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Unbecoming *Malloban*: Trauma, diaspora, and the dis/abled subject

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Abstract:

This paper examines Jibanananda Das's Malloban (1948) through the intersecting lenses of diaspora, memory, trauma, and disability studies to explore the protagonist's fractured psyche as an allegory for the displaced refugee's existential crisis in an urban capitalist society. Tracing the ontology of fragmentation the paper situates Malloban in the precept of trauma fiction, thereby interrogating how diasporic trauma, fragmented memory, and cognitive detachment intertwine to shape Malloban's identity. Building on studies in disability and the insights of trauma theory/ies, the paper studies Malloban's "madness" as symptomatic of his gradual cognitive catastrophe. Malloban's cognitive disability, however, is read not as impairment but as a form of adaptive detachment necessitated by the disorienting chaos of post-Partition dislocation. It further explores Malloban's detachment as a reflection of how the traumatized, diasporic, disabled "self" transforms into the "other" while the subject undergoes a continual of "unbecoming" that entails a threatening detour toward an ontological disconnect. Through rigorous close reading and critical theoretical engagement,

this paper positions Malloban as both a lament and celebration for the fractured and dislocated. The research maps the existential burdens of urban capitalist modernity onto the broader experiences of systemic disenfranchisement and exclusion, and expands critical dialogues on diaspora, displacement, and deterritorialized selfhood in South Asian trauma literature.

“— there’s no shore to be found, not a wink of sleep in his eyes. He sat up slowly. There are bugs in the bed — but it’s not the bugs that are keeping him awake”

(Das, 1973/2022, p. 13)

Could it be that there is a type of suffering that creates a new identity, the unknown identity of an unknown person who suffers?

(Malabou, 2007/2012a, p. xii)

Introduction

From the Eastern corners of the world to the Western nooks, scholarly discourse on Jibanananda Das, the “Rupasi Banglar Kobi” or “Poet of Beautiful Bengal”, remains inexhaustible. While his poetry reflects his departure from the all-encompassing aura of Rabindranath Tagore and marks his engagement with European modernist currents, Das’s equally radical contributions as a novelist, essayist, and short story writer have received comparatively subdued recognition. It was with the posthumous discovery of his manuscripts in the 1970s that the depth of his narrative experimentation came to light. The kind of oddity in the characters, incongruity of thoughts and inconsistency of dialogues most of his novels incorporate, can be traced to the drastic shift Das’s poetry took in terms of style and sensibility, which was undoubtedly influenced by the slightly older worldwide modernist movement of the early 20th century, the post-war existentialist anarchy, and the contemporary scenario of modern Bengali literature. This reading seeks to delve into the fragmented narrative of one of his lesser-studied works, *Malloban*, written in 1948 and posthumously published in 1973. The year 1948 has multifarious significance: it was an era after the second world war, a year following multiple movements that led to India’s independence and numerous vicissitudes entailing the partition of Bengal. Composed during a period of such turbulence, *Malloban* captures the slow unravelling of its protagonist against the backdrop of urban capitalist alienation, displacement, and discontent. Das, having migrated from Barisal to Calcutta,¹ himself navigated the deracination of Partition, a concern that silently bleeds into the psyche of his characters, most of whom are refugees, both literally and metaphorically. *Malloban*, much like Das’s late creative works, embodies stylistic, thematic, and linguistic experiments that reflect an ideologically chaotic world. Characters in such a dishevelled world, caught between the margin

and the centre, rural idylls and urban dystopias, relentlessly struggle to reconcile their pasts with their fragmented present.

The ambience in Jibanananda Das's 1948 novels, particularly *Malloban*, also reflects a deliberate formal rupture that dismantles even the tenuous coherence of his earlier works. Compared to his novels of the 1930s, the later works became "psychologically more disturbing, linguistically more revolting, thematically more surreal, politically more conscious, and eternally unparalleled" (Bhattacharyya and Ghosh Sarbadhikary, 2024, p. 3). This transformation can be well traced to the profound historical upheavals of the 1940s in Bengal along with the burgeoning forces of urban capitalism. The sociopolitical chaos of this period mirroring the sundered identities, personal and national, manifests in Das's oeuvre through a distinct narrative dissonance. Layered with intertextual references and historical resonances, *Malloban* unfolds as both a chronicle of its time and a critique of structural disenfranchisement. The difficulty in defining the recondite relationship among the author, the narrator, and the protagonist, and in identifying the consequent lack of narrative control, amplifies its sense of narrative dislocation that mirrors the fractured realities of post-Partition existence. *Malloban*'s world coadunates disjointed dialogues, contesting voices, and the incessant clash of ideas, thereby confecting a world sans a linear resolution. The trauma-induced cognitive dissonance of the eponymous protagonist in *Malloban* destabilizes the fixed system of literary conventions and reveals "the utter inadequacy of literary theory", as it thrives on its production of meaninglessness and a rejection of all normative rules (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 8). By slowing down the narrative, Das plays havoc with the mandative expectations of narrative progress. Ergo, the fragmented voices within *Malloban* refuse to conform to the ableist doctrinaire demands of coherence and constructs the novel as a site where *othered*² voices are heard and validated. Furthermore, the troping of the abject offers an alternative possibility that marks *Malloban*'s descent into a space where his *ability* to navigate the *normal* flow of events is lost. He enters a state of continual deterritorialization that signals a detour from his former metaphysical certainties. The abject forces him toward an ontological disconnect. The personal and collective diasporic trauma undermines his identity, manifests physically and psychologically, and pushes him into an unfinalizable, ever-shifting state of existential wreckage. *Malloban*'s formal, narratological and thematic range has evoked an extensively heterogeneous body of scholarships where the scholars have touched upon, within their respective theoretical perspectives, the novel's unusual structure, and primarily its affinity to Das's marital discords and consequent quandaries. An aspect largely overlooked, particularly in this context, is the troping of trauma in the novel. With all its silence and clamour, *Malloban* stands as a work of

