if I really truly exist." – Sartre, *No Exit* (19).

The nature of the human self, the world where human exists, and the human relationship with the world can be more enigmatic than they seemingly are. Apparently, an individual lives with the impression of having "a simple unified" self (Daigle, 2010, p. 10) that is engaged in a meaningful world through sundry human enterprises, both in secular and spiritual domains. That unified self is the "I" and is popularly believed to signalize one's essence. Because the world is considered

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meaningful and humans are contemplated to have an essence, human actions by which one relates oneself to the world are deemed rationally conceivable.

But is the human conception of the world and the self correct? Are human actions truly meaningful? The present study seeks answers to these questions through the 1930 poem "Bodh" ("Within My Head")ⁱ by the celebrated Bengali poet Jibanananda Das by taking into account the idea of essencelessness of the 20th-century French thinker Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 80).

Jibanananda Das and "Bodh"

Every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of his life,
every quality of his mind is written large in his works.
– Woolf, *Orlando* (36).

Jibanananda Das (1899 - 1954) is almost unanimously deemed the greatest poet of the post-Tagorean era in Bengal and a preeminent literary figure in 20th-century India. Along with some of his contemporaries (significant among them being Amiya Chakravarty [1901 - 86], Sudhindranath Datta [1901 - 60], Buddhadev Bose [1908 - 74], and Bishnu Dey [1909 - 82]), Das played a pivotal role "in introducing modernist elements in Bengali poetry" (Das, 2019, p. 30). Though deprecated initially for his unconventional poetic style and language, "his influence on Bengali poetry . . . soared over time" (Ray, 2015, p. 153), and his works, in the long run, proved triumphant in exercising "tremendous influence both on the readers and the emerging poets" (Das, 2022, p. 3). Today, he "is placed among the most significant poets ever born in Bengal" (Das, 2022, p. 3). The 20th-century American scholar of Bengali literature Clinton B. Seely reckons Jibanananda Das is "Bengal's most cherished poet since Rabindranath Tagore" (Seely, 1990, p. 9).

"Bodh" is a gem in the literary oeuvre of Jibanananda Das. It is an intricate poem that scarcely encourages an easy exposition. It is probably due to the intricacy that no meticulous explication of the poem has yet been attempted.ⁱⁱ However, this article will strive to expound how "Bodh," more than anything else, is Das's probe into the problem of human essencelessness in a world devoid of meaning.

"Bodh" was composed in 1930 and later became part of Das's 1936 collection of poetry, *The Grey Manuscript (Dhusar Pandulipi)*. In one sense, "Bodh" has close associations with the situation of Das's life when it was written. In his "By Way of Introduction" to Jibanananda Das's poetic collection *The Scent of Sunlight*, Clinton B. Seely opines that in the poem, Das "gives us . . . an account of the burden he bore" in the heart (Seely, 2019, p. xii). Das composed the poem concomitantly as he was in a distressed mental state. He had lost three jobs successively within a span of three years (from 1927 to 1929) – the first one from City College, Calcutta; the second from Bagerhat P. C. College, Bagerhat; and then from Ramjas College, Delhi – just before the poem's composition due to political and student unrest in India ("Jibanananda Das," 2023). The short length of his professional life, obviously, did not provide him with much opportunity to establish his identity as a successful teacher. He could not even reckon himself a successful poet as, at that time, many critics and commentators viciously attacked his poems. One contemporary critic named Sajanikanta Das (1900 - 62), for instance, adversely assessed his poems almost every Saturday in the literary magazine *Shanibarar Chithi (The Saturday Letter)*. Neither could Das deem

himself a successful family man. His conjugal life with Labanyaprabha Gupta (whom he married in 1930) became miserable due to the couple's financial crisis (Kader, 2022). For some, however, Das's mental disposition was also a possible reason behind the failure of his family life (Kader, 2022)ⁱⁱⁱ. Now, that Das found himself unsuccessful in almost every field of life, his obvious situation remained no better than a person lost in the way of the world. In that situation, it was natural for him to be concerned about uncertainties of his identity, the purpose of his life, and the reason behind the failure of his worldly enterprises. He articulates these concerns in a fictionalized way through his persona's doubt about the nature of the world and the self along the lines of "Bodh."

