

Decoding *Professor Shonku*: Reflections on Ray's use of Distance, East-West Binary in Narrating the Tales of Crime, Punishment and Justice

Rajarshi Mukherjee¹, Koyel Dasgupta²

¹Assistant Professor in English at Shyampur Siddheswari Mahavidyalaya, West Bengal, India

²Independent Scholar

Received: 19 Sep 2022, Received in revised form: 13 Oct 2022, Accepted: 22 Oct 2022, Available online: 30 Oct 2022

Satyajit Ray's Professor Shonku tales have been most conveniently categorized under 'Children's Literature'. Irrespective of this, the tales have received extensive appreciation from readers of every age group. In this paper, we shall focus on how Ray uses 'distance' and 'East-West' binary contribute in formulating these tales which can be acknowledged as those of crime, punishment and justice. We shall consider four tales for analysis- "Professor Shonku o Ashchorjo Putul" ("Professor Shonku and Astonishing Dolls"), "Professor Shonku o Roktomatshya Rahashya" ("Professor Shonku and the Mystery of the Blood colored Fishes), "Shonku o Frankenstein" ("Shonku and Frankenstein") and "Swarnaparnee" ("Golden Herb").

The fundamental technique of Ray that ensnares our attention is how he liberates Shonku from the convolutions of urban life. Shonku resides in Giridih in West Bengal, located far away from the city of Kolkata where his life is unsullied by the intricacies of urbanization. His life does not run at an extortionate velocity but at a speed that Shonku himself determines unlike most city dwellers- he proceeds at his own pace while conducting diverse experiments and inventing varied objects while visiting abroad whenever propitious circumstances for that arise. Shonku is not bounded by any mundane routine that most city dwellers are subjected to. Thus, by liberating him from the intricate and prosaic urban life, Ray bestows him with the opportunity to utilize his time to think, coalesce his intelligence and imagination and discover something new. Concomitantly, Ray uses 'distance' as

an instrumental technique in situating Shonku in Giridih as well as in narrating his adventures. The physical distance between Ray's Bengali readers and the places where most of Shonku's adventures take place, galvanizes them to envisage those in their minds and imagine harder so that they accompany this scientist not at a physically unfeasible dimension but at an imaginary plane. Shonku's adventures inaugurate a world that was not possible for the initial common Bengali readers to witness either physically or through social media which was not even at a nascent stage during the time when the stories were originally published. What is most brilliant in Ray's stories is that his implementation of distance as an appurtenant to weave his stories does not obfuscate his readers' ability to conceptualize the events occurring in lands that are so outlandish, instead, they embrace the topographies of the land where a character with whom they share their ethnicity permanently leaves a mark of his brilliance. This use of distance to trigger imagination is a paraphernalia that we can observe Coleridge applying in his poem "Kubla Khan" where Kubla Khan, a ruler of Xanadu is foreign to Coleridge's English readers, sovereign to a land whose name is perhaps even unknown to them. With the sole exception of "Professor Shonku o Roktomatshya Rahashya" ("Professor Shonku and the Mystery of the Blood colored Fishes), all the adventures narrated in the other three tales occur not just outside Bengal but India. "Professor Shonku o Ashchorjo Putul" ("Professor Shonku and Astonishing Dolls"), "Shonku o Frankenstein" ("Shonku and Frankenstein"), and

“Swarnaparnee” (“Golden Herb”) narrate Shonku’s adventures in Norway, Germany and England and Germany respectively. The foreign magnetism is further accentuated by the naming of Shonku’s cat after the promulgated scientist Isaac Newton. However, the presence of characters such as Abinash Babu who is an embodiment of a quintessential Bengali never enables Ray’s Bengali readers to dissociate completely from Bengal while reading and imagining.

