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Aesthetics of Nonsense in *Abol Tabol*

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Abstract: The paper proposes to explore Aesthetics of Nonsense in selective verses of Sukumar Ray's *Abol Tabol* (English translations by Sampurna Chattarji). Aesthetics, explored in this nonsense text, can be mainly divided into following two categories- Linguistic and Logistic. Linguistic techniques are Neologisms, Portmanteau, Reduplication and Sound- over- sense. Logistic techniques are Paradoxical simultaneity of meaning, nonsense tautology, non sequitur and arbitrariness, absurd precision and imprecision, faulty cause and effect, and the use of infinity. By delving into these aesthetics, the paper also explores simultaneity of 'Nonsense ideologue' that "meaning is contrary to its own self."(Heyman li)

 Keywords: Nonsense and Aesthetics.

Introduction

Abol Tabol is a collection of nonsense verses and is originally written in Bengali. That is why, the paper focuses on verses of Sukumar Ray translated by Sampurna Chattarji. These verses are taken from her book *Abol Tabol: The Nonsense World of Sukumar Ray*. *Abol Tabol* is an original, pioneer work of Nonsense written in colonial India. Trailokyanath Mukhopadhay's *Kankabati* was written earlier but it is a Bengali translation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and not an original work. As recorded in *The Tenth Rasa*, Sukumar Ray is one of the pioneers who actively sought to write as well as promote nonsense in India (li). A prolific children's writer, all his works are brimming with humor. For a long time, Sukumar Ray's work was limited to Bengal as it was written in Bengali. When Satyajit Ray translated it in English in a work titled *Nonsense Rhymes* in 1970, it was the first time that a non Bengali could soak his brand of nonsense in. In last decade or two, translation of

Abol Tabol in Indian vernaculars has brought his work to the fore. In Hindi, there are translations by Gosvami (1997), Sinha Roy (2002), Dev (2003) and Kusavaha (2006), among others (Bhadury 11). The oeuvre of Ray's work include Aboltabol" (Gibberish"), novella "HaJaBaRaLa", short story collection "Pagla Dashu"("Crazy Dashu"), play "Chalachittachanchari" and many more.

Nonsense

> Nonsense is a kind of play, one that is not pure exuberance, not unrestrained joy and, above all, not gibberish (though all of these are often elements of it). Rather, it is an art form rooted in sophisticated aesthetics, and play with logic, and it is the art of nonsense that is one of its most appealing aspects. (Heyman xx- xxi)

Encompassing a repertoire of non- sense in its shroud, a nonsense text abounds in sense, for in a nonsense text, there must be a "balance between 'sense' and 'non- sense'" (Heyman xxiv). In this balance the 'sense' scale occupies more space. The case is similar to fulcrum, in which if cotton and sugar weighs same, than, cotton occupies more space. The nonsense scale defies sense, "primarily on the logical and semantic level . . . nonsense operates not by ignoring the rules of sense but by subversively playing with them- stretching, squeezing, flipping upside down, yet, in the end still depending on their existence" (ibid). In other words, a Nonsense text mimics a child's world- fun, arbitrary yet firm in whatever catches their attention for the duration.

> Nonsense usually emerges from an excess of sense rather than a lack of it, or as [Wim] Tigges states, through a 'multiplicity of meaning [balanced] with a simultaneously absence of meaning.' (xx-xxi)

Though writer John Hoskyns is credited with invention of English nonsense verse in 1611, its (Nonsense) origin is difficult to pin down. Moreover, in *The Tenth Rasa*, English translations of nonsense verses written in Indian vernaculars are available. Some of these are older than Hoskyn's work. The opening section contains English translations of Hindi *Sabda* 62, *Sabda* 2, and *Sabda* 52 from *Bejak* of Kabir. Kabir was a 15th Century Indian Mystic poet and saint (3- 5). Similarly, translations of Nonsense works of Tenali Ramalinga- jester and poet of court of Krishandeva Raya- date back to sixteenth century (6- 7). In Europe, John Taylor was more prolific in its use in later years of seventeenth century but it is in mid nineteenth century, with the works of authors such as

Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, that the revival of English nonsense verse took place (Kwoka n.p.). *The Tenth Rasa*traces "spirit of whimsy" (Heyman xii) convoluted with nonsense, in Indian history. In the introductory essay "An Indian Nonsense Naissance," Mychael Heyman states that 'modern or literary nonsense' in India is not only influenced by, but is an extension and a hybrid of colonial contact. Bengali literature was pioneer in imbibing "the foreign brand of Nonsense" (xii). It (Bengali literature) alloyed this "foreign brand of Nonsense" with 'spirit of whimsy' and 'nonsense thread is woven in Indian literary culture'. Spirit of whimsy manifested in India is as quaint and peculiar as '*Om hring cling*'of tantra Shastra or Ulti Language (inverted language) of mystification. In Spirit of whimsy, a undercurrent of spiritual is found. For instance, verses on infant Krishna's antics written by Surdas, Meera Bai and many more are devotional in nature.

From Bengali, the influence has been sporadic to other Indian Vernaculars or in other words to 'the literature of the United Indian Union.' Some luminaries as well as pioneers of Bengali nonsense genre (or Indian nonsense genre as Indian literary Renaissance in nineteenth century started with Bengali Renaissance) are Sukumar Ray, Rabinderanath Tagore, Trailokyanath Mukhopadaya etc.

The paper focuses on verses of Sukumar Ray translated by Sampurna Chattarji. In translation, to capture nonsense is difficult but "as Sukanta Chaudhari writes in his translation of Sukumar Ray, people 'might debate whether nonsense can be translated; but I reassure myself that at worst the result will still be nonsense'" (qtd. in Heyman xviii).

Genealogy of Nonsense is threefold- sophisticated Aesthetics, Linguistics and play with logic.

Aesthetics is mainly a branch of philosophy which critically studies art, nature and culture as manifested in perceived texts. While engaged in critical reflections, there are always devised underlying principles that form the basis of existence as well as evaluation of that perceived text. Both Western Philosophy and Indian Philosophy has delved and explored into it.

According to Indian Aesthetic theory of *Natyasastra* by Bharata Muni, there are eight rasas in any art form and that each rasa, correspondingly evoke one emotional effect. These rasas are-

RASA	BHAVA	MEANING
Shringar(Erotic)	Rati	Delight

Hasya (Humorous)	Hasa	Laughter
Karuna (Pathetic)	Shoka	Sorrow
Raudra (Terrible)	Krodh	Anger
Veera (Heroic)	Utsaha	Heroism
Bhayanaka (Fearful)	Bhaya	Fear
Bibhatsa (Odious)	Jugupsa	Disgust
Adbhuta (Wonderous)	Vismaya	Wonder

Abhinav Gupta added one more rasa- *Shanta* Rasa (evokes bhava of calmness) and total number of Rasas became nine. Rabindernath Tagore called Nonsense "chodda" or "balarasa" (*chodda* or *bala* mean child in English) as he first discovered it in folk rhymes and stories composed for children. Sukumar Ray called it "Khayal Rasa." Bhava or emotion produced by a rasa is critical in studying the respective Rasa. According to Tagore, emotion produced by nonsense hasn't been given any name but it is pure, innocent, beautiful, neither thick, nor pungent. (Heyman xli) Mychael Hryman, in tradition of Bharata Muni and Abhinavgupta, called it the tenth Rasa.

The main shoot of aesthetics in a nonsense text can be mainly divided into following two subshoots- Linguistic and Logistic.

