

## NATIVIZING DETECTIVE FICTION: A STUDY OF SATYAJIT RAY'S SELECTED NOVELS

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### Abstract

In the oeuvre of Satyajit Ray, detective writing occupies a significant place and the way he has appropriated the specific genre, an idea essentially from the west, in terms of technique and theme is greatly amazing. Satyajit Ray, in his detective fiction, makes a conscious effort to foreground a nationalist identity perspective from decolonized perspective. The paper aims at exploring how Ray, through his fictional detective's eye visualizes India's decolonized status and refuses allegations of colonial mimicry. He uses crime fiction as a tool to create a new discourse by appropriating his own technique to mark a distinct departure from his colonial predecessor. This paper also seeks to analyze Ray's texts from the light of anticolonial perspective which shapes the author's childhood. Apart from this, the plot, setting and characters in many of the texts of Ray, also reflect Indian diversity and culture. The paper intends to focus on how Ray attempts in generating a nationalist identity by educating the Indian youth beyond the influence of colonial discourse.

Analyzing the history of the evolution of crime fiction in India especially Bengal, critics such as Suchitra Mathur in "Holmes's Indian Reincarnation" states that detective fiction in India was a result of colonial imposition of the West (Matzke 88). But the emergence of detective fiction in India can never be slighted merely as colonial mimicry. The writings that emerged after the colonial struggle mostly captured the cultural and social impact of colonial power both through the characterization and historical representation of the plot. Pramod Kumar Nayar states that "Anti-colonial struggles were about liberating themselves, at both individual and communal levels, from colonial attitudes and forms of thinking. Postcolonial obsession with history is thus closely linked to the overarching goal of decolonization" (Nayar 36). This is exactly what Ray as a writer of popular fiction tries to transfuse in the minds of his readers, to educate the youth and subsume them in India's rich cultural and historical heritage. The theme of history in postcolonial literature addresses issues of fabricating 'mimic men' other than appropriating history as a tool to restore faith in India's past. Ray subverts the concept of 'mimic men' as he gives the protagonist a purely Indian identity who derives inspiration from Doyle's Holmes but is

not merely a prototype. The aim of the paper is to visualize how Ray's creation is solely an original one deferring from Holmes, though draws inspiration from it and how Ray tries to foster the message of decolonization amidst the veil of detective fiction.

Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) is mainly known for his prolific Film-Making which took Indian Cinema to the West. He belonged to an aristocratic Bengali family whose contribution to art was immense over a period of almost four generations. Apart from making 36 films and documentaries, he had a multi-faceted personality which enabled him to be a fiction writer, calligrapher, music composer, publisher, illustrator and a film-critic. He authored several short stories and novels, primarily aimed at children and adolescents. Feluda, the sleuth, and Professor Shonku, the scientist in his science fiction stories, are popular fictional characters created by him. The scope of this paper is to focus on the literary writings of Satyajit Ray especially his detective fiction.

Feluda, aka Prodosh C.Mitter is Asia's Brightest Crime Detector, originated from Ray's love of puzzles and puns. (Bandyopadhyay 92). His name, decoded by the turbaned witness in "The Golden Fortress", is a pun on his career path since "Pro stands for a professional. Dosh in Bengali means crime. C. is to see- i.e. investigate. Therefore, Prodosh is equal to Professional Crimes Investigator" (75). Readers learn about his history from his cousin Tapes, who explains: "Our ancestral home was in the village of Shonadeeghi, near Dhaka. My father was the youngest of three brothers. The second brother- Feluda's father- used to teach Mathematics and Sanskrit in a school. Unfortunately, he died after a brief spell of illness. Feluda was nine years old at the time. Feluda was brought and raised by my parents (RBM 428)." It is interesting to note how Ray gives shape to his master-piece as an ideal Bengali youth who is twenty-seven years old man, nearly six feet tall, with 'a tight and taut figure... a body shaped by a regular course of physical exercise (Bandyopadhyay 93). He is an early riser who enjoys yoga and walking. Furthermore, he also adores Bengali food, has no interest in avaricious pursuits, has a good sense of humor, and prefers non-violent methods of crime solving (Bandyopadhyay 94). "He is good at cricket, knows at least a hundred indoor games, a number of card games, a little hypnotism and can write with both hands" (ER 27)

