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Moving Beyond the Periphery: Satyajit Ray, Bengali science fiction and the quest for values

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Abstract
Literature reflects society. Science fiction also does so, but in a different way. It foreshadows society. It is generally assumed that social development is related to and results in the creation of science fictions. In Bengal, Satyajit Ray is the outstanding visionary who wrote numerous science fictions when the country's social development was not in suitable mobility. In difficult times, Satyajit provides us the necessary hope of an idyllic future. This essay will focus on the influence of Satyajit who, in his own way, helped to improve our ideological parameters of social development. Furthermore, Satyajit was not confined in the narrow principles that were set forth by the Euro-American practitioners of this genre and moved beyond the peripheries of generic outline.

Keywords: Literature, Bengali science, Periphery, values

Introduction

When we think of art and culture of Bengal one of the names that come to our mind is Satyajit Ray whose reputation as a film maker does not eclipse his contribution to literature. Apart from Feluda stories, Roy wrote numerous science fictions thirty-eight of which are based on the adventures of Professor Shanku. Though his fiction was targeted mainly at the younger readers, it became popular among children and adults alike. Interestingly, in his science fictions, Ray delineates a new version of Bengali society: a society that is technologically improved, yet easily recognizable as our own. Ray began writing science fictions in the 1960s when no other Bengali writer attempted this particular genre. Also crucial is the socio-political scenario of contemporary era that is dotted with acute economic crisis, poverty, the disastrous aftermath of Indo-China War, an entire Indo-Pak war and even an impending Naxalite movement. In a word it was a troubled period when the country's social and economic development were more logjammed than ever. In such a period, Ray imagines a utopic vision of advanced Bengali society, which, after forty years, does not seem fictitious to us at all. In this essay, I will concentrate on Ray's science fictions including the adventures of Prof. Shanku that are based upon a scientific truth and yet moves beyond the peripheries of science itself.

As a literary genre science fiction began to get wide acceptation first at the western countries. It is generally assumed that social development results in the creation of science fictions. Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), one of the earliest European science fiction reflects contemporary Renaissance development of navigation and cartography. Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818) reflects contemporary development of evolutionary science involving the research of Erasmus Darwin, Humphry Davy and Luigi Galvani. However, while reading Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein,* Anne Mellor catalogued three essential features of science fiction: 'it is to be grounded on valid scientific research, it gives prediction about the future of that research and lastly, it offers a humanistic critique of the very nature of scientific thinking.' [1] Satyajit is unique for two reasons. Firstly, it is he who popularized this particular genre in Bengal at a period when society is not technologically and economically developed. Secondly, he not only relies on advanced science but employs the element of uncanny and mystery as a literary weapon to reshape and relocate this Eurocentric genre in the society and culture of Bengal.

The word mystery has divergent connotations suggesting frightening events, suspense, puzzle, thriller, gothic, crime and even events with certain psychological aspect. Satyajit associates it with the Freudian concept of the uncanny. According to Freud, uncanny is an instance where something can be familiar yet foreign at the same time resulting in a feeling of it being uncomfortably strange. Since the uncanny is familiar, yet strange, it often creates cognitive dissonance within the experiencing subject due to the paradoxical nature of being attracted to yet repulsed by an object at the same time. Ray's science fictions give full reign to his interest in the uncanny and the unresolved mystery. These stories were mostly urbane, and were very unassuming until the very last line or last paragraph when suddenly a new revelation left the reader amazed.

Many of these stories begin with a familiar incident that changes the course of one's life and thus has turned out to be strange. In this way, Ray employs elements of the uncanny and unresolved mystery as a generic counter-discourse against traditional European science fiction that tells the fact that science itself can control and explain all the mysteries of the world.

