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Satyajit ray's detective fiction and its socio-cultural impact in 19th century Bengal

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Abstract

Satyajit Ray invented the fictional Kolkata-based private investigator known as Bengali Sleuth Feluda, whose real name is Pradosh Chandra Mitter. He frequently has two sidekicks by his side: Lalmohan Ganguly, a clumsy crime fiction author who goes by the pen name Jatayu, and Topshe, his cousin Tapesh Ranjan Mitra. There is no readily documented legendary genesis story for Satyajit Ray's private eye Feluda, yet it is also not a case of accidental artistic whim. The prehistory of Ray's favourite detective character may be determined by carefully examining his intellectual and cultural milieu. Ray has given Feluda some characteristics that make him different from the stereotypes. In addition to taking down smugglers in Bombay, Feluda exposes a conspiracy and pursues a criminal who is trying to desecrate Indian temples across the country. The study explores the sociocultural imprint Satyajit Ray left in Bengal in the nineteenth century through his detective fiction, *Robertsoner Ruby* (*Robertson's Ruby*) *Hatyapuri* (*The House of the Death*). It reframes writings and the repeating ideas and motifs they include within a larger social and historical framework. This essay also makes an effort to highlight Ray's singularity in terms of his background, methods of detection, and narrative tactics. By borrowing Bengal's rich cultural heritage, Ray localised the genre and used his protagonist to try to solve the unanswered mysteries.

Keywords: Culture, Satyajit Ray, Bengal, detective fiction, Feluda

Introduction

In his book *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M.H. Abrams describes a detective story as a genre that focuses on criminal activity, particularly the investigation of a crime—often a murder—by a professional or amateur investigator (69). The courtroom is rarely depicted in crime dramas because they concentrate on crime investigation. Key components that are almost often present in the genre are suspense and mystery. Readers of crime fiction experience distinct psychological effects and even become mediated witnesses by identifying with the victims of a crime. Crime fiction is often described by readers as a form of escape from more stressful areas of their existence. Crime fiction offers readers a comfortable diversion from their private lives with a compelling narrative. It has been suggested that forensic crime fiction can enhance mental health and be used as a sort of treatment to prevent depression. This practise is known as "distraction therapy."

Indian authors were inspired to attempt creating crime fiction in English by the success of crime and detective literature in regional dialects. Similar to western crime fiction writers, Indian English writers sought to demonstrate their proficiency in the genre. In the 1960s, seasoned writers in north India first opened the avenue. All fiction genres have been covered by Indian writers in English. Indian English writers have an insatiable appetite for writing English crime and detective fiction with a focus on Indian culture and society. Bengali authors have sown the English crime and detective fiction genre in India as a result of its enormous success in regional languages. Satyajit Ray is the first name that comes to mind for everyone. Feluda is considered to be the Golden Age of Bengali detective fiction. He is a private eye who appears in a number of Bengali novels written and directed by an Indian Bengali.

Satyajit Ray as a detective writer makes a paradigm shift in the world of Bengali detective fiction. His ratiocination was the outcome of his vivid knowledge about various subjects. In addition to being a fantastic storyteller, the canvas of his works has unique qualities that

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prove they are appropriate for both children and adults. In order to fully indianize the detective fiction genre and enhance the "desi" flavours in his books, Ray incorporates local culture and history to weave narrative. In this essay, the cultural tactics used in the texts are peeled out. These tactics aid in the nativization of the stories and the creation of a morally tight framework for them. It is clear that colonial influences and encroachment led to the early emergence of detective fiction in Indian libraries. Arthur Conan Doyle and Wilkie Collins, among other English authors, were included on the shelves of Indian libraries for colonised readers to peruse, according to Priya Joshi in her book *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India* (64).

