

Finding Sense Behind Nonsense in Select Poems of Sukumar Ray

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Nonsense literature is generally categorized as part of the macrocosm of children's literature. And there is no denying that as children we have all read such literary pieces with much amusement and delight. In 1900 G.K. Chesterton wrote that, if he were to be asked for the best proof of 'adventurous growth' in the nineteenth century, he would reply, "with all respect for its portentous science and philosophy, that it was to be found in the literature of nonsense" and that "this was the literature of the future" (Chesterton 43). Now, "Nonsense" as a literary genre is difficult to define in absolute terms. It is interpretation gone wild, but also lucid, as clearly appears in the works of the early practitioners of the form in the mid 19th century, namely Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. It is true that the "modern nonsense" originated in the mid-19th century, but it is equally true that the roots of the tradition can be traced back to some of its early practitioners and precursors- such as the anonymous nonsense of nursery rhymes, the 'water poet' John Taylor and the Bedlamite and mad talk of Shakespeare. Again, if the genre of literary nonsense is analyzed with reference to its contemporary socio-political scenario, it becomes clear that nonsense is actually a medium which allows the literary artist to point out various shortcomings of the society at large. So, as its name suggests, "non-sense" always exists in relation to, and as a comment on, "sense." T. S. Eliot, who was much influenced by Lear and Carroll, meant something similar to this when he wrote that Lear's nonsense "is not a vacuity of sense; it is a parody of sense, and that is the sense of it" (Eliot 56). Eliot suggests that, nonsense can be described as a kind of writing that draws attention to and takes

advantage of the arbitrary nature of language. He further claims that nonsense has a kind of anarchic potential because it questions the materialistic reality and deals with the factors that the every-day world considers to be impossible and improbable.

Before getting into any further discussion, it is necessary to understand the difference between fantasy and nonsense. Now, though both forms depict a world which is far away from material reality, yet the fantasy world is regulated by certain logic- the logic of magic. Therefore the events happening in fantasy lands or even in fairytales make perfect sense when we follow the logic of marvel and magic. But there is an intentional lack of rationality in the nonsense- land. However, it is pertinent to mention here that logic and coherence are not totally absent from this land. They exist, but with an absolutely different definition. The purpose and sense behind the non-sense is revealed only when a close study of such texts are made with reference to the socio-political context. Therefore, in my paper I intend to carry out a critical analysis of select poems of Sukumar Ray and understand the manner in which Ray saw his contemporary society.

Sukumar Ray was born in the year 1887. His father was Upendrakishore Ray, whose many-sided genius found expression in his writings, songs and illustrations as well as his work as a printer. Sukumar grew up under the influence of his father. And soon after leaving college he founded the Nonsense Club with his friends and relations as members. The name of the club is indicative of the direction that his genius was to take in the coming years. He wrote two plays for the club- *Jhalapala (Cacophony)* and *LakshmanerShaktishel (Lakshman and the Wonder Weapon)* but neither of these plays contains any hint of the distinctive vein of humour in which Sukumar has no parallel. This we first glimpse in the magazine *Sandesh*. The Children's monthly *Sandesh* was launched in May 1913 with Upendrakishore as editor. Sukumar returned home from England, where he has gone for advanced training in printing technology a few months later, and his writings and pictures too began to appear in *Sandesh*.

Sukumar Ray's humour was free from malice, but not of satire. He had two rare gifts- a remarkably observant eye and a limitless fund of imagination. And it is because of these two qualities that his characters (irrespective of their arbitrariness) acquire living form before our eyes. Surely, we do not (or rather choose not to) doubt the existence of any creature he portrays, real or imaginary. Sukumar's inclination towards nonsense literature had already gained much potential in his initial literary career. And

then in 1914 appeared 'Khichuri' (Hotch-Potch), the first of the *Rhymes without Reason (AbolTabol)*. Here we find the earliest nonsense animals in Sukumar's work.

