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A Reading of Tagore's 'Children's Literature' as Cultural Counter-Sites

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Abstract:

In its very essence, nonsense literature subverts the cultural hegemonic tropes of a society. It fundamentally uses humor in caricaturing those tropes to evoke anti-establishment ethos. Rabindranath Tagore's "*Khapchara*" (1936) dissects a multitude of issues from colonial Bengal, falling under the larger spectrum of socio-cultural themes.

The marginalization of 'nonsense literature' as a literary space marks its existence as a heterotopia. Michel Foucault defines heterotopia as "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted."

This paper seeks to trace how Tagorean nonsense acted as a heterotopia, demolishing certain entrenched ways of comprehending 'sense' in colonial times, eventually highlighting new uncharted ways of understanding that very 'sense' and how his 'nonsense' still holds extreme relevance in making 'sense' out of the neoliberal Indian society in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, nonsensical literature, children's literature, colonial Bengal, Foucault, heterotopia.

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore was a Bengali polymath whose genius spanned diverse formats, such as art, literature, and education policies. Born to the Zamindari family of Thakurs (anglicized as

Tagores), Rabindranath Tagore was directly beneficiary of the Bengal Renaissance. Since many immediate members of Tagore's family were luminaries of this movement, later on, Tagore himself became an exponent of this movement as he too espoused the values of humanism, universalism, and opposition to nationalism in his artistic works.

Tagore was born at an intersection of time and space, where the arrival of the West had stormed the stagnancy of the Indian episteme, and a new awakening was sweeping over the region in the form of the Bengal Renaissance. Its initial impact blinded the Indian intelligentsia, turning many early reformers into irrational followers of the West. Though when Tagore came of age, the first naive admiration had worn off, the ideals introduced by the West remained ever-present. "At the same time, there was growing recognition of the values of India's own heritage. The time was therefore opportune for the emergence of a genius who could unite in himself eastern and western values" (Kabir 6).

In *Sandhya Sangeet*, one of his early poetry collections, he muses on the conundrum of existence. He also demonstrates an early recognition of the unloveliness that follows when man's selfishness masquerades as love. The philosophical strain deepens and intensifies in *Naivedya*, but arguably, the best union of intellect and emotion is in *Balaka*. The poetry in *Balaka* reflects a synthesis of thought and feeling that has altered ontological inquiry. Eventually, this culminated in *Khapchara*, where he dissects many issues from colonial Bengal, falling under the larger spectrum of socio-cultural themes that still plague neoliberal Indian society.

Starting from childhood, Tagore would write poetry that would catch the fancy and imagination of Bengali literary critics. Contemporary and retrospective critiques have deeply analyzed his poems, plays, and novels. However, one genre that has received a lot less attention is that of his essays, where Tagore has been equally illuminating on the conception of an indigenous literary aesthetic, such as that of oral folklore-inspired children's literature.

The academician Suchismita Sen believes that "the problem is further by the fact that Tagore approached the subject not as a scholar but as a typically romantic poet extolling the virtues of these simple, compositions. Nevertheless, the ideas that are articulated in need a fresh review because of their relevance to current scholarship oral poetry" (5).

In the Indian context, scholars have traced the trend of the development of nonsense in its oral forms to folk traditions. Lullabies, nursery rhymes, folk theatre, folk narrative, and other nonsense-like folk material abound in India. Still, outside of the English-influenced spaces of India (especially West Bengal, Orissa, and Maharashtra), nonsense is not widely utilized as a literary style by writers and poets.

This irreverence is rooted in Sukumar Ray's work, where he uses nonsensical verse to satirize the power structures of the colonial regime in Bengal. Not only is Ray's invention a rebellion against the British but also an aesthetic achievement where "it helps to distinguish the nonsense form from other Indian literary forms" (Heyman et al. 52).

The system of Indian arts and aesthetics is intended to elicit complex emotional responses from the viewer. These effects, which include eight *rasas*, are precisely specified and categorized according to Bharata Muni's *Nāṭya Śāstra* (200 A.D.), an ancient Hindu treatise on arts and aesthetics. The ninth *rasa* was added by the Kashmiri Shaivite philosopher Abhinavagupta (11th Century A.D.) in *Abhinavabhāratī*. Each *rasa* represents a different emotional state: *hāsya* (comic), *śṛṅgāra* (erotic), *raudra* (furious), *vīra* (heroic), *bībhatsa* (odious), *bhayānaka* (terrible), *adbhuta* (marvellous), and *Śānta* (peace). All forms of highly evolved and serious art ought to evoke a blend of these *rasas*.

