



*postScriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies*

Online – Open Access – Peer Reviewed ISSN: 2456-7507

postscriptum.co.in

Volume II Number i (January 2017)

Nag, Sourav K. "Decolonising the Eerie: ..." pp. 41-50

## **Decolonising the Eerie: Satyajit's *Bhooter Raja* (the King of Ghosts) in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1969)**

**Sourav Kumar Nag**

Assistant Professor in English, Onda Thana Mahavidyalaya, Bankura

The author is an assistant professor of English at Onda Thana Mahavidyalaya. He has published research articles in various national and international journals. His preferred literary areas include African literature, Literary Theory and Indian English Literature. At present, he is working on his PhD on Ngugi Wa Thiong'o.

### **Abstract**

This paper is a critical investigation of the socio-political situation of the Indianised spectral king (*Bhooter Raja*) in Satyajit Ray's *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1969) and also of Ray's handling of the marginalised in the movie. The movie is read as an allegory of postcolonial struggle told from a regional perspective. Ray's portrayal of the *Bhooter Raja* (The king of ghosts) is typically Indianised. He deliberately deviates from the colonial tradition of Gothic fiction and customised Upendrakishore's tale as a postcolonial narrative. This paper focuses on Ray's vision of regional postcolonialism.

### **Keywords**

ghost, eerie, postcolonial, decolonisation, subaltern

I cannot help being nostalgic sitting on my desk to write on Satyajit Ray's adaptation of *Goopy Gayne Bagha Bayne* (1969). I remember how I gaped to watch the movie the first time on Doordarsan. Not being acquainted with *Bhooter Raja* (The king of ghosts) before, I got startled to see the shiny black shadow with flashing electric bulbs around and hearing his reverberated nasal chant of three blessings. I happened to come across the movie on YouTube recently that held me in suspension as I was thinking to define the place of the ghost in the corpus of colonial and postcolonial Bengali literature. As different sources suggest, Satyajit Ray read the story when he was only eight. Upendrakishore's tale was written in colonial India long ago. Mr. Roy translated it into a movie in 1961. A quick bite at the original tale augmented my confusion. Upendrakishore had very little to say about the countenance of the *Bhooter Raja* (The King of Ghosts); instead he detailed a band of ghosts whose 'eyes were burning like brick field and teeth were as huge as radish.' These ghosts in the story pleaded Goopy and Bagha to sing at the marriage ceremony of their prince. Even the proverbial three blessing were not given by the *Bhooter Raja* (the King of Ghosts) but by his courtiers! But in Ray's movie the sweeping train of ghosts is absent. Instead, Ray introduces a band of silhouetted psychedelic dancers representing different cultural identities. Only the king is visible against a bleak background. More surprisingly his appearance is purely an invention of the film maker since the original story does not provide it. The so-called king of ghosts seems to have lost his regality though there is no lack of generosity and abundance. Ray's portrayal of the King of Ghosts raises some crucial questions: does he really belong to the royal (Bourgeois) class, as the salutation 'Raja' (King) implies or is he just an outcast like Goopy and Bagha, as he is geographically posited in the margin of rurality?

Incidentally, Ray's movie is in no way explicitly nationalist. Unlike his other two classics namely *Jalsaghar* (1958) and *Satranjj Ke Khiladi* (1977), does not manifest any overt nationalist struggle. Nevertheless, *Goopy Gayne Bagha Bayne* (1969) does connect itself to the contemporary colonial culture of Bengal and intelligently counters the colonial hegemony in a covert and allegorical way. Though Ray has taken the cue from his grandfather, he has significantly customised the story. *Bhooter Raja* (The king of ghosts) and the scene of Goopy Bagha's meeting with the band of ghosts are purely remade by Ray. In his ingenuous construction of *Bhooter Raja* (The king of ghosts) and the eerie dance of a band of ghosts Ray deliberately underpins the western literary tradition of Gothic fiction. His cinematic construction of the scene is purely Indian or more precisely regional.

