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**READING BEYOND THE 'MERRY' WORLD OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE:  
THE CHILD/ ADULT FICTION OF SATYAJIT RAY**

**Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of**

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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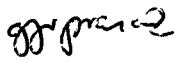


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**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify the dissertation entitled “READING BEYOND THE ‘MERRY’ WORLD OF CHILDREN’S LITERATURE: THE CHILD/ADULT FICTION OF SATYAJIT RAY”, submitted by Urmila Dasgupta, in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of the University, is to the best of my knowledge an original work and may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

  
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## DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This dissertation titled "READING BEYOND THE 'MERRY' WORLD OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: THE CHILD/ADULT FICTION OF SATYAJIT RAY", submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University.

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## INTRODUCTION

Bengal was the first province in colonial India to receive Western education and the seat of flourishing scholarship and literature from the nineteenth century. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was the first to write for children in the latter half of the nineteenth century. He was also the one to write the first book of alphabets of modern Bengali and this text book, *Borno Porichoy*, is till date used in schools in Bengal. Rabindranath Tagore also wrote some short stories for children such as *Homecoming* and *Kabuliwallah*<sup>1</sup>. These are very sensitive analyses of the child's psyche and imagination. He translated these stories into English himself and can therefore be said to be the pioneer of Indian English children's literature. Other western classics were also translated into Bengali; in fact one such translator was Satyajit Ray's grandfather Kuladaranjan Ray. English was first taught in the Fort William College in Calcutta, established by Lord Wellesley in 1800. Within a decade English education spread to the rest of the country. Technical education however, was not imparted to Indians though a lot of emphasis was laid on literature and philosophy. This naturally led to a vacuum in Indian society which remained relatively backward in the fields of science and technology. For Indians during the nineteenth century, knowing spoken and written English was the only tool to secure good government jobs in the British administrative system.

The English language, since being used as an instrument of power by the colonizers, has today grown into the single most important linking instrument of India's heterogeneous society and culture. Although it is still used as a power tool, its quick spread among the bourgeoisie has led to the birth and growth of a bilingual middle class who is the primary market for Indian English fiction. Indian English children's fiction also, therefore, has a ready market. This bilingual middle class is well versed in literatures of the First World. Both adults and children would have had access to mostly such literature. In a post-colonial set-up therefore, Indian English authors would have to establish their "difference" or their Indian identity with credibility and imagination. And as adults control the books that a child buys, Indian English children's authors would first have to impress the adult's understanding of their work and deem it ideal reading for the child.

The post-independence era gave rise to a new set of attitudes towards children's fiction. Mere didacticism was done away with and education through entertainment was emphasized upon. Ray with his well-researched detective stories and fantasy tales followed this trend meticulously. Some of his writings however still retained strong shades of Victorian didacticism and at times he seems to patronize even parents on a number of themes regarding parenthood and the parent-child relationship. I will deal with this point in detail later in my chapters.

Prema Srinivasan defines children's books as shorter, favouring action and dialogue rather than passive introspection. There are recurring plot elements such as the quest motif. There is greater flexibility of narrative events and the presence of child protagonists. The characters tend to be larger than life, more colourful and romantic than in everyday life. She categorizes children's literature in two ways, according to age and genre. According to age she divides it into three – 0-5, 5-11 and 11-16 years. The number of genres that she divides children's literature into is naturally greater and I will enumerate them numerically below.

1. Adventure and Mystery
2. Ancient classics, Folk Tales and Myth Retold
3. Science Fiction
4. Realistic tales
5. Animal Stories
6. Picture Story Book

Satyajit Ray's fiction would primarily fall under the two categories Adventure and Mystery and Science Fiction and some of his short stories would be classified as Realistic Tales. A number of other writers of renown have also been writing on all these genres. Ruskin Bond is probably the best known among them. His *A Flight of Pigeons*, *Panther's Moon and Other Stories*, *Our Trees Still grow in Debra*, *The Adventures of Rusty* and *The Young Vagrants* are all Indian English Classics. His first novel *The Room on the Roof* which he wrote when he was seventeen, won him the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize. His themes include the timelessness of nature and the inevitable passing away of innocence. Environmental awareness and conservation formed an integral part of his writings at a time when they hadn't yet become "fashionable" issues. The Himalayas therefore provided both magnificence and benevolence as the backdrop of most of his writings.

Another writer of international repute is Manoj Das whose first collection of short stories appeared in 1967 and since then he has been accepted as a powerful bilingual author, writing both in English and his mother-tongue Oriya. He feels

children [expect] light and delight [from literature]. If the author cherishes higher values in his or her consciousness, his or her creativity would carry it in spontaneously.<sup>2</sup>

This attitude naturally forms the crux of all his writings for children, *Temples of India* (1970), *Tales from Many Lands* (1972), *Persian Tales of Wit and Delight* (1972), *Rivers of Delight* (1973), *Stories of Light and Delight* (1970), *Books for Ever* (1973), *A Bride Inside a Casket and Other Stories* (1973). In 1996 was published his *Golden Valley*, *The Fourth Friend*, *A Strange Prophecy and Other Tales from the Jatakas* and *The Golden Deer and Other Tales from the Jatakas*.

R K Narayan, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande have all written for children occasionally, though they belong more specifically to the guild of adult fiction writers. Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Narayan's *Swami and Friends* considered a children's classic, Desai's *Village by the Sea*, all belong to the genre of children's literature.

As Ray mostly wrote adventure stories, whether of the detective or the science fiction variety, a look at other authors writing similar kind of stories is important at this juncture. All readers, whether serious ones or someone who wishes to while away some time, adult or child, inevitably enjoy a "whodunit" novel. Children cannot be encouraged to escape reality all the time but stretching one's imaginative wings into an alternate reality is always a pleasurable activity. To quote Prema Srinivasan

Human spontaneity is negated by sameness; excitement and suspense controlled by the familiar world of the formulaic structure provides the necessary enjoyment and pleasure for both adults and children.<sup>3</sup>

Ruskin Bond's *Adventure of Rusty* and *Angry River* can be placed squarely within this sub-genre. Other Indian English authors however took some time to break out of Western influences such as that of Enid Blyton to create a substantial and credulous world of their own, set in



Indian surroundings and peopled by Indian children. Ray too acknowledged the influence of authors such as Jules Verne, H G Wells and Arthur Conan Doyle on his detective and science fiction series. *The Chandipur Jewels* by Nilima Sinha published in 1979 won a prize in The Children's Book Trust contest but evinced very strong influences of the west. Arup Kumar Dutta's *Kaziranga Trail* managed however, to break free of such shackles and created an adventurous story coloured both by tribals and urban Indians. Dutta emphasized issues of wildlife preservation and awareness of environmental problems. His *Trouble at Kolongijan* deals with the evils of money-lending, illiteracy and the benefits of co-operative farming. *Revenge* set in the jungles of Arunachal Pradesh again returns to ecological themes. Another of his books *The Crystal Cave* is also set in Arunachal. In *Smack* he moves away from the jungle into drug-trafficking and juvenile delinquency. Dutta's books bear the hallmark of extensive research on the issues he deals with and are therefore very informative for children. Most of the writers such as Margaret Bhatt, Simran Kaur, Madhavi S Mahadevan, Sigrun Srivastava, Kaveri Bhatt, Vernon Thomas and Niharika Joshi who mostly wrote during the 80's and 90's, failed to reach the heights of originality displayed by Ray and Bond and mostly followed the stereotypical narrative patterns. *Devil in the Dustbin* by Indi Rana however manages to somewhat break free of western influences enough to create a larger-than-life, credible protagonist with strong Indian characteristics. The storyline also deals with typical Indian social problems such as casteism, alienation and racism in the diasporic situation.

Science fiction on the whole, would fall more into the category of fantasy but many of Ray's science fiction stories can also be categorized as fantasy or adventure tales. The use of the supernatural and magic is very frequent in fantastical tales and Ray uses both a number of times to great effect, mostly in his short stories. He was very intensely fascinated with magic till his college days and had often bought books about magic tricks and practiced them in front of the mirror. From the second half of the last century these two elements have been replaced by scientific discoveries, space travel and technology. The Shonku series is a good example of this category. Krishna Narayan's *The Alien Planet* won a prize in a Children's Book Trust competition in 1985. The story is set in a futuristic zone and imaginatively deals with aliens, spaceships and scientists both good and evil. Ira Saxena is another proponent of this genre and has written *Caught by a Computer* and *For the Green Planet*. Margaret Bhatt's *Evil*

*Empire* however is a complete take-off from stars wars and has nothing new to offer. Jayant Narlikar, Hogmani Chaudhury and Dilip Salwi's writings reflect more serious issues such as humanizing of robots as there is an underlying understanding that a day may come when robots may rule the world. Ray too deals with question of prioritizing machines and robots above human beings in his Shonku series. Of all these science fiction authors, Dilip Salwi is probably the most well-known for both his fictional and non-fictional works.

While knowledge of Indian Children's literature is extremely important, it is equally important to remember that all these books in reality are only an addition to the magnum opus of western literature which is more easily accessible to children who read books in English. These children would therefore very easily identify western influences in any book they read by an Indian author. Ray always defined himself as a children's writer and his original works in Bengali enjoy a very mass based readership consisting mostly of bilingual readers, who must have been acquainted with western works and who also must have recognized their influence on Ray. But Ray's success lay in uniquely endowing his work with Indian qualities. His narrative holds traces of characters such as Sherlock Holmes and Professor Challenger but it is nonetheless replete with his own distinctive ideology and original use of tropes such as riddles, puns, travel, inventions and discoveries. The western influence in his narratives become part and parcel of the culture he targets them at and enmeshes them in. I would like to quote Prema Srinivasan to make my point clearer

Formulas are cultural products, [and] ... they in turn influence  
the culture to which they cater and become in turn cultural  
determinants.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, these strategies may even boomerang on their place of origin as I have later clearly explained in my second chapter.

Before discussing the theoretical argument I have tried to sustain in my dissertation I need to give a comprehensive introduction of the author himself. Satyajit Ray was born into a famous Bengali family of writers, illustrators and printers in 1922<sup>5</sup>. The family originally belonged to the Kayastha caste and had probably migrated from Bihar to Nadia district in western Bengal in medieval times. Since the sixteenth century they also owned property in Mymensingh in East Bengal or modern day Bangladesh. They were Vaishnavs by religion

and were known as Deos or Debs. Ramsunder Deb is probably the earliest ancestor who can be traced of the family. Under Mughal rule they earned the title Rai which later became Ray Chowdhury and only with Sukumar Ray did it become only Ray. Satyajit Ray's grandfather Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury (1863-1915) was a famous children's writer, printer and publisher. He was the Bengali pioneer of half tone block-making. He improved the printing process with his own inventions and wrote articles for the British journal *The Penrose Annual Journal*. His firm was known as U Ray & Sons. He started *Sandesh*, the best children's magazine in Bengal in 1913. The magazine was carried on by his eldest son Sukumar after his death. Upendrakishore and two of his brothers renounced Hinduism and embraced Brahmoism as an act of defiance against social and religious orthodoxy and as a symbol of their commitment to social reforms. He wrote songs which are still sung in the Brahmo Samaj and played the flute and the violin. He married into a famous family of brahmo social reformers. Upendrakishore's father-in-law Dwarkanath Ganguly was a firebrand Brahmo who set up the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, the most radical of all Brahmo Samajes. His step-mother-in-law Kadambini Ganguly was the second woman graduate in the entire British Empire. She was also South Asia's first woman doctor and a delegate to the fifth session of The Indian National Congress. His eldest son and Satyajit's father Sukumar Ray (1887-1923) was probably the most gifted children's writer of Bengal till date. He used to specialize in nonsense rhymes and his books *Abol Tabol* and *Ho Jo Bo Ro Lo* are classics enjoyed by generations of readers. He was also an extremely talented illustrator and printer. After his death the family business of printing and publishing soon closed down and the family finances faced a sharp decline. Sukumar's cousins Leela Majumdar and Sukhalata Rao were also very talented and well-known children's writers. Upendrakishore's brothers Kuladaranjan and Pramadaranjan translated popular English science and crime fiction into Bengali, such as those of Jules Verne and Arthur Conan Doyle. Upendrakishore had written children's editions of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and Kuladaranjan carried on the tradition with children's editions of classics such as the Puranic Tales and the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Suprava Ray, Satyajit's mother was very much the central figure in his life and she was a very capable and disciplined individual. She was an accomplished Rabindra Sangeet singer. At the age of five Satyajit shifted from his ancestral home in Gadpar and to his maternal uncle's

house in Bhowanipore in South Calcutta. From his memoirs he certainly doesn't appear to have missed his father's presence, the vacuum more than filled up by a whole horde of uncles, aunts and cousins. But that didn't spare him from being ragged as the son of a famous father and he certainly didn't lose touch with his parental lineage. Kuladaranjan, a bachelor, made it a point to keep constantly in touch with his relatives and the orphaned, young Satyajit naturally came into his special orbit of attention and benefited from his knowledge of both western and Indian literatures. Satyajit Ray grew up on his family's contributions to translations, rhymes, stories and illustrations and later they distinguished his own writings. The Rays had built up a tradition of writing and publishing for children long before Satyajit became an adult and a writer himself. To quote Ashis Nandy

each member of the family had to support the weight of the tradition and simultaneously, affirm his or her own distinctive style of creativity.<sup>6</sup>

After graduating from Presidency College, Calcutta, Satyajit went to Santiniketan to study painting under the masters Nanadalal Bose and Binode Bihari Mukhopadhyay, mostly because of his mother's wishes. The Rays were close to the Tagore family and were probably only second to them as cultural forces in Bengal's milieu. Satyajit's first encounter with Rabindranath was at the age of ten, and the words of wisdom taught him by the great poet were to guide his creative steps in the future. In 1942 after an art tour of central India, where he was very impressed by Ajanta and Ellora, he left Santiniketan and soon found employment as a commercial artist in an advertising firm, D J Meyer and Co. He also did a number of book jacket designs and illustration for the Signet Press at that time. In 1961 *Sandesh* was revived by a number of people including Leela Majumdar, Nalini Das, Satyajit's cousin and Satyajit himself. He began by translating his father's poems Lear's limericks and then slowly graduated to writing short stories – the first of the Shonku and Feluda series. *Badshahi Aangti* was his first full length novel published in 1966-67.

Satyajit Ray was certainly very strongly influenced by the Tagorean humanist, rationalist and secular ideologies, more so because he belonged to westernized, educated, middle class, urban India. His family through their Brahma connection, in spite of their nationalism

displayed definite and strong strains of westernization. Many of them received some training or the other in England and to quote Ashis Nandy

were proud of their British connection ... and that they played the civilizing role demanded of them by the modern institutions introduced by the Raj into the country.<sup>7</sup>

The Rays were the descendants of the Bengal Renaissance which was ushered in with Lord Hardinge's implementation of Macaulay's Minutes. Satyajit Ray, says Chidananda Dasgupta was the

Last great representative of [the] movement for the regeneration of India ... marked by an effort by the middle class Indian to establish the primacy of rationalism without severing its umbilical cord with ancient traditions.<sup>8</sup>

Ray was a humanist, not in the anthropocentric western sense but in the Vedic sense of seeing man as an insignificant part of the cosmos. All his fiction bears very strong strains of his humanist-rationalistic outlook. The Indian philosophy of compassion, non-violence and the understanding of the transient nature of life also strongly colours his writings. Especially his adventure and science fiction was aimed at creating a rationalistic, scientific temperament. His authorial stance was consistently that of a teacher. His writings were aimed at teaching children

to grow up as rational, secular and democratic human beings.<sup>9</sup>

A nuanced understanding of Ray will require knowledge of many historical and social movements both in the West and in India.

