
Death and Existence in Jibanananda Das' Literary Imagination

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Abstract

The present research paper investigates death and existence in the literary imagination of Jibanananda Das (1899-1954), one of the most significant modern Bengali poets, essayists, short fiction writers, and novelists of the twentieth century. Death, suffering, and the crux of existence have been extensive archetypal subjects in literature since ancient civilisations, and Das employs them distinctively with philosophical and aesthetic depth across both his poetry and prose fiction. The study undertakes a close reading and comparative analysis of four selected works: two poems, “Before Dying” (“মৃত্যুর আগে,” 1935) and “After the Death of Men” (“মানুষের মৃত্যু হলে,” 1950), and two short fictions, “The Return” (“নিরুপম যাত্রা,” 1933) and “Bilash” (“বিলাশ,” 1946). In Das’ poems, the interpretation of death and existence is markedly romantic and critically optimistic, governed by Freud’s concept of ‘eros’ or ‘life instinct,’ wherein nature serves as an enduring symbol of existence and death operates as a vehicle to comprehend the meaning of life. In his prose fiction, however, Das represents the disastrous societal struggles and psychological complexities that reduce his protagonists to a state of extreme existential crisis, what Mbembe terms the ‘living dead,’ wherein actual death becomes the ultimate, forced option to escape endless suffering. This trajectory of forced, suicidal death is examined through the theoretical frameworks of Foucault’s ‘biopolitics,’ Murray’s ‘thanatopolitics,’ and Freud’s ‘death drive’ (‘thanatos’). The primary contribution of the study lies in its comparative cross-generic analysis, which reveals that while death in Das’ poetry is philosophically affirmative, in his prose fiction it becomes a rhetorical act of resistance against the brutal power structures of society.

Keywords: death in literature; existence; biopolitics; thanatopolitics; death drive; Jibanananda Das

Introduction

While delving into the history of *death*¹ and dying, it is a vividly distinguished fact that death has been a prevalent subject in the socio-cultural history and literature since the ancient civilisations, such as Greece, Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, India, and so on. Each culture has a different experience of death, and due to its complex history of experience, death has become a phenomenon of different academic discourses- religion, sociology, philosophy, biological science, and most importantly, literature. Michael C. Kearl, in his book *Endings: A Sociology of Death and Dying*, examining death from sociological perspectives, writes, “‘Life’ cannot exist without ‘death’ and vice versa; therefore, death can be understood as an indicator of life” (7); this signifies that death gives life its meaning, boundary, and urgency.

Historical and literary studies of particular civilisations reflect this subject in various ways. As Al Alvarez, in his book *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*, claims, “Perhaps half the literature of the world is about death” (64); this signifies that ‘death’ cannot be separated from life, nor can literature or life in literature across the world be understood without it. In a similar context, French sociologist, philosopher, and writer Baudrillard exclaims:

Our whole culture is just one huge effort to dissociate life and death, to ward off the ambivalence of death in the interests of life as value, and time as the general equivalent. The elimination of death is our phantasm, and ramifies in every direction: for religion, the afterlife and immortality; for science, truth; and for economics, productivity and accumulation. (147)

With reference to Baudrillard, it can be proclaimed that most literary traditions, by privileging themes of eternal ‘truth,’ ‘immortality,’ and narrative ‘productivity,’ attempt to suppress death’s unsettling presence. However, literature also uniquely resists this reduction with a unique presentation. Tragic poetry, elegy, and modernist fiction often refuse to eliminate death, instead making it a structural and affective core, a voice of resistance, revealing that the deepest power of literature lies in holding life and death in unresolved, ambivalent tension rather than dissolving it into value or meaning. In Bengali literature, death is incorporated not as a singular, uniform event but as a multifaceted trope that evolves across literary movements, ranging from medieval *Vaishnava lyrics*² where death symbolises the soul’s anguished separation from the divine (Haberman 123-131), to Tagore’s serene, *Upanishadic* vision of death as a harmonious return to the infinite, such as in *Gitanjali*. The colonial and postcolonial periods introduce a more brutal, materialist treatment of death, particularly in the context of famine, such as in Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s *Ashani Sanket*, where political violence and existential despair are explicit. Consequently, what distinguishes the Bengali literary imagination is its tendency to domesticate death, to embed it within the rhythms of rural life, the decaying body, and the melancholic beauty of nature. Rather than being merely a climactic tragedy, death often appears as an everyday, almost intimate presence, stripped of grand heroic flourishes; it is the slow erosion of the ordinary, the quiet aftermath of loss, and the spectral continuity of memory. This incorporation makes death in Bengali literature less a philosophical abstraction and more a lived, sensual, and deeply psychological reality, one that interrogates the very meaning of human survival and existence.

Jibanananda Das (1899-1954), a modern Bengali poet, essayist, story writer, novelist, and philosopher, quintessentially employs the subjects of death and the crux of existence, which are significantly prominent elements in his literary creation. Especially the poems and prose fiction of Das affines with different writers of world literature like John Keats (1795-1821), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), Franz Kafka (1883-1924), Albert Camus (1913-1960), Paul Thomas Man (1875-1955), and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) who identically use these subjects, i.e. in their writings as principle discourse. Within Bengali literature, Das’ stake on the subject of death and existence is significantly identical, which is unlike the contemporary writers of Bengali literature such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1800-1900), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (1876-1938), Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), and even writers of the *Kollol*³ era. Das’ most dominant predecessor poet, Tagore, is recognised for a seamless fusion of profound spiritual humanism that embraces everyday life, individual emotion, and a universal vision beyond traditional boundaries, such as his *Gitanjali*. Nazrul is known for his fierce, revolutionary voice that challenges all forms of oppression, orthodoxy, and inequality, while celebrating human freedom, love, and rebellion,

