Chapter 3

The Shah of Blah Kills the Tiger by Words

> Speaking is a fine madness; with it man dances over and above all things.[1]
>
> - Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*

> If it is true, as her (Isak Dinesen's) "philosophy" suggests, that no one has a life worth thinking about whose life story cannot be told, does it not then follow that life could be, even ought to be, lived as a story, that what one has to do in life is to make the story come true?[2]
>
> - Hannah Arendt, "Isak Dinesen: 1885-1963"

A young professor in a suburban college was famous for his love of cats, silly jokes, bohemian life-style, and a compelling gift of storytelling. On every important occasion, he would inevitably arrive at least an hour and half late with a well-made story as explanation to prove the inevitability of his situation. What pleased him most was to pick up a dirty street kitten and leave it on the principal's desk. One day the principal called a meeting and following his reputation, the professor arrived when it was almost over. Anyone would have been uncomfortable and even ashamed in such a situation but awkwardness and nervous blushes did not suit the professor well. He explained quite convincingly that he was late because he had to go to the railway station to see off his parents. While returning from the station, he elaborated, there was an accident and

consequent road block, which made it impossible for him to reach in time. Everybody including the principal knew him very well, and yet he looked so sincere and his descriptions were so vivid that they accepted his explanation without any question. Just a few minutes later the telephone on the principal's desk started ringing. He received the phone, said "okay", and left the phone within a few seconds. His smiling face suddenly looked serious and he said: "Professor! Your train ran really fast! Your father couldn't reach you by phone and has just called me to inform you that they have reached safely". There was pin-drop silence before everyone laughed out loud including the professor himself.[3]

The Story of the Storyteller

Rashid Khalifa, the marvellous storyteller of the City of Gup in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, parallels storytelling with "juggling"[4], an act of breath-taking skill requiring great concentration and fine balance. The literal minded people from the City of Chup, on the other hand, perceives stories as "trouble": "Stories make trouble. An Ocean of stories is an Ocean of trouble….What's the use of stories that aren't even true?"[5] Walter Benjamin nostalgically laments the demise of the storyteller in the Western society with the rise of the information culture in print, which does not value the shared mythical memory and community feeling of the ancient oral culture, but rather prefers the verifiable individual experiences of life:

> Familiar though his name may be to us, the storyteller in his living immediacy is by no means a present force. He has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant…Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.[6]

The storyteller is devalued as a threat in a culture of modernity which is slavishly adherent to information and norm and views excess, as Zygmunt Bauman says, as redundant, useless and waste.[7] The emotive and sophisticated art of storytelling that bypasses intellectual recognition by breaking the laws of causality is a threat too dangerous for the modern culture. It can lure and submerge the reader into a world of probable and improbable possibilities which is incompatible with the culture of science and seeks to verify everything in its scale of measurement. The modern day listeners have no time for such leisure nor can their solitary existence take stories as an integral part of community life. Benjamin seems to foresee this future when he writes:

> The intelligence that came from afar-whether the spatial kind from foreign countries or the temporal kind of tradition-possessed an authority which gave it validity, even when it was not subject to verification. Information however, lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear "understandable in itself." Often it is no more exact than the intelligence of earlier centuries was. But while the latter was inclined to borrow from the miraculous, it is indispensable for information to sound plausible. Because of this it proves incompatible with the spirit of storytelling. If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs.[8]

The storyteller is a bearer of deep cultural memory; he is the producer of the marvellous, the imaginary and the fantastic. Many years ago, Plato dismissed him as a liar; he is a man who produces lies as a semblance of truth. When they retell a story from the past, they have methodical liberty and flexibility to intervene. In the modern era of demystification, death of metaphor and loosening of the communal ties of life, where to see gradually becomes the only possible way to believe, the prestige that the storyteller had in ancient societies, has diminished. The world is becoming more prosaic and literal now by putting everything into maps, geographical or cognitive. Revealing every inch of the earth's surface, the world is gradually becoming one, leaving no space for the unknown and the unexplored. The storyteller lives on the fringes and weaves stories which do not contain any truth value, and above all, they are not

bound to explain everything. He sustains on excess or surplus of life and enjoys a rare intellectual autonomy, a flexibility that allows them the power to defy the laws of history, nature and culture.

What is the possibility of the storyteller in a world where, in commonsensical view, they are nothing but trouble-makers? Unverifiability of his stories sheds doubt and affects his natural relationship with the modern listener. Yet, the storyteller has an irresistible magic charm, which exerts authority and control of the speaker over the audience. The weapon the storyteller uses to exert their authority over the audience is acrobatic speech that resonates in the mind of the reader. A story is a linguistic promise, and if it is 'performed' by a charismatic storyteller, it "makes a difference in the world; it could be said that they produce a different world, even if for a single speaker and a single addressee".[9] Listening to a story is a trance-experience[10], or a willing suspension of disbelief, which has the power to seize the reader, suspend his sense of time, space and judgment and transport him into an imaginary state of being. Katherine Young named this liberatory space where the all rules are temporarily suspended and improbable becomes possible, "taleworld"[11].

The Storyteller in an 'Adda'

Tapan Raychaudhuri has characterized the modern Bengali middle-class as "the first Asian social group of any size whose mental world was transformed through its interactions with the West"[12] in the nineteenth century. In 1780, an Irishman, James Augustus Hicky published *Bengal Gazette*, the first newspaper in Asia; and in 1836, Ramkamal Sen observed: "in the last fifteen years these newspapers in Bangla has brought far-reaching changes within the Bangla language and the upper class Hindu Bengali loves to read these newspapers in the morning"[13]. In another context, Ivan Kreilkamp sees Benjamin's modernist quest for an ideal storyteller belonging to a

past era of fullness as a part of a fiction and describes it by using Renato Rosaldo's catchphrase—"imperialist nostalgia"[14]—a yearning for a culture which has been rendered harmless and cannot posit any threat to the dominant print culture:

> We might even say that as the noble savage or innocent native is to culture, the storyteller is to print culture.[9] But whereas the innocence of the native is invented once he has been successfully displaced and rendered harmless, there is little evidence that the redemptive storyteller ever really existed in the first place.[15]

Kreilkamp's thesis shows how print culture did not result in the death of the storyteller, but the desire for this ancient performer remains as a residual force in the mind of people, and the storyteller re-emerges as a literary figure in the Victorian era.[16] In a similar way, the new craze to inform and to be informed could not kill the indigenous traditions of storytelling in Bengal, and they were gradually incorporated, not without resistance, within the new culture of the novel. Later, with the expansion of education, print culture, circulation and consummation of Western literature and consequent development of modernism enkindled imagination and there emerged an urban vocal culture or speech community of the reading public. Their cosmopolitanism and the newly awakened desire to know the world and its myriad stories and share the knowledge gained by reading newspapers and books find expression is the newly formed public practice of *adda* in twentieth century Bengal.

The famous Bengali linguist Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay defined *adda* as a "place" for "careless talk with boon companions", which has been aptly paraphrased by Dipesh Chakrabarty as a "practice of friends getting together for long, informal, and unrigorous conversations."[17] Often the location of these *addas* were a small room or attic in a clumsy lane or by lane. Much has been written about the influence of the coffee house *adda* in the construction of Bengali

literati after independence. In a lecture delivered at Jadavpur University on 5th July 2019 titled "Calcutta after Independence: a Personal Memoir", Amartya Sen says:

> It is difficult to interpret how I have been helped by these *addas*. I have got most of these from my classmates. I came to know from them what they were thinking, or who was reading something new, or something that they came to know from somewhere else. Subjects that were being taught in various classes, from history to economics, from anthropology to biology or physics, all were part of this knowing.[18]

As a practice, however, *adda* lacks the seriousness of a formal meeting and retained the informality and communal mood and mode of the traditional gatherings, but the subject-matter of discussion moves from the local to the global, from Bengal to the world. What characterizes *adda* is, as Buddhadeb Basu observes, its "vitality", "whimsicality", "lawlessness" and "lack of responsibility and utility"—things "which are suppressed in the whirls of a working day".[19] In spite of its value in igniting the mind and pave the way of critical thinking, this non-utilitarianism, or uselessness of *adda* places it in a clash against the capitalist work ethic leaving it as a peripheral practice not sanctioned by the society. Dipesh Chakrabarty observes:

> By many standards of judgment in modernity, *adda* is a flawed social practice: it is predominantly male in its modern form in public life; it is oblivious of the materiality of labor in capitalism; and middle-class *addas* are usually forgetful of the working classes. Some Bengalis even see it as a practice that promotes sheer laziness in the population.[20]

Drawing from Foucault, Chakrabarty observes *adda* as a "plebeian practice"[21] that has the capacity to evade social surveillance. The literary *addas* became a democratic space for leisure where various creative minds derived inspirations coming into contact each other.

