

EXISTENTIAL CRISIS UNFOLDED: REPRESENTING THE SOCIAL MILIEU THROUGH NONSENSE LITERATURE: *HA - JA-BA- RA- LA* : A CASE STUDY

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Life is a story told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. -- Macbeth

Abstract:

Sukumar Ray, an exponent of children's literature and a master of natural sciences, breathes a fine expression of humour and fantasy in his Ha - ja-ba-ra- la. As an exemplar of Bengali nonsense literature, he builds his themes using the inherent subversive elements in fantastic literature. The aim of this paper is to show how Ha - ja - ra - la - ba, that portrays human- animal interaction, shows existential crisis and tells of a nihilistic meaninglessness of life. Apart from the fictional way, this master stoker blends science into the scene -- quantum mechanics, transgressive element of which gives ways to multiple interpretation. With his fictionalization, the study shows how the 'absurd' and 'chaos' in general life is explored through the whimsical and humorous cocktail Ha - ja - ba - ra - la.

Key words: *Nonsense literature, transgressive, quantum mechanics, existentialism, absurd, chaos.*

The renaissance India's myriad minded Sukumar Ray's comical prose Ha-ja- ba-ra- la stands out as a strikingly unique comic mixture that explores the social condition of man through a fabric of magicrealistically blend animal story tempered with strokes of science. Ray has an array of diverse elements well-knit to form a social satire that firstly mocks at the erstwhile society - the society in flux during the British reign in India; and secondly mocks at the human malice seen throughout the ages in its variant forms. Ha-Ja-ba-ra-la, refers to a disarray of a few Bengali consonants, regardless of alphabetic order, that forms a characteristic Bengali idiom, meaning a state of topsy-turviness. Ray, in dealing with the matter in his unique, skillful and artistic style, touches the very existential challenges of life in a manner that perfectly makes sense out of nonsense.

The initial glimpse introduces inconsistencies that lead to vain chaos. Akerchief transforms into a red fatty cat, and the ludicrous Cousin Tree hopper appears. Ray's cat that flips from the states of existence and nonexistence, reminds us of those dire situations that life, at times, brings to us. At several moments in life, we fall in the state of the young boy sitting under the tree, who is assured of a relaxed state while an uncertainty out of the blue breaks down and wrecks his peace. The kerchief -cat is a right parallel to the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland* that loves philosophical discussions.

The boy, in order to save himself from the scorching heat sits under a tree. He sets his hand on a hanky kept beside him to wipe his sweat only to find that the hanky is changed into a cat! Upon expressing astonishment in this queer happening, the boy is dismayed by the strange response of the cat, "Now you have an egg, and then suddenly it turns into a fine quacky duck. It's happening all the time" (Chaudhuri, 46).

Here is the inherent uncertainty of life, thus shown. The boy loses his peace and poise with a sudden unexpected uncertainty. His tired self tries to relax his worn out face with a hanky kept near him only to find that instead of the hanky there lies a cat! Alternatively, this also pulls our attention towards the whimsical cat that seems to be the protagonist of the famous thought experiment of the physicist-- Schrodinger's cat, a

cat that is dead and alive both at the same time-to study the quantum entanglement of particles. Ray, with his beautiful and complex linguistic play of signification uses the 'cat metaphor' to signify the uncertainties in life. The chaos is further accentuated by the almost instantaneous change of the 'signified'. The initial referent kerchief flips into a cat and the cat meows into a crowing crow! How thought provoking and challenging a work would it make for a linguist to define the linguistic signification of such an endless chain of instantaneous line of referents! Further, the arbitrariness keeps on making a deep impact, "You can call me a cat, or a handkerchief, or even a semi-colon" (Chaudhuri 46).

The cat suggests the boy to go to Tibet as the solution of saving himself from prickly summer heat. "Here's Calcutta, here's Diamond Harbour a little to the South, and here's Ranaghat a little to the North, and then Presto! You're in Tibet! Straight roads, an hour and a quarter's drive- just say the word" (Chaudhuri 47). Further, the exact position and the activity of the Cousin Treehopper whom the cat told the boy to meet in order to get an idea of the route to Tibet, is hard to determine. "Suppose you are looking for him in Uluberia: you'll hear he's in Motihari. So you go to Motihari only to find he's at Ramkrishnapur. Off you go again, but they tell you there he's left for Cossimbazar. You can't run him to earth" (Chaudhuri 47). Cousin Treehopper is a direct metaphor of 'inconsistency'. Ray's innovation in structuring up an interesting fictional narrative with the scientific theories that would get established much later is highly appreciable. The analysis, at this point, reads the underlying "Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle" established in 1927: it is not possible to determine simultaneously the position and momentum of a moving subatomic particle as that of an electron. A clear introspection on the principle will allow us to understand that along with the position and momentum, it is impossible to simultaneously determine the velocity, mass, and energy of a moving subatomic particle as that of an electron. There it has a direct parallel with the elusively inconsistent Treehopper. A further extrapolation of the principle tells us that if a whimsical particle existed which would change its activity along with its position; we will be more baffled as it will be quite difficult to find its activity as the magnitude of the work being done is not possible to be determined, since the activity-- work being done or the work done at an instant-- is a reflection of the energy at that moment. The Cousin Treehopper is thus elusive whose actions are very hard to determine: "Suppose this is Tibet... suppose this is Cousin Treehopper's wife cooking dinner... suppose this is a hole in the tree trunk..." (Chaudhuri 48). The study is yet to reveal some more of Ray's revelations. The prose shows itself as a fine piece of futuristic science fiction. There isn't a structured pattern in these illogical utterances. The speech along with the actions is uncertain. There is uncertainty, in figurative level, playing in very many forms, that ultimately leads us to ponder at the meaninglessness of life. Even the rules of mathematics are skewed with the passage of time in Ray's fantasy world: "What made you say that seven two's didn't make fourteen" (49)? "It wasn't quite fourteen when you spoke... at that point it was only 13 rupees, 14 annas and 3 pice. If I hadn't very cannily put down 14 just at the right moment, it would have got to be 14 rupees 1 anna and 9 pice by now" (Chaudhuri 49).

Later, when the Chartered Accountant Croworthy was asked about the calculations that are supposed to have been calculated nineteen days ago, he replies that it was not nineteen days. According to his logic of change in numerical values with time, it was twenty. There comes a cold war of numbers being called out until they stretch nineteen to twenty three -and a half. Croworthy displays both extreme sagacity as well as foolishness almost together, both at the same time. Croworthy does his calculations very accurately but skews them from time to time. The numerical representations in this work needs special mention. One would go laughing at lengths at the whimsical three feet man's measurement of the little boy. "Height 26 inches, cuff 26 inches, chest 26 inches, collar 26 inches" (50). Well, what visual impact might it bring! The old man's curiously determining the little boy's age and his weight is equally interesting. Weight of an 8 year old boy is shown as 2.5 seers! The calculation of age takes a fantastic note. The 8 year old boy is shown as 37 years by the complications of his mathematics. "Over here we turn our age back when we're forty. Then we don't go on to be 41 or 42 but start growing younger at 39, 38 and so on. When we've got

down to ten in this way, we turn upward again” (51). The old man's age reversal theory bears semblance to the postmodern scientific theories of time reversal and existence of parallel universes into a literary scene. Along with literary merit his keen scientific acumen too is displayed. Here is the reference to that hypothetical model of Alternate Universe in which 'time' begins from future i.e., the 'arrow of time' here is reversed.

The numbers further add to the enigma. The futility of speech and the arbitrariness of action are very well explicated here in the baffling calculation and the mumbo jumbo of units that follow: Age: 26 inches; Cash in hand: 2.5 Seers; expenditure: 37 years. This makes no sense but makes too much of sense, when Ray's colonial fiction is seen. Croworthy's remark, upon being asked why he wrote down the accounts, throws us into pondering upon the existential crisis of existence and non-existence, and being and becoming. It is like the baffling questions of Quantum Mechanics - where the state of existence of the event is never independent of the observer. It is as if the figures will start playing hide-n-seek like subatomic particles. In a world, where the numbers and calculations disappear like vapours, can consistency be conceived of?

Bald headed man asks his brother whether the 'rule of three' or the 'rule of fractions' is to be followed in the calculations to be provided. Though the latter is asked, his decision is not considered. Again, for no apparent reason, a fight breaks out between the brother and the 'Other' and “they went on at it hammer and tongs, biff, biff, thud, thud” (Chaudhari 55). But, suddenly, the brother began to bawl, 'Oh my poor other, what happened to you' (Chaudhari 55)? And they 'fell upon each other's neck' and wept. There is reconciliation out of the blue. Reason doesn't seem to simply apply. The readers may be baffled thinking of the reason behind it why or why not they can't live at peace with each other always. This is in a miniature way of representing the conditions of the modern man, who are in doubt of the purpose of their life and goals, and move aimlessly leading to incongruities and uncertainties. Alternately, 'other' seems to bring in the idea of the 'otherness' in our society.

This outlandishly fantastic world of Ray exploited the best of the subversive and the transgressive qualities embedded in the Fantastic, and Magic Realism. Ray brilliantly utilizes the fundamental thought on the relation between thought and language; and how the mimetic function of language shapes one's conscious actions and makes the reader interact with the text directly make an impression of the socio-cultural scenario.

This part of the research exposes how the trivial and the small blow up into making larger problems. The man's reaction on him being referring to as a 'bald headed' shows in a way how trivial matters has the large potential to crop up bigger problems in the society. The old man 'flew into a rage' and said “Just once more and I will crack your slate across with my hookah” (53). And there the crow drops the slate... and the whimsical old man gives birth to a yet another series of hullabaloo. The crow gazed at him vacantly and finally said, 'Hurt again, old chap? I never saw such one' (54). At which the old man started counting, 'Two, three, four...' stopping his tears straight away. As if he was bidding at some auction. This further develops into a bigger fight that ended up in two people injured and one left gasping. The power of language is explored. This is definitely reminiscent of the Big-Endians and the Little Endians of lilliputs in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

Ray, in his rendition, has caught the heated mood afflicted by the cataclysmic post war days that seeped to every corner of the world. This was the time when 'the ceremony of innocence' was drowned and 'mere anarchy' was loosened upon the earth. Higlee Piglee Dee, the “part man, part monkey and the part owl, part goblin- thrashing about with laughter and splutter” (Chaudhari 55), bears semblance to Yeat's 'rough beauty' advancing through the desert. While it is possible to be aware of the imminent dangers that the pitilessly blank gazing 'rough beauty' could bring beforehand, the stances of the ever jocular Higlee Piglee Dee whose life and breath being inconsistent cannot be apparent, and, therefore, the malicious effects created by him get at deeper roots in a subtle manner. This brute beast could be in some ways a

premonition that the absurd life is showing us as the perils of monstrous purposelessness that life is about to bring to us. He, in a jocular manner, dismantles and causes fall. Also, in two major ways, he creates the confusions--his role in the law case and his insensitive approach to Grammaticus Horner.

Also, Higliee Piglee Dee, in some ways, is the author's stream of consciousness voiced. His laughter the thought "Imagine the earth were flat, and all the water in the sea were to drain onto the land, and it grew all muddy and slippery, and everyone kept slipping and breaking his bones-ho ho, ho, ho' is Ray's satirizing the modern men" (Chaudhari 62). Such a possibility could very well figuratively and literally crop in the growing materialistic world. He jokes all the way, "Suppose there is a man who keeps lizards, and along comes a billy goat and gobbles up the lot- ho. ho, ho, ho" (56). He displays insensitivity even when the Grammaticus goat is vexed. Grammaticus Horner B.A., Nutritional Consultant, who is very fond of gram and whose horns are plain to behold, and holds the widely acclaimed skill in goingba-ba, vociferously protests against being verbally crucified: "We may sometimes savour a quilt or a blanket, or perhaps a mattress or pillow, but those who accuse us of devouring beds, tables and chairs are no better than liars" (57). The former drains others emotionally. Even though the goat pours out his emotions in a pity urging manner, Higliee Piglee Dee does not seem to change his stances. He falls asleep at the goat's wailing, not paying heed to the words of the latter. Ray's rendition at once makes us turn our minds to the brutal treatment of animals. His stream of consciousness formulates an apt rendition that is Bengali in its idiom. Grammaticus is the voice of all the silent animals subjected to human torture: "I know it is proverbial to say fools bleat everything, goats eat everything. But this is a false libel" (57). Thus Grammaticus Horner defends himself against libel. In certain ways, it is the voice of the silent subaltern and the marginalized 'other' crying for help. Again, his involvement and his sudden presence at the court draw our attention to the whole business of false witnesses. Higliee Piglee Dee's consenting to be a witness at four annas and his giggle coupled with his commentary, too, aptly corroborate the futility of such a case. "There was once a man whom they coached to be a witness. They'd taught him to say that a certain book had a green cover with a blue leather spine and a blotch of red ink at the top. So when the lawyer asked him "Do you know the accused?" Here replied "He has a green cover with a blue leather spine and a blotch of red ink at the top". Further, when he is asked whether he knew the proceedings of the court he replied "There are two parties in a lawsuit.... And there is a judge who sits down and goes to sleep" (Chaudhari 63). This in several ways represents most of the court cases. Inconsistency in a speech in the witness complicates a case, just like Higliee Piglee Dee's changing his name from time to time creates: "In the morning my name is Coconut- and -Spuds, and later in the afternoon..." (Chaudhari 64). The fox's turning to the judge, owl and referring to him the witnesses as 'a fine pack of lunatic', at once, makes the crocodile flare up his tail and in a foolish frenzy blurt out "I'm buying it at four annas a time" (Chaudhari 64).

Croworthy's speech too doesn't seem any better. Croworthy upon being asked where the road near his home leads to, answers "The roads do not move. And when asked where he lives, he replies "4 annas per hour, 10 pice per mile, discount of 2 pice for cash" (Chaudhari 64).

The reason that caused the pandemonium of a case and the final verdict of the court and how the case initiated, needs special mention. A song written for mirth gives rise to a dispute! As the song, "What the bat said to the porcupine" is sung, it bemoans the porcupine. Soon the crocodile lawyer who 'poked his eyes to squeeze out tears' comes to assuage the pain of the former. However, nobody knows who the actual accused is. Also, without clearly knowing the matter and without having any clear idea of the case at hand, lawyer fox supplicates for the death penalty to be passed on all the accused. The lawyers are not in any better position when it comes to handling a case either. The crocodile urges the judge to go to the root of the matter. Mambo jumbo of mutually unrelated talk goes on. "My lord, it behooves to get at the root of the matter. First, then, a few words about the roots. "Roots are of two classes, edible and non-edible... yams are edible..." (Chaudhari 60). At this point the fox complicates the case making a derogatory remark saying that yams are toxic and execrable weeds and are consumed by porcupines and pigs, thus, hurting the

porcupine. The entropy in the system of the case increases till it explodes into a pandemonium that Croworthy's speech makes. Finally, comes the turn of the judge to deliver the judgment, who still isn't aware of the accused. "Libel case no.24.Plaintiff: porcupine. Accused: - who is the accused" (Chaudhari65). The whole court event structures up as a mockery of those courts and legal matters where problems crop up from a spark of trivial matters and make innocent ones scapegoats-the innocent ones who often do not understand that they are in a trap until they fall into the deep abysses of the trap. Smoothpate, thinking that the accused will get money, readily agrees to be accused. Instead he is sentenced to three months' imprisonment and 'seven days hanging'. Further, the case of making the innocent as the victim has overtones of how the 'other' faced in the colonial setup and of the animal world that is always in the daggers of human cruelty . Alternatively, any pressing issues of victimization that leads to ultimate meaninglessness can be alluded to, here.

Higlee Piglee Dee, in some ways, is the mouthpiece of the author. Higlee Piglee Dee's laugh at the thought "Imagine the earth were flat, and all the water in the sea were to drain onto the land, and it grew all muddy and slippery, and everyone kept slipping and breaking his bones-ho ho, ho , ho" (Chaudhari64) is Ray's satirizing the modern men. Such a possibility could very well figuratively and literally crop up in the growing materialistic world. That Ray is a visionary with keen insight, is proved again.

Ray, with the help of his fantastical writing has languaged in subversive and transgressive elements inherent in the genre magical realism. This at once exposes us to a cross section of problems encountered in our society. The study opens up a new dimension of magic realism. In its aim, ideology and function, it diverts from the other models such as those of Rushdie's and Marquez's. Though written much before them, in his innovation and keen insight he is a postmodern writer in spirit. Higlee Piglee Dee who has a double role in the text, as a voice of tormentor as well as the speaker of the author's consciousness, through his sparkling wit exposes the inherent turmoil and the potential problems of utter confusion that might occur in the near future. Magic Realism is exploited by writers throughout nations in several ways to explicate socio-cultural contexts say, Black Feminist writer Toni Morrison's *Beloved* dealing with psychological impact of slavery, and Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* showing ill effects of imposing Euro-Centric views on to the Indian mind set. Ray's discourse takes a step beyond the boundaries of nations and schools of thought. His concern is humanistic and universal. He pleads a case for the downtrodden men as well as the animal world. Ray, thus, shows a new dimension of nonsense literature his model of analysis cogently knits several causes of absurdities and meaninglessness.

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