as in his *Agnibeena*. However, as a poet, considering the Bengali readership, Golam Murshid claims Das as the most-read modern Bengali poet, just after Tagore and Nazrul (316). For his themes and subjects, Das is often recognised as ‘the loneliest’ poet for his poetic style and identity (Bose 57). Bose also calls Das “A nature-worshipper, but by no means a platonist or pantheist; he is rather a pagan who loves the things of nature sensuously, not as tokens or symbols, nor as patterns of perfection, but simply because they are what they are” (58). Thus, studies on Das continue, especially on the subject of death; scholars and critics across literary genres investigate Das’ literary oeuvre with diverse theoretical approaches. A notable scholar, Clinton B. Seely, in his book *A Poet Apart: A Literary Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibanananda Das* (1990), examines how death functions not just as a theme but as a structural and existential principle throughout Jibanananda’s oeuvre. In this book, Seely closely reads *Sat-Ti Tarar Timir* (Darkness of Seven Stars) and explores how political despair merges with a longing for extinction. Seely’s critical reading of *Grey Manuscripts* (1936), *Bengal the Beautiful* (*Rupasi Bangla*), *Banalata Sen*, and other poems of Das exposes the theme of death in Das, revealing an existential tension between a deep love for Bengal and the allure of death as an escape from human connection.

Prominent Bangladeshi scholar Fakrul Alam identifies Das as “the most death-haunted of poets” (“In Memory of Jibanananda Das”), pointing to the poem “If I Were,” where the poet imagines himself and his loved ones as geese vulnerable to hunters, dying, but seeing even this as relief, “since ‘we would no longer have to face death in small doses as we do daily in our lives’” (“In Memory of Jibanananda Das”). Alam’s critical framing emphasises that death in Das is not dramatic or melodramatic; rather, it is quiet, quotidian, and pervasive. Manas Ray, in his article “Against Negation: Suicide, Self-Consciousness, and Jibanananda Das’ Poem, ‘One Day Eight Years Ago,’” argues against reading the suicide in the poem “One Day Eight Years Ago” as simply a philosophical statement of self-consciousness. Instead, he treats the poem as an archaeology of silence and meaninglessness, where death is not chosen by the self but emerges from the structural collapse of language and meaning itself. Kazi Ashraf Uddin argues that Das’ poem “A Day Eight Years Ago” (1944) embodies an existential tension between individual desire and societal expectations, manifesting through Freudian *death drive*, Lacanian *jouissance*, and the “trauma of the Real.” Uddin’s study finds that Das’ use of grotesque imagery, gothic darkness, anonymity, and repetition compulsion produces a Lacanian “impossible” Real, while also invoking a Hegelian Orientalist sublime that subverts reason and natural order, with Buddhist overtones of escaping *samsara*. To Uddin, the poem stages a helpless awe that transcends earthly attachments (wealth, family, love), leaving the protagonist and the reader in an unresolved, traumatic limbo that prioritises death-drive over pleasure-principle. Anjan Basu, in his article “Jibanananda Das: The Loneliest Poet of the Twentieth Century,” argues that Das was “never disposed to responding to anything in a formulaic fashion - least of all to death,” pointing to poems, from “Dhusar Pandulipi” (“The Greying Manuscript”; 1934) to the last anthology, “Sat-Ti Tarar Timir” (“The Dark Night of the Seven Stars”; 1948), where death is simultaneously cosmic indifference, personal longing, and ironic release. Animesh Bag, in his article “Like a Tangerine: Despair, Death, and the Poetic Self in Jibanananda Das’ Select Poems,” attempts to study the influence of the Romantic poet John Keats on the twentieth-century vernacular poet Jibanananda Das, with particular focus on the Keatsian conception of *negative capability* and its echoes in Das’ poetry. Death in Das is read through the Keatsian lens as aesthetically productive; the poet dwells in uncertainty and mortality not with despair alone but with a kind of creative suspension, which defines his modernist sensibility. Subashish Bhattacharjee’s work, “A Thousand Tiny Deaths: Schizoanalyzing Jibānānanda’s Death Instinct,” argues that death in Jibanananda Das’ poetry is not a final, negative endpoint but a

continuous, productive process of ‘dying’ that coexists with life in a Deleuzoguattarian immanent plane. Drawing on Blanchot, Derrida, and Agamben, Bhattacharjee finds that Das presents death as a recurring, impersonal “thousand tiny deaths” rather than a single biological extinction, evident in poems like “One Day Eight Years Ago” and “The Corpse”. To Bhattacharjee, Das’ ‘death instinct’ or ‘thanatos’ is productive: it creates an incessant urge to die while simultaneously sustaining both biotic and transcendental life, aligning with *Upanishadic* notions of the eater and the eaten being one. Firoze Basu, in his article “Till Death Do Us Part: Vernacular Poet Jibanananda Das’ Notion of Death Consciousness and Influence on Later Poets,” tries to establish a connection between an inherent death-consciousness in Das’ poem “Aat Bochor Ager Ek Din” (“One Day Eight Years Ago”) and the great influence of the poet on his successors. Basu also notes that the abrupt voluntary death in the poem marks the mystery and doubt that is inherent to Das’ poetry.