both mourning and celebration of trauma. It is a narrative of existential wound(s), and wounded existence(s). This study aims to address this gap in Jibanananda scholarship. Here Malloban's anxiety is placed within a critical framework decussating theories of trauma, memory, diaspora, and disability to establish a cogent analysis of the system of repeated motifs, recurrent use of narrative silence, disrupted chronotopes, the marginalized protagonist's gradual loss of cognitive stability and his interrupted embodiment. This study reads Malloban's quest for roots as emblematic of a displaced refugee's existential struggle for belonging, and his marginalization as deeply symptomatic of the émigrés' collective plight, wherein the uprooted self grapples with the dual burden of forced exile and social alienation. We seek to explore how trauma, memory, and diasporic longing emerge as performative and experiential phenomena in *Malloban* and intersect to create a narrative without resolution. His longing to integrate into the unfamiliar structures of urban society, we argue, is inextricably linked to his desire to escape its suffocating confines. We further seek to study how the novel transforms the experiences of cognitive disability into forms of ability and agency. The research also accents how *Malloban* epitomizes trauma not just as an overt response to catastrophic events, but as an ongoing erosion of the self. Through *Malloban*, Das crafts the portrait of a man, and by extension a diasporic, wounded, cerebrally dissonant generation, that is not only displaced geographically but also ontologically. *His* story is inextricable from *history*, not merely a tale of derangement but a confrontation with the impossibility of belonging in the wake of Partition, where the self becomes both a vessel of memory and a site of its erasure. Here memory does not anchor but dislocates, and disability emerges as both an affliction and an embodied archive of loss. Through its deliberate unfinalizability, *Malloban* metamorphoses meaninglessness into a space of meaning-making, wherein identity undergoes a constant deconstruction and reconfiguration within a heterochronous terrain. This narrative space unveils the previously uncharted dimensions of the *Jibananandiya*³ that our study attempts to illuminate.

Towards an ontology of fragmentation: Tracing the genealogy of trauma in *Malloban*

Trauma, in both its immediacy and aftermath, represents a profound rupture in the subject's cognitive, temporal, and ontological contour. It is at once an accident and a response to it, physical and metaphorical, a sudden dissonance taking place in the cognitive map of an individual, thereby throwing the subject into disarray for eternity. Trauma theory in general argues that trauma is often an overwhelming phenomenon that creates a perpetual derangement in the physical-cognitive-temporal placement of a subject. According to Balaev (2008), the prevailing trauma theory today relies heavily on the abreactive model, positing that traumatic

experiences create a “temporal gap” and lead to the fragmentation of the self (p. 150). This *interruption* takes place immediately, but the *interrupted* processes it much later. The formation of a response to a traumatic experience is marked by the juxtaposition of immediacy and belatedness. This paradox is, according to Cathy Caruth (1996), explained by the “inherent latency of the event” (p. 17). The significance of trauma lies in its very incomprehensibility and inaccessibility. It denotes an experience that “resists or escapes consciousness” (Caruth & Hartman, 1996, p. 631). Kali Tal (1996) argues that a traumatic experience works in a liminal state, “outside of the bounds of ‘normal’ human experience” and it is never possible to achieve an accurate representation of trauma “without recreating the event” (p. 15). Tal quotes Chaim Shatan and expounds on the traumatic catastrophe and the ensuing disintegration that “separates sense from nonsense, narrative from chaos” (p. 15). There is a formative power within this disintegration that Malabou (2007/2012a) terms as “destructive plasticity”: the construction of the psyche through a “deconstitution of identity” (p. xix). The traumatized subject or the *wounded* individual thus becomes a spatiotemporal stranger. The *wound* marks a gradual delineation of one’s identity from one’s “proto self” which Damásio (2000) terms as “a preconscious biological precedent of the self”. The occurrence of a traumatic event thus gives birth to a new entity altogether, a psychic metamorphosis takes place, “the path splits and a new, unprecedented persona comes to live with the former person” (Malabou, 2009/2012b, p.1). Embedded in the emergence of this new entity lies the “formative-destructive power of the wound” (Malabou, 2007/2012a, p. 18). The question that arises now is: if this *wound* is something that evades definition, eludes expression, how can it be represented and possibly heal? Malabou draws on Deleuze’s concept of “exhausted identity” and concludes that the possible rhetoric of the representation of a traumatic experience can comprise “figures of interruption, pauses, caesuras—the blank spaces that emerge when the network of connections is shredded or when the circulation of energy is paralyzed” (p. 55). Literature, as Hartman (1996) argues, emerges as a mode of knowledge, a means to reclaim the “non-pathological course of events”, the “unclaimed experience” (p. 641). The crevice between a traumatic experience and its representation, might therefore find possible outlets in the realm of literature:

Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection. (Whitehead, 2004, p. 3)

The apparently elliptical narratives in Das's later fiction have often been dismissed as failed experiments, unnecessarily abstruse, and lacking sociopolitical significance. Let us probe into this inquiry with a provocative assertion, one that may appear theoretically contentious yet remains textually substantiated: *Malloban*, as some earlier scholarly interpretations would have it, is far more than a narrative "dealing frankly with marital and moral choices" (Chaudhuri, p. 118). It is an account, personal and collective, of an unaccustomed *sensation*⁴ that unfolds against the backdrop of a paroxysmal time. Our research invites a reconsideration of *Malloban* as a text that transcends the personal to interrogate the systemic. It beckons to the urgent need to recognize the *wound* woven within the narrative. *Malloban* exemplifies the typical inability to present the traumatic tribulations through a clear and coherent linguistic and stylistic framework. His *wound* can be located within the labyrinth of distorted consciousness where mundane discontent becomes akin to a blunt force trauma to his psyche. Malloban's indifference is not apolitical, his diseases not merely somatic, his silence not merely verbal, rather they become instrumental in elaborating the post-traumatic dissolution of the subject.

From the very beginning of the novel one can discern the protagonist's persistent diasporic urge, conscious and unconscious, to go back in time, to go back *home*. This urge is troped with repetition of certain images, artifacts and expressions. Amidst that dissonance, memory of the time past emerges as an active space where the traumatized subject confronts the past and somehow processes his anguish. In the context of the degenerated urban world, the novel presents Malloban's insanity and derangement as the only viable forms of reason left, and his oblivion as the only form of agency he can exercise. Malloban's insidious trauma is precisely what allows him to persist in this darkness. His inability to conform to the normative rhythms of urban life foregrounds the experience of diasporic pain, transforming trauma from a passive *wound* into a form of active, albeit agonizing, agency, working through a modern marginalized man's encounter with a traumatic force, the formation of his *wound*, its suppuration, the relentless struggle of the *wounded* to heal, and the ways of living with the scar that the *wound* leaves. At the narrative crossroads where madness confronts civilization, darkness intertwines with light, margins collide with the centre, and meaning contends with evasion, traumatic memories generate a layered web of *surplus* meanings that we strive to excavate in the following sections.