However, it would be wrong to claim the persona's situation merely to be the symbolic conveyance of that of the poet. For the poem is far more than that. Das never wished his poetry to be a versified transcript of his personal life. He believed that a poem "has its own way and role to play" (Sinha, 2020, p. 16532). Though poetry and life "originate in the same sphere," there is, for Das, "a subtle border between the two. A true poet [needs to] traverse across the . . . border successfully" (Sinha, 2020, p. 16537). There is no denying the fact that Das's poetry, at times, had its origin in his personal experience or emotion. However, every time the poems ultimately acquired an entity independent of any relation to the poet. The same is the truth about "Bodh." The way Das handles the dilemma of the poem's persona makes the persona the image of every person enlightened about the meaninglessness of anything fathomable. Naturally, the poem's implication becomes universal. Now, because the article aims at depicting through the persona's stream of thoughts the essencelessness of the world and the self, an idea of how everything only exists but is bereft of meaning is needed before probing into the poem. This idea, upon which the whole argument of the article is founded, is being put forth in the next section by means of Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of essencelessness.

Sartre's concept of essencelessness

"Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content
I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled."
– Camus, *The Myth* (13).

Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of essencelessness becomes most conspicuous in three works – *Nausea* (1938), *Being and Nothingness* (1943), and *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946). The first, though a work of fiction, is as much a philosophical treatise as the other two. The Sartrean scholar Antony Manser delineates *Nausea* as a "novel as philosophy" (Manser, 2018, p. 1) in his 1966 book *Sartre: A Philosophic Study*. In all three works, Sartre speaks about an essenceless world and the constitution of an equally essenceless human self. The concept of essencelessness is based on the claim "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 1987, p. 15), which Sartre makes in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. The idea of the primacy of existence over essence was actually propounded by the 19th-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813 - 55). Sartre, however, formulated the concept explicitly in his works. By the expression, Sartre means that anything in the world, including humans, exists before one can conceptualize it with meaning or essence (Sartre, 1987, pp. 14 - 15). Though the claim forms the central motif of Sartre's 1946 work, the predominance of existence over essence was already discussed in detail in his *Being and Nothingness*. In that book, Sartre presents an idea of the two modes of being – the "in-itself" and the "for-itself" (Sartre, 2013,

pp. 18, 95) – to show the primacy of existence and how that primacy makes essence non-present. By in-itself, Sartre signifies matters or the sensible objects around us that constitute the world. Matters are self-contained and timeless (Spade, 1995, p. 80). They exist without any cause or explanation. All this makes them contingent. How a matter came into existence or why a matter is in the form it is are immaterial questions. Matters are simply out there in the world. So, the world is contingent with no predetermined meaning. The world is meaningless, moreover, because matters are inert. They exhaust themselves in being themselves without referring to anything outside themselves from which one can determine what they denote (Sartre, 2013, p. 20). The world acquires meaning only when human consciousness encounters the existing matters. However, the world's meaning that emerges in this way by no means denotes an essence. It rather points to a phenomenal reality that is subjective and fraught with lack and negation and so subject to change.

Sartre then speaks about the "for-itself," by which he signifies consciousness. He identifies consciousness with humans. He makes this identification because it is consciousness that enables one's relationship with the world of existence, and through that relationship emerges the ego, the sense of being "I" or having a self. Though consciousness begets the individual's ego, in itself, it is nothing. It is because consciousness is never located in itself. It always belongs to something (a matter) of which it is aware. In Sartre's words, "consciousness is born supported by a being which is not itself" (Sartre, 2013, p. 99). It is "a void that is filled through its consciousness of the world" (Daigle, 2010, p. 34). Now, being void, even consciousness has no meaning. So, the "I" or the self, constituted by the encounter of the world around, something having no meaning, with consciousness which is again meaningless, can obviously have no essence. Naturally, human enterprises through which the self realizes the world and associates itself with it also become contingent, freely chosen without any predetermined reason or consequence. In short, as Sartre shows, everything one can be aware of or get involved in lacks in essence.

