

***‘The Many Unruly Waves in the Earth and Sky’:  
An Eco/Geocritical Study of Jibanananda Das’s Malloban***

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**Abstract**

*Malloban* (1948), a novel by the Bengali poet and novelist Jibanananda Das (1899-1954), deserves a dedicated reading from the contemporary ecocritical perspectives. The field of ecocriticism, ever-burgeoning as its domain is, is spiraling out in various directions at great speed. This brings into focus a recent critical development known by the various interdisciplinary schools as ‘geocriticism’. Geocriticism carries within its relatively cloistered microcosm numerous interfaces that have arisen in the macrocosmic development of ecocriticism over time. The palmiest of illustration would be that ecocriticism has basically been studied with its relation to literary theory, and/but geocriticism has lent it a far sharper edge, since it concerns itself with the axiom that Earth *evidences its own agency*. The idea of *cortesía*, moreover, as it has been introduced by George Steiner in *Real Presences* (1991), expands the frontier of geocriticism by recognizing the validity of literary craftsmanship such as the novel is; the impact is greater when the same validation comes as a critical response to Earth’s wholeness, the continuation of which can never be summed up in conclusive terms. This very sense of inconclusiveness invites us to probe deeper into the sense of dislocation vis-à-vis location/place in Jibanananda’s *Malloban*. Does *Malloban*’s lifelong attempt for carrying within him, like holy grail, the idea about the Earth’s wholeness catapult him into a solipsistic world? In response to these questions, the paper will demonstrate how Jibanananda’s *Malloban* excels as an idiolectic eco-logos within the ruling ecocritical-geocritical discourse.

Keywords: Place, Geocriticism, Ecocriticism, Solipsism

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## Introduction: An Awakened Sense of Physical Location

Contemporary geocritical school of studies, by way of correlating place and consciousness, has lent a new edge to the meaning of “environmental unconscious” (Buell, 2005, p.142). If one fails to see the subtle correlation between the “environmental imagination” and “the imagination of place-connectedness”, one is surely in the state of “environmental unconscious”. This is the reason why Professor Lawrence Buell in the second chapter of his book *Writing for an Endangered World* urges us to take “a closer look at how the imagination of place-connectedness [...] works”: “... that an awakened sense of physical location and of belonging to some sort of place-based community have a great deal to do with activating environmental concern. Neither the imagination of environmental endangerment nor, for that matter, of environmental well-being can be properly understood without a closer look at how the imagination of place-connectedness itself works: its multiple dimensions, its cultural significances, its capacity to serve by turns as either an insulating or a galvanizing force” (Buell, 2001, p.56). Geocriticism has already gone a long way to accommodate into its fold the disciplines of various origins and perspectives. Till quite a long time, the subject of geocriticism had only been a subject of geography, or, a little more critically speaking, that of cultural geography. Contemporary geocritical discipline, however, has broken itself free from any unilinear genre-specific hegemony. It has dwelt on the reassertion of space by “developing and nourishing an approach that examines the underlying, often invisible interstices of power that invest the social body politic and landscape [...] and a range of perspectives from which to combine ecocritical and geocritical practices in order to make sense of the social, natural, and spatiotemporal world we inhabit” (Tally Jr., p.7). A re-evaluation of Jibanananda Das’s (1899-1954) Bengali novel *Malloban* (1948) offers us not just the disparate spatial anxieties of modernity but also examines how such anxieties “in unprotected darkness and depth” make us affirm that “there is no death, there is no void, there is no individual life, there is inexhaustible ineffable time--- only time” (Das, 2022, p.120).