Buddhadeb Basu celebrated the literary *addas* as a public space of "conditionless democracy"[22], yet they often retained a non-democratic function reminiscent of the older feudal forms where one patron guided and controlled all threads of discussion, debate and arguments. Though conversations in such a place "was not directly sycophantic, could never be totally

democratic, for the very presence of a patron would influence the speech pattern of such a group in all kinds of ways."[23] Even when it was not like that in every *adda* there was an *addadhari*, or central figure who had the sheer capability to bewitch the audience with his stories. An *adda* often became synonymous with the presence of a charismatic figure within a fixed setting. Without their vigorous presence *addas* would lose their charm and become anaemic, pale, and colourless. Satyendranath Bose was known as *addar raja* [the king of adda] and Saiyad Mujtaba Ali came to be known as *adda chakrabarti* [the emperor of adda].[24] In *Provincializing Europe,* Dipesh Chakraborty depicts how *adda* became important for public practices of presenting the self through orality in the community life of Bengal in the twentieth century. To be good at *adda* became a "cultural value"[25]:

> *Adda* became an arena where one could develop techniques of presenting oneself as a character—from Wilde or Shaw or Joyce or Faulkner—through the development of certain mannerisms (meant for the enjoyment of others), habits of speech, and gestures. In the reminiscences of *addas*, people are typically remembered not in a way that "history" or "biography" as genres would represent them (in the round, as it were), but rather as relatively one-dimensional characters who are remembered for how they presented themselves to the *adda*.[26]

The twentieth century saw a powerful re-emergence of the storytellers as an agency within the *addas* and their singularity and authority invaded the ambience of this democratic space. In a dramatically heroic (or mock-heroic) way, they would govern the discussion, albeit ironically, "within a modernity unfriendly to sages"[27].

The Not so Secret Origin

The literary *addas* of the twentieth century Bengal are a derivative of what Trigunatit has classified as the first of its six different types—*majlishi*, *ajgubi*, or *khoshgolpo*'s *adda*.[28] The presence of fascinating figures charming the audience with their innovative stories in a *majlish*,

Chandimandap or *baithakkhana* is nothing new or original in Bengali literature. Troilokyonath Mukhopadhyay's (1847-1919) satirical sketch *Domru-Charita* [A Biography of Domru] (1923) is woven around a nouveau riche landlord who tells exaggerated stories of his peculiar adventures that made him gain his prosperity to a few members of his village community. In Rajshekhar Basu's [Parashuram] (1880-1960) short story "Lambakarna" (1915/16), we find a graphic description of the intense atmosphere in an *adda*:

> The evening adda that gathers at the baithakkhana of Bangshalochanbabu hears many tall claims every night. The governor, Suren[dranath] Banrujje [a leading nationalist politician], Mohunbagan [a soccer club], spiritual truths, the funeral ceremony of the old man Adhar in the neighbourhood, the new crocodile at the Alipore [zoo]—no subject is left undiscussed. Recently, for the last seven days, the subject of discussion has been the tiger. Nagen, Bangshalochan's brother-in-law, and Uday, a distantly related "nephew" of his, almost came to blows last night over this [topic]. With great difficulty, the other members persuaded them to desist.[29]

Writing a little later (the first Ghanada story "Mosha" ["Mosquito"] appeared in 1945), Premendra Mitra (1904-88) keeps a watchful eye on the protocols of this types of gatherings, and yet following the necessity of drastic social change in the latter half of the century, he subtly differs in his representation. Most of his antecedents set their *addas* in aristocratic or at least pseudo-aristocratic settings with wealthy patrons providing food and direction to the discussions, but Mitra's *adda* is set in a shabby, old, public, and therefore democratic, boarding house of 72, Banamali Nashkar Lane in Kolkata.[30] Shibnarayan Roy sees an *adda* as "a meeting place for those who desire companionship"[31] in a society of modern people who have become alienated and the *addadhari* defines a group unlike the old storytellers who defined an entire community.

Etymologically the nickname 'Ghana' has been derived from 'Ghanashyam', one of the one hundred and eight names of Lord Krishna but the title 'Das' originates in Sanskrit 'dasa', which means 'servant' indicating a lower class origin in the caste ladder. "Thin and

asymmetrical like a camel"[32], he is a man of indefinite age, a mysterious figure who suddenly appears with a worn out cambis bag before the young residents of a new boarding house. One of the inmates promises a shelter for him for a couple days and once he starts living with them no one knows when he would leave. Gradually he becomes the authority as the inmates of the boarding house—sleep-loving Gour, forgetful Shibu, messy Sisir and late master Sudhir—feel that they have been blessed with the kindness of his presence with his imaginary anecdotes. Quite interestingly, Sudhir was Mitra's nickname while the other names were taken from the first names of three people who were close to the author, namely, Gaurangaprasad Basu, Shibram Chakraborty and Sisir Mitra.[33] Depending on Ghanada's kindness, storytelling becomes a ritualized event performed on holidays in the boarding house. Ghanada does not do anything for his livelihood, stays in his attic for days except his regular evening walk and occasional disappearances (nobody knows where he goes, especially at the end of the month when the date of payment for the mess approaches), and does not pay even a penny for the share of his food and lodging. On weekends or holidays, if his mood is on, he opens the backpack of his stories and "Whatever we do in other five days, laughing at Ghanada on Sunday and Saturday has not been written in the horoscope."[34] This curious character of extraordinary ability to weave stories creates an imaginary identity for himself—a superhero—that allows him power and a relative autonomy to live a life in excess without being a part of the social machine. It allows him an escape from the policing desire and strict morality of a culture which has an ambivalent attitude towards storytelling and idleness.

In his interviews, Mitra bluntly denies any possibility of being influenced by any living personality while creating the character of Ghanada, yet his occasional comments help us trace the psychic as well as social context behind his works.[35] In "The Storyteller", Benjamin recounts

a familiar German proverb, "'When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about,' goes the German saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar"[36]. In a similar way, in his autobiography *Nana Ronge Bona* [*Weaved in Various Shades of Colour*], Mitra writes about his childhood initiation into the magical world of stories while reading a poem by Jogin Sarkar: "Small man? / From where are you coming, if you can tell stories, tell me one."[37] The storyteller is a traveller in space and time, imagined and real, and Mitra elaborates on the mesmerizing effect that the poem had on him: "Rhyming with this poem, a desire to listen to the unknown stories of thousands of people of the world had awaken in my mind."[38] Elsewhere, he also writes about the *adda* of the *Kallol* group in the second floor of a building in Patuatola Lane in Kolkata which was a familiar place for the union of writers and poets of diverse sensibilities. The group did not discuss literature only, Mitra reminisces, and yet this *adda* was enough to provide current of inspirations.[39] In another essay "Adda, Ghore Othoba Pawthe" ["*Adda*, in a Room or on Road"], Mitra tells us about Sudhansumohan Mukhopadhyay or Sudhada, an integral part of an *adda* in Varanasi: "The person around whom the adda used to become intense was incomparable. How much has he read and how has he thought in different directions is, perhaps, important because this is expressed in one or two glittering expressions".[40] These personal experiences from different *addas* shape the character of Ghanada and furnish the backdrop of his stories.

