Indigenising the Detective Genre in Satyajit Ray's 'Feluda' series: A Study

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Abstract:

The paper navigates through the socio-cultural footmark that Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) etches through his detective fiction in nineteenth century Bengal. It locates texts and their recurring themes and motifs in a wider social and historical context. This would deal with the emergence of the genre initially as an adaptation of the West. The essay tries to focus on Ray's uniqueness in his characterisation, origin, methods of detection, and nuances of narrative technique that makes him the stalwart of Bengali Detective Fiction for Children. Ray indigenised the genre and attempted to decode the unsolved mysteries through his protagonist by appropriating the cultural richness of Bengal.

Keywords: Satyajit Ray, Detective Fiction, Bhadralok, Culture, Feluda.

The evolution of Detective Fiction in European Literature had a distinct impact on the literature of the colonised countries, especially India which was already rich in its own literary heritage. Francesca Orsini in her essay, 'Detective Novels: A Commercial Genre in Nineteenth-century North India' argues that this genre "was brought into India 'ready-made', without the intellectual and historical substratum that had generated it in Europe" (436). Priya Joshi in her book *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India* states that the detective novels, especially the works of Collins and Doyle appeared in the public libraries in India, almost during the same time when they initially appeared in Britain (64). Hence in the later parts of the nineteenth century, as Calcutta was considered the hub of all the administrative and cultural activities of it's imperialist state, the canon of detective fiction was also available to the readers and writers in Bengal. As Bengali had already established its importance as a language in Indian Literature long before the British Rule, it can be perceived that the genre of detective fiction in England served as an archetype for the writers in Bengal. Though the reference of crime could be traced quite early in Bengali literature, yet the fact that detective fiction as an epoch emerged as a result of colonial intervention is evident while tracing the literary history of detective fiction in Bengal.

There is a distinct cultural value associated with the detective writings of Ray and he understood it well while writing down his stories. His stories are strewn with depictions of culture and history emphasising prominently the archival past of the country. They reflect the social milieu of the Bengali middle-class families, their habits, and carefully avoid any mention of the socio-political upheaval that was prevalent during the late twentieth century when these novels were published. His writings kept in mind the audience, reducing the discourse in a manner so as not to have a jarring effect on the reader's psyche. There was a deliberate avoidance of violence and female characters and Ray improvises his work in a unique way so as to bring out these cultural impressions through the setting, life-style, intimacy of relationships, narrative technique, etc to make his writings more appropriately suggestive to the Indian audience.

The paper delves deep into the detective writings of Satyajit Ray and focuses on two major hypotheses: Firstly, in spite of the strewn references from western writers like Doyle, from whom Ray admittedly draws inspiration, his (Ray's) writings distinctly delineate divergences from them, making him create a niche of his own in the genre of detective fiction. Secondly, Ray uses local culture, history to weave the narrative so as to heighten the 'desi' flavour in his writings and indianizes the genre of detective fiction.

Literary critic Saroj Bandhyopadhyay, in her essay *Goyenda Kahini te Satyajit Gharana* (*Satyajit Ray, in the genre of Detective Fiction*), discriminates the detective writings of Ray from the traditional works belonging to this genre. The protagonist Feluda is not typically a detective fiction character. Though he succeeds Byomkesh Bakshi, who was an out and out family man, Feluda is not placed within a familial structure. The narrator of the stories, Feluda's cousin is often termed as a 'functional narrator' by Bandhyopadhyay (936). Apparently, Tapesh Ranjan appears to be like Watson but the liaison, which the sleuth shares with his cousin is quite different from that of Watson and Holmes. Tapesh is quite younger than Feluda. He is more of an apprentice whom the sleuth trains to be like himself in future. The adolescent readers can vehemently identify themselves with the young narrator irrespective of their gender. Bandyopadhyay comments in her essay that though Tapesh is the narrator of the Feluda stories, Feluda has always been the 'guide-narrator'. According to Banerjee, Feluda was always the passive 'centre of consciousness in the novels (937).

Ray domesticates and internalizes several differences in his depiction of characters, in terms of their name, appearance, way of life and their food-habits by giving a sneek peak into the Bengali lifestyle that overshadows most of his works. The sleuth Pradosh Chandra Mitter is mostly known by his nick-name 'Feluda' which is typically Bengali in nature. A Bengali is often vested with a 'dak-nam' or a nick-name given by the close ones apart from the real name by which he is known to the public. The name 'Feluda' can be broken into - the nickname 'Felu' and suffix 'da' meaning elder brother in Bengali. As Mathur suggests in her essay, *Holmes's Indian Reincarnation* that , "it is a name that combines familial intimacy and respect" (91), which is very typical of Bengalis or Indians believing in a close-knit familial relationships that is an inevitable part of the Indian society. The sleuth along with his cousin is a representative of the Indian youth, and Ray tries to idealize the character of 'Feluda' by bestowing him the qualities that would make the readers crave to be like the sleuth.

