
The Illogic of Fantasy and Nonsense: The Indian Context

Author(s): Sumanyu Satpathy

Source: *Indian Literature*, January/February 2015, Vol. 59, No. 1 (285)
(January/February 2015), pp. 165-178

Published by: Sahitya Akademi

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44479274>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Indian Literature*

JSTOR

The Illogic of Fantasy and Nonsense: The Indian Context*

Sumanyu Satpathy

...children's literature did not properly exist until the imagination had been given an entirely free rein to entertain children in unreservedly fantastical books like Lewis Carroll's *Alice in the Wonderland* (1865) and Edward Lear's *Nonsense Songs and Stories and Nonsense Botany and Alphabets* (1870)

Matthew Orville Grenby

Theorists of nonsense usually assert and highlight the difference between minor generic categories such as jokes, riddles, fables and fantasy etc on the one hand and nonsense on the other. In my paper I examine the interrelationship rather than differences between these genres, especially, and in keeping with the theme of this seminar,* between fantasy and nonsense. Though I shall look at the practice of nonsense writing across literary cultures, I shall focus mostly on Indian styles of nonsense to show how it is not so much in terms of *difference* among, as through the peculiar reworking of, traditional genres such as the fantastic that traditional Indian nonsense thrived until Indian literary nonsense's advent through Sukumar Ray.

I

In common parlance, both fantasy and nonsense are used as antonym to what is real or empirically self-evident. Often statements or claims that are hard to believe, or taken as not-true or not-real, are dismissed as either fantastical or nonsense. Talking animals, magic mirrors, flying human beings and such other obvious elements that belong to the world of fantasy or the fantastic are also used liberally to construct the world

of nonsense. Apart from this lack of referentiality, that is, this disjunction between signifier and signified—both being largely non-mimetic forms—the element that is common to both seems to be that the sequence of events in both forms of the narrative defies logic. The classic case of *Alice in Wonderland* or *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll might clarify the point I am trying to make here. The first one, *Alice* begins perfectly legitimately like any other fantasy. Much that happens in the narrative in quick succession holds the attention of the reader more because of the illogic of the events than their verisimilitude: the waistcoat clad rabbit that talks, and the hole into which Alice slides and so on. But soon, and with Alice, it moves into what is recognisably different from the genre of fantasy. Indeed, it continues in regular fantasy manner until the reader encounters a sentence like the following one quite late in Chapter I:

“But do cats eat bats, I wonder?” And here Alice began to get rather sleepy, and went on saying to herself, in a dreamy sort of way, “Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats?” and sometimes “Do bats eat cats?” for, you see, as she couldn’t answer either question, it didn’t much matter which way she put it. She felt that she was dozing off, and had just begun to dream that she was walking hand in hand with Dinah, and was saying to her, very earnestly, etc.

Sharing the character’s puzzlement, the reader begins to question the facticity of what is being described. One is reminded of Tzvetan Todorov’s formulation that, in fantasy, “the hesitation of the reader between a natural and supernatural explanation of the events described...this hesitation may also be experienced by a character” (Todorov 33). But in the passage above, Alice’s narrative poses a situation where the hesitation of the reader is more than that of the character. This happens when Alice grows so tall that her feet appear to be unreachable. It is not only the breach within the body, but a rupture within the domain of language: a breach between the syntactic and semantic:

And she went on planning to herself how she would manage it. “They must go by the carrier,” she thought; and how funny it’ll seem, sending presents to one’s own feet! And how odd the directions will look!

Alice’s Right Foot, Esq.
Hearthrug,
Near the Fender,
(with Alice’s love).

Oh dear, what nonsense I’m talking!

This last sentence is almost a giveaway: Carroll hinting at the departure he is making from the usual genre of fantasy; nonsense takes over—the whole idea of a part of the body being a “place”, and postal address to which the person sends a parcel is more nonsense than “fantasy”. Thus, though both nonsense and fantasy interrogate our relationship with reality by offering a way of reaching out to impossibility, nonsense often refuses even to indicate what that impossibility is. Pictorial representation of the impossible can still help our imagination apprehend it in the world of fantasy; but in the world of nonsense the impossible can be vague at best, and, even better, incomprehensible.

Take, for example, the less known short pieces by Edward Lear, “The Story of The Four Little Children Who Went Round the World” or even “The History Of The Seven Families of the Lake Pippli-Popple”. The first one of these begins in the usual manner of a fantasy:

Once upon a time, a long while ago, there were four little people whose names were Violet, Slingsby, Guy and Lionel... and they all thought they should like to see the world. So they bought a large boat to sail quite round the world by sea, and then they were to come back on the other side by land. The boat was painted blue with green spots, and the sail was yellow with red stripes: and, when they set off, they only took a small Cat to steer and look after the boat, besides an elderly Quangle-Wangle, who had to cook the dinner and make the tea; for which purposes they took a large kettle.

But from now on the illustrations in the form of simple line drawings take over the task of complementary signification, and contribute to the clue about nonsense, especially through differential treatment to the realistic human and animal characters and the nonsense character of Quangle-Wangle. Though the impossible and unlikely Cat is employed to steer the boat, and looks to be doing so, the cook, with a strange nonsense name, Quangle-Wangle, is hardly recognisable as any real being, with fingers protruding from a no-body. The fact that Lear began his career in the pre-photography era as an illustrator of natural history is revealing in the way he abstained from representing Quangle-Wangle realistically, even fantastically. The illustration of the waist-coat clad rabbit may be fantastic but that of Quangle-Wangle clearly belongs to the realm of nonsense. The strange things that happen to the characters set off beyond the strangeness of Fantasy, what can easily be seen as nonsense. This is best exemplified in a section in Lear’s story:

The next thing that happened to them was in a narrow part of the sea, which was so entirely full of fishes that the boat could go on no farther: so they remained there about six weeks, till they had eaten nearly all the fishes, which were soles, and all ready-cooked, and covered with shrimp-sauce, so that there was no trouble whatever.

Thus, what Rob Kitchin and James Kneale say about science fiction is truer of the world of nonsense. "Simple explanations are deferred and narrative closure is resisted: Nonsense words, invisibility and incoherence begin to acquire centrality."

II

Having discriminated between the two worlds of fantasy and nonsense, I would still maintain that these nonsense narratives would not exist without the broad framework of the fantastic: travelling to strange lands being the most obvious framework. Lercercle says: "There is always something beyond the limit, if only the limit itself. Nonsense both explores and embodies the paradox of Lucretius, for nonsensical words either rebound into grammaticality or else cross into a type of agrammaticality that turns out to be no chaos." I suggest that it is the grammar of existence rather than language that is agrammatical about nonsense. Further, though some theorists like Linda Shires conflate the categories of "fantasy, nonsense, and parody since each question the status of the real in a different, and differently disturbing, way, pushing language and meaning towards dangerous limits of dissolution," nonsense writing often engages with great semantic complexity and uses play (not merely wordplay and parody). It often plays with the limits of common sense refusing to limit the meaning of the text to one interpretation, if at all.

There is something that needs to be said about Carroll's slight nervousness about the experimental nature of his narrative. In *Alice* the narrative self-reflexively and self-consciously departs from conventions of fantasy into nonsense with the reader coming across passages like:

Alice felt dreadfully puzzled. The Hatter's remark seemed to have no sort of meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English. 'I don't quite understand you,' she said, as politely as she could.

In contrast, Lear carries on confidently, sometimes brazenly so, of being taken in his own terms. This is evident in the following passage from Lear's tale referred to above:

To which questions a very aged Blue-Bottle-Fly answered, "We found the bottles here all ready to live in; that is to say, our great-great-great-great-grandfathers did: so we occupied them at once. And, when the winter comes on, we turn the bottles upside down, and consequently rarely feel the cold at all; and you know very well that this could not be the case with bottles of any other colour than blue."

"Of course it could not," said Slingsby. "But, if we may take the liberty of inquiring, on what do you chiefly subsist?"

"Mainly on oyster-patties," said the Blue-Bottle-Fly; "and, when these are scarce, on raspberry vinegar and Russian leather boiled down to a jelly."

"How delicious!" said Guy.

Resembling in its structure Mad Hatter's dialogue above, this passage also is indicative of the strange world that nonsense creatures inhabit.

III

The connection and/or interrelationship between fantasy and nonsense is as strong in Indian literary tradition as it is in the West; if anything, even stronger. For the tradition of what we call the fantastic is integral to the belief system in India. Here, the fantastic is inextricable from the sacral, whether one speaks of the sacred epics with the ten-headed Ravan or his flying machine or mysticism of medieval India. The many kavyas depicting *les amours* of Krishna simultaneously with multiple *gopis* who find it hard to believe and yet inhabit the wondrous and magical world....But it is also in the erotic temple sculpture that one notices how the sacred merges with the profane and material, the reality of the body with the fantasy of the sculptors. As Zizek says in a different context, "the structure of the 'real' sex act (the act with a flesh-and-blood partner) is already inherently phantasmatic—the 'real' body of the other serves only as a support for our phantasmatic projections." [Slavoj Zizek in his *The Plague of Fantasies*]. The phantasmatic is also suggestive of the way the quotidian world is apprehended in traditional Indian culture, namely, *maya*. The unseen world of the gods, heaven, hell, fairies and ghosts is as much real (or unreal) as the practical world of earth

and sky, the seasons, wilderness, animals, royalty, social and caste hierarchies, priests and cowherds. The oil-man (*teli*), the potter and his pots, and the crow would coexist alongside the sacred thread, the tiger, raja and the Brahmin. It is these signifieds which typify pre- and modern subcontinental realities and invite the description 'Indian'.

In some regional cultures, *tantriks* used *sandhyabhasa* or *sandigdhabhasa*, meaning 'twilight language' and 'doubtful/equivocal language' respectively. This is a language that the practitioners of the twilight knowledge-zone used in order to deliberately keep the system beyond the reach of the common man. The language of mystification is called *ultibhasa* (inverted language) in Hindi. In Kannada, the literary form or style of producing apparent nonsense is called *bedagu* or *mundige*. The following is one example of hermetically sealed *bedagu*:

Gangadevi became a widow
 Gowridevi took off her ear-rings
 The wind-god carried the bier
 Basudeva set it on fire
 Then on the news spread
 Lord Guheswara is dead.

There is a serious challenge here for the logic-seeking reader. A reader who understands at least the basic plot and names would still wonder: How can the eternal goddesses, the two paramours (Ganga and Gowri) of Lord Guheswar (Shiva), be widowed? How can, for that matter, the great and immortal god Shiva die? Through their inner paradox these lines anticipate the modern tradition of nonsense.

However, it is not only the Indian/Hindu worldview that makes Indian Nonsense "Indian." Rather, it is the deployment of certain verbal strategies that are peculiar to *traditional* Indian nonsense vis-à-vis the *literary* nonsense that can be categorized as part of the vernacular or colonial modern. The traditions outside the high Hindu/brahminical texts can be observed in the 16th century text by *Shikarnama* by Khawaja Banda Nawaz Gesu Daraz:

We four brothers were only from the countryside. Three were without clothes, and the fourth one was absolutely naked. The brother who was naked had money in his *aasteen*. All four went to the market to buy bows and arrows. Death came, and all four died. But twenty-four came back to life and stood up. Just then four bows came into view. Three of them were broken and were quite useless. The fourth one had neither any end nor a bowstring. The naked brother who had money in his *aasteen* bought the bow with neither any end nor

a bowstring. Now the thought of the arrow was worrying. Four arrows came into view. Three were broken, the fourth one had neither a point nor a feather. We bought the pointless and featherless arrow, and headed for the jungle looking for prey. Four deer came into view. Three were dead, and the fourth one was lifeless. The lifeless deer was shot with the pointless and featherless arrow. Now, a rope was needed to tie up the victim. Four ropes came into view. Three were in pieces, and the fourth one had neither ends nor the middle parts. The prey was tied up with the rope whose ends and middle parts were missing. Now, a house was needed for rest and also for cooking the meat. Four houses came into view. Three were broken, and the roof and walls of the fourth one were missing. We went into the roofless and wall-less house. There in a *taak* on the wall a big pot came into view. It was impossible to reach out to the high *taak* and take out the pot. A four-yard deep hole was dug into the floor beneath our feet. Only then could the pot be reached. When the meat was cooked and ready, a man came down from the roof, and said, "Give me my share, for this is your duty". His blood brother was also sitting somewhere nearby. He picked up a bone from the cooked meat and struck the man's head. A yellow potato-bearing tree sprang out from the elbow of the man. We climbed up that tree. We saw that melons were being cultivated and were being irrigated/watered with the help of catapults. From the tree, we started picking brinjals and started cooking *kulia*, and distributed it among the masses. We ate so much that we started swelling. We thought that we had grown very fat, so fat that we could not get out through the doors, and we lay there in the dirt. We escaped through the threshold of the house quite easily, and slept at the door of the house and embarked on a journey.

As we can see, it is both fantasy and nonsense, nonsense woven into fantasy, though not called by any generic name/description.

IV

In the later half of the 19th century, Lear was amazed to see that his "Owl and the Pussy Cat" was known to the school children in Roorkee even before he arrived in India in 1872. But it wasn't until Sukumar Ray's work appeared early in the 20th century that modern or literary Indian nonsense got underway. Whereas the influence of the great English masters of nonsense is conspicuous in his works, nothing in it is derivative. Yet, the English tradition would not have been so easily assimilated and accommodated in India had the latter not have its own

indigenous traditions of nonsense, examples of which I have discussed above, though no specific term for nonsense was in circulation. How does one identify Indian *literary* nonsense, given the fact that the category is being applied *ex post facto* to a kind of culture in which the modern sense of nonsense was nonexistent? To begin with, we should recognize that it exists in intersecting matrices: oral/folk and literary; religious and secular. Commonly used terms in Indian-Hindu *tantrashastra* are often meaningless. 'Om hring cling' is one such set of gibberish. Similarly after the Persian influence, expressions like 'gilli, gilli, golla' became common, as we shall see presently. Though these are in themselves meaningless, they may make sense in specific contexts as in the case of magic. For example, when a street magician performs a trick, and uses these terms, they are taken to be essential to the show, as they are addressed to the supposed master of charms, who alone would understand them. When used in secular and workaday contexts, as they frequently are by writers of modern Indian nonsense, the same expressions become genuine nonsense.

Beginning with Rabindranath Tagore, many Indian artists and scholars have invoked various ancient forms whenever they tried to reflect on or even write nonsense. From the Vedas and Upanishads to the work of the medieval poet-saints paradoxes and puns abound and one may notice how they anticipate the genre of nonsense, even though read as philosophy or mysticism. From oral and mnemonic folk songs, riddles, lullabies and game rhymes to folk theatre and modern films, nonsense has been an integral part of the Indian consciousness. Numerous other examples can be culled from traditional/folk *dastans*, fairy tales, and riddles, children's rhymes which verge on the nonsense, and see how they are then adapted to fit into western notion sometimes forms of nonsense. The tradition (on which colonial culture impacted to generate the genre we are speaking of) is the tradition of children's rhyme variously designated across linguistic cultures. In Bengal, Tagore is one of the first to recognize this fact and see a link between the traditional *chhoda* and Indian literary nonsense. In an essay entitled, '*Chhele Bhulano Chhoda*' (1893) he says:

Ancient *Rigveda* was composed as panegyric to Indra, Chandra and Varuna; but *chhoda* has emerged from the panegyric meant for the twin gods enshrined in the mother's breast—little boys and girls. Neither of these can claim precedence over the other; the *chhoda* may not be historically old, but is so intrinsically. On account of its primitive simplicity it is one of the most ancient of all human compositions.

As we have already seen earlier, Lear noted that his works were known in northern and western Indian towns even before he visited India (1873-75). But it was Bengali literary culture that responded to the foreign brand of nonsense first. After all, Lear had dubbed Calcutta 'hustlefussabad' (Indian Journal, 2 January 1874). Thus mingling of the Indic and the Western can be best seen in the works of the pioneer of literary nonsense in India, Sukumar Ray. In his introductory rhymes to *Abol-tabol* (translated by Sampurna Chatterji as "Glibberish-Gibberish"), he says:

Come happy fool whimsical cool
 come dreaming dancing fancy-free,
 Come mad musician glad glusician
 beating your drum with glee.
 Come o come where mad songs are sung
 without any meaning or tune,
 Come to the place where without a trace
 your mind floats off like a loon.
 Come scatterbrain up tidy lane
 wake, shake and rattle 'n' roll,
 Come lawless creatures with willful features
 each unbound and clueless soul.
 Nonsensical ways topsy-turvy gaze
 stay delirious all the time,
 So come you travellers to the world of babblers
 and the beat of impossible rhyme.

Elsewhere in India, a tradition of literary nonsense was slow to develop, as in the case of Odisha. Nanda Kishor Bala worked on the available Odia folk rhymes for children, which, though not quite consciously "nonsense" can now be seen in terms of the modern tradition as outlined above. In his well-known song on the crow, for example, the following lines constitute a clear instance of nonsense: "The high hills are curly-curly/on which is seated the three-seedy." The lines evoke the strangeness of the distant hills and a vague fearsome creature that verges on the fantastic. However, it was not until the 1960s that the tradition was recognisable as nonsense, with the sudden burst of the Odia version of the limerick: that was called "the Five-liner." We shall take a closer look at these below. In Hindi too the tradition was slow to grow in the works of Harindranath Chattopadhyaya and Sarveswar Dayal Saxena. I have discussed this evolution in greater details elsewhere. More recently, the connection between fantasy and nonsense in the hybrid genre in India can be seen in the following extract from Charu Anands' 'Gilli, Gilli Golla' in Hindi:

But then half a whisker
Suddenly appeared;
It jumped and frisked
And hopped and reared.

It fixed itself
To a golguppa round
So the golguppa with
Half a whisker was found.

It hopped and leapt
And caught a ride
Like a tail, on the raja's
Royal backside.

It fixed itself there
On his bum, on the moon
Just like the string of a blown-up balloon. (My translation)

A similar feature can also be observed in the following piece, "Nanabaya" by J.P. Das

Kakabaya, Kakua, Kakamina
are petrified before the horrible Dhusardhuma.
Chirguni, Pishachuni, Dahani, Kundabhusundi
can really kick up a shindy.
However, the one whose howl scares them all away, I must say,
is Yetiji, I bow to thee, namaste, namaste!

"Nanabaya" usually refers to children's verse in Oriya, like a lullaby. The term can also be seen here in terms of nana (Oriya for different or various) and baya (Oriya for a lunatic), that is, as referring to various types of lunatics. Sometimes, mythical and imaginary entities like Kakabaya, Kakua, Kakamina, Dhusardhuma, Chirguni, Pishachuni, Dahani and Kundabhusundi are invoked to frighten babies to sleep. Another example of how nonsense inhabits the realm of fantasy can again be had from J.P.'s "The Boy from Athgarh"

Fast asleep at eight pm
the boy of eight had a dream.
Eight woodcutters were felling eight trees.
Eight pixies were dancing on the frieze.
The octopus, spreading its eight tentacles
was all set to capture eight barnacles.
Just then eight banshees

with eight ghosts and eight pixies
 tried to pull his breeches.
 Waking up in a fright, he sees
 guarding him were the eight presiding deities.
 Now, there is nothing to fear, he felt.
 Overcome by sleep, in deep sleep he slept.

Here Athagarh is a place name, literally meaning a place with eight forts and the eight presiding deities is a literal translation of *asthadigapalas*. The world of dreams is synonymous with fantasy, and yet the similarity between the illogic of both the forms here mingle happily, and fantasy gives way to nonsense. The element of fantasy is still part of Oriya nonsense; and the best practitioners of Odia nonsense, J.P. Das, Niranja Behera, Das Benhur, Krushna Charan Behera, Yagna Datta Arya have produced work as successfully as any in India. I append below a few specimens.

Thus, that which we call modern or literary nonsense in India is a hybrid product that arose from colonial contact. Whereas many writers have successfully fused the Indian tradition of the fantastic with the western notion of nonsense, many others have stopped at the level of fantasy, failing to crossbreed the two traditions. To sum up, Todorov's study of the genre of the fantastic leads him to suggest that fantasy "is different from the less accommodating, more disruptive texts that actively interrogate the classic genre/reader interface, the most obvious instances of which are the ghost story (because of its refusal to 'resolve' comprehension) and perhaps the more recent 'magic realism'....for political ends." Perhaps, he should have added, "nonsense" to the list of "the less accommodative" of genres.

Note: All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are by me.

Rabindranath Tagore

Khaapchhaara

The bride's two ears
 crab's claws did pierce.
 Groom says, "Wiggle them
 Real slow, no tears.

Bride sees in the mirror-
 not in China, not in Japan

among thousands of fishermen's clan
has happened in the ears such horror. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Yawning in the classroom
Matilal Nandi
said: much as I try
lessons don't come handy.
Finally one day he took a tonga,
Tearing off pages flung them in Ganga.
Compounds, injunctions strewn in the stream-
to learn his lessons this was his scheme. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Rama Prasad Mohanty

Fixer

A tinker am I, I'm the very best,
I set right anything loose.
Boys who frolic and prance
and are a nuisance,
I fix their heads, honest,
by tightening the screws. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Bidyutprabha Mohanty

Grind

Grind wheat-out comes flour
Grind mind-you get power
Grind words- there is a fight
Grind your skin-it comes out white
Grind the ears-lessons drop
Grind the lessons-you reach the top. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Krushna Charan Behera

College Boy

College boy Romesh Roy
For exams is never coy.
Degree is easy,
but what is queasy
is 'unemployment'- the killjoy. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Niranjan Behera**Dama Tripathy**

Dama Tripathy, my neighbour
 never the one to shirk labour—
 he ploughs the ground with a needle,
 moves the mountain with a fiddle;
 makes sherbet out of cole slaw
 and sharpens pencils on a bandsaw. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Monkey Grandpa

Rats and flies were playing cricket
 Monkey grandpa went there to buy a ticket.
 Seeing a huge crowd, the boulder
 jumped over them to reach the counter,
 but alas, he had no money in his pocket. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Rabbit Punch

Higamushogamusheighho
 the rabbit gave a sucker blow.
 The mountain tumbled over;
 so the elephant took cover.
 The jackal ate up the tiger whole
 and the horse fell down the rabbit hole. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Kabibar Parida**Hierarchy**

The critic is the one placed highest
 the fiction writer comes next.
 The playwright is there
 but the poet nowhere,
 the publisher rides the crest. (Tr. J.P. Das)

Yajnadutt Arya

The Youngman of Orissa

Trusting fate's turns

all action he spurns.

Swearing by planetary power

he awaits the auspicious hour.

Pity, he knows not what his worries are

this silly young man from Orissa. (Tr. J.P. Das)



* This paper was presented in a seminar organised by Sahitya Akademi at Goa, 6-9 March 2010.