There are two kinds of *addadharis* who dominated the *addas*—the one who possess knowledge and a magnetic art of storytelling and the other whom Nripendrakrishna Chattopadhayay ironically terms as "specialist"—a person who thinks that he knows everything. Ramprasad Gupta reminisces such a storehouse of all knowledge named Amitabha Sen:

> His command over mathematics, science, literature, and arts used to leave us dazzled. All the developments in the [different] fields of knowledge-science [I have translated the Bengali expression literally] were at his

> fingertips, thanks to good books and foreign journals. It was through him that we first saw the ubiquitous ball[-point] pen of today. That perhaps was the first ball[-point]pen in the world, called Reynolds. We were rendered speechless by it. Everyone took his turn at writing with it. You could write anyway you wanted. Amitabhababu's face wore his familiar gentle smile. Watching us, he only made one remark [in English]: "Mankind at last has been freed from the tyranny of the pen-angle."[41]

In Mandar Mukhopadhyay's essay "Addar Ashkawtha-Pashkawtha" ["Stories Revolving around *Adda*"], we come to know about the other type who was familiar as Negative Dadu:

> As his hair and beards were white, everybody would call him Negative Dadu. He had special expertise in *gul* (useless talk). The measure of his *gul* included going to buy colour canvas with Hussain, eating kabiraji cutlet with Ravi Shankar, travelling with Rathi Thakur to Japan or Java and working on Barshamangal with Dinu Thakur.[42]

These self-absorbed individuals with an inflated ego tries to attract the whole attention, do not allow others to open their mouth, and kills the democratic space of an *adda*. Nripendrakrishna Chattopadhayay writes:

> The most dangerous problem arises with the specialists. Just as the famous doctors are specialists in in their respective areas, in the same way there are specialists among the common people. If someone says something about mangoes in an adda and if there is a mango specialist, he will cry out, have you seen mangoes? Do you know how to eat mangoes? Does the people of Kolkata knows about mangoes?
>
> Generally, the people from Murshidabad are mango specialists…if a discussion starts about mango before them then there is no rescue! On that very moment Ramayana will begin.[43]

As a mixture of both these two types, Ghanada is an encyclopaedia of everything. He often surprises the readers with accuracy and minute detail. Not a "termite" as Nripendrakrishna Chattopadhayay would have called him, but Ghanada has a remarkable presence without whom the *adda* at 26, Banamali Nashkar Lane is miserable and empty.

Thinking Across

The American oral tradition of tall tales where the protagonist always finds himself in extraordinary events but has solution to every problem he faces and smartly comes out of the danger also serves as a source of inspiration for Mitra. In tall tales a yarn spinner narrates exaggerated or larger than life stories about himself as true or factual to an audience who are well aware of the context of his adventures and encourages the narrator with feigned agreement. The exaggerated images produced in such stories as the one in which a person was so tall that he needed a ladder to shave his own beard often leads to absurdity, but we cannot repudiate the narrator as a fraud or liar. The storyteller's assertion is a fragile form of deception which depends upon an unwritten agreement between the narrator and his audience.[44] Henry B. Wonham observes: "The meaning of a tall tale, in this oral scenario, is indistinguishable from the event of performance; significance is the product of a transactive process that occurs in the rhetorical space between narrative presentation and response."[45]

Carolyn Brown defines the tall tale in the following way:

> Its (Tall Tale) peculiarities are, first, that it masquerades as a true narrative, for it is told in the form of a personal narrative or an anecdote, and second, that it is sometimes heard as true, not simply through the mistakes of children or fools but by the design of the narrator. Finally, listeners who hear the tall tale as fictions often act as though they believe it to be true.
>
> We may begin, then, not with a definition that simply calls the tall tale a comic lie or an impossible exaggeration, but with the notion that the tall tale is a fictional story which is told in the form of a personal narrative or anecdote, which challenges the listener's credulity with comic outlandishness, and which performs different social functions depending on whether it is heard as true or as fictional.[46]

At this point, the similarity between the tall tale and superhero comics is quite obvious. There is a discrepancy between the actual and the aspiratory in superhero comics where an unimpressive person accidentally transcends its limits to become an active virtual identity. In Mitra's stories

Ghanada does every charismatic fit that a superhero does but he does it only in his imagination. Following the familiar Bengali colloquial expression, he kills tigers, not in action but in words.

Norris W. Yates identifies a tall tale as "a fantastic yarn rendered temporarily plausible by the supporting evidence of realistic detail"[47]. The stories are told in highly serious tone claiming high authenticity, and they often originate in a well-known or communally accepted event or incident, but Ghanada intervenes in mid-way and explains it in a different light by defying familiar interpretative norms. This overinvestment in the claim of accuracy, however, serves as a warning about the sincerity of the storyteller as the audience is ironically aware of the social status of the protagonist. Yet no one complains and eagerly listens to the gradual unfolding of his predicament. Wonham calls it the "rhetorical middle ground":

> Put another way, a tall narrative is neither purely factual nor purely fantastic, but depends for its effect on the ability of cultural insiders to perceive its relation to both fact and fantasy. If the connection in the listener's mind between reality and representation is at any point broken by the storyteller's excessive fantasy, then the narrative's humorous effect is lost. Competent members of the audience are never "sold" by the teller's exaggerations, yet neither are they purely cynical. Their response places them in a rhetorical middle ground, suspended between knowledge of the tale's distortion and appreciation for the teller's dexterity in stretching the limits of plausibility.[48]

The representation of Ghanada as a storyteller has a peculiar status; he is a storyteller within the story where his story has been narrated by an inmate, Sudhir, who reveals an insider's view of the inner chemistry of relationships at the boarding house. In the boarding house, storytelling is a collective process where the inmates often intervene in the storyteller's game of imagination. Even a slight dissidence breaks the spell of the "transactive harmony" between the narrator and audience and the collaborative process turns violently oppositional. Ghanada's fragile power and authority as an imaginary superhero is often challenged, occasionally conquered, eventually

compromised, and wilfully forgotten because non-acceptance of his authority would end in drying up of a great reservoir of stories.

Mask, Mimicry, Metamorphosis

The opening story informs us about the confusion regarding the age of Ghanada, which might be in between thirty-five to fifty-five because his tall, dry and extremely skinny figure makes it impossible to determine. The only thing that the inmates know about him is that "There is no place where he didn't go and there didn't happen any important event in the world in last two hundred years where he wasn't involved."[49] With very scanty material possession, Ghanada is almost bankrupt, and yet he owns the world in his imagination. Whatever he has is minimal and includes a fovourite hubble-bubble, a rack for clothes, a shelf, a few stools, a bed wrapped in a small blanket and a large (in variation two), faded portmanteau:

> This portmanteau is a matter of curiosity for all of us. We have researched and quarrelled for long regarding what is there inside and what not.
>
> Ghanada has never been seen to open this portmanteau in front of anyone. That is why the blamers say that the portmanteau is the ocular manifestation of Ghanada's stories. There is nothing that Ghanada cannot bring out of it, but actually it is totally empty.[50]

By chance if someone comes when it is open, he closes the lead with a loud thump as if it contains all the treasures of the world. Ghanada knows everything and travels everywhere without moving an inch from his room in the attic. Eccentric in a planned way, he artfully creates a mystery and suspense around himself in order to promote himself as a superhero who saves the world again and again from dire disasters.

"[T]he world is full of masks"[51], writes Benjamin, and Ghanada's creative metamorphosis as a superhero in a newly born nation needs to be understood from the perspective of a desire to rewrite the western canon of adventure narratives. It carves out a space

for a postcolonial agency "not only by beating the scientific-minded Westerners at their own game, but also by engaging directly with the belief systems of the less-civilized others he encounters"[52]. The place he lives in does not permit him this luxury, but his plastic imagination allows him the freedom to master the world. The technique that Ghanada uses to conceal the ordinariness of his origin, pennilessness and evaporating social status are the metaphorical mask of privacy and literal performance of mimicry—"time-honoured, transcultural technology for creative transformation"[53].