The two stories I have chosen – 'Anukul' [2] and 'Professor Shanku & the Chinese Magician [3] deal in two different ways with the question of the uncanny and unresolved mystery and by doing so have problematized the traditional definitions of science fiction. The first story 'Anukul' begins with Nikunja babu hiring an android servant named Anukul from a robot supplying agency. Anukul is an android i.e. it looks exactly like an ordinary human being although it is really a machine. Not only it is good looking, its service to his master is also flawless. Furthermore, it is good-natured the only condition of which is the prohibition of physical violence. i.e. if someone strikes him, he will strike back with a deadly high voltage electric shock. But this never poses a threat to the amiable Nikunja babu. However days pass and Nikunja babu seems happy with his android servant. One day, Nikunja babu's uncle comes to spend a few weeks with him. The uncle is an irascible and rich Brahmin who from the very beginning dislikes Anukul since Anukul locates some faults in his recitation of *sloka*. Meanwhile Nikunjababu was also facing a financial crisis and became worried about how long he can maintain his android servant. Thus, one evening suddenly Anukul rushes in and reports Nikunja babu that an accident has happened:

- 'Accident? What happened?'
- 'Your uncle was standing near the window and singing a Tagore-song about the rain. He got some language error and I felt obliged to correct him. He got furious and slapped me in face. So I had to pay him back'.
- 'Pay him back?'
- 'Yes. I had to give him a high voltage shock.'
- 'Does that mean…?'
- 'He is dead. But there was a clap of thunder just as I gave him the shock.'
- 'Yes. I heard it.'
- 'So you need not tell people the real reason for his death.'
- 'But…'
- 'Don't worry Sir. This will do you a lot of good.' [4]

And so it did. Two day's later Nikunja babu got a call from his uncle's lawyer who says that he has got the entire property of the uncle. Its total value was a little more than a million rupees.

Apart from being a science fiction 'Anukul' is a characteristic Bengali short story. Nikunja babu is an amiable personality. He and his friends with their *adda*, gossip and card-playing represent the society and values of the true Bengali middle class. But, perhaps the most interesting 'thing' is Anukul. The very name connotes a typical Bengali fervor. Yet, 'he' remains in the shadow zone. For his knowledge of Tagore-song and *sloka* he is definitely one of us. But, being an android he is certainly an alien. Here lies Ray's genius in re-making a Eurocentric literary genre for the society and culture of Bengal, making the people of Bengal familiar with their own advanced future.

As a short story 'Anukul' definitely belongs to the genre of science fiction but what is unique is the uncanny behaviour and foreboding that Anukul does. It is not only unusual for a machine but also has an element of unresolved mystery as it comes out true. And here also stands Ray's genius in moving beyond the peripheries of science fiction and achieves something that may be termed as a generic counter discourse that tells the fact that there is still something unidentified and mysterious before which logic becomes bewildered.

The second story I have chosen is 'Professor Shanku and the Chinese Magician'. The science fictions of Shanku are represented as a diary after the scientist himself has mysteriously disappeared. This particular story opens with Shanku experimenting with radioactive acids in his own laboratory when a Chinese magician comes to visit him. Shanku recognized him as the same magician who four years earlier, in a magic show in Hongkong, tried to hypnotize him and failed. The magician gossips for a while, visits his laboratory, and inquires about an animal which is actually a lizard. After his departure, as he comes back to his laboratory, Shanku observes that the lizard is gradually changing in its size and taking the shape of a monster that is nothing but a 'dragon'. He tries to kill it with his gun but fails. The last thing he remembered was the smoky eyes of the dragon drinking acids from a beaker. At this point he was shaken awake by his servant and realized that all he saw was a horrible dream. The servant told him that the magician came back since he forgot his walking stick.

Seeing the 'uncanny' smile in the magician's face Shanku immediately realized that his dream is actually a concoction of the magician's sorcery. The last few lines depict that in an attempt to write down this event in his diary, Shanku witnessed that all this were already written in his own handwriting. Shanku wondered whether this was also an instance of the magician's powerful sorcery.

So, here again, we witness the limitation of science in decoding some of its own mysteries. Since magic is a concept which is frequently associated with the orient (and here the magician is also a Chinese, a man from the East !), we find that Ray used it against the 'dominant' discourse of advanced science and technology and shows that magic as an oriental practice has yet the power to overwhelm the doctrine of science. The same can be said about the stories like 'Professor Shanku the Alchemist' and The Unicorn Adventure'. In both the stories, the Western doctrine of science are overwhelmed by the mysteries of the East.

