

Abol Tabol : Critical Appreciation

Sukumar Ray, the Bengali humorous poet, story writer and playwright was born in a Brahmo family in Kolkata. Born in then the era which can be called the pinnacle of Bengal Renaissance, he grew up in an environment that fostered his literary talents. His works as the collection of poems *Abol Tabol*, is considered equal in stature to *Alice in Wonderland*.

Although before Sukumar Roy, Trailakyanath Mukherjee (1847-1919) had gifted his Bengali readers with the comic elements in his creativity and in post Roy literary sphere, Sunirmal Bose, Annadasankar Roy or Premendra Mitra had left their mark, but they were devoid of the sharp insight Roy had in parodying his contemporary society and the falsity in it. What Trailakyanath in his lucid rural dialect had left to achieve, Roy took the helm and carried it forward in his satiric description of modern city life, the 'Babu culture' imposed upon the rising middle class by the British imperialists and finally of the colonizers themselves. In that respect, Roy's nonsense poetry becomes pregnant with anti colonial sentiments that lie in a shimmering haze under the guise of an apparently meaningless ramble of children's verse. "In an absurd universe without belief there are no ethical standards, no moral judgement, no perception of valid motifs; one thing or one action is as good as another." (The Dictionary of World Literary Terms; J.T.Shipley)

Born in an extremely politics conscious family and surrounded by luminaries like Rabindranath Tagore, Jagadish Chandra Bose, Prafulla Chandra Roy and his father Upendrakishore, Ray grew up in an environment that fostered his literary talents and his poetry shows an extremely poignant ridicule of the rising Bengali middle class and their pseudo-bourgeois ways. The poems depict in a garb of comic deliberation; the futility of human endeavour and the ridicule it generates in the process. "Surrealism turns away from life, but the absurd claims to be a reflection of life." (The Dictionary of World Literature. T.J.Shipley).

Sukumar Ray's humour was free of malice, but not of satire. At times he could indulge in a frank roar of laughter, and this again agreed with his particular personality. Satyajit Ray draws a beautiful comparison between Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury and Sukumar Ray as he says in the "Introduction" to "The Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray": "In sheer drawing skill, Sukumar is not his father's equal' but he makes up for this by two rare gifts, a remarkably observant eye and a limitless fund of imagination. Through a union of these two qualities, his subjects transcend all criteria of technique and acquire living form before our eyes. That is why we cannot doubt the existence of any creature he portrays, real or imaginary. Chandidas's Uncle or "The Old Man of the Woods", the Griffonling or the Higgie -Piggle-Dee - all are equally alive, equally credible." The surreal characters in *Abol Tabol* becomes a reality.

The characters in *Abol Tabol* are not always human beings. Sometimes they appear as imaginary animals. The first to arrive was the Lug-Headed Loom, who thinks and feels like a human but looks like a zoological medley. There had been imaginary animals in old Bengali nursery rhymes, but they lacked character and personality. Closer to Sukumar's are the weird creations of Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear. 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. Lear, too, created many nonsense animals: the Dong, the Jumblies, the Pobble, the Quangle- Wangle, the Blue Boss-Woss. But these again are not allowed to come too close to our familiar world. Their realm is virtually that of the fairy tale. He Lug-Headed Loon, on the contrary, lives in Bengal and further

The Inspector of Drugs Is an uncle of Lug's,

He has no other living relation.

In the same way, the Blighty Cow can readily be seen in Haru's office. The Super-Beast "wails on the meadows and weeps by the streams" and the Pumpkin-Puff seems to prowl around our houses. It is a world all Sukumar Ray's own, and its creation is his finest achievement.

Sukumar Ray uses puns, alliteration and onomatopoeia for humorous effect just as others had done earlier. But the special quality of his nonsense is largely his own creation. According to Satyajit Ray: "If we are to talk of influence, we must think not only of the Bengali tradition but also of European literature, the pantomime, Charlie Chaplin and western comics." Ray had a doubt as to how the Bengali reader would react to this vein of nonsense. The preface to *Abol Tabol* carried an apology: "This book was conceived in the spirit of whimsy. It is not meant for those who do not enjoy that spirit." One might recall that Tagore too had to provide such a defence for *Khapchhara*, the book of nonsense verse that he wrote in his old age.

"Snakes Alive" or Baburam Sapurey , reveals an interesting study of the gradual influx of British East India Company on the soils of the nation while it was still in its hay-days. The speaker may be identified with the British imperialists and the snake charmer "Babu ram" with Farrukhsiyar, the 10th Mughal Emperor. The Farrukhsiyar's Farman (April 1717) gave the Company the right to purchase 38 villages around Sutanuti, Gobindopur and Kolikata and collect taxes directly from the provinces and installed rulers who would suit the interest of the Company. Roy then goes on an elaborate description of the easily mouldable and docile nature of the apparently powerful and revered figure heads 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).

As the readers move on to "A Marriage is Announced" "kongso raj er bongso dhor" identifies the protagonist's Indian roots and lays down upon him "A shade too dark"-which reminds us of Ania Loomba's reading of Caliban in *Tempest* where Caliban has been depicted as the black native and "abhorred slave". Marriage between British and Indians, though, did occur, producing the Anglo-Indian community. This is explored by Masters in his *Bhowani Junction*, and other works. In *Wicked Women of the British Raj* by Coralie Younger, this theme of marriage has received ample attention and discussion through her "unputdownable factual account of the zenana world of the rajas and sultans of India, concentrating on the Firangi bahu and begums of this veiled world of myths and folklore" and of the "European women who broke society's rules to marry the 'heathen' princes of the pompous and extravagant Indian aristocracy".

In "The Purloined Moustache" we have the "The Baboo at the Central Works" that puns the Bengali "Babu culture" that sought to make a living off their British masters. The protagonist's reference "This whisker's like a dirty broom, all bunched and coarse and scary: / I saw it once upon the lout tha runs the local dairy." is demeaning as it portrays that the physical appearance of none but the lower class people may exhibit such traits.

"The Owl's Love Song" may be studied as an interesting case-study of the relation between the East India Company and its ties with mainland England. Although functioning under the protective umbrella of Mainland England, the relationship between the individual companies working independently in the colonies were often strained with the mainland. Thereby, a policy of appeasement was often followed by the Company to let it carry on with its Opium trade and independent misrule; often at the cost of heavily enriching the royal coffers. The role of the 'owl' appeasing his 'mate' may be equated with the appeasement policy followed by the British in India with the English Queen.

The readers are left to question whether "The Inventor" portrays the lure of high offices and fat salaries dangled by the imperialists that produced a class of the westernized Bengalis to work for the Company till they realized that most of the high places were reserved for the colonizers themselves and not through the basis of merit. This became a contributing factor to the growth of nationalism in gradual time.

Sources: <http://www.ijelr.in/3.2.16B/443-449%20ABHIK%20MAITI.pdf>

"THE NONSENSE WORLD OF SUKUMAR ROY: THE INFLUENCE OF BRITISH COLONIALISM ON SUKUMAR ROY'S NONSENSE POEMS-WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ABOL-TABOL "ABHIK MAITI

"Introduction" (written by Satyajit Ray) to "The Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray" of Sukanta Chowdhuri.