Tagore further categorized it with the recognition of an altogether separate *rasa* that children's *chhoda* (verses) occupied: "There are nine *rasas* in our aesthetic theory. But, the *chhoda* (or *chhoda*), meant for children, contains a kind of *rasa* which does not fit into any of the nine *rasas*. The beauty of this rhyme can be called, *baalras* [children's *rasa*]. It is neither thick nor pungent. It is, rather, clear, innocent, beautiful, and that which cannot be related to anything" (3).

The source of Bengali nonsense could be traced from the pure delight of overturning imposed restrictions, such as respecting the societal norms of caste and class without any critical thought, besides criticizing the rigidity of hegemony as power structures in order to create a piece of art that serves the purpose where people "live with such apparent opposing dualities, even to enjoy them" (Heyman et al. 40).

Nonsensical Children's Literature as Heterotopias

Heterotopia is a term coined by the French philosopher Michel Foucault to describe social, cultural, and discursive spaces that are 'other' in a way that could be unpleasant, intense, or perhaps even contradictory. Heterotopias are other realities that reflect and distort the real world. Ships, graves, bars, brothels, Persian gardens, and many other examples are provided by Foucault.

It is a form of heterotopia to define "real" as including tangible spaces inside the constructed narrative realm. The realm of nonsensical literature is heterotopic, outside of the conventional order of things and functions according to alternative rules. Tagore's nonsense in children's literature ranges from the realistic, such as incisive commentaries on Bengal's cultural and social decay under colonial rule, to the fantastic, where the characters inhabit a world that is foreign and imperceptible to our order—still in Bengal, but with its own set of rules and regulations.

Foucault philosophizes the concept of "spaces" by noting that human life is still ruled by several unalterable oppositions that societal and cultural norms have not yet ventured to breach. "These are oppositions that we regard as simple givens: for example between private space and public space, between family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure and that of work. All these are still nurtured by the hidden presence of the sacred" (Foucault et al. 2).

He continues by discussing the realm of essential awareness, which is also referred to as the realm of dreaming. "There is a light, ethereal, transparent space, or again, a dark, rough, encumbered space; a space from above, of summits, or on the contrary a space from below of mud; or again a space that can be flowing like sparkling water, or space that is fixed, congealed, like stone or crystal" (Foucault et al. 3).

Tagore's views on children's literature and their conception also stem from this space of primary perception, or the space of dreaming. Where the child is not conditioned like the adult to have the power of discrimination between truth and falsity. The power of the intellect to discriminate is significantly weaker in children by nature. As a result, it is easier for them to imagine and even inhabit spaces subversive in nature.

Tagore writes: “Both the external world and his own imaginings strike him disjunctly, one after another. Any tie upon the mind is oppressive to him. It is hard for him to follow a matter through from beginning to end by a linked chain of cause and effect. He happily sits and builds sandcastles by the shores of both the external world and the world of his mind. Sand does not bind together, its structures do not last; but that very absence of cohesiveness makes it the ideal material for such childish edifices” (106).

Foucault categorizes six such principles for heterotopias, which would be used to trace how Tagorean nonsense acted as a heterotopia, demolishing certain entrenched ways of comprehending 'sense' in colonial times, eventually highlighting new uncharted ways of understanding that very 'sense' and how his 'nonsense' still holds extreme relevance in making 'sense' out of the neoliberal Indian society in the twenty-first century.

The first principle is called crisis heterotopias, which is when “there are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis” (Foucault et al. 4). Heterotopias of transgression can likewise take the place of these heterotopias of crisis. Psychiatric facilities, jails, and nursing homes, according to Foucault, are all heterotopias of deviation.

An instance of a crisis heterotopia can be found in “Lyric No 10”, where Tagore writes, “I really eat very less / To keep myself thin and slim” (Tagore 13). To preserve an ideal “*kinkor-kinkori*” in his home, the protagonist Tinkari consumes less food. Ironically, the poem portrays Calcutta's impoverished state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The colonized subjects always lived in a state of crisis. More often than not, these crises were manufactured by the (mis)management of the British Raj in the form of countless famines that ravaged the land of the Bengal Presidency.