Upendrakishore's story was first published in *Sandesh* (a Bengali magazine for children) in 1915, with illustrations by the writer himself. Ray read the story at the age of eight and re-read it in the 1960s when he revived *Sandesh* in 1961 (Robinson 183). He decided to film it. His son Sandip, then about eight, also urged Ray to adopt the story on screen and provide something substantial for the children of Bengal. Ray got a chance to unleash the long-cherished desire to revive his own childhood fancies. He wrote the screen play and put sundry self-composed musical numbers in it. There was another temptation behind the decision. It was the irresistible beckoning of Rajasthan, the desert state of Western India. Ray was acquainted with Rajputana (now Rajasthan) in *Raj Kahini* (1905) by Abanindranath Tagore. Ray was tempted to relive his childhood love of chivalry, adventure and princely exploits:

‘The tales were about real kings and real princes,’ Ray wrote in a foreword to Raghubir Singh's outstanding book of photographs of ‘India's enchanted land’, ‘but so filled were they with the stuff of romance and chivalry that they didn't seem real. We read of a land of desert and forest and mountain fortresses; of marble palaces rising out of lakes like gem studded lotuses; of brave Hindu warriors on faithful, fearless steeds charging into battle against invaders; and of their womenfolk who threw themselves into the flames rather than be snatched away as prizes by alien conquerors’. (Robinson 183-4)

It was not a comfortable journey for Ray to make arrangements for the necessary financial support for the movie. After R.D. Bansal who had produced Ray's *Mahanagar* (1963), *Charulata* (1964), *Kapurush-o-Mahapurush* (1965) and *Nayak* (1966) failed to find confidence in the musical project, Ray witnessed creative dejection for time being until in 1967 Nepal and Asim Dutta, producer-distributors assented. But it was not enough to shoot the movie in colour. It was decided that the movie would be shot in monochrome except the last scene in which the Goopy and Bagha won the two beautiful princesses.

Unlike the imperialist Gothic fiction of the West, Bengali horror literature borders on the purely ethnic and typically rural culture of colonial Bengal. Bengali folk tales abound in ghosts. In these tales written in colonial and postcolonial Bengal, ghosts are constructed as mere mischief makers that throw stones at noon and frighten the children. There is a Bengali proverb: ‘*Bhorthi dupur bela bhute mare dela*’ (ghosts throw stones at noontide). Till today

Bengali mothers are often heard chanting the familiar lore to put their babies to sleep or to feed them. Very surprisingly, the ghosts in pre-colonial Bengal such as ‘Chorachunni’, ‘Mechho Bhoot’, ‘Mamdo Bhut’, ‘Gechho Bhoot’, and ‘Bramhadaitya’ among others are represented as sickly beings often occupying abandoned trees. They are poor victims to malnutrition and poverty. They are the living emblems of human suffering. Unlike the Western devils and ghosts occupying large palaces and abandoned luxuries, the ghosts in Bengal’s culture represent the marginalized. The stories in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder’s *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Grandmother’s Bag of Tales) such as ‘*Lalkamal Nilkamal*’ (‘Red and Blue Lotus’), and ‘*Sat Bhai Champa*’ (‘Seven Brothers and Champa’) among many others, *Kunjo Ar Bhut* (The Hunchbacked and Bhut), *Dustu Danob* (Naughty Devil), *Jela ar Saat Bhut* (The Fisherman and Ghost), *Bhut Ar Ghonto* (Ghost and Ghonto), *Bhuter Galpo* (The Story of Ghost) in Upendrakishor’s *Galpomala*, Hemendra Kumar Roy’s *Jader Naame Sabai Bhoj Paay* (‘Names Feared By All’), *Manusher Gondho Paaun* (‘I Can Smell Human Flesh’) and *Sandhyar Pore Sabdhan* (‘Beware After Nightfall’), Rajshekhar Basu’s “Bhushundir Mathe,” and Rabindranath Tagore’s “Konkal”, “Monihara” among many others portray typical Bengali ‘Bhut’ (Ghosts). But surprisingly the ghosts in all these stories mentioned above are deprived of sustenance. They significantly deviate from the westernization of the supernatural. In the British literature, the depiction of the ghosts is mere concretization of the Evil-the biblical account of Satanism. In the Western literary culture, the genre known as Gothic literature is a curious investigation of the aberrant. The Westernised ghosts are typified with zeal to confront human behaviour in revealing ways in order to oppose the Good. The conflict between Good and Evil in European culture is well represented by the demons, devils, vampires, and their allies. The genre known as Gothic Literature is a post-Renaissance product that cleverly adopted the medieval tales. Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) was an announced fiction on literature of improbability and modern probability. The ghosts in the normative stories often occupy abandoned castles situated in a macabre space away from the human habitation. These castles are visited by courageous heroes and heroines in search of aberrant romance. Lizeth Paravisini-Gebert in “Colonial and postcolonial Gothic: the Caribbean” observes that the genre namely Gothic Literature was a result of colonial anxieties. The colonial Gothic tales such as Smith’s “The Story of Henrietta,” Maria Edgeworth’s “Belinda” (1801) and “The Grateful Negro” (1804), and Thomas Campbell’s “The Pleasures of Hope” (1799) mirror ‘a growing fear in British society around 1800 of the consequences of the nation’s exposure to colonial societies, nonwhite races, non-Christian belief systems, and the moral evils of slavery’ (230). Another colonial