Analysis of the Novel

Robertsoner Ruby (*Robertson's Ruby*) is published in *Desh Magazine*, 1992. The beginning of the story introduces the relationship between "mama" and "bhagney," or an uncle and his nephew. Feluda encourages a focus on relationships, which are a necessary component of society. The author emphasises the value of family in modern culture as well as the numerous tiers of social conduct. He limits our understanding of connections like those between an uncle and a cousin, friendship, brotherhood, etc. in practically all of the stories. Lalmohan Ganguly, who was being questioned by Feluda, was unable to comprehend the hints that Feluda dropped into their dialogue in a very sarcastic way. Jatayu exhorts Feluda to be clear in his explanations and claims that his queries constantly make him uncomfortable. In various passages in his works, Feluda publicly criticises Lalmohan Ganguly for being dishonourable in not travelling to Birbhum, the city where Tagore—the renowned Bengali Nobel laureate—spent the most of his time.

The sleuth firmly disagrees with Jatayu's rejection of the sleuth's assertion that Tagore cannot serve as an inspiration for someone who writes crime fiction. Feluda continues by highlighting Bengal's rich cultural heritage and how many tourists it draws each year. It's interesting to note that Feluda and his ignorant partner Jatayu had a teacher-student relationship in which Feluda had to explain every aspect to him. In reality, a writer who writes for young readers makes his prose engaging and instructive while teaching the young readers about their state, nation, and several other topics that he covers through his novels. By implying that we Indians know relatively little about our own country whereas individuals from other countries are frequently interested in the cultural heritage of India, Feluda criticises our society.

In *The location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha sets out the conceptual imperative and political consistency of the post-colonial intellectual project. In a provocative series of essays, Bhabha explains why the post-colonial critique has altered forever the landscape of postmodern discourse. Ray, through this small story goes in the history of India when it was colonised by the Britishers. The shock and torment that the Indians experienced were both cruel in nature. He tells the tale as follows: Patrick, a relative of Peter Robertson, participated in the sepoy's revolt. He was a member of the Bengal regiment, but he just so happened to be in Lucknow when the British triumphed after the rebellion. He had only turned 26 at the time. He went along with some of the other British officers who stormed a nawab's palace and looted anything they could get their hands on. Robertson

discovered a big ruby and carried it back to England. Over time, it was passed down through the Robertson's family and became known as "Robertson's Ruby." "A diary that Patrick Robertson kept in his later years was just recently discovered. It had not yet been made known to anyone. In it, he reportedly expressed guilt for his actions as a young man and claimed that only if a member of his family returned the ruby to India would he be able to truly rest in peace. It is with Peter Robertson, who has brought it. A museum in India will receive it from him before he leaves for England (698-99).

Bengal, as was said in this story, has a lot to offer year-round. Due to their love of travel, Feluda and his duos were drawn to the Birbhum Kenduli Mela. Bengal offers special trains each year to handle the massive influx of pilgrims, tourists, and bauls (Bengali folk musicians) to the fair. Feluda used the book by David McCutcheon, which served as a guide, to explore the location. The fact that Europeans understood more than Indians while being colonisers for a long time is particularly intriguing. Jatayu has a strong superstition. His right eye twitched, giving him the impression that they were going to become involved in a fresh mystery, something the investigator categorically opposes as a man of reason and rational comprehension. The sleuth and his pals coincidentally come across a puzzling circumstance or a case anytime they are out on a tour, and the author exploits chance and coincidence as a tool in this plot device. The personalities and plots are designed in such a way that they unintentionally cross paths with the detective in various circumstances. This weaves the maze of circumstances that make up the story skilfully without making the plotline of the narratives overly complicated. Through his characters, the author and his passions are kept alive. Several of the author's characters share the sleuth's passion for photography, reflecting the author's own deep interest in the subject.