As far as the theme and style are concerned, different scholars and critics read Das from diverse perspectives, especially from modernist literary scopes. At the same time, on the subject of death, many scholars have discussed it in Das’ literary works, especially his poetry, i.e. as discussed earlier. However, Das’ prose fiction has remained unexplored in this context. There is still scope for understanding Das’ literary imagination and continuing the discourse of death and existence in Das; therefore, a comparative study between Das’ poetry and prose fiction is significant. In Das’ poems, the interpretation of existence and death is more romantic and critically optimistic, which a few earlier scholars have dealt with in some selected works of Das. In his prose fiction, Das represents the disastrous societal struggles that lead a man to live in an extreme existential crisis, which can be called ‘living dead’ - subjugating life to the power of death (necropolitics)” (Mbembe 92); finally, real death is the ultimate option to eliminate endless suffering. The existence of a self becomes metaphorically alive even after the speaker’s death. In many prose fictions of Das, Death comes to the speaker as a voice of resistance against the power of society, economic or political, which, yet, needs a critical introspection. The present study examines Das’ perception of and engagement with the themes of death and existence as articulated across four selected works (translated): two poems: “Before Dying”⁴ (“মৃত্যুর আগে,” 1935) and “After the Death of Men”⁵ (“মানুষের মৃত্যু হলে,” 1950)- and two works of short fiction: “The Return”⁶ (নিরুপমা যাত্রা, 1933) and *Bilash*⁷ (বিলাশ, 1946). Through a close reading and comparative analysis of these primary texts, the study endeavours to interrogate the aesthetic, historical, social, and psychological dimensions through which Das constructs and negotiates the discourses of mortality and existential selfhood, situating his literary vision within the broader frameworks of Bengali modernism and the philosophical preoccupations of the mid-twentieth century.

Death in Literature and Theoretical Framework

Death, no doubt, is irrepressible when it is to occur. Every living creature, once born, is doomed to die sooner or later. All lives are destined to face two phases of life: to be born once and die once. In between these two junctures, the struggle continues to exist (for existence) or to be dead (death) in the quest for understanding and justifying the real values of life (by living or dying). Franz Kafka rightly observes, “In fact, things are more difficult. Freedom is life. Lack of liberty is death. But death is just as much a reality as life. And that is precisely the difficulty: that we are exposed to both - to life as well as death” (Janouch 63). Though Kafka romanticises death here, death means decay- inaction. Dying is destruction, and fundamentally, “*the aim of all life is death*” (Freud 32). Whether to exist in the impermanence is a matter of choice, or fate, or death is the ultimate truth, and dying means

destruction, the ultimate loss of a physical body. Therefore, death is dreadful; synchronously, to be dead is the nature of a living body. Nevertheless, does death always come naturally? Does death happen with the conscious mind's concern? Does a living creature have control over its death? Different theoretical approaches and philosophical thoughts perceive and interpret these questions differently. At the same time, there is a counterword, *existence*⁸; similar questions can be raised in interpreting existence and understood manifoldly. In literature, these archetypal subjects have been the catalyst elements in the formation of literary form, content, and discourse. Hakola and Kivistö claim that "death is often recognized as having narrative power" (X). Therefore, literature on death deliberates on the consciousness of life. Adriana Teodorescu writes:

Studying the representations of death in literature, their aesthetical and their social, anthropological, philosophical, psychological and historical implications, may function as a temporary, cultural - and, why not, scholarly - slap in the face of death; a slap that at the same time rebounds in the face of life. Our life. So that we can wake up" (5).

Literature reflects society as a perfect replica of its social and psychological aspects. While discussing society and psychology, man is the centre of these discourses. The lifespan of a man's existence (living) and death is significantly influenced by contemporary social issues and the inner thoughts of human psychology. Therefore, literature is also called the mirror of human life. In this regard, there can be two main circumstances or phases of a human being: one, after birth, the struggle for living or existence, and the second is to fall prey to death, whether naturally, unnaturally, or forcefully. Unfortunately, a human being, in general, has to pass through both these states in the struggle to acquire a spatial identity in society. Oscar Wilde, in his book *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, expresses, "In the wild struggle for existence, we want to have something that endures, and so we fill our minds with rubbish and facts, in the silly hope of keeping our place" (19). Thus, in the silly hope of keeping his place, a man continues suffering till death.

Death is not always natural. In society, an individual's death is manipulated by power, which means a man is a product of society and socio-political-economic power. Michael Foucault, in the fifth chapter, "Right of Death and Power over Life" of *The History of Sexuality*, describes power through the term *biopolitics*,⁹ which is "to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order" (138). To Foucault, biopolitics refers to the power of society that controls life through *biopower*.¹⁰ In its literal meaning, biopower can be understood as control or power over human bodies; it controls all aspects of life, even birth and death. As Foucault says, biopower is "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of population" (140). Therefore, biopolitics or biopower, in society, controls the existence and death of human life; in another sense, society decides who will be 'let live' (136-138) and who will be let die or perish. On the other hand, *thanatopolitics*¹¹ is 'a politics of death,' not merely in opposition to biopolitics. S.J. Murray says, "If biopolitics is a productive power that necessitates or silently calls for death as the consequence of "making live," then thanatopolitics is not merely the lethal underside of biopolitics but is itself a productive power in the voices of those whom biopolitical power "lets die"" (718). Murray also states:

Thanatopolitics asks: how might those deaths-collateral damages, negative externalities, opportunity costs-productively disaffirm the regime of a neoliberal biopolitics that condemns to death? How might those deaths rise up, and haunt, the

spaces of biopolitical production, to critically disaffirm the ways in which biopolitics not only occasions but also tolerates a certain threshold of death as its *modus operandi*? (718)

These questions, relating to power and politics, help scholars understand the crux and politics of death and existence in literary texts more critically. Murray again says, “Thanatopolitics would expose the fault-lines of biopolitical logics. It would attend to the rhetorical conditions in which the dead, the dying, and the dispossessed might rise up and speak” (719). Here, Murray does not claim that the dead literally speak. His statement signifies that literature, narrative, and language create the conditions under which silenced, marginalised, or dead voices can be made audible in critical discourse. Death, when represented in literature, becomes rhetorical; it argues, accuses, and demands accountability from the reader and from power. Das’ literary creation articulates the same: by narrating the slow dying of the protagonists, especially in his prose fiction, it constructs a rhetorical space where the otherwise unremarkable, socially invisible deaths acquire political and moral weight.

