



Beyond Whimsy, Abol Tabol And The Socio-Political Context Of Colonial India: A Study Of Selected Limericks

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Abstract:

This paper examines the role of jocularity and absurdity in the works of Sukumar Ray, with a particular focus on the collection of his limerick verse, *Abol Tabol*, as a technique to British colonialism and its footprint on the socio-political scenery of colonial India. By using postcolonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhaba and Spivak, this research explores Ray's use of hybridity and the combining of the Western category with native literary tradition as a tool for challenging the colonial power dynamics. Ray's selection of nonsense as a mode of expression for social remark is scrutinized in terms of its capacity to delicately comment on present-day social order while also illuminating the brutal dominative power of the British colonizers and the ill-treatment of colonized peoples. Through a detailed study of Ray's use of language, nonsensical words, puns, and wordplay, *Abol Tabol* serves as a powerful tool for social commentary. Ray uses a metasense approach, which develops the parody into sincere literature, putting light on the exploitative nature of British rule and the urgency for decolonization. The analysis also focuses on Ray's use of satire to condemn the Bengali Babu of the time and their blind devotion to their British masters.

Keywords: Nonsense, British, Colonialism, Satire, Socio-political, Babu Culture

Introduction:

"Children's fiction is the imaginative creation of a cultural space in which writers find ways of exploring what they want to say to – and about – children: an arena in which children and adults can engage in various kinds of shared and dynamic discourse." – from a Professor of English Literature in England. ("An Overview of Indian Children's Literature in English - Tulika Books"). The main purpose of children's literature is to entertain children and to provide mental support to children during difficult times.

The word 'Nonsense' according to the 'Concise Oxford Dictionary' means "Absurd or meaningless words or ideas, foolish or extravagant conduct..." (COD 742). Primarily, the word 'Nonsense' denotes "lack of sense". According to 'Merriam-Webster' the word 'Nonsense' means: "language, conduct, or an idea that is absurd or contrary to good sense" or "an instance of absurd action". Nonsense verses were generally written to amuse and entertain children. It falls under the genre of children's literature. Critics and scholars suggest that Whimsical

Nonsense in children's literature serves as an instrument for socialization by challenging the real world and to question the 'sense' in nonsense. Wim Tigges defines nonsense literature in his book *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* as; "A genre of narrative literature which balances a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence of meaning. This balance is affected by playing with the rules of language, logic, prosody, and representation, or a combination of these. To be successful, nonsense must, at the same time, invite the reader to interpret and avoid the suggestion that there is a deeper meaning that can be obtained by considering connotations or associations because these lead to nothing. The elements of word and image that may be used in this play are primarily those of negativity or mirroring, imprecision or mixture, infinite repetition, simultaneity, and arbitrariness. A dichotomy between reality and the words and images used to describe it must be suggested. The greater the distance or tension between what is presented, the expectations that are evoked, and the frustration of these expectations, the more nonsensical the effect will be"(Nonsense Verse | Encyclopedia.com). The Los Angeles public library quotes nonsense verse from Encyclopedia Britannica as; "humourous or whimsical verse that differs from other comic verse in its resistance to any rational or allegorical interpretation. Though it often makes use of coined, meaningless words, it is unlike the gibberish of children's counting rhymes in that it makes these words sound purposeful" (Ray) . C.S. Lewis in his essay "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," writes that writing for children is the "Best art-form for something you have to say".(Lewis 18). Nonsense like verse, rhyme, or whatever seemed to be a medium for satirizing the colonial system. Literary nonsense portrays some socio-political issues by redefining the regular use of language and logic. Sukumar Ray lived in a society marked by colonial oppression and growing resistance against the British Raj. Ray, being a creative artist, appreciated the aspects of Enlightenment, which is evident from his allegiance to Western literature and philosophy. Still, he did criticize the British Empire for its avarice and brutality. Seemingly nonsense verse is nonsensical and childish, but at the back of its charming lucidity and innocent expressions, there lies some acute observations on different aspects of life that are meant for judging mature men.