The setting of the novel happens to be 1929 Kolkata when the Swadeshi movement is reverberating the whole length and breadth of the subcontinent. The protagonist of the novel is Malloban, a common man of forty-two, who lives in a dingy ground-floor room of a dingy two-storeyed rented house in College Street. Malloban’s wife is Utpala and the nine-year-old daughter Monu is their only child. Malloban works as a petty clerk in a foreign company; he is neither a man of sound academic calibre nor a committed careerist. His character pervades the novel only as a humdrum office-goer, a humdrum husband and an equally humdrum father. The arc of his life’s vicissitudes is too limited to be an apt stock-in-trade for a novel proper. It is the same College Street house of Kolkata in a chilling winter month that serves as one unchanging spatiotemporal backdrop for the novel. Malloban, however, refuses to espouse this unilinear spatiotemporal identity--- the identity that his immediate surroundings have extended to him, the identity that his quotidian office-job has bestowed on him, the identity that his punctilious family-life has thrust upon him. Unlike other people of his age, profession and responsibility, Malloban does not think that he lives solely for his family consisting of Monu and Utpala. His seeming idiosyncrasies, eerie gestures and, moreover, his solipsistic tendencies undermine the anthropocene’s convention of seeing spatiotemporality as nothing but a framing device for any sort of phenomenon-study. The perspective of the anthropocene, as Malloban comprehends, has deprived the spatiotemporality of its agency and hence, Malloban intends to see his intensely dwarfed self as an integral part of the more-than-human reality. His solipsism may seem summarily untenable but from within this meditative integrity, he struggles to internalize the nonhuman just as he struggles to internalize his own libido almost every single night. Like a poet “lost in the light of thought”,

he feels with his blood and lust that the nonhuman evidences its own agency but the pursuit of this belief doesn't come without a cost.

### **Spatiotemporality and 'All These Familiar and Half-Familiar Things'<sup>1</sup>**

The geocentrism<sup>2</sup> becomes apparent to Malloban only when he intricately feels that he is place-connected. The space around Malloban is his two-storeyed dwelling place in College Street---a typically value-neutral site for his regular correspondence with office and relations with family. A space, however, is never associated with a place. Only when meaning, values and sentiments are ascribed to a space, a space becomes a place. The space, place and one's subconscious are not just three isolated entities but given the right gaze, right perspective and the right time, they act as one neat unit through which we can try to measure out the boundary lines between the human and the nonhuman. The quality of being place-connected is one major issue here. The space is only a superficial projection of a reality which is necessarily palimpsestic and it is only natural that against the façade of the spatial territories, no authentic search for the subconscious is possible. Hence, all what Malloban grapples for is a place to which he can safely acknowledge his belonging. Figuring out such a place is important for him. Else, it is difficult to get a control over what we usually consider as human-centric viewpoints. It is necessary that Malloban should gradually discipline himself into taking a stance which is not exclusively human. Only by shifting his own gaze from within to without he can initiate the searches for places of his subconscious self.

This shift in emphasis--- from the human-centric to the more-than-human--- helps Malloban to tide over the cliché of "imagological" or "egocentered" approach. In fact, since "multifocalization<sup>3</sup> is more meaningful in a geocritical, geocentered context" (Westphal p.126), Malloban struggles desperately to discover his own self or his "interior existence" in some wishy-washy "charcoal-sketches": "... Malloban was surveying the shadowy, incomparable images of the charcoal-sketches and woodcuts of his interior existence---eyes closed. He really had his eyes closed . . . He wasn't sleeping, he was thinking something; as if someone somewhere was giving accompaniment--- very far away. He was listening singlemindedly" (Das, p.81). There are three different spaces that seem to be looming and lengthening immediately around Malloban--- the built space (the house-environment backed by its socio-cultural stereotyping), the more-than-human space (the city of his living being peripheral to the socio-cultural concentricity of the house) and, finally, the bucolic memories of his fast-blurring childhood. Bertrand Westphal has cautioned the readership against getting carried away by the fallacy of *presentism* (Westphal, p.25), i.e., given a particular spatial-

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<sup>1</sup> The marital relation is like a claustrophobic place to Utpala and, quite naturally, its exact coordinate is not available to her in the strict sense of the anthropocene. Neither time nor place can define it: "Not in time---not in timelessness, not in her own soul or in someone else's heart---nevertheless, in some kind of chance uninterruptedness of all these familiar and half-familiar things, Utpala bent her head and sank down into the life, darkness, death, and disregard of an incomparable otherworld" (Das, pp.82-83).