In my dissertation I have attempted to critically analyze and identify those elements which lie outside the scope of understanding of children, as the hypothesis I am working on is that Ray's writings are not only for children, or rather that his identification of himself as a children's author limits the scope of his true definition. At times his writings reveal distinct adult elements and one gets the feeling that Ray may have been unconscious of the extent to which he layered his fiction with the same and hence his insistence on defining himself as a children's writer following the tradition of his family. What I have tried to prove is that he was primarily attuned to writing for adults but his family tradition made it impossible for him to conceive of writing for anybody but children. He made certain rules for himself as a

children's author and tried his best to adhere to them but as I have shown in my chapters this was not always the case. The line between child and adult elements such as violence and sexuality often becomes blurred in his writing. Moreover his work soon became extremely popular among both adults and children, something that Ray can't have visualized and which must have substantially problematized his own understanding of his fiction and himself as a writer. I have divided my dissertation into three chapters. In the first I deal with his short stories, in the second with his detective series and in the third with his science fiction series. Each of the chapters has been further subdivided into sections. The short stories, I have divided into certain categories and also discuss the issue of Ray's short stories in translation. My second chapter converses with the broad themes of structure, characterization and the child/adult dichotomy within his series, concentrating on complexity arising out of the differences between the intended readership and the actual readership. It also debates the presence of unnecessary violence and latent sexuality. The third chapter also contains sections on structure and characterization but its focus is mostly on Ray's philosophy regarding science and technology. The conclusion of my dissertation is not a mere summary of my chapters but the seat of the resolution of my argument and the hopefully successful winding up of my hypothesis.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the information I have included in this chapter about authors other than Ray, are from the second chapter A Historical Reconstruction: English in India, and Early Children's Fiction of Prema Srinivasan's book *Children's Fiction in India – Trends and Motifs*. (Chennai: T R Publications, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Prema Srinivasan, *Children's Fiction in India – Trends and Motifs*.(Chennai:T R Publications, 1998) p 54.

<sup>3</sup> Prema Srinivasan, *Children's Fiction in India – Trends and Motifs*.(Chennai: Publications, 1998) p 59.

<sup>4</sup> Prema Srinivasan, *Children's Fiction in India – Trends and Motifs*.(Chennai: Publications, 1998) p 65.

<sup>5</sup> I have gleaned all the biographical details of Satyajit Ray and his family from three sources. They are Satyajit Ray, *Jokhon Choto Chilam* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1982), Ashis Nandy, Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide to Exquisite Murders: Creativity, Social Criticism, and the Partitioning of the Self in *The Savage Freud and other essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves* (Delhi: Oxford U P, 1995) and Chidananda Dasgupta, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray* (New Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Ashis Nandy, Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide to Exquisite Murders: Creativity, Social Criticism, and the Partitioning of the Self in *The Savage Freud and other essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves* (Delhi: Oxford U P, 1995) p 242.

<sup>7</sup> Ashis Nandy, Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide to Exquisite Murders: Creativity, Social Criticism, and the Partitioning of the Self in *The Savage Freud and other essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves* (Delhi: Oxford U P, 1995) p 243.

<sup>8</sup> Chidananda Dasgupta, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray* (New Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 2003) p 7.

<sup>9</sup> Chidananda Dasgupta, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray* (New Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 2003) p 173.

## Chapter I

### SHORT AND SWEET/SALTY: RAY'S SHORT STORYTELLING

In this chapter I will focus on Satyajit Ray's short stories. All of them have been coalesced into one volume recently. They number hundred and one in all and include stories in other languages he translated into Bengali. His short stories were compiled into independent volumes for publication. Their unprecedented success led to more and more such compilations. The first *Ek Dojjon Goppo* (*One Dozen Stories*) was published in 1970. It contained some of his most famous stories. This was followed by *Aaro Ek Dojon* (*Another Dozen*) in 1976, *Aaro Baaro* (*Twelve More*) in 1981, *This Time a Dozen Again* (*Ebaro Baaro*) in 1984, *Pikur Diary aar Onanyo* (*Piku's Diary and Other Stories*) in 1986, *Sujon Horbolla* in 1987 and *Eker Pithey Dui* (*One on the Back of Two*) in 1988<sup>1</sup>. I have divided this chapter into a number of sections – Science Fiction Stories, Stories Dealing with Social Questions, Art Stories, Stories with Child Protagonists, Adult Stories and Translation. In all the sections except the last, I have discussed some of his stories as the representatives of that specific category of stories. These include *Septopasher Khidey* (*The Hungry Octopus*), *Bhuto*, *Fritz*, *Anathbabur Bhoi* (*Anath Babu's Terror*), *Neel Aatonko* (*Indigo*), *Lakhpoti*, *First Class Kamra*, *Terodactiler Dim* (*Pterodactyl's Egg*), *Sadanander Khudey Jagot* (*The Small World of Sadananda*), *Onker Saar*, *Golapibabu aar Tipu* (*Maths Teacher, Mr. Pink and Tipu*), *Ashomanjobabur Kukur* (*Ashamanjo Babu's Dog*), *Bonkubabur Bondhu* (*Bonku Babu's Friend*), *Sujon Horbolla* and *Pikur Diary* (*Pikoo's Diary*). All of these stories have been translated except for *First Class Kamra*, *Lakhpoti* and *Sujon Horbolla*.

Ray who had declared

I have regularly pursued my two vocations of film making  
and writing for young people<sup>2</sup>

was nonetheless a writer of such nuances, as cannot be fully appreciated by children between the ages of eleven and fourteen, the age when most people read Ray. In my opinion, most of his short stories can be best understood in their entirety by adults and not even by an adolescent of sixteen.



Ray's short stories mostly revolve around a single situation, the climax of which is usually full of dramatic tension. The entire story leads up to this one climactic moment. Characterization is brief but thorough as the story usually revolves around some relationship, either between humans or between humans and the supernatural. Surabhi Banerjee explains that while writing short stories Ray's

focus is on a moment, delicate and touch-and-go, when a slice of life is chipped off from a large continuum of life – just a fragment with the sap, the freshness still on it, to be picked up and considered. [The short story's] compass is extremely brief for, unlike the novel, it has no scope to present a plot compounded of several related actions woven together.<sup>3</sup>

As Ray considered himself to be a writer for “young people” he consciously laid down certain parameters for himself. Very conscientiously he refrained from allowing any hint of sexuality from creeping into his stories, to the extent that most of his adult characters are unmarried men well adjusted to their single status, their lives having no space for a spouse. Curiously his stories do not portray even little girls. Almost as if the inclusion of a girl character in any story may bring a breath of sexuality into his sexless literary world. Seemingly a very chauvinistic linking up of sex with women or put differently equating sexuality in its totality in the person of the woman.

The literary world of his creation is therefore very much male, considering the fact that all protagonists are male. Apparently he had once confided to the Bengali writer Sunil Gangopadhyay that he was not comfortable creating women characters. The latter believed that this explained why Ray preferred to write children's literature than adult literature.<sup>4</sup> At the same time it is not a world which is conventionally male with brawny and chauvinistic protagonists. Contrarily they are intelligent, verging on being intellectual and coolly mature. They display many characteristics as are predominantly assigned to women and are designated as “feminine”, such as sensitivity, imagination and even a certain physical weakness. The courage they display is not the kind which requires verbal and physical

manifestations at a high pitch. They never engage in exchanging abuse or fisticuffs. At all times Ray's world is urbane and cosmopolitan, very much like himself. Even his descriptions of a village seem to be the kind which anyone sitting in an armchair in his drawing room in Calcutta, may visualize. It is certainly not the kind of description which Sarat Chandra Chatterjee gives of a village in Bengal, effortlessly transporting one to its muddy roads infested with mosquitoes and snakes. That is not to say that Ray's description is any less real but he can never quite emerge from his innate urbanity and prevent the same from slipping into his vision of rural Bengal.

Most of his stories and especially those dealing with the supernatural are open ended. Ray never really tries to tie all the strings, but rather leaves a substantial amount for the reader to tie himself/herself, with his/her imagination. The gaps and silences therefore make Ray's storytelling such a scintillating experience.

## SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

*Bonku Babu's Friend* encompasses nearly all of Ray's concerns while writing short stories for children but I will not be able to discuss all the issues he raises in this section itself, but will certainly address them in different but relevant sections. His stories tried to stimulate children to read about different cultures and civilizations, to study their plants and animals. Bonku Babu, a teacher of Bengali and Geography in a village primary school, knew interesting stories about strange animals and people which he told his students with great relish and held them enthralled. Unfortunately, in spite of being a knowledgeable man he was often the butt of jokes and ridicule, both at the hands of precocious students and the educated social circle of the village, who gathered regularly in the house of the wealthiest man in the village, Sripati Majumdar. Such a state of affairs arose primarily from Bonku Babu's timidity and his knowledge of "how difficult it would be to get another [job] at his age".<sup>5</sup> Such details of economic constraints are nearly always included in the description of all his characters, for example in *Patol Babu Film Star*, *Indigo* and *Sujon Horbolla*. The reader needs to be aware of the socio-economic condition of Bengal and Calcutta, where most of

his stories are set, in order to fully appreciate and comprehend their influence on the unfolding of the story and its denouement.

The most striking aspect of the story is of course the presence of the extraterrestrial being and its interaction with Bonku Babu. The various astounding talents and tools of the *Ang* – the name of the species to which this particular being belonged – transfix both Bonku Babu and the reader. And Ray paints a scene from unfamiliar worlds for children who

sometimes need stimulation in their literature to help them to move away from certain lazy, immature ways of thinking; a good author, consciously or unconsciously provides this stimulation by writing about characters and situations in a way that is both fresh and convincing and which in the light of a child's developing understanding can also point the way forward towards greater insight.<sup>6</sup>

The *Ang* while not human, either in his appearance or his habits, nonetheless provides the solution to Bonku Babu's very human problem dealing with our social and psychological set-up. His life with its constant humiliation and ridicule at the hands of less intelligent, less knowledgeable and crass people, only due to his inability to protest against crude and obnoxious behaviour, was fast becoming intolerable. He portrays the extraterrestrial being as a friend, who engages actively and intelligently in analyzing and providing solutions to very human problems. The *Ang* postulates

not to protest against injustice or to quietly endure humiliation doesn't reflect well on any species, not just on human beings.<sup>7</sup> (Translation my own)

And through the extraterrestrial being Ray executes one of his most important underlying missions while writing for "young people" – to impart important social and human values to them. He adopts on most such occasions a rather patronizing authorial stance though at all times he is nothing but benevolent and urbane. Therefore the advice that the *Ang* imparts to Bonku Babu gives the latter the courage to break social conventions and protest against the humiliation heaped on him and take revenge on his tormentors, in a manner resembling the tenet of the Old Testament – an eye for an eye. Defeating his enemies

makes Bonku babu, a poor teacher in a village school, a most successful man, far more successful than Sripati Majumdar the wealthiest man of the village, in the eyes of the author and the reader.

In Ray's schematics the greatest emphasis is laid on imagination. All his child protagonists and many of his adult characters, are extremely imaginative and sensitive beings and all the stories centre around the necessary nature of imagination in human beings which alone can make them compassionate and understanding. This strangely makes his male protagonists appear remarkably feminine. Intuition and imagination as opposed to logic and proof has always been seen as female attributes rather than male. In *Pterodactyle's Egg* Ray beautifully blends the role of imagination and knowledge in the development of a child's personality and prioritizes the presence of imagination in an individual even over honesty. The protagonist Badan Babu is hoodwinked by a very smooth talking but imaginative and intellectual pickpocket, who spins many tall tales about his journeys through time, with a machine supposedly made from a tree found only in the Himalayas. But Badan Babu forgives him, for he opens up a new avenue for Badan Babu to keep his invalid son occupied with endless stories about such make-believe journeys into the past and the future. While there may be a serious dearth in educated and imaginative pickpockets, there must be an even greater dearth of individuals such as Badan Babu who feel the treasure of entertaining and imaginative story-telling to be well worth the lost fifty rupees and fifty two paisa amounting to roughly one fourth his entire month's salary.

## STORIES DEALING WITH SOCIAL QUESTIONS

In most of the stories which deal with some social question Ray redefines the notion of success. In *Class Friend* and *Lakhpoti* he uses the trope of two friends who are separated after life in their quest for money, education, career etc. In *Lakhpoti* the protagonist, Tridib Chowdhury assumes almost demonic proportions in his never ending quest for money and disregard for compassion towards others less fortunate. Ray's derisive tone while portraying him alerts the reader not to view this man and his wealth as a sign of laudable success. To quote Saroj Bandopadhyay

Ray takes care to show [that] the modern hunt for commercial success turns a man away from the more positive values of life.<sup>8</sup>

The hero of the story Proshanto Babu, a humble school teacher, personifies the humanity the other lacks and very cleverly stages a drama which converts Tridib Chowdhury's attitude to a more compassionate and generous one.

In *Class Friend* Ray demonstrates the strength of friendship cutting across such barriers as class and social standing. Mohit Sarkar, an upper class Bengali with a lucrative job in a merchant office, fails to recognize Joydeb Bose, his childhood friend, in the haggard old man sitting before him asking for financial assistance to educate his son. Suspecting Joydeb to be a fraud he refuses. But later he sees his son, in whom he discerns his class friend's youthful self and immediately gives the lad two hundred rupees. Ray doesn't paint either figure in a negative light. He utters no judgments on either Mohit, who suspects Joydeb of having nefarious designs on him, or Joydeb who is unable to educate his son and is forced to beg for help from a class friend he hasn't met in many years.

*Ashamanja Babu's Dog*, one of his more famous creations, too redefines success but in a far more subtle manner. Ashamanja Babu, a clerk in the registry department of Lajpat Rai Post Office, was a bachelor with few friends and relatives and so he bought a dog to keep him company. Interestingly he didn't feel the need of a spouse. Brownie took the place of his nonexistent family. Brownie was an ordinary dog in every way except one – he could laugh, and displayed a very human sense of humour. He laughed when someone's umbrella was blown away in the wind or when someone's chair broke and he fell down. When Mr. Moody, an American, offers to buy him for two thousand dollars from Ashamanja Babu, for a moment the latter couldn't help visualizing himself

in a spacious air-conditioned office, sitting in a swivel chair  
with his legs up on the table, the heady smell of hasu-na-hana  
wafting in through the windows.<sup>9</sup>

But Brownie's long and loud laughter brought him back to earth quickly, as he realized that Brownie was actually laughing at his daydreams and Mr. Moody's impossible desire to attach a price to laughter and friendship. Although there are no child characters in the story,

Brownie seems to take over the role in practically every way, from being the playful companion to teaching the adult wisdom through his clear and uncomplicated, verging on philosophical, attitude towards life. Ray's delicate and subtle handling of Ashamanja Babu's relationship with Brownie and the gradual revelation of the latter's sense of humour makes this one of his most touching and popular stories.

In *Patol Babu, Film Star* Satyajit Ray incorporates a number of attitudes and values into – literally – a very small role. The making of a film is a team effort where every little detail and every single person including every single extra has great importance and everyone's best efforts alone, can make the whole a success. Patol Babu is deeply disappointed and offended to know, that the only dialogue he has in the role offered to him, is “oh”. But, remembering his guru he bravely puts aside such false notions as pride, ego and regard for social status and gives it his best shot, and returns home blissful in the knowledge that he has done his very best. He foregoes the pay, for nothing he feels, can compensate for the satisfaction which comes from doing one's job to the best of one's abilities. The story reflects Ray's own dedication to film making and his passion for making every shot perfect in every detail. Touchingly told, the story truly bestows on every unrecognized “extra” on film sets their moment of glory and reveals the hollowness of man's Faustian ego.