Here, Tom Maxwell, a fictional character, is shown to have a passion for photography and takes various pictures of India, primarily to portray it as a third-world nation in need of improvement. It is disturbing that the author is worried about how Europeans see our country because he is trying to depict how they see it. Even after decades of Indian independence, the British continue to emphasise our country's impoverished slums rather than its progressive nature. "Poverty is, for instance, I think, far more photogenic than affluence," argues Maxwell. (702). Even if some foreigners enjoyed and appreciated their time in India, many of them now harbour the same contempt that Maxwell had. Where there were no indications of his poverty, Maxwell was never spotted pulling out his camera. He visits the Santhal tribe's tribal community deliberately to document its deteriorated condition and paint an image of India. In this detective story, Topshe highlights the game antakshari, which is particularly specifically played by Indians as an indoor game, as the daily lifestyle of the Indians is detailed in these detective narratives. Topshe goes over every specific description of the large country homes they visit. Sometimes the crooks in Ray's texts resemble real-world criminals. When they visit Dandania, who tries to obtain the priceless ruby through unfaithful ways, Topshe is reminded of one of Feluda's worst offenders, Maganlal Meghraj. The author continues to explain the historical aspects that the state is rich in when the group travels to Dubrajpur, a historical location in Bengal.

“Stones and boulders of various shapes and sizes lay scattered on the ground, covering a total area of at least one square mile. Some lay flat, others on their side. Some were huge as high as three storeyed buildings – but others were relatively small. A few had large cracks running right across, possibly the result of an earthquake hundreds of years ago. It might have been a scene from the pre-historic times. If a dinosaur had peeped out from behind a boulder, I would not have been surprised.” (708)

To support the legitimacy of the location's ancient rocky buildings, the author continues by elaborating on several legends that are common in the rural area. According to Jatayu, Lord Hanuman from the Ramayana's fabled epic fell several rocks near Dubrajpur while carrying Mount Gandhyamadan, creating the edifice. Prior to their independence, Indian workers in the indigo plants endured appalling conditions. Through his characters, Ray strives to paint a picture of this pitiful state of affairs. “Reginald Maxwell hated Indians. He was unbelievably cruel to his workers” (710). He was the one who, while drawing the fan, killed a servant by kicking him to death. This demonstrates the appalling state of the Indian people prior to their independence. Topshe mentions their trip to "Hetampur, known for its terracotta temples, once more. Peter was fascinated by the sculptures on this, especially the one of the European woman on the temple wall. We were informed that it was 200 years old. Tom has no interest in sculptures or temples. He started snapping pictures of a mother bathing her child at a tube well. These anecdotes, which Ray himself delivered in the course of the story-telling to make the youths aware of the condition from which Indians struggled to be free, depict the drudgery and India's deplorable condition. Through his articles, Ray aims to inform his readers. To help the trio become more aware of their state and country, all of his stories include extensive descriptions of the setting and accurate, realistic facts about the places the trio travels. For this reason, Ray keeps bringing up these elements, allowing the genre to veer away from traditional detective fiction.

The stories provide as a window into Ray's thoughts and interests. The interests of the characters frequently overlap with the author's own. The Maharani of Burdwan constructed a temple in Kenduli, where the fair was taking place, 250 years ago. Under a massive banyan tree, a sizable gathering of bauls had assembled. One of them was singing and playing his *ektara*. Mr. Chatterjee started out by describing the sculptures' intricate workmanship and the history of the place. “To my amazement, I saw that a large number of the figures carved on the temple's pillars and walls were characters from the Ramayana and Mahabharata” (712). Ray also exhorts us to manage our basic tendencies, such as our temper, pointing out that after gaining their independence, Indians would rarely endure being yelled at by Britishers and in order to support the long-standing custom of "Atithi Devo Bhava," he is quite concerned about how Indians present themselves to foreigners in terms of behaviour. As a result, he prevents Maxwell from being attacked as he was attempting to record a pyre burning. The colonial sentiments of the British are vented out in Maxwell's opinions, which echo what individuals with white skin believe of the nations they colonised.

Maxwell says, I have seen in the last couple of days just how backward your country is. You haven't moved an inch

in forty-five years. Your farmers are still using animals to till the land. I have seen dozens of men in Calcutta pulling rickshaws. Millions sleep on footpaths. And you dare call yourselves civilized? I know you wish to hide these disgraceful facts from the rest of the world, but I won't let you. I will take photographs of the real India and expose the depths of your hypocrisy to the whole world (715).