fear to be mentioned was the fear of interracial sexuality well discussed in Edward Long “Reflections . . . Upon the Negro Cause” (1772). If the Gothic was a typical Western product borne out of colonial anxieties, the ghost stories written in colonial Bengal sprouted from the deep suppressed longing for liberty and the fear of the colonial suffering. Most of the ghosts are dyed in typical Bengali culture predominant during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In “Monihara” (“The Lost Jewel”) Tagore narrates the story of Phani Bhushan Saha, an educated, enlightened businessman and his wife Mani Malika and their mysterious death. The ghost of Mani Malika reportedly haunted their dilapidated mansion wearing her gold jewellery. Tagore again seems to border on the Hindu doctrines of Karma and after life suffering due to the post-death retention of the lust for the mundane. It is evident that the ghosts in Bengali literature are tied to the cycle of life and death. The question of Satanic Evil is far off. It is interesting to note that in his ghost stories, the ghosts are not like the familiar marginalized spirits; they are rather sophisticated. The ghosts of Mani Malika in “Monihara” or the illusory Persian woman in “The hungry Stones” are well decorated with ornament. It is also notable that Tagore’s ghosts are feudalistic. They belong to the bourgeoisie class. The uses of mammoth palaces, royal chambers and alienated locale in the stories underline the feudalistic outlook.

The original story of Goopy and Bagha was written by Upendrakishore during the first decade of the 1920s. He framed the story as a simple narrative of two men on exile and their miraculous experiences. But Ray’s cinematic adaptation added new facets to the story. In the opening scene of the movie the audience is informed that Goopy is an impassioned singer though he wants the necessary talent for the art. Eventually, the villagers wanted to get rid of the song-full discordance of Goopy. They advised him to go straight to the king and try his luck by singing to him. Accordingly, Goopy visited the royal place and started singing sitting on a low wall just below the king’s window. The king frenzied with Goopy’s unmusical singing smashed his ‘tanpura’ and banished him for the land. Evidently, Goopy Bagha’s ambition for their music career falls to pieces. They were banished from the kingdom. Thus, on exile they went out of their native land and took shelter under some abandoned forest. However, the banishment failed to dishearten them. They failed to delight men with their singing and drumming but their unmusical harmony pleased *Bhooter Raja* (The king of ghosts) residing in the forest. Interestingly in the original story Upendrakishore described a band of horrible ghosts to be pleased with Goopy and Bagha and invited them to sing on the marriage ceremony of their prince. He detailed the ghosts as black shadows