Ray's mind is filled with laughter and joy, as demonstrated by a verse written by Sukumar Ray on the eve of his trip to London in 1911;

"with great hurry and great haste
Brought my coat and my hat
Got my 'passage' and my 'boat',
Arranged my luggage and my 'load'. (Roy 11)

"What is ludicrous, what is strange, what is impossible – this is about them. This is about where imagination can take you, and if you cannot go there, this book isn't for you."

--Sukumar Ray, as an introduction to his book of nonsensical poetry *Abol Tabol*. (Chowdhury).

The first poem of *Abol Tabol* explains the notion of the entire anthology. It is a work called 'khayal rasa,' which can be defined as a mix of 'hasya (comic) rasa' and 'adbhuta (wonderful) rasa.' The competent viewers of such a work must psychologically participate in fits of whim and judge the fanciful universe as no less true than the real world. In addition to wit and absurdity, nonsensical verse may contain aspects of sarcasm. Satyajit Ray opines, "In Sukumar, sound, picture, rhythm, and poet's perception are combined in a unique pattern"(Ray 16). The statement by Satyajit Ray seems to be appropriate if we study the verse of Sukumar Roy meticulously. *Abol Tabol* was published in 1923, written by Sukumar Ray (1887-1923). *Abol Tabol* is an anthology of Bengali nonsense rhymes and falls under the genre of children's literature. The chief features of Sukumar Ray's poetry are humor, fun, wit, laughter, and satire. In the preface to *Abol Tabol* Sukumar Ray wrote, "This book deals with all that is absurd, strange and impossible. It is a book of 'Khayal Rasa'(khayal denotes 'whim'). Therefore this is not a book for those who do not have any taste for khayal Rasa" (Roy 11). In *Abol Tabol*, Sukumar Roy creates an 'illogical' or an 'Absurd' world where logic and reason blend seamlessly with absurdity and dream-like experience. Simultaneously, many strange creatures exist, and Sukumar Roy creates an absurd condition in the so-called 'usual world.' Roy uses whim, pun, innuendo, alliteration, and other semasiological techniques. Sukumar Ray was a trailblazer of nonsense verse in India, and he was superior to many contemporaries of this genre. Apart from

Abol Tabol his several published works include 'Dasur Kirti,' a sequence of farcical stories centering around page dasu, 'Abak jolpan,' a comic drama, 'Ha Ja Ba RA La,' a collection of nonsense stories, 'Lakshaner Saktishel,' another hilarious drama, 'Sabdakalpadruma,' a series of fancy imagination.

Nonsense poetry in Western literature had its origin in the works of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll in the 19th century. It might be said that *A Book Of Nonsense* By Edward Lear (1812-1888), which was published in the year 1846, seems to be an inspiration for Sukumar Ray. Lear also like Sukumar Ray created many nonsensical animals like; the Dong, the Jumbles, the Pobble, and the Blue Boss-Woss similar to Ray like the Stortoise, the Whalephant, the Parakizard, the Lintelope. Nonsensical writing in English was further enhanced, and literary nonsense was made a global occurrence by Lewis Carroll with his *Alice Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871). Carroll's poem 'Jabberwocky' in the latter book is often considered the archetypal of nonsense literature. We must quote it here:

Jabberwocky

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;

All mimsy were the borogoves,

And the mome raths outgrabe

Satyajit Ray in the introduction to *The Complete Verse of Nonsense* states that; "Carroll's 'Jabberwocky' reminds us somewhat of Sukumar; but there is a basic difference. The creatures in 'Jabberwocky' belong to such a remote world of the imagination that they need utterly new words to describe them." (Ray n.p.)

Methodology:

The present paper focuses on Sukumar Ray's *Abol Tabol*, a collection of nonsense poems in Bengali. This paper will analyze the socio-political aspect of some selected verses from *Abol Tabol*. The study is directed in line with qualitative research methods. With the assistance of books, articles, and research works, this study will examine the societal context of colonial Bengal and how Ray satirizes British colonialism and its loyalists.