Malloban the marginal: Reading the discourse of silence, absence, and exclusion

“—it’s in Malloban’s chest that the pain strikes deepest—not because he has no friends, but because that kind of a grimace, that kind of a jab has been made at what little subtle meaning there is in the silence of his life.”

(Das, 1973/2022, p. 51)

“Maybe the bird doesn’t understand that he’ll get his voice back again. He’s lost his voice, who knows what he’s thinking.” (p. 169)

Malloban is an urban, middle-class man who lives in North Calcutta with his daughter Monu and wife Utpala. His latent trauma functions in the “mundane and circular narrative of the deterioration of this small, ordinary family” and is “structured as a series of vignettes of everyday dysfunction and discontent” (p. xi). Silence emerges as a powerful thematic and narrative strategy in *Malloban*, integral to the literary representation of his cognitive collapse. According to Pederson (2018), trauma in literature manifests itself through three primary tropes: absence, indirection, and repetition (p. 101). Absence manifests in a narrative in numerous forms. Physical absence often intertwines with the spectral presence of the past, regularly incorporated in ideas of death, abandonment, and displacement, while emotional absence may manifest through detachment and alienation. Psychological absence can be located in the characters’ cognitive disruptions. Symbolic absence includes a lack of closure within the narrative, while temporal absence captures time gaps and stasis, indicating a fundamental disorientation in quantitative time. Spatial absence can be discerned in the desolate or abandoned settings that echo both a literal and symbolic void. A fragmented chronotope thus signifies a new spatiotemporal dimension where the traumatized subject dwells. Narrative absence can be detected in the structural quiddities, and the presence of an unreliable narrator(s). A trauma novel functions through the employment of “a nonlinear plot or disruptive temporal sequences” to convey the chaos of trauma and the subject’s response to it (Balaev, 2008, p. 159). Interpersonal absence in trauma fiction can be exemplified in the portrayal of fractured relationships, and an overall exhaustion in communication. Repetition becomes a sort of coping mechanism for the subject, a survival skill, that finds its pattern in a literary work. Latent trauma can find its egress within the figurative language of a literary work which, when explored alongside trauma studies, can allow one to “read the relationship of words and wounds without medical or political reductionism” (Caruth & Hartman, 1996, p. 641). *Malloban* exquisitely explores this paradoxical relationship between words and wounds and strives to speak through spots of silence that act as sites of withheld information:

The trauma novel conveys a diversity of extreme emotional states through an assortment of narrative innovations, such as landscape imagery, temporal fissures, or narrative omission — the withholding of graphic, visceral traumatic detail. (Balaev, 2008, p. 159)

Traumatized subjects are thus always trapped in an eternal paradox of silence and revelation. This paradox generates the “pausal style” incorporated in *Malloban*, a style that aims at giving a voice to the unclaimed. Silence thus becomes a “rhetorical strategy” of speaking the unspeakable (Balaev, 2008, p. 162). This peculiar muteness is what Hartman calls “euphemic modes” that indicate that “there’s something which is too difficult to utter” (Caruth & Hartman, 1996, p. 639). Malloban’s silence acts as a tool of interruption and self-preservation, and paradoxically operates as an instrument of defiance that can be discerned in the linguistic, spatial, and temporal discordances in the narrative.

Silence, as explored thus far, actively inscribes a condition of exclusion. A series of questions arise: if silence in *Malloban* operates as a hermeneutic breach in the linguistic and narrative order, how does it simultaneously construct and reflect marginality? In a world governed by hegemonic systems of power, capitalist rationality, colonial residue, and the urban-industrial complex, what does it mean to exist at the periphery? And perhaps most provocatively, does Malloban’s apparent madness function as both the catalyst and consequence of his exclusion, a sort of entrapment wherein his deviation from social norms renders him invisible, yet this very invisibility enables his radical detachment from an oppressive order? We excavate these interrogations in this section and seek to examine how *Malloban* transforms marginality into both a wound and a weapon.

In the relentless turmoil of time, none of Jibanananda’s protagonists found solace. They failed to carve out successful careers by resorting to aggressive, cutthroat tactics. They were unwanted in family life, marginalized in power dynamics, and denied the guardianship of society’s goodwill. The lure of artistry and creativity (*Karubasana*, as his 1932 novella would call it) wounded them, and they paid the cost of this destruction all their lives. They are symbols of the wreckage of dreams and premature death of ideals. Malloban’s marginalization is intimately bound to his intellectual displacement within a capitalist society that quantifies value through productivity. Unlike his peers who seamlessly assimilate into the drudgery of clerical labour, Malloban finds himself intellectually estranged from the bureaucratic structures that engulf him and he keeps “slogging away in this same office” of Bottomley Bigland (Das, 1973/2022, p. 10). His ontological alienation turns him into a Kafkaesque bug. His mind “is