Although it is *Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism is a Humanism* where Sartre proffers essencelessness as a philosophical idea, essencelessness finds the most telling expression in his *Nausea*. The expression, though fictional, is no less philosophical. Through the experiences and soliloquies of the persona Antoine Roquentin, Sartre stresses in the novel "the existent quality of things in the world" that makes the presence of essence in them as well as the self in humans impossible (Manser, 2018, pp. 6 - 7).

Sartre's view that the world and the human self are devoid of essence intriguingly also seems to be Das's so far as the poem "Bodh" is concerned. Das, in the poem, works out his idea of essencelessness with acute brilliance through the development of his persona's thoughts. Perhaps, it would not even be wrong to call "Bodh" a 'poem as philosophy' following Manser's assessment of Sartre's *Nausea*.

The persona's perturbation

"He belongs to those whose fate is to live the whole riddle of human destiny heightened to the pitch of a personal torture, a personal hell."
– Hesse, *Steppenwolf* (17).

"Bodh" can well be claimed to be divided into six sections with regard to the line of thoughts streaming into the persona's mind. The first stanza portrays the persona's bewildered mental state as the outcome of what he feels, "A sense gathering force" (3) in his mind. In the next stanza, the persona reflects on a probable future situation and feels to have lost certainty about everything constituting it as the outcome of his present "sense." The third stanza conveys his fruitless attempt to alleviate the effect of the sense from his mind. The fourth and fifth stanzas recount his loneliness despite being a part of humankind. The three following stanzas record the persona's recapitulation of his assorted mundane engagement and achievement until the recent past. In the last two stanzas, the persona is found musing over the upshot of his apprehension of the sense. In the process of his thinking, the persona gradually realizes the lack of essence of the world, the contingent nature of his enterprise, and, most importantly, his being devoid of a particular self. His realization eventually engulfs him in deep anguish, evoking feelings of forlornness and life's absurdity. However, how does all that happen? Let us excavate the answer, as that will direct us to the answer to the questions posed at the beginning.

The poem opens at a critical juncture of the persona's life when, as stated above, a perplexing "sense" ascendingly gathers "force" in his mind. What exactly the sense is, he does not comprehend well at this stage. However, he is certain about its being neither "a dream . . . nor [anything about] love" (5, 6). Despite his failure to uncover the truth about the sense, he cannot ignore its effect on him. He says, "I can't dismiss [it]" (4). As "It places its hand" upon his (6), he finds himself impuissant. He feels nothing can relieve him of the sense. As though he reaches a stage in which every effort on his part to alleviate the sense becomes "Inane, empty," and "All action seem vain" (8, 7). The consequence is the deprivation of his mental tranquillity – a "peaceful air" (5).

The time the sense takes hold of the persona's mind is pretty intriguing. It is neither day nor night. It is a never-ending twilight that entangles one indefinitely "between light and dark" (1). Das uses the time image deliberately to underscore both the bemusing nature of the sense and the persona's state of impasse. Besides, the time, bearing the traits both of day and night, also indicates the omnipresence of the effect of the sense on the persona from now on.

Having lost the "peaceful air," however, the persona suddenly becomes uncertain about his future. He feels familiar human enterprises to have lost their credibility for him with regard to the time ahead. He can no longer, he senses, "be simple" enough (10) to find undistorted "joy in the harvest" (18), in getting thrilled at the "scent of water on the skin" (15), or even in being able to be happy by embracing "the earth" with "peasant soul" (20, 19). It is pretty likely that these humble but productive works have endowed him with joy and fulfillment until the present. However, with the flummoxing sense hovering "within the head" (23), he feels to have lost attachment with the purport of these works corresponding to his being. A feeling like this is, naturally, unsettling. It betokens his uncertainty about the essence of terrestrial undertakings both in relation to the realization of his self and through that self, being meaningfully associated with humanity at large and becoming a composer of the history of human civilization. He is even unsure about the sort of knowledge worthy of humanity – "Who knows for certain what is worth knowing?" (13).