Another issue which I want to include in this section is post-coloniality, as Ray has developed his own understanding of it mostly through his science fiction stories, whether within the short ones or the Professor Shonku series. In both this chapter and the third I will discuss this aspect with reference to both genres. At times with bold strokes, at times with subtle, Ray's stories are nearly always coloured in post-colonial tones. A post-colonial thief in *Pterodactyle's Egg* claims

people think science has progressed only in the west. And that nothing has happened in this country. I tell you, a tremendous lot has indeed happened here, but how many know about it?<sup>10</sup>

A poor village school teacher feels that there is as much chance of an UFO landing in a remote village in Bengal as New York, opposing the generally held view in the village that such interesting and historical events can only take place in the West. The story which

displays this post-coloniality most starkly is *First Class Kamra*. Pulokesh Sarkar adopts a unique method to rid his friend Ranjan Babu of his excessive love for the West and Westerners. Dressed as the ghost of a British colonel of British India he insults Ranjan Babu calling him nigger and nearly forcing him to get down from a moving train. The plot may well reflect one of Ray's childhood experiences in a train. He was travelling with his mother and aunt when he was separated from them and had to travel alone in a compartment full of British sahibs. He spent the entire journey sitting on the floor of the compartment, terrified that the sahibs may throw him out, but was also astute enough to realize that they were supremely indifferent to his presence.

## STORIES WITH CHILD PROTAGONISTS

*The Small World of Sadananda* is a rare Ray story which has a child protagonist. Sadananda, a sickly boy, develops an extraordinary bonding with ants and takes great pains to observe their living and eating habits. Ray even incorporates a description of a duel between two of them. When the class bully destroys their home, overcoming his fear and his own lack of brawn Sadananda hits him on the head and drives him away. Tipu is another child protagonist and he helps portray the importance Ray gives to the role of imagination in the healthy development of a child's mind in *Maths Teacher, Mr. Pink and Tipu*. Tipu's maths teacher objects most stringently to the fairy tales which formed Tipu's staple diet. Tipu with the help of Mr Pink, an exiled alien who can return to his own land only after getting rid of Tipu's sorrow, makes his teacher's horse – Pegasus – fly away with him. After which incident of course Narahari Babu could make no objection to Tipu's reading habits. Though Ray makes it a point to clear Mr Pink of having any violent intentions, Narahari Babu's verbal exchanges with Tipu are rather violent from the vocabulary used to the body language, apparently breaking Ray's self-imposed ban on literary violence. The interaction between Tipu's father and his teacher opens the debate of parental control over a child's reading habits and places Ray almost in the position of an expert, objectively but gently convincing both the child and parent of his views on the subject. It is most important to allow the child the freedom to stretch his/her imaginative and cognitive wings. If adults clamp down on such freedom, as the career-oriented education system is already doing through stringent

parameters to pass exams, where will the child find the space to breathe? One must say that Ray's stance as the omniscient narrator is very dominating and all pervasive, almost patronizing the adult/child reader.

Other than *Maths Teacher*, *Mr. Pink and Tipu*, and *The Small World of Sadananda*, *Sujon Horbolla* and *Pterodactyle's Egg* also in their very different narrative structures posit a certain philosophy of education. As I am discussing the issue of education I have mentioned *Sujon Horbolla* and *Pterodactyle's Egg*, even though they do not strictly belong to this section. In Ray's understanding, only learning facts by rote from books would certainly not constitute education. Garnering all-round knowledge, putting them into practice or observing the natural world around one, to understand reality in the first place, would be given greater premium.

Children, just like adults enjoy stories which contain characters which they can identify with easily, namely characters of their own age group. But Ray's fiction rarely provides them with such easy modes of identification. Yet he is a very popular children's author. How can such a dichotomy be explained. Two reasons come to mind which may be posited here. Ray always treated children as responsible and intelligent beings. He treated them as equals and not subordinates. This stance was naturally reflected in his fiction. Children therefore could possibly imagine themselves as having already grown-up, participating in the activities of an adult world and protagonist.

## ART STORIES

Two other stories which I wish to mention are *Reward*<sup>13</sup> (Puroshkar)<sup>14</sup> and *Bornandho (Colour Blind)* which deals with the debate on modern abstract art and different forms of realistically represented art. Ray explained his own understanding of art in a lecture –

Among the paintings and sculptures I knew and loved were:  
Gainsborough's Blue Boy, Franz Hal's laughing Cavalier,  
Michelangelo's David, Rodin's Thinker, Landseer's proud  
stag with the spreading antlers and Joshua Reynolds's



Bubbles ... of course I also knew Raphael's Madonna, and Da Vinci's Mona Lisa. I read somewhere that Mona Lisa's right hand was the most beautifully executed hand in all painting. I would gaze at this hand, and marvel at the critic who had studied all the hands in all the paintings of the world, and come to that conclusion.<sup>11</sup>

These stories, especially *Puroshkar* portray such cynicism and bitterness regarding the world of art critics. The conclusion with its child like humour is probably the only section of the story which can lend itself to being a part of children's literature. While the story deals with the debate of the validity of abstract art in a very simplified manner, the biting sarcasm and cynicism which underlines most of the story and much of the intricacies of the actual debate, may well be beyond the grasp of most children. Ray's own illustrations are finely drawn, mostly full of details, black and white sketches. This fact rather undermines the denouement of *Colour Blind* which hinges on the sympathy generated for the talented artist who loses all motivation to paint after turning colour blind.

## FAIRY TALES

Ray is startlingly modern in the least modern genre – the fairy tale. *Sujon Horbolla* was written for very young children with the original Bengali book a larger size, containing many illustrations and a bigger font. The story contains many of the usual fairy tale tropes – the young, innocent but poor hero, the beautiful, learned Princess, a monster whom the hero kills to win the hand of the Princess in marriage. But the learned Princess, in spite of her learning, lays greater premium on physical courage and strength and feels that the only man she can marry has to kill the monster plaguing the kingdom. Ultimately she marries the man who does so even though he can barely write his own name. Of course Ray doesn't endorse illiteracy and takes care to make the Princess undertake Sujon's education after marriage. Simultaneously he strongly critiques a society which denied its women folk the sight of the sun for fear their complexion will get tanned and ensures that Sujon makes the Princess his companion on all his travels through forests. The story is also a strong statement on the right kind of education which strikes the right balance between

knowledge gained from books and that from putting these tenets into practice and studying their outcome as I have mentioned earlier. *Sujon Horbolla* also appeals to its readers to protect animals and grant them their life and freedom. Within a fairy tale Ray deals with feminism, animal rights and his philosophy of education.

## HORROR/GHOST STORIES

Spine chilling, heart stopping horror is perpetrated on innocent readers in a number of stories. The ones which I found the most impressive and effective are *The Hungry Septopus*, *Anath Babu's Terror*, *Indigo*, *Fritz*, *Ratan babu* and *That Man* and *Bhuto*. Only the first story deals with a living being even though it lives only in Ray's imagination. The others mentioned deal with supernatural powers and ghosts. *Anath Babu's Terror* describes a haunted house where lives a killer ghost. Anath Babu who has researched widely on the subject of ghosts and has spent innumerable nights in so-called haunted houses, finally meets his nemesis there. Ray's description is so lucid and dramatic that one can't help feel the shiver go down one's spine.

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*Fritz* too is a ghost story though this time the ghost is that of a doll whose twelve-inch-long skeleton is inexplicably found where it was buried nearly three decades earlier. The story provides no explanations and the denouement is startling enough to amaze and stupefy any reader whether adult or child. The horror that Ray successfully unleashes in all these stories makes such a great impact on the mind of the reader, simply due to his refusal to proffer any explanation for the occurrence of many strange happenings and leaves the whole entirely up to his/her imagination. *Bhuto* offers a very vague and rather stereotypical explanation where one protagonist threatens the other that he has learnt many magical tricks from his guru, who is a rishi dwelling in the Himalayas, and not all of them are merely for entertainment. This same trope is used in another story too – *Khagam* – of a rishi's strange supernatural powers, which turns a man into a cobra. *Indigo* however is suffused with shocking originality. The soul of a British indigo planter enters the body of the hero Aniruddha Bose making him go back to the day the indigo planter committed

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suicide and even transforms Aniruddha's physical appearance to resemble the planter's. Miraculously, even though Aniruddha is forced to hold the revolver to his head by the invisible force, well aware of the consequences, he is saved from death. Again the question "how?" is not answered.

*The Hungry Septopus* is a deviation from these usual ghost stories. Septopus is the name given to a carnivorous tree which nearly becomes a man-eater. The story begins with a description of most of the well-known species of carnivorous plants in this world, before Ray begins the description of the Septopus thus adding credibility to the tale. And when the Septopus has both the beloved dog and friend of the hero in its grip it's almost like being in at the kill of a man-eating tiger about to devour its helpless and innocent prey. So when like Jim Corbett the hero kills the Septopus with one bullet, the reader heaves a great sigh of relief. The build-up to the climax, the information which precedes it and the actual action is all bound together in simple and clear language and a fast paced style that is brilliantly executed, making this is one of Ray's most famous and loved story. Some thing very similar happens in *Big Bill* but all the violent action in this case is reported and not described which reduces its effect on the reader and the conclusion is both unexpected and humorous. Therefore I haven't been able to view it as part of the same genre as *The Hungry Septopus*.

*Ratan Babu and That Man* is one of the most profound delineations of man's sense of self. Ratan babu, a bachelor, loved to visit unknown places. On one such trip he meets a man who in appearance, habits, education and tastes could well have been his alter ego. Unnerved by such similarity and rather irritated by the concept of no longer holding the simple uniqueness all human beings do, Ratan babu pushes the man over a bridge exactly when a train is passing underneath. The next day when he is looking over the railing of the same bridge and a train passes underneath, an unseen force pushes him over the railing. The overt and pre-meditated violence of the story, and its profound philosophical content makes it probably the most obviously unsuitable of all Ray's fiction for a child/adolescent audience.

## ADULT STORIES

*Pikoo's Diary and Other Stories* published in 1986 was the only collection of stories which Ray declared as adult. The most famous of these is of course *Pikoo's Diary* itself. It's the story of an extra-marital affair recorded in a child's diary and written from his perspective. The end of the diary also sees the end of the family with the death of the grandfather, the elder brother leaving home and finally *Pikoo's* mother following suit. *Pikoo* while faithfully recording all these events is quite unaware of their consequences and only feels mildly worried when he realizes that his mother may also leave. Very unemotionally told, the entire story leaves one chilled at heart. And one wonders why, when in most of his ostensibly children's stories he rarely uses a child protagonist, in an adult story he does so.

## TRANSLATION

Paradoxically, Ray in translation is not viewed strictly as a children's writer because *Pikoo's Diary* is included in one collection of Ray stories published by Penguin – *The Best of Satyajit Ray* and the whole is not designated as Children's Literature but merely Fiction. Even though in order to keep the flavour of a child writing, the font chosen for the translation is a childish one and the grammatical and spelling errors are adhered to meticulously – nothing can disguise the adult theme. But how is it that Ray in translation becomes a fiction writer as so many others in Indian English Fiction in Translation instead of a children's writer? This probably proves beyond all other debatable issues, that Ray as a writer more closely resembles one writing for adults than one writing for children. Whether in translation or in the original language the readership of an author is probably the greatest marker required, for his definition vis-à-vis the many categories of literature. If in translation Ray's readers include more adults than children, we can assume that in the original, adults and children would constitute practically equal halves of the entire readership, thus deeply problematizing his (self-endowed) definition as a children's writer.

As a children's writer Ray meticulously adhered to certain tenets such as a minimum of violence and the absence of sexuality but many a time his self-imposed definition of a writer of "young people" slipped and became blurred – consciously or unconsciously. Violence does creep in at times with a man-eating tree to the murder of ants and the inexplicable killings by ghosts. Some rather adult intellectual debates are also included such as the debate on different forms of fine arts. Detailed descriptions of the socio-economic background of many of the characters provide a depth to characters but maybe beyond the true understanding of children – even older children of fourteen years. Though he debar women from his literary world his male characters often include many feminine qualities such as imagination, intuition, compassion and sensitivity. His literary world is, at all times, a very urban and cosmopolitan world with a lot of emphasis laid on keeping oneself informed of the cultures of distant countries or ancient civilizations. Describing his urbanity Ray said

as one born and bred in Calcutta, I loved to mingle with the crowd on Chowringhee, to hunt for bargains in teeming profusion of second hand books on the pavements of College Street, to explore the grimy depths of Chor Bazar for symphonies at throwaway prices, to relax in the coolness of a cinema and lose myself in the make-believe world of Hollywood.<sup>12</sup>

The values Ray preaches through most of his stories and especially the ones I have dealt with are therefore very cosmopolitan. Human values such as loyalty, friendship, dignity of labour no matter how insignificant in the larger picture and above all emotions such as compassion, imagination, willingness to give one's best – all these can never ever be balanced on the same scale as money – certainly they can never be exchanged for it. Intelligence and courage are valorized but very little emphasis is paid to the mere use or display of brawn. Ray himself explained that

it is difficult to think of an artist who is devoid of an attitude to life and society which he reveals in his work.<sup>13</sup>

Most assiduously Ray also follows another agenda in his writing. He tries his best to impart a lot of interesting facts through his stories, from various subjects such as history, geography, natural science which are generally not a part of any school syllabus, thus fulfilling the criteria of educating the child reader through his work. A criterion which, I believe, he thought every responsible writer for children should fulfill. This attitude may also have been fuelled by the knowledge that ultimately children don't buy the books, adults do. And adults dishing out money may well want good value for it. And the most important issue for parents, especially Bengali ones is their child's grades and they would definitely want any extra reading their child engages in to have some impact, direct or indirect, on their exams. But Ray wished to overcome this excessive importance paid to exams alone at the cost of general knowledge and the pursuit of hobbies and sports. In *Pterodactyle's Egg* he incorporates a lot of information regarding the evolution of the planet and the different plants and animals inhabiting its various corners, which may motivate a child to widen his/her knowledge by reading books outside the school ones. In his ubiquitous manner Ray often gently criticizes the parental attitude of Bengalis to give too much importance to the result of exams and too little to the all-round development of the child.

This is the conscious manifestation of a children's writer as children like to have values very well defined and constantly reinforced in their literature as Nicholas Tucker quotes Enid Blyton saying

children's writers have definite responsibilities towards their young public. For this reason they should be certain always that their stories have sound morals – children like them.<sup>14</sup>

However his short stories mostly fail to give children a child character they can identify with as they very often have no child protagonists. But whether they can identify themselves or not children enjoyed his short stories as much as they did his detective or science fiction series. The only way they could do so was, I feel, to imagine themselves as adults participating in an adult world. Adults would find it much easier to identify with his protagonists. Somehow viewing Ray as someone read only by children then seems rather fictitious. It appears that Ray had not much control over his readers who soon numbered both adults and children if not equally, so one may conjecture how much control he had

over his writing itself and whether he was even aware of the many nuances he laced it with? While Ray knew exactly how to handle all the children who acted in his films, while writing for them the definitions and boundaries which he had deliberately chalked out for himself often slipped and became more than a little blurred. At times maybe he wasn't himself aware of the flux present in his work, so engrossed was he in his self-imposed definition of being a children's writer. I feel, he seems to have become confused in a welter of expectations and prevalent definitions that he felt emanating from the Bengali society he was a part of and the literary tradition that he was upholding.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> I have obtained all this information from the Bengali, Calcutta based magazine *Desb*, 2 May 1992, p 59-61.
- <sup>2</sup> Satyajit Ray: A Portrait in Black and White: Photos by Tarapada Banerjee, Introduced by Satyajit Ray (New Delhi: Viking Penguin India, 1993) p 15.
- <sup>3</sup> Surabhi Banerjee, Macrocosms in Microcosms in *Satyajit Ray: Beyond the Frame* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1996) p 147.
- <sup>4</sup> Ashis Nandy, Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide to Exquisite Murders: Creativity, Social Criticism, and the Partitioning of the Self in *The Savage Freud and other essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves* (Delhi: Oxford U P, 1995) p 255.
- <sup>5</sup> Satyajit Ray, *The Best of Satyajit Ray*, trans. Gopa Majumdar (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2001) p 38.
- <sup>6</sup> Nicholas Tucker, *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration* (Cambridge: U of Cambridge P, 1981) p 2.
- <sup>7</sup> Satyajit Ray, Bonku Babu's Friend, *The Best of Satyajit Ray*, trans. Gopa Majumdar (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2001) p 49.
- <sup>8</sup> Saroj Bandopadhyay, The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 85.
- <sup>9</sup> Satyajit Ray, Ashamanja Babiu's Dog, *The Best of Satyajit Ray*, trans. Gopa Majumdar (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2001) p 79.
- <sup>10</sup> Satyajit Ray, Pterodactyle's Egg, *The Best of Satyajit Ray*, trans. Gopa Majumdar (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2001) p 232.
- <sup>11</sup> Satyajit Ray: A Portrait in Black and White: Photos by Tarapada Banerjee, Introduced by Satyajit Ray (New Delhi: Viking Penguin India, 1993) p 18.
- <sup>12</sup> Satyajit Ray: A Portrait in Black and White: Photos by Tarapada Banerjee, Introduced by Satyajit Ray (New Delhi: Viking Penguin India, 1993) p 18.
- <sup>13</sup> Satyajit Ray: A Portrait in Black and White: Photos by Tarapada Banerjee, Introduced by Satyajit Ray (New Delhi: Viking Penguin India, 1993) p 27.
- <sup>14</sup> Nicholas Tucker, *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration* (Cambridge: U of Cambridge P, 1981) p 107.