not at all a clerkish, desk-pinned, toilsome, insipid thing" (p. 11-12). His longing "to make it known that his mind produces all sorts of sound, orderly, structured ideas", and an impulsive desire "to leave his office job and the life he is leading and [dive] into the foamy crest of some great work", emphasize his aspiration toward a radical creative agency that is systematically foreclosed (p. 12). This is how he rebuts the credo of a "one-dimensional" society where the subject is made to abide by the "dictates of external, objective norms and structures" that lead to the loss of "the ability to discover more liberating possibilities and to engage in transformative practice to realize them" (Marcuse, 2002, p. xxvii). Malloban strives to keep his "private space" away from the clutches of the world that tends to manipulate the "aspirations, hopes, fears, and values" of an individual (p. xxvii). His marginalization is also deeply ingrained within his fractured national consciousness. He feels the burden of historical displacement. He senses the gradual erasure of Bengali identity under the forces of political subjugation and economic abnegation. His resentment is evident as he observes that "in politics these days Bengalis are being turned back at every step by Gujaratis, Marathis, Madrasis, UPites" (Das, 1973/2022, p. 12). His momentary revolutionary fervour, his vision of "rising up all ablaze with an irrepressible fire to reclaim the honor and dignity of Bengalis", quickly dissipates into disillusionment and inertia (p. 12). This oscillation between radical impulse and exhausted resignation encapsulates the psychic paralysis of the marginalized subject, a state where systemic oppression reduces political agency to mere fleeting bursts of impotent rage. Malloban's retreat into cognitive detachment manifests in his moment of self-reconciliation when "his head begins to cool off", and "he slowly quiets down, lights a beedi" (p. 12). This *quieting down* is at once a surrender to and a resistance against the relentless exclusions of capitalist and nationalist frameworks. His detachment is not one of indifference but of necessity, a carefully constructed cognitive defence. Here we seek to make the same distinction that hooks (1989) makes, one between "that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance" (p. 23). *Malloban*, thus, offers a transformative radical-political-creative space, both individual and collective, that "affirms and sustains" one's subjectivity, and gives one "a new location" that offers an alternative mode of articulating the world around (p. 23). His estrangement from the polished, urban elite, the "pair of silk stockings, varnished New Cut shoes, a tusser coat, neatly parted hair, a cigarette case" signals a classed invisibility, where he is neither entirely outside nor fully inside the structures of power (Das, 1973/2022, p. 12). His failure is systemic; a condition of expropriation that afflicts an entire generation of displaced intellectuals who refuse to conform to the dictates of colonial modernity and capitalist rationality. Malloban's deviation from normativity renders

him grotesque in the eyes of a society that pathologizes nonconformity. He is both a casualty of the world's machinations and a radical dissenter against them. As a marginalized intellectual, a monstrous other, and a man burdened by the weight of a disappearing history, Malloban inhabits a liminal space of perpetual exile, both from the structures of power and from himself, an unsafe space, one that demands risk and rupture.

Malloban's apparent madness is a dual gesture of resistance and refuge that typifies the marginalized subject. This complexity well resonates with the reckless repetition in Das's short story "Katha Shudhu—Katha Katha Katha Katha Katha",⁵ where the subject stumbles on the brink of a cognitive collapse. The inner world of Malloban, as in many of Das's protagonists, teems with restless *katha*, a tumult of frenetic internal dialogues, while the outer self remains physically inert. Madness in *Malloban* also acts as a radical counterpoint to the polished linguistic and societal norms that governed the literature of Das's era. By disrupting the traditional tongues that upheld notions of rationality and clarity, Das challenges the "regimes of truth", the structures of power that determine the boundaries of sanity (Foucault, 1975/1977, p. 23). *Malloban* posits insanity as a mode of resistance against the ostentatious facade of societal sanity, particularly the urban capitalist society demanding productivity and coherence. Sajanikanta Das, as Sengupta (1995) quoted, sarcastically reflects on this subversive nature of madness while commenting on Das's unconventional artistry:

"Strange things occur behind the walls of a madhouse. Yet those who expose these disturbing occurrences with sensationalism and public display—what are they? Madmen, malicious, or both?" (translated by the author).

This rhetorical question exposes the societal discomfort with madness. Malloban taps on this "disturbing occurrence", and overturns conventional fault lines that demarcate reason and unreason. *Jibananandiya* madness engenders "improper discourse" that is a counter-cultural mode of expression challenging dominant narratives (Leigh, 1983, p. 83).

Dismodernism, disability, defiance: The politics of unruly consciousness in *Malloban*

Malloban the Marginal, Malloban the Madman, Malloban the Monster – Malloban the Misfit. Is he truly incapacitated, or does his so-called affliction reframe the very parameters of the ableist doctrine? His *cognitive dissonance* becomes an *epistemic site* where the self resists assimilation into the rigid frameworks of a capitalist society. Malloban, we argue, via his tactical modes of survival, simultaneously indexes a deeper ontological unmooring that

transcends conventional registers of trauma, and demands interrogation through the lens of cognitive disability as a counter-hegemonic modality. Just as his social marginalization both confines and empowers him, so too does his cognitive rupture open up a space of possibility and resistance. Malloban exists as the ultimate intersectional subject, someone who “queers – or crips – the normative pitch of the autonomous citizen” (Goodly, 2017, p. 91). “Ableist processes create a corporeal standard”, Goodly continues, “which presumes able-bodiedness, inaugurates the norm and purifies the ableist ideal” (p. 91). Malloban radically disrupts the ableist framework that seeks to discipline the mind into coherence and rationality. His story is a reckoning with the impossibility of resolution in an unequal world. What begins as cognitive unease gradually manifests as corporeal distress that aligns with the cognitive dissonance theory:

The original statement of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) proposed that discrepancy between cognitions creates a negative affective state that motivates individuals to attempt to reduce or eliminate the discrepancy between cognitions. (Harmon-Jones, 2019, pp. 16–17)

Cognitive dissonance arises when an individual holds two psychologically inconsistent cognitions, a situation that generates a state of internal agitation that demands resolution. Malloban, however, does not simply experience dissonance. He inhabits it, lingers within its tensions, and ultimately transforms it into a space of both alienation and radical resistance. His narrative defies any teleological closure. His increasing disconnection from normative reality does not signify a failure to resolve dissonance but rather an active rejection of the very structures that demand such resolution. It evolves into a defiant escape from the paradigms that enforce coherence. This transformation reframes disability not as a deficit but as a counterhegemonic position – a site of subversive autonomy. The monstrosity of cognitive otherness, rather than being pathologized, emerges as a locus of alternative epistemologies and nonconforming embodiments. In this sense, Malloban becomes a “dismodern subject”, a figure whose identity is not predicated on wholeness but on a perpetual negotiation with incompleteness: “Dismodernism is a very different notion from subjectivity organized around wounded identities; rather, all humans are seen as wounded. Wounds are not the result of oppression, but rather the other way around” (Davis, 2002, p. 30).

Although Davis primarily theorizes dismodernism in relation to technologically mediated disabilities, we extend it to theorize Malloban’s wound as a site of radical

dismodernist subjectivity that emerges in a post-Partition, post-war, post-industrial, capitalist urban world. His fractured consciousness does not demand rehabilitation; rather, it interrogates the conditions that render coherence desirable in the first place. His inability to assimilate into the normative world of coherence and order is not a failure, we read it as an active mode of refusal. It becomes his way of subverting the oppressive forces of biopolitical normativity, asserting an alternative ontology where disorder is generative, rupture is epistemic, and incompleteness is a radical potentiality.