Linguistic techniques found in a Nonsense text are Neologisms, Portmanteau, Reduplication and Sound- over- sense; and Logistic ones are Paradoxical simultaneity of meaning, nonsense tautology, non sequitur and arbitrariness, absurd precision and imprecision, faulty cause and effect, and the use of infinity. As name indicates, linguistic techniques are based on play of language and are as follows:

- Neologisms- Neologisms are words invented by the author.
- Portmanteau- portmanteau are words that are formed by joining together of existing words.
- Reduplication- in reduplication, words are repeated. For instance good-good, go- go etc.
- Sound- over- sense- in this type, sound is more important than word as *mitti*- Hindi word for soil evokes more poignant connection with homeland than *bhoomi* and *jamin*.

Logistic techniques are

- Paradoxical simultaneity of meaning- Paradoxical simultaneity of meaning "… generally refers to the simultaneous existence of two or more, usually contradictory, meanings" (Heyman xxvii)

- Nonsense tautology- "it occurs when two different words or phrases are used side by side, implying a different meaning but actually having the same meaning" (Heyman xxviii)

- Non sequitur and arbitrariness- non sequitur and arbitrariness refers to a conclusion or reply that doesn't follow logically from the previous statement. There are three further types of Non sequitur and arbitrariness-

- Absurd precision and imprecision- "A particular Kind of arbitrariness, absurd precision, is the inclusion of detail, often numbers, which are so precise as to imply some significance in that precision"(Heyman xxix)

- Faulty cause and effect- when there is no apparent relation between causes and its effect, the result created is called faulty cause and effect.

- The use of infinity- it is a kind of accretion and go on and on. For instance 'A Never Ending Tale' or 'What happened next?'

People often confuse Hasya (comedy) Rasa with nonsense. Two genres sound similar but whereas Hasya (comedy) is based on humor, nonsense is based on whimsicality.

Abol Tabol Verses written by Sukumar Ray translated by Sampurna Chattarji

"Gibberish-Gibberish" by Sukumar Ray. Translated by Sampurna Chattarji

Come happy fool whimsical cool

come dreaming dancing fancy-free,

Come mad musician glad glusician

beating your drum with glee.

Come o come where mad songs are sung

without any meaning or tune,

Come to the place where without a trace

your mind floats off like a loon.

Come scatterbrain up tidy lane

wake, shake and rattle and roll,

Come lawless creatures with wilful features

each unbound and clueless soul.

Nonsensical ways topsy-turvy gaze

stay delirious all the time,

Come you travellers to the world of babblers

and the beat of impossible rhyme.

At first sight to call "a happy fool whimsical cool" to a world of "impossible rhyme," "topsy-turvy gaze" to "wake, shake and rattle and roll" seems meaningless but a closer look reveals that the poem is brimming with meaning on many planes. The poem is definition of a nonsense verse itself- "the world of babblers and the beat of impossible rhyme." The poem is exhorting "scatterbrain", "clueless soul", "lawless creatures with wilful features" to the world of nonsense. The "scatterbrain" is busy lifestyle and the world of nonsense offers a respite to his conscious to "float off like a loon." To "clueless soul" the world of nonsense is the spiritual world. "Lawless creature with willful features" represents stubborn man mired in chaos of life. The world of nonsense offers "a topsy- turvy gaze" to understand it.

To achieve this apparent meaning in meaninglessness, the poem incorporates use of neologism, portmanteau, nonsense tautology and Sound- over- sense techniques. "Happy fool and whimsical cool" have apparently same meaning. Fool or whimsical is happy for his stories are becoming more creative. But at the same time when run on, create a distinctive meaning that since fool is happy, that is why, his whimsical world is creating cool stories. So, the technique used here is Nonsense tautology. Similarly, "dreaming … fancy free" is a paradox but when run on as "dreaming dancing fancy-free" creates the meaning that happy fool is exhorted to enter the world of nonsense dancing and in a dream like trance but at the same time he is obviated from having fantasies or exaggerations about this "nonsensical world." Another instance of nonsense tautology is "wake, shake and rattle and roll." In this line, all words means the same but their run on creates the urgency to shake off lethargy by indulging in immediate action. "Glusician" is a neologism.