The East-West dichotomy has ubiquitously pervaded cultures around the world where the East becomes the inferior other while the West is the superior self. The Western condescending demeanor and humongous pride in their culture and notion of civilization have made the East appear to be uncivilized. The West, as it presumes has been encumbered with the responsibility of improving the barbaric East and metamorphosing the people here into civilized beings. Such a notion emphasizes the East-West dichotomy to be like a Dystopian- Utopian dichotomy where the East embodies everything that is Dystopic and the West is representative of Utopia. Utopia is a state where everything is perfect, it is idealistic and Dystopia, absolutely incongruous with this, denotes a society where there is great suffering or injustice. If assayed through the Western lens, then it shall appear that the Eastern society is an epitome of the characteristics of a Dystopic society and the Western society that of everything that is Utopic. What Ray does in Shonku’s stories is that he implements subversion where his technique of situating Shonku’s adventures in distinct European nations not only exemplifies a subtle utilization of ‘distance’ as paraphernalia but also offers a poignant criticism of the Western ideology. This is because Shonku’s adventures portray rancor, chicanery, and belligerence in humans- everything that can lead to turmoil and extirpation of a healthy society and all these occur in the West with the Western people executing the tasks that lead to a dystopia where humans suffer greatly and injustice prevails and the backdrop of the rise of Nazism in Germany and its repercussions long endured by Europe which Ray use in some of his stories bolster such an interpretation. The Nazi ideology and practices which made people suffer and rendered complete injustice by virtue of prejudice based on culture and ethnicity before and during the second world war illustrated a dystopic society in Western history. The brilliant but maniac Lindquist is menacing to the promulgated personalities around the world as he can reduce them to mere dolls, the leader of the diabolic party professing Nazi

ideologies Hans Rudel endeavors to unleash the virus of acrimony towards the Jewish community in Germany once again, Hermann Goering, Hitler’s chaperon in extirpating the Jews from Germany- all these men pose threat to human civilization and their actions mark the commencement of dystopia and serve as auguries of absolute destruction, suffering and chaos, and tyranny. Lindquist is like a surreptitious being who carries out his clandestine activities and when someone discovers what they are, he finds himself no longer in a state to escape let alone expose the man’s crimes before the world. Contrary to Lindquist, Rudel and Gorrington favor to vociferate their desires and execute them before the world ostensibly with the confidence that they are unvanquishable. Their crimes oppress others and Shonku falls a victim to their tribulations inside the dystopic western society that they weave with turpitude. Thus, the ostensible utopic West is altered into a dystopic one and as the stories inform, an Eastern scientist attempts to restore harmony amidst the chaos. However, one criticism can be directed against Ray- his lack of arraignment of the British as a colonial force in “Swarnaparnee” (“Golden Herb”) when he vehemently chastises the Nazis. Ray moves even further when he presents the English as friendly to Shonku and even applauds his acumen- it was almost like an impossible picture before the commencement of the second world war when India was still under British rule for a British scientist accepting the discovery and brilliance of a native scientist let alone appreciating him and endeavoring to make his deeds known to the world. Ray either voluntarily eschews censuring the British as a colonial power or he like many other Indians was perhaps of the opinion that British rule was really a boon for India and her development. However, Ray’s criticism of the Western notion of their superiority and his ways to abrogate the East-West binary as practiced according to Western beliefs highly contradicts the latter possibility. Thus, it may be true that he deliberately abstains from chastising the British and instead chooses to offer a portrayal of companionship and harmony among the two races thereby rescinding anything discordant.

During both the first and the second world wars- chaos unleashed by the avaricious Western leaders that plunged the Western society into terror took away millions of lives and uprooted the lives of innocent people also impacted India in an indirect way since as a colony of British India, India had to supply her sons as soldiers to fight for the British. Thus, these

men of the East who ostensibly had nothing to do with the war, were not even the citizens of any of the countries involved in the wars who had to experience the horror of the wars, suffered and even lost their lives. In “Professor Shonku o Ashchorjo Putul” (“Professor Shonku and Astonishing Dolls”), “Shonku o Frankenstein” (“Shonku and Frankenstein”) and “Swarnaparnee” (“Golden Herb”), Shonku travels to the West which entices him either with the possibility of a new discovery or to witness a glory of its past and Shonku finds himself entangled within the terrific convolutions weaved by the people there which make him suffer and experience horror. Thus, Shonku’s adventures and the atrocities that he endures are perhaps testimonies to all those innocent Indian soldiers who had to travel thousands of miles away from their homeland only to suffer augmented oppression, agony, and pain.

