Thinking the ‘Hero’, Performing the ‘Super’:

PHILOSOPHICAL INTERVENTIONS IN THE CONCEPT OF THE SUPERHERO TODAY

(A thesis submitted to the University of North Bengal for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in English)

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Declaration

I declare that the thesis titled **Thinking the 'Hero', Performing the 'Super': Philosophical Interventions in the Concept of the Superhero Today** has been prepared by me under the supervision of Dr. Ranjan Ghosh, Associate Professor, Department of English, University of North Bengal. I also confirm that no part of this thesis has formed the basis for the award of any degree or fellowship previously.

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Abstract

The theory of the superhero as produced by the comic-book industry and endorsed by numerous scholars in the field exhibits a violent generalization of the singularity of a philosophical concept and its immense possibility. Curbing philosophical excess, the superhero became naturalized, a commodified product of the culture industry. Fetishization of the superhero as a cultural icon and its reification into an apparently pre-given, homogenous and unchangeable identity emptied it of its active potentialities. Over the years, a formulaic and easily predictable genre developed around the concept where an accidental origin story, a dual identity, a professed mission, bright costume and an exaggerated display of power became its constituting elements. This work questions the definition and the allegedly sacrosanct nature of the superhero's origin and identity by tracing back its lost connection with the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche especially his concept of Overman or Superman. It also attempts to break through the imprisonment of the concept into an insular identity, a self-inclusive genre that has been dominating the creative and critical domain since the birth of Superman in 1938. The work looks into the historical, social and cultural crisis that inspired the creation of the concept and tries to explore how the superheroic imagination opens up diverse modes of creative thinking, transforming and exceeding its own limits. It attempts to create 'movable bridges' across time, genres and cultures by emphasizing the 'different' and often the 'funny' which always exceed the normative principles of superhero comics.

The concept, as Gilles Deleuze sees it, is a living object with an intricate and intriguing life of its own that originates with the primal human desire of naming the unnameable and preserving a moment in the incessant flow of becoming. It bears a tension within and always strives to go beyond the traceable cultural and linguistic point of origin. The concept dies when it attempts to deny and expel its inner instability and becomes insular

by clinging to the comfort of metaphysical security as it happened with the commodified production of the superhero. The 'nonconceptual', on the other hand, as projected by Theodor Adorno, in turn, has a disruptive force that has the capacity to dismantle any attempt to form a stable identity. Adorno calls this politics of revealing the non-identity within a concept, 'negative dialectics'. Both Deleuze and Adorno provide a way in and a way out of, a joy of putting the chaos of existence into an ephemeral cage of concepts and the ecstasy of transcending this burdened existence by lending "a voice to its unfreedom".

The concept of the superhero unfolds a dangerous liaison between philosophy and literature and the first chapter entitled "Re-thinking the Superhero: A Concept in the Making" reconceptualises the superhero in a threefold way. First, it questions the allegedly sacrosanct nature of the superhero's origin and identity in the comic books and dissociates it from the preassigned conventions that historically harnessed its imaginative possibilities. Secondly, it emphasizes on the humanity of superheroes rejecting the familiar trend to see them as nonhuman or posthuman figures. Thirdly, it explores how 'doing' or 'performativity' constitutes the 'being' of the superhero. Widening and opening the scope of the concept, I suggest that any human who consciously reiterates a specialized act with remarkable skill and authority which constitutes his identity as a figure of extraordinary abilities, is a superhero. This new configuration creates an opening and harbours a democratic openness where to be a superhero is not a prerogative of a chosen one but open to all. The removal of originary task makes them more exciting and brings them down to the human world.

Once we see the inner logic of the superhero as being workless or without any set task to perform, the idea of the superhero as a unified category disappears and we become aware about the plural character of the superhero. My selection of four unusual figures from diverse genres as superheroes in the following four chapters—Narayan Debnath's Batul the Great (comics), Premendra Mitra's Ghanashyam Das or Ghanada (Tall Tale), Satyajit Ray's

Professor Trilokeswar Shonku (science fiction), and one of the nine gems of Emperor Akbar's court, Raja Birbar or Birbal (mediaeval history)—all of whom have eventually been turned into comic book figures serve as an attempt to re-shape the discursive field by bringing in a space for fresh dialogues and negotiations. This transgeneric, translingual, and transcultural network of a concept introduces diversity where new co-ordinates come into play every now and then to start afresh an old friendship and form unheard of dimensions of the concept.

The second chapter titled "Tussle with Muscle" situates the concept of the superhero in a turbulent geography where there are as many culturally adapted versions of the concept as possible. The ironic juxtaposition of 'Batul' and 'the great' breaks the unwritten code of the hero / superhero cult, and starts the journey of a new category whose name and appearance quite unconsciously parodies his own self. The otherness of Batul as a superhero is also revealed in the fact that he exceeds generic expectations; he does not possess any colourful costume, a dual identity or a professed mission—three distinctive elements of the superhero genre—and yet we cannot deny his superhero status. This chapter delineates how the dilation of generic expectations by the inclusion of Batul into the superhero league opens up a new possible world by reconfiguring the boundary of the superhero genre. This transcultural predicament of the superhero governs the central concern of this chapter, and in a way, anticipates the other areas that premise this dissertation.

The main objective of the third chapter entitled "The Shah of Blah Kills the Tiger by Words" is to evaluate how Ghanada builds up a technique of presenting himself as a storyteller superhero in an *adda*. This chapter also delineates how Ghanada's proleptic imagination anticipates and answers all possible objections and creates a defamiliarization effect that collapses the divide between truth and untruth, reality and illusion. By referring to the works of Erving Goffman, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero,

this chapter analyses how Ghanada's figural imagination creates an imaginary identity that gives him freedom to live a parasitic, non-instrumental and leisurely life escaping from the policing desire of social and political institutions.

The fourth chapter entitled "Mapping the Genius" argues that what distinguishes Satyajit Ray's Professor Shonku as a scientist is his imagination which challenges the conventional and established rule or mode of science. His approach disrupts the cultural binary of science and aesthetics by performing a mode of doing science that is not constricted within a narrow boundary defined in a narrow way. Scientific knowledge is a complex historical process and the aim to exorcise science from other disciplines is a political manoeuvre. With a view to lend greater relevance to the study, this chapter centers on the making of the scientist as a postcolonial superhero—his philosophy, politics and persuasions. This chapter also serves as a critique of the contemporary culture of science that artificially restricts imagination, fiercely endorses science as the only medium of knowledge and promotes the superiority of a 'scientific mind'. This chapter reinforces the idea that non-scientific cultures and procedures which are deemed to be 'strange' and 'uncanny' carry a promise of an alternative world of knowledge.

The last chapter "Madness of Speech: Truth, Power and the Birbal Way" provides a critical analysis of Birbal's ability to decipher a situation by using his sharp intelligence and sense of humour that made him earn a distinguished position—one of the nine gems of emperor Akbar's court. Birbal's 'fearless speech' and argumentative narrative logic that reinterprets the law and the outlaw and promotes novel ways of understanding justice is also discussed in the course of this chapter. This chapter depicts his art of conversation, diplomatic imagination and its entanglement with laughter and humour; and this shows how this performance lends him the iconic identity of a superhero by way of bringing justice for people.

Within an ‘intra-active transcultural’ space, as Ranjan Ghosh puts it, that holds a disparate clutch of thinkers—Friedrich Nietzsche, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Theodor Adorno, Giorgio Agamben, Erving Goffman, Walter Benjamin, Judith Butler, Wai Chee Dimock, Adriana Cavarero, Simon Critchley and others—my project works out the ethics, aesthetics and politics of superhero as a performer under the rubric of the philosophy of concept, doing and agentiality. The superheroes combine the possible, the praxis and the performance with the impossible, the overdoing and the transcendent. The split in the hero with super serves as an opening at the collapse of conventionality of thinking and sense. By tracking and disrupting the popular cultural model the work hands out a new configuration of the superhero. The concept of the superhero is always, the work argues, more than itself and thinking of the superhero includes the danger of being led to something else. By virtue of the perpetual reconfiguration of its elements, the concept of the superhero makes itself “always new” and it is always already “open onto elsewhere”.

Contents

Acknowledgements i

Illustrations iii

Chapter 1: Re-thinking the Superhero: A Concept in the Making 1

Chapter 2: Tussle with Muscle 48

Chapter 3: The Shah of Blah Kills the Tiger by Words 66

Chapter 4: Mapping the Postcolonial Genius 106

Chapter 5: Madness of Speech: Truth, Power, and the Birbal Way 153

Postscript 181

Bibliography 186

Index 205

Annexure 213

Acknowledgements

Quite impulsively, I made an appointment and went to Kolkata to meet the legendary comic-book artist Narayan Debnath nine years ago. Coming back, when I disclosed the idea of writing an essay on Batul the Great to Sumana Roy—one of my favourite scholar-poets today—she expressed a lot of enthusiasm and suggested that I could write my dissertation on superhero comics. I am extremely indebted to her for igniting the fire in me to work in this area. I had my doubts, and yet I jumped into the river without knowing how to swim. But what appears to be a crucial mistake often has the power to push us towards an adventure into an unknown and uncomfortable territory and explore its limits. When you know that you have made a mistake and reached to a blind alley from where you cannot return, it pushes you to open new avenues of critical thinking. In fact, it took at least a couple years, if not more, for me to realize it and when it has finally been done, thanks goes to my supervisor Dr. Ranjan Ghosh who, as I always say, has taught me how to think. Without his critical inputs and guidance this dissertation would not have been possible. Thanks also go to my childhood hero, my cousin Shyamal Misra, who taught me the English alphabet. It is impossible to mention all but the scholars who have sent me their books and papers also owe my gratitude. My special thanks go to Peter Coogan for sending me a copy of his seminal but now out-of-print book *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. Arnab

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Illustrations

Figure 1: The evolution of Batul's stature (Source: *Comics Samagra* Vol. 1) 49

Figure 2: Batul fighting the Pakistani terrorists in Kargil (Source: *Batul Samagra*) 51

Figure 3: Batul loses his food (Source: *Batul Samagra*) 57

Figure 4: Batul catches a criminal by accident (Source: *Batul Samagra*) 58

Figure 5: Ghanada in *adda* (Source: Ghanada Samagra Vol. 2) 88

Figure 6: Charki paak (Source: *Ghanada Samagra* Vol.1) 91

Figure 7: Shonku and the magician Chi Ching (Source: *Shonku Samagra*) 120

Figure 8: A portrait of Raja Birbar seated with a bow and arrows (Source: Christ's) 155

Chapter I

Re-thinking the Superhero: A Concept in the Making

> A concept is a brick. It can be used to build the courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window.[1]
>
> - Brian Massumi, "Introduction", *A Thousand Plateaus*

> Disenchantment of the concept is the antidote of philosophy. It keeps it from growing rampant and becoming an absolute to itself. [2]
>
> - Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

Philosophy begins with a crisis, says Gilles Deleuze, and the philosopher's task is to provide an epistemological remedy to it by inventing, foregrounding and fabricating a concept. The concept is a living object with an intricate and intriguing life of its own that originates with the primal human desire of naming the unnamable and preserving a moment in the incessant flow of becoming. A concept is neither 'representation' nor an 'effect'; it is a 'creation'—a human answer to a situation which is beyond the human. It is not a metaphor; it has an open future and it serves as an alternative to the dogmatic and representational image of thought. The creation of a concept is an act of producing a map without charting the territory; it is not an imitation but a continuous experimentation with the 'real'. This act of conceptualizing intrinsically possesses a creative violence. It bears a tension within and always strives to go beyond the traceable social,

cultural and linguistic point of origin. As a product of violence it contains within itself the double movement of peace and unpeace, death and life, containment and dissatisfaction. It brings into life a momentary pleasure of solving a crisis by giving the formless a form and a pain and guilt for barring and banning a life of perpetual becoming—the sense of 'being in the world'. But the concept dies when it attempts to deny and expel its inner instability and becomes insular by clinging to the comfort of metaphysical security. This is a metaphorical death that hinders novelty and progress and causes a great rift between 'nature' and 'man'. The arbitrariness of fixed criteria for judgment limits the aim and scope of a concept and raises a question regarding its validity. But a concept always opens up and exceeds its limit; it is innately vulnerable, and hence dynamic and creative. This elusive and allusive nature of the concept leads it to a zone of indiscernibility from where it always escapes, exceeds, revolts and destabilizes any attempt to put it into regulative ideals. The literary artist's dealing with a philosophical concept ends up in pushing the horizon and producing an affect that is "not entirely under the control of consciousness" and "is often conveyed by contagion, contamination and inspiration".[3]

The suppleness and flexibility of a concept makes it vulnerable to change by coming into contact with other forms of life. In *What is Philosophy?*, Gilles Deleuze writes:

> In short, we say that every concept always has a history, even though this history zigzags, though it passes, if need be through, through other problems or onto different planes. In any concept there are usually bits or components that come from other concepts, which corresponds to other problems and presupposed other planes. This is inevitable because each concept carries out a new cutting-out, takes on new contours, and must be reactivated or recut.[4]

There are temporary bridges that connect a concept to other concepts belonging to different time, genres and cultures. This entanglement opens up diverse modes of creative thinking transforming and exceeding the concept's own limit. The shared space creates a neighbourhood. The new and

existing elements come into play every now and then to start afresh an old friendship. This interaction between concepts is not negative but active and provides the power to defy the 'apocalyptic objectivity' of a historian who always aims to secure a single and coherent meaning of an 'unruly' concept. The concept bears a signature of history and yet it is outside the scope of history. In contrast to a history that narrates and shapes the chaotic forces within the concept into a manageable identity, it is necessary to write a new history that rejects the reductive, casual and overarching explanation in favour of the 'nonconceptual', which is shapeless and transitory. "[T]he concept does not exhaust the thing conceived"[5], writes Theodor Adorno, and the "Conceptual order is content to screen what thinking seeks to comprehend".[6] The nonconceptual, in turn, has a disruptive force that has the capacity to dismantle any attempt to form a stable identity. Adorno calls this politics of revealing the non-identity within a concept 'negative dialectics', "which examines the relations between the object and its concept in order to discover discrepancies and reveal hidden potentialities."[7] Both Deleuze and Adorno provide a way in and a way out of, a joy of putting the chaos of existence into an ephemeral cage of the concepts and the ecstasy of transcending this burdened existence by lending "a voice to its unfreedom"[8]. These philosophical moves place the concept in the realm of future without dissociating itself from the past and the present becomes a fusion of amnesia and remembrance, nonthought and thought, poetical and political. As an uncanny thing that always slips through the net of consciousness, a concept is always more than itself; and thinking of one includes the danger of being led to another. By virtue of the perpetual reconfiguration of its elements, a concept makes itself "always new"[9]; and it is always already "open onto elsewhere"[10].

Hero / Superhero

In contemporary culture, a hero is commonly viewed as a figure of suspicion. Everywhere we see a democratic zeal to put an end to all forms of hero-worships. The hero is authoritative, unpredictable and overtly political; as a figure of excess, he does not conform to the ambiance of self-censoring political correctness that governs the modern world. At the same time, hero-worship needs a certain amount of forgetfulness and the memory of an idealized event of the past. In an unheroic (or anti-heroic) age, the superhero revives the dream of heroic action and imaginative remedy to the ills of the world. It is a mutated and transformed version, or a *mimeme*[11], as Arthur C. Danto would call it, of the hero and shares a "zone of neighbourhood" with the mother concept. However, this shared space of togetherness is incestuous in nature and not free from the competing claims of friendship and rivalry.

In common parlance, the superhero seems to be an amalgamation of two different but mutually interdependent traditions of hero-worship. Jerry Siegel's account of the origin of Superman reveals that his idea of the superhero was derivative of and modeled on the mythical heroes: "I am lying in bed counting sheep when all of a sudden it hits me. I conceive a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I have ever heard tell of rolled into one. Only more so."[12] But can the comic book superhero be treated as a hero? As the distinction becomes hazy, suspicion grows high. In her essay "Do We Need another Hero?", Angela Ndalianis admits this difficulty of separating the superhero from the hero:

> This anthology traverses the boundary between hero and the superhero. Where does the one end and the other begin? The title *Super/heroes*, has deliberately dissected the 'superhero' into two in order to highlight the dual focus on these character types – the hero and the superhero – who have much in common.[13]

This amalgamation makes it difficult to define the superhero because it cannot be clearly separated from other cultural genres which portray similar characters with superpowers. The

unease and awkwardness with this infusionism is evident in its use in various combinations such as ‘super-hero’, ‘super hero’, ‘super/hero’, and finally the ‘superhero’. The superhero is a literary hybrid; he is not a hero, and yet he is; the shadow of his mighty predecessor looms large and often eclipses his life.

Taking cue from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s illuminating suggestion, let us see how etymological analysis leads to a philosophical understanding of a concept. They refer to etymology as crazy “philosophical athleticism”,[14] which never ceases to amaze and amuse a thinker. The compound word ‘superhero’ is a curious combination of two cultures—a Latin prefix, ‘super—’, and a Greek root, ‘hero’. In *Superhero: The Secret Origin of the Genre*, Peter Coogan looks at the prefix as a modifier that exaggerates the existing sense of the hero. The exaggeration is quite visible in superhero comics but the assumption that the superhero is nothing but an inflated version of the hero is a clichéd argument and it becomes quite evident if we try to discover the hidden potential of the prefix ‘super—’ (an equivalent to German *über*, Greek *hyper*, French *sur* and Gothic *ufaro*). Coogan writes:

> As with Gibson’s use of the word, *super* here is used to modify a variety of things. It points, as Verral mentions in the last line, to the exaggerated nature of pulp fiction, or the “super fiction field” as he puts it to contrast *Air Trials* with *Cosmopolitan*. He is not suggesting that a “super plane,” a “super airport,” or a “super flying force” are new kinds of planes, airports, or flying forces, but that they are exaggerated versions of the planes, airports, and flying forces that already exist. The same can be said of his use of “superhero”.[15]

Etymologically, the prefix ‘super’ came into English from Latin and quite interestingly it refers to ‘above’, ‘over’, ‘beyond’ and ‘across’. It brings in an aura of newness and difference to the root.

According to *Etymonline* the word 'supersexual' usually meant 'transcending sexuality' in 1895 but from 1968 the meaning changed to 'very sexual'. This clearly visible shift in the meaning of the prefix from 'beyond' to 'very much' is, in fact, contradictory in nature. Quite interestingly, while the former suggests a break, the latter suggests an excess, a vertical connection and an intimacy with something that already exists. For Ranjan Ghosh, this verticality is a gesture of reaching out to the other which connects, communicates and introduces an aura of newness and difference: "Being across breeds the pleasure of being "out of place," a toss amid our "heretical geographies"".[16] This positional advantage adds an excess or surplus which never allows the concept of the superhero to move towards a normative perfect' but carries a sense of the surplus and the inexhaustible, and yet it is closely linked to the world.

If we look at the genesis of the concept of the 'hero', we see that it harks back to the poetic sensibility of Hesiod and Homer's Greece (8th century B.C.) where the age old rituals and conventions of hero-worship are archived in the epics—*Works and Days*, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.[17] The burden of the ancient heroic genre is too heavy on superhero comics as it reveals a cross-continental connection not only with the European epic tradition established by Homer but the ancient Indian texts such as *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, Scandinavian *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Persian *The Shahanameh*. Superhero comics not only borrow heavily, but often they are based on the mythologies of different parts of the world. Naif Al-Mutawa's The 99 is a Kuwaiti superhero rooted in Islamic mythology, Marvel's Thor is based on Norse mythology, and Anupam Sinha's Shakti has been modelled on Indian mythology. If we compare the *mahaviras* as depicted in the great Indian epics, we can see that they are not ordinary human beings, and in fact, they often possess strange superpowers. Hanuman can jump across the sea,

Bhīma has impossible bodily strength, Karna has an impassable breastplate, and Duryodhana has an impenetrable body with the exception of the thighs, his kryptonite.

In Greek mythology, the heroes are subordinates to the gods and they embody *arête* which is often translated as "virtue" but can be explained as "being the best you can be or reaching your highest human potential".[18] If we ignore Thomas Carlyle, Carl Gustav Jung and Joseph Campbell for a while, it is Northrop Frye who in his 1957 book *Anatomy of Criticism*, gives us a working definition of the hero based on the classics: "If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature."[19] And if this formulation seems to be insufficient, four years later Thomas Greene, in his essay "The Norms of epic", reveals it all:

> Epic awe, as distinguished from religious or mythical awe, springs from the circumstance that a man can commit an extraordinary act while still remaining limited. It does not matter that, in practice, the poet describes occasionally heroic action which is beyond human powers, if the hero is understood to be subject to ignorance or foolhardiness and above all to death.[20]

Literally, the Greek word 'heros' refers to "a dead human invested with special power".[21] The heroes rise from anonymity to grandeur. They achieve name, fame, material prosperity, and above all an invincible warrior status by enacting extraordinary fits and fulfilling promises that are unthinkable or miraculous for common people. But a critical scrutiny of the heroic literature reveals that the hero's life "contains the *agon*, the struggle between capacity and limitation".[22] The heroes have their *hamartia*; they fall in a last battle, and as Greene says, "at the end of the movement there lies, implicitly or explicitly, the sense of limit".[23] Despite their tremendous bodily strength, grandeur of personality as well as power to change the fate of the state, they are mortal beings. They would participate in mortal combat fired by the messianic zeal to be

worshipped as a deity after death, and yet they are no gods. Their heroism lies in subduing the fear of death before the final journey beyond Lethe, the river of oblivion. Loaded with the memory of the rise and fall of a nation, they are the relics of the past. The hero, says Carlyle, is a "vital element of manhood, the soul of man's history"[24].

In the historical course of time, meanings of a word often change or transform beyond recognition. New socio-political necessities add new layers of meaning to the old concepts. The relatively new expression that emerges from the comic books, Mike Benton predicts in *Illustrated History*, was originated in pulp fiction as late as in 1917, and swiftly it became a part of contemporary public culture. It was coined to describe "a public figure of great accomplishments",[25] which clearly echoes the sense of the hero. The official appearance of Superman, the first comic book superhero in 1938, however, refers to a different socio-political necessity behind its creation. It was an era of failure when the epithet 'great' seemed to be appropriate for both—a depression and a war. In a society devoid of hope and inspiration, Superman became a ready-made elixir; his magical touch rejuvenated the American 'daydream' of growth and prosperity in an otherwise shabby world of a shattered economy. In this age of turmoil, Richard Reynolds writes: "A new kind of popular hero had emerged: the self-reliant individualist who stands aloof from many of the humdrum concerns of society, yet is able to operate according to his own code of honour, to take on the world on his own terms, and win."[26] Umberto Eco's essay 'The Myth of Superman' (1972), which brought the superhero comics into serious critical attention for the first time, also quite eloquently portrays the illusion that surrounded the time:

> Clerk Kent personifies fairly typically the average reader who is harassed by complexes and despised by his fellow men; through an obvious process of self-identification, any accountant in any American city

> secretly feeds the hope that one day, from the slough of his actual personality, a superman can spring forth who is capable of redeeming years of mediocre existence.[27]

Time and again this background story has been copied and recreated in superhero comics all over the world. In a different time and totally different space, Samit Basu portrays a parallel sense of apathy and disillusionment among the Indian youths in his superhero novel *Turbulence*. In this novel, reminiscing the origin story of *The Fantastic Four*, a whole host of people acquire superpowers during a flight from London to New Delhi. Interestingly, their special powers match to their own fantasies of everyday life. Tia dreams of having multiple selves to satisfy the drudgery of a ruined married life and she gets the power to copy herself like a computer file; Uzma desires to be an actress and she gets something extra in addition to her stunning beauty—a mysterious power to create an ambience that forces people to like her; and Aman, who sought for connections in the 'city of networks', Delhi, becomes a computer virus whose mind has access to all networks despite highest security measures. In earlier life all of them were frustrated individuals having a dream of their own, but somehow their aspirations were put under yoke by repressive socio-political culture. Life without potency produces the desire to transcend the human limit. In his emotional exuberance, Aman captures the banality of a life without superpower:

> I don't know how it was for you growing up in the UK, but here, nearly all of us have this huge sense of irrelevance. We'll never change anything. The world will never know us. We grow up thinking hard work and a certain amount of ability are all we need – and then we eventually have to accept that they can only take us so far. I'm not even talking about being famous here – I've never wanted to be famous. But we never feel like we're a part of anything. Nothing to believe in or fight for. I don't know if I'm making sense.[28]

Not surprisingly, a deep and parallel sense of political failure can also be found as motivation behind George Bernard Shaw's idea of superman or the rise of literary existentialism. Only the

subtle intellectual responses of Shaw or the existentialists seem to be replaced by a populist free play of fantastic imagination. Quite interestingly, in his novel *The Fall*, Camus cannot refrain himself from alluding to "superman".[29] The disillusioned Lawyer in Camus' novel informs the readers about his unbridled desire for power to change the world: "The truth is that every intelligent man, as you know, dreams of being a gangster and of ruling over society by force alone".[30] The superhero emerges as a cultural ramification of a sense of loss where the dream of heroism transforms itself into a daydream of unlimited power and a new beginning. In Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman helplessly exclaims: "the world only makes sense when you force it to".[31] In his effort to make sense of a disjointed world by force alone, the superhero erects a niche of moral comfort, an illusory home in a homeless world.

As we have already seen that the superhero phenomenon, in spite of its new connotation, cannot go beyond the epic ideal of heroism, and what primarily makes it different from its predecessor can simply be explained in purely economic terms—its salability in the market of dream. The heroes, though they seem to be more than human are often like us, full of human flesh and blood. They live and die in order to fulfill our dreams. The reader of the comic-books knows that he is in a self-validating world of dream which is never to be fulfilled. In the world of the superheroes, the logic of probability is in a state of temporary suspension, the reader often laughs at the farcicality of the situations, yet a fragile hope creeps slowly inside; it is a dream of a magical solution of all the problems of his life and times.

The superhero is a product of creative human desire—an expansion of the perception to the virtual—what is yet to be. It is not only an idle day dream but an emotional response that resists the invasion of the human mind by a world governed by reason and re-establishes politics at the core of human nature. Creative and transcultural, it eludes any definition that is a-

historical, narrow and limited in time and space. The superhero has a dual affiliation both to the real and the imaginary; he is real in the sense that he cannot brush off the inevitable shadow of his precursor who has taken such a vital role in shaping the history of mankind and imaginary in the sense that such powerful beings never walked on earth. In a sense, any living being that produces surprise by exceeding humanly conceivable limit of capability, is a superbeing, but the term 'hero' adds an ethical dimension to the term. If morality is, to follow Zygmunt Bauman in *Postmodern Ethics*, "incurably aporetic"[32], the concept of the superhero travels well beyond the popular notion based on the insularity of American values of life.

The Nietzsche Effect

In the month of June in 1938, a spectacular event occurred in America where popular culture officially announced the news of hijacking a philosophical concept in Action Comics # 1. No ransom was demanded and they did not release the victim either, but the hijacking ended as most of the philosophers would cherish to believe, in a bloodless casualty and empting out the grandeur of a powerful concept. The suspicion is so pervasive that Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin, the editors of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, decided to discard the word 'Superman' as the translation of the German *Übermensch*:

> Overman is preferred to superhuman for two basic reasons; first, it preserves the word play Nietzsche intends with his constant references to going under and going over, and secondly, the comic book associations called to mind by "superman" and super-heroes generally tend to reflect negatively, and frivolously, on the term superhuman.[33]

Though in a different manner, Arthur C. Danto also dismisses the Nietzschean undertone in Superman comics as so negligible that "readers of philosophical books might be supposed capable of disregarding such incidental connotations". [34] In her long study of Nietzsche's philosophical connection with America and his influences on the American mind *American*

Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and his Ideas, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen maintained the same distance and her book ends never ever mentioning the comic book superhero. In order to retain the purity of 'scholarship', they proclaimed the necessity to move beyond the diluted version of "Shaw's and Marvel's comic book "superman"".[35] It marks a clear line of demarcation by bringing in the question of authenticity and loyalty of superhero comics to the philosophical tradition of Nietzsche. To them, the comic book superhero is a prime example of a concept gone astray, and in place of exploring its nuances, they made an attempt to severe the tie and rescue philosophy from the vandalism of corrupt popular culture.

However, what we need is a diachronic approach that opens up new avenues of creative thinking by reading the concept of the superhero dialogically with the philosophical tradition of hero-worship as espoused by Nietzsche. Peter Coogan has traced the historical extent to which the 1907 translation of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* hypnotized the American mind and contributed to the development of the superhero genre. Though as a concept the superhero was always governed by the demand of the market, it always had a tendency to move away and create its own space for singularity. In Nietzsche's revolutionary philosophy of the future, *Übermensch* has a unique place for its "singular indefiniteness and unspecificity".[36] For Nietzsche, Overman is the highest stage of self-realization when man, invested with 'madness' and 'lightening', destroys in order to create: "He who has to be a creator always has to destroy".[37] It is a part of an evolutionary process of intellectual advancement where human beings are "a bridge and not a purpose".[38] He is the harbinger of a new dawn, a new beginning where man 'overcomes' himself rejecting God as the creator of the moral universe. He becomes his own God, follows his own law and leads life on earth without the illusive and allusive certainty of transcendence. By using Agambenian terminology, this process of radical transformation can be called 'decreation', that

is, the process where man destroys the old and summons all his "potential to not-be" into existence in order to welcome the hitherto unthought world of ideas, expressions and morality. For Agamben, it "brings the contingent – "what could have been but was not" – into view" ".[39]

To become an Overman, says Nietzsche, it requires "a sacred yes-saying".[40] He is a creature of enjoyment coming out of an individual sense of becoming. In this sense, it seems that the traditional superhero lacks the passion, pain and progress of the self-annihilating Overman that "creates beyond itself"[41]. In Nietzschean terminology, what alienates the superhero from the Overman is the desire to be 'good' and not 'noble': "The noble person wants to create new things and a new virtue. The good person wants old things, and for old things to be preserved".[42] The superhero does not follow a creative process of transformation but takes a sudden magical leap from the human to the superhuman leaving him in a state of astonishment and guilt: "you reached the unreachable and you're not ready for it".[43] As products of mediocrity, they lack Nietzsche's philosophical excess; they are people with superpower but without revolutionary thinking and ideas.