"Scatterbrain" is a portmanteau which is coined by joining of two words- scatter and brain. The "nonsensical world" emerges in the poem "because of the nature and sound of the language used rather than language simply being used to describe a world" (Heyman xxviii). The title of the poem "Gibberish-Gibberish" is an instance of reduplicative pattern and according to Michael Heyman, Indian languages/vernaculars show more use of this technique. For example, *chi- chi,chup-chap* and many more.

There is use of Paradoxical simultaneity of meaning. In line "mad songs are sung without any meaning or tune," a reader needs to fight against the implication of distinction created by the language to reach a meaning. The songs apparently have the meaning of madness in them but they are sung without meaning, is paradoxical. The peculiar part is that both meaning simultaneously exist to lend beauty to the verse.

The whole poem is permeated by Sound- over- sense. The onomatopoeia evolves essence of the "nonsensical world" by more use of rhyming couplet(free- glee, loon- lane, fool- cool, roll- soul and many more), alliteration("come dreaming dancing fancy-free,/Come mad musician glad glusician") and by resonance (musician- glusician, mad songs- tune, floats off- loons, scatterbrain- tidy lane, babblers and impossible rhyme) than reference and litigation.

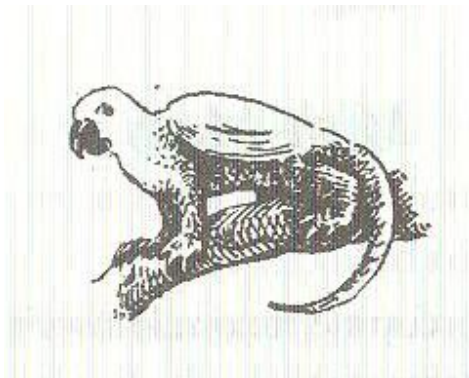 "Mish Mash" by Sukumar Ray. Translated by Sampurna Chattarji

A duck and a porcupine, on one knows how,
(Contrary to grammar) are a duckupine now.
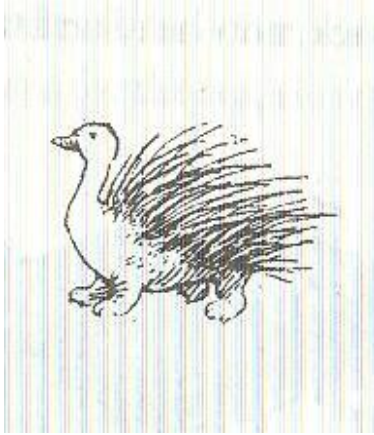
The stork told the tortoise, 'Isn't this fun!

As the stortoise, we're second to non!'
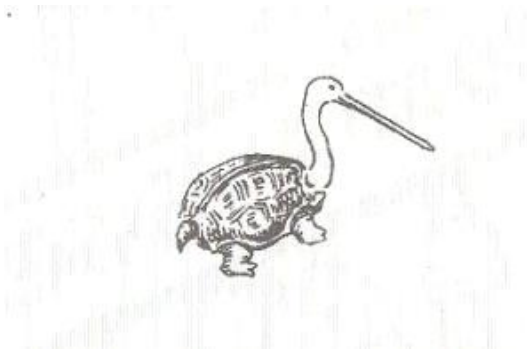
The parrot-faced lizard felt rather silly-

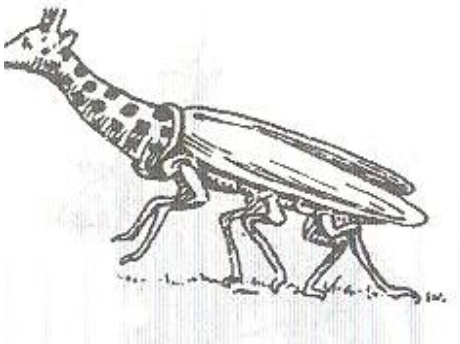Must he give up insects and start eating chilli?