## CHAPTER II

### ELEMENTARY MY DEAR ...: A PEEP INTO THE MYSTERY OF FELUDA

In this chapter I will be dealing with Ray's most popular works, his detective series. This series is very important for the theoretical standpoint I am attempting to uphold in my dissertation as its readership includes both adults and children. Such a mixed readership began to problematize Ray's self-endowed/avowed position of being a children's writer. The difficulties he then faced to satisfy his readers threw into relief his own limitations. I feel this process helps define his authorial identity.

Detective fiction as a genre was first properly defined and shaped by Edgar Allan Poe<sup>1</sup>. A century ago Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes whose investigative method became the classical model on which the later writers plotted their works. Of course later writers of detective fiction, Agatha Christie being the popular of them brought in their own innovations. Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple were two very different detectives with their own distinctive styles. Ray had openly acknowledged that he was a keen follower of the works of Verne, H. G. Wells and Arthur Conan Doyle.<sup>2</sup> His own detective Pradosh Mitter or as he is better known Feluda, seems to carry the influences that rubbed onto Ray for his readings of the other masters. In Bengali literature Saradindu Bandopadhyay's Byomkesh Bakshi had enjoyed the status of being the most popular detective before the arrival of Feluda. But Saradindu Bandopadhyay had written for an adult audience only and therefore his writing was qualitatively different from Ray's and even included Byomkesh's wife as part of the core detective group. To make this heritage clearer I would like to quote Surabhi Banerjee

Saradindu's archetypal truth-finder Byomkesh assimilates some of the traits of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Dorothy Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey and Le Blanc's Lupin, and yet remains an inimitable whose behaviour is integrated with the evolution of the plot. Ray was also an avid reader of both Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. Evidently, the mantle of Byomkesh and of Sherlock Holmes fell on his 'Feluda' – the central character in Ray's detective stories.<sup>3</sup>

## STRUCTURE

While Ray broadly structured his detective stories on the classical model of Holmes there are a number of differences and some very unique features. The stories are usually full of action. At times the action acts like a ladder leading to the ultimate solution as in *Trouble in the Graveyard* (*Gorosthane Shabdhan*) where each clue leads to another till the final solution. Everyone, except for Feluda remains in the dark till he chooses to explain all, usually in the presence of the villain. Another structure followed is one of “chase” where the identity of the villain is soon discovered and then a most dramatic and exciting chase is undertaken to capture him as in *The Golden Fortress* (*Sonar Kella*). While the first option follows the classical model of detective stories that most authors world-wide have followed the latter is more in the nature of thrillers both cinematic and that found in novels.

The most important structural ploy used by Ray is the use of an adolescent boy as the narrator of the mysteries. He did so primarily because the readership he was originally writing for consisted of children and adolescents. Having an adolescent narrator then, would help them identify with the stories and their characters. Tapash Ranjan Mitra is Feluda’s cousin and the narrator of all his stories. Feluda affectionately calls him Topshe and he is known to the readers too by that name. The universal appeal that Ray’s detective stories soon began to enjoy (proved by the fact that they were published, in an adult, literary magazine, from 1970 onwards) was largely due to this narratorial stance. One of the reasons behind the general overwhelming success of the genre of detective fiction is that it reveals

the existence of hidden currents and vicious eddies and whirlpools underneath the apparently unruffled surface of the life of man in society.... these stories point to all those secret serpents lurking behind the bourgeois practice of living, and occasionally raising their terrible heads. The shrewd investigator quite often tears down the veils of apparent complacency that middle class society keeps up. Since in most cases he is not part of the state’s police force, his independent investigation is for all practical

purposes a study of human character carried out by a discerning social being.<sup>4</sup>

Over and above such revelations is the constant and deep-rooted faith in the abilities of the detective (which very rarely fail) in putting the wrong right and see that justice prevails. Ray's detective stories always contain the seeds, if not the actual flower of poetic justice. Good necessarily triumphs over evil. Pobitra Sirkar, a Bengali literary critic writes

detective stories have an embedded ideology that some celestial body will ensure that no criminal can escape the diktat of justice.<sup>5</sup>(translation my own)

Such a stand can be made easily plausible only when the narrator's credibility holds. And an adolescent boy can very easily make such a moralistically naïve perspective credulous as no one expects him to believe in any other ideology. Here it is interesting to note that Topshe in the first Feluda mystery is a fourteen year old lad and Feluda a twenty seven year old professional. Once he grows into a private investigator from an amateur detective he gives up his job and takes to detecting full time. But Topshe can accompany him only when he is on holiday from school.

This adds another feature to the stories – that of a travelogue. As the stories take place during the school holidays mostly it also seems very natural to place them in settings outside Calcutta. This appears natural due to the travel bug that most Bengalis suffer from and school holidays are nearly always spent outside the home town. As a result Feluda's travels include Darjeeling, Gangtok, Rajasthan, Delhi, Shimla, Mumbai, Lucknow, Aurangabad, Duars, Madras, Bhubaneswar, Puri, Benaras, Kedarnath, Badrinath, Hazaribag within the country and London, Hongkong and Kathmandu internationally.<sup>6</sup> This has given him a pan-Indian and cosmopolitan aura. And is one of the major reasons for his equally great success in translation. Also the villains in his stories come from diverse walks of life. They may be foreigners such as an American or a German hippie or very Indian – a non-Bengali Sadhu, a smuggler in North India, an unscrupulous collector of watches, a magician or an actor. All these various characters and the many different settings of the mysteries have collectively helped Ray's detective to reach dizzying heights of popularity.

## CHARACTERIZATION

Most authors of detective stories have endowed their detectives with eccentricities and significant trademarks which help them to be different from both the criminals they deal with and romantic heroes of general fiction or travelogues. Hercule Poirot was a dandy with a comically egg-shaped head and large waxed moustaches. Holmes cannot be recognized apart from his height, aquiline nose and pipe. Rex Stout made his Nero Wolff bad-tempered, hedonistic, arrogant and fat while Dashiell Hammet started the American trend of abusive and aggressive detectives.<sup>7</sup>

But Ray followed the rather more clichéd route of endowing his private investigator with the qualities of a “hero” from a romance whether from novels or cinema. Pradosh Mitter is six-feet two inches, tall, tautly built without any extra fat and looks like he could well act in any cinema as the romantic lead. And in one of his stories *Buccaneer of Bombay (Bombaier Bombete)* he is actually offered the lead role in a Bombay commercial film. In the two movies Ray made based on Feluda’s mysteries he cast his favourite actor Soumitro Chatterjee as Feluda who was at that time one of the leading heroes in the milieu of Bengali cinema.

Feluda is an extremely intelligent, erudite young man. He is a quiet man who plays with his cards close to his chest but with a gift for making witty remarks. In *The Emperor’s Ring (Badshahi Aangti)* when there is a strange cry from the direction of Banbehari’s house which Topshe can’t quite identify, Feluda replies with a yawn “hyena” (hye = yawn in Bengali + na = no).<sup>8</sup> He is not finicky about his food and can adjust to any given situation. He is very agile and courageous and not in the least lazy. He is extremely dexterous with words, riddles and puzzles. Time and again he solves mysteries on the strength of his talent for solving word puzzles. I will come back to further analysis of this talent for solving word puzzles later in the chapter. But at this juncture I will merely give one example and make one little stray observation. In *The Emperor’s Ring* Feluda reveals the identity of the criminal and address by successfully making the connection between the two words “spy” and “spider”. Now in *Goblet of Fire*, the fourth Harry Potter book, Harry successfully solves a puzzle by again making the connection between the word “spy” and “spider”. One may draw the possibility of J K Rowling having read Feluda in

translation. Or one may believe this to have been one of the strangest coincidences in literature written in English.

Feluda shows no signs of being materiastically ambitious. In fact the number of mysteries he solves merely because they have piqued his interest and curiosity make a serious dent in his material resources. When travelling on his own pocket he cannot afford anything more than the 3 tier sleeper class and the Circuit House for accommodation. Also he owns no vehicle or house of his own and shows no inclination to do so either. He is happy to make use of Lalmohan Babu's green Ambassador, although he abhors its colour. The only person we know whom Feluda reveres is Uncle Sidhu. An old man with unbounded knowledge in most subjects and who is completely indifferent, one may say ignorant of the values of the external, material world. His life is totally devoted to the pursuit of knowledge with very little attempt at specialization.

Bengali critics such as Saroj Bandopadhyay loudly claim that in spite of the many non-Bengali traits that Feluda portrays his identity is nonetheless that of an authentic Bengali. Saroj Bandopadhyay cites certain traits to prove his point such as

his natural friendliness and affectionateness, in the way he maintains his relationship with Lalmohan Babu, so finely tuned in the mode of humour, or in the way he shelters the boy Tapash from any serious risk.<sup>9</sup>

But from when did common human kindness become the property of Bengalis alone and the trademarks of anyone's Bengali identity. Surabhi Banerjee writing in English too writes of these qualities in Feluda's personality but fails to see them as values which authenticate his identity as Bengali. Instead they are seen as the traits which prove his humane nature and which prevent him from becoming idealized to an extent which may prevent the reader's easy identification with him. To quote her

Feluda too is humanized by the writer; he is capable of feeling for others, loves children, understands child psychology in particular and is a man of stern principles. He can even spurn unwarranted offers and yet he is not idealized.<sup>10</sup>

Yet Ray himself was skeptical about whether Feluda would be successful in translation as he regarded his writings to have too strong a Bengali flavour to find favour with a pan-Indian audience. He must therefore have felt that Feluda was truly a Bengali personality. But Feluda has done exceptionally well in translation too with all the mysteries translated into English.

The question then arises what actually marks Feluda as a Bengali? Here I would like to put forward my own surmises. One of the most important aspects of Satyajit Ray's detective is his name – Feluda. He is called so by Topshe and because he is the voice through whom the reader is first introduced to him, he is known as Feluda to one and all. The name Felu is actually a nickname and must only be known to family and friends. Even Lalmohan Babu does not address him as Feluda but by the far more formal term Mr. Mitter. The suffix “da” denotes elder brother, so that the combination of Felu and “da” brings this particular detective very close to one's own home and family. Now the predilection for nicknames is a very Bengali phenomenon. Of course it is also a very Indian phenomenon and if I say that this alone denotes his Bengali identity I would fall into the same trap I feel earlier critics have done. But the suffix “da” is only possible in the Bengali language and this is known to be a Bengali word denoting brother by the general Indian audience just as Bhaiya and Anna are known to mean brother in North and South Indian languages respectively.

His lack of material ambition and erudite personality also makes him an example of the social milieu of Bengal especially the middle-class Bengal. His humour which is very sarcastic with a definite bite to it is very reminiscent of the stiff upper lip British humour which many Indians would easily identify because of the colonial baggage it carries. And the Bengalis, more so the middle-class Bengali, who has been educated by the colonial British since the nineteenth century may easily be identified with this particular brand of humour. After all the Bengalis have had the reputation of having their patriotic masculinity undermined by colonial education even before the rest of India was fully colonized. Bengalis therefore were the first to Westernize their culture which was most obviously reflected in their language, starting with the way they spelt their names. Pradosh Mitter is a colonized version of Pradosh Mitra. The long and short of my argument, therefore, is the fact that the Bengaliness of Feluda's identity lies greatly in the construction of his name bestowed onto him by his fourteen year old cousin. His identity

as a Bengali and his role of a detective whose adventures are supposedly narrated to only children and adolescents are indispensably interrelated.

The primary reason for Feluda's success as the oft-repeated "hero", the reason why cynicism on the reader's mind hasn't undermined his "hero" image considering the fact that a large part of his readership consists of adults lies in the success of the narratorial stance and identity. A fourteen year old boy admires and adores his erudite, courageous, physically agile and strong, extremely charismatic elder brother who is a professional private investigator. This is a credible narratorial stance and one which Ray had no difficulty in maintaining and helping to flourish in all thirty-four Feluda stories and novellas. The reader too becomes easily credulous of Feluda's nearly idealized status as the "hero" of all the mysteries. Even though Topshe is aware that if he peeks into Feluda's diary without his permission the latter will be angry, he decides to risk peeking anyway. And though Feluda does get angry he cools down enough to explain the rationale behind his use of the Greek alphabet while making notes and also how to decode them.<sup>11</sup>

Another strategy Ray employs to maintain Feluda's "hero" status is through the use of an alter-ego or the character of Lalmohan Ganguly or Jatayu. We first meet him in *The Golden Fortress (Sonar Kella)* in 1971. He is a writer of crime-thrillers which have no shelf-life but go in for a number of editions. As a result he is never very bothered about their many mistakes as they can always be corrected in the next edition. And Feluda does point out a plethora of errors in them which he always makes a note of. He provides dollops of humour in the narration from malapropisms to frequent fainting spells at the mere smell of danger. And at an overt level these only reinforce and strengthen Feluda's mastery in controlling the mystery and bringing it to a successful end. His admiration for Feluda's powers and personality are made in a far louder and overt voice than Topshe's whose narrative voice is devoid of any "blood-and-thunder" to quote Surabhi Banerjee.<sup>12</sup>

Critics and journalists alike<sup>13</sup> feel that the character of Lalmohan Ganguly or Jatayu (his pen name) is a deliberate dig at the genre of best sellers by the author. As a writer Jatayu is truly extremely slipshod. He carries out no research before writing a novel set in any corner of the globe. When he first meets Feluda he is on the scent of real-life adventure as for once he wishes to model his writing on real experiences. This, of course, is his

motive in becoming a part of Feluda's detective team. Feluda also makes editorial corrections in the drafts of his novels but declines from taking any credit for it. Lalmohan Babu gives very alliterative and bombastic titles to his novels such as *Atlantikey Atonko (Panic in Atlantic)*, *Honduras-ey Hahakar (Lamentation in Honduras)*.<sup>14</sup> Simultaneously it is important to note that Ray himself gives rather similar titles to his adventure stories. *Kailashey Kelenkari (A Killer in Kailash)*, *Gangtokey Gondogol (Trouble in Gangtok)*, *Gosaipur Sargaram (The Mystery of the Walking Dead)*, *Hatyapuri (The House of Death)*, *Joto Kando Kathmandutey (The Criminals of Kathmandu)* to name only a few. Ray, I feel through these titles satirize his own work and his critical attitude towards the prevalent trend of best selling detective adventure stories. His own stories topped the list of best-sellers for nearly three or four decades. Not only does he use Jatayu to laugh at others but he also uses him to laugh at himself. Jatayu's obvious admiration for Feluda arises out of his hidden desire to emulate him. He is however aware of the impossibility of that eventuality. Prokhor Rudra, the hero of Jatayu's stories is Jatayu's attempt to follow Feluda's real life example. Prokhor Rudra successfully solves all the mysteries he is faced with, he fearlessly deals with dangerous criminals and brandishes pistols with a steady hand and never panics or faints in the face of danger or the mere sight of a skeleton in a graveyard. In short Prokhor Rudra is Lalmohan Babu's alter-ego just as he is Feluda's alter-ego.