However, this heterotopia of crisis transforms into a heterotopia of deviance when Tagore tears the role of “babus” down with “Lyric No. 97”, whose protagonist is Khudiram or Khudubabu as he mentions him sitting idly “in the sun” (Tagore 134) and singing a song. The poetry simultaneously conveys deliberate idleness. However, the poem also depicts the typical Calcuttan culture of colonial Babus, who were known for their laziness and sluggishness in clerical work.

Since the middle of the 20th century, the term "babu" has been used often and derogatorily to refer to bureaucrats of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and other officials in the government, notably by the Indian media. The state apparatus of bureaucracy is also referred to as 'babudom,' as in the 'rule of babus,' by the mainstream Indian media. Readers can experience the heterotopia's subversive force because of Tagore's involvement in these verses, which permits growth and evolution. As they progress through the heterotopic regions of these nonsensical verses toward an awareness of individuality, imagination, and identity, the reader also goes through a succession of these transformations.

The second principle of heterotopia is the relationship between a heterotopic space and how it progresses with time. "This description of heterotopias is that a society, as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another" (Foucault et al. 5).

This can be most well understood in "Lyric 60" of *Khapchara*, wherein he writes:
"An eminent Engineer designs the plan
To build a bridge.
The bridge collapses, as usual,
And disappears into an unknown land" (Tagore 71).

An interpretation of this lyric from a Foucauldian analytic framework shows that the "bridge" here is the second principle of heterotopia. The bridge is chiefly emblematic of two concepts, the first being the supposed modernity of technology that colonizers would often bring into colonies (for their commerce and not for the colonized subjects).

The second being how it doesn't last that long, symbolizing the rampant corruption that lurked under the transformation (with the bridge's disappearance) that takes place with the progression of time. The bridge, which was earlier a symbol of colonial modernity in Tagore's sharp-satirical, nonsensical verse, had transformed into a symbol of the incompetent and corrupt engineering practices of the colonizers.

The third principle espoused by Foucault is that of a juxtaposition of incompatible spaces. An example of this can be seen in the space of the theater, where it “brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another; thus it is that the cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space” (Foucault et al. 6).

Similarly, Tagore’s *Khapchara* can be seen as a project of juxtaposition of incompatible sites. The first incompatible site is the space of nonsense in the West that inspired Tagore, as “modern or literary nonsense in India is a hybrid product that arose from colonial contact” (Satpathy et al. 56). Whereas the second incompatible site is that of traditional *chhora* (rhymes), which Tagore believed was instead inspired by the *Rig Veda*, the most ancient scripture of Hindus, as he writes, “The Rig Veda was put together in ancient times out of hymns to Indra, Chandra, and Varuna. These rhymes have a similar origin, from the hymns of the maternal heart to its twin gods, Khoka and Putu. Both sets of texts are of venerable ancestry: for the antiquity of the rhymes is not a chronological antiquity; they are naturally ancient” (Tagore et al. 123).

Thus, Tagore’s project acts as a heterotopia, bridging the seemingly incompatible traditions of the West and East. Combining the English tradition and native Indian traditions of nonsense, *Khapchara* takes part in its aim to paint a picture of colonial Bengal with the sharp strokes of satire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and to reflect the power structures of society from inside.

The fourth heterotopia has been broadly categorized by Foucault as 'slices of time'. When men arrive at an instance of ultimate break with their conventional standard of time in the situational context of tradition, then this heterotopia starts to operate at its optimum capacity. There are two types of heterotopias: heterotopia, which is eternal, and heterotopia, which is temporal in nature.

For the latter, Foucault explains them as being “not oriented toward the eternal, they are rather absolutely temporal [chroniques]” (Foucault et al. 7). An example of this space is perhaps most evident in the depiction of the clash between tradition and modernity in *Khapchara*. “Listen, NeyamotDorji! / I no longer like the old fashion” says Nilubabu in "Lyric No. 93," expressing his disenchantment with traditionalism. Subsequently, Nilubabu exclaims, "Oh, what a surprise!"

(Tagore 129) as Neyamot Miah fashions a garment with buttons on the back of the dress instead of the front.

In this lyric, Tagore examines the urban propensity for the movement of colonial modernity. According to Tagore, blind adherence to this modernity or rejection of traditionalism would not be appropriate. The colonial subject has obviously reached an ultimate break in their tradition, and the link of continuity has been broken.