In response to Maxwell's claim, Ray tries to focus on the specific elements that contributed to India's post-independence growth. You can't just talk about India's poverty and harp on our failings, Mr. Chaubey responds to Maxwell.

Why, haven't you seen the progress we have made? We've explored outer space, we've started producing everything one might need to live in comfort, from clothes to cars to electronics-just name it! Why should you let your eyes stay focused on only one single negative aspect of our culture? Nobody's denying there is poverty in our country, and there is exploitation. But is everything in your own country totally above reproach, Mr. Maxwell? (715)

The traditional Adivasi dance known as the *Santhals*, which is worth watching by the audience, is mentioned in this narrative of Robertson's *Ruby* by Ray. The story talks about tribal culture and the way people danced to the accompaniment of drums and flutes. He mentions about a place *Bakreshwar* which has never stepped out of the primitive times. There were rows of old temples, behind which stood several large trees. People like Mr. *Nashkar* identify *Jatayu* with his crime-thrillers that are not serious in nature. His novels, *Dumbstruck* in *Damascus* and *Shaken* in *Shanghai* are best-sellers but refuse to be far from serious. As he writes down every potential suspect and their motivation for the theft, *Feluda's* intuition seems to be quite strong. Even the sleuth, together with his friends, became a suspect in the theft, according to Maxwell. *Feluda* provides crucial cues to not put too much faith on appearances because they can be deceiving. Maxwell had previously questioned the Indian police's ability to solve the case, but that worry has been dispelled. Mr. *Chaubey* returns the diamond to its proper owner. But the final word in the tale belonged to the detective. *Feluda* learns that Maxwell's relatives murdered the inspector's great-grandfather and to exact retribution. But when it comes to penalising the criminal, the sleuth gives one's feelings and morals more weight. Despite learning the truth, he chooses not to punish the inspector because he believes the crime was justifiable.

II

Hatyapuri (The House of the Death) is published in *Sandesh Magazine*, 1979. Before the novel's proper start, there is a brief introduction to the tale. He talks about *Dungru's* love of singing and musical instruments. This also explains Ray's fascination with music and musical instruments, which he deftly uses as a plot device. The author's need to invoke history is evident throughout all of the chapters, and this need is satisfied by the naming of places that are historically significant, such as "*Hanuman Phatak*" (3). The author contrasts a description of nature with a description of music's sound, which enhances the effect of the author's simple narration. Through his words, Ray heightens the reader's sense of awe for nature with phrases like "*maize field*," "*the modest cottage*," and "*high slope*." destination for middle-class Bengali families. *Topshe* describes *Feluda's* distinctiveness as a detective and a person. According to his description of *Feluda's* palm, which appears to have the

headline "exceptionally lengthy and clear" (4), the man is incredibly bright. The older sidekick, who frequently resembles a laughing stalk in Ray's tales, is likened by the narrator. Lal Mohan Ganguly injects a dash of humour into this book by contrasting his headline with Feluda's. His headline was sufficiently smaller than him to demonstrate his declining intelligence. Ray makes an effort to paint a picture of Calcutta in this story, where there was "constant power outages and a temperature of 110 degrees Fahrenheit" (7). Ray makes fun of the flimsiness of the crime thrillers that were popular in India at the time through his portrayal of Lal Mohan Ganguly. *Frankenstein in Frankfurt* was his first crime novel that contained a hint of the paranormal. Alliterative novel titles containing factual mistakes were used. The fact that Lal Mohan Ganguly himself held nonsensical beliefs, such as that "the Skylab will come tumbling down on Calcutta" (7), made him an even funnier figure for young readers. The sleuth's unusual hobbies also included penning limericks and practising card tricks. The Bengali lifestyles are mentioned here where Lal Mohan Babu appreciates Bengali food like koftas made of green bananas which appeared delicious to him. We see characters like Shyamal Barik take pan after every meal, which was the common ritual amongst most of the Bengalis. No sexual innuendoes are mentioned in the novels where the characters are seen sharing separate beds, rejecting the probability of even the slightest sexual occurrences.