The present study adopts an interdisciplinary methodology that combines close reading and comparative literary analysis across two genres, poetry and prose fiction, within Das’ oeuvre, applying a constellation of theoretical frameworks from political theory, psychoanalysis, and philosophy to interrogate the discourses of death and existence in the selected texts. The socio-political dimension of the analysis is grounded in Foucault’s concepts of ‘biopolitics’ and ‘biopower,’ extended through Murray’s thanatopolitics,’ which reads death as a productive site of resistance for those whom power “lets die,” and further supplemented by Mbembe’s ‘necropolitics,’ particularly the condition of the “living dead,” to illuminate the speaker’s or protagonists’ states of socially imposed existential suspension in the prose fictions. The psychoanalytic dimension draws on Freud’s twin drives: *eros* or ‘life instincts’ which “are those that deal with basic survival, pleasure, and reproduction, and they are sometimes referred to as “sexual instincts” (Jones-Smith 29), also known as (living instinct) or ‘sexual instincts,’ and the another one is *thanatos* or ‘death instincts,’ which “ought to mean an aspiration, a drive to be dead” (Freud XIV), also known as ‘death drive’ (*Todestrieb*)¹². These two drives are applied differentially across the two genres: ‘Eros’ governs the optimistic, nature-affirming voice of the poems, while ‘Thanatos’ underlies the gradual self-destruction of the fictional protagonists. The comparative cross-generic framework constitutes the primary original contribution of the study, tracing how Das deploys the same archetypal themes- mortality, suffering, and existential crisis through divergent aesthetic registers: romantically and critically optimistically in verse, and realistically and socially critically in fiction.

Nature as a Symbol of Existence and Death as a Vehicle to Comprehend Life in Das’ Poetry

Poetry is a collection of extensive feelings, emotions, and thoughts from a poet’s experience. The sense of death and existence derives from an individual’s experiences. Therefore, interpreting poems on death can lead to the understanding of the lived experience of existence. There are several kinds of poems related to the experience of death, such as the elegy, eulogy, and Near-Death Experience (NDE) poems. Das’ selected poems are neither elegy nor eulogy nor NDE poems. Instead, death in Das’ poem is a vehicle to understand the core meaning of existence and death. Das’ poetic voice is optimistic and full of ‘eros’ (living instincts)- an orientation toward the preservation, continuation, and enrichment of life. Akin to the writings of English Romantic poets Keats and Shelley, Das explores the existence of

life with his poetic representation of the everlasting temperament of nature and, at the same time, intends to abate the dreadfulness of death by its aesthetic representation in his literary imagination. Therefore, to comprehend these statements, the study analyses Das' poem "Before Dying" below. The poem "Before Dying" concentrates on praising nature and the surroundings of human beings while staying alive. The poet claims that those who have seen or experienced the natural beauties and the contemporary movements of life are witnesses of true existence; otherwise, there is nothing to be done after death. To Das, witnessing such natural elements makes humans' lives meaningful and alive. As Das writes, "...have found / Children's breath-scent, grass, sun, kingfishers, stars, sky / Traces of these, again and again, the whole year round" (Das, "Before Dying" 13). These lines indicate that the world in which humans live gives them meaning in life through its movements, and that there is nothing after death; this assumption of the poet signifies nature as a symbol of existence. In the poem, Das describes death as non-experience in human life. He emphasises the present time of human beings or life experiences here. Witnessing the ever-existent nature, the human conscious sense of existence acquires embodiment in nature within it. Das delineates nature's beauty to signify the present existent moment of life. Now, how can one be a witness to natural beauty and be proof of that meaningful living? Das writes:

We who have learnt: after days, months, seasons had passed,
 That daughter of earth drew near to tell us the rivers' tales
 In darkness; we who have sensed within banks and fields and paths
 There is another light, on its body the afternoon dust:
 Losing its hold on eyesight, that light is calm and still; there
 Earth's Kankavati drifts into a body of faded incense.
 (Das, "Before Dying" 14)

Here, by saying "the daughter of the earth," the poet refers to nature and informs readers of "the river's tale," which is of actual existence. Das believes that if humans have sensed her (nature) "within banks and fields and paths," they can preserve her in their conscious sense of literature, which Das himself has done as a poet. Therefore, making a self-existent "another light" in nature is essential. Like "Earth's Kankavati," human beings' existence in nature will be "a body of faded incense" through literature. Das does not believe that death is an absolute ending; he is rather an optimist. Instead, he asks the readers to find the answer themselves. What they experience remains preserved as a past in literature. Therefore, experiences depicted in poetry can be permanent, not a human body; death is indomitable yet obscure. Das asks:

What more would we know before death? Do we not know, alas,
 At the head of all roseate desire like a blank wall there wakes
 Death's grey face: all the dreams, the gold the world once had
 Pass into unresponsive peace-as though a sorceress makes
 Use of them; what more would we know? Have we not heard birds cry
 After the sunlight fades; in meadow mists, seen the crows fly?
 (Das, "Before Dying" 14)

The first question in the stanza suggests that people must witness such existence in nature before death. The next question, "Do we not know, alas," affirms that humans must experience life before death, or they already do. The questions also reflect a limitation on human experience and physical existence. The poet hints at how humans can experience and witness the ever-existing nature. After death, there is darkness or not; it is unexperienced. But

death has a value in evaluating life. In a similar context, Edward Dimock, in his article “The Poet as Mouse and Owl: Reflections on a Poem by Jībanānanda Dās,” with reference to the poem “One Day Eight Years Ago,” writes:

If one makes an analysis of the Manasā myth, one can come out with an interesting result which shows life and death on one side of a binary opposition, and zero on the other. What this suggests is that in some Indian perception at least, both life and death are categories of existence, as opposed to total extinction. This is also, it seems to me, what Jībanānanda is telling us. The owl, the poet, death, implacable, feed on life, the mouse; mosquitoes seeking to drink the blood of life swarm with life; the dead man, the suicide of the poem, has his immortality in providing food for death, and is at rest, in a positive state of existence. (606)

Likewise, the poem “Before Dying” reinforces this: death actively feeds on life, and the obscurity of death attains a kind of immortality by becoming conscious in the present and sustenance for death; thus, resting in a positive state of being. However, Nature is signified as eternal; nature means existing or living. The human body is fragile- it gets destroyed, not nature; with nature, it can be alive through the creation of literature. Therefore, to create a piece of literature is to exist. This instinct of creation to stay alive or be willing to exist is due to the psychic drive ‘eros,’ which Freud describes as the ‘living instincts’ of a human being. The voice of this poem reflects the romantic sense of human existence, neglecting or simply not exploring the obscurity of death. In the poem, Das, by nature, symbolises the actual meaningful existence of the impermanent human body as Keats does with “the viewless wings of Poesy” (256) in his poem “Ode to A Nightingale.”

Another poem of Das, “After the Death of Men,” focuses directly on death: how, after death, human beings stay pervasive or return to the present time. The poem offers a historical and philosophical introspection, moving across Indian civilisational time, Bengali history, and universal human experience. Das uses death not as a marginal point but as a lens through which the meaning, failure, and endurance of human consciousness are measured and re-examined. Death here is neither mourned nor celebrated; rather, it is instrumentalised as a vehicle for collective self-understanding/existence. The poet begins with, “After the death of men, man still abides. / Rising from the past he comes to men of our time: / First, to take the measurement of consciousness” (Das, “After the Death of Men” 74); these opening lines establish the philosophy that an individual’s physical death does not extinguish human presence. The dead return not as ghosts but as consciousness, as accumulated knowledge and experience that the present age inherits and is measured against. Death here is explicitly a vehicle. The return of the dead is not the physical body but the memory, knowledge, and history once associated with the dead man. Das claims that after death, man comes to the present to measure the present consciousness of human beings, describing how the past experience of life, love, and knowledge of dead people teaches the present generation. As the lines continue:

Each and every man with his very own distinct being
Has vanished into darkness;
Yet, permeating the light of our time
When they speak of love or knowledge
In the accents of men of our time-
(Das, “After the Death of Men” 74)

To Das, each individual who is now dead has their own experiences, which are now preserved in the memory of the present age. Their return through the psychological representation of the present time can purify the present sense and conscience of existence. The dead, contradictorily, become pervasive through the imagination of literature. This return may initially be obscure to the readers, but it evokes consciousness in the present mind and adds significant value to the present beauty and life. Therefore, death or the memory, knowledge, and history of the deceased is a vehicle to perceive the wholeness of existence. Das' introduction of Dipankar Srijnana, the historical eleventh-century Bengali Buddhist scholar Atisha Dipankara, who journeyed from Bengal to Tibet carrying knowledge, is such an example. He is Das' most powerful symbol of death as a vehicle. As Das writes: "We are at once reminded of the interminable journey / Of Dipankar Srijnana" (Das, "After the Death of Men" 74). Srijnana is long dead, yet his journey, his intellectual and spiritual quest, lives in the present consciousness of the reader. His death did not end his journey; it extended it across centuries. Das uses this historical figure to argue that the most meaningful human lives are those whose death becomes a continuation rather than a cessation.

However, death is not always a philosophical vehicle but a social catastrophe. The contrast with Srijnana's noble death is stark and deliberate. As Das writes, "Only death now, in the scum of female gutters, / Among countless children on pavements, / And in the queued-up impotence of their begetters" (Das, "After the Death of Men" 74). Das is arguing that not all deaths carry the same meaning; some deaths illuminate life, others merely expose its failure and brutality. Yet, Das is quietly optimistic in the poem when he says, "Men analyse this century with a cold detachment, / Thus keeping it illumined with hope" (Das, "After the Death of Men" 75). The act of analysis, of examining death, suffering, and historical failure with clear-eyed consciousness, is itself presented as an act of hope. Literature, philosophy, and critical thought are the means by which the dead and the dying are not simply forgotten but transformed into understanding. This is precisely what Das is doing in the poem itself, using the deaths of history to illuminate the present. Furthermore, Das, in the poem, is also grateful for the tricky circle of time and its extensiveness. There is a complex relationship among society, time, and men. He emphasises how much men learn over time, especially from the past. Is not the past made of dead men's experiences? Where, with time and literary imagination, men's deaths become lively in the present minds and create a meaningful sense of existence. Thus, dead men become alive and meaningful to the present. Das concludes:

After the death of men, man abides yet;
Rising from the past he comes to men of our time
As though to chart out surer directions,
To ascertain the progress of human labour
Governed by measured consciousness.
(Das, "After the Death of Men" 76)

The dead men associated with the past time and experience teach the present age and measure "directions" and "consciousness". Therefore, after death, men stay existent timelessly. Here, the dead man can be seen as the extreme manifestation of Freud's 'eros,' which neglects the concept of death as destruction. Significantly, thus, in the poem, to fill the existential crisis of the present time, imagining death in literature as a return to the present is a vehicle to visualise a comprehensive sense of existence and death. Consequently, Das' literary imagination helps the reader understand the interpretation of death from a different perspective, as its exact experience is not defined. Joseph Carroll, in his article "Death in Literature," writes:

Coping with the death of loved ones or the prospect of one's own death is not an all-consuming motive in most people's lives, but it is a prominent feature of personal experience, and it is illustrated abundantly in literature. We have an adaptively functional need to make imaginative sense of our lives (Carroll, 2012a), and death is a decisively important event in every life. (137-159)

Das, in his poems, has this "imaginative sense of our lives" to perceive death as "a decisively important event in every life." Therefore, Das' "poems do not act as an end but are a part of the circularity of existence" (Bhattacharjee 111). In the same context on Das' poem, Amit Chaudhuri writes:

Das' peculiar and relentless longing to escape the body- in effect, his longing for death- and then, characteristically, to revisit, almost helplessly... existence- even a transitory and perishable existence [...] - is also an almost fatalistic enactment of the creative act. The art-work often seems to Das not so much the result of intention as of that inexplicable 'bodh', the unfathomable will that leads deathward, and then, as unfathomably, back towards birth. ("Returning to Earth")

For Das, death is never a destination but a movement, an inexplicable psychic impulse that pulls the self 'deathward' only to return it, almost helplessly, to existence. Chaudhuri observes that this oscillation between dying and being born is the 'fatalistic enactment of the creative act' itself, wherein death functions not as ending but as the very vehicle through which existence is most fully manifested. With the dead men's return, the poem "After the Death of Men" signifies this.

While dealing with Das' two poems, "Before Dying" and "After the Death of Men," it is exposed that death in his poetic imagination is neither a terminus nor a tragedy but a vehicle through which the meaning of existence is continuously illuminated. In "Before Dying," nature serves as the enduring symbol of existence, and the act of literary creation driven by Freudian 'eros' becomes the means by which mortal experience transcends physical dissolution. In "After the Death of Men," death returns as accumulated consciousness, guiding the present with the wisdom of the past, enacting the circularity of existence that defines the poet's entire poetic vision. Regarding Das' perspectives on death, Ramesh Chandra Chakravarty, in his essay "Jibanananda Mrityu-Bhabna," claims that Das is neither a theoretical philosopher nor a scientist. To him, death consciousness is a constant companion. He has crossed the 'Sea of Life' in the light of the five lamps of the senses. Like Keats, Das is a trailblazer of self-transcendence through strong sense and imagination. Das is an absolute wonder in Bengali poetry. His vision of life and death is unique in Bengali literature. He has overwhelmed us and made us obedient by enriching life and death (360). For Das, in the current analysis, death and existence are not opposites but interdependent conditions, and poetry is the space where their unresolved, productive tension is most comprehensively inhabited. However, in Das' prose fiction, death is not merely an individual psychic or philosophical phenomenon; rather, the deaths of the protagonists speak back to the social structures that define them.

Biopolitics, Thanatopolitics, and Death Drive in Das' Prose Fiction

Literature is not always a reminder of death or mortality. As Sanjukita Chakraborty, in her article "A Study of Death in Literature," mentions, "Books are not actually constant

reminders of the mortality of every life and story but also work as a continual defence against death” (1425-1432). Chakraborty also writes:

Literature offers death ... in multiple ways. One could argue that the importance of death is extremely useful to literature. Bringing a fictional encounter with death to its reader, the stories that also use death in their narrations to make an emotional effect, plot twists, suspense and mysteries but even more importantly death and storytelling seem to own a fundamental and existential connection. (1425-32)

Unlike his poems, Das’ short fictions are based on contemporaneous social crises, representing death and suffering with more realistic narration. The power of society controls the protagonists in the stories. They strive continuously to get rid of the manipulation of power, but they fail. They exist in a life of an existential crisis, mentally and physically- a state of “living dead” as defined by Mbembe. In the end, they cannot survive the struggle of “biopolitics” and end their life by suicide, ill health, or hunger-death. The tendency of the protagonists in Das’ stories can also be seen as Freud’s ‘death drive’ instinct, where their acceptance of death is not natural but rather forced dying.

The protagonist, Prabhat, in “The Return,” is a victim of the power of society. Prabhat, a man in his thirties, leaves his country home to live a good life, but he dies a pathetic death. In Kolkata, Prabhat has been living alone for five years, leaving his family in the village. Though he wants to return to his family, he cannot. How can he return home without money? As a husband, son, and father, he has responsibilities for his family. However, without money, how can he accomplish those duties? Unwillingly, he stays back in Kolkata jobless, hungry, and waiting- with fragile hopes. That hopelessness soon coils into physical and psychological existential crises. For seven months, continuous struggle and conflict prevented him from returning home; his decision to return home was delayed. When he is conscious of himself and about to return, it is too late; with hunger and fever, Prabhat dies an unnatural death. Prabhat’s death in the story raises many questions in the reader’s mind. Why did Prabhat die? Is Prabhat himself the reason for his death? Who is responsible for his death? His family? Is it not society and its control over the human body? These questions are the political interrogations of ‘thanatopolitics,’ which demand answers within the system of power of ‘biopolitics,’ demanding “deaths rise up, and haunt, the spaces of biopolitical production” (Murray 718). Prabhat is the victim of that power. His life is separated and unremarkable, and he has become a subject of the power of biopolitics, which is to “ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order” (Foucault 138). The state of no identity and poverty creates both physical and psychological crises in society. In this traumatic life, death keeps haunting Prabhat day and night. In bed, he keeps thinking of death with a conscious or unconscious mind. Again and again, in the night, he thinks of his dead father and the dead dog; even he hears his dead father’s call. He keeps imagining death, loses his present existence, and keeps finding a way to get rid of it, but how? Prabhat, remembering his father’s death, asks his friend Kartik, “Does anyone know what happens to us after death? Tell me Kartik- what happens after we die?” (Das “The Return” 102) Prabhat answers his questions to escape the present crisis, saying, “Perhaps we continue to exist but only as this table, this wall and the ash from this cigarette” (Das “The Return” 102). In the context, Prabhat’s imagination of the dead as alive and the alive as dead is just a failure to escape the victimisation. He is also a victim of the ‘death drive’ (death instinct). As Freud states, ‘*the aim of all life is death*,’ where a man can have an unconscious desire to die and is tempered by his life instincts; here, self-destructive behaviour is an expression of the energy generated by death instincts. When this energy is directed toward others, it manifests as aggression and