Philosophically, Tagore advocates inhabiting both the spaces of eternity and temporality. The objective of Tagore's exercise is to get the colonized subjects out of their cocoons and help them properly synthesize tradition and the modern world. Tagore's nonsensical literature in *Khapchara* remains relevant to the postcolonial present, where he ought to be critically analyzed "not as sage or prophet, not as a thinker who ought to be canonised over and above any other thinker, but as a historical figure whose thought and action constituted a complex and often contradictory intervention in a moment of profound historical importance: the end of European imperialism and the beginning of a post-imperial world in which the modern European nation state became a universal model of political community" (Collins 154).

The fifth principle, as per Foucault, is based on public spaces that are exclusive, where almost anyone can "enter into the heterotopic sites, but in fact that is only an illusion—we think we enter where we are, by the very fact that we enter, excluded" (Foucault et al. 8). An example of this can be traced to the institution of marriage that Tagore takes digs at in *Khapchara*.

He criticizes the institution of marriage in "Lyric No. 24" with the lines, "Father-in-Law cries for his Daughter/ The Groom laughs ironically!" (Tagore 29). The custom of getting married is openly parodied by Tagore, who introduces Nobu in "Lyric No. 71" and shows how he manages to let go of his worries by marrying five times. "These Tagorean verses echo Sukumar Ray's poem *Sat-Patra* (A Marriage is Announced) where the name Gangaram is used to poke fun at the institution of arranged marriage" (Hoque 95).

Both "Lyric No. 48" and "Lyric No. 49" dispute the dowry system, which was common during colonial times and regrettably is still in place throughout South Asia's many castes, classes, and ethnic groups. "In 2021, reported dowry death cases in India amounted to nearly 6.8 thousand"

(Rathore). Dowries are a difficult and contentious feature of the Indian cultural landscape because they can be interpreted as a paradoxical space that reflects and distorts the ideals of the institution of marriage, where women are permitted to enter but are nonetheless excluded from making their own choices and having to be forcibly financially reliant on their husbands.

Heterotopias have one last attribute: they have a function concerning the residual space. Between two polar extremes, this function emerges. Either they play a part in creating an illusionary space that renders all actual spaces, all locations where human life is divided, even more fictitious. Instead, it is their responsibility to design a different, actual space that is as flawless and well-organized as our own, which is poorly built, and disorganized.

This latter kind would be a heterotopia that prioritizes compensation over illusion. This analysis of comparative spaces is noticeable in *Khapchara*, where Tagore lambasts the space of colonial education and instead develops his own space of indigenous education, which is far more inclusive and egalitarian.

Conclusion

Through his nonsensical lyrics, Tagore also pokes fun at the educational system of British colonialism. As an illustration, in "Lyric No. 3," he adds, "Matilal Nandy yawns at the school" (Tagore 4). This yawning motion serves as a potent allegory for a ferocious critique of the colonial educational system. Through the character of Bholanath, Tagore harshly critiques the colonial educational system in "Verse No. 63," where Bholanath is lauded for "writing more despite being mathematically wrong" (Tagore 88).

The educational venture that Tagore started at Santiniketan by founding the Brahmacharya Ashram in 1901 reflects his worldview. A special effort was made in this school to get the students as close to nature as possible. In the truest sense, this institution was an outdoor school. Far from the supposed civilized view of the colonizers' educational system, Tagore raised a brand-new generation of kids in an environment characterized by spontaneity and freedom. "Like the famous Arab Sufi mystic Khalil Gibran, Tagore was a great lover of children's innocence and a staunch advocate of their freedom. He has emphasised this idea repeatedly in his writings" (Salamatullah 135).

In contrast, the colonial education spaces were designed to act as exclusive spaces even for the children of natives where the main intention was to produce clerks for their purpose of commerce and erode the Indian consciousness so that the British could continue to rule over the Indian subcontinent without any hassle. Tagore believed freedom and play were two extremely essential concepts for learning. He placed so much emphasis on them that not even Mahatma Gandhi's 1937 Basic National Education proposal could escape his criticism.

Tagore's in-depth consideration of the global scenario in an eventual postcolonial world led to the conception of Visva-Bharati in his imagination. He saw this institution of higher learning as a place where the entire world nestles together. Its foundations included a broad understanding of internationalism. "Visva-Bharati is the embodiment of this idea. It provides a unique opportunity to study both the cultures of East and West so that one can have a correct understanding of the contributions made by different peoples to the cultural heritage of mankind in the sphere of art and literature, religion and philosophy and so on" (Salamatullah 138).

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