But Lalmohan Babu and Feluda can't easily be clubbed in the way Holmes and Watson, Poirot and Hastings and Byomkesh and Ajit can be. Lalmohan Babu is not the narrator of the stories whereas all the earlier examples are pairs of the detective and his friend who narrates the adventures. But nonetheless Lalmohan Babu is indispensable to Feluda. Feluda's own statement points in this direction.

You and I complement each other. Like borax to gold.  
You have stayed stuck to me with Araldite ever since our  
days at the Golden Fortress. You can't exist without me  
and vice-versa.<sup>15</sup>

Ashis Nandy says Jatayu, the writer of popular crime-thrillers acts as the foil to the professional detective, and harks back very strongly to the role Watson played in Holmes' life or Hastings played in Poirot's.<sup>16</sup> But he never really fulfills the other role of Watson or Hastings – that of the conductor of the truth. While both Watson and Hastings in their own way, whether with an excessively romantic imagination as in the case of



Hastings or the inevitably wrong conclusions drawn by Watson, helped both Holmes and Poirot to reach the correct solution. Lalmohan Babu never really helped Feluda in solving the mysteries. Only

in *The Rose Tinted Pearl...* it was a brilliant flash of  
Lalmohan Babu's independent intuition that saved Felu  
Mittir from defeat.<sup>17</sup>

But why then can Feluda not do without Jatayu? Of course the green ambassador and Jatayu's greater access to ready cash plays an important role. And I am sure that it doesn't harm him to have so ardent and vociferous an admirer when on the trail of some hardened criminal. But two rather more serious motives come to mind. One is aware that while Ray uses Jatayu as a double edged sword, Feluda to may be using him to remind himself that only innate intelligence, hard earned knowledge and physical prowess prevents him from degenerating into the vastly ignorant writer of crime-thrillers. Lalmohan Babu's innate middle class nature – his love of adventure but extreme fear of danger, his short stature and lack of physical strength or agility, inability to speak in any other language other than his mother tongue, his predilection for rice and fish curry, his unapologetic ignorance of other cultures and peoples, all help in silhouetting Feluda as different from him as chalk from cheese. Moreover the absence of all these traits in Feluda only goes to prove that it is his very pan-Indian and cosmopolitan personality which has led to his success as a private investigator. This of course leads to another question, that of the reason behind Feluda's success in translation.

## FELUDA IN TRANSLATION

All of Feluda's adventures have been translated into English. The first translations took place in 1988 by Chitrita Banerjee. Most of the mysteries however have been translated by Gopa Majumdar. As I have already mentioned, Satyajit Ray had initially been skeptical about translating Feluda. He was afraid that Feluda's "Bengali" identity would prove to be detrimental to his popularity in English but of course later events proved him wrong. The translators did indulge in certain changes but these were mostly personally approved of by Ray. Having come so far in the chapter I feel a close study of at least two texts should be made at this juncture. The two texts I will be dealing with are *Bombaier Bombete (Buccanneer of Bombay)*<sup>18</sup> and *Gorostthane Shabdhan (Trouble in the Graveyard)*<sup>19</sup>. I will be

studying the two texts merely to discuss the intricacies of translation as reflected in them and afterwards return to the broader dimensions of translation vis-à-vis Feluda.

*Bombaier Bombete* as is obvious from the title is set in Bombay and *Gorosthane Shabdhan* is set in Calcutta. In the very first para of the Bengali text of *Bombaier Bombete* there is a detailed description of a sweetmeat called *diamonda*. Now translating this for a non-Bengali reader would make the text unnecessarily tedious for him or her. The translator's omission of the description in this case is not only justified but also praiseworthy as she has done so that while keeping the reader informed of an integral aspect of Bengali culture she doesn't lose his/her interest in the story. In another instance the name of a local brand of a medicine has been replaced by the name of a better known brand, again to hold the readers interest and not alienate him/her through an excess of information. To be specific the name *codopirin* has been replaced by *aspirin*. In some other instance however I feel the omission has detracted from the text. For example Topshe's feelings of awe and admiration for stuntmen who risk their lives everyday and who get no credit for doing so, aren't adequately described. In this case I see no reason to omit the description of such feelings and in the process the aura of goodness that surrounds Victor Perumal, the stuntman gets diminished. In another case a humourous situation is cut down by the omission of one or two sentences. This seems extremely unnecessary to me as I am sure humour is always welcome to all readers specially the kind of simple humour Ray indulges in. In the original text the MISA laws are mentioned twice but in the translated text they are not mentioned in the first instance. This I felt may have been because the laws were repealed by the time the translated text was published but when they are mentioned in the second instance my conjecture stood nullified. I can only conclude that this is a mystery which remains unsolved within a larger mystery which ultimately does get solved.

In *Bombaier Bombete* Satyajit Ray had written all English words in the Bengali script but in *Gorosthane Shabdhan* he uses the Roman script. This may be because the people around whom the mystery is centered are British. But this distinction is obviously lost in translation. Something else that is usually lost in translation is punning. But the use of English words in narration has made it possible for the translator to retain the puns in the text. The pun on the word "grave" is successfully retained in the translation. However something that is lost is accent. For example when the chowkidar speaks in

Hindi accented Bengali it becomes clear that he must be one of the many Biharis who migrate to Calcutta in search of a job, and even a visual picture of the chowkidar rises before the readers mind. But that picture is lost in the translation as it's difficult to recreate a Hindi accent in English. Something of interest occurs when Feluda summons the chowkidar as "Here you". Now such a mode of address has a certain connotation of high handedness about it and high handedness is something Feluda usually avoids. The phrase is one which has a distinct foreign ring to it – a British detective would probably summon a guard in this manner. So in a way the translator is being true to the target language but untrue to the culture of the source language. This leads us to another crucial question that of the audience aimed at by the translator. If it is an international audience that is being aimed at then the use of such English sounding phrases may be justified. Following the same line of reasoning, words and phrases like a *lakh* of rupees, *dhoti* or *paan* should be provided with greater explanation, probably in footnotes. But such is not the case. An average Westerner or even an Asian cannot be expected to know either of these meanings. But if the audience aimed at are non-Bengalis but Indians or Bengalis who can't read Bengali then such an explanation is not required. In which case therefore the "here you" should have been changed to something different, maybe "guard" or "sentry". These slip-ups lead one to think that the translator may have been slightly confused as to the audience she is writing for, or the exact connotations of some of the phrases and words she is using.

Other than these there are very glaring mistakes in the translation. The name Victoria is substituted by Victoria Memorial. And as the former is a clue and the latter is not, it is a mistake which can change the very nature of the mystery. It's actually very easy for a Calcuttan to immediately associate Victoria Memorial with the name Victoria but it is exactly this tendency that Satyajit Ray uses to confuse readers and the detective alike. So if the translator too falls into the same trap the reader will be left totally clueless. Another mistake of less lasting implication is the confusion in the translated text as to whether the object being hunted for was the first or the last reward given to Thomas Godwin by the Nawab of Lucknow. While in the source text it is clearly stated to be the first reward, in the translated text both are mentioned at different times. At first it is said to be the last reward but later it is corrected and changed to the first reward. Something else that I have a problem with is the title. While *Gorosthan* means graveyard, *Shabdhan* doesn't mean trouble. It means "beware of trouble" or "danger"; it is a call to be alert. Actually the

word “danger” is better situated than “trouble”. While it may have been difficult to incorporate a phrase like “beware of danger” in the title, the word “danger” may easily have been used. One of the reasons for its exclusion may be its use in a title of an earlier mystery *Danger in Darjeeling*. But the word “trouble” has been used in other titles too so such an explanation doesn’t really hold much water and the title remains rather unsatisfactory. But it is to the translator’s credit that the spine chilling suspense and the drama of the original is more or less kept intact. The eeriness of the graveyard, the menace of the villain and the drama of the climax is equally successful in both the texts.

Feluda and his adventures, as I have earlier mentioned, is very much reminiscent of Victorian England. His personal habits and traits, his humour containing shades of colonial India, these are easily recognizable both in the original and the translated language. But as the translated text is specifically aimed at English educated audience this characteristic becomes all important. As all Indians are familiar with various remnants of colonialism prevalent in independent India, the shades of colonial attitude in an India detective only makes him more easily identifiable for them. Especially for English educated ones as they already have access to the Western texts which have influenced Ray in his creation of Feluda. Another important component which aids this identification is the language used by Ray. Bengali and English is easily combined into a metropolitan, urban mixture which reflects the post independence, middle-class, bourgeoisie milieu of nearly all Indian cities. All of Ray’s writings which he aimed at children always contained an element of educating the reader or imparting information to him/her. Feluda too carries out this function and educates Topshe and vis-à-vis him the reader about various subjects from photography, history of weaponry, antique value of watches, sculptures and paintings, jewellery and gems, physics, chemistry, natural sciences, the list can go on and on. Such an abundance of knowledge cutting across cultural specificities is bound to help the translation go beyond the original Bengali cultural setting. Here the travel aspects of the mysteries also have a role to play. In translation, the fact that Feluda travels all over India interests a reader outside Bengal as he could then be temporarily functioning from the reader’s own home town or state.

In order to problematize the question of translation I would like to refer to Alok Bhalla’s essay *The Place of Translation in a Literary Habitat* where he says

that the act of translation is a kind of imaginative and existentially serious conversation.<sup>20</sup>

The translator for him is a person who allows others to cross the bridge to another world, civilization, culture and society, usually very different from one's own. This is possible only because the translator has a social purpose. This seems very relevant for all the translations that are taking place today in India, from regional languages to English such as Ray himself, Paul Zacharia, Nirmal Verma, Ismat Chughtai, Mahasweta Devi and numerous others. India being a multilingual society, it is virtually impossible to know about the literature written in different regional languages until and unless they are translated into a common language such as English. This also gives the translator the opportunity to show the world at large that there exists flourishing literatures in most regional languages.

However to counter this argument one can say that English is creating a new hegemony in India where only a certain class of people, mostly urban with certain financial privileges have access to fluency in the language, hence knowledge of the various communities in India. English is very much the language of power the world over, India being no different. Regional literatures once translated into English then attain the kind of power it never enjoyed otherwise. This explains the rush of translations into English, even though English is a foreign language belonging to a foreign culture and society which must make translating Indian languages into it difficult. Translating one Indian language into another would I believe, prove a lot easier, as culturally and socially, if not linguistically they must have certain similarities. Also translating from one Indian language to another would help break the hegemony of English in our country and make translations available to a wider range of readership cutting across class and caste privileges. In 1996 when Mahasweta Devi received the Jnanpeth, she acknowledged the role of translation which helped spread her stories beyond only a Bengali audience, and expressed her gratitude towards, not Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak who has translated her into English, but Arvind Kumar who helped translate her work into Hindi and other Indian languages.<sup>21</sup> Thus she underlines the importance of breaking out of this hegemony created by English and also widening the range of target languages for translations and the reach of such translations among an Indian readership.

Now when we move away from these debates on translation and apply their dynamics to Ray, the first dilemma that arises is the question of Ray's original readership. Ray had aimed at an urban, metropolitan readership that, if not educated in English medium schools would at least be cognizant of the language. Ray's own legacy of an English education and his reading of western detective stories necessarily created a literature aimed at a readership who would, if not be aware of the same legacy would at least be capable of appreciating it. This then nullifies somewhat Alok Bhalla's concept of translation fulfilling a social purpose of creating a bridge between two different cultures. Ray's fiction in Bengali is actually a reflection of the hegemonic effect of the target language. Translating his works then confuses the concept of the translation's inherent inability of expressing cultural specificities into a source language which is unaware of their existence. Apart from widening Ray's readership from Bengalis to all Indians and may be beyond, his translations do not really serve any other purpose. Ray's colonial baggage, the manner in which he westernized Feluda's surname, his frequent use of English, his use of the Roman script, his sardonic humour have combined in a successful amalgamation for Feluda in both Bengali and English.

This deduction is in complete contrast to the standpoint of another translation theorist – Walter Benjamin. According to him the original text is connected to its translation by a vital connection for the translation is a reflection of the afterlife of the original. He claims

translations that are more than transmissions of subject matter come into being when in the course of its survival a work has reached the age of its fame.... the life of the originals attains in them to its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering.<sup>22</sup>

Such an attitude to a large extent subverts the traditional viewpoint of seeing the translation as an inferior, secondary, degenerative version of the original. Benjamin further posits that the translation with the passage of time is subsumed into the literary habitat of the translated language. And it is this last statement which I feel most applies to Ray's works in translation. If Feluda in his derivative form, with the mantle of Holmes and Poirot on his shoulders, can attain and maintain an independent position in the culture and literary habitat of the target language then these translations would have truly achieved an ambition unseen and unthought of by their author and many of their readers.

To borrow Thomas Hardy's language it would complete "the return of the native". Or does J K Rowling's usage of Feluda's trick prove that the native has already returned?

## CHILD/ADULT FICTION

To fulfill the demands of neatness and legibility I have further divided this section into three sub-divisions. The first deals with the narrator and the narratorial significance thereof. The second with the violence and horror around which nearly all of Ray's works are centered. And the last with the underlying sexuality displayed in this series.

## NARRATION

As I have mentioned earlier the most important strategy Ray followed while writing his detective stories is the use of an adolescent boy between thirteen and fourteen years of age as their narrator. This immediately helped him to categorize his writing as that for "young people". If the narrator is an adolescent then mostly adolescents or children approaching adolescence would constitute the main readership. But the unprecedented success of Feluda among children and adults alike completely upset Ray's own understanding of his writings and those he wrote for. His detective stories are the only ones among his fiction which were first published in an adult magazine *Desh* and not *Sandesh*, his children's magazine. The first to be published was the fifth Feluda mystery. His status as private investigator had by then been well established as well as his relationship with Topshe. The latter's role as narrator too was well recognized. Knowingly or unknowingly elements of adult fiction, therefore, must have been present in these adventures right from their conception. How and what exactly are these elements I will now try to investigate.

In order to do so it's first important to start with Topshe and his narratorial style and all that it reveals. Tapesh Ranjan Mitra is a keenly observant and intelligent adolescent. He doesn't make the deductions and connections Feluda does and he is certainly not as knowledgeable but he is not always completely in the dark and often poses very pertinent

questions and comments. He is also very reticent about himself. We never really get to know any personal details about him, whether he goes to an English or Bengali medium school – his dexterity with both is appreciable, who are his friends or which subjects interest him the most. He is ever ready to listen to Feluda's many lectures on various subjects but responds with equal interest to all.<sup>23</sup> In my opinion his role in these adventures is only that of the narrator and Ray carefully curtails his character to suit that necessity. As the reader views Feluda, Lalmohan Ganguly and every other character and every situation through Topshe's eyes, his reactions are bound to condition the reader's response. Therefore if Topshe categorically states which school he goes to or which subjects interest him, he will lose his position as the neutral narrator. He often has to exercise unusual restraint for an adolescent, mostly when Feluda pulls Lalmohan Ganguly's leg, and Topshe in order to ensure the success of the joke, remark or humorous situation has to keep a straight face. But the author does alert the reader to the fact that such restraint is not easy or natural for Topshe and as such it should be greatly appreciated. This then ensures Topshe's popularity among readers, both children and adults. The former admire his maturity and the latter appreciate it and sympathize with him.