<sup>2</sup> "The specificity of geocriticism lies in the attention it pays to a place. The study of the viewpoint of an author or of a series of authors, which inevitably posits a form of identity, will be superseded in favor of examining a multiplicity of heterogeneous points of view, which all converge in a given place, the primum mobile of the analysis. A multifocal dynamic would be required for this analysis" (Westphal, 122).

<sup>3</sup> "In order to escape from the perspectival limitations of a single author or interpretive community, the geocritic will consult as many texts, and as many different kinds of texts, as possible, emphasizing especially the juxtaposition or confrontation of texts written from different perspectives, be they cultural or identitarian or disciplinary. The goal is to develop a polyphonic or dialogical understanding of the place in question" (Tally Jr., p.24).

temporal reality, a place has always been in the same natural state as its visual version testifies to us.

The visual version of a place<sup>4</sup>, as geocriticism puts forward, is a blatant fallacy and Westphal's tenet of *polysensoriality* ordains that any study of place must be open to the haptic, olfactory and auditory dimensions of place. Thus, a polyphony of outlooks will comeingle and confront each other and they are, thus, expected to overthrow the hegemony of any one single perspective. Using a miscellany of senses and a miscellany of methods Malloban tries to come to terms with the epistemology of space, thus playing a second fiddle to his anthropocene ego. After all, geocritical study being a significant reversal of the traditional approach to the literary study of place relativizes the autonomy of human subject. "As if standing in a separate world of symbols, mysterious to this woman [Utpala] of the material world", Malloban is bracing himself to transcend all the stereotypes about his immediate spatiotemporality. This two-storeyed house is not at all Utpala's favourite; nor is Malloban. Mincing no words Utpala can squarely say that she wouldn't have felt so stifled if she could go halves on her responsibility for Malloban, even with a prostitute. Das captures Utpala's antipathy for her immediate surroundings in a vibrant oxymoron--- "the endless darkness of the inexhaustible sunshine". Unlike how the "endless darkness" dismays Utpala, it works as a fountainhead of new thought for Malloban, where "A certain vanished city comes to mind":

Darkness once again thickens throughout the sky:  
This darkness, like light's mysterious sister.

.....  
In this darkness, deepening, closing in upon a February sky.  
A certain vanished city comes to mind,  
In my heart wake outlines of some gray palace in that city. (Seely, 2019, p.43)

If it is the idea of 'a certain vanished' place that Malloban is trying to negotiate with, it comes to him not just through the sense of vision. The "monstrous jolt" of a wheezing lorry, the "brawl and scuffle and yowl" of two lusting cats, "the muffled cries of far-off fog-men", "the sound of dew falling" and "a marvelous, far-off, otherworldly jingling"--- all these multifarious senses are collaborating to form his immediate spatiotemporality. Malloban's ground floor room is dark, drab and cold. The sense of cold that pervades his cubicle emanates from the "strange outburst of blood and lust" of the two cats<sup>5</sup> who have been fighting "in this astonishing cold, under pretense of a fight" (Das, p.8). For him, "the moribund lorry-voice has some significance" and since Malloban's desperate desire is to transcend the moribund corporeality around, he takes it [the sound of wheels or tires] to be "the torrential voice of a clouded night". The rainwater, which in village gutters, tanks and channels "goes babbling along as if talking to itself" (135) or the "ko-ko-koko" that comes "from the direction of the morning fog", when "they [the crows] go flying far off in the other direction to draw out the very earth" (159) represent the tactile or the auditory senses respectively. All these spatial considerations come so naturally to Malloban that we at once

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<sup>4</sup> ". . . the places themselves are not stable, free-standing entities but continually shaped and reshaped by forces from both inside and outside. Places have histories; place is not just a noun but also a verb, a verb of action; and this action is always happening around us, because of us, despite us" (Buell, 2001, p.67).