Amidst his uncertainty, the persona makes a frantic effort to root out the "sense" from his mind –
I want to ignore him

[. . .]

I try to drive him away

To smash his skull to pieces (24, 26 - 27).

Significantly, Das personifies the sense looming in the persona's mind in these lines and the succeeding ones in the third stanza. He does that deliberately. As though the sense has now become a living nightmare to plague the persona with greater vehemence. As such, though the persona fashions the plan of expelling the sense from him by striving to remain occupied in worldly affairs (denoted by the phrase "coming and going" [25]), he realizes pretty soon its impossibility. The sense, he feels, "Keeps circling [him]" pretty much "like a living thing, restlessly" (29, 28) despite every attempt on his part to do away with it.

Being convinced about his incapacity to escape the sense that has now acquired greater potency in perturbing him, the persona suddenly discovers himself alone despite being a part of humankind. He says, "I live amongst all, yet alone" (30). The antithesis here is crucial as it hints at the persons's progression from ignorance to awareness concerning the sense. It is a conveyance of his thought about his being in relation concomitantly to what can be called his "facticity" and his "transcendence" (Spade, 1995, p. 140). Sartre defines facticity as one's "being there. . . in the world in [a] particular situation rather than in another" (Daigle, 2010, p. 36). It denotes those facets of one's being over which one has no control. It is the state one finds oneself in. Transcendence, on the other hand, is the surpassing of one's facticity by exercising freedom of choice. For Sartre, one is always free to choose, so there remains the constant possibility of transcendence of one's state of being and thus defining and redefining oneself as a person. The act of transcendence is also a pronounced revelation of one's lack of essence, *per se*.

A fundamental facticity of life (at least for most people) is one's being born in society – "amongst all." This facticity entails one inculcating popular values. The most important of these values is, of course, the idea of the world as having *a priori* meaning. Evidently, without a value like this, the entire social system and every social and physical science would appear baseless, in fact, fatuous. It is only by taking the world to have meaning that humanity can hope for a particular end of an enterprise, and with such an end in view, hope for its amelioration both on individual and social planes. Belief in the world's meaning endows human activities with essence, and that essence brings individuals together through efforts for and with each other. In this way, human existence in the world gets rationalized.

Thus, when at the outset of the fourth stanza, the persona declares himself to be "amongst all," it can well be claimed that he reveals his facticity of belonging to society. More importantly, however, by the same declaration, he points out that, like most people, faith in the existence of meaning in the world and human actions was the controlling factor in his life until the sense unsettled his mind. He has articulated that faith in the second stanza in his implicitly being "simple" (10) in the past in finding fulfilling joy in "the harvest" (17), the "feel of the body" with the "scent of water on the skin" (14, 15), or the "smell of the mud" on embracing "the earth" with "peasant soul" (18, 20, 19). He could find contentment in worldly undertakings only because they were a meaningful means of erecting a relationship with a world of essence for him.

Right now, however, his faith seems shaken. That is conveyed by his feeling of being "alone" despite living "amongst all." The feeling is crucial as it points to the fact that he has begun to

uncover what the sense is about. He is still, to be sure, "amongst all" for being a member of society and presumably a family unit. But unlike others, he seems no longer to see any essence as he reflects on his surroundings and enterprises. He is lonely, consequently, palisaded from others by the unsettling sense. Now, how can his feeling of loneliness be apprehended as the outcome of his realization of the absence of essence in the world or his undertakings? The following lines in the fourth stanza evince the answer,

Am I the only one to be blinded by the light
Puzzled by the many ways open before me? (31 - 32)

As he speaks about his bewilderment "by the many ways" lying ahead, he clearly conveys his loss of faith in the essence of worldly enterprises. If an action could possess an essence, there would be a way fixed before him in place of "many ways." That way would decide his relationship with the world. In that manner, his facticity of existing in the world would be the sole determinant of his life. There would be no question of his transcendence, and he would bear a particular self.