Literature Review:

Dr Ifte Choudhury opines about Ray's *Abol Tabol*: I was introduced to *Abol Tabol* at a very early age and was fascinated by this unique work. The surreal characters and places became a reality to me. To make my virtual "friends" adapt to the new setting, I began to translate the poems, keeping the essence intact with subtle changes in ambiance. Thus, Kathburo became "Woody," Burir Bari turned into a "Crooked House," and Hukumukho Hyangla was renamed "The Geek." I have tried to keep the work's original spirit as much as possible. This is my homage to one of the greatest masters of nonsense literature" (Ray). Nirbed Roy says: "Sukumar Ray's works had a great influence on Bengali literature. Ray's father Upendrakishore was also a famous writer and a friend of Rabindranath Tagore, India's famous bard, and a Nobel laureate. Tagore also influenced Sukumar Ray and his son, Satyajit. The relevance of *Abol Tabol* will continue for some more centuries; this is not something to be replaced with artificial intelligence (AI) or ChatGPT" (Ray). Sandip Roy in an article written to The Times Of India says, Academic Sukanta Chaudhuri, who did the first full-fledged translation of *Abol Tabol*, says the "quality of great nonsense literature is that it's both sense and nonsense. It appeals at two levels even to the adult and the child." (Roy). That certainly holds true for *Abol Tabol*. Roshni Chakrabarty writing for India Today, credits Sukumar Ray as the father of Indian graphic novels; "Though Ray's father, Upendra Kishore, also used illustrations accompanying his compositions written for children, it was Sukumar Ray who was India's first poet

to use illustrations as such an important part of his work. He had a keen eye for caricature, expressions, actions, proportions and human anatomy." ("Nonsense Verse To Make a Point: Reading Sukumar Ray")

Colonialism and 'Abol Tabol':

"Ray's writing seems to be created for children but underlying the simplicity and humor of his language lies a powerful social commentary and satire."

– Roshni Chakrabarty writing about Ray for India Today. ("Nonsense Verse To Make a Point: Reading Sukumar Ray")

Ray had vehemently criticized 19th-century colonial Bengal through his works. "Ray's *Abol Tabol* applies the elements of literary nonsense and theories of postcolonialism to parody the British Raj and voice opposition to a violent, unfair, dismal, and mechanized socio-political environment, through incongruity, exaggeration, absurdity, and distortion of reality. In his preface, titled 'An Apology,' Ray cleverly lured his readers to turn into rookie detectives and look for secret messages he had embedded in his verses. The nonsense verses cleverly concealed satire on the state of society and administration of colonial India" (Dey). Sukumar Ray belonged to colonial Bengal, and as an artist, he aimed to bring anti-colonial ideologies to the mainstream. Sukumar Ray exemplifies Bhabha's notion of empowered hybridity, where one unsettles problematic binarisms concerning identity formation and lays claim to several different cultural influences with equal ease.

Moreover, Ray's persistent explorations and representations of the issue of hybridity are complex and ambiguous, embracing both positive and negative connotations of such amalgamated social and identity formations. For example, Ray did not spare those "mimic men" from his own community, who represented— in terms of sociocultural cross-pollinations—the insidious effects of unequal power relations within a colonial society. His 'tyash goru' metaphorically represents, and hence satirizes, the subservient Indian clerks produced by the British colonial machinery" (Bhadury 17). Poushali Bhadury asserts, "Ray's own investigation of hybridity seeks to shatter such one-dimensional, negative formulations of the term. It is imbued, instead, with a form of ambivalence, acknowledging both the progressive potential as well as the undesirable aspects of hybrid forms of existence. This is exemplified through Ray's extensive use of the hybrid form of Bengali literary nonsense (where a Western genre is brought together in a new harmonious blend with the existing indigenous literary heritage) within his overall body of work. Equally important are the varying representations of hybridity in his nonsense texts, for example, the monstrous and absurd animals and situations his verses and accompanying illustrations delineate" (Bhadury 12). Ray satirizes the theory of the white man's burden and key concepts of Spivak and Bhaba, mocking misgovernment and imperialism aggression by using fun and humor. This is why nonsense literature is frequently utilized to conceal the true purpose and metaphor for ruling authority. Niladri Roy put it, "A number of poems in *Abol Tabol* contain skillfully disguised socio-political satire mocking the British colonizers of India during Ray's time as well as derision and contempt for a section of the Indian population that he saw as sycophants to their colonialist masters" (Ray 112). I will analyze some selected verses from *Abol Tabol* in the socio-political context of colonial Bengal and Ray's powerful commentary on it. Sukumar Ray utilizes his native literary nonsense as an instrument for engaging in counter-argument acts and expressing contemporary socio-political commentary.