Feluda is conferred with several attributes, both physical and intellectual, which makes him interesting and attractive to the readers who would eventually have a tendency to imitate the sleuth for his brilliant agility, intelligence, observance, perception, detective and analytical skills. These skills gradually evolved with time as he perfectly mastered them all. The protagonist is not a mere hero, he is one of us. He is brave and a typical Bengali in his taste and behaviour. Ray imparts finer emotions and the power of observance to the sleuth that were the very streak of his own character. He believes in keeping his mind open to several spectrums of knowledge and retaining the innocence and inquisitiveness of a child which makes him more susceptible to learning in the future. The educative process is fostered as the protagonist uses concepts like parapsychology, cenotaphs, musical notes and goes on to explain them for the benefit of the audience. Feluda's interest in the classical past and history of India, his love for word-games and puzzles makes him a distinct and independent character. The strict moral code which binds the characters of Ray especially the sleuth himself and his compliance to emotions, feelings, morality and ethics makes his appearance as normal as any other Bengali youth of his age creating a 'dedicated universe of readership' (Chakrabarti 258).

Ray, very distinctly etches a graphic picture of the Bengali bourgeois class and the 'bhadralok' who emerged during the period of 1970's through his characters. Rachona Majumdar in her essay *Feluda*

on Feluda: a letter to Topshe discusses how Ray develops a private investigator, 'a middle-class man who was not bourgeois' and is completely indifferent to material benefits (242). Majumdar further comments that, Feluda was nothing "but a representative of the educated 'bhadralok' whose life found meaning in serving their country through honest endeavours. I [Feluda] epitomized an ideal of modern Indian citizenship . . . a modern man who did not seek to reproduce himself through family and property" (243). Gautam Chakrabarti in his essay, "The *Bhadralok* as Truth-Seeker: Towards a Social History of the Bengali Detective" mentions that the private investigator's 'spirit of rational enquiry', 'upholds the spirit of traditional orders by exposing the soft underbelly of moral corruption' (255) which should be the ideal of every youth of the nation. Chakrabarti pinpoints that the author aims at "the creation of a pan-Indian modern individual who aspires . . . the sense of colonial India necessitating a discourse of the confident Indian who can face up to the "West" on its own terms" (259).

Critic Indrajit Hazra in his essay Felu *Mitter: Between Bhadrolok and Chhotolok*, defines the 'bhadrolok' "in terms of class, the bhadralok can range from the archetypal rich, upper-middle-class Bengali gentleman to the middle-class Bengali gentleman whose relative lack of wealth is compensated by his ability to stand out with dignity in a crowd" (50). This representation of a morally stratified Bengali middle-class society which is judged by terms like 'bhadralok' for the gentleman and 'Chhotolok' for the "crass, uncultured" (50) is predominantly dismantled in the works of Ray. The characters of Ray's novels sway between the boundaries of 'bhadrolok' and 'chottolok' where there is a fine line that separates them from belonging strictly to each of these denoted categories. There is a "palpable sense of preoccupation with the lost world of the *bhadralok* which, Sayandeb Chowdhury discusses in his essay *Ageless Hero, Sexless Man*. He says:

> This is not to say that Feluda's clients are anachronistic, but they are surely exceptional, citizens of a past world untouched by the disquiet of the time around them . . . Many of them happen to be specialists in one thing or the other, consummate in their taste of the finer things of life, . . .This is true, almost to the last syllable, of the clients outside Calcutta, most of whose primary occupation is to act as custodians of a past now irreversibly taken from them.

The author draws a picture of their daily life, their food habits, hobbies, appetite for reading and several other features that define Bengali culture. "Feluda is the archetypal Bengali foodie. (Mazumdar 8)" His culinary tastes resemble the traditional exotic Bengali cuisine which includes Bengali sweets, chicken curry and mixture belonging to a specific shop of his choice in New Market. For example, in *The Curse of the Goddess*, Feluda does give in to Lalmohan-babu's request and visits the Great Majestic Circus, but only after he had finished his chicken curry and dal cooked by the chowkidar's wife. His penchant for food and fondness for fish is also evident in stories like The *Mystery of the Elephant God*, etc. The sleuth is often presented as a voracious reader and is seen reading books like *The Chariots of the Gods* which provides an edge to his sharp mind. These features which Ray incorporates in his characters show the manner in which he perfectly nativizes the genre. Tapesh, who is the cousin brother of Feluda is often called 'Topshey' or 'Topshe' which is actually the name of a fish, Bengalis are fond of. Ray subtly incorporates a tinge of humour in the name where he hints at the sleuth's fondness of Bengali food and also his cousin. The third character Lalmohan Ganguly, introduced in *The Golden Fortress* is a crime-thriller writer with a pseudo-name 'Jatayu' - a mythical bird in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. This valorous bird sacrifices his life, attempting to rescue Sita from the clutches of the villainous Ravana when the later was escaping in his flying chariot. The name Jatayu is not only associated with valour but also with steadfast loyalty towards Rama, who is the epitome of righteousness. Here, Feluda is often considered as a moral centre to whom Jatayu is