Moreover, the expression of the "many ways" open before him reveals his apprehension of the world's essencelessness as well. It is pretty evident, as the essence of worldly action is possible only if the world has *a priori* meaning. An action, as we know, is the means of one's being in the world. The fact that his undertakings bear no essence is the obvious outcome of the essencelessness of the world. Thus, his perplexing sense eventually enlightens him about the world and his relationship with the world. In that enlightened state, he gets "blinded" to the meaning of everything. He can no more be "simple" (10) like others. He experiences a distance from the rest of humanity. He becomes "alone," feeling no more to be meaningfully present in the world and "amongst all" through his actions.

The persona's feeling of loneliness is accentuated again in the next stanza. He says,

Take the ones who have taken birth
On earth, gave, given, will give birth through life
Aren't their hearts and minds the same as mine?
Why then am I alone? (33 - 36)

The stanza is consecutively a plaintive recounting of his attempts at fetching resemblance with others and his failure in doing so in his present enlightened state. The first two lines clearly imply his attempts to be resting chiefly on his reflection on his facticity of being begotten in the human world. He tries to see how he is related to others in his "birth" and worldly transactions. These transactions, expressed in the second line by "gave, given, will give birth through life," seems to indicate both biological instinct and social custom/ necessity. But his effort, naturally, proves futile because he is already aware of the meaning of the sense "within [his] head" (2). He feels at a loss in recouping his composure preceding the incursion of the "sense" on him and, as such, be like others who presuppose the world and everything worldly to have an essence. Needless to say, his mind gets unsettled. His sense of incongruity with others and mental unsettlement acquire the form of the bewildered self-interrogation – "Why then am I alone?"

His mental unsettlement is further intensified and experienced fully as his incredulity towards the value of *a priori* meaning in the world, and human enterprises invites in him the apprehension of the absence of the self, the "I" in him. The apprehension is pretty natural, for the self is the upshot

of, as stated previously, consciousness's encounter with the world. When he has already known the world and his means of encountering it (his actions) as essenceless, how can he believe to possess a definite self any longer? His focus on his self now shifts from his consideration of it from his facticity of being a particular existent in the world to the ceaseless possibility of the transcendence of his facticity. He reflects on his past undertakings and comprehends that none of those bore any essence for him; neither what he felt himself to be in the process of being engaged in them had ever been his identity, his "I." What the performance of those undertakings endowed him with were mere roles in the context of the human world, one role unavoidably to be transcended by another.

The persona's past involvements can approximately be sundered into two categories – his manual industry and the undertakings aimed at the appeasement of his "boundless wishes" (48). Whereas the first category of his enterprises is associated primarily with his necessity in the material sense, the second is related to his desire. He speaks about the first category in the sixth stanza and the second one in the two following stanzas. At first, he delineates his past life as a "peasant" –

Have I not lifted the plough like any peasant?
Carried buckets of water
Sickle in hand, gone into the fields? (37 - 39)

Then he portrays himself as a fisherman –

Like fisherman
Have I not wallowed in the puddles
And wrapped my body in the smell of fish
And water-weed and algae
The same as they? (40 - 44)

Here, as the images of his carrying "buckets of water" or "Sickle . . . into the fields," wallowing "in the puddles" and wrapping his body "in the smell of fish" and "water-weed and algae" reveal, he executed each activity with the greatest possible fervor and dexterity. It is most likely that the accomplishment of the tasks even bestowed on him material success. It is also evident that at that time, he, like most people, believed in the essence of work and having a particular identity ("same as they"). Knowing himself to be a peasant at first, he, later on, revaluated his identity to be certain of himself as a fisherman.

Though he might have felt himself to be just a fisherman for quite a while, eventually, he realized himself to be someone else as well – the bearer of the self that the pursuit of his desire at a particular time and situation made him assume himself to be. Because his desires proved to be diverse with time ("boundless wishes," 48), he explores by reflecting on the past his possession of numerous selves besides the one constituted by his profession ("fisherman"). Each desire he "fulfilled without let" (48), each made him a different person.

The persona delineates one of those past selves vividly in the eighth stanza – his self as a lover.