Similar to how Charminar sparked Sherlock Holmes' intelligence, Feluda is frequently seen smoking Charminar, which he describes as "magajastro," or "brain strength," to help him solve the cases' hard puzzles. In a novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles* by Klinger III he states that Holmes use tobacco, smoking, cigarettes, cigars and pipes (423). When talking about the history of India, historical artefacts like scrolls and manuscripts are frequently brought up as essential conversation topics. His writings are filled with numerous descriptions of nature, and occasionally he goes into great detail to describe an alley, a beach, or a mountainous area where the story is located. The offence in this instance concerned the sale of Indian manuscripts to outsiders. Certain ceremonies, such as the meticulous breaking into pieces of the ancient wooden chariot of Jagannath in Puri's Jagannath temple, highlight the significance of religious rituals in India, which formed an intricate element of the country's cultural milieu. As he spins the tale, Laxman Bhattacharya, an astrologer, is suggested as a potential suspect by Ray. This diverts the reader's focus so they think they can identify the suspect, but they are ultimately proven wrong. The detective thinks and fully withdraws himself without speaking to anyone when he is close to solving a case. "He would go back to his room and lie flat on his back, staring at the ceiling" (31).

The author mostly concentrates on Bengali culture in this novel. The readers' sense of patriotism is sparked by the nature of crime. Since Bhubaneswar is one of India's temple cities, the group also went to some of the city's other temples. The most precious manuscript in the collection was stolen in this tale, and the secretary has since vanished. The sleuth declares gravely that "checking and re-checking facts is a crucial element of an investigator's job" in reference to how the decision was reached (39). In order to solve the case, the sleuth is frequently seen working late into the night on the clues. And in order to think effectively, he needs to clear his head periodically. Ray by describing the moist,

dreary surroundings of the locations the three explores during the investigation, the author heightens the sense of anticipation and gives the scene a scary appearance. Even the readers believe the initial suspect presented by Feluda to be the real criminal. In this case, Nisith Bose is such a figure, and the readers are led to believe that he could be a suspect by his shady behaviour. Feluda withholds some information, which heightens the tension as he keeps his friends in the dark about their destination and motive. Annoyed by this act of the sleuth his friends suggested him to make suspense movies. This is actually author's way of refraining himself from the truth so as to hold the suspense for the audience. Feluda values friendship, Lal Mohan Ganguly seems to be more of a troublemaker, as he sometimes switches on his torch at the climax of the situation when he is not supposed to, yet Feluda values his friendship with him and makes him a part of all his plans. LMG's dance around with a blunt object to strike the perpetrator and failing to even hold it still makes him a laughing stalk to the readers, which eases off the stress with a touch of humour while squirming with the crooks and in the process of arresting them. After the dramatic event, Feluda's method of telling the truth is distinctive and consistent throughout most of his stories. He summons everyone to a public location, particularly the living room, where he unveils the core of the entire scheme, including the culprit and the solution, and, if necessary, delivers him over to the authorities. In the end, it was discovered that D.G. Sen's foot was artificial. The investigator was kept in the dark about this discovery, but Feluda's skill at his job allowed him to uncover even the most delicate of information from those around him because it is very challenging to ignore the sleuth's powers of observation.

Conclusion

Satyajit Ray's detective fiction has left a significant socio-cultural impact in Bengal during 19th century. His stories portrayed the societies' reality particularly the middle-class lifestyle, the political climate, and the social issues that prevailed at that time. His iconic detective character, Feluda, and his sidekick Topshe have become household names, and their adventures have enthralled generations of Bengalis. Ray's literature has been studied and admired not only for its literary merit but also for its representation of Bengali Culture, language, and values.

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