Steve Matthews writes that privacy functions "as the gatekeepers of the boundary between our private selves and the public domain, and for that reason they are important to the control we have over others' perceptions of, and beliefs about us."[54] Ghanada does not need to become an "object-being"[55] or strange body like the comic-book superheroes in order to attract attention, but rather his power of speech is enough to move him to an altered state of consciousness. He is an ideal example of Francis Bacon's "simulator"[56]. For him simulation is a kind of self-defence, a manner of saying no to social curiosity or freeing ourselves by withdrawing information from a world that is morally rigid, highly critical (or hypocritical) of the aberrant and aims to invade one's personal space. To some extent (because one can always guess and guess it rightly) this invisible boundary in association with mimicry or pretension of being something else protects him from moral accountability for his non-working self, which has traditionally been seen as a moral vice as in the proverbial disrespect for the Bengali son-in-law who stays with the rich family of his wife. The stories make it clear that Ghanada is a social parasite and object of ridicule. He does not have a job (or he does not want to do anything at all), family (or an artful evader of social and familial responsibilities) and home, but he is very cautious and aims to create a paradox regarding his identity by keeping his origin untraceable

and unidentifiable. Without adequate knowledge the inmates in the boarding-house are never sure of what to expect of him. This paradox helps him to create the alternative identity and control other's responses towards him by mis/leading them according to his own conscious design: "Do we know our own identity! We are searching that identity throughout our life".[57]

In *Senses of the Subject*, Judith Butler writes about the vulnerability of the subject who has already been written at birth, yet constantly tries to write himself and become the sole proprietor of that originary tale. He is given a name and an organic unity from outside which he accepts as his own:

> [S]ince strictly speaking, I was not present for the process, and I myself seem to be one of its various effects. Further, it may be that retroactively, I reconstitute that origin according to whatever phantasm grips me, and so you will receive an account only of my phantasm, not of my origin.[58]

The name "Ghana" is a typical example of this interpellation where the person who is named does not feel affinity with what the society thinks him to be. Articulating the problem of naming and one's identity, Judith Butler adds in *The Psychic Life of Power*:

> Indeed, one may well imagine oneself in ways that are quite to the contrary of how one is socially constituted; one may, as it were, meet the socially constituted self by surprise, with alarm or pleasure, or even shock. And such an encounter underscores the way in which the name wields a linguistic power of constitution in ways that are indifferent to the one who bears the name.[59]

Probably born in an ordinary household, his desire is the desire of every human being that he should be recognized by others. The problem is how to introduce himself to his inmates and how to avoid the identity that has been thrust upon him. Therefore, only the name is revealed—information of his whereabouts and past associations are withdrawn from easy access: "We could not know if Ghanada has anyone in his three generations".[60] Instead he provides a mock-historical identity with a ready supporting tale where his forefather was Meer-I-Imaraat Sawani Niger Bachanram Das, the building superintendent and the chief of secret intelligence service at

the Mughal court of Agra. Matthews writes: "Privacy and anonymity come apart because whereas privacy is a matter of negotiating the boundary that separates a person from public access, anonymity aims at preventing a link being made between two dissociated self-presentations."[61] This technique of suppression of identity allows him, albeit temporarily, an authority and freedom of expression and imagination.

The creation of an imaginary self which is exactly the opposite of his social identity serves as a subversive parody of the western heroes of the adventure genre. He is a brown superhero and it is not always a pleasant thing to his white adversaries who often use racist slangs like—black nigger, shrunk and bedbug. Though s "Dry" as a "coconut rope"[62], lazy and chicken-hearted (he often faints), he boasts of having enormous physical prowess. He is an expert in martial arts and practice of yoga has taught him to control breathing in such a way that it is not possible to strangle him however powerful the opponent is. The "shark bites are like tickling sensation"[63] for him and the fighting styles he adopts are *bangla kaachi*, *dhobi-paat* and *charki paak*—all derived from the everyday life of common people. An expert in all human and animal languages and adorned with technical knowledge, he keeps himself busy in dramatic adventures to save the world.

The Narratable Self

When the Frenchman Jacques Derrida writes that one is always "a stranger to [one's] name", he accidentally bumps into an old Bengali proverb, which tells us about the calamity of naming a blind child to be lotus-eyed.[64] The name is a mere sign, which symbolically represents an individual, but cannot reveal 'who' one is, rather it hides and pacifies a world beyond discursive knowledge, the singularity of one's being. Who someone is, is singular and imperceptible, and it retains, writes Hannah Arendt,

> a curious intangibility that confounds all efforts toward unequivocal verbal expression. The moment we want to say who somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying what he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a "character" in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us."[65]

In a different context Foucault also warns us that discourse is not life—a life made of language is not equivalent to a flesh and blood existence. There is an unbridgeable gulf between the philosopher's discourse and the lived life of an individual. For Arendt, a story can do wonders in revealing who one is when a philosophical discourse falters miserably. The virtue of narration lies in the fact that though it is weak, fragile and easily breakable, yet it "reveals the meaning without committing the error of defining it".[66] It can serve as an alternative strategy that has the gift of making a bridge across the gulf between discourse and life by focusing into the specific, unique, and particular lived experiences of life: "*Who* somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he himself is the hero—his biography, in other words."[67]

We can tell the story of every human life with a beginning and an end. To Arendt, this narratability of the human life "is the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history"[68]. Taking cue from Arendt, Adriana Cavarero constructs the concept of a "narratable self", which is not equivalent to the discursive subject but unique and unrepeatable, and "comes to desire the tale of his or her own life-story from the mouth (or pen) of another".[69] What guides the narratable self is a 'desire' for a narration of his unique lived existence. This opens a politically charged interactive space of interpersonal relationship between the narratable self and what Cavarero terms as the "necessary other". Politics, for Arendt, begins when individuals meet, interact and are eventually exposed to each other. This exposition to life makes an individual narratable. In Butler's theory of subjection, the constitutive or "abject outside" is solely responsible for identity formation. Cavarero also does not deny the influence of the outside

world in the formation of the inside of an individual. However, whereas in Butler the relationship between the subject and the formative outside is one of melancholia, in Cavarero, the relationship between the narratable self and the necessary other is of friendship and love though it does not exclude occasional enmity and rivalries.

Arendt acknowledges the constitutive power of stories as the preserver of life, but she discourages us to live life like a story. The biography of an individual, quite unlike a fictional story, does not have an author. It is written through the actions and speech of the individual as he responds and moves through life in a zigzag way without any idea about the future. One's life story as a whole is beyond one's control as it is continuously being written by an intense immersion (intimately and collectively) into the slippery and enigmatic thing called life. The story of our life cannot be planned; it is an effect not the cause and the unitary design that comes out of life can only be discovered by others, not the person who lived that life.

The Question of Authorship

In modern day democracy everyone is expected to follow the same norms, which completely disregards the singularity of the individual. The most irksome difficulty for Ghanada is to present himself in a world where he does not fit in in the social schemes of life where everyone, according to modern democratic values, is treated as equals. This "disjunction", according to Judith Butler, "between discourse and the life of the subject is precisely what opens a space for resignification"[70]. In spite of Arendt's timely reminder, the desire to become the omniscient narrator of one's own life is often irresistible. Storytelling is a game, a fantasy which does not have any use value and is not considered to be a significant 'work' in modern society that can earn a prestigious status. Yet the performative power of his art of storytelling allows Ghanada a fictional control over the course of his life. He, therefore, desires to tell his own imaginary

adventure stories so that the others recognise who he is transcending his name. But what he is does not remain only in the stories he tells about himself rather the one's which are told about him by others. The traces of his unique everyday life—private and public—that Ghanada leaves unknowingly in the *mess-bari* also constitute his narratable self.

There is a threefold irony behind the construction of the narratable self in these stories: Though Ghanada writes himself as a fictional storyteller inside the story, he has already been rewritten by the author, and yet, his stories have eventually been narrated within the stories by a third person, an inmate, Sudhir. The irony extends in a different track as Ghanada deliberately does not try to create what he is rather what he is not and wants others to think that this fictional self is what he is. He exhibits a kind of narrative authority as if he was present when he came to this world. "Narrative authority", writes Butler, "does not require being at the scene. It requires only that one is able to reconstruct the scene from a position of non-presence in a believable way or that one's unbelievable narration is compelling for its own reasons."[71] Like mythical Oedipus, his desire is not to find out his origin that precedes him, but to construct a counter narrative against the uselessness that has been rendered on him by a society which does not value his art. By countering the dominant norms, he creates counter norms whose iterative logic constitutes his identity as a superhero by a denial of his formative relations. The surplus identity is not only the result of a sense of loss, as in Butler, but a persistent strategy within an atmosphere which is not only antagonistic but friendly too. This production of the narratable self of Ghanada inside the story is not a third person narration after the fact, but rather it is constituted instantly both as a subject and object of its narration. Ghanada's story is his own story. The role of memory is important here because it is not reflective but creative. It is a semblance of memory that does not look behind, but looks forward in order to create a futuristic past. "The narratable self", writes