I have known the love of woman,
Covered her with glory, neglect, scorn;
She has showered her love upon me

First drawn close, then pushed me aside in scorn.
One day I returned her hatred with love –
Love was then the language of my life (50 - 55)

Like every other desire, as the above lines reveal, the persona fulfilled the one of loving “without let.” He experienced all the joys and pangs of love with his beloved. In that phase of his life, love was the sole emotion he was concerned about. It was the controlling factor in his life (“the language of my life”). Out of deep longing to love and be loved, he overcame all hindrances to be with his beloved –

I forgot the stars whose conjunctions
Spelled impediment to my loves (56 - 57)

The “conjunctions/ Spelled” by “the stars” seem to imply the collective obstacle of society and family in the way of his “loves,” that is, moments of his being together with his beloved and his forgetting the “stars” (symbolizing the family and society), his act of surmounting those obstacles. The persona’s yearning for proximity to his beloved that led him to get over all impediments might evoke in the reader’s mind the passionate longing of the lover for his lady love in “Meeting at Night,” an 1845 poem by the 19th-century English poet Robert Browning. Neither the long and hazardous journey at night nor any social barriers could immobilize the lover from getting to his beloved. He was appeased only when he was able to embrace her and feel their “hearts beating each to each” (12). Similarly, Das’s persona triumphed over all restraints to be with his beloved. There scarcely remains any doubt that at that time, like the hero of Browning’s poem, being a lover was more important than anything else for the persona. Love was, above all, the constituent of his self.

At present, however, love appears to have lost its past magnitude for him. His moments of togetherness with his beloved, he poignantly articulates, were mere “dust on [his] way” (58). He cognizes that his being a lover, like his being a peasant or a fisherman or anything else that his other activities sculpted him to be in the different phases of his life, was nothing more than his identity at a particular point of time and situation in his past life. The identity came to existence by the transcendence of his erstwhile identities and eventually got transcended by the latter ones. Prior to the burgeoning of the sense in him, he was blissfully unaware of this truth. “Like the wind,” he says, “[his] life [had] flown;/ Under the canopy of stars [his] mind [had] slept” (46 - 47). He was too engrossed in the activities triggered by his material necessities or desires and turned a blind eye to the fact that none of those activities could ever constitute his essence.

However, now, being “alone” with his sense, he becomes aware of its significance and so, his actual situation. He realizes that his past selves of a lover, a fisherman, a peasant, and the rest, molded by some essenceless enterprises in an essenceless world were only transitory roles that had meaning in the context of specific circumstances. None of those roles was the sole way open to him when he performed it, and none was his compulsion. He was always free to choose what he wanted to do or be. As such, his roles every time lacked substance. They were without a value that could determine who he was. With this realization, he loses the sense of his self. He feels merely to be existing without an “I” to determine his essence. The feeling makes his mental unsettlement complete, and that unsettled state gets expressed in his agonizing outburst,

Yet one day, I have left them [the selves] behind. (49)

The awakening of the sense in Das's persona and his eventual mental unsettlement as the outcome of his apprehension of the sense's purport bears parallel with what Sartre's hero Antoine Roquentin undergoes in the course of the novel *Nausea*. At the outset of the book, the reader sees Roquentin somewhat agitated and bewildered. He states,

Something has happened to me: I can't doubt that anymore. It came as an illness does, not like an ordinary certainty, not like anything obvious . . . I felt a little strange, a little awkward (Sartre, 2000, p. 5).

Though initially, Roquentin remains ignorant of what this "Something" is about, with time, he comprehends "that the world [only] exists" and "in the world" he "exist[s], like other people . . . That's all" (Sartre, 2000, p. 209). He encounters mere existence because of his realization that everything in the world, including himself, is without essence, that the meaning or essence of something is gratuitous, and that everything is bereft of necessity. He is always free, then, free to bestow meaning on the world and himself. However, this meaning "is without value" in the same way as the freedom he is left with is (Wood, 2000, p. 223). He runs into "life's randomness," something that "has robbed him of [a] meaningful choice" (Wood, 2000, p. 223), as well as the sense of possessing a definite self that exercises choice to cognize itself. The realization "shakes [him] from top to bottom" (Sartre, 2000, p. 146). The same is the situation of Das's persona.

