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Beyond the Children's World: Exploring the Themes of Realism and Guilt in Satyajit Ray's Short stories "Pikoo's Diary" and "Khagam"

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Abstract: Satyajit Ray is a prominent name in cinema and literature in post-colonial India, whose works are not only recognized in his country but also worldwide. He wrote many short stories for his young audience. But these short stories are not only for the children as they often reveal deep psychological and social problems of the contemporary society. Two of them are "Pikoo's Diary" and "Khagam", where the first story reveals the domestic, societal realities and the moral decay of the modern upper class people. The latter is a supernatural tale where a man suffers for his own wrong doings, by a killing a snake without any reason. In the mask of these children's stories, Ray presented these heavy themes which portray the vices of human civilization.

Keywords: Realism, Guilt, Kafkaesque, mythology.

Introduction

“The image of the Indian culture we had had before, and I’m talking [when] I was 14 years old or 15 years old, was usually through colonialist eyes. When Satyajit Ray did his films, you suddenly understood not the culture, because the culture was so complex, but you became attached to the culture through the people.” (Martin Scorsese on Satyajit Ray) (Pandey).

Definitely, Satyajit Ray is someone who put the Bengali culture to the national and global stage. Yet he is not only a filmmaker. He was a polymath. Beside from being a magazine editor and illustrator or a music composer, he is also the one who redefined the Bengali literature and introduced us with diverse characters. These characters such as Tarini khuro, professor Shonku, Feluda, didn’t only stayed in the book but it rather surpassed and now have become an inseparable part of Bengali sensibility. His stories are mostly published in “Sandesh” which was originally established by his grandfather another great Bengali writer Upendrakishore Ray and continued by his father Sukumar Roy who is ‘perhaps Bengal’s most famous writer of nonsense verse and children’s books’ (Ray). From far it might seems that these are children’s stories but in many stories deep down Roy explored the complexity of human psyche and problems of contemporary society. The stories traverse through both the bright and murky corners of the human psyche. However, it will be too cliché and even wrong to categorise his characters simply into good and evil. The dichotomy is way more intense (Chaudhury 68). These stories by Ray often present the critique towards pseudo rationality and excessive admiration towards colonizer’s or western culture and their intellectualism. Two of them are “Pikoo’s Diary” and “Khagam”.

Character portrayal in Satyajit Ray’s Short Stories

Ray’s wide range of writing introduced us with different kind of plots and diverse characters. Be it a realistic portrayal of the society, such stories like “Patol Babu, Film Star”, “Spotlight”, “Nitai and the Holy Man” where Ray presented the plight of an artist, fragility of celebrity identity, media obsession or sci-fi and supernatural tales like “Anukul”, “The Scarecrow”, “Indigo” that portrays the societal exploitation of lower class, return of the psychological horror of colonial rule. Suryendu Chaudhury while discussing the psychological element in Ray’s writing mentioned :

Most of these people belong to the ordinary walk of life living a humble life. It's difficult to portray the psychological aberration in fiction predominantly meant for the teenagers including children. Ray achieves this in a well-crafted manner by the adoption of layering and subtlety in approach. It depends solely on the reader till how much the reader can possibly perceive. So, each story has a different degree of appeal for an individual which differs from the perception of another individual (70).

These are the tales which illustrates the domestic realism, decay of upper class morality, guilt, and finally the limits of rational mind in a 'Kafkaesque' style. The word 'Kafkaesque' can be used to draw similarities to the eerie and nightmarish situation, but 'the adoption of a Western trope to interpret the interplay of the everyday and uncanny in Bengali short stories of Satyajit Ray seems forced' (Chaudhuri 121). Like his other writings these two short stories feature that they are not simple tales for the young audience also the picture of urban society, human consciousness and their pseudo rationality.

The World of Pikoo

The first short story is "Pikoo's Diary" which was published in 1970. Ten years later Ray made a short film on this story for a French Television channel. From the outside it might seem as an innocent tale of a kid who started writing diary for the first time. But through the eyes of Pikoo, Ray presented an unbiased, sharp domestic realism of 1970s and 1980s. The realities of contemporary post colonial India specially the Bengali society is a dominant motif in many of his works. Through this particular story readers come across the candid picture of a child's consciousness, his domestic problems and the political unrest of that time.

Pikoo is a young boy who started writing diary after watching his grandfather. Through his entries we came to know about his parents and his elder brother and the relationship among them. One of the most intriguing elements that caught attention to the reader is the use of language. He writes with a continual flow and in long sentences, which often does not follow the conventional sentence structure. 'I am writing my diary. In my new blue notebook I am writing. Sitting on my bed...I will write in diary every day yes when there is no school' (Ray). Satyajit Ray has deliberately omitted the pauses in correct places along with incorporation of spelling mistakes to make the readers feel as if the diary is indeed written by a small boy (Chaudhuri 85).