Cavarero, "finds its home not simply in a conscious exercise of remembering, but in the spontaneous narrating structure of memory itself."[72]

The Storyteller as a Superhero

The art of the storyteller is to break the habitual and boring everyday routine and open the listener's attention to other forms of life. Telling a story generates narrative authority—a power to control the mood of the audience and affect them in a significant way. "The usual right of a listener to choose not to listen to a speaker", writes Kreilkamp, "is withheld in the case of the storyteller".[73] Except his unusual appearance, what sets Ghanada apart as an individual is his exceptional rhetorical skill, an ability to create exciting stories out of anything—from umbrella to elephant.[74] He hypnotizes his audience by weaving a spider web of stories in which he himself is the superhero. This mimetic metamorphosis from nobody to an imaginary figure turns him active, albeit within a closed group, from the passive existence that renders him powerless and marginalized in a society that values useful work over leisurely life. As a reactionary force against the colonial work ethic, he refuses to work (occasionally vanishes no one knows where) and does not pay for his food and lodging. On working days, Ghanada prefers to stay away in his attic because "except listening to stories, there has never been seen any necessity to find him out".[75] In a story named "Kaanch" ["Glass"], Shibu asks him with mock-seriousness if he has any important business next evening. Ghanada's uselessness is so obvious to everyone, including Ghanada himself, that even his ready-wit cannot save him from being surprised by the abruptness of the unexpected interrogation: "We had to suppress laughter forcefully. Ghanada's work! We have never heard anything strange like that."[76] To mask the undesirability of his situation, Ghanada presents the current state of worklessness as a choice, a secret identity of a superheroic figure who wants to stay away for a while from his busy public life.

On rainy days, general strikes and holidays, when everything stands still and people of work feels paralysed, it is Ghanada who comes to their rescue. Mitra identifies the interpersonal relationship between Ghanada and the residents of the boarding house as "political".[77] Ironically, in spite of knowing what he claims to be real are only imaginative adventure narratives, the inmates of the *mess-bari* cannot come out of the spell of his stories, or even if they come out of it by a sudden desire to expel all impracticalities, they immediately regret it and try to restore the balance. This dramaturgical solution of the real-world where people cohabit in a social space ignoring the apparent contradictions is termed by the sociologist Erving Goffman as "working consensus": "The maintenance of this surface of agreement, this veneer of consensus, is facilitated by each participant concealing his own wants behind statements which assert values to which everyone present is likely to give lip-service."[78] Yet this suspension of value judgment reveals a kind of admiration and sympathy for someone who can live defying rational thinking. What would happen if one expels the security of reasons, and yet uses scientific facts and arguments to tell stories that resists clear conceptualization and categorization? As economically and socially bankrupt, Ghanada is inoperable in a modern society but his cosmopolitan existence—the ability of being at ease both in home and in an imaginary world—provides him a discursive authority in a society that had historically repudiated people who love the pleasure of doing nothing. Paul Kottman writes:

> Cavarero focuses …upon those moments when the disjunction between discourse and life is suspended through narration, and suggests that narrative relations, which see the desire for narration encounter its tale, can themselves be a political action. This happens, for instance, when one tells another the tale of his or her life; revealing that they recognize who that person is. If one understands politics in Arendt's sense, argues Cavarero…then the scene of narration, of telling each other life stories, takes on the character of political action.[79]

The tragedy of labelling what Ghanada endures as a linguistic curse is reformulated in his desire to see himself as a superhero in his stories, which is something unique about him and stays beyond the reach of social rules and regulations. Tragedy is averted by a temporary suspension of his name. The reason his inmates accept and even love him is not his interpellated identity, but as Cavarero would argue, because of who he is and not what he is seen as in society.

Fig. 5 Ghanada in *adda*

The ideas to be shared, or fought over, plans to be made, and stories to be told in an *adda* are not predictable. They arise out of nowhere and playfully pass into something else. However there is a predictable pattern or "style"[80] in each *adda* that is ritualistically maintained in every occasion. For Cavarero, however, the style or content is inessential and what is more essential is the desire for the story that gives the incoherence of the lived life a unity or figure however fleeting it may be.[81] To the inmates of the *mess-bari* listening to stories becomes a part of a habit and at the same time a necessity. In a day of worklessness, Ghanada's stories make them forget,

not without a feeling of guilt, that there is nothing useful to be done. The opening story titled "Mosha" ["Mosquito"] provides a clear account of the style of this *adda*: "Ghanada comes to our adda and routinely sits in the best arm-chair; when someone's luck is good, he asks for a cigarette from him and lights it, then closing his eyes he stays in meditative mode but suddenly starts laughing loudly in one of our remarks."[82] This might seem to be laughter of sarcasm, contempt and compassion at the idiocy and lack of knowledge of the inmates, and immediately he begins the story with an apparently forced unwillingness. At this crucial juncture, the inmates have to play the role of novices who are ashamed of their ignorance and surrender fully at Ghanada's gigantic reservoir of knowledge. A "diver into the sea of memory"[83], Ghanada reveals the imaginary adventure stories as part of his personal experience. Once the stories begin, he is a peculiar combination of a geologist, a cartographer, a chemist, a physicist, a mythologist, a martial art specialist, and above all, a great adventurer travelling relentlessly not only in this world but often in the outer space. The sources of his knowledge are a meticulous reading of newspapers and magazines: "His everyday routine is to read newspaper carefully from the heading to the printer's name and address".[84] Painstaking historical documentation, detailed geographical charting, meticulous scientific factuality, and unrestrained flight of fancy put Ghanada's imaginary travelogues in the borderline of what Joan Didion calls "magical thinking", a fine line that blurs the distinction between the rational and the irrational, the real and the imaginary, sense and nonsense.[85]

Storytelling as an artistic medium requires innovative technique that includes acting to grab the attention of the listeners. Benjamin notices how besides voice modulation, the small gestures of hands can play a key role in affective storytelling: "storytelling, in its sensory aspect, is by no means a job for the voice alone. Rather, in genuine storytelling the hand plays a part

which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures trained by work."[86] In classical Indian context, *abhinaya* or acting includes *mudra* or gestures, control over the facial muscles and twitch and ripple them in an incredible way. Besides creating a hypnotic spell through his gestures, Ghanada dramatizes the narrative performance by using every possible trick of storytelling—deliberation, dramatization and elision—to create a make believe world of fact and fantasy. He acts, overacts, reacts and even underacts whenever necessary to create a situation happy for a story. The appropriate sense of timing for a deliberate pause either to take the second cigarette or to engage the audience in speculation for a possible explanation of something adds to the suspense. He allows his audience a scope to try enthusiastically (often they consciously espouse themselves as fools to inflate Ghanada's ego, but it is not always innocent as it apparently seems to be or devoid of sarcasm altogether) to fill up the gap after a deliberate pause:

> "Yes, a little astrological calculation and with the help of, they may not be flies but something that belongs to the fly family –"
>
> Before Ghanada finished his speech, Shibu filled it up, "The history of the world would have been written from the opposite end."
>
> "The Himalayas would have fallen sideways!" Corrected Sisir.
>
> "Russia-America atomic pact would have been cancelled!" Gaur informed his decision.
>
> "No." Ghanada pushed the pipe of the hubble-bubble aside and looking at us with pity said, "Nothing like all these, two skeletons would have been found in a hidden cave in the Mandara mountain of Cameroon!"
>
> "Whose Ghanada?"
>
> "One of Dr. Larbo and the other of Ghanashyam Das!"[87]

But they never miss any chance to mock him whenever the spell breaks. "How horrible! You forgot the skeletons there!",[88] Shibu adds as if he is utterly surprised. Shibu's comment pushes them on the verge of uncontrollable laughter, but with an ominous apprehension of Ghanada's

displeasure, they begin the rescue operation to save the story from a premature death. Suppressing the laughter forcefully, they start saying whatever comes in their mind to undermine Shibu's impudent remark:

> "Perhaps, there were man eater animals inside the cave!" Sisir guessed.
>
> "Perhaps, when it was going to bite, it sneezed as a fly entered inside its nose!" I elaborated.
>
> "No, no, they were caved inside. And a swarm of flies came and moved the stone." Gaur's easy solution.[89]

When Ghanada's mood is on, he overlooks these trifling remarks and continues with his bizarre explanations and expositions, which are often beyond the comprehension of the audience.

