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Making Sense of Literary (Non) sense in Select Poems of Sukumar Ray's *Abol Tabol*: A Close Reading

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Abstract

Nonsense is a medium through which the literary artist points out myriad shortcomings of the society she/he lives in. Literary nonsense is a genre that technically draws attention to and takes advantage of the arbitrary nature of language. Sukumar Ray's creative works need to be understood in the context of a literary and cultural milieu, which was a product of complex, heterogeneous socio-cultural and political forces. Intellectually indebted to Western traditions, Ray is likely to have been inspired by the mid-19th century works of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. By blending the eastern and the western tradition of literature and art, Sukumar composed the distinctly original poems of Abol Tabol (Nonsense Rhymes). The world of the child is one of unreason and irrationality, governed by neither laws nor logical limits. Children's literature, however, while celebrating the world of the improbable, is a product of the adult mind - a mind that simultaneously possesses both childlike whims and adult wisdom. Although primarily meant for children, Sukumar's nonsense, bearing a strong humorous and whimsical strain, is highly political. This paper seeks to demonstrate, through a close reading of some select poems from Abol Tabol, how Sukumar, via a unique melange of wit, humour and satire, underscores the necessity of (non)sense in a world marked by disturbing and maddening sense, where a certain amount of nonsensical unreason might just artistically restore the balance and equilibrium of a "civilised" society governed by the powers that be.

Keywords: literary (non) sense, children's literature, *Abol Tabol*, whimsy, colonialism, *Babu*, hybridity.

Abol Tabol (Nonsense Rhymes) was published on 19 September 1923, only nine days after Sukumar Ray's (1887-1923) untimely demise. While referring to the final poem of *Abol Tabol* (entitled "Dream Song") as the last composition of his life, whose "mingled strain of fancy and humour must remain an object of wonder in Bengali letters" and which clearly suggests how Sukumar was living in the shadow of death, Satyajit Ray, the film

maestro and Sukumar's only son, asserts: "I do not know of any other humourist who could jest in this spirit at the meeting-point of life and death (Introduction n.pag.)":

A keen primordial lunar chill,
The nightmare's nest with bunchy frill-
My drowsy brain such glimpses steep,
And all my singing ends in sleep. (Sukumar Ray 44)

This is this death-defying animated humour of Sukumar, which adds to his poems in *Abol Tabol* a note of subdued and covert irreverence and spirit of whimsy. Since Sukumar Ray was doubtful about how the Bengali reader would respond to the special vein of (non)sense that he exploits to produce caprice in *Abol Tabol*, the preface to *Abol Tabol* carried an apologia: "This book was conceived in the spirit of whimsy. It is not meant for those who do not enjoy that spirit". This is what Tagore would do as well to defend his *Khapchhara*, the book of nonsense verse that he wrote in his old age.

'Nonsense' as a literary genre is pretty hard to define in absolute terms. The early practitioners of the form in the mid 19th century were Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. However, the roots of the tradition can be traced back to some of its early precursors, such as the anonymous nonsense of nursery rhymes, the 'water poet' John Taylor and the Bedlamite and mad talk of Shakespeare. We can make sense of the genre of literary nonsense when put in its specific socio-political context. Nonsense is actually a medium through which the literary artist points out myriad shortcomings of the society she/he lives in. Thus, "(non)sense" always exists in relation to, and as a commentary on "sense". Therefore, nonsense "is not a vacuity of sense; it is a parody of sense, and that is the sense of it" (Eliot 56). Literary nonsense is a kind of writing that draws attention to and takes advantage of the arbitrary nature of language. Nonsense has an anarchic and subversive potential insofar as it interrogates the existing empirical reality and addresses the concerns that human beings consider impossible and improbable. Literary nonsense is usually marked by the simultaneous co-existence of a multiplicity of meaning and an absence of meaning, thereby striking a subtle balance between sense and nonsense. Hence, literary nonsense works are hybrid texts, occupying "a liminal position between meaning and non-meaning, and it is this quality of unpredictable 'in-between-ness' that is the chief source of the surprise and the delight they occasion" (Bhadury 13). Surrealist art, and in fact all realist art, teaches us that the world can be depicted without the blind replication of reality. As Sibaji Bandyopadhyay observes: "Many Surrealists regarded Nonsense as more than merely gibberish, topsy-turvy stuff and worthy of being considered high poetry. Surrealist poetics makes it possible to be simultaneously connected and disconnected to reality. Some examples of these are also to be found in Nonsense. The topsy-turvy world of Sukumar Ray is a contrapuntal self-sufficient world in spite of having a connection to reality" (32-33).

