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Fantastic Beasts and How to Sketch Them: The Fabulous Bestiary of Sukumar Ray

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[**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the iconic black-and-white illustrations of the imaginary beasts in Sukumar Ray's *Abol Tabol (Rhymes without Reason, 1923)*. Far from being consigned to a secondary place, his illustrations significantly change, subvert, and enhance the representational idioms of the nonsense verse. Ray, a British colonial subject, exemplifies Bhabha's notion of an empowered hybridity, unsettling problematic binarism with respect to identity formation. Ray's own explorations of hybridity were often characterized through his imaginary animals that resist classification as a single discernible species. These complex and ambiguous representations of hybridity embrace both the positive and negative connotations of amalgamated social and identity formations.]

Sukumar Ray (1887-1923) is most well known as one of the first practitioners of literary nonsense in modern India. A renowned children's author, he was also an illustrator, photographer, and editor-publisher of *Sandesh*, an iconic Bengali children's magazine, and a pioneer of print technology during the latter half of the Bengal Renaissance in Calcutta. His prolific body of work, however, has languished in relative obscurity outside of Bengal. The majority of Ray's writings have not yet been translated, although the last two decades have brought forth select translations of his work in other Indian vernacular languages such as Hindi.¹ English translations of his literary nonsense include those by his son Satyajit Ray (1970), and

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Sukanta Chaudhuri (1987),² among others; inclusion of Ray's work in *The Tenth Rasa: An Anthology of Indian Nonsense* (2007) has also enabled it to reach a wider audience. Debasish Chattopadhyay points out the lack of scholarly attention toward Ray's work, though, when he declares in a recent essay that "[l]et alone Western academics, even most Indian academics remain unacquainted with the name Sukumar Ray" (243). While this claim is rather hyperbolic, it is certainly true that scholarly work analyzing Sukumar Ray's oeuvre³ has, to this day been limited. This essay contributes to the existing corpus of Ray criticism; it analyzes the iconic black-and-white illustrations of imaginary beasts in *Abol Tabol (Rhymes without Reason, 1923)* in order to unpack the complex relation between the nonsense texts and their accompanying images; and it highlights, in particular, Ray's preoccupation with hybridity, one of the most pressing sociocultural issues of colonial India.

Sukumar Ray explores the category of hybridity primarily through his creation of imaginary animals that resist classification as a single discernible species, and which exist as fantastic amalgamations, instead. The accompanying illustrations depicting such invented beasts, comprising original sketches by the author himself, are an essential part of the literary nonsense texts in *Abol Tabol*. Nonsense scholar Michael Heyman points out that the coexistence of image and text is often a distinctive feature of literary nonsense, and hence, "in good nonsense, [illustrations] [can] not be easily separated from the text" ("Decline and Rise" 18). Ray's nonsense is no exception; his texts are hybrid, foremost, in their image-text binary. Robert Young points out that "[i]n the nineteenth century . . . hybridity was a key issue for cultural debate" (6), noting especially the appropriation of the term by racist colonial and imperial discourse to address fears about cross-racial encounters. Crucially, Ray's own investigation of hybridity seeks to shatter such one-dimensional, negative formulations of the term. It is imbued, instead, with a form of ambivalence, acknowledging both the progressive potential as well as the undesirable aspects of hybrid forms of existence. This is exemplified through Ray's extensive use of the hybrid form of Bengali literary nonsense (where a western genre is brought together in a new harmonious blend with the existing indigenous literary heritage) within his overall body of work. Equally important are the varying representations of hybridity in his nonsense texts, to take one example: the monstrous and absurd animals and situations his verses and accompanying illustrations delineate. In Ray's case, indigenized literary nonsense becomes a counter-discursive practice, and a vehicle of contemporary political and social commentary, primarily via satiric critique of the British colonial government and their repressive policies (cf. "Ekushey Ain,"

“*Kumropotash*”), along with certain Indian institutions and personages, like the overly westernized *babu* in “*Tynash Goru*.”

Hybrid Influences: British Literary Nonsense and Bengali Children’s Literature

Some scholars⁴ have previously pointed out that “nonsense” is not an easily classifiable term; in fact, resistance to being coded, pinned down and interpreted may be considered one of its chief characteristics when studied as a literary genre. Nonsense is not the pure absence of sense, though; on the contrary, according to Wim Tigges, literary nonsense usually demonstrates a “multiplicity of meaning [coexisting] with a simultaneous absence of meaning” (255). Michael Heyman’s useful definition of nonsense highlights some of the key characteristics that comprise this often-misunderstood literary genre, pointing out some of its inherently contradictory elements:

It is a particular *kind* of play, one that is not pure exuberance, not unrestrained joy, and above all, not gibberish (although these are often elements of it). Rather, it is an art form rooted in sophisticated aesthetics, linguistics and [structured] play with logic. (“Tenth Rasa” xx-xxi)

Heyman echoes Tigges in his analysis of the ways in which nonsense functions: above all, literary nonsense texts exhibit a fine balance between sense and nonsense. As such, nonsense works are hybrid texts that occupy a liminal position between meaning and non-meaning, and it is this quality of unpredictable “in-between-ness” that is the chief source of the surprise and the delight they occasion.

In image-text works of nonsense, the illustrations and text are inextricably bound and need to be considered together for the full nonsense reading experience. In analyzing illustrations of nonsense, especially the ones that cannot be separated from the text, the following question becomes vital: if the nonsense verse, say, retains a balance between meaning and an absence of meaning, do the illustrations also perform a similar function, or are they more straightforward iconographic representations of a few key elements or situations present in the text? May they stand as complex, independent visual texts in their own right? In other words, are the illustrations derivative portions that primarily lend visual support to the written text, or are they also sophisticated and “nonsensical” in the ways in which they both convey meaning and confound it? Far from being consigned to a secondary position to the text, Ray’s original nonsense illustrations create distinct meanings of their own. Although usually generated out of and attesting to the words they supposedly represent pictorially, they significantly change, subvert and enhance the representational idioms

of the nonsense verse. In fact, Ray shows in “*Ahladi*” (“Glee Song”) that, in certain rare instances, the creative process occurs in reverse and that nonsense verses are inspired by pre-existing illustrations, instead—unsettling the (often assumed) primacy of the written text over accompanying pictures.

This article considers Ray’s literary nonsense through the lens of theories of postcolonial hybridity; it also briefly contextualizes his contribution to the corpus of Bengali children’s literature. At this juncture, it is important to stress that although meant primarily for children, and containing a strong humorous and whimsical strain, Ray’s nonsense is highly political. Ray often uses his literary nonsense as satire, commenting obliquely on the colonial society and British administration of the day. For Ray, a colonial subject, the question of competing cultural influences is especially crucial and this is reflected in his choice of literary genres: after all, as Sumanyu Satpathy expounds, “that which we call modern or literary nonsense in India is a hybrid product that arose from colonial contact” (“Tradition and Modernity” xliv). This article, however, does not engage in problematic binary categories of “original” and “copy,” even in cases of genre formations and dissemination. Rather, following Homi Bhabha’s notion of an ambivalent hybridity that shatters such skewed, binary power equations, texts such as Edward Lear’s nonsense verses on India⁵ demonstrate the fantasy of the “original” English literary form, which was substantially affected and shaped in its turn by the colonial enterprise and the attendant transnational encounters.

Bengali children’s literature too is a direct product of British colonial encounter, and consequently, may be considered a hybrid literary form. *Dig-darshan* (*Viewing the Horizon*), published in 1818 by the British Baptist missionaries of the Serampore Mission Press in Bengal, was the first Bengali vernacular-language monthly magazine aimed at younger readers. As Rimi B. Chatterjee and Nilanjana Gupta argue in their introduction to *Reading Children* (2009), “the category of ‘children’s literature’ was, like the novel, the newspaper and patent leather shoes, imported into India by the British where it was quickly and enthusiastically taken over by . . . Indians” (8). While India has always had a rich familial, oral tradition of folk and fairy tales—collected, for example, in Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumder’s iconic *Thakumar Jhuli* (*Grandma’s Tales*, 1907)—the advent of print culture in Bengal via British missionaries in the late eighteenth century led to the first books (primers, moralistic chapbooks, etc.) specifically designed and published for the consumption of child readers. In nineteenth-century Bengal, it eventually fostered a robust publishing climate that encouraged literature aimed at the instruction and amusement of Indian children, and that was often modeled upon British

and European literary forms. The history of Bengali children's literature is thus inextricably tied to with the histories of colonial and missionary efforts in India.⁶

Early Bengali children's books were mostly didactic, meant to be educational, and designed to instill moral values in their young readers. The most common kinds were primers, chapbooks, collections of indigenous and western mythological, folk and fairy tales, retellings of epics, (nativized) translations of world classics and moralistic tales warning child readers of the consequences of disobedience and social transgressions. From the 1880s onwards, there was also a proliferation of Bengali children's magazines such as *Sakha* (1883), *Sathi* (1893) and *Mukul* (1895) in a bid to provide alternatives to British children's magazine staples like the *Boy's Own Paper*, while still being loosely based on the latter's basic format (Mitter 129-30). Leela Majumdar argues that it was only after 1895—when pioneering children's authors like Yogindranath Sarkar and Upendrakishore Ray (Sukumar Ray's father) founded children's publishing houses, like City Book Society and U. Ray and Sons, respectively—that Bengali children's literature came into its own, demanding original works (245). This new class of children's texts did not always seek to instruct, but, sometimes, merely to delight. Moreover, they increasingly took into account the inner worlds of children and their imagination—a legacy from the Romantic notion of the child, especially as articulated in texts belonging to the Golden Age of children's literature in the Anglophone world. It is to this new, revitalized and “original” tradition of Bengali children's literature that Sukumar Ray's work belongs.

With the proliferation of published works for younger readers, children's book illustrations in Bengal too had come a long way, utilizing the various technological advancements of the nineteenth century—from the crude wood-cuts used by the missionaries, to engravings and lithographs, to the sophisticated half-tone printing methods that Upendrakishore researched and refined in his printing press.⁷ Satyajit Ray points out that as an illustrator, Upendrakishore used “oils, water-colours and pen-and-ink, using truly European techniques” in his work (Introduction n.pag.) while his subject matters and protagonists, such as the various animal characters in *Tuntunir Boi* (*The Tailor-Bird's Book*, 1910) were decidedly folkloric in flavor; Upendrakishore's work exemplifies the kind of multifarious influences, ranging across both indigenous and western traditions of art that gave birth to such creative enterprises. Sukumar Ray's oeuvre is no exception either, whether in terms of his writings or his illustrations. Moreover, his upbringing in an intensely intellectual and creative family that traditionally straddled the cultures of both the East and the West⁸ shaped his literary, artistic and intellectual sensibilities

accordingly. Upendrakishore ensured that his son received a broad education, one that included Bachelor's degrees in Physics and Chemistry from Calcutta's Presidency College, followed by postgraduate training in printing and photographic techniques from the London School of Photo Engraving and Lithography and the School of Technology in Manchester. On returning from England, Sukumar became an indispensable part of *Sandesh*, the children's literary magazine Upendrakishore Ray founded in May 1913 and whose publication and editorship fell into Sukumar's hands after his father's death in 1915. Most of Sukumar's nonsense prose and verse first appeared in *Sandesh* before being collected posthumously in *Abol Tabol* (1923).

Sukumar Ray's creative output, therefore, needs to be considered in the context of such a literary and cultural milieu, one that was a product of complex, hybrid sociocultural and political forces. It does not come as a surprise, then, that his nonsense is born of distinctly heterogeneous inspirations. On one hand, indigenous oral and literary traditions such as folk and mythological tales⁹ leave traces in his work; his nonsense also retains the flavor of folk nonsense (like children's common gaming rhymes, etc.—that are distinct from formal literary nonsense, considered a separate genre). Ray's nonsense exhibits distinctly Indian traits, such as an insistence on highlighting the domestic and the local, especially Bengali, cultural landscapes within his work.

On the other hand, he was influenced by classic English nonsense texts, especially those of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. To cite an example, Ray's *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La (A Topsy-Turvy Tale)*, was "obviously influenced" by Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*:

[t]here is the same falling asleep on the grass; the same dream; the same pageant of known and half-known beasts and humans; the same hits at linguistic lapses, social customs and legal procedures; and finally the same return to reality. (Satyajit Ray, Introduction n.pag.)

Further, Andrew Robinson (1987) points out that Ray was inspired by, and exhibited, traits similar to Edward Lear. Partha Mitter (1994) echoes Robinson's observation, and provides a detailed comparative analysis of the ways in which Ray drew his inspiration from Lear's body of work; moreover, Mitter remarks that Ray's and Lear's nonsense texts and illustrations are simultaneously similar yet distinct, both in terms of their singular artistic sensibilities and the cultural disparities they exhibit:

Sukumar knew Edward Lear's limericks. Both of them shared a passion for mingling the surreal with the mundane. Both possessed a flair for standing a perfectly logical statement on its head. Both of

them generated funny, gently satirical ideas. Both eschewed sarcasm, malice and ridicule; both left out the cruel and the grotesque. Above all, they were inspired illustrators. And yet their works display significant cultural as well as temperamental differences. (135)

These inspirations are manifest in Ray's nonsense oeuvre in a more generalized sense. Unlike the previous Bengali tradition of translating western myths, fables and classics of world literature for children, Sukumar Ray never directly translated works by Lear or Carroll, writing instead distinctly original poems and stories.¹⁰ The same holds true of the original illustrations he sketched to accompany his writing.¹¹ Nonsense scholar Wim Tigges points out that "the works of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll . . . are the earliest in the chronology of the genre's history" (140). It seems likely that Sukumar was inspired by this new, distinct genre of literary expression,¹² utilizing both eastern and western traditions of literature and art, to become one of the first literary nonsense practitioners in India.

Most importantly, Ray believed that, to write (or enjoy) nonsense, one needed *kheyal-rawsh* ("the spirit of whimsy"), a term he coined himself. Satyajit Ray is emphatic that "it is not one of the nine *rasas* of Indian dramatic theory" (Introduction n.pag.). Expanding on this, Michael Heyman posits that this new element could be effectively classified as the tenth *rasa*, added to the existing nine *rasas*¹³; he also offers a defense of his categorization by delineating why *kheyal rawsh* would not fall under *hasya rasa* (xl-xliii). In spite of his intellectual debt to western traditions, when Sukumar Ray (re-)classifies the emotions aroused by nonsense in accordance with the theory of affect in Indian art, he essentially lays claim to literary nonsense as an Indian art form—one that, crucially, epitomizes a subversive, creative form of hybridity.

Sukumar Ray exemplifies Bhabha's notion of an empowered hybridity, where one unsettles problematic binarisms with respect to identity formation and lays claim to several different cultural influences with equal ease. Moreover, Ray's own persistent explorations and representations of the issue of hybridity are complex and ambiguous, embracing both positive and negative connotations of such amalgamated social and identity formations. For example, Ray did not spare those "mimic men" from his own community, who represented—in terms of sociocultural cross-pollinations—the insidious effects of unequal power-relations within a colonial society. His *tyansh goru* metaphorically represents, and hence satirizes, the subservient Indian clerks produced by the British colonial machinery. While applauding the positive aspects of simultaneous exposure to diverse cultures, Ray criticizes too the severe oppression and inequalities that colonialism perpetuated. Supriya Goswami's recent analysis of "*Ekushey Ain*"

("The Rule of Twenty-One") reveals how Ray caricatures, in the nonsense poem (159-60), the unjust, repressive policies of the British colonial government. Ray's appropriation of the English literary nonsense tradition (in the form of the hybrid Bengali children's nonsense) to such satiric ends gives his critique a particularly subversive resonance: here, a political subject uses the literary traditions of the colonizer to mock the latter. This poem presents a prime example of the way in which Ray's subversive, hybridized nonsense functions as a counter-narrative, where both form and content are imbued with a critique of the (western) canon and its exclusion of other narratives.

A Problematic Hybridity: Iconographies of Competing Cultural Matrices

"*Khichudi*" ("Hotch-Potch"), the first nonsense verse in the collection, signals the whimsical nature of the anthology by presenting readers with a medley of improbable beasts that adequately portray Ray's ambivalence toward the notion of hybridity. The poem presents its child readers with a number of portmanteau animals in lighthearted rhymed couplets that amuse and delight. Even in this jolly nonsense verse, there exists a range of motivations, emotions and reactions to different animals melding together to create fantastic new crossbreeds; the desire on each count is different, as are the results and effects. For instance, a duck (*hansa*) defiantly combines with a porcupine (*shojaru*) to form a *hnasjaru* ("porcochard"); a stork (*bak*) happily grows from a tortoise's (*kachhap*) shell to form a *bakachhap* ("storkoise"). However, not all such unions are happy ones. When a parakeet melds with a lizard, the question of an appropriate diet—flies or fruit?—becomes problematic (with, one imagines, possibly fatal consequences); a cow objects stridently when a cock lays claim, uninvited, to its body; while the homeless *hatimi* ("whalephant") is torn between the land and the sea.

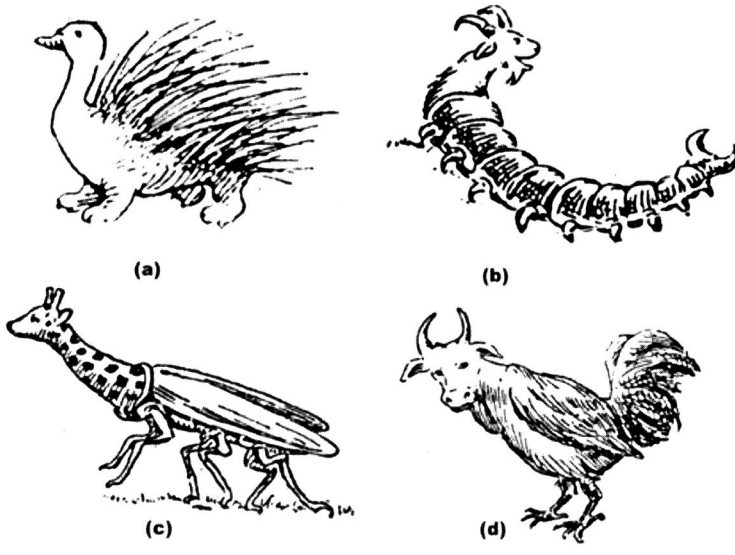


Fig. 1. “*Khichudi*” (“Hotch-Potch”); Sukumar Ray; *Abol Tabol*; Sukumarray.freehostia.com; Web; 10 Oct. 2012.

The main appeal of Ray’s verse comes from the sheer unpredictability of these pairings that occur at random without any explanation whatsoever. The spirit of whimsy manifests itself in this case via the common literary nonsense device of creating portmanteau words in which a number of morphemes combine into one new hybrid word, while preserving elements of both sound and meaning of the original words. Despite their inclusion in verse meant for younger readers, Ray’s portmanteaus have distinctly political undertones. It is significant that he chooses some inopportune combinations where the tug-of-war between the different species has no simple resolutions.

Instead of acting as mere visual embellishment that is secondary to the verse, the illustrations of “*Khichudi*” exacerbate these feelings of being unsettled and out of place, and gain their force from the jarring juxtapositions they present to the readers. Rather than visually presenting a smooth inter-species transition, the hybrid animals that the poem addresses are almost crudely spliced together. Thus, the illustrations add elements of both delight and unease to the poem, and uncover certain aspects to the pairings that the verse does not always address.

A glance at figures 1a, 1b, 1c and 1d demonstrates the unaddressed issues adequately. In verse, the difference between the two animal components of the goat-scorpion hybrid or the giraffe-locust is not as stark. However, it becomes immediately apparent while glancing at the

illustrations why the *hnasjaru* (see fig. 1a) is a relatively content hybrid animal that co-exists easily, whereas the other mixed animals fail to subsist amicably. The *hnasjaru*, where the head and neck of the duck harmoniously blend into the porcupine's body with its sheath of quills, is a meld of two creatures of similar sizes and build. With the goat-scorpion (fig. 1b) or giraffe-locust (fig. 1c), the illustrations clearly depict instead what the verse does not even hint at: the widely disparate sizes, and incompatibility of different body parts of the different animals concerned. Upon viewing the sketches, the reader jarringly realizes that a goat and a scorpion, a tall giraffe and a locust, or a cow and a cock (see fig. 1d) are combinations doomed to fail. The giraffe-locust is oddly unbalanced, its long, thick neck contrasted with a locust's ephemeral wings and torso, and one wonders if it will ever be able to fly. The cow-cock stares outward at the reader with a distinctly disgruntled look on its face, as if aware of the impossibility and undesirability of the mammal-avian hybrid existence. The suddenness of this realization upon glancing at the illustrations also makes the reader wonder what else about these transformations remains in the dark.

To readers, the sketches illustrating "*Khichudi*" make "sense" in that, within the finished hybrid creature the different body parts of the different animals are in proportion. This is opposed to, say, the torso of a full-sized goat being attached to a comparatively tiny yet regular-sized scorpion. However, this gives rise to further questions in the reader's mind: did the usurper cock's body grow to accommodate the size of the cow's head and neck, or did the cow shrink? How could the tall giraffe attempt to fly with dainty locust's wings unless it had shrunk to an inch or less in size? These questions engendered by the illustrations function much like the nonsense verse does, simultaneously giving readers glimpses into sense and nonsense alike.

Ray's portmanteau illustrations in "*Khichudi*" are significant because they demonstrate his unease with an unequal power balance that is almost always weighed heavily in favor of one dominant species. The question of shrinking and enlarging to accommodate vast differences in size implies that the animals do not undergo equal transformations. Rather, Ray points out that when it comes to (colonial) cultural hybridity, there is no ideal mix. In the case of hybrid identities, some aspects of competing cultural influences need to flare up and others need to be diminished (or even obliterated) for the fusion to work. His illustrations in this instance present a visual critique of the politics of forced and/or unthinking cultural amalgamation with one dominant culture gaining undue prominence or control over the other.

The verse only informs readers of the creatures that are actually being combined; it does not give them any hints as to *how* the

combination takes place, or the order in which it does so. The illustrations mend this gap in the readers' knowledge by iconographic signs that represent the final composite animal, and in so doing, also lay bare the question of power hierarchies. If the different elements of these hybrid animals represent varying cultural influences, the final results of the combinations subtly indicate who has greater control over the new discourses formed by (forced or otherwise) cultural enmeshing. In the combined animals, the one that has its head intact is likely the one in charge, as it were; at the very least, it is the one able to articulate aspects of its new state of being. The "hatimi" or "whalephant" may experience intense anxiety and homelessness in its competing desires between the land and the sea, but it is the elephant-head that gets to express its discontent with this existential crisis. The goat that forces its head and torso on the scorpion's body acts out of impatience, imposing itself on another in order to experience a different way of being, while the scorpion does not seem to have much say in the matter. Here, the illustrations become vital to representing the thorny issue of power-hierarchies and the anxieties accompanying competing cultural matrices within a colonial society where varying cultural influences compete to create new hybridized identities.

Thus, the illustrations for "*Khichudi*" do not serve as mere visual embellishments of the text. Instead, they create meanings and questions of their own and interact with the verse in a complex fashion to enhance the possible interpretations, puzzlement and delight that readers may experience from this piece of literary nonsense. Ray's apparently simple nonsense poem for children is, in fact, a layered text in terms of the kinds of sociopolitical critiques that it offers, and his nonsense illustrations, rather than the verse, become his primary vehicle for such commentary.

Hybridized Nonsense as Sociopolitical Satire

Analyzing the ways in which nonsense texts work, Michael Heyman says in his introduction to *The Tenth Rasa*, "nonsense leads us down a path of sense, only to turn aside from the expected destination at the last moment" (xxv). Readers' sojourns down this "path of sense" comprise of their interpretations of different elements of text and image in literary nonsense texts. Much of the pleasure in good nonsense comes, however, from readers' ultimate reconciliation with the fact that no matter how much one may analyze aspects of the text, it will always resist "making sense" as a whole. Nonsense as a genre thus incorporates in its philosophy the idea of unknowability, of incomprehensibility; it recognizes that despite readers' efforts, they cannot hope to understand *all* aspects of human existence, thus making a pointed critique of positivist and rationalist discourses of knowledge.

Crucially, since it actively “invite[s] interpretation” (Tigges 225) from the reader, literary nonsense is particularly suited to veiled social, economic or political commentary. Ray’s work is no exception. Andrew Robinson notes the “keener satirical edge” to many of Ray’s verses, and lists a few choice examples; for instance, in “*Gnof Churi*” (“The Purloined Moustache”) “Sukumar . . . epitomised the timid mentality of the clerks working for the sahibs at that time” (180). As this comment demonstrates, Ray’s hybridized nonsense is rife with political commentary in terms of both form and content. It thus acquires a subversive edge precisely because he uses a literary form largely inspired by the British to satirize aspects of the colonial society and administration in India. In the process, he makes an implicit statement that although Indians might be British political subjects, they are very much at par with their colonial overlords in terms of cultural and intellectual sophistication, capable of doling out pointed critique as the occasions warrant.

Ray’s illustrations are often key to such satiric commentary. In the case of “*Khichudi*,” Ray arguably makes more of a political statement through his illustrations than he does through his verse. The illustrations lend new significance and meaning to the text, which might otherwise merely have been amusing and nonsensical on its own, by subtly pointing out the delights as well as the dangers in (unchecked) cultural assimilation. In poems like “*Kimbhut*” (“Super-beast”) and “*Tynash Goru*” (“The Blighty Cow”), on the contrary, pointed anti-colonial satire replaces gentle irony while representing the topic of hybridity, highlighting its negative aspects in a far more strident manner. Ray is no longer ambivalent about those members of contemporary Indian society who eagerly abandon their own identities in favor of an unthinking (foreign) cultural amalgamation, and the illustrations play a vital role in representing the anxieties attendant upon these mixed creatures.

In “*Kimbhut*” (“Super-beast”),¹⁴ Ray directs his critique toward the enmeshing of varied traditions without proper contextualization. The titular beast, utterly dissatisfied with its appearance and attributes, desires specific attractive features from a host of different animals: an elephant’s trunk and tusks, a bird’s wings, a songbird’s sweet voice, a kangaroo’s legs, a lion’s mane and a lizard’s tail.¹⁵ When its wish is miraculously granted one day, however, the untenability of this new hybrid existence rapidly sinks in. “*Kimbhut*” morphs into a cautionary tale, representing an instance of hybridity gone awry.



Fig. 2. “*Kimbhut*” (“Super-beast”); Sukumar Ray; *Abol Tabol*; Sukumarray.freehostia.com; Web; 10 Oct. 2012.

The black-and-white sketch accompanying “*Kimbhut*” (see fig. 2) stretches to an extreme the problems of scale and proportion of the different animal-parts and the question of competing power-hierarchies addressed by the illustrations in “*Khichudi*.” The assorted features have no relation to each other, and readers may only guess at the final size of this composite beast. The illustration drives home the point that probably the bottom half of the torso constitutes the only element left over from the “original” animal, and that too indeterminately. The final grotesque mixture fails to highlight to their full glory any of the individually attractive aspects of the different creatures; the elephant’s ears fall over and obscure to a large extent the lion’s mane, both the kangaroo’s legs and lizard’s tail stay disproportionately large for the rest of the body, while the elephant’s trunk remains absurdly small, giving it an unbalanced look. The illustration depicts the *kimbhut* standing alone, shoulders stooped, a picture of misery. In this instance, through both verse and illustration, Ray presents a creature so far out of the realm of desirability that it serves both as a target for mockery and as well as a warning to those who would follow the super-beast’s example and crave perceived attractive qualities of different cultures and societies without regard to the consequences.

The generalized satire of “*Kimbhut*” morphs into a pointed critique of colonial enthusiasts in “*Tynash Goru*” (“The Blighty Cow”), especially of the “brown sahibs” who imitate western customs in misguided ways. The *tynash goru*’s carefully westernized grooming, delicate and fussy demeanor and absurd diet¹⁶ paint a mocking portrait of the subservient native subject of British masters. Ray ridicules the Indians who are all too eager in their unthinking imitation of different aspects of British society and culture. As Sampurna Chatterjee points out, “[e]ven today when you use the word ‘*tyansh*’ for someone, it is

derogatory and means overly and unpleasantly westernized” (qtd. in Heyman, “Tenth Rasa” xxxvi-xxxvii), and the composite creature under discussion here is no exception. The first information readers are given is that the *tynash goru*, with the head of a cow and the wings and feet of a bird, is in fact a bird. The implication, of course, is that even the creature itself does not know what it is and recognizes only a tiny part of its hybrid identity. Moreover, it is extremely significant that Ray’s *tynash goru* is for sale to the highest bidder; the verses are presented as a sales advertisement, detailing its various charms. Readers see here a negative, satiric portrait of a hybrid personage as a sell-out that refuses to recognize the very unique subject-position it occupies.

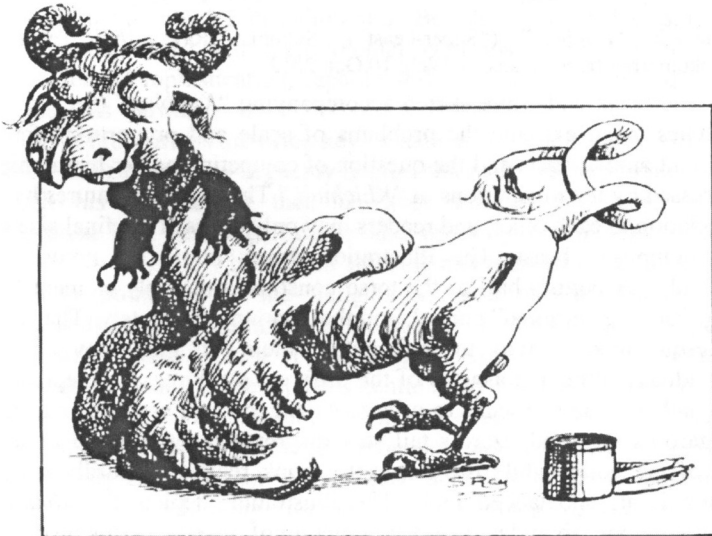


Fig. 3. “*Tynash Goru*” (“The Blighty Cow”); Sukumar Ray; *Abol Tabol*; Sukumarray.freehostia.com; Web; 10 Oct. 2012.

The illustration of this poem (see fig. 3) emphasizes Ray’s message to an even greater degree. For instance, it depicts the *tynash goru*’s eyes as closed, presumably to the reality of the world outside. The creature rests in typical bovine complacency, sprawled in a slack, ungraceful manner, chewing (one imagines) the tallow candles placed next to it. The specific choice of a cow, generally regarded as a domesticated, passive beast that does not show any initiative or intelligence of its own and is raised only to serve humans, is a significant one. It allows Ray to pictorially portray to an even greater degree the *tynash goru*’s unthinking meekness, which within a British colonial context, becomes a dangerous form of compliance to an oppressive and unjust foreign authority.

In fact, the verse references to the *tynash goru's* delicate digestive system, its shaky legs, slack joints, wheezy breaths or its tendency periodically to burst out sobbing for no discernible reason, complement the illustration in underscoring the lack of strength, courage and independent thinking that characterizes this biddable beast. The illustration depicts the creature as so significantly top-heavy and lopsided that readers are left wondering how the *tynash goru* even manages to stand up in a balanced fashion, let alone move around properly. The spindly bird-legs and cow's tail of the back torso, in such ungainly contrast to the significantly more imposing head, neck and front wings of the beast, visually represent the uneasy balance of various different attributes—comprising both Bengali manners and those “borrowed” from British customs—that the *tynash goru* emblemizes. The ponderous quality of this hybrid creature, depicted in the verses, is also conveyed visually by excessive use of shading and cross-hatching to present a “heavier” picture that is mostly in shadow. The scarf around its neck (present in the illustration, though not mentioned in the verses) completes the picture of absurdity and adds to Ray's pointed satire: it seems that aside from the attributes of a cow and a bird, this creature wishes to mimic some human fashions too. Ray does not provide an origin of story of how the combined creature came to be, but instead, readers get a graphic instance of (undesirable) hybridity in action, and moreover, one that is commoditized in terms of its novelty value, existing only to be sold cheaply.

These examples demonstrate that Ray's nonsense sketches do not merely supplement his verse, but often provide alternative inroads into the delightfully illogical and absurd worlds, characters and scenarios that he presents to his readers. The illustrations thus become equally vital in expressing the balance of sense and nonsense in Ray's various representations of hybridity throughout *Abol Tabol*. Moreover, his nonsense verse is often shot through with veiled, satirical political commentary; the images he provides are also equally nuanced, working with and against the text to create complex metaphors for the state of contemporary colonial Indian society, while simultaneously resisting straightforward interpretation.

In “*Kumropotash*” (“Pumpkin-Puff”), another instance of keen satire via nonsense verse, the focus moves from hybrid (colonial) subjects existing in uneasy states of being to a different representation of the specter of authoritarian rule. Unlike the creatures in the poems discussed above, Ray's *Kumropotash* is not an easily-identified hybrid beast. In other words, it is not an amalgamation of different features from various animals, but rather, an entirely unique fantastic creature. There is another important qualitative difference: unlike the benign beasts mentioned above, the *Kumropotash* is a despotic tyrant to its

human subjects. In this poem, Ray portrays a society whose behavioral codes are dictated entirely by the movements of the ferocious *Kumropotash*. The first of a series of warnings that the narrator provides acts as a representative example of the *Kumropotash*'s arbitrary tyranny over its subjects:

If Pumpkin-Puff should dance—

Beware! Beware! You mustn't dare beyond the stalls advance.

You mustn't glance to fore or aft, or cast your eyes aslant,

But grapple close with tips and toes the Rancid Radish Plant.

("Pumpkin-Puff" 1-4)

[(Jodi) Kumropotash naache—

Khobordaar esho na keu astaboler kachhe;

Chaibe nako daine baine chaibe nako pachhe;

Char pa tule thakbe jhule hattamular gachhe! ("Kumropotash" 1-4)]

The above verses describe a place where fear of despotic authority is all-pervasive and where one's daily movements are strictly regulated in relation to the activities of the powers-that-be. In Ray's imagination, apart from dancing, *Kumropotash*'s activities also take the form of crying, laughing, running and braying, but there are dire consequences for not following the specific set of absurd responses prescribed for its human subjects during each activity. In fact, the consequences are so ominous that Ray's narrator is not even able to utter what they are except to assure that they are dreadful indeed, leaving the readers speculating about the possible punitive measures: "Perhaps you scorn my warning words, or think they sound demented./If Pumpkin-Puff should find you out, he'll make you sore repent it" ("Pumpkin-Puff" 21-22) ["*Tuchha bhebhe eshob kotha korchhe jara hyala/Kumropotash jante pele bujhbe tokhon thyala*" ("Kumropotash" 21-22)]. Evidently, Ray intends readers to conjure up their own inventive visions of diverse punishments, instead of explicitly spelling out what these are and spoiling their suspense.

Apart from the satiric depiction of a meek society cowering under an absurd tyrant, "*Kumropotash*" renders itself remarkable by its local, intimate, familiar settings. As Satyajit Ray also points out, this imaginary place is rather close to the spaces the (contemporary) readers themselves inhabit: the *Kumropotash* "seems to prow! around our houses, otherwise we need not have been so mindful of his wishes" (Introduction n.pag.). In other words, the poem subtly points out that close surveillance of the downtrodden subjects is one of the strategies of power exercised by the ruling authorities. However, the utter daftness of the above "rules" allows Ray to satirize the arbitrariness of British rules and regulations when it came to their Indian subjects, along with the censorship of free speech, movement and action. Ray's critique is oblique, hidden in the guise of children's nonsense verse

populated by imaginary despotic personages, and thus, not deemed “important” enough to be a target of direct censorship efforts by the British authorities. Yet, it is quite apparent to an Indian audience that the poem is also an example of biting satire and a strong indictment of repressive colonial rules and regulations in India. Ray’s poem is intensely political in both its image and textual dimensions; here, nonsense proves itself to be the perfect vehicle for such subversive satire, given its propensity for ridicule and delight, which nevertheless underscores the grimness of the colonial situation.

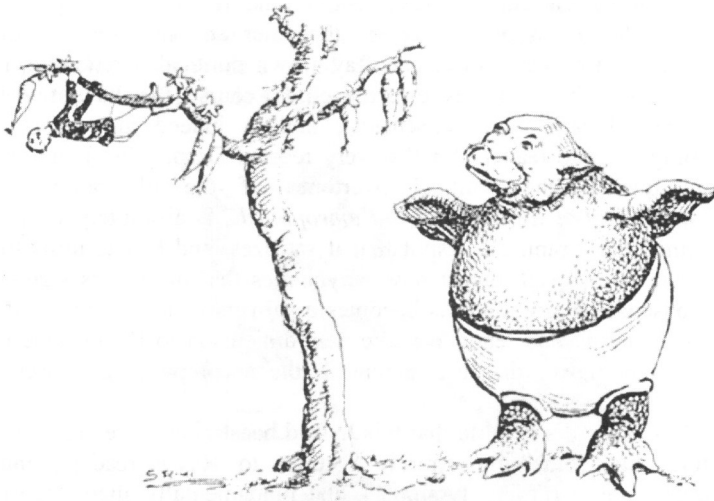


Fig. 4. “*Kumropotash*” (“Pumpkin-Puff”); Sukumar Ray; *Abol Tabol*; Sukumarray.freehostia.com; Web; 10 Oct. 2012.

In the case of “*Kumropotash*,” the illustration works against the verse to change its affective quality in significant ways. The verses present a terrifying, mysterious figure policing people, keeping track of their movements, and enforcing erratic rules with ferocity—an image entirely at odds with the illustration that depicts it “dancing” (see Fig. 4). Significantly, the verses only depict *Kumropotash*’s actions, but mention nothing about the creature’s appearance. It is the illustration that mends this gap in the readers’ knowledge, as it were, providing their only way of catching a glimpse of what manner of creature this iron-fisted despot may be.

The fearsome authoritarian personage turns out to be a rotund figure of absurd proportions, with stunted, fleshy wing-like structures for arms and extremely short legs with three-toed, waddling feet. The small eyes, broad, flat nose and wide, jowly, walrus-like face with its elongated ears atop the overinflated torso provoke laughter rather than cold terror in readers. Moreover, Ray’s accompanying sketch is

especially notable for the contrast between the ruler and its subject. This contrast operates on several levels: the huge *Kumropotash* with its round proportions to the right of the sketch is set directly in opposition to the miniscule, spindly human figure at the extreme left of the frame; the *Kumropotash* is only half-clad in a pair of shorts and sports a bare upper torso, whereas the man is fully dressed in “civilized” garb; the tyrant stands upright on the ground, while its subject hangs upside down from a tree; and, most importantly, the visual depiction of the tyrant is crude and animalistic, while its oppressed subject is a terrified (Bengali) *babu*. The illustration speaks volumes about both the power-hierarchy that is in place between the ruler and the ruled in the imaginary nonsensical world, and Ray’s own political positioning, in terms of his political stances toward each. Of course, the illustration is sufficiently bizarre and nonsensical, and is indeed amusing and appealing to child-readers for that very reason. Despite its funny and absurd quality, the political overtones of the illustration are unmistakable. The illustration in “*Kumropotash*” is absolutely vital to “othering” the tyrannical despot that it satirizes, and hence, turns the tables on the skewed, unjust power-dynamics that the verses signify. The nonsense illustration thus becomes a subversive tool in the hands of Sukumar Ray and lends a whole new dimension to the critique of authoritarian power that is inherent in the accompanying nonsense verse.

Moreover, it is notable that this hybrid beast is not a recognizable creature, but something entirely foreign to Ray’s readers, thus representing a disruptive, tyrannical, and fundamentally alien force in power: the contemporary political equivalents are all too apparent to be missed. Significantly, the massive size of the *Kumropotash* may be distressing to the comparatively tiny human beings it rules over, but the illustration allows readers access to the ludicrous aspects of the situation as well, and lets them mock the creature in all of its incongruous glory. Scornful laughter is one of the most powerful ways of denying and bringing down authority. By providing another perspective, albeit a nonsensical one, on contemporary political situations, Ray’s satire becomes especially sharp-edged by virtue of the accompanying illustration. In “*Kumropotash*,” the illustration thus throws into sharp relief the subversive, counter-discursive elements of Ray’s hybridized literary nonsense, highlighting the scathing sociopolitical commentary it often doles out.

Illustrating Whimsy: Local Beasts

Sukumar Ray’s *kheyaal rawsh* or “spirit of whimsy” was not always utilized for political commentary, though. His free-ranging imagination also gives readers many nonsense animals that amuse and

fascinate simply for the sake of pleasure. These include *Hnuko Mukho Hyangla* (“The Lug-Headed Loon”), “who thinks and feels like a human but looks like a zoological medley,” and who inhabits spaces that seem quite close to the contemporary readers’ “familiar world” (Satyajit Ray, Introduction n.pag.). *Hnuko Mukho*’s home is in deepest Bengal, and his maternal uncle Shyamadas is the local Inspector of Drugs. These throwaway references that seek to position this entirely imaginary animal within a local context tie him to both the fantastic and the familiar. Ray seems to suggest that the fantasy creatures populating his imagination are not so far away from the realm of possibility after all—an unexpected turn in the Bengal countryside, and perhaps his child readers could chance upon *Hnuko Mukho*’s playful dancing and enthusiastic singing.



Fig. 5. *Hnuko Mukho Hyangla* (“The Lug-Headed Loon”); Sukumar Ray; *Abol Tabol*; Sukumarray.freehostia.com; Web; 10 Oct. 2012.

In Ray’s poem, *Hnuko Mukho* suffers from an existential dilemma regarding the most efficient way to kill flies with his two tails. This nonsensical reason for his deep depression makes it amusing to readers; the point, nevertheless, is that people everywhere nurture their own idiosyncratic obsessions and have reasons for sinking into existential gloom. Readers may not be able to fully appreciate the *Hnuko Mukho*’s specific problem, but in terms of emotional effects, it parallels human experiences, and the accompanying illustration (see fig. 5) makes this all too evident. *Hnuko Mukho* has a wholly unique appearance: rather large, pointed elf-like ears; a tuft of wispy hair crowning his pate; small round staring eyes under frowning eyebrows; a long hooked, beaky

nose; cheeks that hang down past his jaw in loose folds of flesh; and a curiously human-looking mouth that turns down at the corners. His body, perched atop a thick branch, is also a mixture of a number of distinct features; he has a small torso (compared to his over-sized head) with human arms, extremely short and stumpy elephant-like feet and, of course, two tails at the rear. Although *Hnuko Mukho Hyangla* is an imaginary creature, the droop of his face, his wide-set eyes, the dissatisfied mouth and the irritated facial expression prove remarkably human-like, allowing readers to sympathize with his plight. An invented beast he may be, but the illustration extends the verse in underscoring that in terms of thoughts and emotions, *Hnuko Mukho*'s human-likeness creates an involuntary tie to the readers.

As also mentioned above, Ray often places his fabulous creatures close to (local) human settlements and concerns—this recurring feature is brought to a head in “*Bhoy Peyo Na*” (“An Invitation”), where readers find a terrifying “monster” attempting to coax a human being into visiting his home. While the verses (narrated in the first person) point toward a possibly unsettling and scary appearance of the former without giving readers too many clues about its appearance, it is the illustration (see fig. 6) that allows the readers pictorial access. Ray’s signature black-and-white sketch serves to limn the creature, while obscuring some of its features that almost blend into the black rocks in the background. Readers see a creature with humanoid arms and hands with opposable thumbs, but its massive size, the three horns atop its head, the bulging, round eyes and nose, the thin, flat mouth, the elongated neck that ends in a mane of sorts, the collection of feathers at the back of the torso and the legs of a predator all combine to produce a decidedly unfamiliar personage.

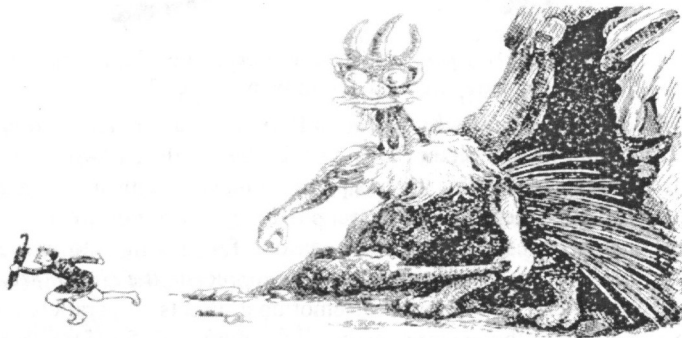


Fig. 6. “*Bhoy Peyo Na*” (“An Invitation”); Sukumar Ray; *Abol Tabol*; Sukumarray.freehostia.com; Web; 10 Oct. 2012.

The invitee in the poem perceives this difference as a monstrosity, fashioning the creature as the Other. Nevertheless, Ray's ambivalence regarding representations of the true nature of either party is essentially a critique of parochial identity politics—represented in this case by the human invitee. Ray refuses to provide a didactic authorial stance via either text or image, inviting active interpretation and open-mindedness on the part of the reader instead. In the poem, the “monster” pronounces a strong desire to associate with human beings—hence the (apparently) cordial invitation to visit its home. Unfortunately, the man it addresses does not seem too keen on accepting the invitation, choosing instead to run away from such an encounter. Scorned at this point, the “monster” loses its temper and threatens to give the invitee his comeuppance for this rudeness if the latter comes within striking distance.

The effect of the poem would be entirely incomplete without the illustration, which extends the verse's meaning significantly by providing readers with a more thorough glimpse at Ray's vision of this unique creature. Apart from simply complementing the text by providing a visual counterpoint of the descriptors, the illustration also invites interpretation, asking readers to judge the intent and the nature of the invitation. The man fleeing for his life while clutching his umbrella is strikingly dissimilar to the monstrous figure at the mouth of the cave holding a sizable cudgel. Once again, Ray uses the technique of contrast to visually highlight the distinctions between the two: apart from the stark difference in sizes, the figures are also positioned at opposite ends of the frame. Moreover, the figure of the fleeing man does not have any background sketches anchoring it to its surroundings, while the “monster” is framed within an intensely dark cave (thus, the resulting levels of black and white space at each end of the frame are significantly different). The disparity between the illustrations of man and “monster” is also highlighted by the fact that the man is garbed in conventional clothing and clutches a tiny umbrella, while the creature is without any recognizable clothes and carries a gigantic cudgel; the former is in a state of motion, while the latter holds perfectly still. The creature's visage is inscrutable; it is impossible to make out whether it is threatening, or genuinely hurt or enraged by the refusal of the man to trust his promise of a safe visit to his cave.

In this poem, the stark contrast in the visual depictions of the two characters highlights the insurmountable distance between the two, one that might never be bridged. The illustration thus underlines the failure as well as the limitations of, cross-cultural interactions, providing an instance where ignorance and fear of the Other leads to a breakdown in the (desirable) fantasy of cross-cultural pollinations. Moreover, the illustration brings home the fact that in this nonsense world of make-

believe creatures, there is only so much that readers employing reason and normal deductive powers can hope to understand. In its invitation to interpretation, but ultimate refusal to definitively signal the “monster’s” intentions, the illustration perhaps provides the clearest road to the illogical and perplexing territory of nonsense beasts and worlds.

Yet another imaginary creature, the grim and bitter *Ram Garurer Chhana*, (the “Griffonling”) remains remarkable in its vow never to laugh. In “*Ram Garurer Chhana*” (“The Griffon’s Grouse”), Ray satirizes intellectuals who place undue importance on serious, rational discourse alone, rendering them unable to enjoy life’s other pleasures. Moreover, Ray symbolically pits them against the spirit of whimsical, nonsensical thoughts and actions that do not bend to the tyranny of reason. Andrew Robinson speculates that Ray’s whimsical character *Ram Garurer Chhana* “must surely have been inspired, at least partly, by the solemnity of many Brahmos who surrounded Sukumar in the Samaj” (179), drawing readers’ attention to the mocking and sociocultural parodic aspects of this particular poem. The illustration (see fig. 7) depicts this tug of war between grimness and amusement, symbolizing the divide between rational and nonsensical world-views and becomes significant on more than one score.



* The sign reads 'Laughter Not Allowed'.

Fig. 7. “*Ram Garurer Chhana*” (“The Griffon’s Grouse”); Sukumar Ray; *Abol Tabol*; Sukumarray.freehostia.com; Web; 10 Oct. 2012.

In the illustration, readers encounter *Ram Garurer Chhana*, who considers it a sin to laugh or be mirthful, sitting at the mouth of his

cave and staring despondently into the surrounding landscape. Next to it, there is a sign that states “Laughter Not Allowed” (“*Hashi Nishedh*”). The sign, not mentioned anywhere in the verses and accessible only via the illustration, becomes significant for two reasons. First, it signals to readers that *Ram Garurer Chhana* is a literate beast, and thus, closer to human society than imagined. Second, the sign is written in Bengali, which places this imaginary beast firmly within the local cultural context. Perhaps its isolated lair lies somewhere within the Bengal countryside, cunningly hidden in a spot others have overlooked so far. Ray’s illustrations convey as vociferously as his nonsense verse that these fantasy creatures are all-too-familiar and that they usually reside within intimate Bengali cultural landscapes. The original illustrations Ray sketches thus become vital to the creation of the nonsense world of his imagination, whether in depicting elements of the characters’ realities that the verses do not address, or connecting them even more firmly to the local and the familiar.

Ram Garurer Chhana looks similar to a humanoid reptile, possessing an elongated tail and a reptilian torso, but with vaguely human arms, hands and head. Like *Hnuko Mukho*, this fabulous beast too sports remarkably human-like, melancholic facial expressions, with a mouth drooping at the edges and a frowning, furrowed brow; these common human expressions of sadness the fantasy creature exhibit makes it a sympathetic visual depiction on Ray’s part. Quite independent of the accompanying verse, the illustration in this instance is also remarkably successful in conveying the *Ram Garurer Chhana*’s determinedly isolated existence. The sketch depicts it turning its back on the readers and grudgingly presenting only its profile to one’s view. It sits in the midst of nature, yet oddly withdrawn from it, as symbolized by the tucked-in limbs, the tightly contained posture and its positioning at the extreme right-hand side of the frame, in front of a dark cave where it might retreat at a moment’s notice. The sketch thus gives readers important clues to the inner world of the fabulous creature, quite apart from providing child readers with the absurd, whimsical and pleasurable elements of literary nonsense.

The tension between laughter and gloom that is a central concern of this nonsense poem is depicted iconically, moreover, as Ray surrounds the cheerless *Ram Garurer Chhana* with natural elements (clouds, trees, etc.) that brim over with joyous effervescence. Some of the trees in the distance—in the left-hand bottom side of the frame—look like they are anthropomorphized, with grinning, smiling faces, while puffy white clouds float over a verdant landscape entirely at odds with the doom and gloom writ on the face of the fabulous beast in question. It is also significant that the trees and the clouds are sketched using lighter ink-strokes, in stark contrast to the solid blacks and

intricate cross-hatchings depicting the *Ram Garurer Chhana* and his dark cave. The illustration accompanying the poem clearly articulates the tug-of-war between dramatically opposing world views, which, significantly, also pit the category of “nature” against that of “civilization” and its many (cultural and intellectual) dilemmas. This poem may be Ray’s reply to those who refuse to understand or subscribe to a whimsical frame of mind that can appreciate nonsense and “twinkling laughter,” those for whom he wrote the following apologia in his original preface to *Abol Tabol*: “This book was conceived in a spirit of whimsy. It is not meant for those who do not enjoy that spirit” (qtd. in Satyajit Ray, Introduction n.pag.).

Conclusion

Sukumar Ray’s nonsense poetry and illustrations encompass a complex mixture of the East and the West and a medley of diverse discernible influences, as well as works of unprecedented originality. As Andrew Robinson also declares, “[s]uch a unified analytical and artistic mind is rarely found anywhere; in the history of Bengal it is unique to the Ray family—not even Rabindranath Tagore truly possessed it” (169). Sukumar Ray takes his inspiration from the stalwarts of classic western literary nonsense, alongside oral and printed Bengali children’s literature and Indian folk and mythological tales to create a strain of literary nonsense where the local and the domestic hold a place of pride, in a subversive act of re-forging the canon of world literature. He exemplifies, then, the creative, productive hybridity Bhabha speaks of, demonstrating “an empowering hybridity within which cultural difference may operate” (Ashcroft et al. 97). His verses and sketches remain imbued with *kheyaal rawsh*, the spirit of whimsy, of clever wordplay, of laughter and delight. They remain accessible to young and old alike and also provide keen political commentary and satire where warranted. Like the best of nonsense writers, Sukumar Ray defies classification: sometimes he presents gentle irony at instances of hybrid cultural amalgamations, at times he infuses his verse and illustrations with biting sociopolitical satire, or often simply champions laughter for the sake of laughter itself. His illustrations, in particular, comprise strikingly original works of art, ones that do not merely supplement the verses but provide rigorous meanings and puzzlements of their own, thus enhancing the nonsensical sojourns readers would make into the world of Sukumar Ray’s creations. The fabulous bestiary he creates through his nonsense verses and accompanying illustrations comprises a small portion of his remarkable oeuvre, but one that continues to delight Bengali children and adults to this day, presenting incisive commentary on hybrid forms

of existence and cross-pollinations of cultures in the colonial sociopolitical milieu of the early-twentieth-century India.

Notes

1. Hindi translations include those by Gosvami (1997), Sinha Roy (2002), Dev (2003) and Kusavaha (2006), among others.

2. In this essay, all English translations of Ray's work are taken from Sukanta Chaudhuri's 1987 translation, and all Bengali quotations are taken from the 1973 (rpt. 2011) Ananda Publishers edition.

3. Apart from Chattopadhyay's article (2010), also see Majumdar (1981), Robinson (1987), Bandyopadhyay (1991), Mitter (1994), Ghosh (2004) and Goswami (2012). In addition, there is a Special Issue of the literary journal "Prastutiparba" (1973) devoted to critical commentary on Ray's work.

4. See Tigges (1987), Heyman (2003, 2007) and Satpathy (2003) for commentary on the nature and characteristics of literary nonsense.

5. See Sumanyu Satpathy, "Lear's India and the Politics of Nonsense" (2003) for an examination of Lear's inherent racism and imperial bias as exhibited in the nonsense verses he composed while on a trip to India in 1873-74.

6. For book-length histories of Bengali children's literature, see Gangopadhyay (1961), Mitra (1967) and Dey (1978).

7. See Sarkar (1981), R. Goswami (1981), Sengupta (1981), Das Munshi (2011), as well as Upadhyay and Chaudhuri (2011) among others for examples and analyses of nineteenth-century Bengali book and periodicals illustration processes. See Robinson (170-73) for an account of Upendrakishore's experiments and innovations in half-tone printing.

8. See Chattopadhyay (2010) and Robinson (1987) for a more extensive background on the kind of intellectual and cultural environment in which Ray grew up.

9. For instance, Ray's play *Lakshmaner Shaktishel* (*Lakshman Shell-shocked*) is a comical, farcical parody of the Indian epic *Ramayana*, and incorporates within itself several literary nonsense traits.

10. Satyajit Ray, however, translated select nonsense verse and prose by Lear, Carroll, and Hilaire Belloc to Bengali in a volume entitled *Today Bandha Ghorar Dim* ("Bundle-Tied Horse's Eggs"), a phrase originally coined by Sukumar in "*Abol Tabol*" ("Dream Song").

11. The only significant exception to this is an instance in which Sukumar Ray appropriates W.W. Denslow's illustrations of the Hammer-Heads—from the 1900 first edition of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*—to accompany "*Ahladi*" ("Glee Song"). I am indebted to NaToya Faughnder for pointing out the Denslow illustrations to me. Remarkably, Ray radically transforms Baum's surly, unfriendly Hammer-Heads, borrowing only Denslow's iconic images, to re-interpret them as three brothers subject to non-stop, effervescent laughter, and advocating belly-aching laughter simply for its own sake: "*Haschhi kyano keu jane na, pachhe hashi haschhi tai*" ("We laugh because we want to laugh, and that's the reason why") (*Sukumar Sahitya Samagra* 30; *Select Nonsense* 32). The grinning visages of the original fantasy

illustrations are textually transformed to become a trio of misfit Bengali brothers, and in fact, they are considered iconic Bengali children's characters.

In this case, the illustrations precede the verse, and Ray's text is written in response to these pre-existing images, providing a clear example of a productive hybridity at work in its appropriation and re-interpretation of Denslow's (and Baum's) artistic vision. This also showcases the range of influences, both literary and artistic, that Ray was subject to, from the high literary nonsense of British writers such as Lear and Carroll, to classic American children's fantasy such as *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

12. Tigges declares, "Considered as a literary genre . . . we cannot indeed trace the origins of nonsense beyond the nineteenth century" (138).

13. *Rasas* are categories in Indian aesthetic art that correspond to specific emotional affects and provide the dominant emotional core of different works of art. Each *rasa* present in a work of art is supposed to invoke a particular form of emotion in the audience, and works of art as a whole must evoke combinations of various *rasas*. The nine *rasas* each correspond to one emotional effect: love, anger, the comic/happy, disgust, heroism, compassion, fear, wonder and peace.

14. The Bengali word "*kimbhut*," approximately meaning "grotesque," has much more derogatory connotations.

15. It is interesting to note that even as a composite creature, the animal in "*Kimbhut*" cannot stop referring to the "whole" when it comes to determining cultural and behavioral standards; for instance, it asks itself whether an elephant would ever prance about, although it sports *only* the trunk of an elephant and not any other feature. Hybridity in its turn breeds desires and fantasies of originary "wholeness," no matter how illusory they may be.

16. It eats only "*shabaner soup aar mombati*," i.e., "soap soup and tallow candles."

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