Linguistic dissonance: Decoding *Malloban*'s “meaningless scrawl”

“What I want to say doesn’t get said. I end up saying all sorts of other things. I’m incapable of expressing myself properly. Don’t take it the wrong way.”

(Das, 1973/2022, p. xiv)

What makes *Malloban* a trauma fiction *par excellence* is its “intense and multifaceted engagement with language as not only a medium of artistic expression, but as its subject” (Das, 1973/2022, p. xiv). Malloban’s gradual cognitive dissociation comes as a result of a Sisyphean struggle for existence with his tongue cut out and limbs slowed down. This deceleration finds its literary parallel in Das’s profound poetic sensibility, linguistic incongruity, and frequent “shifts between formal, colloquial, and dialectical Bangla and manipulation of idiomatic language” (p. xv). The juxtaposition of the prosaic and the poetic, the formal and the colloquial, marks the physicality of the protagonist’s trauma and acts as the only organic way to articulate his longing for a lost home while language itself expands as a “lost landscape” (p. xiv). Das’s narrative riddles are marked by “overspecified ends” that are structural components of a literary work embodying trauma (Caruth & Hartman, 1996, p. 642). The excised parts between the “overspecified ends” “serve as pathways through which the protagonist attempts to cope up with the traumatic disruptions that he faces” (Bhattacharyya & Sarbadhikary, 2024, p. 4). *Malloban* has neither a beginning nor an end. “The ostensibly chronological sequence of events” states Sengupta (1995), “masks a deeper reality that lacks a clear beginning, distribution, or coherent historical narrative” (translated by the author). The circular structure of the narrative mirrors the episodic nature of Malloban’s memory and oblivion. To deconstruct the traditional narrative pattern, Das defers his authorial responsibility and defies linguistic categorization, relinquishing his control as a central figure. As the story progresses, the line between the protagonist and the narrator becomes increasingly ambiguous. The juxtaposition of *Malloban*’s “half literary, half colloquial language” and “the violent excess of Utpala’s highly idiomatic

language” results in “a physical sensation of the linguistic incongruence” (Das, 1973/2022, p. xx). Malloban’s thoughts are almost similar to the “drafts of literary compositions” that are “full of awkward figures and crossings-out” (p. xx). This psychological complexity permeates the linguistic framework of the novel, ultimately spilling over into a tangible, physical manifestation of the overall dissonance. Malloban’s words twist and contort, much like his body “tossing and turning in bed and circling in the city streets” (p. xx). His narrative functions in a space outside the cartography drawn by those in power. This process of going outside the familiar space makes him doubly marginalized as a traumatized subject, but at the same time, paradoxically, this recorporealization is what constitutes his agency. The linguistic obscurity vividly reflects his physical and psychological discomfiture as he continuously struggles to grapple with the daily grind of city life in Calcutta while yearning for the simplicity and familiarity of a village 150 miles away. Language in *Malloban* becomes “a work in progress” and sometimes proves to be “an utter failure” (p. xxi). The point when language fails, the outlandish articulation of trauma begins. Whittington points this out in her introduction to the translation of *Malloban*:

This stems from Jibanananda’s idiosyncratic sentence structure, punctuation, and compound words, and from the relationship of these stylistic features to the construction of space, place, and displacement. A passage may open matter-of-factly and seem to demand a straightforward colloquial rhythm or even a terse choppiness, then begin to flow and reach lyrical heights until interrupted by a knot of impossibly awkward yet strangely compelling words or phrases. (p. xxii)

Das’s use of “dashes and semicolons, sometimes in unexpected places” and in the omission of commas where they are expected generate “a proliferation of gaps and abrupt pauses alternating with poetic cadences” (p. xxii). These narrative lacunae serve as “rhetorical strategies that convey the assorted meanings of trauma in fiction” as well as help the narrator structure the narrative “into a form that attempts to embody the psychological “action” of traumatic memory or dissociation” (Balaev, 2008, p. 159).

Landscapes of trauma: Mapping personal and collective dislocation in *Malloban*

The spaces of suffering, where it begins, where escape is sought, and where one remains, are central to shaping the trauma narrative. Physical space in a narrative becomes “a referent for the individual’s sense of self or identity” (Balaev, 2008, p. 161). After the traumatic event takes

place, the natural, physical space allows the subject “to test the boundaries of the self against an external medium” to understand “what is self and non-self, and to differentiate between contemporary reality and traumatic past” (p. 161). The concept of place in *Malloban* unfurls as a crucial perceptual substructure that shapes the protagonist’s meaning-making capacity within the physical environment. *Malloban* incorporates place as an active character. Malloban and Utpala live on two separate floors: “Two creatures — isolated in these two rooms, above and below” (Das, 1973/2022, p. 7). Malloban is silenced under the grotesque dominance of Utpala, an embodiment of “lowly, ugly violence” (p. 47). He finds no one to talk to and heal his trauma thereafter: “But who could he talk to? Any listeners? No sympathy, no humor” (p. 31). This echoes what Caruth (1996) calls a “plea by an other who is asking to be seen and heard” (p. 9). Malloban’s unreciprocated plea metastasizes into a sickening self-disgust that makes him realize that “there’s no easy pleasure in life” how he has made a muddle of the “coarse pleasure of eating, drinking, lying down, and sleeping” (p. 33). This psychological “uneasiness” turned into a rhetorical one, this growing “unnaturalness” of the sensation, and the “muddle” created out of them materialize in the clutter of his physical space, where the accumulation of disorder becomes a spatial embodiment of his psychological disarray. These symbolic elements invite a deeper analysis of how physical spaces in the novel reflect and amplify the emotional landscapes of the characters. The gradual loss of coherence in Malloban’s downstairs room (reflecting a hierarchical understanding of space) mirrors the disintegration of its occupant, almost embodying a sense of pathetic fallacy:

The arrangement of things in Malloban’s room had begun to bare its teeth as before; mounds of dirty yellowed papers all around, through the window endless dust and smoke from the street, the incessantly pattering nests of pigeons, cheroot-stubs all over the floor, bruised cheroot, tobacco leaves, ash, matchsticks, bird feathers and droppings, fragments of an old discarded lantern, a pile of broken chimney glass; unending rows of dirty oil, acid, and medicine bottles, pots and pans, water jugs, a heap of sacks and baskets, eight or ten pairs of torn, flattened canvas shoes, dirty shirts, mosquito net weights — no doubt by some mysterious divine power, there is not a sound to be heard, nothing can be seen to move, but throughout the room old women, like dried fishes, like witches, like little old heaps, seem to be carrying on day and night, weeping and wailing, assaults and violations — Malloban could sense it, could feel it. (p. 143)

This single breathless sentence, attempts to construct a narrative from random, wasted elements – broken, torn, rotten, discarded, worn out – reflecting stagnation, stasis, blockage, and disharmony. Unlike the small, mildewed and congested physical space of *Malloban*, Utpala's room is spacious and speaks of sanity and clarity. Situated on the second floor “it is quite big, the floor always neat and clean” and “never a piece of paper, ribbon, safety-pin, or speck of powder lying around” (p. 4). It is important to note that even though everything is not in perfect condition, “thanks to Utpala’s efforts, nothing shows” (p. 4). Utpala has the capability of triumphing over the discords of life, *Malloban* does not. Unspoken words and unchecked thoughts assail and consume him. They render him traumatized and mute, as if abandoned like a bird trapped “in the dark of a draw-well (p. 47). Yet, this bird called *Malloban*, though physically trapped, continues to search for an imagined home, longing to “[huddle] together in an egg-filled nest” (p. 126).

The metaphor of the *nest* represents what Bhabha (1994) would term an “interstitial space”, a liminal threshold that resists full assimilation into either departure or arrival. As argued earlier, *Malloban*’s traumatic experience and its effects are quiescent. It obfuscates the broader upheavals caused by the political events of the 1940s, particularly Partition, which led to his migration from Barisal (then in East Bengal, now in present-day Bangladesh⁶) to Calcutta. The latent representations of trauma in *Malloban* function as palimpsests of more explicit historical traumas. Instead of overtly referencing political upheavals, *Malloban* evokes the subtler, interiorized anguish that creates a layered narrative of diasporic suffering, where the mundane intertwines with the realities of displacement and alienation. *Malloban* constructs the diaspora space through the constant dialectic between personal memory and political history, as the protagonist’s internal conflicts are enmeshed with the broader sociopolitical disruptions of post-colonial Bengal. Avtar Brah (1996) locates the formation of the diaspora space “within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life” and through “the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively” (p. 183). Integral to this dislocation is *Malloban*’s fraught relationship with home, a physical location as well as an affective and epistemic construct, always deferred, always ungraspable. For the refugee, home is “always either over- or under-determined, either an excess or a supplement”, a remainder that resists assimilation into stable belonging (Hall, 1990, p. 230). This condition of *leftoverness* defines *Malloban*’s predicament: he is a dismembered subject, suspended within an elusive locus where identity is at once formed and undone. This spectrality of home is further complicated by *Malloban*’s inability to anchor himself in his immediate physical surroundings. His domestic space is not a site of comfort but a locus of confinement. Diasporic identity, shaped by forced migration

and historical rupture, cannot be located within a stable, singular home. Rather, home becomes an unhomely site. As Bharati Mukherjee (2004) articulates, “the price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids, is the trauma of self-transformation” (p. 274). Malloban chronicles this transformation, not as a completed arc but as an ongoing negotiation between belonging and unbelonging. This recursive search for a home that no longer exists, a home that was perhaps never there to begin with, mirrors Hall’s (1990) assertion:

It is because this New World is constituted for us as place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to “lost origins”, to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning. (p. 236)

Malloban, like his displaced generation, is perpetually suspended in this impossible homeward journey, a journey towards a lost *nest* – one that no longer exists except in the spectral folds of memory.

An-other space in Malloban

“No, no, I’m not sick, just a little confused.”

(Das, 1973/2022, p. 136)

This section of our study expands our exploration of traumatic and diasporic displacement from the physicality of Malloban’s spatial dislocation and the collective upheaval of Partition into the liminal, the alternate. This “abject space” operates as a narrative force that reveals the inherent instability of his identity. He is constantly threatened by what is cast out or *othered*. Kristeva (1982) defines abjection as something that “disturbs identity, system, order”, a primal repression associated with that which both fascinates and repels (p. 4). Abjection manifests in *Malloban* in visceral ways through the protagonist’s interactions with animals, decaying urban landscapes, and his acute sense of disease, dislocation, and trauma. The depiction of the zoo, for example, with its images of confined animals, the slaughter of goats, and the pervasive stench of the Khidirpur market, reflects the protagonist’s internal crisis. “The abject”, notes Pentony (1996), “challenges the subject by revealing the thin veil that separates life and death, purity and impurity, inside and outside”. Monu’s disgust: “What a stink of piss, ick!” captures the *other* side of that veil (Das, 1973/2022, p. 62). This narrative engagement with abjection also charts a critique of social order and linguistic coherence. The use of vile idioms, street