Sukumar grew up under the influence of his father, Upendrakishore Ray, whose versatility manifested itself in his lucid re-writing (and reworking) of old legends and folktales for children, devotional songs, illustrations and his work as a printer. Sukumar wrote two plays - *Jhalapala (Cacophony)* and *Lakshmaner Shaktishel (Lakshman and the*

Wonder Weapon) for the Nonsense Club founded by himself along with his friends and relations, and ran a magazine, *Sarey-Batrish Bhaja (Savoury Mix)*. These contain the first expressions of Sukumar's humour. Upendrakishore, as editor, launched the children's monthly *Sandesh* in May 1913. Months later, Sukumar returned to Calcutta from England, where he had taken advanced training in printing technology. Back home, his writings and illustrations started appearing in *Sandesh*. As long as Upendrakishore was alive, he filled the pages of *Sandesh* with his own writings and illustrations, leaving Sukumar little space to publish his work. Upendrakishore's work bears testimony to his fine and tender humour absolutely free from irony or satire, which was a reflection of his personality. Sukumar's humour, however, was not free from satire, though devoid of malice. His habitual indulgence in candid laughter mirrored his particular personality. Sukumar had a rare combination of an observant eye and a profound imagination. This is precisely why, argues Satyajit, "We cannot doubt the existence of any creature he portrays, real or imaginary. Chandidas' Uncle or the old Man of the Woods, the Griffonling or the Higgle-Piggle-Dee – are all equally alive, equally credible". The publication and editorship of the children's literary magazine *Sandesh* fell into the hands of Sukumar after his father's death in 1915. Most of Sukumar's nonsense prose and verse first appeared in *Sandesh* before being collected posthumously in *Abol Tabol*.

Sukumar plays with language and we find the earliest nonsense, hybrid creatures in Bangla in his "*Khichuri*" ("Stew Much!"), - animals which were born out of language games: A duck once met a porcupine, they formed a corporation / which called itself a Porcuduck (a beastly conjugation!) (Ray 8-9). He creates other whimsical compounds such as 'Stortle' (a combination of a stork and a turtle) and 'whalephant' (a fusion of a whale and an elephant) – the portmanteau creatures suggesting a hybrid identity. Sukumar's weird creations come much closer to those of Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear. Ray's Lug-Headed Loon, Blighty Cow and the Super-Beast have much affinity with Carroll's 'Jaberwocky' and Lear's the Dong, the Jumblies, the Pobble, the Quangle-Wangle, the Blue Boss-Woss, etc. And much like Lewis Carroll's Alice books, Ray's *Abol Tabol* and *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La (A Topsy-Turvy Tale)* caricature adult behaviour and parody the laws of contemporary society. Bangla literature, be it prose or poetry, abounds in wit and humour. However, little or almost no nonsense can be found in it. Sukumar uses puns, alliteration and onomatopoeia for humour's effect just as other writers had done before him. In Bangla literature nonsense is largely his own creation. Satyajit remarks: "If we are to talk of influence, we must think not only of the Bengali tradition but also of European literature, the pantomime, Charlie Chaplin and Western comics. (As Sukumar's illustration makes clear, the candle-sucking brats in 'Infant Joy' were inspired by the Katzenjammer Kids of the American comic strip" (Introduction n.pag.).

Sukumar Ray's illustrations depicting invented beasts and creatures, comprising original sketches by the author himself, are an integral part of the literary nonsense in *Abol Tabol*. Ray, a British colonial subject, exemplifies Bhaba's notion of an empowered hybridity, unsettling problematic binarism with respect to identity formation. Poushali Bhadury

observes: “Sukumar Ray explores the category of hybridity primarily through his creation of imaginary animals that resist classification as a single discernible species, and which exist as fantastic amalgamations, instead” (12). Nonsense scholar Michael Heyman argues that the coexistence of image and text is often a distinctive feature of literary nonsense, and hence, “in good nonsense, [illustrations] [can] not be easily separated from the text” (18). Sukumar’s nonsense is no exception since his texts are hybrid, in their image-text binary. These complex and ambiguous representations of hybridity embrace both the positive and negative connotations of amalgamated social and identity formations. Sukumar’s indigenized literary nonsense becomes a counter-discursive practice, and a vehicle of contemporary political and social commentary, primarily through a satiric critique of the British colonial government and their repressive policies (for example, in “*Ekushey Ain*” and “*Kumropotash*”), coupled with certain Indian institutions and personages, like the overly westernized *Babu* in “*Tyansh Goru*” (Bhadury 12-13). His *tyansh goru* is a metaphor for the “mimic men” from his own community, the subservient Indian clerks generated by the unequal power dynamics of the British colonial machinery. Ray comes down heavily on the inequalities and oppression produced and perpetuated by colonialism.