Also crucial is the East/West binary. East is repeatedly represented by the Chinese magician, the magic world of Dung-lung-do or, the famous Nakur babu who has the strange ability to forecast, while the West is represented by Sanders, Crole and other scientists of Europe. Interestingly, Shanku himself remains in the shadow zone. As an Indian, he belongs to the East while as a scientist he definitely belongs to the Western doctrine of science. Perhaps, he is trying to keep a balance between the sensibilities of the two worlds or providing a critique of the two, or any one of them or, both of them.

Ray began writing science fictions in 1961 with 'Bankubabu-r Bandhu'. Perhaps he was influenced by Jules Verne, or by Conan Doyle or, even by his own father Sukumar Roy who wrote *Heshoram Hushiyar-er Diary*. It is noticeable that *Heshoram Hushiyar-er Diary* is one of the earliest Bengali science fiction. Sukumar was poking absolute fun while Satyajit was more specific. With a few exceptions like 'Byomjatrir Diary' or, 'Hipnozen', in all his science fictions,

we notice that Ray provides advanced science as only a backdrop while the plot revolves round a bewildering event, which paradoxically, cannot be explained by science. This mysterious event whether it is Anukul's foreboding or the uncanny effect of the magician's sorcery, is the center of his plot while science itself becomes marginalized. Again, Satyajit does this not only to launch a generic counter-discourse but also to create a set of science fiction that is very much Bengali as well as Indian.

It is generally considered that innovation is intertwined with social development. Both the scientific and technological innovations help to achieve the goal a better civilization. Here, the role of science fiction becomes crucial. It not only inspires creativity but also generates the ray of hope and promise for a better future. It is true that we have also seen the ugly face of science. With the innovation of dynamite, hand-grenade, land mine, rocket-launcher and nuclear artillery, we have already witnessed the dark side of it. However, we have to keep faith not only on our sense of responsibility, but also on our humanity. Today, many of our earlier dreams have turned into reality. Once space travel continued to be popular subjects for science fiction as evidenced by the works Jules Verne and Gustavus Pope's *Journey to Mars* (1894) or, *Journey to Venus* (1895). Today, space travel is no longer a fantasy, we have become familiar with it. In both the works of Issac Asimov and Satyajit Ray we find different sorts of robots and androids. In 'Anukul', the titular protagonist is an android that does all sorts of mechanical works perfectly. In Bengal, we are not technologically advanced or economically wealthy enough to achieve an android for personal purpose. But the goal is not very far. Today, we have our Anukul in the form of vacuum cleaner, washing machine, water purifier, digital diary, memory card and automatic dishwasher. Therefore, we are already on our journey and Ray's science fictions propelled it from behind.

Today society is changing rapidly. The introduction of android phone, 4G network and chip level automation has made a drastic advance towards a new technological era. It is true that the rural areas of Bengal are not yet developed enough to embrace these advances, but the signs are already there. Today, even a villager uses cell-phone and is well aware about its sophisticated mechanisms. So we can say that the fictional world is not far enough. Now, we have our own writers like Sunil Ganguly, Sirshendu Mukherjee, Adrish Bardhan and Jayanta Bishnu Narlikar who wrote science fictions in a thousand different ways. It is noteworthy that the area of science fiction is still dominated by the Euro-American writers like Issac Asimov, Michael Crichton and Barbara Richards. But, today, whenever we read their works or, watch a movies like *Star Wars*, *E.T*, *Jurassic Park*, and even *The Terminator* series we never suffer an identity crisis. Today we have our own vision of Future and definitely we owe it to Ray. We wondered at the various possibilities of science and yet simultaneously, we find that science itself is not the measure of all things. There is still room for more wonders and surprises. Ray's own feelings are also interesting. Ray once commented that if we solve all the mysteries with an advanced science, we will lose our ability to marvel. Yet, we have to proceed on our quest for an improved and intelligent tomorrow. We have to remember that great power bears great responsibility. We may suffer misfortunes but we need to be sincere in our quest and we have to be a better human being. I conclude this essay with an excerpt of Tennyson's poem *Ulysses*:

'Come my friends,
'Tis not too late to find a newer world
…
We are
One equal temper of heroic hearts
Made weak by time and Fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.'

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