Conclusion: the outcome

. . . it appeared to me, in the extreme of fatigue, that I finally understood the secret of life and the world." – Camus, *The Fall* (20).

Now, what is the sense the realization of which unsettles the mind of Das's persona (as also that of Antoine Roquentin) called? For Sartre, it is "nausea" (Sartre, 2000, p. 164). "Nausea," says Daigle, is the sense of

a loss of meaning on different levels. The world loses meaning as things begin to exist and lose the veneer that human reason has put on them . . . The individual existence also loses meaning as [one] experiences the loss of [one's] self. [The] ego becomes a fleeting, evanescent thing . . . Nausea is the state that [one] is in, while [one] fails to see meaning in the world or in [one]self (Daigle, 2010, p. 29).

Das's persona (and Roquentin) senses precisely this.

A little digression, however, becomes necessary here. Sartre did not actually use the term "nausea" in a theoretical context. It was used in the novel *Nausea* to denote the perturbed mental state of the persona on his running into "life's randomness." Nevertheless, what gives rise to nausea has always remained central to Sartre's philosophy – the bare existence of matters and humans that disannuls the possibility of fixed essence in the world and the self. Intriguingly, however, Sartre recalls the idea of nausea in his seminal work *Being and Nothingness*. He hints at the fact that we do not usually suffer from it because we look at the world through the lens of phenomenal essence (Daigle, 2010, p. 38). Nevertheless, the moment one becomes aware of the existential quality of the world, nausea becomes a "perpetual experience," something that "remains with [one] even

when [one] tries to get rid of it" (Sartre, 2013, p. 404). Now, as Sartre does not suggest another term for nausea (quite possibly because the term appeared to him best suited for denoting the inescapable experience of meaningless existence), the "sense" of Das's persona has been signified by that word.

Let us come back to the main issue – the nausea of Das's persona. Now that we know the persona suffers from nausea, we might ask what nausea fetches. The answer is "anguish" (Detmer, 2008, p. 70). The term "anguish," however, has diverse connotations in Sartre's philosophy. In the case of Das's persona, the anguish is primarily the self's awareness of its "failure to coincide with or be identical with itself," thus violating "the principle of identity" (Detmer, 2008, p. 71). In short, it is "the mode of" the self's apprehension of "not being itself" (Sartre, 2013, p. 68). The persona's mental unsettlement that immediately follows his nausea and gets reflected in his cognizance of his being devoid of an "I" is actually his anguish.

But, again, what ensues anguish? We find the answer in the last two stanzas of the poem. The first thing to follow it is one's loss of faith in God or any other metanarrative which denotes the existence of necessity or meaning in the world and the self. The persona says, "I leave my gods behind" (62). That he uses the plural noun "gods" and not its singular form, "God," is significant. He does that deliberately to encompass in the denotations of the word both the Almighty and every other concept that advocates the presence of universal truth or value in the world. Now, as he has forsaken his "gods," what is he left with then? The answer is his "forlornness" (Sartre, 1987, p. 29). Forlornness, for Sartre, is the painful realization of the necessity of exercising freedom of choice, which is bereft of values as the sole way of self-constitution. In that state,

[one] can neither seek within [oneself] the *true condition* which will impel [one] to act nor apply to a system of ethics for concepts which will permit [one] to act . . . the *one thing* left for [the person] is to trust [the] instincts . . . [One] needs to choose whichever pushes [one] in one direction. (Sartre, 1987, pp. 27, 26)

To "trust [the] instincts" – that is also precisely what the persona does. He says, "I . . . recourse to my own heart" (62, 63). Already in deep anguish, he is at this moment forlorn as well. Sartre points out that "forlornness and anguish go together" (Sartre, 1987, p. 29). The persona seems to feel the presence of forlornness in the core of the human condition since time immortal. Like "endless eddies in water" (65), it ceaselessly "whispers" (64) its existence to the consciousness. But usually, humanity remains deaf to the whisper. The persona, so far as he appears to think, was also forlorn all along. However, like others, he was unaware of the fact until the "sense" began tormenting him, and he eventually made out what the "sense" was about. Now, however, on becoming aware of his condition and accepting it, he can no more have "peace," whether in "sleep" or lying "awake" (67, 69). He finds himself "alone" more deeply (68). He maintains "silence" (69) to "joy" that is usually found "in the face of man, woman, child" (70). The obvious reason is his disparity from the people who are unaware of the truth, both of the world and themselves. As those people constitute the majority of humankind, the persona's forlornness ensures his perpetual alienation from the rest of the world.