loyal to. By using this name, Ray tries to emphasise the "socio-cultural spectrum of the colonial native" who makes a "subaltern attempt" to emphasise the rich cultural history by reviving events from the past (Chakrabarti 260). There are strewn references from *The Mahabharata* in novels like *The Mysterious Tenant* which begins with Feluda reading the epic. The author seems to inform the readers about important details to illuminate their knowledge about India's epic texts.

Apart from introducing dollops of humour, the purpose of Lal Mohan Ganguly was not merely to provide comic-relief but also to give an insight into a different kind of Bengaliness or 'Bangaliyana'. He is an apt representative of a Bengali middle-class 'bhodrolok' (gentleman) just like Feluda himself. He is average heighted, bald, funny in his appearance, wrongly pronounces English words but is always ready to accept his mistake. He writes crime thrillers, with several factual errors, yet is inordinately popular amongst the readers. Ray tries to portray a contrasting character to 'Feluda', through the protagonist of Jatayu's novels i.e. 'Prakhar Rudra', who has super-human abilities making Feluda look much more realistic in appearance.

Ray was always a socially responsible writer. His human qualities are equally vibrant as he tries to give a realist depiction of what appeals to the mind of the readers for whom he initially construed the narratives. The examples are deliberately strewn across most of the detective stories: in *The Mystery of the Elephant God*, Feluda's concern for his friend Lal Mohan Ganguly reflects his character who values friendship more than anything else. Feluda's compassionate nature and his sense of responsibility prevented him from punishing Prof. Nihar Ranjan Dutta in *The Mysterious Tenant*, and the famous zamindar Mahitosh Singha in *The Royal Bengal Mystery* whose crime was his zest for fame. Feluda's pity prevents him from punishing Ranajit, despite him stealing the research materials of Mr. Dutta and thirty-three thousand rupees in *The Mysterious Tenant*. These features indicate that the entire oeuvre of the stories is intricately bound to humane characteristics that are also found in the characters depicted by Ray. Mathur says that the Feluda stories are a form of writing back rather than being an instance of colonial mimicry as a whole (Mathur 90).

The author tries to draw attention to rich Indian civilization as he mentions the intricate architecture of India like the forts of Rajasthan, Agra and the caves of Ellora. He juxtaposes trivia and historical facts and folk-lore of a place to make the setting come alive to the readers. In *The Emperor's Ring*, the sleuth gives an educative introduction to his cousin about the history of Lucknow and the Nawabs who built Bhoolbhulaia in the Burra Imambara, the Monkey Bridge over the Gomti, and the Residency which was the "centre of the Bristish forces during the Mutiny." Topshe describes Lucknow, "There are buildings with turrets and minarets all around; the roads were broad and clean and the traffic, besides motor cars, included two different kinds of horse-drawn carriages. One, I learnt, was called a tonga and the other was an ekka."(Ray 28). The Indian culture at its peak can be witnessed in the elaborate description of the city Varanasi in *The Mystery of the Elephant God* which reinstalls the reader's faith in India's enriched culture.

Hence to sum up the contents of this study, Ray tries to give a vivid picture of the Bengali middle-class society by reflecting mostly on the lifestyle, day to day cultures and habits that encompasses a Bengali household. He purposefully refrains from delineating political issues but cleverly draws the picture of Kolkata and some of the towns of Bengal which the protagonist visits while resolving his cases. Some of the historically enriched settings like Lucknow, Rajasthan, Varanasi, Agra are aesthetically dealt with and elaborately narrated to empower the image of India through his writings. This also reverberates the author's patriotic zeal and weaves cultural nationalism by representing India in a positive light. The uniqueness in dialogues, characters, settings along with the juxtaposition of suspense, action and humour enables Ray to paint a gripping narrative that keeps the readers

hooked. Ray's abstinence from vesting 'a super-hero image' to the protagonist and the very fact that the readers can relate to the characters, makes the series immensely popular and instills the purpose of weaving these narratives.

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