



**Compiled and Circulated by: Mr. Manas Barik, Guest Lecturer
Dept. of English, Narajole Raj College**

=====

Sense Behind The Nonsense in *Abol Tabol*

Nonsense literature or literary nonsense intends to project certain socio-political concerns by disrupting and redefining the existing conventions of language, reason and logic. 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 literature, whether rhymes, verse or prose, too seem to be a medium through which the author or the writer makes an attempt to use the comic mode in subversive ways to attack the stereotypes of colonial system. The works of both Sukumar Ray and Edward Lear within the paradigm of children's literature is thereby, political in intent.

The world in which Sukumar Ray lived and wrote was one that was witnessing colonial oppression and raising voices of resistance against the Raj. Ray being a creative artist, might have accepted the positive dimension of the European Enlightenment - this is apparent from the fact he himself was well-read in western literature and philosophy - but he did criticise the empire for its greed and violence. The dialectic of enlightenment has been problematized in the European context too and the apprehensions that Ray had within the default 'renaissance' of Bengal or the crisis of modernity had common resonance worldwide. The critique of industrialization, mechanical culture, destruction of agrarian societies, creation of 'babu' culture, totalitarian impulses and destruction of individualities are his key concern. So his poems from *AbolTabol* (Rhyme without Reason) can therefore be read as a sardonic critique of the Bengali Intelligentsia.

In the poem "Kimbhut" or "Super Beast", the creature is depressed as it craves for the parts of other animals. He wants a voice like the cuckoo and envies the birds as they soared in the sky. He wishes to have wings to fly like birds, the lithe legs to hop like the Kangaroo and also the trunk and tusk like the elephant. The lion's proud mane and the scaly tail of the lizard too made him envious. But then, when one day suddenly all his desires got fulfilled and he got all that he had ever wished, the Super Beast suffers from acute identity crisis- "I can't be a moth or a horse or a snake... /Oh what can I be?"

=====

Sem. – IV :: Paper C10T :: POPULAR LITERATURE

=====



**Compiled and Circulated by: Mr. Manas Barik, Guest Lecturer
Dept. of English, Narajole Raj College**

=====

Here Ray was probably concerned with the thriving 'babu' culture of Bengal that was doing nothing but making educated Bengalis a perfect subject for the colonial empire to exploit. The education and exposure to European - primarily English - language culture and custom was being popularised through British pedagogical apparatus for its own benefit and was being embraced with wide open arms by the natives because it gave them employment as well as a false sense of status and pride. This led to a situation where these native individuals began neglecting their own indigenous customs and traditions and eventually began suffering from a crisis of identity. Through the poem he critiques this very tendency of educated middle class Bengalis who were fast losing their unique individuality to English culture, custom and tradition. The creature in the poem - apparent from the poet's own illustration - is extremely depressed as it desires for many things that are absent in his own self but present in others. Interestingly when it gets all that it ever desired for, it becomes more miserable than before as now it is devoid of any identity of its own. Ray, through this poem critiques the, then existing colonial educational apparatus, and comments against those natives, who like the *Kimbhut* were not satisfied with their own conditions, customs and traditions and through the education, desired and even imitated the colonial manners. He thus provoked an alternative current of thinking using humour as a tool to critique - though in a comic tone - the fact that blindly embracing the colonial custom and manners would only make one as miserable as the identity less *Kimbhut* who is only fit to be either laughed at or made fun of.

The poem also expresses the plight of the modern man in the industrialised and mechanised world which causes absolute dehumanization. The colonised subject, like the 'Kimbhut' has no identity or individuality of his own and is caught within a sense of nothingness. He is alienated, not just from his work or labour but also from his own self and thus is human no more. The question "Oh what can I be" that *Kimbhut* asks itself seem to be the very quest that remains unquenched in the mind of the identity less modern man.

=====

Sem. – IV :: Paper C10T :: POPULAR LITERATURE

=====



**Compiled and Circulated by: Mr. Manas Barik, Guest Lecturer
Dept. of English, Narajole Raj College**

=====

Again, the portrayal of pot-bellied and lethargic Bengali men can also be found in Ray's illustration of- "Kumro Potash" (or the "Pumpkin Puff"). Going by the poem, people did strange things just because Kumro Potash danced or moaned or ran. The Pumpkin Puff may be understood as the representative of the Bengali Babus, who made the town people awestruck and afraid by boasting about their 'special affinity with their English Bosses which was due to their Western education. In yet another poem titled as "HukoMukoHangla" or "The Lug-Headed Loon", Ray criticizes the very accepted notion of the rationality and conventionality, which during his time were set and decided by the Raj. The creature in the poem is distressed, as by following conventions of rationality he cannot swat flies that were sitting at the centre of his back, as two of his tails worked only in two directions. The readers might laugh at the Loon's foolishness of not using his own brain and following the conventions without questioning their effectiveness. But at the same time, the Loon's behaviour may also be interpreted as a spoof on the Bengali aristocracy, who in spite of their affluence were neither happy, nor satisfied. Their desperate endeavours to be in the good books of the Englishmen often led them to dwell in despair, just as the creature of the poem.