<sup>5</sup> The feline image is redolent of the 'doe in heat' in Das's remarkably controversial poem "In Camp":  
"That doe in heat calls on.  
No sleep come to this heart of mine  
As I lie here, alone" (Seely, 2019, p.23).

feel that without due recognition to the nonhuman around we cannot even approximate who we really are. The spatial studies also bring to light the inefficacy of the anthropocene epistemology about language. By endeavouring to reach out first to the more-than-human space and, then, to the vignettes of those precious childhood memories, Malloban does realize that every single object in nature has its means of articulation and there is nothing odd or supernatural about it: “Malloban feels a touch of magic. And yet it’s not supernatural--- how naturally ancient, this light, the birds, the sky’s language” (169).

### **The Many Unruly Waves: Beyond the Binary of the Social and the Natural**

For Malloban, it is also clear that just as the absence of language turns out to be the best piece of correspondence with Banalata Sen in the concluding section of Das’s poem “Banalata Sen”<sup>6</sup>, the same loss of language inculcates in Malloban a consciousness of a different order. Malloban now knows that the meaning of life lies in counting “the many unruly waves in the earth and sky, arranging them according to some mysterious direction . . .” (151). Reconciled to this type of consideration about time, place and consciousness, Malloban finds no puzzle in the choric flight of the cawing Kolkata crows from the dense fog towards a foggier place of no direction. The fog may have blurred the vision but the jarring and repeating cawing of the crows completely blurs the stereotypical boundary lines between the human-centric and the post-human realities. The seeming absence of language of the more-than-human world, or, in other words, the solitude, persists as the one essential signpost of life: “From the direction of the morning fog, they went flying far off in the other direction to draw out the very earth, those crows, to bring out the shining sun for everyone---even those who aren’t crows, aren’t birds---ko-ko-koko---what a racket of a hundred consciousnesses, arbitration, solitude” (159). The sense of place is not just this unmitigated solitude for Malloban but it is also a river of life--- inscrutable, untraversable: “The name of the river of our lives---uncrossing, Malloban was thinking: nowhere can anyone cross over, never, anywhere in the course of this river; but still, so many people traverse it every day on the strength of pain, danger, failure, death” (122).

Just as in Malloban’s musings, the name of the river of our life is “uncrossing”, the same sense of uncertainty permeates what we earlier recognized as “reliable spatial or environmental markers”. Regarding the growing volatility in the distinction between “the social” and “the natural”, editors Robert T. Tally Jr. and Christine M. Battista in their “Introduction” observe: “What once seemed to be fixed, stable, or at least reliable spatial or environmental markers, such as national boundaries, regional borders, public or private properties, and even identifiable climate zones, are now threatened by the increasing volatility of both the social and natural worlds. Indeed, this distinction between the social and the natural is itself dubious and unhelpful, and it becomes increasingly untenable as the twenty-first century wears on” (Tally Jr., p.2). Given the increasing volatility in “the social and natural worlds”, Malloban feels like the protagonist in Das’s poem “In Fields Fertile and Fallow”:

Blinded by the brilliance of a bloody flood, this simple creature  
Finds no relief as yet.  
Here the earth is rugged

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<sup>6</sup> In the concluding two lines of Jibanananda Das’s poem ‘Banalata Sen’, the apparent absence of language is a fitting referent for the post-anthropocene: “All birds come home, all rivers, all of life’s tasks finished. / Only darkness remains, as I sit there face to face with Banalata Sen” (Seely, 2019, p.47).

With its cracks and fissures of an April field.  
There are no more promises. (Seely, 2019, p.87)

Malloban's heavily battered marital life has turned out to be a site of "no relief" and "no more promises". To Malloban, Utpala's love is as empty as a "huge empty basket of sunlight" or as squalid as "porcupine-impertinence, cockatoo-mischief, civet-aggrievedness, cat-grimaces, cobra-fangs, and tigress-paws" (Das, p.57). Still, Malloban accepts Utpala without demur, all the while sitting like a "shamkol stork"<sup>7</sup>. Utpala's discontents and disgusts are not unknown to Malloban. The tortures, though Malloban does not deem them tortures, keep on coming in a spate but Malloban does not evaluate them in the stereotypical scales of "social" and "natural". Whatever it is, what frightens him most is that, if at all confronted, Utpala will fly away like "a peahen from branch to branch in some magic jungle." The paradox is that Malloban perceives too well what it all means by "flying away".