With all his power and enchantment, the superhero is a continual disappointment that fails to live up to the dream and optimism of Nietzsche. The superhero comics explore the myth that unlimited power is the solution of everything in the world. Relying on an extraterrestrial hope of redemption that Nietzsche so earnestly tried to dissuade us from, it fails to welcome uncertainty and chaos as the centre of life. Ndalianis writes:

> [H]eroes and the myths are created in response to social change or social need. Heroic action usually has a fundamental link to the welfare of the society from which the hero comes. Heroes and superheroes have never operated in a vacuum. They respond in a dynamic way to various challenges and social needs. Whether conscious or unconscious, hero narratives give substance to certain ideological myths about the society they address. Occupying a space outside culture, the super/hero often serves the function of

> mediator figure that enters a community in crisis with the aim of resolving its conflicts and restoring the *status quo*.[44]

Even so the superhero is less 'dynamic' and more 'spectacular' than the hero. The superhero's life ensures predictability and lacks the sense of drama of his predecessor who performs within limit and under the continual vigilance of death. The hero plunges himself into the chaos of life and politics to change the fate of the state and establish order when the superhero waits impatiently for his turn. As the torch-bearer of tradition, he is passive and "is not called upon to act unless the status quo is threatened by the villain's plans".[45] At the demise of god, they are the gods without divinity. Despite Spiderman's ambitious slogan—"with great power comes great responsibility"—we have enough reason to mistrust his self-imposed vocation. Ironically the superhero, with all his powers faces a different sense of limit; he cannot relieve the world of its miseries and mechanically engages himself in an impossible rationality.

"By the time Siegel attached the name Superman to his hero, Superman were everywhere"[46], writes Gavaler, and yet "By the late twenties," Coogan writes, "the superman trope had become commonplace and emptied of philosophical content".[47] The self-reflexive eighty's sees a re-emergence of this connection which culminates in Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Killing Joke* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns.* Moore ends the Book VI with a famous aphorism from Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: "Battle not with monsters, lest you become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gaze also into you".[48] The dismal view of the world sipped in horror and darkness which emanates from *Watchmen* is the mirror image of the chaotic world of Nietzsche:

> Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose. This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces. It is not god who kills the children. Not fate that butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It's us. Only

> us....The void breathed hard on my heart, turning its illusions to ice, shattering them. Was reborn then, free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world.[49]

But for Nietzsche, this nihilism is not purely negative and the realization of emptiness is not divested of all light. Rejecting the metaphysical comfort, his concept of *Amor Fati*, or love of fate brings in the agency of man as the central thing in his universe and encourages "a Dionysian yes to the world as it is".[50] This devastating frankness is not an easy way for the superhero who tries to impose sense to a world gone crazy. In *Watchmen*, the Comedian treats life as a 'joke' and in *Batman: The Killing Joke*, the Joker ceaselessly teases Batman to come out of his self-protected illusion and messianic role playing:

> When I saw what a black, awful joke the world was, I went crazy as a cot! I admit it! Why can't you? I mean, you're not unintelligent! You must see the reality of the situation. Do you know how many times we've come close to world war three over a flock of geese on a computer screen? Do you know what triggered the last world war? An argument over how many Telegraph poles Germany owed its war debt creditors! Telegraph poles! Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha![51]

In an insane world where an argument over telegraph poles can start a world war it is useless as well as impossible for Batman, already enmeshed in a conservative ideology, to set everything 'right'. In spite of all his superpowers, the comic book superhero remains astonishingly incomplete, narrow, and limited in his scope to transform the world.

In an interesting essay, Matthew Levy and Heather Mathews extends Foucault's notion of *parrhesia* ("free speech" or "frank truth-telling") to explain this devastating openness of *Watchmen* to shock the readers.[52] In a sense, Nietzsche too is a *parrhesiastes* (truth-teller) who engages himself in a risky game with the readers which involves the danger of humiliating the age old wisdom and the necessity of moral solidarity. The *parrhesiastes*, says Foucault, "is someone who says everything he has in mind; he does not hide anything but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse".[53] In their open assault, *Watchmen* and

The Dark Knight Returns, share a Nietzschean impulse to unveil the mist of quintessential goodness that surrounds the superhero and establishes a fresh equation of creative and critical readership that denies death in fixity and moves boldly towards the future by denying the inhibitions of the superhero comics to welcome newness as the crux of becoming life.

Travelling across Time, Genre and Culture

"You start dying slowly / If you do not travel," declares the Brazilian poet Martha Medeiros, and in his book *Travel as Metaphor: From Montaigne to Rousseau*, Georges Van Den Abbeele writes, "If travel posits the risk and anxiety of death, it also signals the way to health, wealth, and wisdom".[54] Travel is not only shifting from one place to another, it harbours an inner opposition, the lure of profit and the insecurity and risk of being lost. As an act of transgression, travel has the power to transform the traveller, but this transformation cannot move beyond recognition as the economic value of travel is calculated in terms of the traveller's connection with an *oikos*, or home, a limiting point of reference. The home one leaves and the home one returns to are not the same place. Time passes and the world creeps inside the home, and the home moves into the world. To a psychically transformed traveller both the old home and the world start unfolding themselves in unforeseen ways. The movements from one place to another call into question the narrow ideological frameworks that govern home and open up new interpretative regimes. Similarly, a concept's travel across temporal, disciplinary, cultural and generic boundaries extends its hermeneutic possibilities. As a particular concept engages in multifocal dialogues with different times, places and genres, it starts resonating with a polyphonic voice and stands face to face with the otherness of its own being. This act of travel beyond the culture of origin does not mean total dissolution of a concept or genre beyond recognition, but a transfiguration

that turns it from passive to active and receptive, and therefore threatening, alien, more meaningful, and evocative than itself.

If we go back to the philosophical origin of the concept of the superhero in Western thought, we see that in ancient Greece Lucian of Samosata (120-192) coined the term *hyperanthropos*; in Germany, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) used the word *Übermensch* in *Faust* before Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) hijacked it for his groundbreaking work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; and in America, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was the propagator of a refined, self-reliant and aristocratic *Over-Soul*. Nietzsche was highly influenced by the ideas of Lucian and Wilhelm Richard Wagner (1813-1883), and in fact, he was rereading Emerson while writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In Eric Bentley's words, Nietzsche finds in Wagner "the highest of higher men, holding the key to a new epoch of art and life… a premonition of superman".[55] In one of his interviews, Stanley Cavell also marvelled at the philosophical proximity between two thinkers from different continents—Emerson and Nietzsche: "No matter how many people tell you the connection exists, you forget it, and you can't believe it, and not until you begin to have both voices in your ears do you recognize what a transfiguration of an Emerson sentence sounds like when Nietzsche rewrites it".[56] Though Ratner-Rosenhagen deliberately forgets to touch upon the history of Nietzsche's influence on the popular cultural field of superhero comics in her otherwise scholarly study, she does something useful by tracing out the influence of Emerson on Nietzsche's ideas:

> [I]n late 1881 or early 1882 Nietzsche purchased a black notebook, which he devoted exclusively to excerpting forty passages from Emerson's *Essays*. Some of the passages are transcribed verbatim, while others show minor modifications. However, it is the passages in which Nietzsche turned a quotation from the original third person into first person that reveal his deep absorption in, and identification with, Emerson.[57]

Emerson looks at heroism as "obedience to a secret impulse of an individual's character"[58] and Nietzsche urges us not to throw away the hero in our soul. Passage after passage from Emerson, for example, the following one from the essay "Uses of Great Men" establishes the close association between the ideas of the two thinkers:

> It is natural to believe in great men...All mythology opens with demigods, and the circumstance is high and poetic; that is, their genius is paramount...Nature seems to exist for the excellent. The world is upheld by the veracity of good men: they make the earth wholesome.[59]

This excerpt from Emerson's essay plainly reveals the story of a transcontinental travel, an alliance where an American thinker influences the ideas of a German philosopher, and eventually the rethought, reformulated, and defamiliarized idea of Emerson's 'great men' travels back to America as Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. The history behind the concept of the comic-book superhero shows that leaving behind its German affiliation, it soon started to wear an American mask by shedding off the exclusivity and philosophical excess that characterized Nietzsche's thought.

With the passing of time literary genres develop around philosophical ideas. In the extended chronology of literatures of the world, the superhero genre appears to be very young as it was established in the late 1950s or 60s. Peter Coogan traces three immediate literary inspirations instrumental behind the making of this genre: the science fiction superman (*Frankenstein*, 1818), the dual-identity avenger vigilante (*Nick of the Woods*, 1837) and the pulp *Übermensch* (*Tarzan of the Apes*, 1912).[60] He also points out *Adventure Comics* #247 (April 1958) as the clearest example of the word 'superhero' to be used to identify a comic-book which "features the first appearance of the Legion of Super-Heroes and their name on the cover".[61] We have already seen how the concept is inseparably connected with the epic or heroic literatures of the past and these immediate processors reveal that the superhero genre is nothing original but all

its normative principles that 'define' the genre—costume, dual identity, power and mission—are familiar tropes derivative of other genres. Jess Nevins argues: "A superhero cannot be defined as being generally distinct from characters of other genres; too many examples of superheroes to name appear in other cultural genres." [62] Influenced by Rudiger Bartelmus' concept of "heroenkonzept"[63] in which a catalogue of heroic motifs are gathered together, he suggests a "superhero continuum", which brings together all the living and literary superpowers of the Western tradition under one umbrella. However, he excludes the Asian and the African tradition out of his scope assuming that these two traditions did not, in any way, affect the Western concept of the superhero.

No genre can live a life of seclusion away from the other genres. They travel across the world and overlap with each other in incestuous liaison. In spite of the laborious logic of the marketplace, there is a principle of impurity in the heart of the superhero genre which has the power to confound its "sense, order, and reason".[64] A close look into the superhero genre also reveals diachronic tendency where it begins dialogue with genres belonging to other time and place, and thereby creates, as Wai Chee Dimock argues, a "fluid continuum"[65]:

> They are empirical rather than logical (Cohen) and as such likely to be confronted with specimens they are not able to foresee. Even ancient genres such as tragedy and epic (which Aristotle discusses in the Poetics) get messed up as more and more unrecognizable objects lay claim to those titles.[1] The membership of any genre is an open rather than closed set, because there is always another instance, an other empirical bit of evidence, to be added. These instances make for a peculiar morphology: literature has not solidified and (as far as we know) will never solidify into a congealed shape. Its force of incipience pulls and strains against all taxonomic regimes. The spilling over of phenomena from labels stands here as an ever-present likelihood, a challenge to any systemizing claim."[66]

Elsewhere, Dimock also observes the predominance of the rule of the mechanical clock that looks at American literature as a homogenous unit and argues for the necessity of seeing across the arbitrary barriers of nation, language, genre and culture:

> I have in mind a form of indebtedness: what we called "American" literature is quite often a shorthand, a simplified name for a much more complex tangle of relations. Rather than being a discrete entity, it is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures. These are input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit and forms of attachment—connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world. Active on both ends, they thread America texts into the topical events of other cultures, while also threading the long durations of those cultures into the short chronology of the United States. This double threading thickens time, lengthens it, shadowing in its midst the abiding traces of the planets multitudinous life.[67]

A genre is not a product but an unfinished process which has the power to surprise by breaking away from solidified generic expectations. To think of one genre is to invoke another, and Dimock calls this interactive, translingual, transnational and transcultural frame of relationship where disparate genres share a common space, "deep time"[68].

Without denying the creativity of the comic medium it can be said, albeit ironically, that the origin of the 'American superhero' is not in America but 'elsewhere'. The superheroic imagination transcends the barrier of national, temporal and generic boundaries. It is not only confined in the limited sphere of comics and has many unpredictable origins and capricious manifestations. The superhero is not a commodity; it is a form of desire, an imaginative structure in formation which defies the commercial claim to restrict it within a closed system. Originating in the human desire to transcend the limits of being human, the superhero is a transcultural phenomenon, a figuration of a figure, which exists in human imagination irrespective of time, place and culture.

This movement towards embracing the 'planetary time' results in scale amplification and re-thinking of the concept of the superhero against its narrow history, philosophy and politics. The ethics of 'planetarity' requires, writes Spivak, an imaginative flexibility to look into the distant spaces and the future which shocks the idea of belonging.[69] And in his essay "More than Global" Ranjan Ghosh writes:

> [I]t is crucial to read each literary work more or less in detachment from its local roots in a specific author or locale, as well as in detachment from its place in so-called world literature. The work's sacredness, that is, its complex relation to an imaginary realm, is what is most important about it, more important than its local and global affiliations.[70]

In a critical genealogy the superhero can be traced in pre-capitalist cultural forms of the past and its comic book avatar has often been culturally translated or reformulated in strange and subversive ways in different part of the world. If we follow Ghosh's arguments, the "sacredness" of the superhero should be understood not in terms of its existence as a popular cultural icon in comics and movies, but in relation to an extended "imaginary realm," which is comprised of a complex intertwining between the global superhero and its strange, subversive, and culturally translated versions along with all other pre-capitalist figures of human transcendence. The uncanny intrusions of forgotten loyalties from the archive of history and the unanticipated local adaptations, mimicries and satires have the power to destabilize the globalized idea of the superhero governed by predetermined laws of a conservative industry, and thereby flout the comic book historian's desire for cartographic map-making. For Ghosh, sacred is not something godly, fixed and preservable but rather inanely connected and abysmally contaminated which generates shocks and provokes our experiences. Sandeep Banerjee finely summarizes Ghosh's notion of the sacred as "a literary text's refusal to be reduced to history *despite* its historicity".[71] This challenging and often awkward border crossing reveals, as Dimock writes, an "unexpected

web of allegiance",[72] and promises, as Ghosh argues, "a "more," the unexpected web of meaning" which he has termed as "more than global"[73]:

> [L]ocal and global have their usual separateness and rupture; but, in what I argue as "more than global," such ruptures often become a kind of provocation to question the promise and latency of a dialogue between the two. … So "more than global" is inscribed in what I call "intra-active transculturality" which is not about going beyond the global or reducing the local to a form of representation or meaning-formation. It is the destruction of an expressive and organic "totality" (Rigby 195) but is also a way of providing a sense of a totality, a world-wide-forming totality, whose access is not always in accessibility.[74]

We are permanently trapped in the across and thinking in terms of 'more than global' disrupts the teleological logic of the formation of the superhero that is always already deformed in its origin. This promise of the excess or 'more' makes the superhero active rather than passive and not confined within space, time and genre as it travels backward to an erased past and forward to a possible future.

The idea of "trans-moment' or "trans-now" is, as propagated by Ranjan Ghosh, "about enacting a communication—difficult and debatable—between apparently incompatible paradigms of thoughts and concepts."[75] This type of liberal, queer and even at times unsettling association adds a sudden spark of meaning to a concept randomly used in everyday life. The superhero has often been satirized and there are other uses of the idea in a variety of aesthetic, social, political, economic and cultural spheres. The easy availability of t-shirts with a superhero face or logo in the third-world countries reveals how the local markets often do not care about the international laws regarding the possession of trademark license. The Superman logo in a t-shirt worn by someone in a remote Haitian village totally devoid of any connection with the world of American superheroes opens a new horizon of meaning stripped off of its usual context. The word superhero is also frequently used in totally unpredictable contexts; as in the following

quotation from an article in the Bengali newspaper *Ananda Bazar Patrika* dated May 6, 2018: "The police are like superman in villages. They have to take care of everything from a small pin to faraway Alaska".[76] The amateur Hindi documentary *Malegaon Ka Superman* [*Supermen of Malegaon*] (2012) parodies the superhero movie conventions and depicts the drudgery of the living condition of a small town in India. It portrays a skinny, pencil-thin and sunken cheek superhero fighting a villain whose dream is to set up a tobacco empire and see India filthy: "I want to see all children, youths and old men of India spitting on the road because I love filth very much".[77] In its retelling of the origin story, Superman is presented as a young man who works in a factory, addicted to *gutkha*, and hardly earns his both ends meet. Far away from its usual locale, this new avatar saves people from the clutches of a tobacco villain, but ironically, Shafique Shaikh, the actor who plays the role of Superman dies of oral cancer, which developed due to his addiction to *gutkha*. An amateur actor from Bangladesh—Ashraful Alom Saeed—who self-promotes himself as Hero Alom has recently become a social media phenomenon. Alom's caricature of Superman wearing a *lungi*, a traditional dress for men worn around the waist, and *gamcha*, a thin cotton towel as cape, is hilarious. An ordinary family dog who has an extraordinary ability to tell time in a world where time has gone missing becomes a superhero in Himanjali Sankar's novel *The Stupendous Timetelling Superdog* (2013). In Saikat Majumdar's novel *The Scent of God* (2019), a segment is titled as "Supermen." In a crucial moment of the protagonist's life, an overwhelming squall of emotion makes him forget his well-organized speech and he vehemently outbursts against the ills of a saffronized institution where he has been trained since his childhood. To break away from tradition and its rituals, the novel upholds, one requires superheroic courage and imagination. These liberal uses of an idea in unusual contexts modify the way of seeing the superhero in straightjacket and are harmful for the dogmatism,

prejudice and narrow-mindedness of the comic book universe. The travel of the superhero from comic book to other spheres of literature and life challenges and subverts the assumed 'autonomy' of the genre and forces it to face the opposing feelings of delight and uneasiness generated by the out of place otherness of its own being.

The lethal irony behind the concept of the superhero becomes clear when a *New York Times* columnist, Thomas L. Friedman, used the term "super-empowered individuals" to describe Osama Bin Laden as someone who wants to destroy America because they are "wild", "crazy" and "revolutionary".[78] In Friedman's account, Laden becomes "a super-empowered angry man", the leader of a network of people driven by religious fanaticism not sponsored by any state who takes a vow to preserve the sanctity of his own culture against the aggressive influence of liberal America. The question arises if America is wild, free and progressive that resists normalization and welcomes change, as Laden sees it, what is there for the superhero to preserve as Reynolds claims in his book? Apparently it seems that the superheroes are doing the same thing what Bin Laden and others are doing in the name of preserving the sanctity of their culture. Just as Captain America is to the American mind, he is no less a superhero to his own people albeit tagged as a terrorist by another group which is equally eager to protect their own cultural values. In order to normalize the chaotic world, he has to become more than human and the only weapon he can use, in a similar way as a superhero does, is violence.

We have seen that the formula of the superheroes as produced by the comic book industry exhibits a violent generalization of the singularity of an age-old concept. In *On the Origin of Superheroes*, Chris Gavaler rightly denies the possibility of any definition of superhero at all:

> Superheroes are the ultimate amalgams, all-swallowing über-characters that consume other genres like black holes. They defy conventional definitions because they contain too many conventions. If that non-

> definition sounds cowardly, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein plays the same game with "game" (what traits do marathons, chess, and solitaire share?) . . . definitions work like erasures. I prefer the pointy end of pencils.[79]

In Ghosh's "intra-active transcultural" space inside a "more than global" world, the superheroes and its others coexist in the same space without denying the singularity or cultural specificity of each other. This 'worlding' of the superhero which brings all these 'apocryphal' uses together and connects times, spaces, genres, disciplines and cultures in a single thread do not mean dissolution of everything but an eruption of new sense, a defamiliarized understanding of the superhero. Ghosh elaborates:

> "More than global" is an affection that leads one to experience the other outside oneself and eventually to know oneself better. The local is known better outside itself as much as the global is understood better in "more than global" which is, however, not beyond global…So finding oneself more in others is to become more of oneself.[80]

When normativity becomes a threat, reconfiguration of a genre is necessary in order to broaden its scope. To borrow Dimock's terminology, we can say that we need a "regenreing"[81] of the superhero genre.

Superhero Comics: Commodity or Literature?

In the parochial world of superhero comics a pair of global companies—Marvel and Detective Comics—is the joint owners of the descriptive trademark license for the word 'superhero' (a word from the English lexicon!) since 1979 and they are eager to establish the superhero as a machinic artifact of the popular culture industry. The descriptive trademark license identifies and distinguishes the comic books produced by them as the source of all the variations of the word 'super hero'. The S-word has become a forbidden territory and numerous people have been sued for the infringement of trademark laws by using this word in the title of their books. Dan Taylor, a comic artist, was forced to change the title of his series from *Super Hero Happy Hour* to *Hero*

Happy Hour in 2004. In a similar instance, Marvel and DC jointly opposed the use of the s-word in the title of the book *A World without Superheroes*, a comic series created by Ray Felix. What frightened these two giant companies was that, unlike the copyright, descriptive trademark license has to be safeguarded as it can be annulled if the term becomes generic. For instance, 'cellophane' and 'kerosene' were names of products but gradually they became generic names which can be used by everyone. Brian Cronin cites a very interesting case of defense of the trademark by a company where Xerox coined the slogan—"use a Xerox copy machine to make a copy, not make a Xerox".[82] It is clear that to preserve the ritual 'sacredness' of the 'global' superhero, it is crucial for the market to severe its tie from history, pinpoint its origin with a marker, and establish the 'fact' that it has the capacity to transmit its meaning unequivocally. The clever strategic alliance between two arch-rival companies in this matter has an unambiguous message—the science of economy should keep the transgressive power of fiction, which subverts the logic of the capital in check by using all possible ways—authority, money and stringent laws of genre itself. The reductive logic of the capitalist marketplace believes in attractive packaging and circulates the superhero as a narrow and predictable global icon, a naturalized cultural product, which was originated in the comic-book industry. This thesis is a critique of this naïvely essentialist originary tale. It endorses a counterbalancing move, which tackles the linear tendency of globalization by a vertical, or as Ranjan Ghosh would say a "more than global" view of the superhero.

A close scrutiny into the history of the concept of the superhero reveals that leaving behind its German affiliation[83], it soon started to wear an American mask by shedding off the exclusivity that characterized Nietzsche's thought. Curbing Nietzsche's philosophical excess, it became naturalized, a commodified product of the American comic-book industry. The

fetishization of the superhero as a cultural icon and its reification into an apparently pre-given, homogenous and unchangeable identity emptied it of its active potentialities. Over the years, a formulaic and easily predictable genre developed around the concept of the superhero where an accidental origin story, a dual identity, a professed mission, bright costumes and an exaggerated display of power became its constituting elements.

Just as the philosophers disregarded the Nietzschean influence on superhero genre, it was also necessary for the comic book industry to banish the 'unruly' Nietzsche, a philosopher who embraces chaos as life. Since its inception[84], superhero studies have remained as typical of 'interpretosis', a frantic search for origin and meaning. Key scholars have kept themselves busy in their effort to build a conservative theory of the superhero genre, which, in spite of its acknowledgement of various influences, tries to create a secure boundary around the concept of the superhero. Coogan's definition of the superhero is noteworthy:

> A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers—extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically expresses his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generally distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret.[85]

This tendency is also evident in viewing the superhero as an archetypal figure. In *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, Reynolds finally rings the death bell of Nietzsche by showcasing the superhero as an archetypal figure in a modern American mythology that upholds the foundational beliefs and morality of a particular culture: "A key ideological myth of the superhero comic is that the normal and everyday enshrines positive values that must be defended

through heroic action—and defended over and over again….The superhero has a mission to preserve society not to re-invent it".[86]

This tendency to objectify the superhero often does not allow creative freedom to the artists. The making of the superhero comics, on the other hand, is a collaborative process which brings together a group of people—writer, penciler, inker, colourist, letterer, and above all, an overseeing editor. The superhero comics are often produced under strict surveillance that curbs artistic excess and freedom of imagination. The disappearance of the author and his shared responsibility as a member of a team engaged in the production of comic books once prompted Carmine Infantino to demand a removal of his signature "Bob Kane" from all his works. They are craftsmen appointed for producing an art object for the market and this disappearance of the individual artist and the intrusion of the market into art as the most important consideration raise questions regarding originality, creativity and authorship of the comic text. The storyline is simple; it moves around a stereotypical superhero and there is barely any place for writerly experimentation with the concept. In superhero comics, convention precedes invention and intellectual freedom is often curtailed by economic necessity.

With the rise of fandom the ancient distance between the writer and the reader is dissolved in the comic book universe. "Through the discourse between fan and editor", writes Will Brooker, "comics "authorship" was created and debated."[87] A story is commissioned and cancelled, a letter from a dedicated fan can start a controversy and affect the editorial decisions, a fan can be hired as a writer or artist, and a writer or artist can be removed from the project instantly if he is not found 'suitable'. In other words the artist is transformed into a casual worker in a capitalist enterprise; art becomes secondary, nothing more than a sellable thing in the

marketplace. In one of his 1981 interviews, Alan Moore wished to see less dependence upon big companies and more freedom of artistic expression:

> I'd like to see, and this is pure whimsy, a return to the old-fashioned little studio set-ups like [Will] Eisner/[Jerry] Iger had in the thirties and forties. This would give the artists and writers a greater autonomy, since they'd be selling stuff to the companies as a sort of package deal. It would give them a stronger [share of] the merchandising royalties. And I should imagine that some editors might be quite pleased to save time in commissioning one complete job rather than hassling 'round trying to commission two or three separate people.[88]

Walter Benjamin's essay "Author as Producer" (1934) depicts the idea of the author as the epitome of capitalist ideology that needs to be newly theorized. The dislocation of the author in the comic book universe challenges the traditional claim of autonomy of the author in a similar way as Walter Benjamin depicts the author's position as a producer of entertainment for the market. The author is not an autonomous entity. As a producer, he is forced to decide "in whose service he wishes to place his activity".[89] However the irony is that while for a Marxist like Benjamin it should be the proletariat, the writer of the comic book overtly and shamelessly takes the side of the capitalist. Benjamin's ideal example where all genres dissolve and the reader himself becomes a writer is the Soviet newspaper. He writes:

> The newspaper is the arena of this literary confusion. Its content eludes any form of organization other than that which is imposed upon it by the reader's impatience. And this impatience is not just the impatience of the politician waiting for information or that of the speculator waiting for a tip-off: behind it smoulders the impatience of the outsider, the excluded man who yet believes he has a right to speak out in his own interest. The editorial offices have long ago learned to exploit the fact that nothing binds the reader to his newspaper so much as this impatience, which demands fresh nourishment every day; they exploit it by continually throwing open new columns for readers' questions, opinions and protests. Thus the unselective assimilation of facts goes hand in hand with an equally unselective assimilation of readers, who see themselves elevated instantaneously to the rank of correspondents. There is however a dialectical factor

> hidden in this situation: the decline of literature in the bourgeois press is proving to be the formula for its regeneration in the Soviet press. For as literature gains in breadth what it loses in depth, so the distinction between author and public, which the bourgeois press maintains by artificial means, is beginning to disappear in the Soviet press. The reader is always prepared to become a writer, in the sense of being one who describes or prescribes.* As an expert - not in any particular trade, perhaps, but anyway an expert on the subject of the job he happens to be in - he gains access to authorship….Authority to write is no longer founded in a specialist training but in a polytechnical one, and so becomes common property. In a word, the literarization of living conditions becomes a way of surmounting otherwise insoluble antinomies, and the place where the words is most debased - that is to say, the newspaper - becomes the very place where a rescue operation can be mounted.'[90]

The comic book industry, on the other hand, undergoes a reformulation of the idea of authorship for its own purpose cleverly bypassing Benjamin's dream of dissolution of genres and the Brechtian notion of "refunctioning" or "functional transformation" of forms and instrument. The reader is incorporated into the production process (Alan Moore worked as a toilet cleaner) but the author is stripped of his authority to experiment and transform the work of art.

In the capitalist marketplace, the superhero becomes a mark that can be distinctively used and reused over time. For economic purposes, the identity of the superhero needs to be coherent and definable so that it can be promoted and sold as property for the interest of a person or a particular group. One's property, however, is not an open pasture. It needs to be guarded with a wall to protect it from others. The American investigative journalist Eric Schlosser sees through this dark side of capitalism that seeks to control its products and all means of production:

> The history of the twentieth century was dominated by the struggle against totalitarian systems of state power. The twenty-first will no doubt be marked by a struggle to curtail excessive corporate power. The great challenge now facing countries throughout the world is how to find a proper balance between the efficiency and the amorality of the market. Over the past twenty years the United States has swung too far in one direction, weakening the regulations that safeguard the workers, consumers, and the environment.

> An economic system promising freedom has too often become a means of denying it, as the narrow dictates of the market gain precedence over more important democratic values.[91]

In an interview published in *Crisp Comics*, Felix also strongly argues against the imprisonment of a word which was coined before its use for the comic books:

> I had heard in 2006 that Marvel and DC had jointly renewed their trademark on the word Super Hero….Even still, jointly trademarking a word does not entitle any company or individual rights over the word as DC/Marvel had proclaimed. In their eyes they own every and any variation of the word regardless of spelling, variation in a statement or sentence in the English language or foreign. Registration marks do not work that way. It's illegal and impractical. Also, registration gives you legal rights to word usage for a literal element. Meaning a specific product which uses the actual word to sell a product(s). Trademarks/registered marks are never secure and can always be brought into opposition by any party which feels that it is infringing on their registration rights.[92]

However, very recently in 2016, Marvel and DC acknowledged their defeat and decided to withdraw their case filed against the British author Graham Jules' title *Zero to Superhero: How to Start & Grow Your Business with Zero Cash* (2013). Arguing for a more democratic use of the word superhero Jules says: "I'm a big fan of superheroes and everyone knows Marvel and DC's characters because they are brilliant. But there are many other new authors out there who also have good ideas and it's a shame they can't utilize the word themselves."[93]

To put a word into the prison house of business is unethical from the literary point of view. What is the possibility of superhero comics becoming literature as part of the comic book industry which is conservative and resists creativity? As early as in the 1940's, Fredrick Wartham waged a war against sensationalization in comics. Jess Nevins describes superhero comics as an immature "capitalist enterprise"[94] and Aaron Meskin denies the status of literature for most of the mainstream superhero comics on the ground that they are not "creative, original, well-structured and unified".[95] Alan Moore who changed the faces of the superheroes forever

describes it as "culturally catastrophic" because it disregards the "overwhelming complexities of modern existence" and embraces a simplistic view of the world as presented by Marvel and DC.[96] In one of his interviews Alan Moore says:

> I will say that when I was a child, from about 7 to 12 reading *Superman*, comics were an incredible stimulus for my imagination. They were brilliant…I don't think that superheroes or superhero comics of today are aimed at children anymore.
>
> What are these movies doing other than entertaining us with stories and characters that were meant to entertain the 12-year-old boys of 50 years ago? Are we supposed to somehow embody these characters? That's ridiculous. They are not characters that can possibly exist in the real world. Yes, I did *Watchmen*. Yes, I did Marvelman. These are two big seminal superhero works, I guess. But remember: Both of them are critical of the idea of superheroes. They weren't meant to be a reinvigoration of the genre.[97]

It seems that superhero comics never grew up as it remained formulaic, unoriginal and imitative. The artists who make them are professional salaried workers who work for the corporate houses to craft a story under strict editorial directives. Consequently, superhero became a reified concept that ate up its own possibilities. In spite of its philosophical connections through Nietzsche, the concept of the superhero failed to maintain its promises and except in the hands of a few exceptionally talented writers, such as, Alan Moore and Frank Miller, superhero comics failed to become literature if literature is seen as self-reflexive and capable of raising questions regarding its own origin. The clichéd world of the superheroes, Deleuze would have argued, rarely provides shocks, shatters beliefs and provokes new experiences for the readers.