Topshe's narratorial style can be seen as a significant element in the popularity of Ray's detective series. He carries some of Ray's own signature narratorial traits such as his excellent eye for detail while describing any situation or place. To quote Saroj Bandopadhyay again

Topshe's prose ... is charged with the essential quality of Ray's films, the art of the precisely essential, just the little that needs to be put across. There is not a single sentence ever in Topshe's account that is superfluous.<sup>24</sup>

But Topshe's prose is not naturally focused. Feluda himself guides him on this head.

If you can avoid an overload of rusty adjectives and the so called learned expressions, and go straight for what you've seen, that will serve the purpose best.<sup>25</sup>

And it is certainly not difficult to see the author speaking through Feluda to guide the adolescent narrator into his and therefore an adult narratorial style. Surabhi Banerjee describes this phenomenon saying



surprisingly enough, the distance between the author and the narrator gradually shrinks, thus creating a complexity of point of view. In his detective stories, he adopts Topshe's point of view, yet Feluda, the detective, guides his narration throughout, the upshot being the coalescence of the adolescent-narrator's point of view with that of an adult-mature narrative stance. Thus Feluda operates as the centre of consciousness in a rather subtle manner.<sup>26</sup>

Such coalescence necessarily problematizes Ray's authorial identity as a children's writer or at least a writer for adolescents. In my opinion, Ray finds it difficult in spite of a constant vigorous effort to actually demarcate any significant line between adult and child fiction. The adult voice refuses to be silent and makes its presence felt forcefully time and time again.

But Topshe's narration never fails in correctly characterizing him as an adolescent. His language inevitably reveals his age. In *The Emperor's Ring* when Feluda tells him how to write Calcutta using Greek alphabets, he exclaims

Stop, stop! Why the class will be over in spelling just three syllables.<sup>27</sup> (translation mine)

Again in *Feluda in London (Londoney Feluda)* he says

Feluda has told me a number of times that of all the detectives created in the world Sherlock Holmes is the number one.<sup>28</sup>

The words "number one" help make the prose lively and bring out an adolescent's characteristics use of slang. This reveals Ray's success as a writer who never fails in his characterization of children and adolescents. They are never stilted in his stories though they may be very few in number. They are natural, lively and life like.

## VIOLENCE AND HORROR

One of the self-imposed limitations Ray's fiction reveals is a paucity of gory violence. Ray follows certain strategies in order to restrict violence in Feluda stories. As I have already mentioned while discussing Feluda's characteristic, he is very dexterous in puzzle solving

and Ray often centres the solution of the mystery on the correct solution of a puzzle or by correctly revealing the reason behind an apparent work of magic. In Saroj Bandopadhyay's opinion

the finest story in this manner is *The Curse of Chhinnamasta*. Children and adults alike break into exclamations of spontaneous admiration at the brilliant wordplay of "Kailash" (the name of a mountain) meaning *Koi Lash*, i.e. "Where is the dead body?" or the English word "key" hidden in the Bengali *kee paini kee khunjchhi?* (Lit. "What haven't I got? What am I looking for?")<sup>29</sup>

Such examples only prove that such problem solving is probably the only successful substitute to horror and violence.

Violence is present in some form or the other in all his writings. Of course detective thrillers or adventures generally have a greater degree of violence and horror than Ray's stories but these don't really suffer from a dearth of drama or horror. All the mysteries don't depict murders but they do incorporate violence at some level or the other. There are often unsuccessful attempts at murder but the horror in such cases is nonetheless real. During the climax of *The Emperor's Ring* Feluda and Topshe are locked in a room with a poisonous rattle snake that advances to attack them and Topshe passes out in terror. No one but the snake gets killed at the end but the "spirit" of the horror certainly hangs heavy over the story and provides ample drama for all readers, children and adults alike. In *The Mystery of the Elephant God (Joy Baba Felunath)*, an old sculptor who can certainly not harm anyone, is murdered because he witnesses the villain up to some hanky panky. In *The Mystery of the House of Death (Hatyapuri)* too there are two murders, one of which doesn't seem all that necessary for plot development. According to Saroj Bandopadhyay, Ray while

writing for children ... would not like the horror of a murder to hang heavy over the spirit of his story.<sup>30</sup>

In my opinion this is a completely erroneous line of reasoning. For a gifted writer like Ray it was possible to bring horror into the most normal of situations. He did not really require actual bloody murders to bring the element of horror and drama into his fiction. In his adventures a spider can become more horrific than the nuclear bomb. It is all dependant on the sensitized handling of a subject by the author. Horror and violence is

the crux of most of Ray's writing and his variety of both can induce them in anything from a plant or snake to a real dead body. In my opinion he doesn't really succeed in de-horrifying his stories, though he may have tried hard. Certainly he doesn't describe gory, bloody murders but such restraint doesn't fail to bring in the element of violence. Any subject matter can have violence or non-violence attached to it depending on how effectively it is deployed within the descriptive and narrative style of the author. And Ray's brilliant in depicting drama, horror, suspense and violence in his fiction.

## SEXUALITY

Ray's literary world is always dominated by men. Even his child characters are all male. Sexuality therefore enters this world rather obliquely, more in the form of homoeroticism. It is nonetheless present and most prominently so in the Feluda series. The trio of Feluda, Lalmohan Ganguly and Topshe has a number of undercurrents always centered around the very male figure of Feluda. Topshe openly admires him but is never in awe of him and Feluda is more than happy to guide him in all matters. Topshe alone can impinge upon Feluda's privacy with impunity. While there is not much physical contact between the two, other than Feluda's occasional pat on his head or shoulder. Significantly whenever they travel outside Calcutta, they share the same room and sleep on adjacent beds. While the homoerotic strains here are very subtle, they are not so between Jatayu and Feluda. The former very obviously is an admirer of the latter and can never really dare to cross the limit or boundary drawn by Feluda. Even in the middle of an adventure Lalmohan Babu, bursting with curiosity, doesn't dare to question Feluda before he is ready to reveal all and always offers him complete and submissive obedience. Feluda in turn appears very fond of him and while deriving amusement from his antics, holds himself responsible for his safety just as much as he feels responsible for Topshe. Lalmohan Ganguly is three years senior<sup>31</sup> to Feluda but their power relation is subverted. In *Mystery of the Elephant God (Joy Baba Felunath)* when Lalmohan Babu has to face a dangerous situation in the villain's house and Feluda is unable to save him, the latter apologizes to him even though eventually no harm is done. The entire episode is rather reminiscent of the strong male unable to protect the weaker females in his charge. This is further emphasized by the fact that Feluda enjoys Lalmohan Babu's open admiration and doesn't hesitate to make many demands on him from borrowing his car during investigations to accompanying him on all adventures and sharing the danger with

him, as well as inviting him to indulge in unconventional antics like riding a camel with the surety that Lalmohan Babu would never refuse him. It appears to me that while Feluda always essays the role of the dominant male, Topshe and Lalmohan Babu with respect to him, essay the role of the submissive females. While with Topshe such homoerotic strains can also be problematized as incestuous, in the case of Lalmohan Babu such a risk doesn't arise and therefore appears a lot more straightforward.

Even though children may overlook such undercurrents, adults certainly will not and I doubt that many adolescents will be completely oblivious to them either. When Satyajit Ray openly claims to be writing for children as I have mentioned in detail earlier in my dissertation, the question arises for whom was he including these adult nuances? No writer, I am sure, would painstakingly include such matters in his/her writing, as would not be understood by the targeted readership. And with such adult materials in Ray's works, it is only natural that the readership would also include adults. It is only surprising that Ray always or at least initially found it very difficult to understand the motive behind the popularity of his fiction among adults. But as he never gave up his self-defined identity as a children's writer he later began to face a number of limitations and problems while dealing with the demands of his readers. As far back as 1984 he wrote to Saroj Bandopadhyay

Let me close this letter with a personal problem. I am facing serious problems with both Shonku and Felu-da. I have already used up all the major elements or staples of the science fiction or fantasy, in my Shonku stories. I'm worried about the future. It's the same with Felu-da. There are limitations when it comes to writing detective stories for adolescents. For one has to leave out most kinds of crime as adult material. Sharadindu-Babu did not have to face this problem. But I have to face it. And yet they are now all so close to me that I cannot think of banishing them.<sup>32</sup>

By 1990 the demands of adult readers for more violence and passion in the Feluda series had taken on such alarming proportions that Ray was obliged to provide an explanation in *The Mystery of Nayan (Nayan Rahasya)*. Even in the preface to his translated works he felt obliged to provide his own definition of his fiction and the limitations he had imposed on himself. Such defensiveness I believe reveals Ray's resentment of adult

readers who made such demands as forced him to rethink, reanalyze his own understanding of his fiction. His reaction to his adult readers appears to border on civil curtness if not rudeness and is all the more surprising for he used to reply to all the letters written to him by children on his own and never used the services of a secretary. His aversion to an adult readership may of course be traced back to his family tradition of writing for children which such a readership would prevent him from upholding or carrying forward.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> According to Saroj Bandopadhyay *Oedipus the King* and *Hamlet the Prince of Denmark* were the first works of art which showcased the joys of investigation and deduction which solved the existing mystery/problem or completed the goal set for the hero. Saroj Bandopadhyay, *The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray* in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 90.
- <sup>2</sup> Satyajit Ray, *Unicorn Expedition and Other Fantastic Tales of India* (New York: NAL Penguin Inc, 1987) p viii.
- <sup>3</sup> Surabhi Banerjee, The Intellectual Sleuth in *Satyajit Ray: Beyond the Frame*, (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1996) p 167.
- <sup>4</sup> Saroj Bandopadhyay, *The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray* in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 90-91.
- <sup>5</sup> Pobitra Sirkar, Satyajit Ray: Lekhok in Probodh Kumar Moitra ed. *Anonyo Satyajit*, (Calcutta: Nandan, 1998) p 36.
- <sup>6</sup> Saroj Bandopadhyay, *The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray* in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 94.
- <sup>7</sup> Pobitra Sirkar, *Satyajit Ray: Lekhok* in Probodh Kumar Moitra ed. *Anonyo Satyajit*, (Calcutta: Nandan, 1998) p 34
- <sup>8</sup> Saroj Bandopadhyay, *The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray* in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 94.
- <sup>9</sup> Saroj Bandopadhyay, *The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray* in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 94.
- <sup>10</sup> Surabhi Banerjee, The Intellectual Sleuth in *Satyajit Ray: Beyond the Frame*, (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1996) p 170.
- <sup>11</sup> Satyajit Ray, *The Feluda Stories: Emperor's Ring*, trans. Gopa Majumdar, (New Delhi: Viking, 1996) p 483-485.
- <sup>12</sup> Surabhi Banerjee, The Intellectual Sleuth in *Satyajit Ray: Beyond the Frame*, (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1996) p 171.
- <sup>13</sup> Swapan kumar Ghosh, Kahini, Porichalok O Choritro, Sagarmoy Ghosh ed *Desh* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2 May 1992) p 31.
- <sup>14</sup> Saroj Bandopadhyay, *The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray* in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 96.

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- <sup>15</sup> Saroj Bandopadhyay, The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 96.
- <sup>16</sup> Ashis Nandy, Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide to Exquisite Murders: Creativity, Social Criticism, and the Partitioning of the Self in *The Savage Freud and other essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1995) p 249.
- <sup>17</sup> Saroj Bandopadhyay, The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 98.
- <sup>18</sup> Satyajit Ray, *The Feluda Stories: The Buccaneer of Bombay*, trans. Chitrita Bannerjee (New Delhi: Viking, 1996).
- <sup>19</sup> Satyajit Ray, *The Feluda Stories: Trouble in the Graveyard*, trans. Gopa Majumdar (New Delhi: Viking, 1996).
- <sup>20</sup> Alok Bhalla, The Place of Translation in a Literary Habitat, *Hindi*, Vol 1, April 2000.
- <sup>21</sup> I have garnered this piece of information from Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi ed. *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, (London & New York, Routledge, 1999).
- <sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry John (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).
- <sup>23</sup> Saroj Bandopadhyay, The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 99.
- <sup>24</sup> Saroj Bandopadhyay, The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 99.
- <sup>25</sup> Saroj Bandopadhyay, The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 100.
- <sup>26</sup> Surabhi Banerjee, Macrocosms in Microcosms in *Satyajit Ray: Beyond the Frame*, (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1996) p 159-160.
- <sup>27</sup> Pobitra Sirkar, Satyajit Ray: Lekhok in Probodh Kumar Moitra ed. *Anonyo Satyajit*, (Calcutta: Nandan, 1998) p 38.
- <sup>28</sup> Pobitra Sirkar, Satyajit Ray: Lekhok in Probodh Kumar Moitra ed. *Anonyo Satyajit*, (Calcutta: Nandan, 1998) p 38.
- <sup>29</sup> Saroj Bandopadhyay, The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 95.
- <sup>30</sup> Saroj Bandopadhyay, The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 95.

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<sup>31</sup> Satyajit Ray, *The Feluda Stories: Trouble in the Graveyard*, trans. Gopa Majumdar (New Delhi: Viking, 1996).

<sup>32</sup> Saroj Bandopadhyay, The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 100.



## CHAPTER III

### ACID, ROCKETS AND PHILOSOPHY: ANALYZING SHONKU'S FORMULA

Scientific fantasy and supernatural tales were Satyajit Ray's forte. Professor Shonku, the protagonist of his science fiction series was created before Feluda in 1961. In this chapter I will critically analyze these stories and try to reveal the underlying ideology which, I believe, is coloured by the contemporary world political scenario and which may not catch the attention of all readers of this series as unlike Feluda, Shonku didn't really attract too many adult readers. I have divided the chapter into sub-sections to facilitate streamlining my argument. Firstly I will deal with the structure of the stories, secondly their characterization, thirdly Shonku in translation and lastly the adult elements in these stories under the guise of their overall styling as children's stories.

A simple fairytale doesn't need to keep any basic rules in mind. Fantasy allows the full run of imagination and not much attention is required nor given to reality and the rules governing it. Science fantasy too allows ample scope to the imagination but a greater degree of reality checks is required. Certain basic facts are taken for granted such as the possibility of the invention of a time machine which only operates in a certain specific manner as set down by the author or the fact that a man can become invisible but still retains certain abilities such as that of sight. But the story thereafter has to grow in tandem with realistic depictions of situations and characters. Satyajit Ray follows these assumptions that govern science fiction and makes each of Shonku's inventions exceptionally believable and the events which unfold are often as inexplicable to the professor as to the reader.

Science fiction in Bengali was first written by Hemlal Dutta. His story *Rahasya* was published in 1882 in the magazine *Shochitro Bigyan Darpan* in two issues.<sup>1</sup> In English literature it was Jules Verne's who first created the definition of science fiction and as such he is considered the father of science fiction. But H G Wells before him, writing scientific romances, went a long way in providing a model for this new genre of fiction.<sup>2</sup> Ray acknowledged that some of

his stories may well carry clear influences of his favourite childhood authors Jules Verne, H G Wells and Conan Doyle.

Surabhi Banerjee draws a significant comparison between Jules Verne and Satyajit Ray and even goes so far as to set them down numerically. I quote her

- (i) the kindred areas of thematic interest – their stories deal with voyages, expeditions to space, land and the underworld,
- (ii) their stories are filled with narratised geology and unexpected visionary material, and
- (iii) the air of verisimilitude. Verne said in an interview in 1904, ‘I have always made a point in my romances of basing my so-called inventions upon a groundwork of actual fact, and of using in their construction methods and materials which are not entirely without the pale of contemporary engineering skill and knowledge,’ and finally
- (iv) the conspicuous dearth of, or rather the absence of, women characters.<sup>3</sup>

She also points out certain dissimilarities. In her opinion Ray’s stories are more complex and the fact that Shonku is a world-renowned scientist with extraordinary intelligence and achievements lends creditability to the stories. She also feels that Ray’s talent at characterization is greater than Verne. All the smaller characters including the robots are more fully sketched by Ray than by Verne, whose only character of some vitality is Captain Nemo.