An intrinsic aspect of Shonku’s adventures is his medicines and weapons which he himself manufactures. We must also understand that the medicines or the weapons that Shonku invent are not made out of materials that commonplace Bengalis shall not understand or will fail to appreciate. Thus, Ray enables Shonku to dwell in foreign lands but never allows him to get free of the archetypal Bengali attributes completely. The weapons or the medicines that Shonku create appear to be almost mythological- for example ‘Miracurall’ which is said to cure ailments of every kind, ‘Annihillin’ which is said to annihilate anything without a drop of blood spilling in case of living beings. These weapons and medicines almost allude to mythology. Miracurall which we get to know was formulated with Swarnaparnee, a plant with healing capabilities mentioned in ancient Indian texts strongly reminiscent of ‘Sanjeevani’ which according to the Indian epic *Ramayana* is found in the Himalayas and was carried by Lord Hanuman to save Lakshman’s life in the battle between Lord Rama and Ravana. Both are plants and the Indian medical science of Ayurveda involves using natural gifts and preparing medicines using plants to heal diverse human ailments. Thus, Shonku’s Miracurall centred on which Ray wrote “Swarnaparnee”(“Golden Herb”), is intrinsically associated with India and even though Shonku prepares his medicine and gives it the shape of a tablet, its essential Indianness is safely preserved. When in “Golden Herb”, Shonku saves Jeremy Sonders’ life who is a British, Ray’s subtle elusion from not affecting his story with the Colonizer-Colonized relationship between Sonders and Shonku cannot circumscribe us

from tracing the subversion- the British pride on their scientific advancements and sophisticated developments in every field including medicine and here, a British gets healed not by any advanced Western treatment but by the tablet concocted by an Indian scientist with the chief material bearing an allusion with an Indian epic and an Indian medical science and thereby exhibiting a quintessential Indianness. *Ramayana*, we must remember is not just an Indian epic but is a central tenet of Indian mythology and thus Miracurall’s or its chief material Swarnaparnee’s allusions to ‘Sanjeevani’ make them appear to be mythological as well. Secondly, ‘Annihillin’ evokes the Christian mythological tale of God striking Satan with thunder and completely crushing his rebellion. Thus, ‘Annihillin’ which brings destruction, and ‘Miracurall’ which has the power to heal ailments of every kind forms a dichotomy themselves of ‘Death and Life’. These two incongruous forces which define human existence cannot occur together in anyone’s life as one cannot live and die concomitantly according to the established and fundamental significations of these two words. These two contradicting forces cannot be harnessed within any human on this planet and the only One who can control both of them and in whom these two forces can be harmonized is God, the Almighty according to every mythology across the world. The British saw themselves as being invested with almost God-like authority in the colonies including India and therefore, endeavored to implement everything British as superior into Indian life thereby attempting concurrently to eradicate many Indian values and beliefs as those did not conform to the British ideologies and acknowledged as uncivilized or inferior. Shonku who discovers and owns both ‘Miracurall’ as well as ‘Annihillin’, the former signifying life and the latter death, can control using his medicine and weapon as to whom to save with Miracurall and whom to destroy with Annihillin and thus in a way control life and death which only God can. While Shonku is no God but an Indian scientist who with his two discoveries attain perhaps a God-like authority and the subversion lies in the fact that he replaces the British from their God-like authority by controlling life and death with his two priceless possessions, something which even the British advanced science could not formulate or implement. Secondly, gun being able to eradicate a population without causing any physical injury and just within a blink appears to be no less than a fantasy and so does a simple tablet that can cure every ailment appears nothing less than a science

fantasy. Thus, these two in particular besides his other formulations including Airconditioning Pill, Remembrain, etc. amalgamate Mythology and Science. Their characteristics make them appear almost mythological but the fact that they have been prepared by a scientist in his laboratory presents Ray's Shonku and his discoveries as a brilliant conglomeration of science and fantasy. The two forces which ostensibly can never coexist homogenizes in Shonku and his possessions thereby strengthening Shonku's position in a God-like authority.