A Study Of Selected rhymes From 'Abol Tabol'

Baburam, The Snake-Catcher (Bapuram Sapure) ;

The speaker of the poem, particularly a Bengali babu, stops Baburam, the snake charmer, and asks him to provide him with a special type of snake. This snake can neither bite nor hiss and is fed on milk and rice. It is a gentle type of snake; it does not show its fangs or bristle. If the speaker gets hold of such a snake, he will beat it with a stick, thereby killing it.

"That are eyeless,

Hoodless, Clawless.

Do not run or crawl

Do not sting at all

They never hiss or hoot

Never hit or hurt." (Roy 57)

As Spivak in her essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak* claims; "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 other into a domesticated other that consolidates the imperialist self" (Spivak 253). Ray's poem 'Baburam sapure' (Baburam, The snake-catcher) reflects the British endeavor to civilize Indians. This poem reflects the British's endeavor to subjugate Indians. In the British colonizer's view, the snake which is a sign of fertility is satan according to the colonizer's. The speaker wants to strike the head of the snake with a heavy stick. The narrator is the symbol of the colonizer and its violent hegemonic power, which used brutal means to maintain dominance. The poem represents the exploitation by the British colonizers over the innocent peoples of India, represented by the innocent serpents. Also the snake charmer ('Baburam') can be identified as Farrukhsiyar, the 10th Mughal Empire, and the narrator as British colonialists; "The Farrukhsiyar's Farman (April 1717) gave the Company the right to purchase 38 villages around Sutanuti, Gobindapur and Kolikata and collect taxes directly from the provinces and instilled rulers who would suit the interest of the Company. Roy then goes on an elaborate description of the easily moldable and docile nature of the powerful and revered figureheads like the Nawab of Bengal- Shiraj Doulla and later the Nizam of Hyderabad and Oudh whose presence only facilitated the colonialists in enriching their coffers without stirring up much ado. Here, the imagery of the snakes can be equated with both dread and reverence. Much like the kings and rulers were".(Maiti 445). According to some critics, Ray was implying about the political scenery of the times, and he seems to make fun of the blind followers of the non-violent movement in India's struggle for independence. Allegorically, the 'speaker' might be the British secretary of state for India linking with the Muslim league and the congress party, the two main political parties of the time which Ray contemplated as futile, and Baburam, the snake-catcher as the British government. Manabendra Bandyopadhyay discusses in detail the various facets of 'Baburam Sapure' in the 10th edition of *Kavita Parichoy*, where he says, "I feel this poem is a slap on our faces to make us realize how we look at life." "The British administration was paranoid about 'seditious and subversive literature' and Sukumar knew that rhymes seemingly written for children were the best possible disguise for messages of an anti-colonial and subversive nature that would help him avoid censorship" (Dey).

Section Twenty-One (Ekushey-Ain)

Ray's poem 'Ekushey-Ain' ('Section Twenty-one') begins with;

"In Lord Shiva's own land

Rules and laws, a disastrous brand!

If, by chance one slips

Him the police grips." (Roy 89)

The poem begins with glory to Lord Shiva, the omniscient being in Indian mythology, and in the second line, the poem shifts to 'Rules and laws, a disastrous brand!' identifying the brutal laws imposed by the colonizers. In independent India, article 21 of the Indian constitution refers to; "Protection of Life and Personal Liberty: No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law" ("Article 21 in Constitution of India"). But during colonial Bengal article twenty-one was the official Secrets Act (1923), implemented by the British rulers to oppress the Indians. The other acts that the British imposed on Indians were the 'press act,' 'Rowlatt Act,' 'Indian Criminal Law Amendment Act,' etc. Sukumar Ray was not directly involved in politics, but he criticized the British rulers through fun, humor, wit, and satire. The poem creates vivid imagery of anti-colonialist feelings. Ray also points out the indiscriminate tax system imposed upon the Indians; "If mustache you do grow, \You are liable to be taxed, you know!" (Roy 89). It is important to note that here, Lord Shiva is not the Shiva of mythology, but the Indian kings who were the puppets for the Britishers.