Another important distinction; Ray’s stories were also distinguished by his clear intentions of making them entertaining reading for children and adolescents. Therefore he meticulously kept such obvious adult elements as romance and sex out of the boundary and scope of the adventures of Professor Trilokeshwar Shonku. Within this chapter I will try to reveal how, in spite of such strict guidelines, Ray did include many adult elements in his ostensibly children’s science fiction series. These may have been included unwittingly and they may be

beyond the grasp of the majority of readers who are children, but they are certainly the reason why Ray's *children's stories* attracted such a large adult readership. But before I jump to the conclusion of the chapter let me discuss the broad structure which Professor Shonku's narration follows.

## STRUCTURE

Ray wrote all the Professor Shonku stories in the diary form with a date preceding each entry. But he never mentioned the year in these dates which make it impossible to actually trace these stories and link them to any historical event. The first story of course, records the discovery of this amazing chronicle of adventures. The first person narrator of *Byomjatrir Diary* is amazed by the diary itself as it changes colour, possesses elastic pages which do not burn nor can be damaged by any human or animal. But in the end, inexplicably, this diary is consumed by ants and the reader is left to his/her own conjectures about the truth of the experiences narrated within. The first person narrator is not even sure who Professor Shonku is and where he may be currently residing. All he knows is that he is an extraordinary scientist who lived in the small town of Giridi and invented many marvellous machines and robots and even medicines.

When Ray had written the first Shonku story he hadn't envisaged an entire series. When its popularity demanded later additions he must have been hard put to find some way of resurrecting the diary which was eaten by ants. He solved the problem by the sudden discovery of further twenty-one diaries from Shonku's residence in Giridi by the first person narrator of *Byomjatrir Diary*. In a way, the mention of twenty-one diaries may also have acted as a limitation but as each diary did not signify merely one adventure or experience a further crisis did not develop.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently the first person narrator, who was actually Shonku's publisher, made no further contributions to the narration and it was mostly carried on by Shonku with some rare interpolations by others, such as Abinash Babu in *Swapnadeep (The Dream Island)*.<sup>5</sup> In the latter case the style of narration is made very distinct from Shonku's

and the reader has no problem in identifying a stranger narrating part of the adventure as Shonku is unable to do so temporarily, for whatever reason.

Generally Shonku made an entry about each day's singular events at the end of the day or when a set of events have been resolved and the climax over. The diary was the record of all adventures when they were over but they were drawn from immediate memory and, therefore, many of the entries began with sentences such as

Let me set down the nerve-racking experiences of today.<sup>6</sup>

or

It is two hours since we arrived in Cairo. My hands are not steady, yet I must write down the terrible events of the last two days.<sup>7</sup>

Science fiction on the whole is actually a collection of a number of sub-genres and the parameters of such a collection is also rather arbitrary and amorphous. To quote Surabhi Banerjee

viewed operationally, science fiction is best judged ... as a grouping (a compound-genre or pseudo-genre) of story types, not all of which are closely related, there are stories about inventions; stories set in the future; stories of non-human civilizations, adventure stories placed in other worlds; stories of great natural catastrophes; stories that transform reality in all.<sup>8</sup>

The Professor Shonku series too has been variously divided into categories by different critics. Broadly they can be collated as follows

1. Space expeditions and strangers from a new planet
2. Robots and other mechanized creations
3. Extraordinary animals and plants
4. Touchstones and nectar
5. A time machine
6. Invisible creatures
7. Unsolved wonders

8. Misuse of applied science and dishonest scientists
9. Miscellaneous.<sup>9</sup>

*Byomjatrir Diary* would be an example of the first at two categories, *The Dream Island* of the third, *Corvus* and *Professor Shonku and the Strange Doll* of the eighth and *The Sahara Mystery* of the seventh. A close textual analysis of all these stories may not be possible within the limited scope of this chapter but I will attempt to make certain references to them in the later sections, especially in the following one dealing with characterization.

## CHARACTERIZATION

Professor Trilokeswar Shonku's name is of great significance. It literally means the god of the three worlds – sky, earth and water. Professor Shonku is equally comfortable in all three, thanks to his amazing inventions, and can travel in space, on land and under water with equal ease and aplomb. In Ray's own words

Professor Shonku, the scientist-inventor may be said to be a mild mannered version of Professor Challenger, where the love of adventure takes him to the remote corners of the globe.<sup>10</sup>

I have already mentioned the various similarities between Jules Verne and Satyajit Ray and will not go into the debate again. Shonku as a surname is rather unknown though strangely familiar as it is probably a corruption of the name Shankara in Bengali. The name is not used as a surname though and hence it confers a strange but familiar identity on him. Also this gives Shonku a regionless and casteless character, very important for his cosmopolitan identity. His illustrations portray him as a bearded and bespectacled man in his middle ages, usually attired in a laboratory coat and trousers, very similar to Professor Calculus in the *Tintin* comics.<sup>11</sup> In spite of the absent minded professor look, Shonku is not a comic character. He is a scientist of great renown with scientist friends in nearly every country of the world. He is frequently invited to seminars held in different corners of the globe and comes away from them greatly acclaimed by all. His manner is certainly mild and dignified and extremely polite to both great scientists and laymen such as his rather disbelieving

neighbour Abinash Babu. He lives alone with his cat Newton and his servant Prahlad in Giridi, a very small town in Jharkhand. There are, in a typical Ray created world, no women characters in the series. All the scientists, neighbours and villains that Shonku interacts with are inevitably male. The world in which he resides is, as is obvious, very cosmopolitan even though he is actually placed on the periphery, geographically. I will elaborate upon this point later. His scientific interests are varied and he takes on the roles of an archaeologist, anthropologist, chemical experimenter, an engineer who makes very complex and efficient robots, machines and vehicles as well as a pharmacist who invents pills to cure all human ailments. But above all he has an adventurous spirit which induces him to undertake hazardous journeys to solve the yet unsolved mysteries of this universe. He is extremely courageous but abhors violence and has invented only one weapon of destruction – the annihilin gun, ostensibly for self-defense. However in the story *The Dream Island*, I feel his use of the annihilin gun is rather unjustified. He uses it on a tiger while he is himself in the Shankoplane, the aeroplane he has designed and manufactured himself. The tiger would never have posed a threat to him if he had not flown near it and according to the narration he only reached the top of the trees of the jungle where the tiger was sighted and as such the latter could not have attacked and harmed him seriously. Yet Shonku annihilated the tiger with the gun. This violence rather undermines the reason for the gun's creation – self-defense.

While Feluda functions from the urban centre of Calcutta, Professor Shonku operates from the small town of Giridi. Yet his reach is far more international than the former's. The reason behind such a difference, explains Ashis Nandy, is the understanding that

to do great science, as the moderns define it, one has constantly to rub shoulders with western scientists, for creative science is primarily a western pursuit.<sup>12</sup>

The historical reason for such a definition is of course the policy of imperialism which withheld technical education from the colonies and provided it with only such education as could be utilized in generating cheaper administrative labour for the empire's needs. Therefore in order to establish Shonku as a credible scientist of extraordinary genius, it is extremely important to show him hobnobbing with various members of the international scientific community which is primarily dominated by the Europeans and Americans, namely

whites. And in order to make this reasoning hold true at all times it is also very important to have villains who hail from the Western world. The Eastern world which is relatively scientifically and technologically backward can certainly not yield scientific frauds and psychopaths. Most of the villains are scientists who are misusing their scientific talents. Of the twenty-one villains in the Shonku stories, only two are Indian.<sup>13</sup>

## RAY'S PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

In this section I will be dealing with all the issues which I feel falls outside the purview of children's literature; and the elements which can be defined as entertainment for adolescents and children. Primarily this involves Ray's particular understanding and philosophy of science and technology. Within this series Ray uses Shonku as the mouthpiece for his philosophy and therefore from now on I will not try to demarcate between the two and when discussing Shonku's philosophy can be safely read as discussing Ray's.

Shonku's understanding and philosophy of science is very Indian in nature. Although he believes that science will one day solve all mysteries existent in this world, he refuses to disbelieve the presence of the supernatural and the occult especially when he witnesses certain inexplicable happenings with his own eyes. He advocates a sense of proportion and abhors the grasping and greedy nature of humans. He believes, as is revealed in the story *Demetrius*, that man should live as an ordinary being and neither become a puppet nor a monster. Control over one's self and restraint in one's wants and needs are two values he valourizes. While he applauds courage and scientific curiosity, he deplores Icharean ambition and greed.

*Byomjatrir Diary*, the first Shonku story, says Siddhartho Ghosh<sup>14</sup> was written in the tradition of Sukumar Ray's *Heshoram Hushiarer Diary*. The latter, he says, was written as a critique of Arthur Conan Doyle's euro-centric Professor Challenger and the former is a parody of Yuri Gagarin's successful space expedition and the resultant mad race in technological supremacy between America and the erstwhile Soviet Union. Technological advancement was then (and even now) seen by western eyes as the only paradigm of judging the progress of human

civilization. Professor Shonku at this juncture of world history takes off in a home made spaceship with his cat Newton, servant Prahlad, who reads the *Ramayana* to pass time, and his equally home made robot Bidhusekhar. He reaches a planet named Tafa, technologically far superior to us. Their problems are not that of illiteracy but that of too many brainy people and they are suffering from a surfeit of technological advancement and natural calamities. Thus, Ray successfully portrays the dangerous fallout of the single-minded pursuit of such a philosophy of science and technology; which only aims at fulfilling human ambition for control over this planet and universe; and also the Western attitude towards nature and natural resources, both of which are seen as present only to be exploited for the enhancement of human comfort and economic prosperity. While Ray designates such an attitude and the actions which arise from it as primarily Western, he is not unaware of the fact that it has influenced the entire world in reality.

At this juncture I wish to use an example from one of Ray's movies, *Pratidwandi*. When the protagonist of the movie

is asked at a job interview whether Man's landing on the moon isn't the most important thing to have happened in recent times, he answers that the Viet Nameese [sic] people's resistance to American aggression is far more important. This was not just smart dialogue [written by Ray] but a statement of [his] faith.<sup>15</sup>

Ray's faith in human values and the fact that he prioritizes humanity above technology and science are obvious conclusions from this example as well as from *Byomjatriri Diary* and another remarkable Shonku story *Tellus*.<sup>16</sup>

What I want to draw attention to in both these stories is the presence of humanized robots and machines. These reveal human characteristics outside of their maker's control and the latter is even unaware of the reason for such characteristics. Let me first discuss *Tellus*. The name alludes to a machine, spherical in shape, made of platinum and weighing forty-two kilos. It holds within its memory all the knowledge at the disposal of human memory, all over the world, and it can therefore answer any query posed to it, provided of course the answer is known to human civilization in the first place. The machine is activated by the



words “Tell us” and hence its name. One day after an earthquake Tellus suddenly disappears. When Shonku and his scientific colleagues ultimately find it in a park they realize it has inexplicably developed a mind of its own with a definite philosophical bent to it. It speaks in elliptical sentences and philosophizes on the ideas of age, knowledge and human achievements or progress. It also reveals clairvoyance which Shonku disregards and comes to harm at the hands of the villain. In the end Tellus dies – I am using the word “dies” deliberately because Tellus’ transformation gives it a very definite human character and voice – and bursts into a number of fragments; an eerie voice is then heard saying

I know what comes after death.<sup>17</sup>

Bidhusekhar, Shonku’s robot who first made an appearance in *Byomjatrir Diary*<sup>18</sup> also reveals a mind of his own, a sense of humour and even clairvoyance, none of which was part of Shonku’s design. In fact according to Shonku’s calculations it shouldn’t possess any of these qualities and he can certainly not fathom how it does so. But Shonku accepts such an unexpected development with great equanimity and even tries to hone these talents by teaching Bidhusekhar to speak Bengali. Bidhusekhar’s name itself is remarkable in its difference from the names Western scientists were prone to give to their robots. Bidhusekhar is a rather old-fashioned Bengali name, common more in the nineteenth than the twentieth century and one which has a weighty, aristocratic ring to it. Such a deliberate and consistent pattern by Satyajit Ray; humanizing all the machines created by Shonku to carry out human functions more efficiently, thus making technological inventions far superior to the average human capability; clearly delineates his own ideology regarding science and technology. Even more than his Shonku series or even the short story *Bonku Babu’s Friend*, his film script *Alien*, which he was supposed to make in Hollywood reveals or makes his ideology very clear. In many ways of course there are many points of similarity between *Bonku Babu’s Friend* and *Alien* but as I have already discussed the former in my first chapter, I will refer only to the latter here.

The highpoint in the script is the Alien’s friendship with the most ridiculed and helpless boy in a small village on the furthest corner of the periphery of human civilization. Ray in a letter to Marie Seton described his storyline and placed the word civilization within quotes. The Alien was completely oblivious to the various equations of power and economic

relations between America and India as portrayed in the former's attempt to help the latter solve its water crisis. The many ways in which politicians and media persons of both countries made sure of economic and political mileage from the transaction; the glamour behind the photographer's lens were all equally unimportant, uninteresting and non-existent to him. What he treasured most were the wondrous sights shown to him by the young boy – snakes, frogs, fireflies, lotuses, birds and squirrels. Ray, through his use of extraterrestrial beings, again and again attempts to emphasize upon the need to prioritize human values such as friendship and compassion above technology and power over fellow humans. The fact that in all his stories technologically superior beings, whether they are extraterrestrial beings or human made machines, always prioritize humanity above technology and forces the reader to rethink and reevaluate values governing human society regarding the importance and role of technology and science in human lives. Ray never really explains the origin of the supernatural and surreal in his stories but their mere presence forces modern day scientists to recogitate over their assumptions and hypotheses regarding science and its purview in human society and life.

Another observation which is important enough to be noted and discussed is that, all of Shonku's inventions, from his robot Bidhusekhar to the miraculous pill – the *miracurall* – which cures all diseases, are made from indigenous products and ingredients and verge on being handicrafts; Shonku actually makes them with his own hands in his backyard or his laboratory and they can never be produced successfully on a mass scale.<sup>19</sup> While this is not a communist agenda it is nonetheless an anti-capitalist one. Shonku's philosophy of science ties in smoothly with his nationalism; his use of indigenous ingredients, the name he gives his robot, the manner in which he makes the small town of Giridi the centre of his cosmopolitan world. Also he doesn't view man as the being born to master and tame nature. This universe and the millions of life and non-life forms in it are not, in his understanding, present only for his use – a rather Vedic philosophy or a Blakean one.