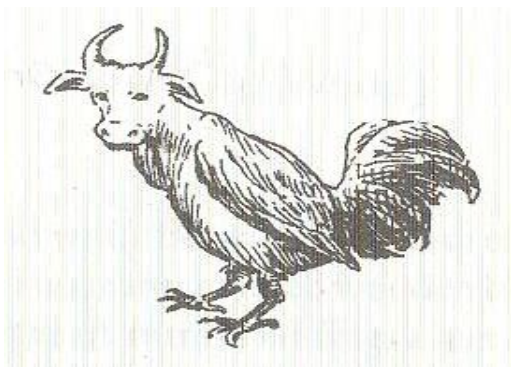The goat charged the scorpion at a rapid run

jumped on his back, now head and tail are one

 The giraffe lost his taste for roaming far and wide,

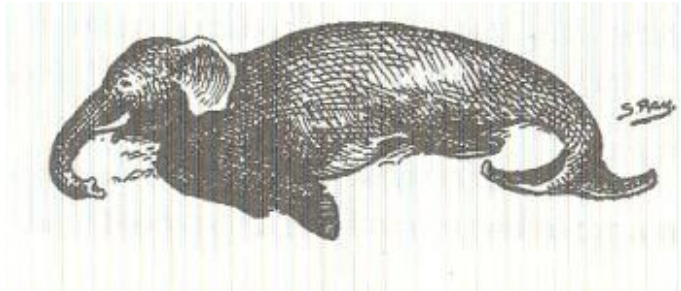like a grasshopper he'd rather jump and glide.

The cow said. 'Am I sick, too, from this disease?

Or why should the rooster chase me, if you please?'

And oh the poor elewhale – that was a bungle,

while whale yearns for the sea, ele wants the jungle.

The hornbill was desperate as it had no horns,

merged with a deer now, it no longer mourns.

The poem, at first sight, seems to have no meaning and superficially indulges in a child's fancy of mixing up two animals and whimsically fancying up the result. But underlying philosophy of 'what if' and 'mish mash' insinuates that these questions don't end at 'mish mash of animals' only. This philosophy works at a very basic level in the poem and is extension of more elaborate transcendental questions of life that start with 'what if.' These mish- mash animals show myriad of emotions and personalities which renders them more reality than they are real. Some animals react favorably like "The hornbill was desperate as it had no horns,/ merged with a deer now, it no longer mourns."

Some of these, voice their confusions as "The parrot-faced lizard felt rather silly,/ Must he give up insects and start eating chilli?" When goat charged the at scorpion at a rapid run and jumped on his back, a new animal forms which has now one head and tail. So this mish- mash is not convivial but forced too. Some animals are showing their discomfort also as cow is confused about rooster's chasing and Elewhale is in pain as "while whale yearns for the sea, ele wants the jungle." Assessment of results of these 'what ifs,' into some being positive, some into obstruction and some into unresolved issues, provide some insight into quandaries itself. The poem also emphasis on the necessity of 'creative indulgences' of minds. Use of portmanteaus- "Duckpine," "Stortoise," and "Elewhale" are accompanied by illustrations- renders these fancies more concretion.   Poushali Bhadury in her paper "Fantastic Beasts and How to Sketch Them: The Fabulous Bestiary of Sukumar Ray" provides an alternative interpretation that these illustrations are satire on colonial hybrid subject of Sukumar Ray's times. These mish mash animals are symbolic of hybrid psyche of an educated Bengali (Indian) who was vacillating in his attitude towards then ruling British Government.

The phrase "contrary to grammar" works as a case of Absurd precision and imprecision. It highlights the precision of going against the rules of grammar but simultaneously renders that this imprecision necessary.

 When "The stork told the tortoise, "Isn't this fun!/ As the stortoise, we're second to non,!'" in the phrase "second to non" the number 'second' serves the function of precise grand revelation of imprecision of them being a significant mish mash.