A pochard and a porcupine, defying the grammarians,

Combined to form a porcochard, unmindful of their variance (Ray 1)

Such whimsical compounds are the Storkoise, the Whalephant, the Parakizard and the Liontelope. Not content with naming them Ray also draws their pictures to help the readers to understand them in their completeness. Sukumar Ray's weird creations come much closer to those of Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear. Indeed Ray's Lug-Headed Loon, Blighty Cow and the Super-Beast bear much affinity with Carroll's 'Jaberwocky' and Lear's The Dong, the Jumblied, the Pobble, the Quangle-Wangle, the Blue Boss-Woss etc. In fact much in the fashion of Lewis Carroll's Alice books, Ray's *AbolTabol (Rhymes without Reason)* and *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La (A TopsyTurvy Tale)*, caricature adult behaviour and parody the laws of contemporary society.

Now, children's literature in general and nonsense literature in particular, have often been blamed for filling a child's mind with fancy and illusions. They are said to be responsible in taking the child away from the world of reality. The fact overlooked here is that, rather than "dulling" (Lewis 22) or disillusioning the mind of a child, such genres actually enrich it further by giving it, as C.S Lewis in his essay "On Three Ways of Writing" writes, "new dimension of depth"(Lewis 22). Thus if the handkerchief suddenly transforms into a sniggering cat in Ray's *Ha- Ja- Ba- Ra- La* (translated as *A TopsyTurvy Tale*) it does not make the child despise either the handkerchief or the cat. Rather it provokes the young reader to think creatively. For the adult minds however, Ray's verses had a completely different purpose.

Sukumar Ray belonged to colonial Bengal and as a creative artist, he was concerned with foregrounding anti-colonial ideologies. He understood well that the English education and an exposure to western culture, which were promoted by the colonizer, were actually for its own benefit. Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1835 laid down the governing principles of an educational system that was to introduce a small group of Indians to western thought and literature, so that they could become a link between the British and the masses they governed. This in turn led to the Bengal Renaissance which was a socio-cultural and religious movement that encouraged the middle class Bengali men to get acquainted with the Western literature and philosophies. Ray himself had gained Western education which in turn gave him the advantage to

understand the British ideology and temperament with accuracy. But when Macaulay framed his “Minute” on Indian education, he had not imagined that a section of such educated Indians would end up questioning the foundations of British rule in India. Sukumar Ray was one of them who wrote Children’s’ (nonsense) literature with nationalistic agenda. Along with his anti-colonial sentiments, Ray was much critical of the thriving ‘Babu culture’ in Bengal which was an offshoot of the Western education.

The *Babus* were the by-product of Bengal Renaissance. They were Bengali men, now well versed in English language and literature, who had become loyal employees of the colonial administration. They embraced the opportunity of British employment and dwelt in a false sense of pride and status. In this context, I would like to refer to another recent publication by ArunaChakravarti – *Jorasanko*. It is a sprawling novel that spans a unique phase in the history of Bengal and India. The book depicts the high politics, romance and tragedy which were all integral parts of the family life of the Tagores. The novel, apart from depicting the growth of Rabindranath Tagore’s literary career, also gives us a wonderful account of the women in Tagore family. One such remarkable lady of the Tagore clan was Sarala Devi who was the niece of Rabindranath Tagore. She was quite a spirited woman who shared with her uncle the zest for independence of her country. Her account of Bengali men as depicted in the novel is worth mentioning in this context. As she travelled several times by train in her life,

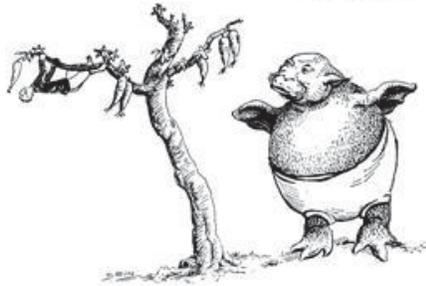
She realized that of all the people of India, Bengalis had the poorest health and the weakest spirit. Unlike the strong virile bodies and hard facial contours of the Marathas and Rajputs she saw at the various stations, Bengalis were short of stature and emaciated by limb. Their bodies were whittled down by repeated attacks of Malaria and dysentery and their bellies were swollen with enlarged spleens. The contrast became evident from the moment the train entered the Bengal Presidency. Even the voices of the coolies were different. Weak, timid and quavering (Chakravarti 355).