Fig. 6 Charki paak

In an insanely moving modern life, Ghanada does not move at all and observes the whole universe from his attic. He does not approve bodily movement—the only moving thing for him is his synthetic imagination. To preserve the sanctity of this imaginatively felt reality of a space, he

is always ready to abandon the profanity of actually moving there. Whenever his inmates in the *mess-bari* make plans to go to Digha, Darjeeling or Diamond Harbour, either he directly stands in their way or contrives something unusual so that they are forced to cancel their programme. In such situations, Ghanada is one who is an "expert in making happen what is unexpected"[90] and enjoys a sadistic pleasure by ruining other's plans. Knowing that Ghanada claims himself to be a great fisherman, the inmates of the *mess-bari* plans to go for fishing with Ghanada in the story "Daant" ["Tooth"]. One fine morning when they are busy in preparation, Ghanada begins the story of his fishing adventure in Avalon in California. He claims to have caught an eight hundred kilogram tuna, which made all famous fishermen dance at its will. No one has spare time for Ghanada's nonsense in such busy moments. To cut him short of his fabrication, Gaur instantly catches his words and finishes it quickly saying that he has already read the story in newspaper, which wrote in detail how Ghanada caught the fish from the beach even without using motorboat or a wheel. To some extent everyone supported Gour because they wanted to postpone the story for a holiday. Such neglect for his stories makes Ghanada upset and he instantly leaves the room saying that they know nothing because the original story was not allowed to be published in the newspapers:

> Once Ghanada bends who can make him straight! Though he was not very enthusiastic, he had no objection against our caprices too. Even he agreed to accompany and teach us…Sunday was our expedition! Ghanada did not come down from his room after Friday evening. The cook served him food upstairs. We came to know that he had cold. On Saturday morning we came to know that there was fever with cold and in the night bulletin we were informed that he had toothache.[91]

Everybody realizes that Ghanada is trying to take revenge by ruining their plans and decides to give him a lesson. They know Ghanada has one weakness—Superman's kryptonite—he cannot

resist himself before food. Next morning they move upstairs to meet Ghanada with a plate of delicious croquette:

> "What's the matter, Ghanada! You are not coming down for three days? Aren't you going with us?"
>
> "How can I go!" It's difficult to understand whether Ghanada's sigh is for us or for the plate of croquette.
>
> "Yes, it's not right to travel with toothache," we are full of consolation. "But it's not possible to offer you to taste the croquette. We have such a bad luck. Let's go."[92]

With the possibility of the disappearance of the plate of croquette, Ghanada fails resist himself:

> "As you are requesting so much, let me taste one." It seems as if Ghanada doesn't like the idea.
>
> As if we are also reluctant—"but in such toothache…"
>
> Gour almost swings the plate near his nose!
>
> Almost snatching the plate from his hand, Ghanada says in a tone of self-sacrifice, "Let it pain. I have a responsibility. How can I not go with you and at the same time not check what rubbish you are having!"
>
> The first bite went without any problem, then the second bite—*kotus*!
>
> We cried out together.
>
> On the one side of the floor, there lied the big round marble that was inside the croquette, and on the other, the two rows of false teeth from inside Ghanada's mouth.
>
> With big, round eyes Gour asked in a honeyed tone, "It seems that it's false teeth. Does the false teeth pain too?"[93]

Even this revelation fails to outsmart Ghanada, and with a pitiful smile, he begins the adventurous history of his lost teeth. Once Ghanada begins his story, they cannot move. The station wagon comes outside and starts blowing horn impatiently, but Ghanada continues to weave his spider web until they are totally entangled and surrender helplessly losing the desire or power to resist. The story ends with an account of the removal of his teeth as he used false teeth as spy camera during his adventure in Avalon: "There was no time to go for fishing then."[94]

Occasionally the "working-conscientious" or the unwritten agreement of the *mess-bari* is broken by the intrusion of a new member (obviously for financial reasons as Ghanada never pays

at all), an outsider who certainly does not have any respect for Ghanada's talent. A new member, Bapi Dutta, who has a special weakness for duck curry, joins the *mess-bari* in "Haans" ["Duck"]. Unlike others, he does not love to stay there during holidays, but rather buys a few specially chosen ducks and takes them home. One weekend he fails to go home for some reasons and Ghanada gives him a grand treat with his own duck. When he comes to know, furious, Bapi Dutta goes upstairs, shouting and calling him "shrivelled, *morkot*, cannabis-addict, over smart".[95] But as skilful manoeuvrer of the situation around him, Ghanada has an aptitude to change a situation by turning the serious into something insignificant just as he makes the trifling into something serious in his stories. As if the terrible noise has disturbed his sleep, Ghanada comes out from his room and accepts the charge innocently without making any fuss about it. Even more furious, Bapi Dutta wants to know the reason behind this kind practical joke, and Ghanada, in a gloomy note, utters only one sentence: "That's nothing. Till now, I have cut twelve hundred and thirty-two ducks. I don't know how many more I have to cut."[96] Saying this, Ghanada starts moving towards his room sadly. This fails to appease Bapi. He knows Ghanada's tricks very well and calls him a *gulbaaz*. In a reluctant note, Ghanada begins the prologue baffling Bapi with only one word—"Ngaruserchong":

> "What did you say!" Bapi Dutta is angry.
>
> "Ngaruserchong! It's not you, it's the name of a duck." Ghanada assures…"Do you know cutting the belly of one duck, even after buying the whole area of the city of Kolkata, it's possible to take Bengal, Bihar and Odisha on lease with what remains!"[97]

This explanation, quite visibly, baffles Bapi and enfeebles his tone. Yet he keeps the temper and enquires if there is diamond or ruby inside the duck's belly:

> "Diamond, Ruby!" Ghanada Smiles contemptuously, "with such intelligence, you can buy ducks only to eat!"
>
> "What is there?" Bapi Dutta is eager now.

> "What is there?" Ghanada sits on his cot comfortably. We also sat wherever we could. As Sisir has arrived just after the dinner, he couldn't bring the cigarette case. Looking at him in reproachful eyes, Ghanada says solemnly, "There is one snuff-box."
>
> "Snuff-box! I thought, it was a chillum of something!" There's no force in Bapi Dutta's sarcasm. He has taken a place on the side of the cot.
>
> Ghanada frowned sharply. "It's late at night, it's better to go to sleep." He yawned.
>
> We are afraid but Bapi Dutta is obstinate. "Why is there a snuff-box?" It seems that he has forgotten the grief of his four ducks.[98]

Now Ghanada begins his story in a mode of documenting a historical record:

> It's because on 17th July 1935 I lost my way and was dying in a blizzard on the highest plateau on earth; as the biggest villain of the world von Bruhl started following me with his gang like hyenas; it didn't matter if I died but there was no way to save my reputation; because I saw a ghost in the three mile steep way of the sixteen hundred and ten feet high Gurla mountain range; and also because I could kill the *changu* (hyena) with the last bullet of my gun."[99]

It creates a pin drop silence in the room and Ghanada delays a little more before beginning his extraordinary adventure story, which inscribes a sound knowledge of geographical details of the routes and terrains and flora and fauna of Tibet. Knowing the trick well, the other inmates are forced to turn their laughter into cough, but when Ghanada finishes his long story, Bapi Dutta becomes his biggest admirer. Bapi goes on buying ducks relentlessly with a hope to find out the snuff-box until it becomes unbearably unappetizing for the others. The next story "Suto" ["Thread"] reveals how the inmates make an ingenious plan to put an end to this excessive duck eating by putting a real snuff-box inside the belly of a duck. Cutting the duck, Bapi Dutta discovers a box, joyfully brings it to Ghanada, and an unwilling Ghanada is forced to open the box only to reveal a piece of paper with a written hand note: "Ghanada's gul".[100] The inevitable consequences make Bapi leave the *mess-bari* and Ghanada confines himself in the attic for a long period of time in spite of the frantic attempts of the inmates to bring him to their *adda*.