violence. When this self-expression is inward, it can lead to suicidal behaviour (Jones-Smith 27). Again, can Prabhat really escape by suicide? To answer this question is crucial; to fit in the system of 'biopolitics,' Prabhat must simply die. In the story, the impending situations make Prabhat indifferent to society and the world. He is living in the world, contradictorily, a 'living dead' (Mbembe 92) life. He keeps questioning the dog Ketu's death: "Was she beaten to death? Or did she die a natural death. How could she die before return? Couldn't she have waited a little? Won't she be ever return?" (Das "The Return" 107). Ketu's death symbolically haunts Prabhat till his death. It is like his own self-inflicted cruelty. The struggle of life and self-carelessness gradually make Prabhat a corpse. His continuous questions, "How long does a man live, after all? No, we do not live very long, and only a few are successful or make enough money. But, there are other accessible gifts- the gifts of love- and why deprive oneself of those?" (Das "The Return" 111), signifies his resistance, where Prabhat is already a victim of society. Recurrently, he consoles himself; he cannot escape. The only option for the man is to accept the situation; there is no option but to blame oneself. As the narrator writes:

- who see life as the wasteland of god- is their own doing. They fear to experience and succeed and they choose to live like the living dead. They call their sloth, love and their penury, magnanimity. They deny the primordial law which rules the process of life... Millions are born, millions are crushed to death-" (Das "The Return" 112).

Here, 'primordial law' may refer to the power of society, where Prabhat's suffering of 'the living dead' resembles Mbembe's concept of 'living dead,' where life is subjugated to the power of death.

Shantishekhar, the protagonist of Das' story "Bilash," like Prabhat, is defeated by the societal system of power. Shantishekhar, a middle-aged man, lives alone in a lodging in Calcutta. His wife and children died long ago. The insecure position in his job, rejection, separation, and poverty make him not recognised in the society of power and politics. Most of his days are spent either in the American news agency office or in his lonely room. In the lodging, most of the time, he stays sleepless and unconscious in dreams of dead people. His dream of the dead is also a failed escape from reality. The reality is full of contradictions and suffering; in the dream world, he sees and talks to his old headmaster and tries to find the meaning of impermanence in existence, which remains unattained till the end of the story. There is always a power that controls men in society. Like Prabhat, Shantishekhar is no exception. He does not like his job, but he is supposed to do it only to stay alive in Kolkata; otherwise, there is no job for survival. The Mastermoshai (teacher) asks him, "Why do you have to-?" (Das, "Bilash" 44). Shantishekhar replies, "This city is somehow- (Das, "Bilash" 44). Here, the word 'somehow' may refer to the despicable system of society of 'biopower' that controls men. This system is of power, whether social, economic, or both. Man must fit into this system, or he must perish by it, as Foucault claims human subjection in 'biopolitics,' i.e., Shantishekhar tries to fit in till the end of his life. Money, in society, dominates over the human body. Shantishekhar says, "- but I have no money, and my body is only human. No money, no creature comforts, the body is breaking down; can't wait;" (Das, "Bilash" 44). Money controls the human body; it is the power of society. There is no way to walk against that power, especially for individuals like Shantishekhar, who are in the position of a clerk with a low salary. Therefore, there is no option but to accept the decay of the self (body), as the body is already subjugated to the power of death (Mbembe 92). Shantishekhar receives respect neither in the lodging nor in the office. He is given more work pressure than his part. The boss, Sarben Ghosh, mocks him. Sushmita, one of his co-workers, gives him company at

night, making Shantishekhar's life more futile. The narrator states, "From behind the lines of vulnerability written all over his face, what does Shantishekhar want? Who will provide him with ease and the reassurance of hope? Not Sushmita" (Das, "Bilash" 56). This excerpt suggests the exclusion of Shantishekhar even from his own space, where he once had hope, as there is no value to an individual space in the logic of 'biopolitics,' except being subjugated. Thus, from dreaming of death, the imaginary sense of death starts haunting Shantishekhar, which shows the psychological breakdown of the protagonist. Therefore, lying on his bed, Shantishekhar says, "- let this night always divine the day and remain night-let this sleep become death" (Das, "Bilash" 59); this signifies a condition of 'living death.' In the end, Shantishekhar dies an unknown death. His death can be either suicide or illness. Most importantly, his death is not natural; instead, it is caused by the brutal power of society. Shantishekhar's death opens the interrogation of 'thanatopolitics.' The continuous laughter of Sushmita, which is a mockery of the protagonist's weak, fragile, and unremarkable body, is exposed as a power politics over the weak and marginalised. Throughout the story, power takes identity, or it is given to human beings by the system of society. Organisations, institutions, and other systems of society decide who will become what. Man is just a product, a subject; as an independent individual, he has no value in the power politics, for 'biopower' subjugates life and controls the body (Foucault 140). As the line "You can tell Morugan Saheb that a proofreader has died, another has been appointed" (Das, "Bilash" 62) indicates, the monopoly of power in representing human identity. Here, man's body or position, which is given by power, has been given value, not to Shantishekhar as a human identity. Thus, the story "Bilash," with the death of the protagonist, demonstrates how biopolitical logics work within the system. At the same time, through the lens of 'thanatopolitics,' the deceased wakes up and becomes a voice of resistance. Shantishekhar and Prabhat are both subjects of 'biopolitics.' They both lived in a society that made them metaphorically dead and finally forced them to accept actual death to escape from reality. However, can their death be called an escape or a voice against the brutal power of society, with the interrogations of Murray's Thanatopolitics? In this context, Murray's interrogation is remarkably apt for the reading of Das. As in the stories "The Return" and "Bilash," the protagonists cannot speak against power while alive; they are too economically and socially weak. But their deaths, as narrated by the author, become acts of rhetorical resistance. The reader is forced to ask: who is responsible? That question is 'thanatopolitics' in action, using death as a voice that biopolitics tried to silence permanently. Das, by writing these deaths with care and moral attention, ensures that the dispossessed do rise up and speak, in Murray's sense, "those deaths rise up, and haunt" (718). The protagonists in both stories try to get rid of such brutal clutches, in futility, by self-abandonment, rejection, hunger, and severe illness, and by ultimately dying; they are self-inflicted; therefore, their death can be called forced suicidal death.