The second thing is, for Das, the sense of life's absurdity. Sartre defines absurdity as the state of one's being without "external justification" (Barnes, 2013, p. 649), that is, a state in which one finds that there is nothing in life that would justify their existence. Das uses the images of "rotteness"

in “overripe fruits,” “[b]lighted vegetables,” and “desiccated flesh” (80, 81) to delineate the emergence of the sense of absurdity in his persona. Rotten fruits, vegetables, or flesh are practically useless things. Despite existing, these things are purposeless due to their rottenness. “Rottenness” here becomes symbolic of the purposelessness of existence. Being purposeless, these things amount pretty much to being nothing. As the persona speaks about rottenness, he can actually be said to be accentuating the fact that on experiencing anguish, he has realized himself to be “in the presence of nothing” (Manser, 2013, p. 58). “Nothing” here does not point to “a special kind of object [that] causes the feeling” (Manser, 2013, p. 58). It rather signifies his conviction of the non-being (nothingness) of any purpose of life that can justify his existence. The conviction comes from his awareness of his being devoid of a self and the essencelessness of the world and his enterprises. Now that he feels his life to have become purposeless, and so, to be without justification, his worldly existence has become absurd, like rotten fruits and vegetables and desiccated flesh.

Moreover, a rotten object cannot repossess its previous state. The fruits, vegetables, or flesh the persona portrays are perpetually dissociated from freshness by the attribute of rottenness. Similarly, as the sense of absurdity “blossoms in the . . . heart,” the persona realizes it will permanently dwell in the depth of his “bosom” and “cling to the earth” around him (83, 73, 75). As such, he will never regain the mental state prior to his awareness of his sense of absurdity. His nausea, thus, leads him to discover the ultimate “secret” (72) of life through his anguish – that of a human’s existence as “a useless passion” (Sartre, 2013, p. 402). The phrase points to his cognizance of the fact that, to use the words of T. Collins Logan,

life . . . is fundamentally pointless, that passions of human beings are contrived and useless, that there is no objective or purpose to existence that is not invented and thus pure fiction [so, pure absurdity] (“Answer to”).

That is precisely the final realization of the persona.

Through the development of the persona’s thoughts and his ensuing conclusion about the forlornness and absurdity of life in “Bodh,” Das presents a dismal picture of the human condition and the world where the human condition is experienced.

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Notes

ⁱ “Within My Head” is the translated title of “Bodh” by Chidananda Das Gupta. In this article, Das Gupta’s translation has been used. However, I have maintained the original Bengali title to indicate the poem’s name throughout.

ⁱⁱ Only a few short commentaries on the poem are available. Fakrul Alam, for instance, has opined the poem to be narrating the story of a man “overwhelmed by the poetic fit and, indeed, consumed by it” (Alam, 2010, p. 29). Clinton B. Seely, as the article will relate shortly afterward, links the poem to the situation of Das’s life. Such opinions, however, barely seem to be proper evaluations of the poem.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kader says, “So far as I have understood, Jibanananda Das seemed like a man . . . [who] wasn’t very easy to live with” (Kader, 2022). Das was like that probably because he was a poet more than anything else. In Das Gupta’s words, “Jibanananda Das was not only a poet; he was nothing but a poet” (Das Gupta, 2006, p. XVIII). If that is the case, his mind basically remained preoccupied with abstract poetic thoughts. Such preoccupation might have led him to neglect his family and any practical human affair.

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Biswarup Das is a faculty member of the Department of English in Jamalidaha TDH School, Coochbehar, West Bengal, India. His fields of interest include Existentialism, Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, Sānlùn Buddhism, Indian Literature, nineteenth century British Literature, and twentieth century French Literature.