Sukumar Ray too was critical of such puerile and effete Bengali men (especially the Babus) who lacked the sense of nationalism and were more than happy to serve as slaves of the British Empire. His poems from *AbolTabol (Rhyme without Reason)* can therefore be read as a sardonic critique of the Bengali Intelligentsia. The poem with which I wish to begin my discussion is “Kimbhut” or “Super Beast”.



The creature in the poem is depressed as it craves for the parts of other animals. He wants a voice like the cuckoo and envies the birds as they soared in the sky. He wishes to have wings to fly like birds, the lithe legs to hop like the Kangaroo and also the trunk and tusk like the elephant. The lion's proud mane and the scaly tail of the lizard too made him envious. But then, when one day suddenly all his desires got fulfilled and he got all that he had ever wished, the Super Beast suffers from acute identity crisis- "I can't be a moth or a horse or a snake... /Oh what can I be?" (Ray 17). Now, the Super Beast's condition is reminiscent to that of the Bengali Babus who were not content with their native conditions, customs and traditions and desired to imitate the colonial manners to enjoy special privileges from the British masters. But, in their attempt to do so they gradually lost their uniqueness and individuality and were ultimately left to question like the Kimbhut- "Oh what can I be?" (Ray 17).

Again, the portrayal of pot-bellied and lethargic Bengali men as depicted in the novel of ArunaChakravarti, mentioned earlier can also be found in Ray's illustration of- "Kumro Potash" (or the "Pumpkin Puff").

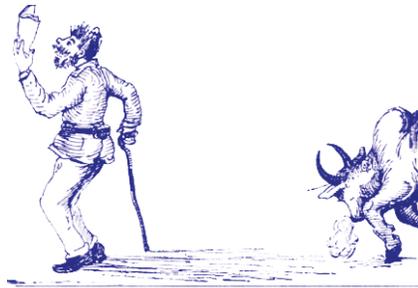


Going by the poem, people did strange things just because Kumro Potash danced or moaned or ran. The Pumpkin Puff may be understood as the representative of the Bengali Babus, who made the town people awestruck and afraid by boasting about their 'special affinity with their English Bosses which was due to their Western education. In yet another poem titled as "HukoMukoHangla" or "The Lug-Headed Loon", Ray criticizes the very accepted notion of the rationality and conventionality, which during his time were set and decided by the Raj.



The creature in the poem is distressed, as by following conventions of rationality he cannot swat flies that were sitting at the centre of his back, as two of his tails worked only in two directions. The readers might laugh at the Loon's foolishness of not using his own brain and following the conventions without questioning their effectiveness. But at the same time, the Loon's behaviour may also be interpreted as a spoof on the Bengali aristocracy, who in spite of their affluence were neither happy, nor satisfied. Their desperate endeavours to be in the good books of the Englishmen often led them to dwell in despair, just as the creature of the poem.

The lack of common sense as well as the ability to make good decisions was also induced among the law abiding Babus of the British Raj. This fact is depicted beautifully in Ray's "Ki Mushkil" (translated as the "Encyclopedia").



In this poem, the person holding an encyclopedia searches the book frantically to find an escape from a charging bull. The book is said to have information on every subject under the sun including "The way to cook chutney or steam a pilau", "Of medical matters", "making of toothpaste, of ink and soap". It also tells about "pujas and pundits" but lacks the information about "The best way to tackle a charging mad bull" (Ray 27). This excessive dependence on book for matters of common sense (as depicted in the poem), does actually highlight the reality of a section of Bengali intellectuals who had bidden adieu to their own faculty of reasoning and understanding due to their slavish obedience to the rules laid by the British for them.

Keeping up the vein of criticism of the Bengali *Babus*, we find the Big Boss (or *Babu*) in the poem “GophChuri” or “The Purloined Moustache” suddenly claims that his moustache has been stolen and he also scolds all his staff who try to reason with him by stressing the impossibility of such happening.