Conclusion

The current study, through extensive analysis of the selected poems and short fiction of Das, concentrates on understanding death and existence in his literary imagination. The interpretation of death and existence in Das' literary oeuvre acknowledges different aspects and perspectives on existence, existential dread, and death. The analysis of Das' poems describes nature as a symbol of existence and death as a vehicle for understanding the sense of existence. The poem "Before Dying" describes that human beings who experience the beautiful nature and the present movements of life are the witnesses of pervasive existence. In this poem, nature functions as the enduring symbol of pervasive existence, and the act of literary creation, driven by Freudian 'eros,' becomes the means by which mortal experience

transcends physical dissolution; where death is a reminder to make the alive remember the present existence and the value of living. On the contrary, the poem “After the Death of Men” speaks of dead men and the possibilities of human values even after death by teaching consciousness. Thus, Das extends this argument historically and philosophically, demonstrating that death is the vehicle through which human consciousness, knowledge, and experience circulate across time, teaching and measuring the present from the past. Across both poems, the dominant psychic force is ‘eros,’ the will to witness, create, and remain bound to the living world, where death serves not as destruction but as the boundary condition that makes existence irreplaceable and worth the act of literary manifestation. On the other hand, death in both stories, “The Return” and “Bilash,” is represented in a more realistic approach with the complexities of socio-political and economic power, where the protagonists are the subjects. Death here is neither a philosophical vehicle nor a romantic affirmation but a socially imposed fate, the terminal consequence of biopolitical exclusion. The protagonists of the stories have no way out of freedom except dying. Their life is like ‘living dead’- no control over their own life, where ‘biopower’ decides whether their life is to be alive or to have perished. Both the protagonists, Prabhat and Shantishekhar, pay for their brutal forecast with their lives. Their death is, of course, not sacrificial but a forced, suicidal death. Yet, reading through Murray’s ‘thanatopolitics,’ these deaths are not merely tragic endings. Rather, by narrating them with moral care and political attentiveness, Das transforms his protagonists’ socially invisible deaths into acts of rhetorical resistance, interrogating the brutal ‘biopolitics.’ To conclude, it can appropriately be stated that Das’ most profound literary imagination, across both his poetry and prose fiction, is not merely about death at all but about the impending ethical and political power of literature itself to make the invisible visible, the voiceless audible, and the dead, in some small but enduring measure, alive- towards pervasive existence.

End notes

1. Death is ‘the fact of dying or being killed,’ or ‘the end of life; the state of being dead.’ *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (2005), P. 392.
2. The Vaishnava lyrics of medieval Bengal, most commonly known as the Vaishnava Padavali (literally, “gathering of songs”) form one of the most significant chapters in the history of Bengali literature. In the *Vaishnava Padavali* of Chandidas, Govindadasa, and Vidyapati, death is incorporated not as a biological or tragic end, but as a metaphorical and emotional extreme within the devotional-erotic play of Radha and Krishna. David L. Haberman in his book *Acting as a Way of Salvation: A Study of Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana* discusses different aspects of life, death, and soul in the context of Vaishnavism.
3. *Kollol* was one of the most influential literary movements in Bengali literature, in which a group of young writers began their careers around from 1923 to 1935.
4. The poem was translated by Supriya Chaudhuri, and published in *A Certain Sense: Poems by Jibanananda Das* (2016).
5. The poem was translated by Shirshendu Chakrabarti, and published in *A Certain Sense: Poems by Jibanananda Das* (2016).
6. The story was translated by Gautam Chakravarty, and published in *Jibanananda Das: Short Fiction, 1931-33* (2001).
7. The story was translated by Chandak Chattarji, and published in *Three Short Stories: Jibanananda Das* (2016).

8. Existence is 'the state or fact of being real or living; to be present in a place or situation,' or 'a way of living especially when this is difficult or boring.' *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2005), P. 532.
9. The term was used by Michel Foucault in his book *La Volante de savoir* (1976), in France, Paris, by Editions Gallimard.
10. The term was first used in Foucault's book *La Volante de savoir* (1976), in France, Paris, by Editions Gallimard.
11. The term explained by S.J. Murray in the article "Thanatopolitics," published in *Bloomsbury Handbook to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2018).
12. This concept of 'death drive' (Todestrieb) pertains to an unawareness-driven inclination to undermine oneself, experience deterioration, and revert to a lifeless condition by Freud in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961). Freud proposed this drive as a counterpart to the life instincts, termed Eros, which are linked to survival, procreation, and creative expression.

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