Ray through his detective novellas tries to revive local cultures and systems which form the backbone of native India. He tries to evoke national consciousness about India's historical richness by constructing images and fictional plots which are woven around realistic settings and bears resemblance to eminent historical events glorifying India's past, reviving myths and rejuvenating pride in its cultural forms. The setting of the plot is often at historical places like --- Lucknow in "The Emperor's Ring", Jaisalmer in "The Golden Fortress", Benaras in "The Mystery of Elephant God", Jodhpur Fort, Udaipur, Darjeeling, Haridwar, Agra, Delhi, Rajasthan and many others. Ray tries to mention important sites like "Kesar Bagh, Badshahi Manjil, Lakhu Phatak" referring to great monuments in Indian history. To emphasize India's dense foliage and splendor, Ray mentions natural preserves like "Sunderbans", "Terai" etc.

Ray purposefully marginalizes the occupation of British and its legacies emphasizing more on events like the Sepoy Mutiny as he mentions it in "Robertson's Ruby" and many more similar episodes, characters that heighten Indianess, to test the knowledge of Indian readers giving them a glimpse of the country's historical variety. Ray absolutely refrains from mentioning the British's degraded status and hence proclaims India's decolonized state by educating Indians about geography, climate, landscape and history of India. Though there is similarity between Feluda who is the protagonist and Holmes, his western counterpart yet Ray cannot be accused of colonial mimicry. Feluda can often be termed as the 'other' which is

discussed in the work of Edward Said, as opposed to ‘orient’. Orient is the superior image in the West which is copied in the colonized states and is “constructed as a mirror image of inferiority”. Hence Ray’s protagonist had the risk of being called the ‘other’ but Ray’s ingenious innovative differences which he inserts in the character sets him apart negating the allegation. The Indian publishing industry considered the Indian borne crime narratives and writers as inferiors comparing them to the western ones as these writers lacked inventiveness and popularity. In order to avoid this and exercise freedom of publishing Ray chose his own magazine *Sandesh* to get the works published. This also enabled him to limit his readers mostly to children. Analyzing the history of detective fiction it can be seen as Francesca Orsini remarks in “Detective Novels: A Commercial Genre in Nineteenth Century India” that the method of deduction and the clues which are hinted in Sherlock Holmes have ancient Indian forebearers. So here the whole concept of colonial mimicry is negated. Hence the main aim of Ray as a writer is to urge the present generation to move away from this colonial violence and to relieve Indian minds from the impacts of colonial thinking.

While formulating the sleuth it is important to trace the differences between the Holmes and the Feluda series because it reflects Ray’s purposeful non-engagement in colonial discourse. Ray’s narratives are devoid of gory projection of violent images and foster the vast richness of Indian heritage. Close reading of the texts reveal that there is a huge age discrepancy among the characters and writers as well. Ray and Doyle along with their created characters Topshe and Watson who act as an aid to the detectives differ in their age and outlook. Firstly Topshe is young and is taken care of by Feluda, his main purpose is to learn detective skills and enhance his intellect. Whereas Watson is extremely educated, he says that “in the year 1878 [he] took [his] degree of Doctor of Medicine of the University of London, and proceeded to Netley to go through the course prescribed for surgeons in the army” (Conan Doyle 3). Watson is a father figure to Holmes and is highly respected and is considered as an integral part of the investigation, which Topshe is not. Feluda restricts Topesh’s involvement in the narrative and marks him as a student rather than an aid to assist in crime solving. The notion of British as superior clan is deconstructed by comparing a mere boy in his teens to an old man of wisdom. Ray therefore tries to implement that this young boy’s progressive nature might surpass the intellect of Watson in his age.

Another notable difference between Holmes and Feluda is the presence of a third character Lal Mohan Ganguli ( Jatayu) later. He is introduced in the third story of Ray i.e. “The Golden Fortress” as a crime writer with a pen-name Jatayu. Here the name resembles a historical character “Jatayu” from Ramayana who proclaims his strength to battle against Ravana. Here Jatayu, i.e the writer makes a quest to compensate for being vertically challenged by exercising his mental strength. The reference to history repetitively in Ray’s stories enriches and challenges the knowledge of Indian readers. Lal Mohan Ganguli is seen to dedicate his absurd writings bearing factual errors to eminent British men, implying their influence on his writing. His “The Antarctic Anthropophagi” is dedicated to memory of Robert Scott (Royal Bengal Mystery 427) and his “The Atomic Demon” is attributed to David Livington. The list of his influences being British men goes on and is projected as impractical as the writer himself does not possess sufficient information about the Englishmen he writes. Critiquing the vulnerability of Jatayu’s education of both east and west, Ray tries to mock the overestimation of western education and calls for Indians to strengthen their education system to make it at par with foreign education. Ray also tries to mobilize the concept of Indian romanticism in his fictional detective narratives by elevating the disparities between the imaginative and the real world of the character Jatayu.