Superhero: Concept, Performativity, Politics

Historically the concept of the superhero has remained a victim of a predetermined theory that conjures a narrow and specific image of an impossible figure that does not exist or exists only in imagination. This type of easy categorization or the commonsensical view of the concept has become a part of everyday life. The concepts of everyday life, unlike the philosophical ones,

uphold a shared, explicable and regulated world of common sense, which demands unquestionable submission to an ethics of universality. They are produced by habit and their origin belongs to a forgotten and unidentifiable moment of the past. Engraved deeply in our unconscious, the concepts of everyday life are readily accepted without any suspicion and recognized immediately as fixed points of reference. They are part of conformist system that reveal "inertia or failure of thinking"[98]. The adherence to norms and disavowal of excess make them static and incapable to capture the fluidity of becoming life.

In a world of fiction, the superheroes often have the power to travel in time, but their embeddedness in a narrow comic book cultural past has barred their possibilities for an open and democratic future, and therein resides the necessity to think the superhero otherwise or in terms of what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls "potentiality"[99] to think or act. To think is not only the capacity to think the actual or the intelligible, which Agamben calls "potentiality to be", but it has the power to move beyond what is present to a world of possibilities or "potentiality to not-be" or "impotence". Concepts are inexhaustible, and if we look at the concept of superhero through Agambenian lenses, we see that it had always remained trapped into a conceivable past or "potentiality to be" that made its identity possible. With all their powers, the comic book superheroes can have only one identity, that is, an archetypal saviour, and they can channelize their power only in one way—towards a self-oriented goal of a great responsibility to save the 'innocent'. This is their destiny. They have an originary task and they go on working in an iterative logic without causing any real effect or transformation in the society.

Agamben raises a valid question when he says: "How can a man / stop on the street and ask: *this* / *is my destiny*?".[100] Human beings, says Aristotle and confirms Agamben, do not have any originary vocation and this is what separates them from animals:

> Other living beings are capable only of their specific potentiality; they can only do this or that. But human beings are the animals who are capable of their own impotentiality. The greatness of human potentiality is measured by the abyss of human impotentiality.[101]

In a world where there is no messiah, the superheroes have a messianic task to perform. They are driven by a pre-conscious activity. There is no escape from a destiny that limits and confines their immense potentiality and creates a homogeneous group without any exception. Agamben rejects this homogeneous or dominant mode of understanding through his idea of "inoperativeness". "Inoperativeness" is not inactivity but an attempt to find other routes of conceiving things which are rule breaking or come out of unorthodox experiences of life. The comic book configuration of the superhero is a denial of its future. The superheroes are always more than what we think and they have immense possibilities which are yet to come into actuality.

The concept of the superhero unfolds a dangerous liaison between philosophy and literature and this work attempts to reconceptualise the superhero in a threefold way. First, it questions the allegedly sacrosanct nature of the superhero's origin and identity in the comic books and dissociates it from the preassigned conventions that historically harnessed its imaginative possibilities. Secondly, it emphasizes on the humanity of the superheroes rejecting the familiar trend to see them as nonhuman or posthuman figures. A resistance to see the superheroes as posthuman has long been witnessed within the field itself. Alan Moore opines: "Everybody is the hero in their own narrative….Why shouldn't people from the lower classes be entitled to a mythology of their own?"[102] In *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel* (2005), the arch-enemy of Superman dreams of greatness for all human beings:

> All of us – everyone – deserves a chance at greatness. All that takes is the belief that it exists. But his existence threatens not just that belief, but our existence. I think there's something inherently dangerous

> when something real becomes mythic. I believe when that happens we lose the part of ourselves that yearns to be great. Because when forced with a myth? We can't win.[103]

In fact, this trend of humanizing the superheroes started in the Silver age when the world of comics witnessed a turn from mythical to historical and the superheroes gradually became public figures who need to justify their own works. Jamie A. Hughes observes that "With each passing year superheroes are becoming more involved in "real world" scenarios that mirror the current political and social problems".[104] Thirdly, it emphasizes and tries to explore how 'doing' or 'performativity' constitutes the 'being' of the superhero. Widening and opening the scope of the concept, I suggest that any human who consciously reiterates a specialized act with remarkable skill and authority which promotes his identity as a figure of extraordinary abilities, is a superhero. This new configuration creates an opening and harbours a democratic openness where to be a superhero is not just a prerogative of a chosen one but open to all. The removal of originary task brings them down to the human world. Sean Carney rightly observes: "they are necessary because they are figures for humanity's ability to overreach itself, but superheroes cannot be allowed to take over human responsibility from humans".[105]

Once we see the inner logic of the superhero as being workless or without any set task to perform, the concept of the superhero as a unified category disappears and we become aware about the plural character of the superhero. In my thesis, the selection of four unusual figures from diverse genres as superheroes—Satyajit Ray's Professor Trilokeswar Shonku (science fiction), Narayan Debnath's Batul the Great (comics), Premendra Mitra's Ghanashyam Das or Ghanada (Tall Tale), and one of the nine gems of Emperor Akbar's court, Raja Birbar or Birbal (mediaeval history)—all of whom have eventually been turned into comic book figures serve as an attempt to re-shape the discursive field by bringing in a space for fresh dialogues and negotiations. This transgeneric, translingual and transcultural network of a concept introduces

diversity where new co-ordinates come into play every now and then to start afresh an old friendship and form unheard of dimensions of the concept. The superheroes are not aliens, or posthuman figures born in failed scientific experiments, or accidents inside atomic reactors but they are human agencies with incredible potentiality to form an institution on their own. The world is full of a diversity of superheroes as performative individuals who are not necessarily endowed with brute physical power but gifted with a super ability which differentiates them from others. The intelligence and scientific creativity of Shonku, the raw power of Batul, the unriddling ability of Birbal and the art of storytelling of Ghanada—all these are unique qualities that posit them against expected social ideals. A reiterative performance of their authority and skill shape their distinctive identity as anti-democratic and elite subjects capable of extraordinary achievements.

"[I]n literary studies", writes Judith Butler, "performative politics refers to certain acts of self-constitution"[106] where a fictional identity is constructed by "stylized repetition of acts through time".[107] In her account, human subjectivity is nothing more than a "naturalized effect"[108] of meaning and being where a person's profession, speech, gestures, movement and style—all contribute to the making of an apparently stable theory of identity. Whatever task the superhero vows to endorse, an exceptional performance constitutes his identity and gives him authority. To keep this authority intact, he has to perform repetitively. This performative power lends him authority to create his own space contrary to aggressive social objectification and turns the socially unacceptable into acceptable.

However this performative identity of the superhero may falter and there are moments of breakdown when the superhero fails to create the intended or desired effect. J. L. Austin notices that all performatives are "subject to certain whole dimensions of unsatisfactoriness to which all

actions are subject".[109] On the other hand, in his reading of Austin's text, "Signature, Event, Context", Derrida finds out a structural risk involved in performativity as every repetition carries a germ of difference:

> A standard act depends as much upon the possibility of being repeated, and thus potentially of being mimed, feigned, cited, played, simulated, parasited, etc., as the latter possibility depends upon the possibility said to be opposed to it. And both of them 'depend' upon the structure of iterability which, once again, undermines the simplicity of the oppositions and alternative distinctions. It blurs the simplicity of the line dividing inside from outside, undermines the order of succession or of dependence among the terms.[110]

The superhero's identity depends upon the effect of the spectacular. Showing only what he wants to show the performative power of the superhero's activity brings into existence a being that he speaks of. Diverting attention from the inherent ruptures, hollowness and paradoxes, the superhero forcefully tries to restrict the possibility of any other interpretation of the subject. There are moments when his sovereignty as a subject is lost and he needs to regain his intended authority. There are "misfires" as Austin would say, or "counterperformatives" as Donald MacKenzie and Alice Bamford would say, which have the power to disrupt all efforts of producing a coherent subject. In her essay "Performative Agency", Judith Butler observes:

> [I]t is only under certain kinds of conditions, and with no degree of predictability that theoretical models successfully bring into being the phenomenon they describe. There are occasions in which they fail, or there are 'counterperformative' instances when inverse effects are produced, and both the explanatory and anticipatory dimensions of theory are foiled.[111]

The everyday individual who becomes a superhero is more prone to failure than his counterpart hero because he does not have the sovereign authority and recognition of the hero as a pillar of the state. The hero's authority depends upon illocution; his speech is his command, which demands submission from others. The superhero as a common man depends upon perlocution, which is conditional and depends upon his power of persuasion, external reality and chance

factors. The active agency that Austin discovered behind the speech acts becomes dispersed and there is no wonder that Butler finds a very "limited performative agency"[112] behind performative acts.

The intervention of the superhero in the normative social life and his ethics of action raise questions regarding free will or the capacity of human agencies to shape the world. While thinking of the subject Butler humourously notices a feature that is symptomatic of the traditional superhero culture: "many people do act *as if* they were not formed, and that is an interesting posture to behold". [113] No human being can escape or transcend the biological, linguistic and cultural elements that form their subjectivity. What does it mean to 'do' or 'act' when the 'I' is formed well before one becomes aware of his self? Does doing and acting designate the same thing or doing is merely mechanical and acting involves the presence of an agency that is sovereign and has significant control over the act? Forgetting the Derridian implication that all performatives are in a sense performances, Butler tried to distinguish the conflated nature of performance that is a bounded act and performativity that is a re-citation of a norm that precedes the performer.[114] Performativity cannot be fully separated from performance and this opens up the possibility of choice for the subject whether to follow a norm or reject it and embrace another alternative. Butler also acknowledges that "Of course, it is possible to break with certain norms as they exercise the power to craft us, but that can happen only by the intervention of countervailing norms."[115] This is perhaps what Nietzsche had in mind when he proclaimed many of his paradoxical comments on the possibilities of self-creation. In spite of knowing about the deterministic nature of the universe, he prioritizes agency over structures and norms. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes:

> To become what one is, one must not have the slightest notion of what one is . . . The whole surface of consciousness—consciousness is a surface must be kept clear of all great imperatives . . . Meanwhile the

> organizing 'idea' that is destined to rule keeps growing deep down—it begins to command; slowly it leads us back from side roads and wrong roads; it prepares single qualities and fitness that will one day prove to be indispensible as a means towards the whole—one by one, it trains all subservient capacities before giving any hint of the dominant task, 'goal', 'aim', or 'meaning'.[116]

For Nietzsche, genuine agency is possible by following an individual ethic of doing that creates new convention and establishes a model of identity that do not conform to the age old customs of society and culture. Ken Gemes and Christopher Janaway elaborate:

> According to Nietzsche, most humans, being merely members of the herd, are merely passive conduits for various disparate forces already existing and operating around them. Some individuals, due perhaps to conscious design, but more likely due to fortuitous circumstances, actively collect, intensify, and order some of those disparate forces, and create a new direction for them, thereby, in fortuitous circumstances, reorienting, to some degree, the whole field of forces in which we all exist. It is these individuals, according to Nietzsche, who deserve the honorific 'person', who by imposing their strong will exercise a form of free will and genuine agency".[117]

The centrality of a dominant task in the life of superheroes and reiteration of this act constitutes his identity, which is not a compulsion as Butler would love to see it, but a conscious choice. Though not beyond the constructive forces that shape life, the superhero creates his own convention and has an active agency that places him against the tide of life. They are always already enmeshed in everyday chores of the society, and yet they are not normalized beings. They are outsiders and peripheral figures who are able to create exclusivity around their own selves through the performance of a disruptive gesture—a difference. The principle of excess that works in their performance has the power to dismantle the limit set by normativity and suggests fresh opening for social, political and ethical thought.

The superheroes are synchronic figures capable of rewriting history on their own. In opposition to Richard Reynolds' thesis where he upholds the superheroes as a preserver of social

values, the superheroes possess a breaking force and an iconoclastic spirit. They do not fit into the world but manipulates the world to fit into their own schemes of life and establish a parallel discourse of power that is emancipatory as well as effective. They are very often challenged, refuted and made the butt of ridicule because in the rise of democracy no one loves to see one among them to become more important in the social ladder. Yet they succeed and create a grand effect by their ability to do what cannot be done by others. The superhero may not reach the "normative horizon of its aspirations",[118] yet they maintain a gravity that cannot be ignored.

The function of the present time is predominantly to promote the idea of the equal status for all its citizens and the superhero's promotion of elitism and hierarchy is unfashionable and even shocking in a world of populism. What is the position of the superheroes in a world culture that endorses equality and abhors hierarchy? My work suggests that the acceptance of the paradoxical presence of the Aristotelian idea of "good hierarchy" in democracy is healthy. Without hierarchy the world appears to be idealistic and impractical. This defense of hierarchies is based on what can be called "appraisal respect", a kind of admiration that we should have for those who exhibit certain excellences in their respective fields: "accepting that others know more or can do more than us communicates and enables an openness to learning and growth"[119] Among all the writers in colonial Bengal there is only one Tagore who has earned an irrefutable position by his craft of wring. To deny that he is the most talented Bengali writer is the other name of promoting a culture of mediocrity that forcefully tries to make everyone equal. It might be politically correct but obviously the most foolish thing to do.

However we cannot see the superheroes as utopian figures with a call for impossible social action or a magical solution of the problems of the human world. They are human beings but it will be fallacious if we see them as merely governed by the same laws of mundane social

life. Both these positions disregard their anti-establishment and anti-theoretical impulses—one being impossible and the other as responsible. As figures of supreme poetic imagination, they represent the Dionysian substratum of the human mind that harbours a passion for creation. They do not represent but create possibilities as the chaotic energy of the superheroes threatens the prevalent order of society by performing a difference. Instead of upholding any particular cultural value as the slogan 'the American way' indicates, they often flaunt the tradition they are embedded in and can never become an integral part of society as their more influential counterpart, heroes. Their actions are capable to modify and eventually change what Charles Taylor calls the "social imaginary"[120] which always aims to secure a way of fitting together, or common understanding among the people. With a flamboyant and free display of individuality, they infiltrate and transform the seemingly familiar and ideal space of democracy. As they do not conform, people may call them mad and even laugh at them but they cannot ignore them because they uphold the magnetic power of the new, the different and the unthought. In a psychoanalytic reading the repetition compulsion of the superheroes can be seen as an effect of a trauma—murder and loss, accident in atomic reactor or failed scientific experiment—but this work looks at this ritualized repetition of performances as a pleasure principle that provides the superheroes their power, scope and stability to maintain their asymptotic relationship with the society. Their habitual performances set them apart and serve as a continuous reminder that keeps their position secure in a society that is forgetful and not capable of absorbing otherness in the mainstream politics of cultural life.

Endnotes:

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Chapter 2

Tussle with the Muscle

> There seems to be a new scent in the air: a sense of new and different possibilities; new ways for us to interact with history.[1]
>
> - Alan Moore, "Introduction" in Mike Mignola, *Hellboy: Wake the Devil*

The Bengali comic-book artist Narayan Debnath's (1925-) choice of the name for his 'hero' is quite unusual for a man who is destined to be 'super'.[2] In Bengali, the word *batul* refers to 'hand catapult' and yet in another sense it means 'short'. A catapult is not a weapon which can be controlled easily. There is always a chance of overdoing things or missing the mark. We often see that Batul does not have full knowledge and control of his power—"You don't have any idea about your actual capacity!"—and everyone around him knows that "anything can happen when Batulda is here."[3] The realization of overdoing things always comes later: "Oops! What have I done?"[4] Problematizing the position more, the classical Indian superheroes with great power in *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*—the *mahaviras*—have always been depicted as colossal figures—tall and stout as the *saal* tree. In spite of the fact that an undersized hero is doubtful enough to excite popular imagination, Debnath portrays him as short on purpose. Batul is reckless, strong and often responsibly irresponsible and his shortness is odd enough to produce

curiosity and laughter in a culture where the practice of body shaming has been normalized. The ironic juxtaposition of an adjective *batul* as a proper name with another adjective 'great' and his existence as a subject who produces laughter by silly superheroic acts thus destabilizes the unwritten code of the hero / superhero cult. Batul is an unconventional superhero whose name and appearance quite unconsciously parodies his own self.

The Superhero Question

In his early career, Debnath might have been influenced by Dudley D. Watkins' *Desperate Dan* (1937) and Hal Foster's *Tarzan* (1929), but the 'flayed look' of the superhero which started with Brune Hogarth and is present in almost all other American superheroes, is missing in *Batul the Great* (1965). Instead of the detailed musculature, Debnath adorns Batul with an improbably proportioned body of flat muscles, a peculiarly puffed chest and very thin waist and legs. His costume—black shorts and orange or pink skintight *genji*—almost bald head and naked feet (because shoes last less than a week in his feet) give no indication of his superpower. His body makes us wonder how is it possible for his skinny legs to balance his top heavy body which can push iron beams inside the earth with minimum effort. The first glimpse of his peculiarly exaggerated body is nothing but a cartoonist's delight.

Fig. 1 The Evolution of Batul's stature

Following Friedrich Jameson, Debnath's *Batul the Great* can be regarded as a "pastiche" or "blank parody"—a postcolonial rewriting of the Western superhero genre—leaving aside its postmodern connotation. In *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* Jameson writes:

> Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter.[5]

It is a form of "the cannibalization of all the styles of the past" where we are aware of the history, and yet we are unable to find our connection to history, and "The new spatial logic of the simulacrum can now be expected to have a momentous effect on what used to be historical time".[6] There is no wonder that during my conversation with Debnath he seemed to be quite reluctant to align Batul with the western superheroes:

> A girl from ETV requested me to declare that Batul is a superhero, and I told them, "Well, if you say so I'm also saying that he is a superhero". I never said this myself. She requested me to say this and I said that he is a superhero, Bengal's superhero.[7]

When Debnath started the series in 1965, Batul did not have his extraordinary superpower and in last fifty years, though basically unchanged, Batul has gone through a few evolutionary phases in terms of his physical as well as mental characteristics. In his early years, like any other person, he was afraid of crocodiles, bears or angry goats and would run madly away from them. In another interview Debnath has provided us a detailed account of this transformation. We come to know that the publishers of Shuktara wanted Batul to do what Captain America did for his country, and during the 1971 Bangladesh War of Liberation, Debnath decided to transform Batul into a superpower.[8] It was wartime when Batul had been given an impenetrable body, bullets started bouncing back from his chest, and in his nationalistic zeal he started fighting with tanks

Fig. 2 Batul fighting the Pakistani terrorists in Kargil

and wiping out the enemies to save his nation. Again, following the popular demands Batul became an advocate of neo-nationalist propaganda at the end of the twentieth century. Two major national events—the Indo-Pak war in Kargil (1999) and the killing of the pilgrims by terrorists on their way to the Amarnath Temple (2002)—have been highlighted by Debnath in a series called *Aekai Aeksho* (*One Equal to Hundred*) where Batul protects the pilgrims of Amarnath, helps the *jawans* to fight the Pakistani terrorists, and kicks them back to their own territory. The advent of Batul, the patriot, however, can be seen as an aftereffect of these shocking events which resulted in a proliferation of popular neo-nationalistic films in Bollywood: "Don't be afraid, I'll not punish you. I just want to say one thing that you are deceiving people in the name of those who are fighting and dying for us, for our country."[9] In Debnath's representation, the enemies beyond the line of control often utter a few easily recognizable Arabic words—*iblish, kotol, dojokh,* or *behesth*—popular innuendos insinuating 'their' religious as well as national identity. This accentuation on the Muslim identity of the terrorists might not be just accidental. Under its comical note, it reflects the deadly hostility between two countries declared free at one midnight in 1947. Batul subscribes to this inherent ideological contradiction of identity politics, a reminder of Debnath's own ambivalent position in a network of incorporation and elimination into the society.

Now the question arises—can we call Batul a superhero? To designate someone as a superhero who does not follow the conventions of the superhero genre can surely raise eyebrows of the critics. Batul does not wear mask. He does not display any supernatural power or use superior technology too. Yet he accomplishes numerous missions impossible because of his impenetrable body and tremendous raw power. Whereas the superheroes have a strained relationship with the society, he is much more absorbed in community relationships in

comparison to his conventional counterparts. Without the mask to hide his power, he does not even have an alter-ego which is full of insecurity and doubts. He has no origin story and has no alleged mission as Spiderman, Superman or Captain America has: "With great power there must also come . . . great responsibility"[10]. It is only in a post-1971 issues, we find Batul to express such an obligation: "I must go if people are in danger!"[11] The source of his power is not known. He doesn't have Samson's lock, Chota Bhim's *laddu*, Mandrake's hypnotic power, Thor's hammer or Gupi/Bagha's magic blessings. Only he consumes a huge amount of food which might clarify the secret of his power. As Sumana Roy puts it succinctly, "In a very Hindu way perhaps, it was all inside him"[12].

The Ethical Subtext and Counterperformativity

While defining comics David Kunzle indicates morality as a basic marker—it tells "a story which is both moral and topical".[13] The ethical subtext of *Batul the Great* is grounded on the colloquial or age old morality of Bengali culture. Growing up in the first half of the twentieth century, Debnath's ideas are aligned to proverbial knowledge with a binary politics of its own. From his inflexible ideological position, he has to draw a clear line of demarcation—right and wrong, good and bad, true and false, hero and villain—for his readers and dissociate them from the evil influences for 'their own benefit'. The others of the society are not normal beings and restoration of norm by making them ideal citizens is to be done either with prize or punishment.

There are, however, contradictions in Batul's axiomatic position as a moralist. Though he is a representative of a marginalized genre his thematic as well as moral content reaffirms the traditional and the established. He experiments with a new form but the content shows nothing innovative in terms of morality. As an authoritative figure Batul is a victim of a knowledge system that has a predefined notion of either/or. This politics of transforming the other into the

same through reward and punishment often fails due to the untranslatability of the other into the mainstream knowledge system. The constant effort of the other to escape the confinement into normativity blocks the possibility of any productive communication.

The attempt to tame and civilize the 'whipping boys' becomes problematic when in *Marshal Arts*, with all his superhuman abilities, he loses way in a dark and smoggy day and the little child led by intuition returns home safely. A few of his contradictory attitudes include: (i) as a green warrior he saves tigers but quite unexpectedly hunts deer; (ii) he saves snakes but sells bears to the circus; and (iii) quite uncaring of the consequences, he breaks bridges to catch the 'criminals'. The peace maker is rash in his actions and quite unknowingly destroys other's peace of mind. The collateral damage due to his heroic exploits destroys beyond recognition, yet it is ignored as inconsequential because death and destruction are often affectless in an apparently illogical comic world. The beating of the criminals and young delinquents are often done only to enjoy the perverse pleasure of beating and except a few acts of negotiations, as with the robbers in "Ekai Eksho", he relies chiefly on a problematic use of violence as a necessity—a weapon to implement the law and order of the society.

As the law-keeper of the society, Batul relentlessly works to implement the accepted codes of morality. The moralization is done using conventional proverbial codes—"Virtue proclaims itself", "To earn fame by spending another's money", and "A bully is always a coward". Debnath makes Batul a typical Bengali cultural exclusivist who abhors being lured towards the excesses of the popular whether it is behaviour, movie or money. In *Batul the Great* "The cultural development of the schoolchild became a battleground" between the "civilizing objectives of the education system" and "illicit pleasures of popular culture".[14] The delinquents in Debnath's comic strips wants to enjoy the excess of life even if by robbing a bank: "We'll

have a storm of fun”[15]. They do not accept power passively but form their own paradigm of resistance. They are also unwilling to go to the school, play every prank possible on the teachers and Batul himself, and often bombard the school building itself: “Laws should be made to close the schools. It’s just useless expenditure of energy”.[16] The panoptic techniques used by Batul to track the categorically deviant and rehabilitate them into the mainstream through punitive action remains a failure. The surveillance and severe punishment cannot transform the delinquents into law-abiding individuals but rather their humiliation gives birth to a kind of disgust for both the law and its arbitrator. The virulent adversaries are often knowingly in direct conflict with the authority. The adopted children of Batul as well as the ‘anti-socials’ often group together and plan to kill Batul to become free, an indication of the failure of Batul’s civilizing mission. They reveal a Plebian instinct displaying a fundamental questioning of power. In their private space, which is beyond the reach of Batul’s authority, he is derogatorily addressed as *batkul*, *udkhul*, *damra* or *dharibaaz*. However, this personal space is often invaded and Batul learns about many of their plans in advance with the help of the sidekick Lambakarna (often derogatorily addressed by their adversaries as *langboat* meaning a tail). One who has a large year as the name suggests, he has a superpower—he can hear everything even from a mile away. The politics of resisting the crude power, which always showers in the form of kick, box or hit, provides them a kind of autonomy within the oppressive structure. Batul always tries to bring them under control, and though he apparently succeeds, they often remain beyond his iron grip and he ends up with invectives—*hatachchara*, *khacchar*, *bitle*, *morkot*.

Batul the Idiot

The extraordinary muscle power of Batul is a ‘problematic blessing’ because his foolish, superhuman, and thoughtless gestures often cause trouble for his neighbours—he breaks bridges,

makes shortcut through their house, and often unknowingly hits people so hard that it grows potato on their head. The peculiar thing is that his skin is hard and impenetrable like a rhinoceros and he even does not realize what terrible things he is doing. Batul also cannot resist the temptation for food. The love for food almost leading to avarice is a recurrent leitmotif in *Batul the Great*—a reminder of the Bengali preoccupation with delicious and spicy cuisine. He has aversion for nothing—from dog food to bear meat, from shark to swordfish and even coal tar—he can eat anything with pleasure. It is not surprising that many of the issues are full of Tom and Jerry-like hide and seek games between Batul and his adversaries—the two young boys—where they madly try to protect their food from each other. Sometimes they make Batul a fool and win the food and at other times Batul makes a fool of them.

In "One and only Batul" we come across a story where he tries to make a fence around his home for privacy but when this effort results in a series of accidents for a horse-carriage and his neighbours, they decide to make the fence for him themselves. The new fence not only gives Batul his desired privacy but makes him a total outcaste in the town.[17] In fact, he often uses more power than it is actually necessary and this 'little more' in his language becomes deadly for others. Life with a superhero may not always be beneficial but a nightmare.

At times Batul is stupid and he often becomes the victim of petty childish pranks making us burst into laughter. Everybody, including the worthless police officers around him, knows that he has an empty pot inside his brain:

> Your muscles will not work much upon Pakal Peno. He has brain. He will slip just like a Pakal fish. If you want to catch him, Batul, you have to use head instead of your body! . . . If you see him, then inform me. This job is to be done not with muscles but with brain.[18]

Yet his enormous strength often accidentally supplements his lack of brain. In the same story Batul unintentionally pushes the police officer so hard that his head goes inside the stock of a

Fig. 3 Batul loses his food

Tree, and when he tries to bring him out holding his legs, he does it with so much power that the man comes out like a rocket and hits Pakal Peno who was passing by only to lay him flat onto the ground. With irony and teasing humour, Batul replies: “What you said was right, officer. You have taken him in your grip by your head. Ha ha!”[19]

The overdesire to serve people often ends up for him in paying compensation for what he does. The police does not like him because, uninvited, he does their work and wins people’ praise. Yet he is a common man fallible in every step of life. In one place, Batul fails to recognize a bear in darkness and calls it aunty ending up in hilarious laughter for the readers. He

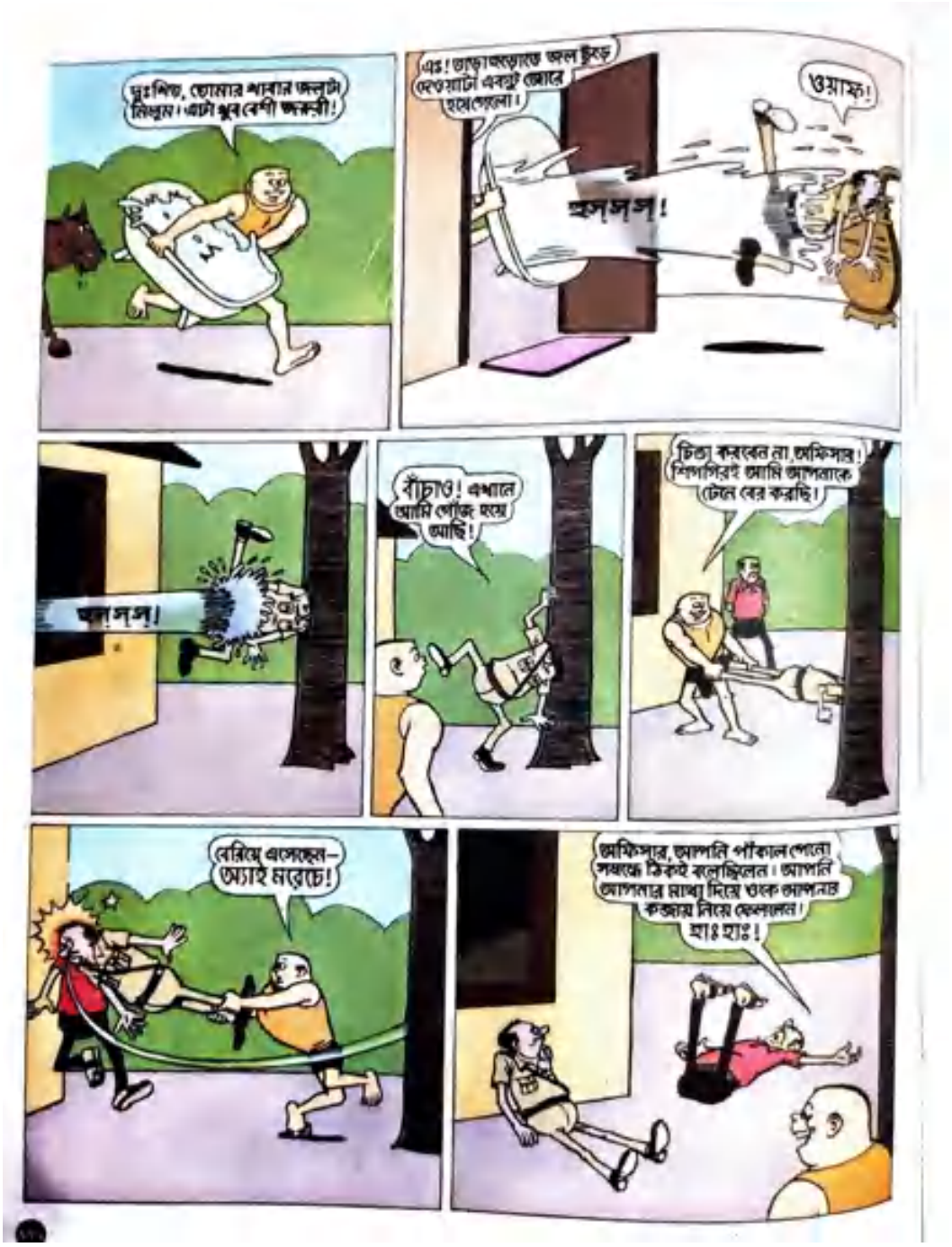

Fig. 4 Batul catches a criminal by accident

goes to a salon to shave and is ridiculed by the barber as he does not have beard, the criminals use his power to break the jail or bank, and the doctors thank him because his superheroic exploits bring many people to the hospital. The people around him always have a hesitant feeling

for him. They often seek his help knowing that he is a disaster: "Just when I have seen Batul, I know that something unusual is going to happen."[20]

An Orphan Again!