Counterperformativitiy

The everyday menu of the *mess-bari* is decided according to Ghanada's whimsical preferences. They order the best food available in the local restaurant, smoothly places a cigarette into his fingers just when his mood for story sets in, and do not complain when at the end of the story he leaves, as if mistakenly, with the entire cigarette case as his own. Yet this storyteller superhero is a cowardly and faint-hearted man who stops his evening walks in times of social unrest and is duly taunted by his inmates.[101] At times Ghanada's excessive mimicry (role playing of the superhero) turns out to be what Roger Caillois sees as "a luxury, even a dangerous luxury"[102]. Performativity has a built in possibility of subversion. Ghanada's illocutionary model has its own Austinian misfires. His illocutionary verdict about himself as a superhero is actually a perlocution dependent upon an audience who, ironically, is aware about his bankrupt social position. To add more to it, that they know his hollowness is also not beyond Ghanada's recognition. The audience, though careful not to displease him, often feels irritated. They tease, taunt, mock, cough (in disbelief), laugh (in ridicule) (often they cough in order to suppress laughter) and ask questions about the empirical validity of his imaginary accounts. The magic spell breaks and Ghanada suddenly takes leave to upstairs silencing them with cold silence. But this questioning of his identity does not dismiss or erase his status as a superhero altogether and the inmates does everything possible to bring him back to his seat the next holiday. Ghanada knows their hunger for stories but does not consent easily. He comes down from the attic only when he wants thereby retaining his authority unharmed.

If someone tries to cross-check the informative details—scientific, sociological, linguistic, or biological—one would find that Ghanada is pedantically accurate, but the stories he

weaves hang loosely on zero gravity, and allows him the freedom to improvise according to necessity. There are strange and incredible logics behind Ghanada's counterfactual imagination:

> If unburned brick becomes hard after burning why would two white cats of Durgapur not catch three rats? What kind of logic is that? ….To offer this kind of logic is only possible for one person and he can turn the negative into positive with the magic of his words.[103]

This kind of extravagant gaming with *naya* philosophy to prove what he wants to prove is possible only for one person, Ghanada, the Great. His logic is incomprehensible, and therefore, he remains invincible. Any suspicion is refuted by a rejoinder coming out of his extravagant imagination, which can bring anything out of airy nothing to fill up the loophole in the narrative. Often he is challenged only at the last moment when he is already leaving, and therefore, does not bother to reply at all.

The organic relationship between Ghanada and the inmates of the *mess-bari* is often fraught with tension and rivalries, yet there is no lack of togetherness and communication. Kottman writes: "Like Arendt, Cavarero begins from the simple fact that the first consideration for any politics is that human beings live together, and are constitutively exposed to each other through the bodily senses."[104] This relationship is outside the surveillance zone of the nation state and does not endorse the politics of equality, which confers on each individual the same right and dissolves his uniqueness. When Ghanada becomes angry or upset for some reason, or even unreason, he deserts the *adda* for a few weekends, or vanishes for a few months. The inmates do everything to break his stony silence. Sometimes they tease him with food, ignores him totally, or brings a rival to hurt his inflated ego[105]. When they ignore him for long, Ghanada becomes eager, moves around the room but cannot join the *adda* without invitation. They also make plans to trap him, but he is too intelligent to come out of everything. In many such instances, they try to trap him using his own old stories[106]. A letter from Monsieur Schaustelle, a

French cartographer, arrives[107]; after a few days hard labour in the national library, a scroll is made using parchment paper, Chinese ink and random letters from Brahmi, Kharosthi and Egyptian scripts; and a man from an amateur theatre group is presented as Maulavi Zia Uddin Khan from Al Azhar who has come to meet Ghanada with a request to translate the Arabian manuscript of Ibn Zubayr. But Ghanada is ever ready to lose his specs, divert them from the topic, or prove that the scroll is not original.

Sitting in the attic of a *mess-bari*, Ghanada travels to unknown and inaccessible lands across the globe. He creates an alternative reality out of the possible and challenges the norms by an intrusion of the shocking, the new and the unthought. In her essay "Narrative Threads: Philosophy as Storytelling", Megan Craig Writes:

> I think that philosophy is one of the most valuable forms of storytelling, one of the most compelling ways in which one finds oneself moved by principles, values, and ideas that reconfigure one's sense of self and world.[16] But in addition to great thoughts about reality, we need immersion in the difficult realities of life itself. As Vincent Colapietro reminds us, "Quitting the study, leaving the house, and venturing forth into the world beyond the confines of those enclosures, be it to enter the secluded field or the crowded street, entails crossing a number of seemingly insignificant thresholds."[17] Venturing out into the messy and real terrain of the world is made easier when one has an adventurous spirit and an expansive, elastic imagination. The best philosophy and literature hone such imagination, forcing it into new directions and keeping it nimble enough not to recoil when faced with the unknown. Our theories are bound to weaken or to fail—some of them catastrophically at the very moment when we need them to buoy us the most. But these failures are also opportunities to engage in a form of magical thinking—learning to hold two or more equally compelling truths together, hearing multiple stories, living with the tensions within our own souls, without having to choose one over the other or to cancel anything out.[108]

To think of a meaning or moral in his story is to overlook its significance. No logic, request or temptation can move him out of the dingy and dirty mess. Though the inmates refute his fabulations as Robert Blake's stories[109], they cannot think of moving from the mess without him.

The merging of two kinds of disparate and seemingly incompatible realities—scientific information and imaginative storytelling—puts Ghanada into a peculiar position, which recalls Plato's caution of being carried away by the power of poetry and imagination. Ghanada's stories breaks borders and creates a rupture in their understanding of reality as they cannot put the narrator and his stories into any form and creates an unease by putting them on the edge. Though a social invalid, Ghanada tries to create a value out of uselessness. Craig rightly says: "Plato saw the risks of this complication, but he also saw its promise—the enlivening power of inspiration and the possibility that we can be transfigured by something deeply strange and foreign, literally moved to grow expansive wings."[110] Wonham call this effort "humorous failure"[111] because though he temporarily becomes a superhero by bending the social norms for a while through his stories, ultimately he fails to challenge credulity and confirms his inferior status. To realize him as a superhero, we need sympathy with his kind of life, imaginative flexibility and a banishment of rational knowledge or judgment that we usually don't have.

Endnotes

[1]Friedrich Nietzsche, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is* (London: Penguin, 1992), 33.

[2]Hannah Arendt, "Isak Dinesen: 1885-1963," *Men in Dark Times* (New York: A Harvest Book, 1968), 105.

[3]This story is part of my personal experience and has been narrated from memory. The name of the professor has been withheld for quite obvious reasons.

[4] Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1991), 109.

[5]Rushdie, Haroun, 157.

[6] Walter Benjamin, trans. Harry Zohn, "The storyteller: Reflections on the works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations* (NY: Schocken Books, 2007), 83.

[7]See Zygmunt Bauman, "Excess: An Obituary," *Parallax* 7, no. 1 (2001): 85-91.

[8] Benjamin, "The storyteller," 89.

[9]James Loxley, *Performativity* (London & NY: Routledge, 2007), 2.

[10]Brian W. Sturm, "The "Storylistening" Trance experience," *The Journal of American Folklore* 113, no. 449 (2000): 287-88.

[11] Sturm, "The "Storylistening,"" 294.

[12]Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Delhi: OUP, 1988), ix.

[13] Ritika Batabyal, "Reception, Resistance and Transformation of a Foreign Genre within the Colonial Culture: A study of Nigerian (Igbo and Yoruba) and Indian (Bangla) Novels," (PhD diss., Jadavpur University, 2013), 100.

[14]Ivan Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (NY: Cambridge U P, 2005), 3.

[15]Kreilkamp, *Voice*, 4.

[16] Kreilkamp, *Voice*, 2.

[17] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 180-81.

[18] Amartya Sen, "Calcutta after Independence: A Personal Memoir," *Anandabazar Patrika* [Rabibasorio], August 18, 2019, 1. Translation mine.

[19] Buddhadeb Basu, "Adda," in *Kolkatar Adda,* ed. Samarendra Das (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2010), 11-15. Translation mine.

[20]Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 181.

[21]Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 203.

[22] Buddhadeb Basu, "Adda," 13; see also Bhaba Roy, "The Story of the Evolution of Adda," in *Bangalir Adda*, ed. Leena Chaki (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2009), 213. "Adda does not know any law, it does not follow any centrality; it only knows free, conditionless democracy". Translation mine.

[23]Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 190.