diction, and references to disease, death, and dirt are all examples of what Kristeva (1982) calls “linguistic abjection”, where the polished language of social and political order is disrupted by the grotesque and the profane (p. 41). *Malloban*’s abject language can be read as a carnivalesque inversion of the social and linguistic order, a space of resistance against the modern urban discourse of sanity and sophistication. It further manifests in the constant references to Malloban’s bodily “dysfunctions”. His vomiting, barfing, stomach acid, and goitres highlight the “surplus” of the body: the unnecessary excess that constructs Malloban almost as a posthuman subject. He becomes a site of radical excess that does not merely resist the humanist impulse toward coherence but revels in its own incompleteness (MacCormack, 2012, p. 295). Malloban’s diasporic, dismodern, posthuman body resembling “a slimy thing like a snail or a shellfish” articulates an ontological slipperiness (Das/Whittington, 1973/2022, p. 190). To be slimy is to be ungraspable, amorphous, a body that seeps beyond the rigid contours of definition, and evades the taxonomies of coherence and control. In this dissolution of form, he becomes both excess and absence, an entity that cannot be held, classified, or fully known. Malloban’s gradual physical transformation, a body likened to “a strange goiter” with “lumps of meat” embedded in its folds also mirrors the psychological toll of his trauma and exile (p. 191). The abject thus forms what we term “an-other space”, a narrative realm that challenges conventional notions of necessity, agency, and functionality. It reframes abjection not as a condition to be “diseasified”, but as a vital narrative tool for articulating the displaced, traumatized subject. This space reflects the Bakhtinian concept of “the surplus” where true individuality emerges, beyond societal norms and temporal constraints (as cited in Morson, 1991, p. 1074). The grotesque kitten-killing episode, where Malloban, with a fleeting sense of superiority, ends up sickened by his own actions, works as a critical moment of diasporic abjection in the narrative. His act of killing the crying kitten mirrors his attempt to sever ties with the endless cycle of suffering, the fruit of momentary pleasure as he often refers to the birth of his daughter, Monu, in a moment of anguished introspection. Yet, immediately after, he is overwhelmed with nausea, a physical embodiment of his psychological trauma. His attempt to annihilate a generational trauma, whether through the symbolic killing of the kitten or his musings on parenthood, only further entangles him in the defining abjection of his disoriented self. Brah’s (1996) *diaspora space* thus becomes the *abject space* in Malloban. It leaves Malloban adrift: neither rooted in his past nor present. His body, like the fractured narrative, embodies this suspended dislocation. The goitres and tumours become not simply symptoms of physical ailment but symbols of his ongoing “unbecoming”, the swelling of space, time and memory within him.

Temporal displacement: Memory, stasis, and circularity in *Malloban*

“The history of trauma is a history of forgetting.”

(Ruth Leys, 2000, p. 119)

Malloban forgets his 42nd birthday in the very beginning of the novel. This mild amnesia permeates the narrative, with the protagonist encountering recurrent episodes of oblivion thereafter. Within Malloban’s amnesia lies the fossilized trauma, and “in and through its inherent forgetting”, as Caruth (1996) explains, “that it is first experienced at all” (p. 17). The oversight of a simple birthday gradually unravels into a vast narrative of forgetting, of the grand historical indeterminacy. Malloban repeatedly sinks “deep in the self-forgetfulness of his own imagination and sincerity” (Das, 1973/2022, p. 134). The boundaries between fantasy and reality blur, and meaning dissipates, giving way to an overwhelming sense of stupor. This pervasive stupor reflects a constriction of consciousness, as Pederson (2014) contends, a trauma narrative ought to resonate with “its evocations of confusion, shifts in place and time, out-of-body experiences, and a general sense of unreality” (p. 340). In such a disposition, time does not move linearly; it loops, pauses, and falters. This frozen state, which halts any stable construction of identity, unfolds through temporal circularity. Malloban’s nostalgia becomes “restorative”, with a reconstructive zeal (Boym, 2001, p. 22). Malloban’s “sub-imagination” becomes “sub-genius”, the narrative begins to celebrate the *incapacity* of the “poor man” (Das, 1973/2022, p. 134). The “land of cleverness” in a way reflects Malloban’s entrapment in an existential limbo (p. 134).

Malloban’s cognitive shutdown becomes more problematic with the establishment of two orders of time: the chrononormative time represented by the physical clock; and the fluid, ubiquitous yet eternally absent psychological time. The clash between these two discourses of time creates unbridgeable gaps reflected in Das’s peculiar punctuations. This collision is evident in the following section of the novel where Malloban’s synaesthetic perception of time forges a metaphysical, metaplastic, metanarrative template in the diasporic sensibility of an alienated modern man:

In the sky there are many stars; outside it is very cold; inside the room a profusion of soundlessness, darkness like the scent of the black coat of time; outside, the sound of dew falling, or of time flowing by — there is no sandglass anywhere, only the murmuring whispering sound of the sand, trickling out Utpala’s cold conch-like ears and into the depth of Malloban’s soul. (p.24)

Malloban's fragmented consciousness is further complicated by his frequent shifts between different registers of language. After expressing silent disgrace about his wife's presence, he abruptly shifts to the restorative memories of "winter nights", "baul songs", and "new autumn paddy", before sinking down "like an exhausted flounder into some abysmal tank" (p. 5). This "abysmal tank" is precisely what Hartman calls "memory-place" (Caruth & Hartman, 1996, p. 644).

Malloban's discourse on dreams is marked by a strange continuum in a temporal viscosity:

But already everything is thinning; solvent, successful time, pain, patter, wittiness, mischief, fear, blood, lust, in unprotected darkness and depth, there is no death, there is no void, there is no individual life, there is inexhaustible ineffable time — only time. (p. 120)

His "sly" and "dense" dreams lure him into an "expendable dream-heap" and confront him with an impossible task: to untangle "that knot of knowing-unknowing" and "to transcend all knots and reach the height of normality" (p. 124). Yet, normality remains elusive, both for Malloban and his narrative, since his memory is not effaced, but keeps getting warped, as a perpetual consequence of trauma (Pederson, 2014, p. 340). Malloban's cognitive disarray embodies this mnemonic destabilization, where private memory no longer functions as an autonomous domain but is instead haunted by the vestiges of an irrecoverable past. His compulsive regressions, fragmented recollections, and disjointed temporal consciousness mimic the sedimentation of exiled histories into individual consciousness. They render the self an involuntary custodian of a vanishing cultural archive. Within this framework, Malloban's existential drift – his inability to reconcile past and present, his immersion in anachronistic reverie – must be read against the broader collective trauma of the Bengali refugees. His dissonance is a resistance to the linear progression of a history that has already abandoned him. Thus, *Malloban* constitutes a necropolitical chronicle of Bengali displacement. His recurrent descent into the past, his fixation on spectral memories, lost landscapes, and inaccessible homes, becomes a ritual of counter-memory, a form of resistance against historical erasure. As Pierre Nora (1989) posits, when living memory is destabilized by violent rupture, it is replaced by *lieux de mémoire*: sites of memory that function as compensatory spaces for a history that can no longer be organically transmitted (p. 7). Malloban's dissociative episodes thus transform his mind into a *lieu de mémoire*. This is where *Malloban* moves beyond the domain of personal affliction and becomes a metonym for the post-Partition psyche of the Bengali refugees.