In one of her essays, Sumana Roy asks a very crucial question: "Why are all these comic-book superheroes orphans?"[21] The answer is, perhaps, hidden in the paradoxical concept of time and death in the comic books where the superhero plays the dual role of both a common man and a mythical figure. Umberto Eco writes:

> The mythological character of comic strips finds himself in this singular situation: he must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore, he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable (this is what happens to Superman); but since he is marketed in the sphere of a "romantic" production for a public that consumes "romances," he must be subjected to a development which is typical, as we have seen, of novelistic characters.[22]

The comic-book superhero is a living myth, a performative being, whose identity depends upon a continuous re-appropriation of his trivial, often unimportant acts. In his case, the meaning of his life is not attached to death as it is with the ancient heroes nor can he grow old and retire from his inconsequential job. He has to entertain people for long, at least, as long as he is saleable in the market. To solve this problem the comic artist brings in confusion in the concept of time. In this world the real important time is the time of momentary action. This moment of action, however, is not entirely free from the traces of the past and predicts a very vague anticipation of the future. Movement in time is denied by keeping each story isolated yet somehow loosely connected to the other stories of the series and they are quite self-sufficient. There is no in-between flow of time from one frame to the next and Batul happily jumps from one action to another to overcome the endless planning and plotting of the same the anti-socials and juvenile delinquents.

Peter Coogan tackles this orphan question in another way by bringing in the idea of freedom in superhero comics:

> Superheroes stand as metaphor for freedom—the freedom to act without consequences and the freedom from the restrictions of gravity, the law, families, and romantic relationships. Perhaps this is why so many superheroes are free of their families as unmarried adult orphans.[23]

The superheroes might have a family affiliation as depicted in the origin stories (Batul does not have one though), but their relationships with other people have always remained extremely problematic, complicated, and hazy and they are denied a chronological biography. They act, but "To act" means as Umberto Eco says, "to "consume" himself"[24], the comic artist keeps the superhero always busy in merry-go-round activities. His stories are only remotely related to each other because clear relationship between them would create a sense of continuity leading towards death. Batul cannot have a meaningful romantic relationship because he cannot grow up in time, he cannot die as he has to satisfy the enormous appetite of adventure of the modern readers and he cannot marry because marriage and procreation mean gradual movement towards death. Eco Explains:

> Superman comes off as a myth only if the reader loses control of the temporal relationships and renounces the need to reason on their basis, thereby giving himself up to the uncontrollable flux of stories which are accessible to him and, at the same time, holding on to the illusion of a continuous present. Since the myth is not isolated exemplarily in a dimension of eternity but in order to be assimilated must enter into the flux of the story in question, this same story is refuted as flux and seen instead as an immobile present.[25]

The banishment of young women from *Batul the Great* reveals Debnath's 'politics of asexuality'. Debnath belongs to an older and conservative generation who are uncomfortable with the idea of free-mixing between children. Women are very rare in *Batul the Great*, and wherever they are, they are presented in the form of an old aunt. When I asked him about the lack of female characters in his works, he hesitates and finally says: "The magazine in which it is

getting published belongs to children and that is why no female characters have been introduced in it."[26] It is a bizarre logic, indeed. On the other hand, in spite of working in a western medium, he is also highly critical of the rampant visual culture on television influenced by the west and its effect on the blooming minds, and as a guardian, seems to guard Batul from any possibility of a romantic relationship. To Debnath, the word 'love' (sex is a far cry) is part of a cultural paranoia where childhood is an imagined utopia—'pure', 'innocent', and free from all 'carnal' desires.

The unique predicament of the comic-book superhero situates him in the horizon—in a no man's land between the human and the post/non/trans-human. He is not human because he exceeds all the humanly conceivable limits of power; he is human because he is the creation of man, and therefore shares the pitfalls of his own creator. The superhero, to use Agamben once more, is essentially "inoperative" and without any originary "vocation" like the other human beings.[27] "Inoperativeness", writes Agamben, is that possibility, which will never be actualized. Had the superhero been something other than human, he might have actualized many things, which are deemed to be unthinkable for the human beings. But the superhero cannot even think what human beings cannot; he is a plaything in the human artist's imagination and does what he is impelled to do. He often has a much professed vocation though, that is, one of saving people in disgrace, but it is neither obligatory nor inherent rather it is imposed upon him by his creator, or to be more precise, the market. The unending struggle of the superhero to overcome the ingenious plots of the ever-plotting villains brings in a kind of circularity and stasis in the superhero's life. The superhero himself does not act except when the villains force him to act. He cannot prevent anything. The immobile superhero, despite his immense "potentiality" to act, does not affect any real change in the world. As powerful as Batul is, he could solve, or at least try to solve the primary needs of the world—food, clothing and shelter for the hungry and

dispossessed. Yet he remains there with his scanty conservative morals and keeps himself busy in a small town saving the damsels in distress, fighting the Pakistani terrorists, catching bank robbers, and befooling himself by the childish pranks of two extremely creative juvenile delinquents. He is born for entertaining people with the joy of scantiness and any act of changing the world is impossible for him because "economics . . . denies any 'definitive' take on a hero"[28].

A Hunger for Redundancy

What is the necessity of the comic-book superheroes then? Is it only wish-fulfillment, or as Umberto Eco would say: this is a "hunger for redundancy" which keeps the interest of the readers alive in spite of the repetitiveness of superhero comics? Superhero comics, however, do not have the dynamism and creativity of wish-fulfillment as we find in this beautiful poem "Suddenly If" by Premendra Mitra:

> Suddenly if, by some magic,
> I'm made the king for tonight,
> I'll decree a few laws,
> One or two, I'll severely punish.
> …
> I'll topsy-turvy the whole world,
> Break all the do's and don'ts everywhere,
> Make a few laws of my wish,
> And celebrate the event of being the king.
> However mighty the truth be,
> If it's strict, it'll be punished by me.
> Suddenly if, by some magic,
> I'm made the king for tonight.[29]

The king or the hero of the poem might be a tyrant in future but he explodes with an endless possibility of new beginnings. Heidegger recognizes the immense possibility of the heroes when

he says: “the heroes we choose focus our common sense of what is most important in life, shaping our feel for which battles we should fight as well as how we should go about fighting them”[30]. Batul’s story reverses this statement in its attention for scantiness and shows that the superheroes might not be heroes. We might wish to have the power of a superhero to become a hero. We might wish the power of Batul not to be like Batul. What deters us is the farcical situation that Batul always creates. We would love to be Superman though. The grandeur and personality of Superman would easily dupe us but Batul is a fool like us. We would never befool ourselves by knowing that we are fools.

Endnotes:

[1]Alan Moore, "Introduction," in Mike Mignola, *Hellboy: Wake the Devil* (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Comics, 1997), V.

[2] The comic-book culture in Bengal is barely one hundred years old. Before the arrival of Narayan Debnath in the 1950s, comics were not an accomplished literary-artistic medium in Bengal. The first Bengali comics with speech balloon appeared in 1921 and its creator was Sukhlata Rao (1886-1969). It began to flourish with Prafullachandra Lahiri's (1900-1975), popularly known as Kafi Khan, works serialized in the pages of *Jugantar Patrika*. However, it moved to maturity very quickly. Shaking off its earlier dependence on the Western form, it became original in terms of theme if not in technique in the works of Debnath, especially *Batul the Great* (1965). See Biswadeb Gangyopadhyay, "Introduction," in *Kafi Khan Samagra* (Kolkata: Lalmati, 2012). 5-7.

[3] Narayan Debnath, *Batul Samagra* (Kolkata: Deb Sahitya Kutir, 2011), 5. All translations from Narayan Debnath's *Batul Samagra* are mine unless noted otherwise.

[4] Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 6.

[5] Friedrich Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 17.

[6] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 18.

[7] Narayan Debnath, personal interview by Aditya Misra, 24th April, 2011.

[8] Narayan Debnath, "Interview: Narayan Debnath, "interview by Chirantan Kundu, , *Parabas* 4, no. 4 (2001), http://www.parabaas.com/PB22/LEKHA22/bNarayan22.html

[9] Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 502. The victory of the Indian soldiers over the villainy of Pakistan is the main theme of these movies. For instance, *Border* (1997), *Mission Kashmir* (2000) and *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001) are a few of them.

[10] Randy Duncan & Matthew J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form, Culture* (NY & London: Continuum, 2009), 231.

[11] Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 507.

[12] Sumana Roy, "Small-town chest-puff: Revisiting Narayan Debnath's Batul the Great", *Himal Southasian* (May 2010),

https://www.himalmag.com/small-town-chest-puff/

[13] Aaron Meskin, "Defining Comics?," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 4 (2007): 379. JSTOR.

[14] Procter, James. *Stuart Hall* (London & NY: Routledge, 2004), 20.

[15] Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 7.

[16] Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 1.

[17] Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 103..

[18] Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 357.

[19] Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 358.

[20] Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 424.

[21] Roy, "Small-town chest-puff".

[22] Eco, "The Myth", 15.

[23] Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of the Genre* (Austin: Monkeybrain, 2006),14

[24] Eco, "The Myth", 15.

[25] Eco, "The Myth", 16.

[26] Narayan Debnath, personal interview by Aditya Misra.

[27] See Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford U P, 2009), 1-25.

[28] Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan, *The Power* , 234.

[29] Premendra Mitra, "Suddenly If," *Kobitasamagra* (Kolkata, Signet: 2015), 615-16. Translation of this Bengali poem is mine.

[30] Ian Thomson, "Deconstructing the Hero," in *Comics as Philosophy*, ed. Jeff McLaughlin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 100.

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.

Chapter 4

Mapping the Postcolonial Genius

> The feeling of the scientist and the poet both have gone out in search of the inexpressible One. The difference lies in that the poet does not think about the method and the scientist cannot ignore the method.[1]
>
> - Jagadish Chandra Bose, "Literature in Science"

> [T]he scientist or artist is personally as much the product of a tradition as the producer of a product, which transcends that tradition. In other words, creative artists or scientists do not simply produce a transcendent product; in a sense, they actually transcend *themselves*. They produce something that they could not have willed, and which they could not know they had the ability to produce. As the bearer of tradition, they have not only gone beyond *it*, they have gone beyond *themselves*; they have transcended their Selves. One is reminded of the beautiful story about Haydn who, listening for the first time to his *Creation*, broke into tears and said: "I have not written this."[2]
>
> - Larry Briskman, "Creative Product and Creative Process in Science and Art"

The diary is an artefact which stages the "intimate theatre of history"[3] of an individual's life in a performative manner, personal style, and individual technique. It is a form of creative storytelling which regularly and deliberately translates events and incidents as well as subjective reflections of the phenomenal world and the writer's everyday life in an objective fashion. Cautiously inscribed, documented, preserved, and kept away from the eyes of others, the diary is an archive of secret communication with one's owns 'self'. The diary, writes Irina Paperno, "turns life into text, the diary represents a lasting trace of one's own being—an

effective defence against annihilation"[4].The pages of a diary are something that remains of a person who is no more, it gives us a sense of the person as he was, and yet the authenticity of the subject produced in a diary can be questioned because no diary can be exhaustive; it is a story that does not tell us everything. The diary of an individual and its political context—the rise and falls in a nation's history—are also intimately related to each other: "The diary allows the linking of the self to historical time".[5] Often with a turn for the literary, the dramatic and the fictitious, it is a residual and performative form of self-fashioning that intends to constitute a stable subject by arranging and often eliding incoherencies of life. In spite of occasional jumps and cuts, it apparently produces a picture of the subject in the making and his milieu in a particular phase of history. The habitual narcissistic impulse and showcasing of subliminal thoughts, half-baked beliefs, and suppressed desires can make a diary contradict the carefully constructed public image of a person.

The scientist as a person may not be scientific in his approach. The legendary physicist Albert Einstein's travel diaries quite astonishingly reveal a racist outlook which betrays his belief in geographical determinism of human intelligence. While commenting on the hot and humid climate of the East, Einstein eventually ends up revealing his belief in the intellectual superiority of the West: "wouldn't we too, in this climate, become like the Indians".[6] If a genius like Einstein cannot erase these subjective 'fallacies', the question arises how do individual beliefs, historical differences, and cultural specificity affect the so called objective approach of a scientist? It seems that though the diary reveals a very strong sense of self where the self itself often overlooks the complexity and ambivalence within its own creation. The diary is a more intimate and direct form of life than a biography.

The Bengali film-maker and writer Satyajit Ray (1921-92) published "Byomjatrir Diary" ["The Diary of the Space Traveller"], the first story of his science fiction series on Professor Shonku in 1961in *Sandesh*, a children's magazine mostly run and edited by the Ray

family. Shonku loves to keep an account of his everyday life in minute details. Writing a diary is easier for an "over-imaginative" person, which he thinks he is not and casually calls himself a "non-writer"[7]. He wishes to have the linguistic skill of a creative writer but ultimately resolves that it is not necessary to use language aesthetically in a diary because he is only recording the truth, he is not fictionalizing the events and incidents of his life.[8] While differentiating a scientist from a creative writer, he stresses on the capacity for rigour, close observation and patience: "Actually, as he is a creative writer, it is difficult for him to travel with us. We have come here to observe everything closely and for this we need time and patience."[9] But the question is can a scientist be a detached observer of life erasing the burden of the call of the outside—the aesthetic, ethical, social, political, or ideological? It seems that Shonku often finds it difficult to maintain this demarcation: "I understand that the attraction for a, most probably, imaginary place is not at all a sign of a scientist. But what can be done? The unpretentious emotions of our mind have to be expressed in diaries!"[10]

Historicizing the Trans-historical

In one of his conversations with Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno rightly says that "all humans deep down, whether they admit this or not, know that it would be possible or it could be different"[11]. Just after the emancipation from the British Raj, it was a crucial and decisive phase in Indian as well as world history when a newly born nation was urgently in need to regenerate itself. However this immediate transformation or utopian wish fulfilment is only possible in science fiction, "a literary genre…whose main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment."[12] The advent of Shonku is a literary response to this collective desire for the nation's own heroes in every sphere of knowledge—arts as well as sciences—who will make a difference. In that sense Ray's attempt can be seen, to use Adam Roberts' phrase, an attempt at "world-building"[13]. Shonku is utopic in his thinking and projects a fierce will to otherness in contrast to the shabby

realities of life after independence. It is sheer nonsense, one can think, but deep down there is a conscious desire and hope to go beyond. There is a wish image of tremendous potentiality: in spite of its social, political and economic odds one day India will revive the lost glory and earn respectability in the world.

Trilokeswar Shonku is a curious combination of the Bengali tradition and Western modernity where the proper name stands for any of the three supreme gods from the Hindu tradition—Vishnu, Shiva and Surya—and the title surprisingly refers to the geometrical cone. This man is five feet two inch, myopic, thin but strong, and most surprisingly with long beard but bald at the age of twenty one. In his own description he has a wide forehead (a mark of his intelligence) and in "the eyes there is a mixture of sharp intelligence and peaceful restraint."[14] He has a combination of crystal clear (remembers everything from the time when he was only eleven months old) and eidetic memory (knows sixty-nine languages) and an auditory and nasal sensitivity a few times greater than common people. As a genius he is a little eccentric and yet a gentleman who is acknowledged all over the world for his adventures and invention of numerous brain storming medicines and technologies. From a small town named Giridih—now in Jharkhand—and far away from the metropolis, he regularly travels to attend conferences, join in collaborative projects, and take part in exciting adventures across the world. He thinks, as every superhero does, it is his 'duty' to save people from danger.[15] Peculiarly enough, his cat is named after one of the greatest scientists of the world—Sir Isaac Newton. Christening a cat by someone's name is a scandalous move in Indian culture which is biased towards the human over the animal. One cannot call a cat or dog by the name of the greats in Indian history—this is blasphemy. Yet this naming has a peculiar popular appeal to the wounded psychology of a formerly colonized nation. The cat is lovely and adorable, and yet it is domesticated. Taming Newton is taming the epitome of Western science and civilization.

In his famous Independence Day speech delivered in the midnight of August 15, 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru hits the right note of an emerging nation's politics of "nation building": "The achievement we celebrate today is but a step, an opening of opportunity, to the greater triumphs and achievements that await us. Are we brave enough and wise enough to grasp this opportunity and accept the challenge of the future?"[16] Just as Uncle Ben advices Peter Parker, Nehru also urges his countrymen not to forget that "Freedom and power bring responsibility."[17] In such an environment imbued with intensified nationalism, Professor Shonku emerges as a product from a country whose rich intellectual history had been demolished during its two hundred years of colonial subjugation. However Ray is not one to succumb to the foolhardiness of a narrow-minded nationalism that views everything indigenous in the superlative. In one of his interviews Ray tells us how he was influenced by the cosmopolitan attitude of Nehru and Rabindranath Tagore:

> I admired Nehru, I understood him better, because I am also in a way a kind of product of East and West. A certain liberalism, a certain awareness of Western values and a fusion of Eastern and Western values was in Nehru […] as a man, I always understood what Nehru was doing, as I understood what Tagore was doing – because you can't leave Tagore out of this, it's a triangle.[18]

Trained in Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan, Ray was an heir to the Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century which sought to disseminate western knowledge in Bengal and propagated a fusion of liberal humanist thoughts with cosmopolitan imagination. A derivative of this east-west syncretism, Ray seeks to transcend the narrow boundary of selfish self-preservation that creates a divide between nations and embrace the world community. "Travel widens the mind"[19], Shonku remembers the proverb and cultivates the traveller's respect for other nations, people, and cultures. In Ray's imaginary landscape, Shonku is a world-traveller. There is no surprise that his closest friends and collaborators with whom he feels at home in the world—Jeremy Sanders (anthropologist), Francis Fielding (astrophysicist), and Wilhelm Kroll (geologist)—are not from his country of origin, but

Europeans, two Englishmen and the a German. They are equally respectful of the Indian tradition and culture. Another friend Chris McPherson, the geologist, always carries a signed copy of Tagore's *Gitanjali*, a precious gift by the poet himself to his father.

In spite of Ray's ahistorical gesture that denies fixity in time (the diaries carry only dates, the years have mysteriously gone missing from its pages), Shonku cannot escape historical predicament. After a close scrutiny of the textual references, Biswajit Ray suggests that he was born in 1911 or 1912[20] which establishes the fact that he should be around fifty years old when the first diary was published in 1961. The inaugural story "Byomjatrir Diary" ["The Diary of a Space Traveller"] narrates to us the story behind the discovery of a diary of the famous scientist who suddenly disappeared fifteen years ago:

> Professor Shonku had disappeared about fifteen years ago. Some people would say that he died while carrying out a dangerous experiment. But others would say that he is still alive; only he is hiding and doing his work secretly in some remote area of the country, and he will come out when the time is right.[21]

This abrupt disappearance of Shonku reminds us the story of another legendary figure whose sudden disappearance had already become a subject of public curiosity that enthralled the nation for several decades. The radical Indian leader Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-45?), popularly known as Netaji, who travelled around the world to organize the Indian National Army and fought against the British, was considered to be the harbinger of a new era in popular Indian imagination. In 1945, exactly fifteen years before Shonku appeared in the public domain, he suddenly disappeared leaving the whole country in a perennial mourning. People were not ready to take him as dead and believed that his return as a superhero will magically solve all problems—poverty, inequality and injustice—of the nation. Shonku is a reincarnation of Bose, albeit in another mask to satisfy the collective desire of a nation—a magical presence which can solve all insoluble problems of life.

In Search of an Origin

The creation of Shonku is a "chutnification" (the Bengali word that can be used for it is *khichuri*), as Salman Rushdie would say, of traditions, genres, and cultures. Ray draws from various sources both from the east and the west. The familiar Indian folktales, Tantra, Black Magic, hypnotism, and Sukumar Ray are punched together with Mary Shelley, H. G wells, Robert Louis Stevenson, H. G. Wells, and Isaac Asimov. In one of his remarkable nonsense poems in Bengali "Bigyan Sikkha" ["Science Education"], Sukumar Ray (1887-1923), the illustrious father of Satyajit Ray, parodies the bookish knowledge that inheres the risk and danger of treating nature as a 'sealed book' and bringing everything under the mechanism of human authority:

> Come here; let me see your head, let me see it with futoscope,
>
> Let me see how much adulterated spuriousness is there in the butter of your brain.
>
> In which way does the gate of intelligence open, and in which way does it close;
>
> How much brain space is lightly filled and how much is dense.[22]

Science is only one branch of knowledge and it cannot explain everything. The poem concludes with a call for a return to common sense rather than trying to seek miraculous solution of all problems through science: "There is everything, only I couldn't find where has it been written—/ How would I stop a mad bull running after me!"[23] In fact, Sukumar Ray graduated from Presidency College in 1906 with double honours in physics and chemistry. He was aware of the overdoing of science in an adopted culture, which seeks either to re-appropriate all indigenous knowledge in scientific terms, or discard everything home-bred as irrational and non-science. An eccentric scientist, Professor Nidhiram Patkel, appears in his micro-story "Satti" ["The Real"]. Imbued with romantic nationalism, his inventions are comprised of *deshi* ingredients—easy to use and damn cheap. Professor Patkel's famous invention is Gawnghobikat Tel, a type of oil with strange power: "If you drink the oil, it is a medicine for spleen; if you smear it, it is a medicine for ulcers; and if you apply it in your

moustache, it will grow the size of half of your hand within seven days."[24] In fact, the name "Patkel" has been derived from a familiar Bengali proverb *eentti marle patkelti khete hoy* which can be roughly translated as "If you through a brick, it will come back to you as a stone". Following the lead of Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya (1918-1993), the Marxist-rationalist philosopher who extensively wrote on the role of science and philosophy in the everyday life of Bengal, Biswajit Ray observes:

> According to his (Debiprasad) opinion, it is true that the country has become independent but the baggage of non-attainment of the common people is so large that they search for a medicine that cures all ailments. Not only that, they also want a person who can cure all ailments by chanting a mantra.[25]

Shonku is an extension of what Patkel is—a *deshi* superhero—who has solutions to many problems of his life and times, albeit ironically, he refrains himself from mass production of his inventions that will radically transform the nature of humanity itself.

Sukumar Ray's *Henshoram Hunshiarer Diary* [The Diary of Henshoram Hunshiar] (1922)—a parody of Arthur Conan Doyle's (1859-1930) *The Lost World* (1912)—is a humorous text where Henshoram, the adventurer, reaches to an unknown land ten miles north of the Bandakush mountain. In this land he encounters strange animals and plants, names or renames everything in a colonial style as if they did not exist before they saw them but strangely returns without any proof except a few handmade sketches. Sukumar Ray's cross-linguistic word play in his naming of the animals—*gomratherium*, (in Bengali *gomra* refers to irritable temperament), *clillanosaurus* (*chillano* is to cry out loud) and *langratherium* (*langra* refers to a lame person)—in the new land is hilarious. Satyajit Ray, his son, borrows the diary format from his father's work and follows the narrative structure of science fiction which is a western form, but an undercurrent of subversion runs through the stories and eventually deconstructs the genre. Profoundly interested in the complex process of the making and unmaking of culture, he rewrites and upturns the typical generic expectations by starting a creative dialogue not only with Doyle's Professor Challenger—a symbol of white

supremacy—but the whole Victorian enterprise of adventure genre where Christopher Columbus stands as a trendy mythical figure.

Imperialism is an umbrella term which agglomerated many ideas together, such as, white racial superiority, social Darwinism, hypermasculinity, adventure and war, and finally, the self-imposed mission to civilize the uncivilized. Aware of the ills of colonialism, Shonku does not support imperialism of any kind while Challenger remains an integral part of the imperialist project which became, writes the historian Eric Hobsbawm, a "part of the political and journalistic vocabulary during the 1890s in the course of the arguments about colonial conquest"[26]. The late Victorian sense of decadence gave rise to the necessity of, as Kenneth Wilson says, "national character"[27]or decontextualized idea of Carlyle's "great men" built upon the ideals of duty to the nation, uprightness, and scientific temper whatever that means. Regarding the rise of this popular heroism, Kenneth Wilson writes:

> A hero is a man whose sound character and manly virtues allow him to overcome the obstacles before him and vanquish his enemies. Imperial destiny and individual heroism were, then, the two structuring principles of popular imperialism's concept of history.[28]

The hero travels across the world in search of adventures as the flag bearer of the British supremacy with the white man's burden on his back. Doyle's stories set its tone with one of romantic excess of the Victorian England where men are ready to take risk of adventures to win a women's heart or serve his nation: "There are heroisms all round us waiting to be done….But you should do it because you can't help yourself, because it's natural to you, because the man in you is crying out for heroic expression."[29]

Edward D. Malone, the light-hearted journalist, is treated with contempt as a boy in the beginning of *The Lost World* but later he achieves manhood by taking part in the slaughtering the ape-men in the plateau. The masculine adjectives Doyle uses for Professor Challenger—"violent", "dangerous", "cantankerous", "unsocial", "rude", "megalomaniac", "fanatic", "absolutely impossible", and "hated by everyone"—are not applicable to Shonku.

Shonku does everything a white superhero does but he is not a replica of Challenger and rather he has a soothing presence likable to others. The stereotypical notions of white superiority, arrogance, and disdain, the hallmarks of Edward Said's orientalism, make Professor Challenger believe that he belongs to the final stage of Darwinian evolution. The "half-educated" Londoners are treated by him as if they belong to a "common herd"[30]: "The Sub-species of the human race to which you unfortunately belong has always been below my mental horizon."[31] He vehemently guards his privacy from the "foolish curiosity of the public"[32], denigrates the inquisitiveness of the "faithful Negro" and treats them as villainous, brutish, brainless, and deformed. This "Columbus of science"[33] uses persuasion, gifts, and threats of coercion in order to make the natives work as guides in his nostalgic search for pre-historic life in a world where almost everything have already been put into the cognitive map. Ironically enough, the man who inspires Challenger's journey is a bohemian artist and a poet—quite obviously a person full of creative imagination and "wanting in merit"—who seems to have visited that plateau and left his sketchbook, the only tangential 'proof' of its existence in reality.

Along with Darwin's theory of evolution which stirred the Victorian imagination, Doyle must have been familiar with Nietzsche's idea of *Übermensch* through the English translation of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* either by Alexander Tille or Thomas Common which appeared in 1896 and 1909 respectively. The word "superman" has been used at least three times in the stories of Challenger: Challenger has been described as a "super scientist",[34] Malone wants to be a "superman"[35] to please Miss. Gladys, and later he thought that the indigenous people of the plateau "looked upon us as supermen"[36]. Whereas Doyle's superman belongs to the present, Ray uses the word only once and leaves it for the future. At ease to share his space with all other beings on earth, Shonku prefers to stay human.

The hypermasculinity of Professor Challenger is an idealization of white supremacy—physical, intellectual and technological—that finds delight in a voyage to a 'virgin' land and rewrites its history and culture in its own terms. With "eyes shining with the lust of slaughter"[37], Challenger meets the ape-men in the plateau. He goes back to the mediaeval age of chivalry to draw his superficial codes of honour, but the grim experience of colonialism, makes Shonku draw his intellectual resources from an indigenous and more inclusive philosophy of life. Shonku believe in an ethic of incorporation, collaboration, and hospitality which redefines superheroism in terms of the elements his culture values most. Ray counteracts the ideology of heroic imperialism in several ways: the old law of friendship, network of human interaction, respectful curiosity to know the other cultures, and finally a sincere responsibility to preserve humanity, the world, and its environment. Shonku is immune to the allure of materiality, does not believe in plundering other countries by using the power of superior technology, and he does not destroy the serenity and beauty of an unknown territory by rewriting its history, society, and culture. Shonku's mission is not to destroy the ancient and the vulnerable but to preserve with care, learn from them, and yet leave them as they are without disrupting or intruding into their life.