[24] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 187. See also, Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 206. Sukumar Ray reminisces Hiran Kumar Sanyal who "had a remarkable capacity to help the *ashar* [*majlish*, convivial gathering] come into its own. On days on which the Monday Club had no specific subject to discuss, he kept us enthralled by telling us all kinds of stories".

[25] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 187.

[26]Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 206.

[27]Ivan Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8.

[28]Biswajit Ray, "Ek Sanyasir Adda: Ekti Apatobismrita Rachana," in *Bangalir Adda*, ed. Leena Chaki (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2009), 192.

[29]Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 191.

[30]The name of the street reminds us of the famous 221B Baker Street and serves as a pastiche of the detective stories of Arthur Conan Doyle.

[31] Shibnarayan Roy, "Panchasher Dawshoke Pikeparar Adda" in," in *Bangalir Adda*, ed. Leena Chaki (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2009), 13. Translation mine.

[32]Premendra Mitra, "Robinson Crusoe Meye Chilen" ["Robinson Crusoe was a Girl"]," in *Ghanada Samagra* [The Collated Stories of Ghanada], vol. 3 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2010), 17. All translations from Premendra Mitra's *Ghanada Samagra* are mine unless noted otherwise.

[33] Surajit Dasgupta, *Bangla Chotogolper Suchana O Premendra Mitra* [*The beginning of Bengali Short Story and Premendra Mitra*] (Kolkata: Dey's, 2006), 171.

[34] Premendra Mitra, "Chata" ["Umbrella"], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2000), 368.

[35]See Premendra Mitra, "Kaar Aadoley Toiri Holo Ghanada" ["The Model for Ghanada"], interview by Kartik Majumder, *Anandamela*, May 28, 1986, 21-23; Premendra Mitra, "Ghanada Elo Kothaa Thekey" [How Ghanada Appeared'], interview by Kinnar Roy, *Kishor Gyan Bigyan*, June 1986. *https://ghanada.wixsite.com/ghanada-gallery/interviews*

[36] Benjamin, "The storyteller," 84.

[37] Premendra Mitra, "Nana Ronge Bona" ["Weaved in Various Shades of Colour"], in *Smiritikawtha O Onyanno* [*Autobiography and Others*] (Kolkata: Dey's, 2017), 22. Translation mine.

[38] Premendra Mitra, "Nana Ronge," 22. Translation mine.

[39] Premendra Mitra, "Purono Kolkatar Smiriti O Kallol Jug" ["The Memory of Old Kolkata and the Kallol Age"], in *Smiritikawtha O Onayanno* [Autobiography and Others] (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2017), 233.

[40] Premendra Mitra, "Adda Ghore Awthoba Pawthe," in *Kolkatar Adda*, ed. Samarendra Das (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2014), 37. Translation mine.

[41] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 206-07.

[42] Mandar Mukhopadhaya, "Addar Ashkawtha-Pashkawtha" ["Stories Revolving around Adda"], in *Bangalir Adda*, ed. Leena Chaki (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2009), 161. Translation mine.

[43] Nripendrakrishna Chattopadhayay, "Adda Aro Adda," in *Kolkatar Adda*, ed. Samarendra Das (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2010), 30. Translation mine.

[44]Henry B. Wonham, *Mark Twain and the Art of the Tall Tale* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 31.

[45]Wonham, *Mark Twain*, *27.*

[46] Carolyn Brown, *The Tall Tale in American Folklore and Literature* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 10-11.

[47]Wonham, *Mark Twain*, *34.*

[48]Wonham, *Mark Twain*, 35.

[49] Premendra Mitra, "Mosha" ["Mosquito"], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Pubs, 2010), 21.

[50]Mitra, "Futo" ["Hole"], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Pubs, 2010), 126.

[51]Joyce Cheng, "Mask, Mimicry, Metamorphosis: Roger Caillois, Walter Benjamin and the Surrealism in the 1930s," *Modernism/Modernity* 16, no. 1 (2009): 79.

[52]Anwesha Maity, "Ghana-da's Tall-Telling: Reframing History, Estranging Science, and Appropriating Indigenous Structures of Feeling," *Studies in the Fantastic* 4 (2016/17), 49.

[53]Cheng, "Mask, Mimicry, Metamorphosis," 65.

[54]Steve Matthews, "Anonymity and the Social Self," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2010): 351.

[55] Cheng, "Mask, Mimicry, Metamorphosis," 68.

[56] Francis Bacon, "Of Simulation and Dissimulation," in *Bacon's Essay's: A Selection*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1977), 64.

[57] Premendra Mitra, "Vela" ["Boat"], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 2 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), 412.

[58]Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 2.

[59]Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford and California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 31.

[60]Premendra Mitra, "Chokh" ["Eye"], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), 350.

[61]Matthews, "Anonymity," 355.

[62]Premendra Mitra, "Ghanadake Vote Din" ["Vote for Ghanada"], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), 281.

[63]Mitra, "Ghanadake Vote Din," 287.

[64]Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London and NY: Routledge, 2000), 2. The Bengali proverb is *kana cheler naam padmalochan*.

[65]Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1998), 181.

[66]Arendt, "Isak Dinesen," 105.

[67]Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 186.

[68]Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 184.

[69]Paul A. Kottman, "Translator' Introduction," in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London and New York, Routledge: 2000), x.

[70]Kottman, "Translator' Introduction," xxi.

[71]Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, 4.

[72]Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 34.

[73]Kreilkamp, *Voice*, 9.

[74]Most of the stories are based on a single and apparently unusual everyday object or animal. For example, "Kaanch" [Glass"], "Dhulo" [Sand] and "Mosha" [Mosquito].

[75]Premendra Mitra, "Kaanch" ["Glass"], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), 52.

[76]Mitra, "Kaanch," 52.

[77]Premendra Mitra, "Tawl", in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 2 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), 50.

[78]Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1956), 3-4.

[79]Kottman, "Translator' Introduction," xxii-xxiii.

[80]Premendra Mitra, "Naach" ["Dance"], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 2 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), 69.

[81]Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 34.

[82]Mitra, "Mosha," 21.

[83]Premendra Mitra, "Dhulo" ["Dust"], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 2 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), 23. Elsewhere "the storehouse of memories," 27.

[84]Mitra, "Tawl," 52.

[85]Megan Craig, "Narrative Threads: Philosophy as Storytelling," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 28, no. 4 (2014): 438-53. Premendra used *National Geographic Magazine* and other scientific journals for the references.

[86]Benjamin, "The storyteller," 108.

[87]Premendra Mitra, "Machi" ["Fly], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), 310-11.

[88]Mitra, "Machi," 311.

[89]Mitra, "Machi," 311.

[90]Premendra Mitra, "Ghari" ["Watch"], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), 147.

[91]Premendra Mitra, "Daant" ["Tooth"], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), 138-39.

[92]Mitra, "Daant," 139.

[93]Mitra, "Daant," 139.

[94]Mitra, "Daant," 147.

[95]Premendra Mitra, "Haans" ["Duck"], in Ghanada Samagra, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), 158.

[96]Mitra, "Haans," 158.

[97]Mitra, "Haans," 159.

[98]Mitra, "Haans," 159. Tibetan name for Lesser Whistling Duck.

[99]Mitra, “Haans,” 159.

[100]Premendra Mitra, “Suto” [“Thread”], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), 172.

[101]Mitra, “Tawl,” 52.

[102]Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” in *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, ed. Claudine Frank (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), 97.

[103]Premendra Mitra, “Maap” [“Size”], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), 429.

[104]Kottman, “Translator’ Introduction,” ix.

[105]Premendra Mitra, “Dhil” [“Clod”], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), 190.

[106]Mitra, “Machi,” 309.

[107]At times they become confused to distinguish between imagination and reality. e.g. “After coming down, I asked Sisir, “Well, did the insured letter really arrive or it’s our imaginary creation?” Sisir replied in a thoughtful mood, “I’m also thinking the same thing.” See Mitra, “Suto,” 185.

[108]Craig, “Narrative Threads: Philosophy as Storytelling,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 28, no. 4 (2014): 449. JSTOR.

[109]Premendra Mitra, “Chuch” [“Needle"], in *Ghanada Samagra*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2001), 215.

[110]Craig, “Narrative Threads,” 446.

[111]Wonham, *Mark Twain*, 45.