wearing teeth like radish and eyes as red as brick-kiln. Evidently Upendrakishore attempted to revise the clichéd portrayal of ghosts in the Bengali literature. But Satyajit Ray significantly deviated from the traditional portrayal of the supernatural and treated it in comic vein in the movie. Goopy and Bagha's unmusical singing and drumming eventually pleased *Bhooter Raja* (The king of ghosts) who spangled and twinkling apparition stupefied the dynamic duo. It is interesting to note that the song that failed to please the king delighted the king of ghosts. The king of ghosts bestowed three boons on the two incompetent musicians. Interestingly, the first boon given to them is of enthralling singing ability. With the first boon, they captivated many kings later on. Probably, Ray intended a postcolonial reading of the original story. Their music becomes the language of writing back for both Goopy and Bagha in the movie. They performed at music contest organised by the Good king of Shundi. The song is interestingly on the global identity of music. The song of Goopy and Bagha moved beyond the threshold of nationalist identities and offers global fraternity. Unsurprisingly they won the contest. Immediately they were appointed as the court musicians.

Satyajit Ray was very much rooted in colonial Bengal. He was well aware of the indigenous cultures of Bengal and its rich variety. As a result, in his films regionalist postcolonialism is very much manifest. Postcolonialism as a critical discourse has ever been used as an umbrella term to denote the collective writing back. Regionalist postcolonialism should be a critique of colonial violence in a particular region. It may or may not be geographically unitary or nationally collective. It is a postcolonialism of a small group of people residing in a small region. In *Goopy Gayne Bagha Bayne* (1969), one may see a cinematic symbiosis of this regionalist and nationalist postcolonial resistance. But Ray's postcolonial vision is not overtly postcolonial in the movie. He took the story from Upendrakishore and it was intended for children. But Ray has significantly translated his grandfather's vision into an allegorical one: 'In general, he thought of his own writings as 'essentially "entertainment"— in the Graham Greene sense' and he intended most of them for older children, without wishing to draw hard and fast distinctions as to who would enjoy them' (Robinson 298). Therefore, he had to reconstruct the paranormal meeting of Goopy and Bagha with *Bhooter Raja*. As I have already pointed out that Ray's portrayal of the *Bhooter Raja* or the king of ghosts does not borrow from the conventions of the Gothic. First of all, Ray's *Bhooter Raja* (The king of ghosts) does not occupy any gruesome castle or any medieval landscape. Goopy and Bagha met the benevolent king at some jungle. He resembles any peasant from colonial Bengal: 'From early on he decided to dispense with certain

conventions about Bengali ghosts: that their ears are like those of an elephant, their teeth like long radishes and so on' (Robinson 187). He is the least horrible unlike Dracula and company. He is benevolent and is full of grace. Satyajit employs comic elements in his depiction of the ghost. The nasal chant of *Bhooter Raja* (The king of ghosts) is simply a reworking on the myths of ghosts in the precolonial Bengal. Basically, most of the ghosts in the stories written in the colonial Bengal are found to occupy some lofty trees or abandoned buildings or dense jungles miles away from man's habitats. The spatial alienation of the King of Ghosts both in the original tale and the movie is an important postcolonial trope. He seems to be a parody of the feudal landlord in *Jalsaghar* or *The Musical Room* (1958) and the Kings of Bengal such as Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of Awadh, in *Satranj Ke Khiladi* or *The Chess Players* (1977) who had lost their former royal predominance to the British Enterprise. Therefore, the cultural situation of the *Bhooter Raja* (The king of ghosts) hinges between the elitist and popular culture. Through his portrayal of King of Ghosts Ray creates a third space of belonging.