The sentences don't follow the rigid grammatical rules and the words are repeated. It flows like the consciousness and projects what's going on inside the mind of Pikoo. "I dialled one seven four they told me the time sumtimes I do that to hear the time but what they speak I just cant follow" (Ray). This continual flow reminds us what the famous British author Virginia Woolf termed as 'Stream of Consciousness'.

Not only through the inner consciousness but also through the eyes of Pikoo, Ray shows us his domestic sphere. Pikoo seems to be the only family member who is close to his grandfather. He is suffering from what Pikoo called 'coronani thombosi' (Ray). But neither his father nor his mother talks or visits his room. On the other side, Pikoo innocently shares his mother's friendship with another man called Hitesh who frequently visits his mother and brought him gifts. He also narrates his parents fighting over that matter, "Baba sed you have no sense then Ma sed why are you shoughting you have only just come back from office. Baba sed something yes it was in english and Ma also sed english very quickly like people in the cinema (Ray). This infidelity projects the decay of upper class morality of that time.

His elder brother, who is 12 years older than Pikoo and currently in college, gradually gets indulged in politics. But Pikoo's father is against his lifestyle "Dada is not home he went day before yesturday or may be before that I don't know whare. Dada does politis it is hopeless Baba sed and also Ma" (Ray). Pikoo mentions his brother's good aim in shooting. Ray through the character this elder brother moves beyond the domestic life and illustrates the political scenario of that decade. Pikoo even mentions the sound of bombs in the street he hears from his house, "Last nite a bomb went off it made big bang. Baba sed bomb Ma sed no no may be police gun. Baba sed has to be bomb, thees days I hear bang bang offen thru my window" (Ray). But when his brother went missing for quite a few days his parents stayed indifferent to this situation. It shows the emotional detachment between the family members in urban society.

Through the naive eyes of Pikoo, Ray presents the colonized mind of the upper class in post colonial India. He mentioned that all ceiling fans in his house are from a foreign company called 'GEC', but only his grandfather had a fan of 'Usha'. His grandfather's use of an Indian brand suggests the holding of his own Indian culture which symbolically contrasted with his father's use a foreign brand that suggests the love for colonizer's product and culture.

Pikoo even asks in his diary why their servant calls his mother 'Memsahab' (English woman), "why does he call her memsahab is Ma a mem or is she a sab no its really very funny" (Ray). He innocently critiques the anglophile mind of upper class. The ending of this story is quite ambiguous. Pikoo hears a ring of a bell from his grandfather's room but when he enters in his room and watches him lying still. But Ray did not confirm he is alive or not. "But Dadu was lying not talking but he wasn't sleeping. So I said what's the matter Dadu what is it but Dadu said nothing he just stared at the fan" (Ray). He also didn't mention what happened to Pikoo's brother who is missing for many days. Rather Pikoo writes in his diary "...now I am again writing my diary sitting on my bed but no pages left now and no one in the house only Dadu and me and there's a fly it keeps coming again and again. A very stupid fly what a bother and now this page is finished notebook gone all over The End." (Ray)

Modernist and Post modernist literature often defined by their open-ended endings. Like his other short stories Ray's this story successfully not only portrays 1970s Bengali society but also the post modern Indian and regional literature. It realistically portrays a child's innocent inspection of his outer world, inner conflict between family members, the urban alienation and political scenario of that time. Pikoo's Diary is 'the terrible story of how a family gets ruined, it is all seen from the eyes of little Piku. Much of the things don't make much sense to him, as is natural. He lives in his own world but is observant enough to write down whatever is happening around him in his family' (Chaudhury 85).

The Supernatural Tale of "Khagam"

Another short story is "Khagam" which was published in 1973. It is a supernatural tale of a rational man named Dhurjati Babu, who kills a snake without any reason. By the end of the story the reader will see that he went through a metamorphosis and turns into a snake himself. In "Khagam", the man is turned into a snake for killing a snake at the curse of a sage and that too in the 20th century! (80). From the narrator's narration we came to know about the appearance of Dhurjati Babu, he "was a short, pale-looking man in his late forties, with sharp features and grey eyes" (Ray). He appears to be a rational modern intellectual but contemplates eastern ancient religion and rituals, "The more scientific knowledge was spreading in the West, he said, the more our people were heading towards superstition... Look at our Ramayana and Mahabharata. It is said they're history, but actually they're no more than a bundle of nonsense (Ray). He considered the Hindu monks as fake. This shows his love for colonial past in modern people.