Concluding reflections

The narrative power of *Malloban* lies precisely in its resistance to a conclusive truth. It embodies instead an ongoing encounter with trauma's inexpressibility. Trauma in *Malloban* is multivalent. It unfolds at the intersection of post-Partition rupture, systemic marginalization, and cognitive dissonance of a mind suffocated by a capitalist order that values productivity over artistic introspection. Malloban himself is an exilic aberration, a marginalized monster and a marginalized master artist, rendered abject by a society that demands coherence, utility, and assimilation. Yet, it is within this abjection, this enforced liminality, that radical potential emerges. His nausea, physical and existential, is but a visceral response to a social order that persistently exiles the non-normative subject. This study has ventured to position *Malloban* within the framework of trauma fiction by tracing how its nuanced disruptions and syntactic-semantic dissonances act as mirrors of a fractured diasporic identity – through an exercise of what Hartman (1995) terms as “read[ing] the wound” (p. 537). It has argued how the *Jibananandiya* aesthetic constructs a world where apparent absurdity teeters on the edge of exquisite acerbity. Through critical engagement with trauma theory, disability studies, and diaspora studies, the paper has posited that Das transcends a positivist account of modern alienation. The challenge of bringing together such a complex matrix of trauma, memory, disability, and diaspora into a singular critical framework is evident, yet it has endeavoured to show how these seemingly disparate themes coalesce in *Malloban* to offer a layered narrative of disintegration and reformation. Standing at the margin, *Malloban* ceases to be merely a novel and becomes a political space, an epistemic disruption, a site of radical contestation. Malloban's dissonance is read as a refusal to submit to the coherence demanded by capitalism. This very destabilization – of self, memory, and meaning – constitutes an insurgent mode of being, where trauma becomes not only a symptom of historical violence but a force of creative dissent as well. “The politics of location”, asserts bell hooks (1989), “calls those of us who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of revision” (p. 19). Our reading of *Malloban* offers us precisely one of such spaces, perilous yet imperative, where existence itself becomes an act of “radical openness and possibility” (p. 23). Jibanananda Das, via Malloban, does not simply inhabit this space; he constructs it, dismantles it, and rewrites its very possibilities, while transforming cognitive disruption, diasporic trauma, and existential dissent into templates of resistance. The displaced subject in Das's novel is perpetually in the process of “unbecoming”: a state where identity and belonging are in constant flux. Yet, this very “unbecoming” of the subject is what pushes him toward “becoming” an alternative to the displaced, disrupted, disabled,

dismembered self. Das does not efface time; he bends it, allowing the narrative to become almost an anti-narrative where he relentlessly brings in the unseen, the unsaid, the cold, the dead, and the forgotten, not as peripheral but as central to the narrative's very existence. This recursive loop, as embodied in the final poetic exchange, encapsulates the cyclical, almost surreal, tension between proximity and distance, belonging and estrangement:

They'll never run out, the cold, the night, our sleep?

No, no, they won't run out. (Das, 1973/2022, p. 213)

Endnotes

¹ During Jibanananda Das's lifetime, the city now officially called Kolkata was known as Calcutta under British colonial rule. His birthplace, Barisal, now in present-day Bangladesh, was then part of the Bengal Presidency of British India, later East Bengal, and subsequently East Pakistan after Partition in 1947. The independent nation-state of Bangladesh was formed in 1971. This geopolitical history is inseparable from earlier fractures: the first Partition of Bengal in 1905, justified by colonial administrators on the grounds of administrative efficiency, effectively divided Bengal along communal lines and intensified the politicization of language. Its reversal in 1911 did not undo the communal and linguistic fault lines it had honed, nor the fledgling understanding of language as a political instrument and a boundary-making tool. The 1947 Partition re-inscribed these divisions, now on the cartographic scale of India and Pakistan, with East Bengal bound to Pakistan through a tenuous and contested linguistic-religious rationale that would later ignite the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. In this essay, historical place names are used in reference to Das's own temporal context. The nuanced sense of place that emerges from this layered history, along with the fractures in linguistic identity it precipitated, are not merely historical background but palpable thematic currents in this essay. Our 2025 reading of a 1948 novel is undertaken in a world where language remains a politicized medium of identity, belonging, and exclusion. In this light, *Malloban* is approached as a literary artefact whose geographies and linguistic textures resonate with enduring questions of cultural self-definition, thereby demonstrating how historical divisions continue to inform contemporary interpretive frameworks.

² Italics are used in this paper to indicate titles of works as well as to emphasize specific words and phrases, thereby highlighting key concepts within the discussion.

³ The term is used as an adjective to signify the distinct narrative style of Jibanananda Das, characterized by spectral trauma and latent violence. Bhattacharyya and Ghosh Sarbadhikary (2024) described it as reflecting the unique themes, characterizations, and atmospheres in Das's fiction. See Bhattacharyya and Ghosh Sarbadhikary's article (<https://rupkatha.com/V16/n2/v16n215g.pdf>).

⁴ A precursor to this concept can be traced in Das's poem "*Bodh*" (translated as 'Sensation' in Clinton B. Seely's *A Poet Apart*) where the poet describes a sensation that "spins like a living head" (p. 64). In the poem, the anxious subject, as clueless as Malloban, questions why this sensation "mumble[s] to itself alone like churning waters" (p. 65). It is a modern man's narration of "alienation in the midst of everyone due to his own incommunicable idiosyncrasies (*mudradosh*) (Ray, 2015, p. 155). Arguably, "*Bodh*" lays the foundation for the existentialist concerns that permeate *Malloban*, anticipating the peak of existentialist philosophy even before it had gained global traction. This sensation, with its visceral immediacy, parallels Sartrean *nausea*. Suffice it to say, with its queasiness and abject undertones, this unwonted sensation serves as a prism through which the dismembered and displaced state of Malloban's mind can be studied.

⁵ *Katha* in Bengali can mean both 'words' (noun) and 'to speak' or 'to tell' (verb). The compulsive repetition of the phrase thus carries a double force: it signals both the act of speaking and the words themselves, collapsing action and object into one single, restless loop of linguistic futility. This doubleness recurs in *Malloban* and adds up to the paradox of speech, signifying the simultaneous compulsion and incapacity to articulate. The staccato iteration resembles a verbal stutter in which

language becomes both an inescapable medium and a failed instrument: he can neither mean what he says, nor say what he means.

⁶ See note 1 for historical context.

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