In fact, the desire of flying away from this claustrophobic urban setting, the place of his apparent belonging, is exclusively that of Malloban. The suffocating, sulking life of his menial job is far too removed from his care-free childhood which he has long abandoned in the dusty roads of his village. When the night deepens in the incorrigibly throbbing city-streets, he often feels that he is incapable of sleeping even after the day's ordeal. In those wee hours when the nastily honking lorries pass his house, he derives a special pleasure in the fancy that the "sound of wheels and tires" has turned into "the torrential voice of a clouded night" (8). In fact, "the torrential voice of a clouded night" is very much an integral part of his childhood memory. The clerk's job is his means of subsistence and it is for this job that he has chosen all this sordidness of the urbanity. Ostensibly he seems to be interested in his work, his work being his means of livelihood, but then, at the end of the day, it is the place-connectedness that best characterizes his interest.

If the work or the workplace is an indispensable component of Malloban's living, the marriage with Utpala is no less an insubstantial issue. The desire for gratification is crucial just as it is crucial for all living beings on earth irrespective of their status in the social hierarchy. The "strange outburst of blood and lust", for Malloban, serves as an equalizer. The consideration that humankind indulge in what we understand as carnal only due to a hearty love for each other does not make any sense for him. As another sleepless winter night comes and passes like the imperceptible sounds of dewdrops, his sleepless ears hearken the "deadly mischiefs of cats in heat" and he sees place-connectedness not as a weltanschauung of essentially human feelings but as a "great synthesis at which one arrives after analyzing all baser life forms" (9). The crudely spatial and the crudely marital, as Malloban sees them, are now synonymous with one another. Naturally, if a marriage takes place and continues due to something other than love, it is not at all surprising. It is not always that Malloban engages himself into identifying what exactly Utpala feels about him--- "indifference" or "distrust" or "displeasure". But these questions are not as intriguing to him as the "magnanimous magic in the chatter of birds" in the pre-marital times: "Those days before marriage, late fall before winter, early fall before late fall, the surprisingly transient possibility of fall in the fields, in the sunshine, in the faces of people, in the chatter of birds, the magnanimous magic in the imminent winter night, just so they seemed to him" (102). For Malloban, the "magnanimous magic" will only sustain if he can hold on to all these precious mnemonics of his boyhood through the constant sways of ambivalence. Had there been no eeriness, no strangeness, no unpleasantness, no ambivalence in the myriad and multiple responses from others including

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<sup>7</sup> "Shamkol stork" of the novel is actually the Asian openbill stork (*Anastomus oscitans*).

the human and the nonhuman, this wonderful consciousness about place would not have shone upon Malloban's psyche. The only consciousness is the sense of place (the heavily contingent senses of here and there) and only by transcending the dichotomy of "social" and "natural", can one reach the acme of a hundred consciousnesses: "but there's no end to time; after all, we dwell within time; the hand of time comes and wipes away this thing here--- wakes up that thing there; [...] But Malloban has sub-imagination [...] As a result, instead of a sun of consciousness, he had found endless stars of subconsciousness" (134).

Here, it is evident that the more-than-human realities around, geocritically speaking, are equally fluent and equally effective in constituting the world of the 'endless stars of subconsciousness'. There is a time in the novel when Malloban is almost under a delirium due to his sudden bout of illness. The subconscious is the most poignant and the most fertilizing this time. The everyday world of consciousness has ceased to work; what is working instead is the unfiltered ebbs and flows of spatiality which are deeply embedded in the protagonist's subconscious or "sub-imagination". The human and the more-than-human world, at this point of time, have so overlapped with each other that Malloban's ceaseless talks and the ceaseless gurgles of the gutters do appear to be the same and indistinguishable: "Malloban went on talking, the way that when a deep rainy night is free of rain for a few minutes, in village gutters, tanks, and channels, water goes babbling along as if talking to itself" (135).