The Missing Whiskers (Gnof Churi):

Superficially it is one of the most hilarious and dramatic verses, it can be read as a social satire. The Boss Babu or the head clerk of the office suddenly becomes 'sick'. His office colleagues made a circle around him but were unable to do anything that would bring him to normalcy. The Boss Baby finally, after such tantrums, declared the cause for his distress; "My whiskers have been stolen!" (Ray 4). The symbol of mustache has a sense of pride and a status symbol. However, his colleagues do not find any change in the shape and size of the mustache. Because it is in its appropriate place and it can't be stolen;

"Theft of the mustache-how absurd! Can it be a fact?

The mustache was perfectly safe, its length intact

Pacified him and a mirror in front; they did hold

'The mustache can't be stolen,' they told".

But the Boss dictates support and compassion for this absurd situation. The Boss becomes furious and abuses his colleagues also to impose fines on them;

"The head clerk, enraged and aggressive, got

Don't care for anyone as I know the whole lot!

Dirty and ugly like a broom-stick

Shyambabu's milkman has a mustache, like it.

You say this is mine, and I'll kill you all.

So he said he fined them once and for all". (Roy 37)

The phrases "head office" and "head clerk" are remnants of colonialism. This poem contains a metaphor beneath the levity. During the British colonial era, individuals such as Boro Babu and the chief clerks of numerous offices would give orders to their subordinates, expecting them to comply without question, even when the boss was wrong. The concept of 'Babu' was introduced by the British in a disparaging sense. The Bengali Babus accepted this notion of the colonizers and considered them superior to the others. It is well known that the poem was penned during World War I. Conspiracies and spies are connected with brutal wars. The boss's deceptive conduct, leading him to assume that his mustache has been stolen and arranging a fake one in its place, is the work of a spy. The most important aspect is that Boss Babu thought his mustache and himself to be so important that his enemies hired a spy to substitute it with an inferior one in an attempt to reduce his persona. "Sukumar ridicules the mindset of the so-called middle class 'Bhadralok' (the middle-class gentleman) for whom people engaged in menial work like the milkman man were objects of neglect and ignominy." (Roy 38)

According to some critics, including Niladri Roy, editor of *The Complete Abol Tabol*, "The Old Woodman" makes a historical reference to the British recruiting of Indian soldiers for World War "The Purloined Mustache" conveys a striking social message about the abuse of authority by upper-level officials in offices and social institutions. "Old Tickler" could be interpreted as a spoof of British anti-sedition rhetoric in 1914, among other things. Even "Judging The Court" could be a political remark on the Honors scandal in the English Parliament in 1922. Numerous further poems make fun of inadequate politicians, negative stereotypes, societal norms, value systems and rituals. (Ray)

Conclusion:

Sukumar Ray's gibberish *Abol Tabol* is a masterpiece that not only amuses but also instructs or teaches, providing a window for exploring the complexities of colonial Bengal and his vehement denunciation of colonialism and its societal by-products, especially the babu culture. Using his outstanding talent, Ray mocks the British Raj and the pseudo-bourgeois values that emerged in the early 20th century Bengal. By portraying the actuality of colonial Bengal ambiguously, Ray intended to ignite the political consciousness and rebellion in the region. Ray's utilization of nonsense verse as a medium of social commentary is incredible. By choosing children as his primary audience, he was able to express his criticism of colonialism and the Babu culture in the most approachable and provocative way. Satyajit Ray, in the introduction to *The Selected Nonsense of Sukumar Ray*, opines: "Sukumar's humor was free of malice, but not of satire. At times he could indulge in a frank roar of laughter, which again agreed with his particular personality. Many people have told me of his fun-loving, outgoing nature and his brilliant conversation" (Ray n.p.)

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