The Algebra of a Postcolonial Scientist

The word 'scientist', Stefan Collini points out, was first coined in 1834 by mimicking the word 'artist'.[38] It was the nineteenth century which witnessed the consolidation of a deep structural divide between the two disciplines—the sciences and the humanities—barring communication between them awkward, difficult, and not even debatable. In his 1959 Rede lecture "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution", C. P. Snow observed the incorrigible signs of the time—a mutual distrust and incomprehension between the scientists and the literary critics. He also noticed how an anxiety arising out of the ignorance of each

other's craft gave birth to contempt and disrespect which narrowed down possibilities of any mutual dialogue:

> Literary intellectuals at one pole—at the other scientists, and as the most representative, the physical scientists. Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension—sometimes (particularly among the young) hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding. They have a curious distorted image of each other. Their attitudes are so different that, even on the level of emotion, they can't find much common ground.[39]

When Snow was addressing to a quintessential British ailment, the state of affairs in colonial India, which had a rich and diverse literary, cultural, scientific, and philosophical heritage, was quite different and even more complicated than probably he could think of. In ancient India, like Greece, science as a discipline was not totally separated from the other areas of knowledge. Debaprasad Bandyopadhyay writes: "Nothing was classified separately as "science" in the so called Indian tradition, though some elements of so called "Indian culture" may obviously be categorized as "science" from the European point of view."[40] In Koutilya's *Arthashastra*, the umbrella term *kala* or applied arts included chemistry, civil engineering and medical sciences as well as aesthetics, carpentry, painting, and beautician's art work. The blurring of the boundaries between the subjective and the objective, the ontological and the epistemological, and the explicable and the intuitive marked the Indian way of thinking. When modern science was introduced by the colonizers, the first generation scientists of India found themselves in-between an indigenous philosophy of the material world and an alien culture, the ideology of modern science. The foreign intervention into the colonized space of thinking and education in the name of objective/white normativity had twofold implications—the local had often been appropriated and abbreviated by a global form of knowledge, and albeit partially, the indigenous philosophy of the phenomenal world peeped through and contaminated the sanctity of the discipline of science.

Snow optimistically coined the term "third culture", an approach that would bridge the gap between the arts and the sciences. This approach was not something unfamiliar in nineteenth century Bengal. The social psychologist Ashis Nandy observes how cultivatedness in this part of the world did not refer only to crude and specialized professionalism but a deep interest in a wide array of things. The ideal Bengali gentleman or *bhadralok* was a man of multifaceted talents—a rounded personality. Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858-1937) was a physicist, a biologist, an engineer, a creative writer, a sportsman, a hunter, and a whole hearted Brahmo with deep inclination towards the philosophy of Vedanta.[41] To him goes the credit of writing the first Bengali detective fiction and he even delivered the annual lecture of the Bongiyo Sahitya Sammilani, the literature society of Bengal in 1911. In this lecture "Bigyane Sahitya" ["Literature in Science"], he talks about a movement towards an "all-pervasive oneness" in the world of knowledge:

> The tendency to compartmentalize has become popular in the world of knowledge in the West now. Each of the different branches of knowledge has arranged to keep itself isolated there and as a result the desire to know oneself as a whole has almost disappeared. This kind of classification helps in the primary stage of learning and practising knowledge because it helps to collect materials and arrange them; but if we follow this norm till the end then it does not become possible to unveil the complete image of Truth, the practice goes on but the salvation is not attained.
>
> On the other hand, India has always carefully observed so that the One does not lose in the many. Due to this long standing practice, we can see the One easily without any considerable hindrance in our mind.[42]

The scientist seeks inspiration from the poets who desires to see more than they see. They transcend the limit of biology to see the unseeable in their mind's eye. He observes how the different disciplines of science often cross the borders or transgresses the limit set by norms. In spite of the all disciplinary hazards, he sought to mix things up unapologetically in order to create a fruitful mutual dialogue to form a culture of diversity. This approach is open, curious, and does not shy away from the novel insights from the other areas of knowledge in

order to preserve the decorum of disciplinary sanctity. The Indian cultural amphibians also went back to draw sustenance from "sources that have been discarded by modern knowledge and to reframe them in terms of science".[43] Creativity in science became a trans-disciplinary exercise in thinking and knowledge formation. The chemist Prafulla Chandra Ray digged out the history of the advancement of chemistry in ancient India and Bose's works on plant physiology was influenced by the Vedantic tradition of non-dualism—the belief in the existence of one organizing principle that encompasses everything in this universe. Ashis Nandy deftly writes how some of the first generation Indian scientists tried to build an Indian way of science:

> Most of them spent their professional careers trying to build an entirely new Indian structure of science. Some gave up the task half way, finding it too onerous; they preferred to become political activists, institution-builders, or academic bureaucrats, and gave up science, if not formally, at least *de facto*. Others a much smaller group, preferred to go the whole hog and fought a losing battle against the formidable edifice of modern science. Both responses were consistent with the logic of a colonial situation, and one must judge for oneself which was the more tragic dead end.[44]

A unique product of his time and space, Bose perhaps deserved a noble prize, and that he did not, was a source of melancholia for a hesitant postcolonial cultural nationalism that always sought recognition from the west.

Ray's Shonku catches this dilemma between tradition and modernity. Often tagged as a scientist from the country of "rope tricks and snake charmers"[45] stereotyped by the west, Shonku, like Bose, aims at bridging, however unconvincingly, the two extreme cultures of knowledge formation. He challenges and subverts the European mastery over modern scientific knowledge, and against all odds, curves out a space for an ideal postcolonial agency capable of leading the world. This is a dream that Bose also dreamt off:

> The national greatness of our country that has almost vanished is still waiting for our internal creativity. To create it anew by activating the desire is within our power. The ascending speed of the glory of our country that soared high once upon a time has not ended and one day it is bound to touch the sky.[46]

Fig. 7 Shonku and the magician Chi Ching

"The appearance of the supernatural power in man is an eternal ritual of our country," says Bose in the same lecture.[47] A *rishi* has to master the six deadly foes to discard his ego—*kama* (desire), *krodha* (anger), *lobha* (greed), *moha* (attachment), *mada* (pride), and *matsarya* (jealousy). The Vedic ideals that Ray added to Shonku are *sthairjyo* (patience and calmness) and *sangjam* (self-restraint) which imparts integrity of character:[48] "I have won over greed long ago".[49] Just as Ray's famous detective Feluda, Shonku is an ideal middle-class gentleman, a *bhadralok*, who does not drink, is rarely angry and never jealous, cannot be bought by money, unmarried, and does not have a family. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay writes:

> The masculinist emphasis in these adventures is also linked to the presentation of Shonku as a mystic, a role that often values celibacy. Moreover, Shonku almost never discusses his mother, as if he shared with the trinity of Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma an endless loop of masculine origin—even birthing a miniature version of himself in a laboratory flask, which is presented in the story as a natural and inevitable product of evolution requiring no maternal presence ("Shonku and the Strange Creature"

> [1971]). His father, on the other hand, a traditional doctor and herbalist, appears directly as a role model[50]

Yet he is a modern man and accepts the logic of Sanders when he says that there is no shame in claiming what one deserves. The humility of not claiming one's due recognition is sheer stupidity and he does not refrain himself from proclaiming the title of the greatest scientist of the world: "No scientist in the world has ever invented so many different things".[51] Yet Shonku never wins the noble prize, probably a sentimental gesture on Ray's part, coming out of the failure of Bose to grab it in spite of his contributions to the field of science.

The Scientist as Amateur

Andrew Pickering has made a distinction between the "culture" and the "practice" in science where the first denotes "the field of resources that the scientists draw upon in their work" and the second refers to "the acts of making (and unmaking) that they perform in that field".[52] Pickering Writes:

> Where the science-as-knowledge traditions routinely think of scientific culture as a single unitary entity…Hacking insists on the multiplicity, patchiness and heterogeneity of the space in which scientists work…the production of instruments, facts, phenomena, and interpretations in the laboratory is precisely the hard, uncertain, and creative work of bringing together the kinds of disparate cultural elements that he lists.[53]

On 4th December 1865, a Belgian priest Eugène Lafont (1837-1908)—popularly known as the 'father of science in Bengal'—arrived in Calcutta. He was trained in two different disciplines—physics and philosophy—and immensely influenced the young minds at St. Xavier's College. Under his influence, Jagadish Chandra Bose studied physics but combined it with classical Latin and Sanskrit. Ashis Nandy writes how "Throughout his undergraduate days, he took a variety of courses without specializing in any."[54] This "patchiness and heterogeneity" of his resources led Bose to formulate his own uncanny way of doing science which was far removed from the existing notion of scientific knowledge.

What distinguishes one as a creative genius in science, Dean Keith Simonton suggests, is the capacity to move across disciplines which include a wide range of intellectual, cultural, and aesthetic interest—defocussed attention and self-discipline, openness to novel, complex, and ambiguous external stimuli, and unconventionality and openness even to seemingly bizarre ideas.[55] The geniuses have a border crossing tendency and the resources they draw upon are not only confined within the field of science but other fields of knowledge which Ashis Nandy deftly calls "non-scientific determinants of the scientific culture"[56]. "It is the denial of these roots", philosophical, sociological or political, writes Nandy, "in the name of an impersonal reified science, which, I believe, is responsible for many of the ethical problems of the contemporary culture of science and the limitations of the scientist as a human being."[57]

Being a cross-disciplinarian himself, Satyajit Ray did not want to align Shonku into the rigidity of the formal structure of the scientific discipline. When Shonku finishes his academic studies in physics at a very young age, his father, deeply aware about the storehouse of classical knowledge, suggests him to explore other areas: "You've studied science for long. Now study other subjects for around four years. Arts, literature, history and philosophy—are there any scarcity of subjects?"[58] Quite obviously, Shonku's friend Chris MacPherson finds him to be the most suitable person to share his unusual experience: "Everyone will not believe this, especially the scientists. I'm telling you because your mind is open and you have many strange experiences."[59] Nandy observes that fighting against all odds—personal, intellectual, disciplinary and political—Bose failed in his project to reconstruct science in an Indian way. Ray's fictional world supplements this defeat by making Shonku an indisputable genius, a product of the postcolonial environment who is honoured throughout the world in spite of his uncanny way of approaching science.

The result of this postcolonial hybridity is that here knowledge becomes a derivative and as well as a creative discourse. Shonku's knowledge of other disciplines allows him to see connections that others cannot see, he does not follow blindly what he has been taught as a student of science, and he shows a peculiar tendency to respect what he does not comprehend. Ray's attitude as well as Shonku's, Anway Mukhopadhyay writes, "suggests that a purely secular respect can be preserved for a purely religious phenomenon, even when the secular observer does not share the "structures of feeling" (Williams 128-35) setting in motion the religious event".[60] The non-rational or the unreasonable that cannot be explained in scientific terms belongs to the world of nonsense/nonscience and are unworthy of the attention of a positivist. Even if they get attention, they should be derogated with vitriolic anger. Ray's as well as Shonku's plan is not to draw a line of demarcation by eradicating the past era of mysticism with a thousand watt light of scientific certainty but embracing history in a holistic sense which will allow us to comprehend the nature of things in a different way.

"I don't believe in any other achievement except scientific achievements,"[61] proclaims the mad scientist in "Professor Shonku o UFO" ["Professor Shonku and the UFO"] and attempts to destroy the greatest sculptures of the world—Parthenon, Coliseum, Eifel Tower, and Anchor Bhatt—by using the advanced technology of an alien spaceship. The dehistoricized view of science as an impersonal, objective, pure, uncontaminated, and rational phenomenon free from the outside social, economic, political, psychological, cultural, and other influences is a conservative ideal where the excess that does not fit in is excluded and labelled as unscientific, and therefore unnecessary. Shonku believes in a science which does not bracket off arts, history, and culture. The evolutionary science of Darwin that creates a rift between the present and the past in the name of progress is replaced by a peaceful cohabitation where tradition and individual talent go hand in hand. He cannot refrain himself from learning and admiring the cavemen of Altamira, Egyptian priests who

knew the secrets of preserving a dead body, and even the mediaeval alchemists for their creativity and desire to make the impossible possible:

> After visiting the cave of Altamira in Spain, many questions about the ancient human beings have raised in my mind. I am yet to understand how the human beings who lived fifty thousand years ago and were very little different from the apes could use their hand to paint such wonderful pictures. I see one picture or other and I feel that even the contemporary artists also cannot paint so well when these human beings made them even though they could not walk straight.[62]

The Bricoleur

The French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss criticises the dissociation of modern science with nature in *The Savage Mind* (1962). The ancient civilizations, he thinks, had their own system of thought which were in no way inferior but worked more closely and stayed in communion with nature. This simplicity and collaboration is beyond the reach of modern science. His concept of the *bricoleur* is a critique of the ideology, activity, and ethics of modern science and technology that aims to remodel the future by transforming the world beyond recognition:

> The 'bricoleur' is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand',… that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions. The set of the 'bricoleur 's' means cannot therefore be defined in terms of a project (which would presuppose besides, that, as in the case of the engineer, there were, at least in theory, as many sets of tools and materials or 'instrumental sets', as there are different kinds of projects). It is to be defined only by its potential use (...) because the elements are collected or retained on the principle that 'they may always come in handy' ... Such elements are specialized up to a point (...) but not enough for each of them to have only one definite and determinate use.[63]

The *bricoleur* is not bounded by any one discipline; he culls disparate and heterogeneous elements from different areas of knowledge. He is an amateur who combines, recombines, and manoeuvres the disparate but limited elements at his disposal, uses minimal technology, and thinks outside the territory of the enlightenment logic of scientific reason. Any systematic blueprint of action is beyond his way of doing things. Unlike the engineer, the bricoleur has fewer choices in a finite system; he cannot have whatever he wants, yet he is never in full control of neither his elements nor his product. He follows a zigzag route to reach his point where it does not work in the same way as the primary plan:

> The bricoleur occupies a specific environment, that of the workshop; he works individually on individual objects (it is difficult to imagine the product of bricolage as a replicable object); he works with tools rather than machines, and his materials are ready-to-hand, taken from his immediate environment.[64]

Christopher Johnson writes that Strauss presents *bricolage* as "a technical metaphor for a cognitive and creative process", "a survival of ancestral ways of thinking and doing which persists in certain everyday practices of our modern industrial civilization"[65].The great works of ancient civilizations like the Egyptian pyramid or the mummy open our eyes to the limit of modern science. The *bricoleur* is limited by spatial and temporal location; his work comes out of necessity rather than business or even pure desire to know. The *bricoleur* uses 'tools' rather than 'machines.' This distinction was established by Friedrich Engels where there is companionship and love with labour in the former and alienation of the worker in the later.

Johnson also notices how the fear of the specialist and his susceptibility to the knowledge / power nexus runs as a subtext behind Levi-Strauss' concept of *bricoleur*.[66] The fear of the divorce between everyday life and specialized scientific knowledge might also be a reason behind Ray's dismissal of the specialists in his works. Shonku is closer to the human values in contrast to the modern specialist and he is more creative and alert to see connections that the specialists fail to see:

> I have never claimed to be a specialist in a particular area, but preferred to call myself a scientist because I have unrestricted access in all branches of science. The remaining four of our group are known as specialists although they are not equal in age, experience, achievement or fame.[67]

Challenger, the imperial scientist with whom Shonku engages in a metatextual dialogue and negotiation, is also equally suspicious of the specialists:

> I will not conceal from you that my opinion of experts is not a high one, and that I have usually found that a man who, like myself, has a well-equipped brain can take a sounder and broader view than the man who professes a special knowledge (which, alas, is so often a mere profession), and is therefore limited in his outlook. [68]

The creative instinct in Shonku follows his personal fantasy and his creative experience is often beyond his control. "I believe in easy way. So my machine also will be as easy as water,"[69] says Shonku. To his bewilderment, the tools he makes, like the robot Bidhusekhar, always work more than he intends them to do.

While searching for the foundation of the creative process in India, M. Mukherjee gets an interesting answer from a *mistri* (carpenter/mason)—the perfect example of Strauss' bricoleur—in Bodh Gaya: "when we want to do some work, procedures for producing the thing come spontaneously to our mind-and then we have become *visvakarmas*."[70] This kind of "spark-ing activity without any blueprint", writes Debaprasad Bandyopadhyay, has an equivalent in Indian philosophy in Bhartrihari's concept of *sphota*.[71] Without adequate funding and infrastructural facilities, Shonku works in a small laboratory at his home with home-made equipments. This reminds us of both, Bose who made his instruments with the help of a local carpenter and Ray himself who made his first movie *Pather Panchali* [Song of the Little Road], which brought him first international recognition in 1955, in sheer financial scarcity and infrastructural deficiency. Shonku is proud of his achievements within a culture of negativity: "Is it not that the whole world should know what a Bengali scientist can do with his limited resources?"[72] He does not lament for the lack of money or a modern

laboratory but overcomes all obstacles with an irresistible urge to create. However time changes his view and in a later story "Professor Randir Time Machine," we see him to fail to continue his research due to lack of instruments and money. Yet it does not change his anti-business attitude. Ray's Shonku contains all—the imagination of a poet, the logic of a philosopher, and the analytical ability a scientist. The real laboratory is "inside the mind", says Bose, and the thing one needs to succeed is *sadhana*, a "disinterested concentration" that forgets the outer world while working.[73]

Elitism and its Discontents

The everyday life is ordinary in comparison to the excitement of the laboratory. It keeps Shonku away from easy availability: "Though it sounds displeasing, I have to accept that I don't have time to chitchat with ordinary people."[74] Though he loves his solitude, being an Indian, he is not as fiercely protective of his privacy as Challenger who cannot control his anger if someone trespasses into his property and does not hesitate to throw them out. The society is a "common herd"[75] for him. The ordinary people often surprise Shonku with their talent which are beyond his reach in spite of his superior intelligence. There are three ordinary figures who immensely contribute to his life—his servant Prallhad, the neighbour Abinashbabu whom he describes as "the king of the unscientific people,"[76] and Nakurbabu, an outsider who turns out to be a close companion in his later life. Nakurbabu looks innocent as if he has least experience of the complexities of life.[77] Yet he is a rare talent who is capable of hypnotism, telepathy, and clairvoyance—an ability which he derives, as any mainstream superhero does, after being hit by an occurrence of ball lightening. Shonku does not have any explanation of his superpower but he expects that someday science will solve this puzzle. The old-fashioned and conservative Bengali gentleman Abinashbabu is hostile towards anything new, has least interest in science and often treats it as a joke: "At times it seems that Abinashbabu does not even believe that the earth is circular and it is moving around the

sun."[78] The buffoonery of this man makes Shonku a little hostile towards him at the beginning and he even punishes him with a medicine which makes one watch dreadful nightmares. He arrives without appointment, disturbs his work, irritates him, teases him horribly by calling him a quack, and asks weird questions to which Shonku does not have answer. A little jealous of his neighbour's fame, all these provide Abinashbabu a strange sadistic pleasure. In the first diary, he even demands a compensation of five-hundred rupees from Shonku because his rocket damaged his radish beds. Shonku accepts everything with a kind of resigned indulgence and treats his superstitious neighbour as a man of zero intelligence. At times, he even enjoys his company: "Today, when I'm free, Abinashbabu's company might not be bad. After all, he is a funny person."[79] Nothing exciting ever happened in Abinashbabu's life, yet this man gradually becomes a close friend and companion in many of Shonku's later adventures. In "Swapnadip" ["Dream Island"], when the alien knowledge-sucking plants start eating the brain of Shonku and all other pundits, it is Abinashbabu who remains unaffected and comes to their rescue. This man also reveals extraordinary courage to save Shonku from a cruel and insane scientist named Massingham and urges Shonku: "I just want to say that you should think if it will be safe for you if you have to go for some hazardous act without me in future."[80]

In an unfinished story "Intellectron", Shonku invents a machine which measures intelligence—an ironical gesture to Challenger's method of mapping the brain according to the size—but he accepts that it cannot measure the diversity of the human brain where honesty, sincerity, and all other human attainments remain side by side. In a scale of 100 to 1000, Shonku scores 917 but Abinashbabu scores only 377. Abinashbabu wants to know if he is an idiot and Shonku replies:

> 'No no, why would you be an idiot? I think you yourself will acknowledge that you don't have bookish knowledge. You have normal general knowledge. And the most important thing is that you are an honest person. That's not a negligible quality.'

> ‘Is it possible to get these measurements in that machine?’
>
> ‘No. I’m telling this from my experience of knowing you for twenty years.’[81]

In a similar way, he accepts that Nakurbabu’s supernatural intelligence that includes a mixture of clairvoyance and hypnotism cannot be measured by any machine. No person is a born idiot and he takes Prallhad with him in his first expedition in the outer space because he does not think that only the intelligent people are necessary in these adventures. Thinking complex things make you unaware, and at times insensitive, of the simple and everyday matters:

> Even though Prallhad is an idiot, perhaps it will be helpful if I take him with me. I don’t at all think that in these kinds of expedition only intelligent people are necessary. Often those who are not intelligent are brave because they take more time to find out the reason of fear.
>
> I don’t have any doubt that Prallhad is brave.[82]

The dialectic between man and machine is under close scrutiny in some of the diary entries of Shonku. He never tries to erase the gap between man and machine. For him, it is the human who should define the machine and not otherwise. In the technological world of Shonku, machine does not control the human world, and even if there is a little chance to do so, it is terminated at its root. Politically conservative, Ray is aware of the power of technology in shaping the human life around us and even the possibility of the construction of a ‘new humanity’. Once the robots start to think, they will not be under human control. Shonku’s competitor Borgelt ultimately realizes: “This kind of mechanical human beings should be like machines. I made my robo so much more like me that it could not tolerate me anymore.”[83] To him the existence of man is more authentic and desirable than that of a robot, and at any cost, he would not let anything overpower the human. Over dependence upon technology enslaves us, writes Martin Heidegger:

> This drive would culminate, or self-destruct, writes Heidegger, when human rationality comes to build up a theoretic representation of its own working so seemingly assured as to enable it to build its apparent duplicate…‘If humanity achieves this, it will have exploded itself…’[84]

Shonku is not unaware that the distinction between man and machine can be erased any time and it will eventually lead to disaster as the scientists do not have control over their creation: "Would the humans finally become slave to technology? I believe so."[85] In "Byomjatrir Diary" ["The Diary of a Space Traveller"] he feels uncomfortable and switches off the robot Bidhusekhar when it starts thinking independently. He knows where to stop because once the robots get the key to what makes our species human, it is impossible to control them: "I'm happy in my Robu's work. The limit to which it works is enough for me."[86]

Surprise is an emotion which often comes out of one's ability to think and make bizarre associations. The fact that Abinashbabu does not have that faculty—the literal understanding of things never allows him to be surprised—surprises Shonku the most: "It is incredible to think that a person does not possess any sense of wonder at all."[87] The world is too big and too complex to bring everything under a cognitive model. There are incidents when Shonku's pride of being the greatest scientist of the world is punctured: "there are still a few things in this planet that can surprise wise people."[88] Once a Chinese magician ruined his pride of being in full control of his faculties by hypnotizing him in his own laboratory and a whizz-kid who knows everything leaves him awe-struck. We often find him in such deadlock situations when his science fails to interpret things proving him no less an idiot than Abinashbabu is and he does not spare any chance to pull his legs: "I have seen the range of bookish knowledge now. You have been pestered enough by burning your hands with acids for twenty years. Stop this child's play and start farming potato with me instead."[89]

The most humiliating incident for the greatest scientist of the world happens in "Byomjatrir Diary" where he plans for a journey in the outer space with his servant Prallhad, cat Newton, and robot Bidhusekhar. To his surprise, the robot starts thinking independently during the journey and tells him that the inhabitants of a planet named Tafa are the most intelligent beings in the solar system. Their civilization is a few million years old, but the

trouble with them is that there are too many intelligent people at the same place, and that is why they have decided to bring a person of lesser intelligence—an idiot—from the nearby planets every year to entertain themselves. When Shonku replies that in that case they would be happy to see Prallhad, Bidhusekhar starts laughing in such an ugly manner that he switches him off. When they reach there, the ant-like inhabitants of the planet receives them graciously and let them live comfortably. To his irritation and anger, Shonku finds that they do not want to talk to him about science. They politely reject his wish saying that it is not necessary because they enjoy his simple words, which leaves a hint for the readers. With all his intelligence, Shonku fails to understand the hint and the story ends in an anti-climactic mockery of his intelligence. The adventure ends in anti-adventure:

> Getting angry I pointed my snuff-gun right at the hole of his nose and pulled the trigger off.
>
> But nothing happened to him.
>
> How would it happen? They actually haven't learned to sneeze yet![90]

The Brown Mythology

The imperialistic nature of modern science harbours a desire to "cultivate the scientific eye and the detached scientific mind"[91] and aims to bring all natural phenomena under cognition, authority, and control. The prying and 'intrusive' Professor Challenger perceives the earth as a living organism, plans to dismantle its equilibrium only because he is intellectually capable of doing this, and invites people, excluding women, "to witness a remarkable triumph of mind over matter."[92] Challenger brags:

> I refuse to entertain the most remote sense of personal obligation. Truth is truth, and nothing which you can report can affect it in any way, though it may excite the emotions and alley the curiosity of a number of very ineffectual people.[93]

Knowing the shortcomings of this attitude, Shonku diverges his way in order to work in communion with, intimacy to, and admiration for nature—a lesson derived from the classical storehouse of knowledge. This attitude is remarkably different from what Levi-Strauss calls

the “machine civilization,” which breaks the resistance of nature in order to remould it anew and carries the risk of destroying the fine balance of everything.

The enlightenment notion of the perfectibility of man through the application of scientific reason gave birth to the idea of the noble savage and the colonial rulers took the responsibility of moving them in the ladder of ‘progress.’ It was this power and authority of science along with technological advancement justified the British sense of racial superiority, global governance, and technological control over the world. Technological advancement was used as a scale to measure intelligence and worthiness of a race or even civilization which ultimately ended in a great rift between man and nature, man and animal and the enlightened and the barbarian. Joel Dinerstein writes:

> Weapons, mass production, and communication networks became the fetishes of colonial dominance and racial superiority, which were disseminated (for example) in numerous British best sellers through binary opposites of dominance/passivity: “machine versus human or animal power; science versus superstition and myth; synthetic versus organic; progressive versus stagnant.”[9] Such oppositions still inform contemporary theories of Western superiority (e.g., “the clash of civilizations,” “the end of history”). Casting preindustrial (or premodern) peoples as risk-averse and enslaved to obsolescent ideologies—that is, as not progressing—sentences them to second-class status with regard to the future.[94]

“Technology as an abstract concept functions as a *white mythology*,”[95] adds Joel Dinerstein. Severed from history, Doyle’s hero is a hypermasculine figure who believes in ‘objective truth’ and is ready to colonize any territory outside his knowledge. To use Franco Moretti’s term, by the power of the “white magic”—guns and bullets—Challenger and his alleys become supermen or men from the future to the ‘prehistoric’ inhabitants of the plateau and start rewriting the ‘blank space’ according to their whims. This ironic pleasure of discovering a territory as the first human that already exists and a desire for colonial domination over the land marks the transit point where science meets colonialism.

The quarrelsome Challenger claims that he has "never yet encountered any problem… which my inventive brain was unable to solve,"[96] but his foolish arrogance seems to be disrupted by a small tick—an aspect too little to be included in his problematization and the idea of intellectual greatness. The tick episode in *The Lost World* reveals how the scientific conviction of the imperial scientist is not immune to the minute factors external to science:

> 'You should cultivate the scientific eye and the detached scientific mind,' said he. 'To a man of philosophic temperament like myself the blood-tick, with its lancet-like proboscis and its distending stomach, is as beautiful a work of Nature as the peacock or, for that matter, the aurora borealis. It pains me to hear you speak of it in so unappreciative a fashion. No doubt, with due diligence, we can secure some other specimen.'
>
> 'There can be no doubt of that,' said Summerlee, grimly, for one has just disappeared behind your shirt-collar.'
>
> Challenger sprang into the air bellowing like a bull, and tore frantically at his coat and shirt to get them off. Summerlee and I laughed so that we could hardly help him. At last we exposed that monstrous torso (fifty-four inches, by the tailors tape). His body was all matted with black hair, out of which jungle we picked the wandering tick before it had bitten him.[97]

To his dismay, the king of the ape-men also serves as an absurd parody of Professor Challenger—the highest product of modern civilization. He frantically tries to avert any conversation regarding this astonishing similarity. First, he denies it point blank, then tries to reinterpret in his own terms, and finally, gives up and hesitantly requests Malone to suppress it in the newspaper report. They are reminded again and again of the advancement of the "natural man" in using tools as well as their sensual capacity—the power to watch, listen, and smell—that came out of sheer existential necessity. They are observed and kept in vigil by the 'Indians' from inside the deep forest, but to their amazement, they fail to see any of them: "How can they watch us? The half-breed shrugged his broad shoulders. The Indians know. They have their own way."[98] At a point when they lose way in the forest, the whole party agrees to "trust the fallacious instincts of underdeveloped savages rather than the highest

product of modern European culture."[99] They are astonished of the uniqueness and fail to determine if the secure caves are made by the Indians or by nature itself, and when the explosive bullets from the civilized world fail to pierce the body of the dinosaur, it is their primitive arrows dipped in the juice of strophanthus save their life.