Yet this logical scientific man kills a snake when he and the narrator visit a local sadhu or monk Imli baba. They came to know from the people of the town that the baba had a king cobra. Although

Dhurjati babu at first showed no interest but later he decided to visit the hut. After meeting the monk when he and the narrator encountered the snake suddenly he threw stones at it. When the narrator tried to stop him he justified his killing by saying that he saved others before the snake bite anyone else. “That’s the end of at least one vicious reptile!”(Ray)

But when Imli baba encounters him, he showed no anger, he stays still and said ‘One Balkishen is gone; another will come to take his place. Balkishen is deathless . . .’(Ray). The narrator compares this scene with a mythological tale of ancient India, the scene of Durbasha’s curse on Shakuntala. From the beginning readers witnessed Dhurjati babu’s insults towards Hindu mysticism. The author here draws a striking comparison between the cruel modern rationality and ancient tale of Hindu mythology.

The concept of karma is one of the most important aspects in Hinduism. It is “the term more specifically refers to a principle of cause and effect...wherein individuals' intent and actions (cause) influence their future (effect): Good intent and good deeds contribute to good karma and happier rebirth, while bad intent and bad deeds contribute to bad karma and worse rebirths.” (“Karma”)

In this story Ray also completes this cycle when Dhurjati babu also started to transform into a snake. After returning from the monk’s hut his skin started having spots and gradually started losing his human voice which turned into a dry hiss. In his room he started crawling in the floor. Baba is calling me—“Balkishen!” . . . I can hear him call.’ His knees now buckled and he went down on the floor. Flattening himself on his chest, he started dragging himself back on his elbows until he disappeared into the darkness under the bed (Ray). The loss of human rationality increases when he suddenly asks the narrator a childish question, the difference between ‘snake’ and ‘curse’. His falling to make difference projects the decay of his rational mind.

At the end of the story when Dhurjati babu went missing the narrator starts looking for him. He visits the hut of Imli baba and found a human skin beside the hut of Imlibaba and baba calling his pet snake to drink the milk. “It was actually the sloughed-off skin of a man. A man who had ceased to be a man. He was now lying coiled inside that hole. He was a king cobra with poison fangs. There, I could hear him hissing. The sun had just gone down. The Baba was calling: ‘Balkishen—Balkishen—Balkishen’” (Ray). The ending denotes the end of the entire metamorphosis of Dhurjati babu. Such is the strength of morality that punishes the guilty in its own ironical manner (Chaudhury 80).

The depths of introspection and the heights of sublimity attained by Ray in the apparent simplicity of presentation is in itself the most remarkable achievement (85). The changing of the body in this story, the eerie, supernatural ending remind the readers Franz Kafka's work *The Metamorphosis* and his style of writing which is known as 'Kafkaesque'. In that work, the protagonist also turned into a giant insect. But there Kafka used this motif to explore the absurdity and meaninglessness of life. But in the story "Khagam" Ray uses the changing of body to show the braking down of rational ego of human. The concept of metamorphosis can be seen in another story of Ray. In "Mrigankobabu's Incident", narrates how Mrigankobabu after beginning to take interest in the evolutionary history of man ultimately turns into an animal of the primate order (81). In many stories of Professor Shonku – another famous character created by Satyajit Ray – readers can encounter this changing or shift in human body, At the beginning of the story Dhurjati babu's distaste and looking down to the eastern religious beliefs shows his colonized western rationality. In many of his short stories, Ray portrays the characters of modern upper-middle class people living in urban places. Dhurjati Babu One of them, who presents himself as logical person and deemed the eastern philosophy and religions as mere superstitions. The killing of that snake by Dhurjati babu and his turning into a snake at the end of the story also shows that nature balances itself by returning our own actions to our self.

The title "Khagam" also indicates the Indian mythological tale which is taken from Mahabharata, where a sage named Khagam cursed his friend and turned him into a snake. The metamorphic ending of this short story also symbolically denotes the karmic cycle as well as the return to his real indigenous past.

Conclusion

The writing of Ray often seen as tales for children, but behind many of those tales Satyajit Ray systematically moves beyond the juvenile world and illustrates the realistic nature of our society. Those simple tales act as an oblique irony of human lives. Be it the domestic sphere of Pikoo or the supernatural ending of Dhurjati babu, these stories explore the dark side of adult world. Ray through his writings shattered the mask of modern rational society. His writings deal with the fundamental nature of human beings. They transcend the time and still relatable to our contemporary society and readers.

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