The lack of common sense as well as the ability to make good decisions was also induced among the law abiding Babus of the British Raj. This fact is depicted beautifully in Ray's "Ki Mushkil" (translated as the "Encyclopedia"). In this poem, the person holding an encyclopedia searches the book frantically to find an escape from a chasing bull. The book is said to have information on every subject under the sun including "The way to cook chutney or steam a pilau", "Of medical matters", "making of toothpaste, of ink and soap". It also tells about "pujas and pundits" but lacks the information about "The best way to tackle a charging mad bull". This excessive dependence on book for matters of common sense (as depicted in the poem), does actually highlight the reality of a section of Bengali intellectuals who had bidden adieu to their own faculty of reasoning and understanding due to their slavish obedience to the rules laid by the British for them.

=====

Sem. – IV :: Paper C10T :: POPULAR LITERATURE

=====



**Compiled and Circulated by: Mr. Manas Barik, Guest Lecturer
Dept. of English, Narajole Raj College**

=====

Keeping up the vein of criticism of the Bengali Babus, we find the Big Boss (or Babu) in the poem “GophChuri” or “The Purloined Moustache” suddenly claims that his moustache has been stolen and he also scolds all his staff who try to reason with him by stressing the impossibility of such happening. Like a typical Babu, he is of a dominating kind who treats the lesser clerks as “pack of dolts”. His charging of a fine from them on account of the moustache theft is indeed humorous, but at the same time, it is also a slanting comment on how the masses were exploited by the British as well as by those whose Western education made them faithful flag bearers of the Raj.

Ray’s verses not only critique the Babus for their faithful adherence to the British Raj, but they also point out the manner in which the colonizers treated the Indians in general and the Bengalis in particular. Historically speaking, in the colonial period, British and the Bengalis were delineated by sharp stereotypical distinctions. On the one hand was a supposed masculine ideal- identified by a love of sports, particularly hunting, a chivalric approach for women etc.- all of which contributed to the ‘manly character’ which was seen as the unique mark of Briton. On the other hand the Bengali Babu was viewed as the complete foil to this- effeminate, bookish, over serious (like the Griffon’s Grouse of Ray’s poem for whom laughter under any condition is forbidden), languorous, lustful and lacking of self-discipline.

In another poem of Sukumar Ray titled as “Bapuram Sapure”, translated as “Snakes Alive”, one witnesses a situation where the narrator of the poem – an unknown entity – requests Bapuram the snake charmer to get two snakes who are absolutely harmless solely because the unknown narrator wants to beat them and turn them cold. Through this poem Sukumar Ray portrays yet another concern. The snake that is a symbol of fertility in the context of Bengal and also worshipped as the vengeful mother goddess ‘Manosha’, is nothing but Satan to the coloniser’s mind. Mating snakes might be auspicious to some sections of society in Bengal but to a colonial mind they are nothing more than the Arch Foe. Thus when the pair is bought by the unknown entity of the narrator, just with a motive to beat them with “cudgel” and “knock them cold” the entity seem to represent the violent hegemonic powers of the contemporary times who used violence as a means to establish its superiority. The unprovoked violence compels

=====

Sem. – IV :: Paper C10T :: POPULAR LITERATURE

=====



**Compiled and Circulated by: Mr. Manas Barik, Guest Lecturer
Dept. of English, Narajole Raj College**

=====

one to realize that the poem depicts the cruel subjugation and exploitation of not just the body of the colonised man but also of his faiths and beliefs. Interestingly this unknown cruel entity of the narrator finds its parallel in one of Edward Lear's poem about an 'old man with a gong'. The act of smashing the old man who played with the gong, depicts, the irrational violence of the power apparatus portrayed here as the agency of the "they". It overtly reflects the fact that whatever is not liked by "them" would not be allowed to exist, just as in Ray's poem the pair of snake was not allowed to live by the narrator.

Ray's nonsense was therefore what can be called metasense, as it successfully turned parody into serious literature. By depicting the reality of colonial Bengal in an oblique manner, Ray intended to trigger the birth of political consciousness and radicalism in Bengal so that it could react against the contemporary socio-political atmosphere which was violent, unjust, exploitative, grim and mechanized. Whatever Ray's intention might have been, the poems of *Abol Tabol* offered excitement and fun to the young minds in an alternate world of nonsense.

=====

Sem. – IV :: Paper C10T :: POPULAR LITERATURE

=====