Heidegger, writes Timothy Clark, "attacks on the absolutism of modernity's drive to know"[100] by the reawakening of "a fundamental questioning into the conditions, sources and limits of human knowledge"[101]. The truth for Shonku is not conformability to a theoretical model, but *aletheia*, or unconcealment in Heidegger's sense of the term: "I cannot think of any scientific discovery to be entirely human creation. The possibility is always there from before, perhaps, it was always there; either it is only by their intelligence or by sheer luck, human beings comes to know the possibilities and use them."[102] There are things about nature which will remain beyond the human reach forever, and for him, one such enigma is the human mind: "Perhaps the human mind will remain a complex mystery forever."[103] He is aware that the scientific knowledge is neither complete nor it will ever be, yet scientists have a strange capability to make intelligent machines:

> Some people would ask the question how I could make such an instrument without solving the puzzle of memory. In reply, I would say that only one fourth of what we know about electricity today was known in the nineteenth century, yet with this incomplete knowledge many excellent instruments were discovered. In the same way, my machine Remembrain has been made.[104]

Shonku knows the human limit and stands away from Challenger's positivist rhetoric of science, such as, "Man was always the master"[105] and "a great mind molds all Nature to its use".[106]

Time—past, present and future— are vertically connected in Shonku's philosophy of life. There is no clash but collaboration between civilizations is the only desirable for him. The 'natural man' of the 'prehistoric' age appears in in both—Doyle's *The Lost World* and Ray's "Professor Shonku o Cochabambar Guha" ["Professor Shonku and the Cave of

Cochabamba"]. As a follower Darwin's theory of evolutionary progress, Challenger treats them as a subhuman species; they are intellectually inferior, and therefore it is his duty to engage himself in a civilizing mission. After the final battle and the consequent annihilation of the ape men, they become the "truth makers of the plateau."[107] According to John Mackenzie, "Social Darwinian precepts ensured that the destruction and elimination of "inferior peoples" could be predicted, described, and condoned. Hence the warfare that accelerated the process was not destructive, but an evolutionary imperative."[108] Ashis Nandy also warns us against this cultural hegemony and the environmental and ethical danger of replacing the indigenous with a foreign culture.[109] There can be no unlimited progress of life and during an experiment Shonku sees the whole evolution/transformation of humanity in a flask in his laboratory which reveals to him the origin of humanity, its progression from man to a "small-Superman or Overman," and finally its regression into a thing-like being that cannot move or even think. In spite of human arrogance there is the end of everything at the end of human time:

> Is it really an animal? Is it really a future condition of the humans? A condition in which the ancestors of the humans will lie down on earth like a piece of flesh, it will not have hand or leg, it will not be able to walk, work or think, only it will wearily watch the last phase of earth with its enormous eyes.[110]

The comparative view discloses a serious cognitive dissonance between Challenger and Shonku—the representatives of the imperial and the postcolonial science. Shonku reveals love and sympathy for all human beings and animals which cannot be found in the colonial desire for human mastery over other humans, animals, and the non-human environment: "I do not support the barbarous experiments of the scientists on such animals as guinea pig. I myself have never killed animals in the name of science."[111] Going against the enlightenment notions, he accepts instinct as a vital force of life. What is natural should be left to flourish on its own without human intervention for our own good. "It is strange to think", Shonku wonders, "that despite so much education, human beings are lagging far behind the animals

in many spheres."[112] The critique of the pride and arrogance of modernity is a recurrent motive in Ray as we find in such movies as *Agantuk* [*The Stranger*] (1991). The world-traveller uncle in *Agantuk* cannot use the term barbarous for the cannibals of Africa, it is only that they have a different taste which is unusual for us. To his awe and wonder, Shonku also acknowledges their creative faculty and denies calling them 'uncivilized'. "This is also true that man has not been able to reach even in the vicinity of nature in producing complex machines,"[113] writes Shonku in his diary. Though he often breaks through or transcends the limit of the current order of scientific knowledge, he knows that there is a limit of knowability—the insignificance of the human beings in the large scale of the universe where the audacity of knowing everything turns out to be a fool's conviction.

Science, Money and Mission

The popular image of the modern scientist is one of an alienated being busy in search for abstract knowledge, or invention of new technology who often shakes off all ethical responsibilities to the earth and its living beings. If the power which is generated by the mechanistic understanding of a knowable universe joins the greed for name, fame, and material prosperity, it can have a dangerous repercussion to the world. The king's pet scientist in Ray's movie *Hirak Rajar Deshe* [*In the Kingdom of the Diamond King*] (1980) brashly pronounces his individuality—"Ami eka, ami ekok, ami ekomebadwitiam" ["I'm alone, I'm singular, I'm without equal"]. He invents only for the sake of invention and money without any earthly or human concern, which leads to social disaster once the technology he invents becomes state controlled machinery in the hands of a dictator. The Victorian man of imperial science, on the other hand, has to win name, fame, and money outside England but has to keep his motive under the guise of philanthropy. In "When the World Screamed," Challenger exclaims:

> 'Away, sir, away!' he cried, angrily. 'Raise your mind above the base mercantile and utilitarian needs of commerce. Shake off your paltry standards of business. Science seeks knowledge. Let the

> knowledge lead us where it will, we still must seek it. To know once for all what we are, why we are, where we are, is that not in itself the greatest of all human aspirations? 'Away, sir, away!'[114]

Yet when the expedition is over, they return to England with precious diamonds stolen from the plateau. Challenger and each of his teammates gets fifty thousand pounds as share that makes them super-rich in Victorian England. Being rich, however, had never been a cultural prerogative in twentieth century Bengal. When Shanku finishes his study at a very young age and starts thinking of beginning his career, his father reminds him:

> 'It does not mean that you have to earn a lot because you can. It is true that money is necessary to lead a solvent life and it expands the way of mental peace; but those who do not have that provision, do not know what is living with happiness, work hard throughout their life only to earn both ends meet, or those who by the intrigue of fate cannot earn—there is no greater significance, no greater happiness in life if you can reduce the grief of these people.'[115]

Shonku follows this advice throughout his life where renunciation becomes a value of life: "I do not have any attraction for wealth. I'll be happy if I can live an ordinary and comfortable life."[116] Less is more for him. Shonku's father also remains as a formidable influence behind his dangerous adventures to save the life: "Your life will be blessed if you can save the life of a great person."[117]

In Ray, money is often presented as a motive that is inevitably connected to power and corruption. In "Nefrudeter Samadhi" ["The Burial Chamber of Nefrudet"], he tears up the papyrus containing the formula of making diamond:

> Nobody will be able to use this formula because it is known only to the three of us and all of us know that the rarity of diamond is the reason of its price and unusual value. It is good and necessary to preserve this rarity in some cases. There is no doubt that diamond is one of them.[118]

The myth of money and its lure in a capitalist society can lead a scientist forget that his concern should be a service to humanity. Ray's is a critique of the non-utilitarian desire for knowledge and what David E. Nye terms as the grandiloquent "technological sublime". Shonku is an inventor and a globetrotter who travels around the world not to earn money as

the colonizers did but to earn honour, fame, recognition, and identity for himself and his country.

The undaunted Professor Challenger has been described by Doyle as "the greatest brain in Europe, with a driving force behind it that can burn all his dreams into facts,"[119] but translating dreams into facts without thinking about its repercussions often leads to ethical disaster. The purpose behind many of Shonku's inventions is often motivated by fantastic social hope, but he knows that wish-fulfilment is potentially unsafe if used insensibly. There is no ultimate freedom from the pain and longings of life and Shonku is doubtful about the social life of the things which he invented because as Adorno says, "the fulfilment of the wishes takes something away from the substance."[120] This is why he does not commodify the brain-storming technologies which are products of unbridled fantasy. The millionaires, mostly American, madly run after him with bags full of money, but Shonku stays away from the lure of this competitive world: "I have not made my machine to fulfil the wish of the American millionaires – I have written this to him in a polite way."[121]

The commercialization of science robs the scientist of his power over his creation. The repetition of production puts the scientific product in chain where the scientist who made it for the first time remains just as a name. The romance of the scientist with his invention is lost as it becomes a product beyond the control of the inventor, a thing in the market. Biswajit Ray rightly observes that "there is a relationship between patent with right and money, Shonku knows that it evolves into a power structure and wants to stay outside it consciously".[122] Shonku loves the robot, which he has made spending a meagre amount of three hundred and thirty three rupees. It is by no means perfect rather a little squint-eyed, yet it is unique and adds a human touch to his invention. If Shonku wanted to commercialize this product and produce them in a modern factory, each product would be a replica of the other. Shonku's non-compromise with the market makes his hand-made product unique and it

allows him an aesthetic and ethical freedom. Ray is also aware of the pitfalls of the patent law which allowed the Italian scientist Guglielmo Marconi (1874-1937) to hijack the credit of inventing the wireless telegraph from Jagadish Chandra Bose in 1901. This incident created a popular aversion for this law in the Bengali mind. The Indian government too decided to deviate from the international patent law in 1970 by keeping a few essential things outside its scope. The story of Bose is retold in Shonku's diary again and again where it is the Indian scientist who gets the credit for his invention rather than his European counterpart. In "Shonkur Shanir Dosha" ["Shonku's Bad Luck"], he takes the credit of inventing omniscope, miracurol, linguagraph, and air conditioning pill just a little before another scientist named Gropius. In "Professor Shanku o UFO" ["Professor Shanku and the UFO"], he gets the credit for his radio communication with the aliens because his paper is slated in the conference just before the Italian scientist Rodolfo Carbony (the reference to the radio and the Italian scientist to be noted) who also did the same thing. As his paper repeats Shonku's work verbatim, Carbony decides not to present his paper in the conference. When he meets Shonku after the conference Shonku tells him, had he read the paper, it could have made their claim stronger but Carbony replies:

> No. It wouldn't have been like that. People would have said that I have tried to hijack your achievement in a dishonest way. You're famous in the world, you're lucky, and beside this, your country is lagging behind in science, so as you belong to that country, your achievement attracts the West more. No one knows me. Why would people listen to me?[123]

This is just the opposite of what happened to Bose and how his contribution was forgotten and dumped into the garbage of history. This is a role reversal where it is the Indian scientist who is lauded as the champion of science. However the marketplace logic of competition and rivalry is not applicable to Shonku. With his characteristic openness and benevolence, Shonku decides to stop his research in that area and writes a letter to inform his decision to Carbony:

> I know that in this kind of jealousy what actually happens is a waste of human energy, yet it is sad that even the great scientists can commit crimes being under the pressure of this enemy. I can recount at least four from my own experiences whose jealousy had affected me.[124]

A Critique of the Present

The diaries of Shonku interrogate the nature of scientific creativity, something, which Karl Popper denied to see as valuable for the progress of science:

> The question of how it happens that a new idea occurs to a man—whether it is a musical theme, a dramatic conflict, or a scientific theory—may be of interest to empirical psychology; but it is irrelevant to the logical analysis of scientific knowledge.[125]

To him the dissociation of the scientific temperament or understanding from aesthetic, political, and ethical considerations suits the reductive logic of modern science for its own good. This search for objective truth added with human greed can cause disasters for the planet earth. Challenger disturbs the core of the earth to prove the "triumph of mind over matter"[126] and it spits out with anger. Krypton, we come to know, have been destroyed by the enormous greed of an advanced scientific culture which wanted to wrench everything out of its core. Shonku believes in a harmonious association between mind and matter, a philosophy which he derives from Bose and cultivates in his life. He belongs to the group whom Paul Feyerabend celebrates and Bertrand Russell denigrates as "wrong-headed and anarchical cranks."[127]

The institution often kills the pleasure of invention by imposing strict rules and structural rigidity. Shonku's space outside the institution allows him the intellectual freedom and his diary serves as a critique of the cultural politics behind the idea of a 'scientific temperament.' Interestingly, he is addressed as a professor yet stays out of the academia because doing science is not a job, duty, and obligation to him. For him, the scientist is a magician and an artist where magic serves as something unexplainable: "Many incidents have

happened in my life which cannot be explained by scientific reason."[128] Chandak Sengoopta rightly observes:

> For Ray, the ideal society was one where morally and socially responsible individuals could act, think and create, unconstrained by political pressures or the irrational imperatives of religious and cultural traditions. The high prominence in Ray's films and stories of mavericks and characters who refuse to fit in stemmed from his liberal conviction that 'the seeds of social good stem from individual and even eccentric initiative'.[129]

What science cannot explain should be outright rejected as useless non-science is not the logic to which he subscribes. The rich Indian storehouse of knowledge have often been denigrated in this way by the colonizers and treated with indifference when they failed to understand them. Shonku embraces everything that cannot be explained by scientific reason. His world includes planchette, astrology, ayurveda and everything that science demarcates and excludes as non-science. The ancient tradition of ayurvedic medicine is modernized into tablets as miracurol which can cure almost everything. Again and again he feels intrigued by non-reason and even wishes to bring the supernatural under the rubrics of science: "Many of our scientists laughingly discard supernatural incidents, yet they cannot answer satisfactorily how these incidents are happening."[130] In the same way, he does not understand how astrological predictions often become true though apparently there is no logic behind them: "Sometimes that kind of prediction becomes true though I have failed to understand the reason behind it with scientific intelligence."[131] It is important to preserve the non-scientific cultures, writes Paul Feyerabend, because they often possess a power to enrich and even revise the modern scientific knowledge. This failure to understand them in scientific terms or ignorance about the sociology and philosophy of their origin leads to a wholesale dismissal as it often happens in case of traditional medicine—homeopathy or ayurveda. Shonku's acknowledgment of the other ways of knowing the world often reaches on the verge of the absurd, the miraculous, and the fantastic, yet Shonku serves as a fierce critique of positivist

science in the sense that he does not discourage any possibility however fragile it might be. Derogated as a magician and not a scientist by his western counterparts, he often becomes a victim of anti-Indian attitudes and sentiment, stupidity, conspiracy, incredulity, and jealousy, yet he does not uphold any sign of reverse colonialism and bypasses everything with characteristic generosity and kindness.

"Highest type of bravery, the bravery of the scientific mind,"[132] boasts Challenger. The climax of vitalist activism, he is an example of *homo faber* (working man) who believes in controlling his own fate as well as the environment by using technology and sharply contrasts with Shonku who is a *homo ludens* (playing man) and does not equate civilization only with science but refinement in other branches of knowledge—arts, philosophy, and literature. Oblivious to the globalized version of modern science as an objective system he moves across such disparate disciplines. The 'planetary' ethic Shonku advocates in his life and work is an adventure in cultural syncretism that connects the hereditary knowledge with the acquired, the pre-colonial with the postcolonial, and finally, the spiritual with the technological where nothing is discarded forever as non-science:

> I think every scientist to whichever country he belongs should visit Egypt. It's really strange to think about the competence they showed in science five thousand years ago. There is a lot to research about this. Almost everything, there chemistry, mathematics and medicine, reached to an unbelievable consequence.[133]

To practice this new ethic in science Shonku needs to reformulate many of the idioms that govern the discipline as a whole. The bizarre idea of mixing mushroom, snake skin, tortoise eggshell and tantrum boropaxinate or aqueous vellosilica to produce a strong, light, and durable metal; prawn's moustache to make a medicine; and the desire to find out the scientific base of the supernatural may seem to be irrational but if we take it as symbolic of doing something out of the box, it does not amuse us at all. If we look at the history of science, we see that many inventions like penicillin and saccharin came into existence

accidentally when the scientists who discovered them had least idea what they were going to discover. There are also no less cases of theft of other's discovery. Many scientists tried to bribe, threat, steal, or buy his inventions but they failed: "Massingham has least idea that it is no possible to discourage Trilokeswar Shonku by threat."[134] It is his duty as a super-scientist to save the world from the excess of science as well as the scientists.

"[T]he essential function of utopia", says Ernst Bloch, "is a critique of what is present", and Theodor Adorno adds, "utopia is essentially in the determined negation, in the determined negation of that which merely is, and by concretizing itself as something false, it always points at the same time to what should be."[135] The superheroic illusion created by Ray is a postcolonial critique of the scientific culture, something that comes out of the deceptions of modernity and reveals the anthropocentric short-sightedness and arrogance of the modern world. Why does he not mass produce his inventions for the betterment of human life? Shonku himself answers the question: "All these are crafted by human hands and there is only one person who can make them, there is no second to him, he is Trilokeswar Shanku."[136] If it is so why do we see him tensed when his formulas are copied and stolen by an American millionaire? Shonku is doubtful about the social and business life of his inventions. All new inventions contain enormous potentiality to transform human life, and yet at the same time it begets irrecoverable loss. Inventions have their bitter side effects. They severe us from the past, change our habit, and destroy the old regime. Ray's modernity, criticizes Brinda Bose, emerges from "a dynamic relationship with history where there are no violent ruptures but only lessons from the past and the present."[137] When he finds a plant that produces immunity from all diseases and makes man immortal, Shonku thinks: "This immunity from all diseases…is it good for the human beings?"[138] The most ambitious desire for a utopian is to eliminate death itself, yet "if death were eliminated, if people would no longer die, that would be the most terrible and most horrible thing"[139]. Shanku looks at life both as a technical

problem as well as metaphysical. There is a *sadhu* who knows a mantra which can provide life to a dead animal, and in "Shonku o Frankenstein", a scientist discovers a formula to return after death. Shonku tries to copy the mantra but fails and realizes the inhumanity inside the very idea of immortality. What if the computer that the scientists have made to solve the human questions becomes intelligent beings with consciousness and asks us back? His words are prophetic: "If too much work is given to the machines, then a time will come when machine will not remain servant to man rather man will become technology's servant."[140]

What is progress? Only being successful in an experiment is not progress rather progress remains in the scientist's ability of not claiming the credit and bury it when its repercussions can be dangerous. Shonku invents a medicine as in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde* but suppresses it until another scientist claims to invent the same thing. When Shonku warns Danielle, the scientist who invents it after him, about the adverse effect of this medicine, he replies: "'But science cannot be halted for that reason', said Danielle. 'Experiments have to be continued. And if my experiment becomes successful, it has to be accepted that it is an example of the progress of science.'"[141] Danielle takes the medicine himself to understand how it affects the human body and eventually kills four scientists who disagreed with him in a conference. The desire to know is inevitable yet not knowing everything is an essential precondition of human life: "…there should be a limit of human greed to know everything. There should be something that can raise questions in human mind and surprise them."[142]

There is no wonder that it is Compu, a robot, which punctures the human pride by designating itself and the greatest scientists of the world who have made it as a child. Shonku accepts this with humility: "At the end of the twentieth century, we have to accept that human beings do not know more than what they know."[143] For him, nature is not a "sealed book"[144] only waiting to be decoded in time. Winning over nature and make it human's slave is not his

purpose. He looks at it as an “open book” (Galileo’s description of nature)—a source of interminable wonder. He is known as the greatest inventor of the world, yet does not think that it is fully his credit behind his inventions because they are derived from the bountifulness of nature. What guides Shonku’s life as a scientist is expressed in a wonderful Bengali word—*jijibisha*—an endless desire to know that encompasses a work ethic that goes on working restlessly but systematically without any method. “There’s no end to human inquisitiveness”[145], which urges him to transgress the limit of the possible yet with caution to erase the “darkness of the human mind”[146].

Endnotes:

[1]Jagadish Chandra Bose, "Literature in Science," in *Abyakta* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2009), 76. Translation mine.

[2]Larry Briskman, "Creative Product and Creative Process in Science and Art," *The Idea of Creativity*, ed. Michael Krausz, Denis Dutton and Karen Bardsley (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2009), 41.

[3]Irina Paperno, "What Can Be Done with Diaries?," *The Russian Review* 63, no. 4 (2004): 572.

[4]Paperno, "What Can Be Done with Diaries?," 563.

[5]Paperno, "What Can Be Done with Diaries?," 572.

[6] Albert Einstein, *The Travel Diaries of Albert Einstein*, ed. Ze'ev Rosenkranz (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton U P, 2018), 16.

[7]Satyajit Ray, "Ascharya Prani" ["The Strange Animal"], in *Shonku Samagra* [*The Collected Stories of Shonku*] (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 216. All translations from Satyajit Ray's *Shonku Samagra* are mine unless noted otherwise.

[8]See Ray, "Professor Shonku o Har" ["Professor Shonku and Bones"], 38. "Professor Shonku o Golok Rahasya" ["Professor Shonku and the Mystery of the Ball"], 70.

[9]Ray, "Munro Dwiper Rahasyo" ["The Mystery of Munro Island"], 366.

[10]Ray, "Swapnadip" ["The Island of Gold"], 191.

[11]Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing," in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 4.

[12]Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1.

[13]Adam Roberts, *The History*, Viii.

[14]Ray, "Ascharya Prani," 217.

[15] "In whatever danger Msaaingham is in it is our duty to save him." Ray, Professor Shonku o Gorilla ["Professor Shonku and Gorilla"], 154; See also, "It is our duty to stop him," 161.

[16] Jawaharlal Nehru, "A Tryst with Destiny," *The Guardian*, May 1, 2007, https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/may/01/greatspeeches

This desire to reawaken India and revive its lost glory found suitable expression in the nationalist songs of the famous Bengali poet and lyricist Dwijendralal Roy. i.e. "Bharat abar jagat sabhay shrestho ashon lobe" ["India

will achieve the greatest place in the assembly of the world once again"] and "Sawkol desher rani se je amar janmabhumi" ["My motherland is the queen of all countries"].

[17]Jawaharlal Nehru, "A Tryst with Destiny."

[18]Suman Ghosh, "In Defiance of the State: The Nehru Era and Satyajit Ray's Films," *South Asian Studies* 32, no. 2 (2016): 144.

[19]Satyajit Ray, "Ekshringa Abhijan", 259.

[20]Biswajit Ray, *Professor Shonkur Sesh Diary* [*The Last Diary of Professor Shonku*] (Kolkata: Lalmati, 2013), 21.

[21] Ray, "Byomjatrir Diary" ["The Diary of a Space Traveller"], 3.

[22]Sukumar Ray, *Samagra Sishusahitya* [*The Collected Children's Literature*], ed. Satyajit Ray and Partha Basu (Kolkata: Ananda, 1976), 6.

[23]Sukumar Ray, *Samagra Sishusahitya*, 7.

[24]Sukumar Ray, *Samagra Sishusahitya*, 53.

[25]Biswajit Ray, *Professor Shonkur Sesh Diary*, 45-46.

[26]Kenneth Wilson, "Fiction and Empire: The Case of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle," *Victorian Review* 19, no. 1 (1993): 22.

[27] Wilson, "Fiction and Empire," 23.

[28] Wilson, "Fiction and Empire," 25.

[29]Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Lost World," in *The Complete Professor Challenger* (Kolkata: Projapati, 2018), 6-7.

[30]Arthur Conan Doyle, "When the World Screamed," in *The Complete Professor Challenger* (Kolkata: Projapati, 2018), 251. Notice the Nietzschean influence which is quite visible in this phrase.

[31]Doyle, "The Lost World," 25.

[32] Doyle, "The Lost World," 37.

[33]Doyle, "The Lost World," 35.

[34]Doyle, "When the World Screamed," 225.

[35] Doyle, "The Lost World," 6.

[36]Doyle, "The Lost World," 181.

[37] Wilson, "Fiction and Empire," 32. See Doyle, "The Lost World," 165-66. And Lord Roxton exclaimed "I wish I had fifty men with rifles. I'd clear out the whole infernal gang of them and leave this country a bit cleaner than we found it."

[38] Stefan Collini, "Introduction," in *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): xii.

[39]C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 4.

[40] Debaprasad Bandyopadhyay, "Making of the Indian Philosophy of science," *Margins* (Feb 2000): 59.

[41] Among the people who influenced him was Bhagaban Chandra Bose, his father, who was a multifaceted personality.

[42]Jagadish Chandra Bose, "Bigyane Sahitya" ["Literature in Science"], in *Abyakta* (Kolkata, Dey's Publishing, 2009), 74. Translation mine.

[43]Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, "On the Mythologerm: Kalpavigyan and the Question of Imperial Science," *Science Fiction Studies* 43, no. 3 (2016): 442.

[44]Ashis Nandy, *Alternative Sciences: Creativity and Authenticity in Two Indian Scientists* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1980): 20.

[45]Satyajit Ray, "Ascharjontu," ["The Stranganimal"], in *Shonku Samagra* [*The Collected Stories of Shonku*] (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 502.

[46]Bose, ""Bigyane Sahitya"," 83.

[47] Bose, ""Bigyane Sahitya", 83.

[48]Satyajit Ray, "Nakurbabu o El Dorado" ["Nakurbabu and the El Dorado"], in *Shonku Samagra* [*The Collected Stories of Shonku*] (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 415.

[49]Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shonku o Robu" ["Professor Shonku and Robu"], in *Shonku Samagra* [*The Collected Stories of Shonku*] (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 110.

[50] Chattopadhyay, "On the Mythologerm," 445.

[51]Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shonku o Baghdader Rahasyo" ["Professor Shonku and the Mystery in Baghdad"], in *Shonku Samagra* [*The Collected Stories of Shonku*] (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 172; See also Ray, "Swarnaparni" ["The Golden Leaves"], in *Shonku Samagra* [*The Collected Stories of Shonku*] (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 606.

[52]Andrew Pickering, *Science as Practice and Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3.

[53]Pickering, *Science as Practice and Culture*, 8-9.

[54]Nandy, *Alternative Sciences*, 35.

[55]Denis Dutton, "What is Genius?", *Philosophy and Literature* 25, no. 1 (2001): 185-86. (181-96)

[56]Ashis Nandy, *Alternative Sciences: Creativity and Authenticity in Two Indian Scientists* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1980): 12.

[57]Nandy, *Alternative Sciences*, 10

[58]Satyajit Ray, "Swarnaparni" ["The Golden Leaves"], in *Shonku Samagra* [*The Collected Stories of Shonku*] (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 607.

[59] Satyajit Ray, "Shonkur Congo Abhijan" ["Shonku's Adventure in Congo"], in *Shonku Samagra* [*The Collected Stories of Shonku*] (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 442.

[60]Anway Mukhopadhyay, "Ray between Two Owls: Satyajit Ray and the Aporias of Enlightenment," South Asian Review 36, no. 1 (2015): 41.

[61]Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shonku o UFO" ["Professor Shonku and the UFO"], in *Shonku Samagra* [*The Collected Stories of Shonku*] (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 491.

[62]Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shonku o Cochabambar Guha" ["Professor Shonku and the Cave of Cochabamba"], in *Shonku Samagra* [*The Collected Stories of Shonku*] (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 134.

[63] Christopher Johnson, "Bricoleur and Bricolage: From Metaphor to Universal Concept," *Paragraph* 35, no. 3 (2012): 361.

[64] Johnson, "Bricoleur and Bricolage," 361.

[65] Johnson, "Bricoleur and Bricolage," 357-58.

[66] Johnson, "Bricoleur and Bricolage," 364-65.

[67]Satyajit Ray, "Mahakasher Dyut" ["The Messenger of the Space"], in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 408.

[68]Doyle, "When the World Screamed," 225.

[69]Satyajit Ray, "Corvus," in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 237.

[70] Bandyopadhyay, "Making," 71.

[71] Bandyopadhyay, "Making," 71.

[72] Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shonku o Robu," 101.

[73] Bose, ""Bigyane Sahitya", 81-83.

[74]Satyajit Ray, "Nakurbabu o El Dorado," 416.

[75] Doyle, "When the World Screamed," 251.

[76] Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shonku o gorilla," 154.

[77] Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shonku o UFO," 473. "Bhaja machti ulte khete janenna."

[78]Satyajit Ray, "Byomjatrir Diary," 6.

[79]Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shanku o Golok Rahasya" ["Professor Shonku and the Mystery of the Ball"], in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 63.

[80] Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shanku o Gorilla," 171.

[81]Satyajit Ray, "Intellectron," in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 642.

[82] Satyajit Ray, "Byomjatrir Diary," 6.

[83]Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shanku o Robu," 111.

[84]Timothy Clark, *Martin Heidegger* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 12.

[85]Satyajit Ray, "Professor Randir Time Machine" ["Professor Randi's Time Machine"], in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 520.

[86]Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shanku o Robu," 104.

[87]Satyajit Ray, "Ascharjontu," 500.

[88]Satyajit Ray, "Ekshringa Abhijan" ["The Expedition in Ekshringa"], in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 283.

[89] Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shonku o Har" ["Professor Shonku and Bone"], in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 35.

[90]Satyajit Ray, "Byomjatrir Diary," 20.

[91] Doyle, "The Lost World," 104.

[92]Doyle, "When the World Screamed," *248*.

[93]Doyle, "The Lost World," 59.

[94] Joel Dinerstein, "Technology and Its Discontents: On the Verge of the Posthuman," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2006): 571-72, JSTOR.

[95] Dinerstein, "Technology and Its Discontents," 570.

[96]Doyle, "The Lost World," 131.

[97]Doyle, "The Lost World," 104-05.

[98] Doyle, "The Lost World," 73.

[99] Doyle, "The Lost World," 78-79.

[100]Timothy Clark, *Martin Heidegger*. 3-4.

[101] Clark, *Martin Heidegger*, 11.

[102] Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shonku o Robu," 101.

[103] Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shonku o Gorilla," 166.

[104]Satyajit Ray, "Dr. Shering's Smaranshakti" ["Doctor Shering's Memory Power"], in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 287.

[105]Doyle, "The Lost World," 142.

[106] Doyle, "The Lost World," 170.

[107] Doyle, "The Lost World," 175.

[108] Wilson, "Fiction and Empire," 31.

[109] Nandy, *Alternative Sciences*, 20.

[110]Satyajit Ray, "Ascharya Prani," 220.

[111]Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shonku o Gorilla," 152. See also, Satyajit Ray, "Swarnaparni", 606. "A weapon is necessary for self-protection, but I can't bear bloodshed. That's why this pistol that does not kill the enemy but annihilates."

[112] Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shonku o Gorilla," 154.

[113]Satyajit Ray, "Kompu," in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 380.

[114]Doyle, "When the World Screamed," 235.

[115]Satyajit Ray, "Swarnaparni," 607.

[116]Satyajit Ray, "Swarnaparni," 614. See also, Satyajit Ray, "Corvus," 246. "I don't care the thing called money".

[117]Satyajit Ray, "Swarnaparni," 621.

[118]Satyajit Ray, "Nefrudeter Somadhi" ["The Burial Chamber of Nefrudet"], in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 553

[119]Doyle, "When the World Screamed," 227.

[120] Bloch and Adorno, "Something's Missing," 1.

[121]Satyajit Ray, "Dr. Shering's Smaranshakti," 287. Shonku never visits to America.

[122]Biswajit Ray, *Professor Shonkur Sesh Diary*, 49. Translation mine.

[123]Satyajit Ray, Professor Shonku o UFO," 472.

[124] Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shonku o UFO," 472.

[125] Roberts, *The History*, 6.

[126] Doyle, "When the World Screamed," 248.

[127] Roberts, *The History*, 8.

[128]Satyajit Ray, Shonkur Suborno Sujog," in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 357.

[129]Chandak Sengoopta, "'The fruits of independence': Satyajit Ray, Indian nationhood and the spectre of empire," *South Asian History and Culture* 2, no. 3 (2011): 374-75.

[130] Satyajit Ray, "Don Christaboldir Bhabishyatbani" ["The Prophesy of Don Christaboldy"], in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 592.

[131]Satyajit Ray, "Marurahasya" ["The Mystery in the Desert"], in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 225.

[132] Doyle, "The Lost World," 74.

[133] Satyajit Ray, Professor Shonku o Egyptiyo Atanka" ["Professor Shanku and the Egyptian Terror"], in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 21.

[134] Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shanku o Gorilla," 159.

[135]Bloch and Adorno, "Something's Missing," 12

[136]Satyajit Ray, Nakurbabu o El Dorado," 415.

[137]Brinda Bose, "Modernity, Globality, Sexuality, and the City: A Reading of Indian Cinema," *The Global South* 2 (2008): 48. Ritwik Ghatak also criticizes Ray's "clinically disinfected realism of poverty." See, Ritwik Ghatak, *Cinema and I* (Calcutta: Ritwik Memorial Trust, 1987), 15.

[138]Satyajit Ray, "Munro Dwiper Rahasya" ["They Mystery of the Munro Island"], in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 378.