Music in Ray's movies plays crucial role: 'Once again music is the characteristic trope through which Ray thinks through difficult political and aesthetic issues' (Dube 143). Both Biswambhar Roy in *Jalsaghar* and Wajid Ali Shah in *Satranj Ke Khilari* are fond of music. Music became their culturalist tool of resistance: 'In the film Ray does not present us with a fully worked out refutation of the expanded cultural critique as he does in *The Chess Players*. The film maps resistance through the figure of Biswambhar Ray, particularly through his passion for music as an alternate register of cultural value' (Dube 40). The observation quoted above by Reena Dube is also applicable to the case study of *Goopy Gayne Bagha Bayne* (1969) since the *Bhooter Raja* (The king of ghosts) is equally fond of music. It was Goopy's singing, though he was out of tune, that pleased him and he gave out three boons. Ray in the movie uses music as a culturalist tool of resistance against the colonial oppressions. In the original tale by Upendrakishore we do not find the psychedelic ghosts in shadow dancing. A keen scrutiny of the scene would reveal that Ray has deliberately constructed the scene to parody the decadence of Bengal, since the ghosts seem to be the members from different classes involved in a shadow-dance of death:

These came to be kings and warriors, sahibs, fat people (like pundits, padres and lawyers), and the common people – no doubt a significant number to choose, given the four basic castes in Hinduism. Significantly enough the nasal chant of the King of Ghosts is full of musicality and

Ray's signature rhyme. His sentences are repeated in a rhythmic pattern to produce the desired eerie melody. (Robinson187)

Significantly Ray has stuck to the Indian dance form in order to produce a postcolonialist effect. He chose a sort of South Indian dance form though he has moulded it into an innovative format. He wanted to have a particular form of dance for the scene that would candidly manifest the colonial threats in Bengal and the significant nationalist resistance. He took only four instruments instead of the twelve in the original dance form - a mridangam, a drum like a tabla, a ghatom, a comical folk-instrument (Robinson188). To represent the contemporary social milieu in colonial Bengal he chose four important people, kings and warriors, sahibs, fat people (for different privileged classes pundits, padres and lawyers), and the common people. Ray has deliberately omitted melody and banked on rhythm only "because melody suggests a kind of sophistication"; he wanted only rhythm" (Robinson188). All the people except the Sahibs were clothed according to their social identity. Only the sahibs are projected as 'shadow puppets which were under-cranked at sixteen frames per second for a wooden, mechanical effect' (Robinson188). The shadow dance begins with each class holding its signature instrument and 'making its characteristic movements' (Robinson187). Ray resorted to negative printing and dexterously makes a shimmering effect to produce a paranormal situation. Both cultural and psychological conflicts are portrayed in this scene: 'acorpuent padre gesticulates at a pundit with a book, obviously the Bible or some tract; a sahib rudely dismisses a hookah brought by his servant: the kind of behaviour increasingly prevalent among the British in Bengal following the initial phase of 'Indianisation'' (Robinson188). Gradually the scene heats up and the tempo of the rhythm escalates to conform to the class struggle among the warring classes. Finally, these shadowy figures representing different regional classes and the imperialist Sahibs are engaged in a shadow fight. The Padre tries to show a book, evidently a bible to others to their disdain. The frenzied dance and the ensuing quarrel represent regional classes in colonial Bengal as well the anti-colonial resistance against Christianisation. Finally, peace is restored with each classes framed collectively in a paradigmatic vein: 'Music is able to restore the harmony of ghosts, even if humans will insist on fighting, killing and dying' (Robinson188).

Ray in this movie has laboured for a genre formation to counter the European Gothic genre. This genre is typically founded on the soil of Bengal and its culture. He seemed to have adopted the dynamics of the children's literature well from his father Sukumar Ray who wrote stories and poems apparently for the children and planted the seeds of regional

postcolonial motifs underneath. Ray in this movie evidently reconstructed Upendrakishore's tale into a postcolonial allegory that truly reflects the cultural nuances of colonial Bengal: 'The children's stories and sketches by Sukumar Roy and the stories, cartoons, and films for children by Satyajit Ray are enormously popular in Bengal and represent a recognizable tradition. They signify the dream possibility for the postcolonial artist that his cultural production becomes as much part of the national and regional unconscious as folk and subaltern genres' (Dube 55).

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