Malloban's stance towards the spatiotemporality around has come to the readership through random references to innumerable birds. The gaze of a bird is the most fitting for Malloban, for he has spent a considerable part of his childhood amid the birds of various colours and various origins. Birds are bold mnemonics for him, that wheel him back delicately to the days of his yore. Their art of flight, the ceaseless chatter and, moreover, the distinguishing gesture of each of the species happen to be a great reservoir of meaning for Malloban. The haplessness of his marital life gets meaningful to him only if he can think of a bird "torn from her mate . . . in a shoreless, unfathomable void" (60). Moreover, the daily tiff with Utpala, in its deadliest pitch, is without any message or sharpness in the absence of the right bird-metaphor. Utpala doesn't mind chiming and flying off as a duty-bound parakeet, while she is sure that the rest of the world will play a second fiddle to Malloban, the hornbill: "But it is not up to the shamkol to give me one [...] The hornbill will keep sitting there flaunting his beak---waiting for the Marwari trader to come and take his oil---the parakeet will fly off to her own throne, ..." (74). When after a stiff altercation both the contending sides give in, an all-passion spent kind of stillness lasts in the air, which only the right avian gaze can figure out in infallible wordings. Thus, a fatigued Utpala lying listlessly on the zoo's green grass is like a cold wet mollusk---unmoving yet unrelenting: "... she [Utpala] was lying there pathetically like a cold wet mollusk or parasite when the sea has slipped away, pulled back by the ebb tide" (74).

Malloban's predilection for a bird's gaze has not been an open secret. It is true that Utpala has used the shamkol bird image oftentimes to taunt Malloban's highly eccentric and eerily peripatetic behaviour but even she doesn't know why it is comfortable for Malloban to "mumble", "buzz" and "tingle" like a "lonely bamboo-bug on a late autumn afternoon--- plaintive and pathetic, without heat, without warmth" (138). The avian image gives Malloban an objective tool for steering clear of this anthropocentrism of his immediate surroundings and see the world around him without the vantage-point of a conventional type. The gaze also enables him to appreciate the fact that the memories are nowhere static. There is a fantastic coming and going about all that we know as spatiality. If in the faceless anonymity of an

urban living, Malloban has lost his precious childhood, there is no doubt that he will also lose his interfaces with the present surroundings as well, including the frequent tiffs with Utpala. The light of the stars and the spilt sombreness in the background will continue to pervade as the only anagnorisis of life for Malloban when birds will just fly away from him like a boshontobouri bird: "Like a boshontobouri bird in the small hours of the night, as he gazed at a heap of stars and darkness before falling asleep again, spilling over a bit, with a laugh, going beyond the willing-unwillingness to wake up, to stay alive, ..." (139-140). This desire for flying and "going beyond" the immediate spatial constraints is, in a sense, a wistfulness of every such Malloban to escape "this world of values in disorder" (202).

## **Conclusion**

In a poem, "Bengal the Beautiful # 1", Jibanananda Das has, as it were, pinpointed the location where one could meet this "torn-white-sail" like Malloban: "Upon the Rupsa river's murky waters a youth perhaps steers his dinghy with/ Its torn white sail--- reddish clouds scud by, and through the darkness, swimming/ To their nest, you'll spot white herons. Amidst their crowd is where you'll/ find me" (Seely, 2019, p.95). This paper in absolutely disillusioning terms shows how Malloban survives even in the most hostile of situations thanks only to the sense of place and more evolving sense of place. Beyond the binary of the social and the natural, the many unruly waves of life now look like a "stupid Nepali kukri", giving a clear impression that "there's no saving" anymore, not for "today's world": "The relationship between a woman and a man, between a human and a human, between a human and nature, has lost its subtlety--- its success, its simplicity; it's lost its savor; in today's indiscriminating world, severing all the neat bonds of relationship, the immeasurable strength of mind of innumerable utter fools have cleared themselves a path like a stupid Nepali kukri" (Das, p.196).



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