[139] Bloch and Adorno, "Something's Missing," 8.

[140]Satyajit Ray, 'Compu," 383.

[141]Satyajit Ray, "Dr. Danielle's Discovery" [The Discovery of Dr. Danielle"], in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 579.

[142]Satyajit Ray, "Ascharjontu," 513.

[143]Satyajit Ray, 'Compu," 389.

[144] Doyle, "The Lost World," 59.

[145]Satyajit Ray, "Professor Shonku O Golok Rahasya," 63.

[146]Satyajit Ray, "Mahakasher Dyut" ["The Messenger of Space"], in *Shonku Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2002), 414.

Chapter 5

Madness of Speech: Truth, Power and the Birbal Way

> In the evening, the chief of the king's army came to the king. He bowed his head and announced, 'My lord! Except the jackals and the dogs, you'll not hear any sound from anyone's mouth in this village.'
>
> The chief minister said, 'the honour of the king has been ordained / restored.'
>
> The priest said, 'the goddess is on the king's side.'
>
> The Vidūṣaka said, 'My lord! Give me the permission to leave now.'
>
> The king said, 'Why?'
>
> The Vidūṣaka said, 'My Lord! Neither can I beat someone nor can I kill, by the grace of god I can only laugh. I'll forget to laugh if I stay in your court'.[1]
>
> - Rabindranath Tagore, "Bidushak"

The narratability of the human life—unique and unrepeatable for every individual—is considered to be the "prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history"[2] by Hannah Arendt. The lived life of an individual, which is comprised of a peculiar mixture of intentions and accidents, reveals a "design" beyond the individual's conscious realization as he is always already immersed in the flow of life itself. "[T]he design", writes Adriana Cavarero, "is what that life, without ever being able to predict or even imagine it, leaves behind."[3] A person is a living story open to be read by others. It is not essential that the design, which is unique and unrepeatable for every individual and comes after life, has to be determined, rather it varies and depends upon the tellers who have a strong feeling—love, hate, admiration—for someone and recounts the tale after his or her death.

Life is Hi/story

The archival documents regarding the life of Mahesh Das (1528-1586) are very scanty. All we know is that he was born in a bhatt-brahmin family in 1528 in a village near Kalpi. In the court of the Raja of Rewa, he was a poet writing in Braj bhasha. There he was adorned with the title *brahma kavi*. When and how he came to Akbar's (1542-1605) court is not known, but according to Abul Fazl—the historian at the emperor's court—he came to be noticed by Akbar around 1563. Fazl respectfully mentioned about his spiritual qualities and intimacy to Akbar but he did not mention anything about his poetic capability or witticism. To the other historian of the court, Abdul Qadir Badayuni, he was a "bastard".[4] However it is the stories which make the hero 'super' by providing him a mythical status and within one hundred years of his death, writes C. M. Naim, Birbal became a cult figure in popular imagination.[5]

If we look at the etymology of his name, 'Mahesh' is a shorter form of 'Mahewasra' who is one of the supreme deities in Hinduism and the title 'Das' refers to a 'servant' or 'devotee.' In contrast to Mitra's Ghanashyam Das, who probably belongs to the lower-middle region in the caste ladder in Bengal, Mahesh was born in a Brahmin family. Following Walter Benjamin, Cavarero writes on the paradox of naming a new-born baby:

> As Walter Benjamin notes, the names that parents give a child 'do not correspond – in a metaphysical rather than etymological sense – to any knowledge, for they name newborn children.' The name announces the uniqueness, in its inaugural appearing to the world, even before someone can know *who* the newborn is; or who he or she will turn out to be in the course of their life. A unique being is without any quality at its beginning, and yet it *already* has a name. The newborn does not choose this name, but is given it by another, just as every human being do not choose how to be. The uniqueness which pertains to the *proper* is always a given, a *gift*.[6]

The name that had been carefully chosen for him and the family he belongs to suggest for him a religious life devoted to the gods, but quite paradoxically, he becomes a courtier and a poet devoted to a Muslim emperor. The emperor adorned him with the title Birbal or Raja

Birbar. S. H. Hodivala suggests that the title might have been borrowed by Akbar from *Vetala Panchavinshati*—a Sanskrit text—where there is a person named Vira Vara who was so much devoted to the king that he willingly sacrificed his own son.[7]

Portrait of Raja Birbal Seated with Bow and Arrow

In search of his destiny—Mahesh Das—a common man from the village with a modest background, came to Delhi, the capital of the Mughal Empire. Nobody knew him and he also scarcely had any idea that one day he would become one of the Nine Jewels of the emperor's court. What he had buried deep in his heart was, as Cavarero would say, a "desire" for a story that would instantly reveal to people 'who' he was. The end of Birbal's eventful life mark the closure but kept him alive in the narrative memory of people who upheld him as a champion of justice—a superhero. The death opened up an opportunity for the birth of a unique and meaningful series of narratives out of his lived life or flesh and blood existence.

The actuality of Birbal's life seems to have been obliterated from the bosom of time and we rely chiefly on the historical memory as recorded in his narrative biography.

This narrative biography over the historical, philosophical or discursive formation of the subject is the central concern for Adriana Cavarero. The "narratable self", to use Cavarero's term, is consistent with the life and blood existence of a person in the mind of the man to come: "'who' someone is…is revealed and made manifest through that person's actions and speech – words and deeds which, *ex post facto*, form the unique life-story of that person"[8]. This gives birth to a new politics away from the discursive construction of the human subject and allows it "a relatively 'autonomous' agency or voice" because unlike the historical or philosophical discourse, "the tale is not 'indifferent' to the one whose life it reveals; on the contrary, the tale is for that unique existent."[9]

If Tansen, as the saying goes, had the superheroic ability to bring rain or even ignite fire by the melody of his songs, Birbal's gift was sheer, sparkling, and unprecedented wit and imagination. The command over language and narrative authority lent Birbal an unusual capacity to solve puzzles by using a unique and sophisticated technique. The puzzles are presented in the court as a bolt from the blue and he usually have no premeditated plan but a sheer presence of mind to solve them. His spectacular practice of doing things, partly as a spontaneous response to a complex situation and partly as an act of active self-disclosure, had such a dramatic affect that the emperor did not hesitate to bestow his trust on Birbal's wisdom. The sense of humour and the spectacularity of his method, which is often well rehearsed, make them memorable and eventually narratable in the public sphere. We do not get the inner world of Birbal as we find in the modernist novels but his world of performance and immersion in the rituals of the courtly culture.

The Court-jester, the Vidūṣaka and the Mirror Affect

In Bharat Muni's *Nāṭya Śāstra*, the physical appearance of the vidūṣaka has been described as "dwarfish, should possess big teeth, and be hunch-backed, double-tongued, bald-headed and tawny-eyed".[10] As far as his function is concerned, he is one "who looks to people's pleasure, can imitate manners of all people, resorts to various (means) and mixes with women, is ready-witted in disclosures made through pleasantry, or in Covert Pleasure and is clever, and can give censure through his words, is to be known as a jester (vidūṣaka)."[11] The essential aspects of the notorious vidūṣaka are, therefore, physical deformity, cunning ingenuity and the ability to produce pleasure by imitating other people. He is often crude and lacks subtlety of thought and action. Noticing this characteristic feature, David Dean Shulman has differentiated between a radical court-jester of the folk culture and the vidūṣaka of Sanskrit drama who are often presented as the foil to a virtuous hero and is deformed, ugly, insensitive, foodie, and a laughing stock to the audience:

> The jester's stories are marked by a boldness and an intensity never attained by the Vidūṣaka…although the jester has inherited many of the Vidūṣaka's traits…the clown is now gifted with pure intentionality and a comic inventiveness entirely legitimate within his assumed context. He is entirely self-conscious; his raison d'être lies in his wit. Unlike the Vidūṣaka, even at his most foolish the jester can never be a fool.[12]

The radical court-jester of the folktales is often presented as someone fighting for the cause of the common people often overshadowing the ruler himself. Taking life lightly and providing humorous solutions to the serious social, political, and ethical problems of life is his profession. He plays a dangerous game of wit, but as he is always one step ahead of the others, he always escapes the wrath of the emperor and "provides "the necessary corrective to the king's human inadequacies and deviations from the truth."[13] The sovereign emperor is often surprised, irritated, and angry at the jokes at his expense but he is liberal enough to applaud the jester's confidence and boldness which frequently reach to the verge of audacity

and insolence. The elusive vidūṣaka compliments the ruler as an eye opener, without him his reign is miserable and incomplete.

The "narratable self" lays bare from birth within a shared and interactive space which Arendt calls "political".[14] In his attempt to prove his point in the shared space of the court where he lived the most part of his life, Birbal is always dramatic. He writes a play in which he manipulates others—often unwilling or unaware—to participate as actors in spite of their hesitation and the play ends in a way he desires it to end. This method of conjuring reality is part of the profession of a vidūṣaka but this is a highly distorted reality that allows opening up fresh avenues for critical thinking. "For, in my case, a poor Brahmana," Says the vidūṣaka in Sudraka's *Mrichchhakatika*, "everything turns out in a contrary manner: just like the reflection in a mirror, the left appearing to the right and the right to the left."[15] There are several narrative versions of Birbal's first meeting with the emperor and one of them is particularly interesting in this context:

> One day the emperor went to a village with his mobile court. Soon after, an announcement was made declaring that if any artist could draw the most realistic picture of the emperor, he would be awarded a huge sum of money. A number of artists tried their best but no one could make the emperor smile. He frowned, grimaced, felt amused, became indifferent and even became angry but never pleased. When everyone failed, a small boy named Mahesh Das produced an oval object wrapped in paper and carefully handed it over to the emperor. The emperor shook it, held it up, became puzzled for a moment, opened the wrapper, paused for a moment and then started laughing. The oval object was nothing but a mirror, and therefore produced the most realistic picture possible of the emperor. Realizing the trick, Akbar declared him the winner, gave him the award and in addition gave him his royal seal inviting him to his court when he comes of age.[16]

The mirror can reveal an exact likeness, yet with an exception, quite embarrassingly for the viewer, the mirror turns the left into right and the right into left. Years later, Birbal joins the emperor's court where he goes on holding up a mirror in front of the emperor to let him realize the hidden 'reality' of life. This perceptual refiguring of reality which Shulman says,

"emerge from the outer zone of unstructured potentiality"[17] is his road to truth and allows him a transformative power. What Birbal is gifting the emperor is a power of seeing things from a different perspective which he does not possess and in the process revealing the hidden treasures of his own self. These polyphonic mirror-effects give the emperor a second birth and a performative recurrence of these tricks brings before us a unique biography of Birbal as a superhero without excavating into the lost archive of his lived life.

The utterance of his name which was given to him at birth would not reveal *who* Birbal is; rather it is determined by *praxis*—his active engagement with life. It became essential to create an affect otherwise he would lose himself in the crowd of illustrious men at the court. To reveal his difference Birbal becomes dramatic and intensifies the situation. To attract the attention of the emperor he beats his own drum silently. He takes the risk of exposing himself in the life of the Mughal court and gradually manifests himself as a public figure of great accomplishment. This is apparent from the story of his first entry into the court. On the very first day in his new beginning, a corrupt gatekeeper of the court allows him in only in a condition that he has to hand over half of the reward from the emperor to him as bribe, and Birbal insists on getting hundred lashes from the emperor as his reward, half of which will be shared equally with the gatekeeper. The emperor realizes his hint and takes necessary actions to remit the shortcoming.[18] To respond instantly to the questions life poses before us becomes an integral part of his life. There is no blueprint of action or preconceived theoretical knowledge available to him—no *sophia* but *phronesis*. As practical and creative he is, it leads him rethink life in his own terms. The emperor provides him employment not because of a single and bare display of intelligence but realizing the hidden potentiality of the boy—a possibility which he could foresee in advance. We see the primacy of the practical life where the unexpected and the uncanny take over the life of the mind that produces a stable theory. The boredom and normalcy of everyday life is often disturbed with the eruption

of the new, unexpected, or even uncanny. Birbal's job is to tackle new people and new problems and regain the authority and control over the aberrant life. And he performs this serious business without taking it seriously—with sunny humour. Eventually he earns a new name—a gift from the emperor for his work—which is not an interpellation signalling a paradoxical death in language and the old name Mahesh Das goes into oblivion.

The Technique

What activates the narrative memory of people is not so much the intellectual process how Birbal solves the puzzles, a mathematician can do it too, but the outcome of it and the production of laughter at the end. There is a set task for Birbal at the court—one of solving the puzzles or lawsuits by using his creative imagination. The nature of his job always brings new challenges one after another, and never allows him to be complacent because just as in a game of trapeze, one failure could lead to defamation and even death. In many occasions, only one interpretation of a problem is presented to him; he comes to realize the whole thing within a minute, and then finds out a way of retelling the story turning it upside down. He often buys a day or two from the emperor and apparently digresses from the point but all these are done in order to create the exact situation necessary for the comic timing. It leads to an ironic reversal of the whole situation and a revelation of another perspective which no one except Birbal could realize before. Shulman calls it a "double direction" or "internal oscillation" of a court-jester which "is meant to propel us toward a still greater freedom of perception, to a stance within an unstructured and always unfinished creative domain."[19]

One important thing of his life is humour but it does not turn his life into a joke. For him being funny is a choice and he is not condemned to be funny as the court jester of Raja Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagar—Tenali Rama.[20] This choice adds a pressure of performance and responsibility. He can mock, leg-pull, and irritate even the emperor himself without causing any offence. Yet though he has the impunity of a jester, as a responsible

courtier he has to maintain a limit. Strangely everyone is bound to take him seriously, which is quite unusual for a jester, and he achieves what other jesters cannot because of the important role he plays in running the empire.

The riddle is a language game that harbours an ethical challenge originating from everyday life. Presented as child's play, it is a serious meditation with hidden trapdoors of narration. There is always a design or structure in Birbal's way of doing things. "Birbaliana"—his method—is another name of the faculty that notices contradiction or manufactures one in order to solve a problem. There is a Sanskrit tradition known as *samasya purti*—solution / satisfaction of a problem—which poses a challenge to complete a verse where only one half is provided and the other half is to be fulfilled. That Birbal was a poet, this practice of making a poem must have been familiar to him and he internalizes the technique to solve the problems presented to him. His command over language is extraordinary and the linguistic playfulness often plays a vital role in this process:

> One day Akbar Badshah was riding along on his open palanquin. Raja Birbar rode along in attendance at his side. And Birbar's mother's name was well known to be Kali [=black], and Akbar Badshah's esteemed mother's name was Ni`mat [=blessing]. It happened that on the road a black bitch was coupling with a dog. The king's gaze fell on her. He said to Birbar, "Look what that black bitch [or, that bitch Kali] is doing." Birbar submitted, "Refuge of the World, according to you she is Kali/black, but to that dog she is indeed a Ni`mat/blessing!"[21]

The inherent sexism of the joke is quite insidious but for the time being we can overlook this in order to look at Birbal's comic timing. Returning an equally insulting reply—the other half of the story—to the emperor Birbal makes him speechless. If the first half of the joke disturbs the balance of the situation by provocation, the second half restores it with a warning to the emperor not to transgress the limit. Interestingly, Birbal does it by crossing the same line that the Emperor crossed, thereby providing him impunity by the logic of the riddle from the possible rage of the emperor.

Does Birbal laugh?

There is an interesting Bengali proverb which says that the idiot laughs thrice: first, he laughs without knowing the point of the joke at all; second, he laughs after comprehending the joke; and third, he laughs realizing that he was a fool not to understand the joke earlier. Akbar does not laugh thrice but the entire effort of Birbal is often to make the emperor laugh an uneasy laughter, the third of its kind, at the expense of his own stupidity. Simon Critchley rightly argues that "humour recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic affirmation but comic *acknowledgement*, not Promethean authenticity but a laughable inauthenticity".[22] The invention of laughter at the end also works as a defence mechanism for Birbal against the wrath of the emperor. Gradually his performance becomes ritualized. There is a double bind at work in Birbal's performance: his jokes are rites in the sense that it is reiterated again and again and understood by a particular group of people in the court (Mary Douglas's sense of jokes as rites), and anti-rites, a liberation from the ritual in the sense that it mocks the ritualized power of the emperor (Simon Critchley's notion of jokes as anti-rites).[23] As the audience do not understand the situation or what is going on in Birbal's mind, it creates a tension in their mind and the affect is a guilty pleasure—a recognition of one's own foolishness ending in tongue-in-check laughter. This is not what Kant describes as "the sudden evaporation of expectation to nothing"[24] but a production of something, in that case, a sudden spark of meaning foregrounding the vulnerability of the ritual or norm. Yet Birbal is not radical because his performance does not change the present power structure though it has a subversive potentiality. It is a temporary defamiliarization of the norm; just after the momentary jolt is over, everything returns to normal social consensus. Just as the comic book superhero, the messianic power of Birbal can only provide us, as Peter Berger calls "a signal of transcendence";[25] he cannot provide us any permanent solution to the problems of life.

What Birbal can show us is only what Gilles Deleuze calls an "outlandish" view of life. Simon Critchley writes:

> Humour effects a breakage in the bond connecting the human being to its unreflective, everyday existence. In humour, as in anxiety, the world is made strange and unfamiliar to the touch. When I laugh or just smile, I see myself as the outlandish animal that I am, and begin to reflect on what I had previously taken for granted."[26]

This alternative view, not fully outside the scope of common-sense morality of his time, works as an implicit satire urging the emperor to change the way he views life and the world—a mirroring act that reveals to the emperor his own image to himself.

Birbal's technique serves as a way to return to common sense by an inversion of the world of common sense. The humour made the emperor and the courtiers, albeit temporarily, come out of the inertia of thought and the unanticipated shock forces them to think critically about a particular problem at hand. In such an instance, a wealthy merchant requests Birbal to catch a thief who seems to be an insider to the house, most probably one of the servants. Birbal agrees to help and gives one stick to each of the servants saying that the guilty man's stick will grow one inch within a night. The next day it is found that one of the servant's stick is one inch short. The psychological game that Birbal plays with the thief makes him believe in something irrational. To use Critchley's words, the "real" is rendered "surreal"[27] to make us smile. This solves the problem and the reality is restored at the end.

Bergson notices a "momentary anaesthesia of the heart"[28] in the act of laughing. Something unanticipated halts us for a moment and then an uncontrollable gesture shakes our body to its core which we call laughter. The point of realization occurs in between the pause and laughter. But does one who makes us laugh also laugh with us at the expense of his own joke? It seems that his laughter rather smile is of a different kind. Of course, he does not laugh at the upright down situation which he himself creates. He smiles a smile of fulfilment

when everything is over and the order of things is established—a Blakean laughter after the creation of the tiger.

Jeffrey T. Nealon writes: "Political truth functions not on the logic of the fact, but on the logic of the joke…you can't outflank performative truth solely by serious appeals to the really true."[29] In order to aggravate the situation Birbal even does not deter to present himself as ridiculous, which ultimately serves as a reminder of the limitedness against the fallacy of the emperor believing himself the sovereign. He cannot show himself off as a superior wit to the emperor and thereby has to play himself down. To outflank a performative mode, it needs another performative which follows the subversive logic of sense and cripples it from inside. The right wing intolerance of the jokes is an example of its power in alluding to something alternative to the present:

> Serious people in tweed coats or lab coats, arguing in scholarly journals or on news programs, won't get the whole job done; and it's clear that a right-wing strongman like Trump fears, above all else, laughter at his expense. So if theory really does want to engage the world, it had better learn to tell some good jokes. Taking a hand in the game of power requires performative engagement, not solely insistence on the unforced force of the constative "truth."[30]

The joke manipulates what Jeffrey T. Nealon calls the "plastic space" between saying and meaning.[31] The illocutionary force of the utterance creates a situation compelling the audience to think and its perlocutionary effect traps the audience to accept their ignorance by laughter.

Of Friendship

If friendship is *homonoia*—a recognition of oneself in the face of the other—as it is to Aristotle, it is difficult to plant a seed of friendship between the emperor and his subject. Moreover Daud Ali and Emma J. Flatt opine that "it was a common complaint in colonial narratives that Indians failed to comprehend a distinction between patronage and friendship."[32] The question of equality does not arise as no emperor would like to see himself

in the face of the other, rather he might recognize someone as a friend, who, among the crowd of sycophants, can entertain, converse, and sometimes show him his own image—his greatness and occasionally his folly albeit not without the danger of being decapitated causing the emperor's displeasure. The politics of the empire makes Akbar befriend many kings and princes formally but Birbal is the person whom the emperor trusts fully—he becomes his confidante.

If *filia* or friendliness is "a virtue that holds the middle between the vices of obsequiousness and flattery," Birbal finely maintains the balance without losing his dignity despite the "strangeness" and "infinite distance"[33] he has with the emperor. They perfectly fit in Derrida's "asymmetrical and heteronomical curvature of the social space", which is "a relation that confounds and disrupts human autonomy and social reciprocity."[34] The radical otherness of Birbal—social, intellectual, religious, authorial—brings in an outsider's view inside the court. The friendship here arises out of the responsibility towards the other by a suspension of rivalry and an acceptance of each other's greatness without any question. Even if there is any rivalry, it is a battle of wit where the emperor stays at the receiving end as an inferior intelligence, an acceptance of which makes him a better ruler if not a better human. The jokes play a performative role of a prayer by producing an experience—"of waiting, of promise, or of commitment"[35]—that opens up a possibility for the future.

Being the emperor's favourite also harbours a risk because it often leads to unhealthy rivalry where someone can become an object either of respect and fear or of derision to the other courtiers. These oppositional feelings of respect and disgust can be noticed in the writings of the court historians of Akbar: "Abul Fazl and Abdul Qadir Badayuni were diametrically opposed contemporaries; the former described Birbal in respectful terms, the latter called him a 'bastard'."[36] Abraham Eraly describes the courtly culture of winning the

emperor's heart in the Mughal court where even a poet who was not necessarily a warrior could be assigned to command an army:

> To rise in service was to rise in the emperor's favour. Artful sycophants thrived in this environment. Though the Mughal emperors were generally clear-eyed enough to see through the fog of adulation that enveloped the court, and pick out true talent…still, to get ahead in imperial service it was necessary for an officer, however talented he might be, also to have the talent to win and hold the emperor's favour. On the whole, those who did well at the Mughal court were ambidextrous men, who could please the emperor as well as perform well in office. Thus, Todar Mal, who was both competent and courtly, flourished, while Shah Mansur, who did not have courtly graces though he was brilliant as finance minister, lost his life.[37]

Adaptability, presence of mind, the ability to manipulate the emperor's mood, and overall, an unquestionable devotion—Birbal had everything that the Mughal emperors praised. More than anything else, the emperor sensed no fear from him. He was not a threat to the throne—one without any desire to be the sovereign. There is no wonder that it is often said that he belongs to a group of three people, along with the musician Tansen and the poet Faizi, who had never been punished by the emperor. Not having any risk of losing his throne or life to him, Akbar opened himself to Birbal. They seem to be inseparable where one cannot survive without the other. Akbar was so affectionate that he built a stone palace only for Birbal at Fatehpur Sikri so that they could stay close to each other and he left the place forever after his death.

There is historical record of an incident where Akbar takes the risk of his own life to save his friend revealing the depth and intensity of friendship between two people who are unequal in terms of age, wealth, and power:

> An incident in 1583 in Fatehpur Sikri was further demonstration of the close bond between Akbar and Raja Birbal. During an elephant fight organized in the grounds of Akbar's court, one of the elephants, 'unique for violence', suddenly rushed towards Birbal, and seized him with his trunk. Akbar turned his horse around and galloped towards the elephant, charging at him, while all around him his soldiers and

> courtiers shouted out in alarm. The elephant then turned towards Akbar but, inexplicably, faltered, and Birbal was saved.[38]

There are three kinds of friendships for Aristotle—of utility, of pleasure, and of virtue. For Akbar, his friendship with Birbal provides all—utility (to govern the empire), security (to trust in internal affairs of the empire), and pleasure (witty company loaded with anecdotes, jokes, and fun). The third parameter which indicates towards the 'uselessness' or virtue of friendship where one is ready to sacrifice one's life for a friend seems to be the most important to Akbar. There is something beyond the usual parameters that instigates the emperor to rely on this man with an eye towards the future.

In his obituary of Jean-Marie Benoist, Derrida ponders over the intricate relationship between friendship and mourning. The friends know in advance that one of them will have to depart before the other:

> To have a friend, to look at him, to follow him with your eyes, to admire him in friendship, is to know in a more intense way, already injured, always insistent, and more and more unforgettable, that one of the two of you will inevitably see the other die. …and so will carry the other within him a while longer, his eyes following without seeing, the world suspended by some unique tear, each time unique, through which everything from then on, through which the world itself—and this day will come—will come to be reflected quivering, reflecting disappearance itself: the world, the whole world, the world itself, for death takes from us not only some particular life within the world, some moment that belongs to us, but, each time, without limit, someone through whom the world, and first of all our own world, will have opened up in a both finite and infinite—mortally infinite—way.[39]

The audacity of Birbal's thought with its ironic bent of humour, fearlessness, and love of intellectual freedom leave such a permanent mark on Akbar's memory that only death can impart. The mourning cannot be fully focussed towards the friend who is now deceased but an interiorized idea of the friend within the self. Losing a friend always arrives, Derrida suggests, with remorse as well as a feeling of guilt. Remorse, for he will never be able to have his eloquent presence in the court, guilt, for he could have saved his friend's life by

deciding not to send him in a war. In losing Birbal Akbar loses a part of himself; in sending him to a battle he authorizes the death of the friend as other and the friend within the self.

Derrida's insistence on the visual nature of friendship is breached violently in Birbal's death. When Birbal died in a war with the Pashtun Yusufzais in 1586, his body could not be found and he did not have a proper cremation in a Hindu way. When the emperor heard the news of Birbal's death, he closed himself indoors, did not talk to anyone, and did not eat anything for two days. So much so that the emperor left Fatehpur Sikri forever in 1585, one possible reason of his departure might be the death of his friend. This public performance of mourning reveals the affective impact of losing a shared life in friendship. The emperor performs his duty as a friend and it also is a burden that he cannot discard. In one of *dohas* Akbar writes:

> Deen dekhi sab din, ek na dinho dusah dukh
>
> So ab ham kan din, kachhahun nahin rakhio Birbal
>
> (He saw the poor and gave them all, but never distributed sorrows
>
> Now that he has given even [sorrow] to me, Birbal has kept nothing for himself)[40]

That Birbal keeps nothing for himself is both literal and metaphorical—he loses everything he has in death including his corporeal body which could not be found, and he sacrifices the most precious thing, his life itself for the emperor. The gift of death is that it produces an individuating effect which is irreplaceable and the emperor has to mourn for this loss forever. Another *doha* popularly attributed to Akbar, reveals the nature of the bereavement of the emperor at Birbal's demise:

> Pithala so majlis gai, Tansen so rag
>
> Hasibo ramibo bolibo, gayo Birabara satha.
>
> (Social life disappeared with Pithala; music disappeared with Tansen
>
> And laughter, repartee and conversation with Birbal)[41]

In a letter to Abdur Rahim after Birbal's death Akbar writes: "The world is like a mirage to beguile thirsty souls… at the end of this frenzy is simply a mist—a fume."[42] "No one owns a

tree"[43]—Birbal teaches the emperor when he indulges himself with the vanity of owning the material world. Whenever the Muslim emperor becomes arrogant or exhibits pride in his material possessions, it is the Hindu Birbal who brings him back to the path of virtue. The death makes him realize the intense existential agony and despair in a finite world. Birbal is a tragic superhero who does not die in a battle of wit, but in an actual war, an action where one often faces situation at the wit's end.

On Parrhesia

Parrhesia or truth-telling, however unpleasant it is on the face of the authority, is an ancient Greek practice. The person who is ready to accept the danger of this act is called in Greek a *parrhesiastes*:

> *Parrhesia* is a form of criticism, either towards another or towards oneself, but always in a situation where the speaker or confessor is in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor…The *parrhesia* comes from "below," as it were, and is directed towards "above".[44]

There is a difference between *parrhesia* or free-speech and rhetorical speech in the sense that whereas the rhetorician uses different devices in order to persuade his audience, the *parrhesiastes* catches the audience unaware and throws the bare truth on face. He does not persuade but provides a shock with a sudden revelation. The 'parrhesiastic game' requires courage because it involves a kind of sincerity towards the truth without thinking about the consequences of going against the power—the emperor or the majority. Beatrice K. Otto calls it the "death-defying wit"[45] of the court-jester because it often reminds a not so democratic tyrant his foolishness, shortcoming, or his duties with the risk of being beheaded. Shulman rightly says: "The danger is, nevertheless, entirely real, an essential component of the jester's experience, while his triumph over it is no simple victory but more of a continuous, dialectical battle between fear and wit."[46]

As a respectable courtier, Birbal's technique is not one of buffoonery; he does not only talk but dramatize. The ability to think otherwise provides Birbal a relative autonomy, a

tongue-in-check freedom of speech from courtly convention and normativity and he injects subversion with delight. The power of suggestiveness is so powerful that the emperor cannot deny in public even if he wants to deny something:

> Akbar, his son Prince Salim and Birbal went hunting. When the day warmed up, Akbar and Salim took off their heavy coats and gave them to Birbal to carry. Then Akbar said to Birbal in jest. 'It looks like as ass's load.' Birbal replied, 'No, your majesty, more likely of two asses.'[47]

A little boy in Nirendranath Chakraborty's poem "Ulanga Raja" ["The Naked King"] dares to ask the king, who believes that he is wearing very fine cloths when he is wearing nothing, a simple question: "O king! Where are your clothes?"[48] Only Birbal has the ability to speak to the emperor in this way and the laughter produced as an effect is a superheroic laughter. Shulman rightly says that "the jester is always only one step away from the abyss. A major part of his appeal lies in his insouciance in the face of terror."[49] Birbal plays a vital role in curbing the immense power of the emperor by reminding him his duty and limitations. He just hints at the emperor's mistake, often coughs politely to disagree and argues in a very subtle way which provokes the emperor to think:

> Once Akbar and Birbal were enjoying a boat ride on the Jamuna when a string of pearls fell into the river from the emperor's hand. Akbar said to Birbal. 'Birbal, *mala de'*, i.e., 'Get me the string of pearls', which could also be heard as, 'ma la de', 'Get me your mother'. Birbal promptly replied, 'Refuge of the world, *bahnedo*,' i.e., 'Let it flow away', which could also be interpreted as, 'bahne do', i.e., 'give me your sisters.' The emperor fell silent.[50]

One remarkable thing about Birbal is that he beats nonsense with nonsense and has this remarkable capacity to transgress the line in order to bring the emperor back in limit.

In "monarchic *parrhesia*", the threat comes from displeasing the emperor, yet the *parrhesiastes* speaks the truth because he thinks that it is his duty to speak the truth. Birbal can easily play the role of a yes man at the cost of his own self-respect, but it is his moral duty to stop the abuse of power. He makes *parrhesia* the 'art of his life' with a slight technical imperfection because he creates an affect by using many rhetorical and storytelling

devices instead of speaking the truth on the face of the emperor—a cautious move yet less foolish, more effective, and desirable than his ideal counterpart.

The jokes have a remarkable capacity to expose the fallibility and transitoriness of any accepted form or pattern. Critchley writes: "By laughing at power, we expose its contingency, we realize that what appeared to be fixed and oppressive is in fact the emperor's new clothes, and just the sort of thing that should be mocked and ridiculed."[51] To say that the emperor can also speak nonsense and be stupid is a challenge to the symbolic power of the emperor as a sovereign ruler. However telling the truth on face of power without any protective measure is foolish and Birbal's addition of humour in *parrhesia* gives him a relative autonomy. Birbal is a bureaucrat who has eaten 'salt' from the emperor and so he cannot be as radical as to turn the power structure on its head. He's happy to hint at things which are unwelcome and how the existing structure can be made better. There is no malignancy but a generous critique of the empire, its emperor, the society and its politics of which he himself is an integral part. Critchley writes:

> A real comedian – that's a daring man. He dares to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what he sees is a sort of truth about people, about their situation, about what hurts or terrifies them, about what's hard, above all, about what they want. A joke releases the tension, says the unsayable, any joke pretty well. But a true joke, a comedian's joke, has to do more than release tension, it has to liberate the will and the desire, it has to change the situation.[52]

Counterperformativity

Intimacy with the emperor breeds jealousy. The rivals want to see one fail from favour. There are challenges which Birbal has to face from within the court both from the other courtiers and the emperor himself. They are not always ready to accept his superiority—moral or intellectual—and try to beat him in his own game. In the slippery space of the Mughal court one can suddenly fall out favour without even understanding what has gone wrong. Abul Fazl writes about an incident where he becomes a victim of Salim's plot but eventually it was the

emperor himself who realises everything and tells him not be worried.[53] At times, it is the emperor himself who tries to establish his own sovereignty in all respect:

> In great many other stories, the Indian kings seem to go out of their way to pose irrational questions to their jesters or set them impossible tasks. They seem to hide secret doubts about the total superiority they overtly claim, and need a final victory over the jester to reach the perfection they desire.[54]

In one of these stories, Akbar wants to know the exact number of crows in Agra from his courtiers. As no one knows the right answer, it creates a pin-drop silence in the court. It is Birbal's turn now and he promptly replies with an exact number. The other courtiers protest. They ask what if the number is more or less. Birbal ingeniously replies if the number is more it means that some crows have come to see their friends in Agra and if the number is less then it means that some have gone to other places to see their friends. However every story does not necessarily reveal a mere battle of wit producing happy, if not innocent, laughter. Often Birbal has to avoid dangerous death-traps set by his colleagues:

> A few jealous courtiers wanted him to die. They made a plan. They used the royal barber who had close access to the emperor. While shaving, the barber told the emperor that he knew a holy man who could send people to heaven and bring them back. The barber also added that the emperor could send one of his trusted courtiers if he wanted to know how the emperor's departed relatives were doing in heaven. And who was more trusted other than Birbal? When the emperor requested him to be his emissary in heaven, Birbal bought some time from the emperor for preparation. He secretly appointed people to build a long underground tunnel from the place where he would be burned alive. When the pyre was lighted, Birbal easily escaped and returned after a few months with dishevelled hair and long beards. The emperor was eager to know how his father was doing in heaven and Birbal informed him that he was fine in heaven except one thing—there were no barbers in heaven and so his father had requested him to send the royal barber as soon as possible.

In their essay "Counterperformativity," Alice Bamford and Donald Mackenzie elaborate on the idea of "deliberate counterperformativity": "the use of a model with the conscious goal of creating a world radically at odds with the world postulated by the model."[55] There is also an oppositional set of stories in which Birbal is presented as a loser in

a Battle of wit with Mulla Do-Piyaza—probably a fictional figure and a guardian of orthodox Islam. Do-Piyaza uses the same technique on Birbal that he uses to outwit his adversaries. Reminiscing Freud's theory of jokes, Naim finds a suppressed religious tension in these folktales:

> One day a learned brahmin told the emperor that it was an excellent omen to see two crows together at dawn. Birbal, who was present, also- confirmed it. The Mulla, however, whispered in Akbar's ear, 'Your majesty ought to test it'. Akbar ordered Birbal to let him know immediately if any morning he saw two crows together. One morning, Birbal rushed in- and woke the emperor. Akbar was quite peeved, for it was a cold winter morning, but he followed him outside, only to find one lonely crow - the other had flown away. Losing his temper, he gave Birbal a few slaps. Later that day, a Rajput princess was presented to the emperor in marriage. Then the Mulla stepped forward with folded hands and said, 'Your majesty, if you had seen those two crows you wouldn't have received this gift, for we know what he received who saw them.' Birbal was utterly shamed.[56]

Truth, Justice and the Birbal Way

Arendt provides us a critique of the concept of the genius as a Renaissance phenomenon. The idea of the genius for her puts more emphasis on the person rather than the craft and the creation. The genius becomes a reified producer promoted in a way as if he has full control over the process of his own formation—one who he is.[57] The court is a serious place for serious people where no frivolity is allowed in front of the emperor. The courtiers have to be cautious lest they displease the emperor and get punished. They are often expected to play the role of lampposts saying yes to whatever the emperor says. The comic imagination of Birbal has the capacity to solve complex political, ethical and whimsical questions in an effortless and witty way. This is something different—a liquid yet effective response to life which he learns through experiences. Not only the solution but the way he reaches to it or the craft is something which makes him popular. Only one person dares to break the normative rules of the court and make a fool of the emperor himself.

David Dean Shulman rightly observes that the importance of the court jester lies "in the imaginative working out of a reflective perspective that profoundly alters the normative attributes of the king".[58] Birbal is different because he is not only a jester but a warrior. He is a poet and a statesman with a personality that causes laughter but does not allow others to disrespect him as a buffoon as the other court jesters like Gopal Bhar and Tenali Rama. The liquidity of his ludic style helps Birbal in two ways: it allows him to take a momentary control over the emperor through a "symbolic violation of the norm" and pacify any possibility of his anger with laughter. There is no aim to criticize and transform radically rather his purpose is to make the emperor think in a different way, a corrective method which is difficult to achieve in any other serious mode. It works as an eye opener for the emperor about his human limitations. Powerful as he may claim to be but he is not omnipotent; there are grey areas outside his control and authority.

Abul Fazl, the historian of the court, writes about Akbar's excellent ability to judge and pronounce verdict to the guilty. Instead of blindly adhering to the yardstick of evidence and objectivity, he follows his own instinct to find out loopholes or inconsistencies in the presented narrative and solves it in his own dramatic way. The demonstrative approach of Birbal to establish justice is effective because rather than using brute force and pronouncing verdict upon the guilty, it creates a creative ambience for justice where everyone is amused to realize the source of the trouble. Small things that escape the notice of others—an oily bag obviously belongs to an oil merchant and an old woman who cannot see well cannot stitch in a professional way—become his chief weapon to understand a case:

> There was an old man who left his lifelong savings to his neighbour before going to a long pilgrimage. When he returned, the neighbour totally denied it leaving the old man no choice but to appeal to the court. When Akbar ordered Birbal to solve the puzzle, he asked the old man if there were any witness for him. There were none. The old man told him that the exchange occurred under a mango tree. Birbal advised the old man to go to the tree and request it to come to the court. The bewildered old man left

for the place but even after one hour did not show any sign of return. The court became impatient but Birbal tried to appease them saying that the old man would return soon. Hearing this, the impatient neighbour suddenly said that it would not be possible for the old man to come back for several hours because the mango tree was far away.

There are simple traps to play with the psychology of the guilty person. The neighbour feels secure (the tree cannot bear witness), and waiting for long, becomes irritated losing his patience. He might even have started thinking about the saneness of Birbal as a judge. Yet this unusual and even useless (to others) order from Birbal plays the trick. Totally unaware of the implication of what he is saying, the neighbour reveals everything. In these stories, the matter is often of trust which has been broken by people who seems to be honest and trustworthy—a neighbour, a Brahmin or a servant—and Birbal has to restore the balance of the existing structure of loyalty by unveiling the rule breaker.

Often whimsical and moody, the Mughal emperor orders Birbal to find out five greatest fools in Agra. In spite of trying his best Birbal manages to get only three—a woodcutter who sits on its back but carries the load on his own head out of concern for his old donkey; a husband who slips and falls on the ground but fails to get up because he is not willing to change the position of his hands indicating the measurement of cloth he needs to buy for his wife; and a merchant who searches for his diamond ring in a place far away from where it is lost because that particular place is dark. When Akbar asks him about the rest of the two fools, he easily designates himself as the fourth one because he wasted a whole day on such a foolish mission. Till now it is a funny story with little food for thought. What Birbal starts after that is an elaborate gesture to demonstrate his infallible devotion to the emperor:

At this Birbal prostrated himself flat on the floor, and placed the emperor's feet upon his head. Then he kissed the royal feet and stood up.

'May the sun and the moon revolve around you! May you live for a thousand years! May the world sing your praises for another ten thousand years! But if Your Majesty will forgive this worthless

> servant's impertinence—may I dare to humbly suggest, that the fifth fool is *you* for having sent me on such a foolish mission.'
>
> Akbar laughed…'This is why I love you, Birbal. You can make me laugh and forget for a moment how important I am!'[59]

Despite being a common man, Birbal never fails to bring the emperor back on earth from his ivory tower existence. Shulman writes: "Yet he [the court-jester] always has the upper hand with his royal patron, who, at least in the popular perception, relies upon the jester to maintain his precarious relation to reality and to truth."[60]

Rabelais' defines the court-jester in the following way: "Irreverent, libertine, self-indulgent, witty, clever, roguish, he is the fool as court jester, the fool as champion, the fool as good to the wise and challenge to the virtuous, the fool as critic of the world."[61] This is only a half-truth about Birbal. He is ever respectful and though witty and clever, he is never self-indulgent and roguish. The virtue of his critique is "not a judgement, but a practice"[62] and questions the "uncritical habits of mind" not with anger but humour and activates a hope that it will modify if not bring change into the world. Birbal expands and stylizes the practice of his critique which eventually constitutes his identity—the superhero. Critchley rightly argues that humour as a critique not only marks the aberrations from the normativity of social life by bringing in the 'unthought,' but also indicates a future possibility of change:

> I want to claim that humour also indicates, or may be just adumbrates, how these practices might be transformed or perfected, how things might be otherwise. That is, humour might be said to project another possible *sensus communis*, namely a *dissensus communis* distinct from the dominant common sense. In laughing at a joke I am also consenting to a certain ideal image of the world. In this sense,… laughter has a certain messianic power.[63]

Endnotes:

[1] Rabindranath Tagore, "Bidushak," in *Rabindra Rachanabali* [*The Collected Works of Rabindranath Tagore*], vol. 9 (Calcutta: West Bengal Government, 1988), 634. Translation mine.

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

[33] Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 1.

[4] C. M. Naim, "Popular Jokes and Political History: The Case of Akbar, Birbal and Mulla Do-Piyaza," in *Cultural History of Medieval India*, ed. Meenakshi Khanna (New Delhi: Social Sciences Press, 2007), 29.

[5] Naim, "Popular Jokes," 31. Naim also mentions the Eighteenth century biographical dictionary of the nobles at Mughal court *Ma'athir al-Umara* as the first text to mention Birbal as a famous wit.

[6] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 19.

[7] Naim, "Popular Jokes," 29-30.

[8]Kottman, "Translator' Introduction," vii-viii.

[9]Kottman, "Translator' Introduction," xxii

[10] Bharata-Muni, *The Nāṭyaśāstra: A treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy and Histrionics*, trans. Manomohan Ghosh, vol. 2 (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1961), 224.

[11] Bharata-Muni, *The Nāṭyaśāstra*, 226

[12] David Dean Shulman, "A Kingdom of clowns: Brahmins, Jesters, and Magicians," in *Cultural History of Medieval India*, ed. Meenakshi Khanna (New Delhi: Social Sciences Press, 2007), 4.

[13] Meenakshi Khanna, "Introduction," in *Cultural History of Medieval India* ed. Meenakshi Khanna (New Delhi: Social Sciences Press, 2007), xiv.

[14]Kottman, "Translator' Introduction," ix-x.

[15] Sudraka, *The Mrichchhakatika of Sudraka*, trans. M. r. Kale (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers, 2015), 67.

[16] This is my own version of the Birbal story shorn off of the page-filling tendency in most of the retellings of the Birbal tales. This has been maintained throughout except stated otherwise.

[17] Shulman, "A Kingdom of clowns," 6.

[18] Historically, on 11th March 1582, Birbal requested the emperor to appoint trustworthy people in is service so that the wronged people can reach him with complains without any trouble and in 1583 the emperor appointed Birbal as the overseer of the Department of Administration. See, Amrita Sarin, *Akbar and Birbal* (New Delhi: Puffin, 2005), 19.

[19] Shulman, "A Kingdom of clowns," 15

[20] Shulman, "A Kingdom of clowns," 17

[21] Frances W. Pritchett, "Unpublished translations by FWP from several Akbar-Birbal joke books," http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/txt_akbar_birbal_fwp.html

[22] Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 102.

[23] Critchley, *On Humour*, 5.

[24] Critchley, *On Humour*, 5.

[25] Critchley, *On Humour*, 17.

[26] Critchley, *On Humour*, 41.

[27] Critchley, *On Humour*, 10

[28] Critchley, *On Humour*, 87.

[29] Jeffrey T. Nealon. "Jokes and the Performative in Austin and Derrida; or, the Truth is a Joke?," *Cultural Critique* 95 (2017): 19.

[30] Nealon, "Jokes and the Performative," 20.

[31] Nealon, "Jokes and the Performative," 8.

[32] Daud Ali and Emma J. Flatt, "Friendship in Indian History: Introduction," *Studies in History* 33, no. 1 (2017): 3.

[33] Fred Dallmayr, "Derrida and Friendship," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 2, no. 4 (1999): 108, https://doi.org/10.1080/13698239908403293.

[34] Dallmayr, "Derrida and Friendship," 108-09.

[35] Dallmayr, "Derrida and Friendship," 110.

[36] See, Ira Mukhoty, *Akbar: The Great Mughal* (New Delhi: Aleph, 2000), 309. Badauni writes: "By means of conversing with the Emperor and taking advantage of the idiosyncrasies of his disposition, [Birbal] crept day by day more into favour, until he attained to high rank and was honoured with the distinction of becoming the Emperor's confidant and it became a case of thy flesh is my flesh and thy blood my blood."

[37] Abraham Eraly, *The Mughal World: Life in India's Last Golden Age* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2007), 240-41.

[38] Mukhoty, *Akbar*, 310.

[39] Jacques Derrida, "Jean-Marie Benoist (1942-90)," in *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2001), 107.

[40] Mukhoty, *Akbar*, 314.

[41] Moti Chandra, "Who really was Miyan Tansen, the singer who could 'start a fire with his music'?", *Scroll.in*, Oct 8, 2017, https://scroll.in/magazine/853181/who-really-was-miyan-tansen-the-singer-could-start-a-fire-with-his-music

[42] Mukhoty, *Akbar*, 314.

[43] Sarin, "The Golden Touch," in *Akbar and Birbal* (New Delhi: Puffin, 2005), 47.

[44] Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext (e), 2001), 17-18.

[45] Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools are everywhere: The Court Jester around the World* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), xvi.

[46] Shulman, "A Kingdom of clowns," 6.

[47] Naim, "Popular Jokes," 26.

[48] Nirendranath Chakraborty, "Ulongo Raja" ["The Naked King"], in *Kobita Samagra* [*The Collected Poems*], vol. 1 (Kolkata: Ananda, 2015), 14.

[49] Shulman, "A Kingdom of clowns," 6.

[50] Naim, "Popular Jokes," 26.

[51] Critchley, *On Humour*, 11.

[52] Critchley, *On Humour*, 9-10.

[53] Eraly, *The Mughal World*, 242.

[54] Naim, "Popular Jokes," 35

[55] Alice Bamford and Donald Mackenzie, "Counterperformativity", New Left Review 113 (2018): 100.

[56] Naim, "Popular Jokes," 28

[57] Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*, trans. Frank Collins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 47

[58] Shulman, "A Kingdom of clowns," 5.

[59] Amrita Sarin, "The Five Greatest Fools in Agra," in *Akbar and Birbal* (New Delhi: Puffin, 2005), 82-83.

[60] Shulman, "A Kingdom of clowns," 16.

[61] Otto, *Fools are everywhere*, 6.

[62] Judith Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue," *kritik* (May 2001), https://transversal.at/transversal/0806/butler/en

[63] Critchley, *On Humour*, 90.

Postscript

> The most living thought becomes frigid in the formula that expresses it. The word turns against the idea.
>
> - Henry Bergson, *Creative Evolution*[1]

> [P]hilosophy involved a critique of, and literature an expression of, "being in" the world.[2]
>
> - Richard J. Lane

One fine morning in June 2016, my brother, a critical heart patient, suddenly became ill. He needed a risky second time open heart surgery to replace his aortic valve which was not working. The first surgery was performed twenty years prior to this in 1996. In addition to this, there was a hole in his lungs which was leaking blood and his pacemaker also needed to be changed. Totally unaware of his condition, we took him to Vellore. The cardiologist who examined him said that he needed immediate operation, but he was not sure if any surgeon would like to take the challenge. The office of the cardiology department assigned us a surgeon; he was young, overconfident, and too eager to operate. An overconfident surgeon is not a good surgeon, we thought, and took him to a renowned cardio-thoracic surgeon based in Bengaluru. This man had a soothing presence—calm, composed, compassionate—and we immediately realized that we were at the right place. As we were not mentally or economically prepared, we requested for a few days so that we could come back and arrange the huge amount of money necessary for the operation. The doctor did not grant us permission; instead he placed his hand on his patient's

shoulder and said in English and broken Bengali, “Don’t worry. *ami achee to*”—I’m here for you, everything will be fine. This particular gesture of care and affection—the will to care and protect—marks the individual moment of the superhero.

The next few weeks were the most intense moments which left a lasting impression on my mind. The doctor and his excellent team took care to solve every issue—medical, psychological and financial—that we had to face. In the meantime we met an old woman, so poor that she was unable to bear the cost of his son’s surgery. She started crying, took the gold earrings in her hands, and said that it was only what she had. The doctor said, “*ami achee to*”. A person left the hospital after consulting the doctor because he was unable to afford the cost of his one year old son’s surgery. The doctor sent his secretary to find them in the nearby hotels to bring them back. “No child leaves my hospital without treatment”, said the doctor when the man was brought back, and the child was operated successfully for free. When they took my brother to the operation theatre, the doctor was silent, may be slightly tensed too in spite of his vast experience of performing thousands of surgeries. My wife was talking to him. He took her hand and said that he would try the best a human can do. What more could we expect on such a moment? After ten hours, the battle was over. He won. The operation was a success.

The law of performativity does not permit deliberate citationality. The subject, as it appears, has no choice. Yet in her political theory Butler cannot disavow the presence of willed citational practice behind the construction of subjectivity. There are instances where the repetition of an act is a deliberate human choice. Judging from this angle, this particular doctor who has become a legend by his own right is a superhero. As a surgeon he can do what most of the others cannot do and he is worshipped almost as a god by his patients. Ironically enough, he also wears a mask not to hide but to proclaim his identity and saves lives every day by

performing complicated surgeries. This does not mean that he is infallible—he has his kryptonite. He also can have days when he fails to perform—the human fallacy—but it does not rob him of his respect or brings him down to the level of the others. In one of his interviews the doctor spoke about 'magic hands', hard work, and a burning desire to change the rule of the game as the hallmark of a genius surgeon. The word 'magic' complicates the statement. Magic is used here in the sense of its rarity and to some extent inexplicability—a surplus. We do not know why in spite of similar hard work and desire to excel everyone cannot perform wonders. Everybody plays cricket and many of them works incredibly hard but there is only one Sunil Gavaskar or Sachin Tendulkar who becomes the superhero by the acquisition of extraordinary skills that distinguish them from the others. There is a celebration of the moment of the individual in performative practice which creates a social affect—the recognition of a face as a singular being amid the crowd of a facelessness.

The scandal in superhero epistemology, as we have already discussed in detail, arises out of the concept's suspension into a form. A superhero who moves in a circle following a norm imposed from outside is a superhero in a very limited sense. The superhero fails to fulfill the promise of its 'origin.' There is an infelicity between potentiality and actual performance causing a rupture between what it means and what it actually does. There is a serious commitment without a plan to accomplish, and in exchange, the superhero thoughtlessly plunges into the middle of actions providing temporary solutions to the recurring problems of an imaginary world. "Paradoxically", Shoshana Felman writes in another context, "the failure to carry out the promise makes it possible to begin it again".[3] The repetition in case of the superhero does not create any difference.

The alternative aesthetics questions the comic-book superhero's authenticity, places it within a larger history, opens up silences, and delimits it by making the concept more conducive to creativity. The prefix 'super' in the concept of the "superhero" is not fixed; it is not definite or stable, and does not refer to a particular thing. The superhero is a creative tendency, it is not an object. The Indian superhero Krish, despite his allegiance to the Marvel/DC universe, reveals an interesting predisposition when he says, "The superhero is a thought".[4] The Hindi word he uses for 'thought' is *soch* which covers a broader spectrum of meaning. It is a thought that has the potentiality to transform the world. The superheroes do not think or work alike and their different manifestations, each peculiarly differing from the other, advocates for a conceptual transformation by the intrusion of something new. There is a "line of flight", a conceptual freedom to create "an opening that allow thought to escape from the constraints that seek to enclose and define creativity."[5] The effective life of the superhero lies not in its isolated existence but in its traveling across the world and engagement with a convoluted network of intra-active relationships within a more nuanced and larger literary and philosophical culture.

On a deciding a moment in the movie *Bruce Almighty* (2003), Bruce realizes that he is not what he thought himself to be—a difference has been accidentally conferred upon him from outside as a gift but he actually does not know what to do with this immense power. This produces a disjunction—a sense of the ridiculous. On the other hand—the superhero—as it has been delineated in this work is a common man who gradually achieves his ability to make a difference by an effort of his own. This is not accidental but deliberate creation. There is no easy way to achieve this superidentity except years of hard work, determination, perseverance, and an inexplicable surplus. "An intelligent being", writes Bergson, "bears within himself the means to transcend his own nature."[6]

Endnotes:

[1] Henry Bergson, *The Creative Evolution* (London: Macmillan, 1960), 134.

[2] Richard J. Lane, *Jean Baudrillard* (London and NY: Routledge, 2003), 69.

[3] Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*: *Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* (Stanford and California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 25.

[4] See, Rakesh Roshan, *Krish* (Mumbai: Eros, 2006), DVD. "Superhero ek soch hai."

[5] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, trans. Hugh Tomlonson and Graham Burchill, *What is philosophy?* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), viii.

[6] Bergson, *The Creative Evolution*, 159.

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Index

A

Abbeele, Georges Van Den, 17

abhinaya, 92

adda, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 76, 77, 90, 98, 100

addadhari, 72, 74

Adorno, Theodor, 108, 141, 146, 149

negative dialectics, 3

nonconceptual, 3

Agamben, Giorgio, 13, 36

inoperativeness, 37, 63

potentiality, 36

Akbar, 154, 155, 159, 162, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179

Ali, Saiyad Mujtaba, 72

alter-ego, 54

Angela Ndalianis, 5

anonymity, 83

Arendt, Hannah, 66, 84, 85, 86, 90, 100, 103, 153

Aristotle

good hierarchy, 44

friendship, 165, 168

Austin, J. L., 40

misfires, 41

B

Bacon, Francis, 81

simulation, 81

Badayuni, Abdul Qadir, 154, 167

Bandyopadhyay, Debaprasad, 118, 128

Bartelmus, Rudiger

heroenkonzept, 21

Basu, Buddhadeb, 71, 72

Basu, Rajshekhar, 73

Basu, Samit, 9

Batul the Great, 39, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 64, 65, 66

Bauman, Zygmunt, 11

excess, 68, 103

Benjamin, Walter, 32, 68, 70, 75, 81, 92, 103, 154

storyteller, 67, 103

Benoist, Jean-Marie, 168

Bentley, Eric, 19

Benton, Mike, 8

Berger, Peter, 163

Bergson, Henry, 164, 180, 184, 185

Bhartrihari

sphota, 128

Bin Laden, Osama, 26

Birbal, 39, 153, 154, 155, 156, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179

Bloch, Ernst, 108, 146, 149

body, 49, 51, 53, 58

Bose, Jagadish Chandra, 106, 119, 122, 123, 129, 141, 149

Bose, Subhas Chandra, 112

Bricoleur, 125

Briskman, Larry, 106, 149

Brooker, Will, 31

Brown, Carolyn, 78

Butler, Judith, 40, 41, 82, 86, 181

C

citationality, 181

Camus, Albert, 10

Carl Gustav Jung, 7

Cavarero, Adriana, 85, 87, 89, 90, 100, 153, 154, 156, 179

design, 153, 161

narratable self, 85, 86, 87, 156, 158

Carlyle, Thomas 7, 115

Cavell, Stanley, 19

concept, 1-3, 4, 5, 6, 12, 13, 16, 18, 20, 23, 24, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39

Chakrabarty, Dipesh, 71

Chakraborty, Nirendranath, 172

Challenger, Professor, 115, 116, 117, 128, 129, 130, 133, 135, 137, 138, 139, 143, 145

Chattopadhyay, Bodhisattva, 122

Chattopadhyaya, Debiprasad, 113

Chattopadhayay, Nripendrakrishna, 76, 77

Chattopadhyay, Sunitikumar, 71

Critchley, Simon, 162, 163, 164, 173, 179

Collini, Stefan

scientist, 117
Coogan, Peter, 5, 13, 20, 62
Counterperformativitiy, 98, 173, 175
Craig, Megan, 101
D
Danto, Arthur C., 12
mimeme, 4
Darwin, Charles, 116, 125, 137
Debnath, Narayan, 39, 48, 49, 50, 51, 53, 54, 56, 62, 63, 66
moralist, 55
ethical subtext, 54
morality, 54, 55, 56
Del Caro, Adrian, 12
Deleuze, Gilles, 1, 2, 5, 46
becoming, 1, 2, 14, 17, 34, 36, 38
line of flight, 183
outlandish, 163
zone of indiscernibility, 2
zone of neighbourhood, 4
Derrida, Jacques, 40, 84
friendship, 166, 168, 169
diary, 106, 108, 111, 114, 130, 131, 138, 141, 143
Didion, Joan, 91
magical thinking, 91, 101
Dimock, Wai Chee, 21, 22, 24, 28
deep time, 22
fluid continuum, 21
Dinerstein, Joel, 134
Doyle, Arthur Conan,
Professor Challenger, 114, 115, 116, 117, 133, 135, 140
Douglas, Mary, 163
E
Eco, Umberto, 9, 61, 62, 64
Einstein, Albert, 107, 149
Emerson, Ralph Waldo
Over-Soul, 18, 19
Eraly, Abraham, 167
etymology, 5, 74
evolution, 116, 122, 137
F
Fazl, Abul, 154, 166, 173, 176
Felman, Shoshana, 182, 185

Feluda, 121

Feyerabend, Paul, 143, 144

Focault, Michel, 72, 84

parrhesia, 17, 170, 171, 172, 173

plebeian, 72

fool, 158, 162, 176, 178

Foster, Hal, 49

Franco Moretti

white magic, 135

Friedman, Thomas L.

super-empowered individuals, 26

friendship, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169

G

Gavaler, Chris, 15, 27

Ghanada, 39, 74, 75, 77, 79, 80, 81, 83, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102

Ghosh, Ranjan, 6

intra-active transculturality, 27, 183

more than global, 24, 27, 28, 29

sacred, 14, 23, 24

trans-now / trans-moment, 24

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 18

Greene,Thomas, 8

H

Heidegger, Martin, 37, 65, 131, 136

aletheia, 136

hero, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 15, 19, 28, 38, 41, 48, 54, 64, 65

agon, 8

Hicky, James Augustus, 69

Hodivala, S. H., 155

Hogarth, Brune, 49

Hobsbawm, Eric, 115

humorous failure, 102

humour, 157, 160, 161, 163, 164, 169, 173, 179

hunger for redundancy, 64

hypermasculinity, 117

I

idiot, 57

imperialism, 114

Infantino, Carmine, 31

interpellation, 82, 160

irony, 87

J

Jameson, Fredric, 50, 66

jester, 157, 158, 161, 171, 172, 174, 176, 178

Jerry Siegel, 4

jijibisha, 148

Johnson, Christopher, 127

joke, 158, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 168, 173, 175, 179

Joker, 16

Kallol, 76

K

Kottman, Paul, 89

Koutilya, 118

Kreilkamp, Ivan, 70, 88, 103

Kunzle, David, 54

L

Lafont, Eugène, 123

Lambakarna, 57

Levi-Strauss, Claude, 127, 134

bricoleur, 125, 126, 127, 128

machine civilization, 134

laughter, 160, 162, 164, 165, 170, 172, 174, 176, 179

M

Mackenzie, Donald

counterperformative, 41

mahaviras, 7

Majumdar, Saikat, 26

Marconi, Guglielmo, 141

Matthews, Steve, 81, 83

Medeiros, Martha, 17

messianic, 163, 179

Miller, Frank, 10, 15, 35

Mitra, Premendra, 39, 64, 74, 75, 76, 78, 79, 89

mimicry, 81, 82, 99

mission, 54, 56

modernity, 109, 120, 136, 138, 146

Mukhopadhyay, Anway, 124

Mukhopadhyay, Mandar, 77

Mukhopadhyay, Troilokyonath, 73

Muni, Bharat, 157

Moore, