



Ufos, Aliens & The Ideological Diffusion: Paradigm Shift In Satyajit Ray's Culture - Specific Science Fantasies

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ABSTRACT

An intricate colonial schema of normative power relation prefigures heavily in the binary identification of the idea of science as sharply demarcated from the area of history in the western epistemology. This proposition also underpins the generic membrane of science fiction's futuristic agenda in the western world. The stereotype of the a-historical value-neutrality is therefore central to this literary product of western scientism. Logically then, the cult of this genre in the context of the Indian postcolony invites discursive inspection as the immediate historicity of the Indian society calls for adaptive re-configurations of the literary form's generic scope along the ethical lineage of Indian scientism. The present article scrutinizes Satyajit Ray's efforts to entwine the cultural values of our society into the larger ethical perspective of his story's elemental scientism, concomitant to the collective psyche of the indigenous populace, which assures a paradigmatic shift in the field in the Indian context.

KEYWORDS

Episteme, scientism, stereotype, paradigm, historicity, re-configuration etc.

"Arise. Heed the prophecy... Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites."
--- Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Way back in the years around the sixth decade of the last century, when the colonial hangover in the social fabric was still quite thick and the blazing consumerism of the global market did not quite bedazzle our imagination to a callously cloned mimic mediocrity of extremely oblivious cultural awareness, Satyajit Ray narrated the experience of an alien encounter amidst a dark bamboo grove somewhere in the provincial localities of suburban Bengal in his first ever literary work *Bonku Babu's Friend* (1962) and thus initiated a crucial but much awaited cultural adjustment in the collective psyche of a quintessentially Bengali adolescent reader with respect to his or her aesthetic reception of a scientific fantasy in terms which are at once historically nuanced and politically alert. As a result, it does indeed amount to a paradigmatic shift in the field of science fictions or fantasies in the Bengali literary canon as the genre, as a typical outgrowth of intense colonial enterprise in the field of knowledge as such, stands adequately redefined by Ray in the context of the changing socio-cultural matrix of Indian scientism and never been blatantly appropriated as a colonizing tool to calibrate our idea of science in the sole light of the positivist philosophy of the western world.

The literary alacrity with which Ray dribbles his phantasmagoria home and makes his somewhat singular idea of science coil into the cosy corner of his reader's mind is something brilliant in itself. The charm of this extraordinary literary acumen often mesmerizes the average reader to remain impervious to the significance of Ray's vital idea of science that has stimulated a much animated debate of late among the critics usually camped on opposite poles ranging from sanctioning to defying any import whatsoever to his notion of science as this notion bobs up as the ontological a priori for the creative scheme of his science fictions. Ray's rubrical praxis in discourse, however, encloses within its folds almost all events labelled usually as magical doubled up with events labelled usually as futuristic, hence scientific, as approved by the normative rehearsals of western epistemology traded to us by our heavy colonial legacy. Such ideational culturalism results in a confluence of perceptive binaries as those of science and history that is externally suspect of an alarming imaginative anomaly alien to the construction of any systematically developed scientific imagination. Biswajit Ray addresses

this trouble of this unique ideological configuration of science in the fundamental imagination of Ray in his book *Professor Shankur Sesh Diary (The Last Diary of Prof. Sanku)* (2013) and successfully brings into focus that Ray's scientism "does not always approve of the state regulated idea of science" (2013: 68) where the 'state' should be taken as a veritable colonial construct. Ashis Nandy criticises the insistent claim of the role of culture in Ray's formulation of a somewhat 'meta-scientific outlook' operating within the creative framework of his SFs and ponders on the phenomenon rather cynically as he tends to diagnose an element of crass populism in Ray's essential aesthetics (2011: 257). Reckless violation of the fundamental codes applicable to the specific form of art and the commercial prescription of gross sentimentality, the two most conspicuous negative regularities which characterize the so called faulty aesthetics of popular Hindi movies in India are, according to Nandy, alleged to be ironically ingrained within the textual world of Ray's popular fictions. In his remarkable article "Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide to Exquisite Murders", Nandy observes that, "[not] only do magical elements return in the guise of superscience to play an important part in his science fiction, so does the element of predictability in his crime stories" (257).

Nandy's censure continues to draw a drastic parallel between the commercial populism of the average movie market and the working aesthetic venture of Ray's SFs that makes the former comment that "Ray's identification with his scientist-hero... is at least partly powered by his self-image as a Renaissance man, straddling the disjunctive cultures of the humanities and science" (258). Once treated in doubt, the cultural scientism of Ray is immediately pointed out by Nandy as Ray's emblematic effort of self-fashioning induced by the three generation Renaissance fetish of his illustrious forefathers. He embarks upon a plausible pathology of Ray's scientism replete in the creative imagination of the latter's SFs and blurts out at length in the following vein:

In popular fiction, however, his commitment to the worldview of science is romanticized. Specially in his science fiction, the events on which he builds his stories often reveal an openness to experiences (such as paranormality and extra-sensory perceptions of various kinds) that might be taboo to the [film maker] Ray. Ideologically, he may be more closed in his popular works, methodologically he is much less encumbered. Even a casual reader quickly finds out that Ray is not a perfectionist in his popular writings: he is less careful about his workman-

ship and his imagination is less controlled. (258)

However inadvertent that critical laceration might be on Nandy's part, any watchful reading of his critique, and consequent disapproval, of Ray's scientism unearths perhaps the most crucial cue to the culturally insightful author's single treatment of the idea of science. Nandy emphasizes an attitudinal 'openness' to experiences traceable in Ray's idea of science and that openness owes a lot more than what usually meets the eye to the developing idea of science in Indian history in and around the time when Ray was fashioning out his science fictions for the young generation of Bengali readers living with the social awareness of their unique spatio-temporal reality. Ray's culturally tempered presentation of science in his science fantasies, or more appropriately in his speculative fictions, are often put into comparison to the same literary praxis of his father Sukumar Ray or that of his grandfather Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury. Nandy relates the heavy Renaissance fervour of the latter two to the psychological grooming of Ray as even a child in somewhat a caustically blasé manner (258) and Biswajit Ray attempts to locate the immediate legacy of Satyajit Ray as a writer of SFs in the perspective of his father and grandfather respectively being the eminent literary men in the genre of popular science in the very early part of the 20th century (Ray, 2013: 59).

It is wise to assume that the immediate fallout of a genealogical attempt in studying the scientism of Ray with an eye to determine it instantaneously and on a much larger scale as an offshoot of a Renaissance mindset like that of Sukumar or Upendrakishore does not go scot-free of the charge of overt and blatant generalization. Sukumar was an academically trained student in the schools of western science, procured his degree from the British colleges and wrote with a frank and free preference of interest to the archive of western scientism though he had no less concern for the nationalist sentiment of his contemporary Bengali society of the pre-independence days. In the three-volume hardbound Sukumar Sahitya Samagra (Complete Works of Sukumar Ray), although one will surely get bowled over by the astounding vivacity and range of Sukumar's interests and imagination also will not perhaps miss in his literary corpus the sheer absence of any reference to the persons and ideas linked to the heritage of Indian scientific thoughts down from its dim days of antiquarian past. Sukumar's preferential fulcrum always inclined heavily to the Eurocentric ideas of anything scientific as such and the issues of culture were neatly differentiated from his discussion of that 'scientific', be that in the form of a fictional account of a scientific invention or that of a scientist's (European indeed) biography. But the table turns almost a full circle, and perhaps a little oddly enough, if we try to read the essentially cultural primer of Satyajit's scientism jumping a generation back in linkage to the historically nuanced scientism of his grandfather Mr. Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury. Upendrakishore was a fine product of the so called 19th century Bengali Renaissance that resulted from the complete colonization of Bengal both administratively and educationally and yet a strong awareness and obligation to his historical locale in fashioning his exquisite tales of popular science is unmistakably mapped out in him. In the enlightening write-up on the paleontological creatures of extreme antiquity titled *Sekaler Katha* (Tales of the Days Gone By), published in the form of a monograph in the year 1903, he offers a splendid literary excursion of the Jurassic and the Triassic worlds to his young readers and finishes the fascinating tale with a subtle but sure clue to the geographical situatedness of some of these creatures and events in the very localized pre-historical past of India. The ploy at once attracts the attention of an Indian, in this case Bengali, reader and serves to qualify the claim of literary verisimilitude to an authentic degree of scientific imagination and cultural intimacy. Upendrakishore procures, if we are allowed to quote Coleridge verbatim in this instance, for these creatures of scientific imagination their needed "semblance of truth" (Jackson, 1985: 314) in absolute cultural terms by locating their existence on the very soil of Indian antiquity when he mentions the presence of paleontological species like the *Tigodons*

and *Shivatheriums* in the Sivalik ranges near Dehradun in India (Chowdhury, 2013: 189).

The interlacing of culture with science, be that for the sake of guaranteeing a justifiable historical locale to his literary tales of science or else to understand and represent the very idea of science in unsmudged ethico-moral terms, is certainly an awareness then that Satyajit incurs from his family line especially more from the psycho-cultural adjustments of Upendrakishore than from the Eurocentric appropriations of his father Sukumar. Nandy is ruthless in locating the presence of this ethical element in the scientism of Ray and ascribes the origin of the same in the long standing tradition of British, therefore colonial, culture of novel writing. For Nandy, the effort is nothing but appropriation of the western tradition and he reads Ray, the writer of popular science fictions, more as a replicator of the colonial monolith of Baconian "inductionism and empiricism" (2011: 256). Despite, however, the disapproval of Nandy, the ontology of this entwined awareness remains singularly crucial in understanding Ray's science fictions if we try to study that awareness in relation to the history of science in India. Dhruv Raina offers a significant proposition on the ethico-moral gravitas of scientific thoughts in India down the ages and refers to the post-positivist repositioning of the archive of ancient body of knowledge in his article "Scientism and Romanticism" to facilitate a historical understanding of the idea elaborately enough (Raina, 2011: 19 – 48). "In studies on the history of science and technology in India", writes Raina, "the historiographic frames are structured by a multitude of factors, such as the nature of the interaction between traditional forms of knowledge and new knowledge" (19). The historiographic urgency and the cultural impetus behind such relocation of the philosophy of science in the essentially localized context of the Indian society are further clarified by Raina in more economic terms in the following statement:

Further, epistemological approaches to the study of the sciences in the developing countries have had to break with the standard or Big Picture of the history of science and technology...An epistemological view of the sciences in the developing countries may be grounded in a socio-economic theory of marginalization. An investigation of science, technology, and development in India has frequently been undertaken within the frames of the politics of knowledge, centre and periphery, and metropolis and province. The necessity for such a theory resides in both global and local contexts of science and politics. (20)

Once resolved that in India the "seeds of a modern indigenous scientific tradition were first sown in Bengal" (24) during the late 19th century, the Bengali psyche witnessed the dovetailing of both the Eurocentric and the revivalist projects of scientific thoughts in the shaping of the nation's consciousness in the following decades of its self expression which matured into the hugely complex idea of Indian modernity. The revivalist tract of cultural scientism traces back its origin in the writings of another great man of the philosophy of science – Acharya B. N. Seal – who relentlessly and impeccably posits a logical communication between the Indian philosophical tradition and the positivist philosophy of science in praxis in his astounding book *The Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus*, first published from London in 1915. Seal embarks upon the understanding of the Nyaya logic and "represented it in the idiom of inductivist philosophy of science" (Raina, 2011: 27). V. Shekhawat in his article "Emergence of a New Paradigm and the Onset of Sastra Phase" approaches this issue of locating the idea of science in the Indian philosophical tradition and offers an interesting discursive opportunity in placing the idea of indigenous 'sastra' as a signifier of the 'science', saving the latter's incumbent political connotation of being loaded with hegemonic hangover of the western epistemology (Shekhawat, 2007: 49). Shekhawat insists on the recognition of the "heterogeneity of cognitive pursuit" (106) elsewhere in the book and insists on the philosophical cognition of the idea of science in the cited article beyond the paradigm of the western epistemology:

Indeed, if *sastra* represents the acme of Indian cognitive systemization, then what is of greatest historical significance is the study of the conditions under which this concept originated and was fashioned more and more thoroughly. *Sastra* represents the Indian conception of science, and it is during the study, pursuit and growth of *sastras* that knowledge was reclassified and re-systematized. Indeed, proper rational construction of history of Indian sciences would be impossible without giving due regard to the period in which this concept was fashioned and perfected [c. 200 BCE] (49)

The unavoidable logical outcome of such a contested legacy of discursive practice in theorizing a culturally conducive idea of science entwines the spatio-temporal configuration adapted to the required ethical standardization of the much professed value-neutrality of science in the local context. Nandy does exactly detect the urgency of such a historical necessity in his article "Defiance and Conformity in Science: The World of Jagadis Chandra Bose" and observes that in the individual psyche of the great Indian scientist, on whom the article is essayed, the "cultural psychology of scientific creativity also allows one to probe the creativity of individual scientists as link between cultural and individual needs" (2004: 18). The reconciliation of the theoretical components of positivist thought and the elements of Indian historicity are central in the literary approaches to explore the full scopes of popular science writings in India as one has to take into account the anxieties and confusions of such a project at large which an Indian writer trying hands in the genre of SFs is inevitably fated with. Nandy further explores the historical limitation of the value-neutral scientific thoughts in the same article when he warns his readers that,

Scientific creativity, like any other form of human creativity, assumes the ability to use one's less accessible self in such a way that the primordial becomes meaningful to the community and the individual scientist. Out of this ability comes not only the creative scientist's sense of being driven, but also his distinctive approach to concepts, relationships, and operations, the order that he imposes on his data, and the limits he sets on his insights. The scientific community prescribes where and when professional assessments begin, but it can never fully control what at any point of time is accepted as objective, impersonal, and formal scientific knowledge. (2004: 86-87)

The measure to "control" the unbridled implementation of scientific exegesis in the form of hyper-technologically materialistic enterprises of western futurism in an imperially consumerist manner does call for an ethical re-standardization of the ideas that eventually give birth to the socially sanctioned initiative of cultural scientism duly put in vogue by the "Needham project" (Habib and Raina, 2001: 281). The ethical message on which almost the whole oeuvre of Ray's SFs conclude are briskly put to criticism by Nandy, and he labels Ray's psychic bent as a prototypical derivative of the Eurocentric scientism when he derides the author as a tame and "uncritical believer in the emancipator and educative role of Enlightenment values" (Nandy, 2011: 260). The placement of the hegemonic a-historicity of western science against the ethical historicity of cultural values, as that is put into praxis in the SFs of Ray much to the critical discomfort of Nandy, may be shielded by Habib and Raina's focus on the changing scenario of scientism in the whole world since the middle of the last century as they weigh the situation elaborately enough in their article "The Missing Picture: The Non- emergence of a Needhamian History of Sciences in India":

By the end of, what Hobsbawm [...] calls, 'the Age of Catastrophe', a number of scientists and scientists-turned-historians of science attempted to project science as a cultural activity that enjoined humanity – this moral vision was to fill the vacuum left by the two wars. From Sartre [...] to Bernal and Needham an attempt was underway to redefine humanism, wherein science would provide a cultural affirmative for the West ruined by two world wars. This 'moral' vision of science was to strike a sympathetic chord within the nebulous

scientific communities of newly independent nations like India where the bonds between state and science were mutually reinforcing...." (2001: 283)

Many of the pieces of the puzzle of Ray's cultural scientism that immediately calls into action a thoroughbred historico-philosophical reading fall into places if Ray's treatment of science is stripped of the usual 'overdeterministic' metaphors of the western epistemology which finds a politically insinuated binary proposition in the 'underdeterministic' ideation of history and culture and ethics thereof (Fuller, 2001: 121). Consequently, when Ray comes to write his SFs by the sixth decade of the last century exclusively for the children of Bengal the general vision of science with both its utopian and dystopian possibilities must have been very open to him as it might logically be inferred from his well trained exposure to the cultural on-goings and shifts in the western societies. His assured awareness of the historical evolution of the idea of science was not perhaps absolutely novel and unique for his generation, but his cultural adjustment of the 'scientific' put into the praxis of his SFs is certainly sentient with that deep knowledge of the historical contextuality. During Bengal's 19th c. colonial interface the power of the West in the idea of science asserting itself in the social fabric of Bengal was sacrosanct until it was read and relocated historically in the early part of the 20th c. by such thinkers like P. C. Ray or B. N. Seal who worked their way into an Indian lineage of scientific thoughts parallel to that of the prevalent hegemony enjoyed by the western episteme. Consequent to this colonial system of knowledge, the rubric of Bengali science fiction initially was habituated to re-create this hegemony primarily into the newly introduced generic space. Ray, while writing almost exclusively for the Bengali children of the post-independence era, wrote within the cultural matrix of this inevitable postcolonial society and largely adapted the genre of SF into the form of science fantasies that did not appropriate the generic methodology of such writings usually extant in the west. Ray's long honed awareness of a strong cultural legacy and his conviction in the ethical parameters of Indian civilization also extend themselves to shape his open ended attitude to the fundamental scientism working in the collective imagination of a Bengali child. He deliberately selects to pave a culturally loaded Indian path in his attempts to narrate speculative fictions of scientific overtone. The challenge is synchronized with the socio-cultural milieu of his young readers effectively enough who found themselves by the 60's of the last century, perhaps a bit inadvertently but albeit inescapably, in the postcolonial crossroads of two cultures – the Indian and the Western - corroborating respectively to the colonized and the colonial. As a result, the speculative products of high western scientism like the UFOs, aliens, the humanoids or androids meet the average Bengali people in the most ordinary situations of mundane life in the SFs of Ray as uneventfully as that of the nature's course of a day passing into night. The cultural construct that he foregrounds in the narratives have an inexorable historical authenticity to make them appear as less falsifiable and more and more plausible in nature, context and ethical reach. The localization of the ideas contribute to the adaptive authenticity of these tales of Ray the onus of which unavoidably falls not on the western specificity of the genre but on the assimilative re-positioning of the 'glocal' (global + local) open-endedness of the same that might be traced in the long track of evolution of scientific thoughts in India as well as in the relatively young generic history of the Indian science fictions.

In the very first literary venture of Ray to fabricate a fiction of science on alien encounters, *Bonku Babu's Friend* (1962), and the other culturally loaded alien-story of *The Maths Teacher*, *Mr. Pink and Tipu* (1982), the author reveals his proposition of cultural scientism in the most effortlessly literary style, which is non-metaphorical and therefore direct and quintessentially authentic to the experiences of inhabitants of the provincial towns of the Indian postcolony. His reading of the power politics embedded within the textual carnival of western science fictions is impeccable when he mocks the mimic attitude of a 'cultural amphibian's' (Said, as quoted in Raina, 2011: 25)

perceptions over the possibility of encountering a UFO in the rural setting of Bengal in Bonku Babu's Friend thus:

Bonku Babu repeated his words, his tone still gentle: 'Suppose someone from a different planet came here?'

As was his wont, Bhairav Chakravarty slapped Bonku Babu's back loudly and rudely, grinned and said, 'Bravo! What a thing to say! Where is a creature from another planet going to land? Not Moscow, not London, not New York, not even Calcutta, but here? In Kankurgachhi? You do think Big, don't you?' (Majumdar, 2012: 3)

The fictional identity of an alien, a Martian or a UFO is typified by the futuristic colonial version of western science and therefore the possibility of such an encounter on the human part must be a privilege for the western people only. This restrictive attitude is a cultural fetish with far reaching implications to construct distorted notions of anything non-western as stereotyped by the sheer absence of science. The hegemonic fetish of this complementary interdependence of colonialism and science is subtly indicated by Ray in a short fiction apparently not dealing with science and yet which puts out a dialogic discourse on the configuration of the set of binaries like the logic (science) / mystery (cultural), west / non-west or the British / Indian etc in the common psyche. In the story *The Hunting Lodge of Dhumalgarh* (1984), one of the characters pass a seemingly naive comment which in due course breaks the fifth wall to the critics of culture with a considerable effectiveness. Although the story is modelled on one of Ray's favourite topics, the supernatural air affected by ghosts and wraiths, it betrays a delicate mindset in Ray all alert to the colonial gaze in which India is often represented to the western readership. Pratapnarayan, the power hungry prince faulty of the surreptitious murder of his own elder brother in the story offers an acerbic comment on this colonial gaze and blurts out in contempt,

'Macardy thinks that India is a store house of ghosts and spirits. I could not convince him otherwise. The Sahib used to assume every abandoned house as a haunted one. It was set deep in his imagination.' (Ray, 2009: 417)

This colonial gaze is inextricably intertwined with the generic limitations of SFs whose origin is concomitant with and complicit to the fundamental project of the west-oriented colonial hegemony. John Reider scrutinizes this complicity of the genre richly in his fascinating book *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* and lights up the issue with the following logic:

Emergent English language science fiction articulates the distribution of knowledge and power at a certain moment of colonialism's history. If the Victorian vogue for adventure fiction in general seems to ride the rising tide of imperial expansion, particularly into Africa and the Pacific, the increasing popularity of journeys into outer space or under the ground in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries probably reflects the near exhaustion of the actual unexplored areas of the globe – the disappearance of the white spaces on the map, to invoke a famous anecdote of Conrad's." (2008: 4)

The most critical twist in Ray's *Bonku Babu's Friend*, is perhaps stored in the dual employment of the cultural signification of this last cited phrase – "unexplored areas of the globe" – as the representative mindset of the common Indian mimic mediocrity glossed with colonial knowledge does not find any logic even in the utter theoretical probability of an alien landing in a waste and retrograde land as that of India, which is not only devoid of any glamour of the metropolitan west but also is marginalized and dark. The Bengali phrase "pora desh", translated as "God-forsaken place" by Gopa Majumdar (2012: 3), is a qualifier to describe the inferior status of India in the hierarchy of power offered and attested by the western epistemology that successfully replicates the colonial binary of the civilized / savage construct in the story. All the characters

present in the story are unaware of this inherent politics ingrained in their collective psyche, save that of the protagonist. Therefore the rich host of the weekly hangout, lawyer Sripati Majumdar, whose profession is a deliberate indication of his Eurocentric outlook and has a touch of colonial superiority, might easily conclude with authority and consensus in the story that the aliens must not be fools to come to any insignificant rural part of Bengal and they must be "sahibs, and they will land in some western country, where all the sahibs live" (3). The helplessly tame and patient Bonku Babu, the village school-teacher of Kankurgachhi, never found words to reason with the dominant Sripati Babu or his cronies who were the regular leg pullers of the former in these weekly meetings. It was almost a custom with Bonku Babu to leave these meetings dumbfounded following many sarcastic gibes and humiliating jeers and the day on which the events of the story were shaping up was also no exception to this routine. But Bonku Babu did not support the opinion of the meeting regarding the sole possibility of an alien encounter only in some foreign and remote metropolitan city of his imagination and kept thinking of the phenomenon of the moving point of light of the very evening in the northern sky on his way back to home. The phenomenon of the mysterious light triggered off the whole discussion on the UFOs and the aliens. En route to a short cut through the bamboo grove of Poncha Ghosh in the pitch-black darkness of the night, goose bumps broke out on Bonku Babu's body as he involuntarily bumps into a UFO and an alien amidst the small pond at the centre of the grove. What follows next is narrated with Ray's usual literary alacrity and once over with the initial awe and aura of the earthling and the alien break into a communication which is of the most crucial import for our discussion of Ray and his cultural scientism in context. The alien is, marking a paradigm shift in the treatment of such fictional bodies in the colonial projects of western SFs, not inimical to Bonku Babu and hits up a working mentor-pupil relationship with the latter almost in no time. After a short while, he leaves with a personal advice to Bonku Babu leaving him both mesmerized and elated at once. Ang, the alien that represents a version of not only technologically but also ethically superior civilization in the story, echoes the immaculate humanism of Tagore that is philosophically value loaded and culturally oriented around the age old wisdom of the Indian Vedantas. Ethical insinuation prefigures in Tagore's poem "Nyay Danda" that reads "Anyay je kore ar anyay je sohe/ Taba ghrina jeno tare trinasama dohe" [He who does ill and he who tolerates ill/ Let them both burn like weeds in your wrath] (Tagore, 2000: 442). The same insinuating note erupts out of the prophetic suggestion made by the alien to Bonku Babu:

Look, I have been watching you. And I have examined your arms and legs. You belong to a much inferior species. There is no doubt about that. However, as human beings go, you are not too bad. I mean, you are a good man. But you have a major fault. You are much too meek and mild. That is why you have made so little progress in life. You must always speak up against injustice, and protest if anyone hurts and insults you without provocation. To take it quietly is wrong, not just for man, but for any creature anywhere. (Majumdar, 7)

The rest is a logical outcome of the literary design as Bonku Babu is transformed into a spirited man with his wits and stands against all the cronies of Sripati Babu with a harmless but hilarious retaliation. The alchemization of the common man in Bonku Babu is definitely a cue to Ray's secret criticism of the members of the Bengali community who are often charged with the symptoms of mental sloth and moral laxity. A clandestine intimation to take over a revolutionary stand against all situational odds underpins the affable and comic hit back of Bonku Babu. But what is more noteworthy is the alien's attempted pathology of not only the spatio-temporally bound social situation of a timid Bengali man like Bonku Babu, but his more universal observation of the existential ethical crisis and its salvage on the cultural level of both the personal and the collective psyche of any race of beings whatsoever. The ethical condition pressed hard in the utterance of

the scientifically superior alien is less Darwinian but more philosophical in essence when he blurts out unequivocally that to take any injustice quietly "is wrong, not just for man, but for any creature anywhere."

This is exactly where Satyajit Ray finds his cautious self-fashioning tales of scientific fantasies for his young readers fastened to their unique cultural location of a postcolonial social space by the 60's of the 20th century in the juvenile republic of India only a few years after its hard earned freedom from British rule back in 1947. Ray, in fact, took to the writing of science fantasies keeping an alert eye upon his readership satiated in this complex urban and semi-urban social dynamics of a historically suffering Bengal desperately struggling to cope up with the toddling economy of a nation that has just won its freedom from a long drawn colonial rule at the cost of riots, refugees and reckless political instabilities. As it falls out, the socio-historical situatedness of his characters and events narrated in the science fantasies were conceived in such a way as to contentedly creating scopes of cultural identifications with the social situations of his readers and thus working up the ambience of a veritable social narrative for the text that candidly makes room for may be the rudimentary but definitely fundamental scientism of the mundane and yet traditional Bengali life quite understandably and effortlessly. Thus the textual experiences of the characters in the fictive spheres are happily shared by the real life experiences of the children for whom these are been narrated which, in turn, contribute to the historical credibility of the characters in the texts. Textual credibility relies on the historicity of Ray's scientism, which might be at times reaching out to limits to raise questions against the very epistemology of science taught to us by the western system of knowledge, and finds its ontological foundation in that pre-colonial historical past in a manner that has much to do even with the west's re-examinations of its so called scientific superiority in the dystopian years following the great wars of the last century. Therefore, Ray's science fantasies do not anymore remain complicit to the epistemic pre-eminence of the western scientific thoughts at the expense of the gross stereotyping of non-western ideas of science, but engages with debates of real merit on the cultural cognition of the idea of science more significantly on the onto-cultural level. Ray does not tend to limit the idea of science to the mere application of certain law-governed methodologies imbibed and sanctioned by the western epistemology so far, but goads us to traverse newer paths, breaks the barriers of overdeterministic dogmas and tends to implant the spirit of enquiry into such realms and phenomena which are usually identified as areas of study pigeonholed by the sheer absence of science. The recognition of a value-oriented discursive space for science is the driving force of Ray's science fictions and his cultural scientism might well be read as an attempt to ascribe to science "the quality of a cultural universal" (Cunningham and Williams, 1993: 411).

The ethical input preached at the end of Bonku Babu's Friend, might well have a Renaissance smack of manifest humanistic ardour as it is assumed by Nandy's suspicion of "the integrative capacities at the disposal of his self" (Nandy, 2011: 260) in Ray, but that does not reduce the scope of the author's cultural reading of Indian scientism to a single monolithic structure. Renaissance was not a homogenous idea even to Ray's grandfather Upendrakishore in whom we have already traced a certain culture consciousness contributing to the formation of the Indian psyche. Upendrakishore, despite being enlightened in the colonial legacy of utter Renaissance thought in the second half of the 19th century, was openly critical of the anthropocentric project of humanism that formulated its bedrock of being. He concludes the monograph Sekaler Katha with the following words that critiques the sacrosanct hegemony of western anthropocentric ideology and leaves the text open ended with possibilities favourable to the culturally tolerant imaginative mind of an Indian reader:

A lot remains untold of the animals of the days gone by. You will grow up and will read of them. We sometimes think that

the world was perhaps created only for us. I hope that this misunderstanding is now going to be resolved. Bubbles brew up and then disappear in the same water. Since its creation until now, all life forms are coming to being and are ceasing to be some day in this pattern. All relishes it for a day and then disappear in days. Now, what right do we the human beings have to claim that we have come to stay for some more days? (2013: 191)

For Ray, as it might be worked out of his exquisite science fictions with little efforts, the conjunction of the 'scientific' with the 'cultural' within the historical dynamics of the Indian society definitely has an anxiety embedded in its substratum of self-fashioning motive. The event of Renaissance is often criticised for professing a straight jacketing syncretic view of human endeavours to the extent of appropriating the given power structure of the imperial order and for establishing a hegemonic position to the European scientism as sacrosanct and value-neutral that finds in the non-European nations its stereotype of the 'other' characterized with the absence of science. Science and culture, more importantly its ethical values, are well demarcated in the western positivist thought process which is induced with the political ideology of Renaissance teachings. But this indictment of binary standards is not prevalent in the social fabric of the Indian knowledge system where knowledge, be it scientific or cultural, always is perceived not necessarily as power but as a mode of achieving emancipatory wisdom rich with the ethical credence of the philosophical sublime. In his fascinating study on Bnkimchandra Chattopadhyay's philosophical orientation in "The Moment of Departure: Culture and Power in the Thought of Bankimchandra" Partha Chatterjee discusses the fundamental premise of the Sankhya system of knowledge in the Indian tradition and opines that the Sankhya philosophers did "recognize the need for gaining a knowledge of the world", but "the goal of knowledge was salvation", and not power, for them (Chatterjee, 2012: 57). It is on this note of understanding the "knowledge of the world", albeit the materialistic one and therefore scientific, that Ray embarks upon his literary project of writing science fictions for the Bengali juvenilia and could never take his eyes off the immediate ethical requirement of his readers that is indispensable on their part for a proper appreciation of this vigorously colonial genre relocated adequately to fit into their strictly localized conditions. His narratives are indeed less technographic to appropriate the praxis of western SF but more ethnographic to adapt to the very fabric of culture that he writes within and writes for.

Notes:

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The quote at the beginning of the article is taken from p.20 of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's celebrated novel **The River Between**. The source is cited below.

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