Cixin argues, "mainstream literature describes a world created by God, while science fiction takes on the role of God, creating worlds and then describing them" (24-25) and in Shonku's tales we find Ray weaving a world within the larger world of human survival which has elements of reality in terms of the historical backdrop against which the stories are set, particularly in "Golden Herb" and "Shonku and Frankenstein". However, his stories postulate a new dimension that becomes the conglomerating space as discussed for mythology, fantasy, and science. Cixin's argument of science fiction taking the role of God accentuates Shonku's God-like authority hitherto discussed which Ray has ascribed him to. Thus, it is preposterous to categorize Shonku's tales as strictly science fiction since mythological allusions and fantasy play equally significant roles in structuring them thereby reflecting the fundamental trait of Indian disposition- the heterogeneity or the diversity which makes it imbecilic to categorize India under a single heading since there are perhaps, we can say so many 'Indias' within the one 'India'. This we must never forget is what the British had endeavored to do- disdain to understand and accept India's internal plurality over their intransigent conventions.

While attempting to define what is meant by science-fictionality, Csicsery Ronay argues,

that it is linked to two 'forms of hesitation, a pair of gaps' (Seven Beauties 3): Firstly, the historical dimension of possibility – are we at this point in our technoscientific progress able to actually do this? Is this possible? And secondly, the ethical dimension of consequence – if we do this, what would the repercussions be and how would things change in accordance? Would it be good or bad to do this? Both dimensions are part of science-fictionality and determine the extent to which we think about the future as historical process (qtd. in Schmeink 19).

The first hesitation that is discussed is vehemently justified by the presence of weapons such as Annihilin and medicines such as Miracurall- both instigate question as to how far science in the real world has developed so that these almost mythological objects can be prepared by the scientists who truly exist. The second hesitation is also indispensable and in "Shonku and Frankenstein", when the tale about the origins of the theory and experiment to bring a dead man back to life and its first implementation are narrated, we are informed that science gave birth to a monster and we ask- "was it all worth it since it caused more harm to humanity than being good?" Therefore, in reality, even if such an endeavor is undertaken the question of its consequences shall be haunting and perhaps none will ever tread on such a path where the end result could be enigmatic- it could be a euphoric moment for science in terms of discovery but destructive for the human race much like the atom bomb and nuclear weapons. Scientists can be perturbed by such questions and as readers, we can be as well. Since the Reader Response theory places the highest importance on the reader and her interpretations of the text and as Roland Barthes argues in his "The Death of an Author" that the death of the author will be followed by the birth of the reader, we readers as part of that process to give birth to the text cannot seem to liberate ourselves from such questions which unequivocally rise in our minds and frames our comprehension and interpretation of science fiction. Perhaps, science fiction alleviates such a reading of the principal importance of the reader because of the continuous presence of the author in the form of the knowledge that she is at an elevated position where she is free from any such constraints as an author and can take the liberty in the name of literature to shape the reality, the consequences of what science attempts to formulate in the stories and can change those or modify according to his caprices. Readers are perturbed by these haunting questions whereas the author initiates them as per his own desires.

Each of these four tales narrates incidents where a crime has been committed but justice is restored at the end of each of them. Such a structure seems familiar because fairy tales follow the same. What is significant is that justice is restored by Shonku or Shonku is chaperoned by others. In "Professor Shonku o Ashchorjo Putul" ("Professor Shonku and Astonishing Dolls"), "Shonku o Frankenstein" ("Shonku and Frankenstein"), and "Swarnaparnee" ("Golden Herb"), the crimes are the fruits of human minds owing

to their mania or prejudice- one that is a mental disease and the other that is largely determined by the beliefs one is made to inculcate and as a second part of the process, it also depends on how the person comprehend the beliefs and discard the ones steeped in prejudice, fascism, and toxicity. Linquist in "Professor Shonku o Ashchorjo Putul" ("Professor Shonku and Astonishing Dolls"), is a brilliant scientist but concomitantly a victim of a terrible psychiatric phenomenon about which Ray doesn't discuss explicitly but we can hypothesize that Lindquist perhaps suffers from a mental disease which could be the result of some trauma that compels him to reduce living humans into dolls and the tiny 'lemings', rat kind of an animals into gigantic like figures. Ray's story fails to enlighten us with the real cause behind his fanatic behavior to strip these people who are remarkable in their fields of work of their agencies to have any control over themselves or their bodies. Women had been devoid of any agency over their lives by patriarchy for ages and even today, absolute equality seems far-fetched. When a woman is gazed at inappropriately or when her body gets violated even today, the oppressor apprehends that the woman's body is not under her control and he has a right over it and that is exactly the reason why the woman's voice does not hold any significance for him. In the case of marital rape, this is even more vivid since even today many husbands conform to the patriarchal notion that once married, the woman's body is the property of the husband and he can do whatever he desires and she must comply either willingly or unwillingly. This loss of agency which women over the centuries in some way or the other have struggled to retrieve appears in Ray's story to be a way of exploiting men as none of Lindquist's victims are women. The bodies in this case are violated not by raping them but by reducing them in size and restricting their movements. However, the bodies are being touched without the permission of the person by Lindquist, and even if it is not sexual in kind these instances of touching the body become instances close to molestation. The reduction of these 'great' men into dolls is not solely literal alleviation in terms of size but metaphorically it reduces them into being impotent men who could no longer express their sexual vigor or penetrate a woman- things that patriarchy asseverates embody masculine pride. The inability to use a phallus voluntarily even though when a man is possessing it are like loss of patriarchally defined 'masculinity' and thwarting misogynist and patriarchal conventions for whom the presence of the phallus itself determines a

human's superiority. While we do not know what finally happens to Lindquist but we are illuminated with the knowledge that even he gets reduced to the size of a doll. Thus, patriarchy avenges its humiliation by a man through two other men- Shonku and Ackroyd. "Shonku o Frankenstein" ("Shonku and Frankenstein") and "Swarnaparnee" ("Golden Herb") are like the two ends of the same story- they are connected with one another where the former is the present and the latter is the past. Shonku in "Swarnaparnee" ("Golden Herb"), encounters the diabolical and vicious Hermann Goering who chaperoned Hitler to disseminate Nazism and blinded by racial prejudice executed millions of innocent Jews and in "Shonku o Frankenstein" ("Shonku and Frankenstein") he comes across Hans Radal who galvanized by Hitler's ideas long after Nazi regime has ended in Germany, endeavors to foment the prejudices in people's minds and spread enmity and perhaps initiate Hitler's dream project of extirpating the Jews from the face of this earth forever. In the first case, even though Shonku could abscond from the Nazis and ensure the safety of at least one Jew family and teaches Goering a lesson but could not save Germany or Europe from the even more monstrosity and barbarism that were to come. In the second case, however, by substituting Radal's Satanic brain with that of a Jew Boris Aaronson's Shonku restores peace and stymies the chaos that could have perhaps unfettered. The subversion lies in the fact that a Nazi by blood and in body, Radal would behave as a Jew and think like one- something that would have been a nightmarish minatory to Hitler and his regime. Thus, Julius's last words to Shonku- "Germany shall never cease to be grateful to you" (Ray 596) are extremely poignant and strongly suggest how dire could have been the consequences if history would have repeated itself. What is also significant is that in both these stories, Shonku's British friend Jeremy Sonders accompanies him- in "Golden Herb" through his action of replacing Miracurall with sleeping pills and in "Shonku and Frankenstein" physically and it is unmistakable that one with a colonizing and fascist identity succors a representative of the oppressed race to punish representatives of another fascist community. Despite Ray's insistence on the crimes of the Nazis and perhaps voluntary avoidance of including the colonizer-colonized relationship between Jeremy and Shonku, these pervade the stories and when in "Golden Herb", towards the end when Sonders reveals to Shonku how he had replaced Miracurall with the sleeping pills, it appearsto have been a colonial

contravention of Shonku's belongings and altering them without his knowledge. The colonial sense or rather belief of possessing a superior understanding of circumstances and perspicacity to find a worthy solution get illustrated in Sonders' actions where he didn't bother to discuss with Shonku before actually implementing his plan. When in "Shonku and Frankenstein", Shonku devises a plan to save Radal's life but abluting him of his fascist brain, he deliberately does not disclose his maneuvers to Sonders as well as Croll before the entire process is completed and the aim is accomplished- this appears like avenging Sonders' actions in "Golden Herb" and rescinding the colonial pride thereby emphasizing that the colonized can excel on his own regardless of how arduous it is for the colonizer to accept. Finally, in "Professor Shonku o Roktomatshya Rahashya" ("Professor Shonku and the Mystery of the Blood colored Fishes), the blood-colored fishes being alien species reach the earth and invade the territories of the marine plants and animals of the planet thereby harbingering suffering for the marine life. This echoes the colonization of India by the British, encroaching on not solely the Indian landmass but Indian life and thereby bringing in two hundred years of colonial hegemony, plundering of Indian riches, exploitation, and finally partition of the subcontinent thereby causing colossal pathos and affliction on part of the native people. The fact that this adventure occurs in India is highly significant and accentuates the colonial reading of it as we just discussed. What is also important is that here Shonku is aided not by a European but by two Japanese scientists, also a race of the East who suffered terribly at the hands of a Western power America during the Second World War. The Easterners form a comradeship and drive the alien forces from what was never theirs to claim and this is perhaps a celebration of Indian independence after long periods of agony and struggle.

The West has always considered the East as the inferior and uncivilized 'Other' whom they need to offer salvation and rescue from degradation and downfall. Ray subverts this when he sends Shonku, a representative of the East to the West and makes him save them from diverse adversities with his wit, knowledge, and brilliant discoveries. It is also significant to understand that science much like the logical positivists argues that it cannot believe anything that cannot be verifiable through empirical observation. Thus, there seems to be no place for fantasy. Science-fiction, derived from science subverts such a notion when it infuses fantasy particularly here

with Shonku's adventures with science and narrates such things which do not even exist in reality let alone someone will verify those through empirical observation. Thus, literature can conjure what ostensibly is impossible and that is where its exceptional beauty lies- it can make us see what is ostensibly inconceivable. This is further accentuated by the fact that Shonku appears as a figure of the grandfather narrating his adventures to his young grandchildren in the form of his diary entries which it seems he writes and leaves as accounts for posterity to speak to them through these written words as a grandfather amusing and perhaps bewildering his young grandchildren with the brilliant accounts of his life. This gets further emphasized when we look at Shonku's illustration as an old man.

REERENCES

- [1] Cixin, Liu. "Beyond Narcissism: What Science Fiction Can Offer Literature". *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2013, pp. 22-32. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5621/sciefictstud.40.1.0022>.
- [2] Schmeink, Lars. "Dystopia, Science Fiction, Posthumanism, and Liquid Modernity". *Biopunk Dystopias*, 2016, pp. 18-70. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ps33cv.5>.
- [3] Ray, Satyajit. *Shonku Shomogro*. Ananda Publishers, 2003.