Apart from his anti-colonial sentiments, Sukumar was critical of the thriving ‘*Babu* culture’ in Bengal, which was a corollary of the Western education, as he understood that an exposure to the English education and western culture, as promoted by the British colonial administrators, following the principles of T.B. Macaulay’s “Minute on Indian Education” (1835), was actually for its own benefits, albeit fraught with internal contradictions. As Ania Loomba cogently argues: “One of the most striking contradictions about colonialism is that it needs both ‘to civilise’ its ‘others’ and to fix them into perpetual ‘otherness’ ... colonial empires both fear and engender biological as well as intellectual hybridities” (145). Colonial education policies aimed to create Europeanised natives, such as the *Babus* in Bengal, who, according to Macaulay, would be “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect” (Loomba 146). The *Babus*, who were the by-products of the Bengal Renaissance, were Bengali men, well versed in the English language and literature and loyal employees of the colonial administration. They embraced the employment opportunities under British colonial administration in India and harboured a sense of false pride and status. Sukumar was highly critical of such effete Bengali *Babus* who sorely lacked any patriotic spirit and loved to serve the Empire. Some poems of *Abol Tabol* can therefore be read as a scathing critique of the Bengali Intelligentsia. In “*Goph Churi*” (“The Missing Whiskers”), for example, which is a social satire, the moustache suggests a social identity and is a status symbol. The expressions “head office” and “head clerk” in the original Bangla poem are colonial by-products, since the very idea of the “head clerk” (denoting an official hierarchy) had not even existed in the pre-colonial period. The British introduced the concept of *Babu* in a derogatory sense and these Bengali *Babus* were clerks in offices of the British merchants. The slavish and servile Indians, with blissful complacency, accepted the *Babu* identity as an accolade. The head clerk had an exaggerated sense of glory for his post as he considered

himself superior to the rest and perhaps they thought that a man in such a position must have a befitting moustache.

In “*Ramgorurer Chhana*” (“The Sons of Rangaroo”), the glum-faced guy in his domain is a humourless person, suggesting a morbid totalitarian tyrant. The poem might also be read as making a mockery of the solemn and serious practitioners of Brahmoism, an influential religious and spiritual movement, started in Calcutta in 1828 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The Brahmo community was led by serious individuals with a reputation for solemnity in demeanour and appearance. According to Andrew Robinson, this poem “must surely have been inspired, at least partly, by the solemnity of many Brahmos who surrounded Sukumar in the Samaj” (179). Sukumar himself had been born into a Brahmo family. As Satyajit writes: “His (Sukumar’s) mother Bidhumukhi Debi was the daughter of Dwarkanath Gangopadhyay, that brilliant and spirited member of the Brahmo Samaj” (Introduction n.pag.). Sukumar, however, had a propensity for speaking out against what he considered unnecessary restraints or affected mannerisms. It is not certain whether Sukumar chose the name “*Ramgorurer Chhana*” (literally the kids of a fictitious entity, *Ram-Gorur*) to mean the followers of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, or whether he meant someone contemporary connected with the Brahmo Samaj. (Roy 197) Madhurilata Mahalanobis, Sukumar’s younger cousin, reminisces: “I would like to talk about another ritual that *Dada* (Sukumar) did not at all like. *Jyathamoshai* (Elder paternal uncle) was an orthodox Brahmo. Every day we had to pray before meals. Dada was just about to eat when *Jyathamoshai* dictated, ‘Start eating only after chanting the mantra’. *Dada* used to say: ‘I don’t like these things. I do not understand why *Baba* (father) does these things. I shall neither chant anything nor invoke God” (223).