Ray's ideology paints him in very modern rather than post-modern colours but a discussion of one of short stories centered around a robot *Anukul*<sup>20</sup> may dispel such a conclusion. I deliberately discuss a short story here, in spite of the fact that the chapter is dedicated to the Shonku series, only to help elaborate on my argument in the same. Nikunjo Babu hires

Anukul, a robot to do his housework. He was warned not to hurt Anukul's sense of dignity even though he was hired as a house help. Nikunjo Babu's uncle comes to visit him and when he sings a Rabindrasangeet in the verandah on a rainy day, Anukul corrects him. Angered he slaps the robot and unfortunately meets his death at its hands. But after his death Nikunjo Babu inherits his uncle's property which saves him from the severe financial crisis he was facing. Following the logical sequence of events it is difficult to attribute clairvoyance to Anukul's repertoire of skills and the sole motive for his action but its outcome certainly leaves one incapable of passing any foolproof judgment on his action.<sup>21</sup>

Ray's father and grandfather were both technologically trained and scientifically knowledgeable from their experience with their printing press. But Satyajit didn't have any such training or knowledge. His science fiction may appear to have "an air of contrivance"<sup>22</sup> as his understanding of and reaction to science and technology is reminiscent of a creative persona alone. Professor Shonku who was structured, as I have mentioned earlier, on Conan Doyle's Professor Challenger was however "less assertive ... less amusing and less fully realized a character .... Still [Ray] infuses the stories with an agreeable flavour of an old-fashioned pseudo-scientific yarn"<sup>23</sup>.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Siddhartho Ghosh, Satyajit O SF, in Probodh Kumar Moitra ed. *Anonyo Satyajit*, (Calcutta: Nandan, 1998) p 80.
- <sup>2</sup> Surabhi Banerjee, Sojourns into the Fourth Dimension in *Satyajit Ray: Beyond the Frame* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1996) p 134.
- <sup>3</sup> Surabhi Banerjee, Sojourns into the Fourth Dimension in *Satyajit Ray: Beyond the Frame* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1996) p 143-4
- <sup>4</sup> Manobendra Bandopadhyay, Lal Khata, Bohurupi Kali ebong Ityadi, in Bijit Ghosh ed. *Satyajit Pratibha* (Calcutta: Radical Impression, 1993) p 181.
- <sup>5</sup> Satyajit Ray, *Shonku Samogro*, (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2002)
- <sup>6</sup> Satyajit Ray, *Unicorn Expedition and Other Fantastic Tales of India* (New York: NAL Penguin Inc, 1987) p 127.
- <sup>7</sup> Satyajit Ray, *Unicorn Expedition and Other Fantastic Tales of India* (New York: NAL Penguin Inc, 1987) p 150-1.
- <sup>8</sup> Surabhi Banerjee, Sojourns into the Fourth Dimension in *Satyajit Ray: Beyond the Frame* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1996) p 134.
- <sup>9</sup> Surabhi Banerjee, Sojourns into the Fourth Dimension in *Satyajit Ray: Beyond the Frame* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1996) p 142 and Siddhartho Ghosh, Satyajit O SF, in Probodh Kumar Moitra ed *Anonyo Satyajit*, (Calcutta: Nandan, 1998) p 84.
- <sup>10</sup> Satyajit Ray, *Unicorn Expedition and Other Fantastic Tales of India* (New York: NAL Penguin Inc, 1987) p viii.
- <sup>11</sup> Ashis Nandy, Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide to Exquisite Murders: Creativity, Social Criticism, and the Partitioning of the Self in *The Savage Freud and other essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves*, (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1995) p 249.
- <sup>12</sup> Ashis Nandy, Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide to Exquisite Murders: Creativity, Social Criticism, and the Partitioning of the Self in *The Savage Freud and other essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves*, (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1995) p 257.
- <sup>13</sup> Ashis Nandy, Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide to Exquisite Murders: Creativity, Social Criticism, and the Partitioning of the Self in *The Savage Freud and other essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves*, (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1995) p 256.
- <sup>14</sup> Siddhartho Ghosh, Satyajit O SF, in Probodh Kumar Moitra ed *Anonyo Satyajit*, (Calcutta: Nandan, 1998) p 79.s

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<sup>15</sup> Dhritiman Chaterji, *The Legend on a Pedestal: A Personal Memory*, Indian Review of Books, Vol 1 No. 8, May 1992 p 31.

<sup>16</sup> Satyajit Ray, *Unicorn Expedition and Other Fantastic Tales of India* (New York: NAL Penguin Inc, 1987) p 119-136.

<sup>17</sup> Satyajit Ray, *Unicorn Expedition and Other Fantastic Tales of India* (New York: NAL Penguin Inc, 1987) p 136.

<sup>18</sup> Satyajit Ray, *Shonku Somogro*, (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly an alternate argument has been put forward by Manobendra Bandopadhyay in his essay Lal Khata, Bohurupi Kali ebong Ityadi, in Bijit Ghosh ed. *Satyajit Pratibha* (Calcutta: Radical Impression, 1993) p 182. Since Professor Shonku never really explained or put forward any definite formulae for his many inventions, a certain disbelief in them and their credibility may arise, but Satyajit Ray successfully allays such doubts with his own argument regarding the role of such inventions, which I have already discussed at great length. But Manabendra Bandopadhyay feels that Shonku's secretiveness arises from the need to safeguard all his formulae and inventions till they are patented in his name and then there will be no danger of theft. Otherwise someone else may steal them and take the credit for his handiwork and genius. I have of course not followed this line of argument in my dissertation, rather it's opposite.

<sup>20</sup> Satyajit Ray, *Shonku Somogro*, (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Siddhartho Ghosh, Satyajit O SF, in Probodh Kumar Moitra ed *Anonyo Satyajit* (Calcutta: Nandan, 1998) p 88.

<sup>22</sup> Dhritiman Chaterji, *The Legend on a Pedestal: A Personal Memory*, Indian Review of Books, Vol 1 No. 8, May 1992 p 29.

<sup>23</sup> Dhritiman Chaterji, *The Legend on a Pedestal: A Personal Memory*, Indian Review of Books, Vol 1 No. 8, May 1992, p 29.

## CONCLUSION

The Rays as a clan were probably only second to the Tagores in influencing the cultural milieu of Bengal over the last century and a half, through their writings and illustrations. They were aware of the excesses of the Bengal Renaissance, most well exemplified in the writings and the lifestyle of one of its brilliant proponents, Michael Madhusudan Dutta; and found their equilibrium, just as the movement too found its poise, in the worldview of Rabindranath Tagore. In Chidananda Dasgupta's words

it was Tagore's concept of India, traditional and yet modern,  
aglow with a new hope, its doors and windows flung open to  
the world ... [its] right blend of East and West <sup>1</sup>

that formed an intrinsic part of the mental make-up and outlook of post-independence India, mostly through Nehru's vigorous adoption of it. Tagore's ideology, therefore, had naturally coloured the Bengali psyche from the late nineteenth century till the present and Satyajit Ray was certainly one of its active participants. The Rays, from the time of Upendrakishore, were active Brahmos; a minority offshoot of Hinduism who gave up idolatry, casteism, and religious orthodoxy. They followed a number of Vedic and Christian tenets and were the pioneers in the movement leading unto empowerment of women. As a child Ray had missed the hedonistic flavour of Hindu festivals in the puritanic and severely meditative quality of the Brahma Sabhas but he was nonetheless very deeply influenced by their philosophies.

Ashis Nandy has posited a theory; where he says that highly creative people, consciously or unconsciously, partition their selves in order to both protect and formulate their different

creativities as best as is possible<sup>2</sup>. I would like to discuss Satyajit's fictional self in the light of this theory. The Rays, according to Ashis Nandy, having faced the interplay of very strong social, cultural and religious forces within the psyche of the family created a split therein. They reserved their imagination for their writings and illustrations for children and their rationality for their active, social intervention to reform orthodoxy and xenophobia. They must have counted themselves as one of the torchbearers of the rationalist and empirical values of the Western Enlightenment in Bengali society. Satyajit Ray was no exception to this phenomenon, and a lot of tension underlines the split he fashioned between his cinematic and his fictional self. He confined his classicist, rational self to his cinema and his imaginative, unrestrained self to his popular fiction. His films depict his restraint in the telling of the story, his attention to detail and his use of mythology and the classics in many symbolic visuals. His fiction reveals an equal lack of restraint in the depiction of events where dramatic action predominates and scant attention is paid to characterization and details. Most of his fiction is based on adventure and fantasy elements. Violence, though not of the blood and gore variety, forms the crux of his writings. His fiction is also largely based on the predictability of the outcome. Good always shines over evil and the protagonist always triumphs. Ashis Nandy says

in this respect the popular writings of Ray fit in with the dominant frame of popular cinema in India.<sup>3</sup>

Ray's ideologies as a Renaissance man strongly colour his characterization in his fiction. The philosophies and ideas his scientist-hero and detective-hero depict can very easily be traced back to Ray himself and his sense of a self straddling the twin streams of humanities and

science in post-Independence India, with the weight of his upbringing and education solidly behind him. He felt he was closer to Nehru in his ideologies than to Gandhiji as they shared a certain liberalism, a certain awareness of values and a fusion of Eastern and Western values.<sup>4</sup>

Ray, the staunch believer of renaissance values, imparts them in all sincerity to children through his fiction, thus becoming an educative figure in moulding the values child-rearing practices of his own and future generations should take note of, if not base themselves upon. Therefore he also fulfills even in the less restrained of his selves, the demands of his “other” more rational self. Ray doesn’t provide a moral at the end of each story but the Brahmo concept of what is good for children informs much of Ray’s writings indirectly.<sup>5</sup>

Ironically enough, his own description of his stories reveal how ignorant he was of such a stance in them. I quote him

I like to present my stories, without making any kind of bombastic propaganda statements. They’re stories first and foremost, they’re tales shall we say.<sup>6</sup>

Most of the villains in his fiction are out and out evil; the violence though sanitized is nonetheless concrete and depicted in a personalized manner. Only in some of his short stories does he rise above the black and white into the grey area of the human psyche and leaves it to the reader’s sensibilities and sensitivity to judge the villains as evil or a character who has strayed onto the deviant path through the exigencies and upheavals of his life. Of course it is very important to note that his fiction portrays an all male world with only oblique references to any women. Both in his science fiction series and the short stories dealing with science and technology there is an openness to believe in the presence and



concrete workings of the unexplained and unseen supernatural and the paranormal. To quote Ashis Nandy

even a casual reader quickly finds out that Ray is not a perfectionist in his popular writings: he is less careful about his workmanship and his imagination is less controlled.<sup>7</sup>

Paradoxically, it is where his imagination is less controlled that he allows greater play to his more educated and disciplined self who is attuned toward an agenda, whose focus is on transferring the values he has consciously imbibed through his family lineage and tradition, as well as his education with its western outlook and respect for ancient roots, to his readers whom he believed to be only children. Ray in a lecture once said he had

regularly pursued [his] two vocations of film making and writing for *young people* (italics mine) untrammelled by any thoughts of ever having to describe or analyse why [he did] certain things in the way [he did] them.<sup>8</sup>

Ray started writing when *Sandesh*, the children's magazine started by his grandfather was revived in 1961 by different members of the family, Nalini Das, Leela Majumdar, Sukhalata Rao. He started by translating Lear's limericks and his father's nonsense rhymes. Slowly he graduated to writing his own stories about Shonku and Feluda. In an interview he admitted

if *Sandesh* wasn't there I wouldn't have started to write. ...

Because *Sandesh* is there I have to do stories, verses articles or translations of limericks for them. Since *Sandesh* was revived, it has to be kept fed – it is done with pleasure.<sup>9</sup>

Having started his writing career as a children's writer, writing for the most famous children's magazine in Bengal, *Sandesh*, it must have been difficult, if not impossible to

envisage himself as anything but a children's writer at any point of his life. In the same interview he remarks

I do my writing in the time I get after doing my film work.

This time is not much – besides I feel no urge to do any serious writing like a novel or something else of that nature.<sup>10</sup>

This amply portrays his own understanding of children's writing as non-serious and therefore, himself as a non-serious writer. The only writing which he took seriously was what he wrote on films, his own and others and film making in general. In a letter to Saroj Bandopadhyay (7 June 1982) he wrote

I never thought my stories would be considered worthy of critical study. I had told myself that I would be content if all those for whom I wrote my stories were happy. I never thought of myself as a writer. All that I knew was that interesting plots came to my head, and when I came to write them out, a kind of tight order came naturally. There was nothing more to it.<sup>11</sup>

In Ray's understanding of his writing he provided healthy, fun reading to children which also held a lot of information such as the travel details in *Feluda*, which enhances their education and general knowledge. The sudden rise in popularity of his fiction, especially among adults must have problematized his own understanding of himself as a writer and his work. In fact it made him rather defensive and touchy about the reactions he received from his readers. Some of his *Feluda* series was published in *Desh*, an adult magazine and a number of requests from adults poured in for more sensational and violent murders and sexually charged crimes. In *Nayan Rahasya* he puts an explanation for the lack of the same in *Feluda*'s

mouth. In the preface to the collected volume of Feluda's translations he explains himself thus,

when I wrote my first Feluda story, I scarcely imagined he would become so popular that I would be forced to write a Feluda novel every year. To write a whodunit while keeping in mind a young readership is not an easy task, because the stories have to be kept 'clean'. No illicit love, no *crime passionnel*, and only a modicum of violence. I hope adult readers will bear this in mind when reading these stories.<sup>12</sup>

But violence, unnecessary violence, some degree of sex, certainly a great deal of homoeroticism, is present in his fiction, specially his detective series. In spite of the fact that he wrote for children in a conscious manner, sticking meticulously to the parameters he had set for himself as a children's writer, adult elements crept into his fiction making it extremely difficult to categorize it into watertight compartments. Hence I feel it is best to view his fiction as child/adult fiction and not even young adult's fiction, which is considered suitable for both adolescents and adults. Ray in translation however does not have a tag of being a children's writer. This phenomenon is also an important criterion for the kind of categorization, I feel, will do the greatest justice to Ray's fiction. Another reason for Ray's success in translation is the westernization of his urban upbringing even though he was very strongly rooted in his Bengali lineage and contemporary milieu. The influence of western authors on his fiction also helped in bridging regional specificities and creating the space for a pan-Indian identification with it and the characters depicted therein.

Interestingly, it is Ray the non-serious fiction writer, who is far more pedagogic in his outlook than Ray the serious film maker. And herein lies the crux of Nandy's theory of the partitioning of selves, that creative people indulge, in order to protect their more intuitive, less educated, less conditioned and therefore more vulnerable selves. According to him, for Ray, his fiction is a "freer" medium which allows his more educated self free play. His serious cinematic medium is the expression of his inner intuitive and more vulnerable self. If in his fiction he didn't fulfill the exigencies of his family's educative role in the Bengali literary and cultural and social milieu, he couldn't have reached the dizzying heights of a genius in his cinematic works.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Chidananda Dasgupta, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray* (New Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 2003).
- <sup>2</sup> Ashis Nandy has discussed this theory in his essay Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide to Exquisite Murders: Creativity, Social Criticism, and the Partitioning of the Self in his book *The Savage Freud and other essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves* (Delhi: Oxford U P, 1995).
- <sup>3</sup> Ashis Nandy, Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide to Exquisite Murders: Creativity, Social Criticism, and the Partitioning of the Self in *The Savage Freud and other essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves* (Delhi: Oxford U P, 1995) p 257.
- <sup>4</sup> Satyajit Ray, *I Like to Present Stories: On his Work and Philosophy*, *Sunday Observer*, May 30-June 5 1982, p 15-17.
- <sup>5</sup> Ashis Nandy, Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide to Exquisite Murders: Creativity, Social Criticism, and the Partitioning of the Self in *The Savage Freud and other essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves* (Delhi: Oxford U P, 1995) p 263.
- <sup>6</sup> Satyajit Ray, *I Like to Present Stories: On his Work and Philosophy*, *Sunday Observer*, May 30-June 5 1982, p 15-17.
- <sup>7</sup> Ashis Nandy, Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide to Exquisite Murders: Creativity, Social Criticism, and the Partitioning of the Self in *The Savage Freud and other essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves* (Delhi: Oxford U P, 1995) p 258.
- <sup>8</sup> Satyajit Ray: A Portrait in Black and White: Photos by Tarapada Banerjee, Introduced by Satyajit Ray (New Delhi: Viking Penguin India, 1993) p 18.
- <sup>9</sup> Bawdip ed. *Ray in the Looking Glass* (Calcutta: n p, 1993) p 75-76.
- <sup>10</sup> Bawdip ed. *Ray in the Looking Glass* (Calcutta: n p, 1993) p 76.
- <sup>11</sup> Saroj Bandopadhyay, The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray in Shanti Das ed. *Satyajit Ray: an Intimate Master* (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1998) p 84.
- <sup>12</sup> Satyajit Ray, *The Feluda Stories*, trans. Gopa Majumdar (New Delhi: Viking, 1996) p 9.

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