In both Doyle and Ray's detective writing there is a distinct difference in the relationship of police and private sleuths. While Holmes and Feluda work independently of police the former is more critical of the police procedures than the later. All these differences between Feluda and his western counterpart pinpoint the fact that Feluda was not merely an outcome of colonial mimicry as some writers accuses him of being so. Romantic relationships and women characters are absent in Feluda stories as the audience was strictly limited to children initially before it gained popularity among the adults which was quite unlike the Holmes series. The disparities between the creation of both eastern and western writers states the message of decolonization that was overcoming the Indian mind gradually. Ray's stories amalgamate Westerners as a different sect of writers who inhabit the Indian subcontinent. British characters often appear in the periphery of certain stories where the Indian counterparts who replaces them are equally efficient. As for example in Royal Bengal Mystery Dr. Graham who was a renowned physician in Lucknow was replaced by Dr. Srivastava who was of equal caliber. Ray limited the use of western characters in order to portray the dwindling influence of Western culture and India's lack of interest in reading them. At certain times like in "The Emperor's Ring" Ray uses foreigners as educators and informants for Indians.

The vivid depiction of India's history and picturesque description of Indian culture redefines the identity of India as a colonized state. It visualizes India in a newer form where the writer takes immense interest in its own people, places, history and culture. In "The Emperor's Ring" the mention of Shah Jahan's son Aurangzeb and his ring around which the mystery pivots takes the readers back to India's enriched past. Another scene is introduced where Feluda and Tapesh sit by the River Ganges in Haridwar to watch "a Vaishnav singing a bhajan near the temple, surrounded by a group of old men and women. Cows, goats, dogs and cats moved about freely, in happy conjunction with the humans" (The Emperor's Ring 75). This scene bears references of Indian religious practices and rivers like the Ganges which is an important river bearing Indian heritage. Ray tries to encourage the Indian youths to go back to India's deep mines of varied culture and ancient texts as he mentions 'Yudhisthir's chariot' in "The Mahabharata" and "Jatayu" from "The Ramayana". Drawing attention to this Hindu epic to underscore the many victories of India's past, Ray grounds his endorsement of and respect for India's long standing history in religious and historical legends. In the "Emperor's Ring" information regarding the Ram Lila festival bears no relevance on the progression of the storyline but is meant to inform readers on the traditions of North India.

Through the unraveling of mystery Ray advocates several Indian languages like Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali etc, to encourage youth to take interest in Indian classical languages in order to understand fellow countrymen, form a stronger bond with Indian traditions and generally enhance the caliber of its citizens. The clear implication is to portray that educated men in India are mainly familiar with more than one language. Though English is one of the languages required for crime solving, yet it is like one of the several Indian languages popular in India. A representation of everyday life events is one of the several ways Ray employs to foster national identity through education. Feluda and Tapesh traverse the country solving crimes while participating in familiar everyday cultural practices like playing cricket. Another important ritual is tea drinking where the person on the other side is often enticed into a conversation over a cup of tea or long walks. By using all these techniques and juxtaposing them with crime and mystery, Ray generates a distinct genre which is devoid of the influences of colonial impositions and reinstates the definition of nation and identity.

He utilizes the crime fiction platform to expand the readability and popularity of the series and, more importantly, instruct readers on how to visualize the 'real' India. Readers who comprehend all facets of Indian history are better equipped to move away from confining colonial discourses, respect and celebrate their Indianness and extend such knowledge to future generations. While the aim of revamping Indian education to include exposure to India's vast heterogeneity marks yet another divergence from Conan Doyle's Holme's series, it also proves to be the most significant indicator of a decolonized text that advances beyond the need to respond to colonizers. Hence, Ray's Feluda series provides a kind of literary independence. By reminding readers about India's cultural and social wealth, the urge to mimic has been replaced with national pride. He requests readers to take delight in their independent nation and feel a sense of camaraderie with fellow Indians. To that end, the Feluda series demonstrates the role of Indian literature in generating and sustaining a strong national identity. India, Ray argues, has more to offer than the valleys, peaks and everything that is recorded in its history.

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