In “*Satpatro*” (“Gloomy Tidings”) Sukumar pokes fun at the conventional wisdom in arranged marriages of his time, which often prioritized family antecedents of the groom over his abilities, prospects, pecuniary condition and the reputations of immediate family and relations. In a sense the poem unravels the sexist bias of the patriarchal society where Gangaram is the prospective groom and the marriage is settled without ever soliciting the bride’s opinion. In this dramatic monologue where the narrator speaks and the bride’s father listens silently, Gangaram is described as having no credentials, either in looks, or education or in terms of material belongings. When Sukumar writes, “He sat for final tests at school. No luck. He flopped / Nineteen times he tried, and then he stopped” (Ray 24), it is reflective of the contemporary aspect of high failure rates of natives in a biased colonial education system. Supriya Goswami writes: “In spite of a high failure rate, the colonial educational system not only produced aspiring civil servants, but also lawyers, doctors, journalists, scientists, and other professionals, many of whom were denied lucrative jobs on the basis of their race and alleged incompetence” (156).

In “*Baburam Shapurey*” (“Baburam the Snake Charmer”), there are three distinct voices – one articulate and the other two silenced. The narrator’s is the active voice that commands; the snake charmer is at the receiving end. Although it is the latter who controls and manipulates the snakes that represent the repressed colonized, he is miles away from

the centre of power. The aggressive and venomous ‘snakes’ are a potential threat to the elite narrator, representing the ruling class(es) or the white colonizer, who is aware of his own importance and so basically a coward. The narrator will batter and kill the timid and submissive ones in a bid to appease his instinct for revenge, or perhaps to leave a message to the rest that the same fate might befall them. This is why the narrator “would love to have one” from the snake charmer – “ones that only take a meal of milk and rice”, and not the ones that “bite”, “hiss”, “butt”, “whistle”, “slink about” or “show their fangs, or bristle” (Sukumar Ray 18). Niladri Roy observes: “It is worth nothing that these were times when the British government had started to make a token attempt at involving native Indians in political governance. Their influence continued to be limited, however, and it is quite probable that Ray (Sukumar) may have linked Indian political figures to puppets dancing to the tunes of the British” (161).

Sukumar’s poem “*Khuror Kol*” (“Uncle’s Invention”) is a satirical commentary on the ingenious methods of exploitation of the innocent, ignorant and naïve people by the “*Khuros*” (uncles) of society – the experienced elders belonging to the coterie of powerful capitalists. These people use baits to attract and trap the hapless, working class people. The invented device with the bait of some foodstuff shows that the victims are absolutely impoverished and helpless. These undeservedly rich “uncles” of society get richer while poverty escalates for the unfortunate “beasts of burden”. The poetic discrimination of the “machine” controlling humans is reminiscent of Chaplin’s movie *Modern Times*. Given that the poem (published in February-March, 1916) was written during the First World War (1914-1918), Sukumar might be anticipating an age of dehumanisation. Deep inside an exterior of fun and laughter, Sukumar introduces the serious issues of greed, exploitation and cruelty. During this war period cartoons depicting elaborate, ridiculous machines/weapons were popularized in England by William Heath Robinson (1872-1944), who began his career as a book-illustrator. His cartoons about World War I became extremely popular, and as early as 1915, a collection of them was published in book-form as *Some ‘Frightful’ War Pictures* (Roy 136).

Children’s literature, which intersects with defining historical moments in colonial India, negotiates and represents the momentous historical forces that unsettled Britain’s imperial ambitions in India. Early twentieth-century Bengali children’s texts not only draw literary inspiration from nineteenth century British children’s literature, but whose themes are equally shaped by empire. Intellectually indebted to western traditions, Sukumar is likely to have been inspired by the works of Lear and Carroll, and by blending the eastern and the western tradition of literature and art, he wrote distinctly original poems and stories. Bengali children’s literature is a product of British colonial encounter, and consequently, of colonial modernity. The world of child is one of unreason and irrationality, governed by neither laws nor boundaries. Interestingly enough, however, children’s literature, while celebrating the world of the improbable, is a product of the adult mind, and not figments of children’s imagination. Therefore, the mind that invokes the spirit of whimsical nonsense must simultaneously possess both childlike innocence and adult wisdom. And this is

precisely the world of Sukumar who might have thought of reforming the world through a rare melange of wit, humour and satire, in his representations of the absurd and insular world around him. *Abol Tabol* underscores the necessity of (non)sense in a world which is so rigorously full of maddening sense. A certain amount of nonsensical unreason might just artistically restore the balance and equilibrium of a 'civilised' society governed by the powers that be.

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