Like a typical *Babu*, he is of a dominating kind who treats the lesser clerks as “pack of dolts” (Ray 4). His charging of a fine from them on account of the moustache theft is indeed humorous, but at the same time, it is also a slanting comment on how the masses were exploited by the British as well as by those whose Western education made them faithful flag bearers of the Raj.

Now, where on the one hand, Ray’s verses critique the Babus for their faithful adherence to the British Raj, they also point out the manner in which the colonizers treated the Indians in general and the Bengalis in particular. Historically speaking, in the colonial period, British and the Bengalis were delineated by sharp stereotypical distinctions. On the one hand was a supposed masculine ideal- identified by a love of sports, particularly hunting, a chivalric approach for women etc.- all of which contributed to the ‘manly character’ which was seen as the unique mark of Briton. On the other hand the Bengali Babu was viewed as the complete foil to this- effeminate, bookish, over serious (like the Griffon’s Grouse of Ray’s poem for whom laughter under any condition is forbidden), languorous, lustful and lacking of self-discipline.



An incident as mentioned by John M Mackenzie in the General Editor's Introduction of Mrinalini Sinha's book *Colonial Masculinity The 'Manly Englishman' and The 'Effeminate Bengali' in The Late Nineteenth Century* aptly highlights this discrimination.

“In 1920s, a station master on the Bengal Assam Railway had changed his name from Satish Chandra Mukherjee to Sydney Kenneth Mackenzie in order to join the Volunteer Force and secure rifle so that he could hunt the tigers which infested his area” (MacKenzie viii).

This deliberate alteration of identity on Mukherjee's part highlights his desperation to get acceptability (in spite of being a Bengali) in the Volunteer Force and get the opportunity to take on the European hunting mantle. He was of course found out and rejected as it was practically impossible for a Bengali man to impersonate a *Sahib*. In fact the colonial cliché of the effeminate Bengali *Babu* was taken for granted so much so that it was the basis of the entire ensemble of political, economic and administrative imperatives that underpinned the strategies of colonial rule in the late nineteenth century.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak” claims and asserts that,

No Perspective critical of imperialism can turn the other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely other into a domesticated other that consolidates the imperialist self (Spivak 253).

This endeavour of the British to domesticate the Indians is well reflected in another of Ray's nonsense verse- “Bapuram Sapure” translated as “Snakes Alive”. In the poem one witnesses a situation where the narrator of the poem – an unknown entity- requests Bapuram, the snake charmer to get two snakes who are absolutely harmless, solely because the narrator wants to beat them and turn them cold. Now, the snake that is the symbol of fertility in the context of Bengal (and is even worshipped) is nothing but Satan to the colonizer's mind. The narrator intends to beat the pair of snakes with “Cudgel” and “knock them down” (Ray 14). His intention represents the violent hegemonic power of the colonizer who used violence as a means to establish superiority. The unprovoked violence against the harmless serpents makes the reader realize that the poem actually depicts the cruel subjugation and exploitation of the

colonized subjects by the powerful colonizers.

Sukumar Ray's nonsense was therefore what can be called metasense, as it successfully turned parody into serious literature. By depicting the reality of colonial Bengal in an oblique manner, Ray intended to trigger the birth of political consciousness and radicalism in Bengal so that it could react against the contemporary socio-political atmosphere which was violent, unjust, exploitative, grim and mechanized. Now the question arises as to why did Sukumar Ray choose nonsense as his medium for commenting upon his contemporary social conditions? Again why did he target children (and not adults) as his primary readers? Was he then trying to attract less attention from the Raj while he spoke to the children and to the adults in two completely different languages? Whatever Ray's intention might have been, it is undisputable that his compositions provided an alternate definition of logic and rationality. To the young minds they offered the excitement of the possibility of an alternate world of nonsense, and to the strained adult minds they provided relaxation from the morbid reality. Peter Dickinson in his essay "Defence of Rubbish" wrote that it is often difficult to survive only on plums and "any rational reading system needs to include a considerable amount of pap or roughage" (Dickinson 80). In other words, Nonsense is that roughage which is necessary to digest the chunks of rationality. And Ray's verses served this purpose with élan.

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