When "The goat charged the scorpion at a rapid run/ jumped on his back, now head and tail are one," in here, the technique of Faulty cause and effect is used. The jumping of goat on scorpion should not result into their being one animal. The cause doesn't lead to effect but to fault.

In lines "The cow said. 'Am I sick, too, from this disease?/ Or why should the rooster chase me, if

you please?"' sexual innuendo is created through the use of Absurd precision and imprecision. The cow is precisely lamenting and asking the imprecise question why the rooster is chasing her?

The onomatopoeia via rhyming couplets(for instance how- now, fun- non, silly- chilly, run- one wide glide, bungle- jungle, horns- mourns), alliteration ("while whale yearns for the sea," "taste for roaming far and wide,")and resonance (for instance whale- sea, ele- jungle, hornbill- horns, grasshoppers- jump and glide) evolves the nonsensical substance of the poem.

"The Ol' Crone's Home" by Sukumar Ray. Translated by Sampurna Chattarji

Mouthful of puffed rice, smiling and chomping,

In a ricket-rackety house, a clickety crone is stomping.

Bedful of cobbywebs, headful of soot,

Inky-Blinky bleary eyes, back bent like a root.

Pins old the house up, glue sticks it down,

She herself licks the thread that winds all around.

Don't dare lean too hard or bare boards may break.

Don't cough hick-hack, the brick-brack will shake.

Plonk goes the streetcart, honk goes the car,

Smash goes the beam, crash the house on to the tar.

Wonky-wobbly are the rooms, holey-moley walls,

Swept with dusty brooms causing musty splinter-falls.

The ceiling gets soggy and saggy in the rain,

The ol'crone all alone props a stick in vain.

Fix it, nix it, day and night a-grouse,

The clickety-clackety crone in her rickety-rackety house.

A poem, seemingly without meaning, it contains the travails of an old lady living alone and going through hardships of life. The sense part of the verse tends to be darker but nonsense part keeps it light. The nonsense is purely employed at linguistic and logical level. Instances of Reduplication frequently employed are clickety-clackety, rickety-rackety, Inky-Blinky, hick-hack, brick-brack, holey-moley, and soggy and saggy. The poem creates sensations of sound and sight by using words that represent sound. A few instances are "a ricket-rackety house," "a clickety crone," "cough hick-hack," "the brick-brack will shake," "Plonk goes the streetcart," "honk goes the car," "Smash goes the beam," "crash the house on to the tar."

"Wonky-wobbly are the rooms," "holey-moley walls." Streetcart, Bedful of cobbywebs, headful are instances of Portmanteau created by joining the words- street and cart, bed and full, and cobber(friends) and webs respectively. Rhyming couplets are used in this poem as well. A few instances are chomping- stomping, soot-root, down-around, break- shake, the car- the tar, walls-falls, rain-vain, grouse- house. "A- grouse" is an example of nonsense tautology. It has two meanings and both meanings are true. **A grouse** is a small game bird. But the verb 'to grouse' is different. It means to gripe about how unhappy you are.

Conclusion

In the above poems, the whimsical world is weaved with logical and linguistic techniques. Spirit of

whimsy is clearly visible in the creative use of words and imagination. Overt manifestation of emotions evoked is difficult to pin down. These emotions are pure, innocent, chic, neither thick, nor pungent. Beneath pun riddled babble, each poem is brimming with multiple layers of meaning. The heavily tilted side of sense is balanced by nonsense created by linguistic as well as logical techniques. In fairytales or other folktales, there is always a moral given at the end. In *Abol Tabol*, despite apparent nonsense, there is undercurrent of meaning, philosophy and moral that mimic these other genres. This is another characteristic that is peculiar of Sukumar Ray. Neologisms, reduplication technique, sound over sense technique, nonsense tautology is adopted in all poems. Onomatopoeia is created by means of alliteration, reference and rhyming couplets which truly captures a child's heart.

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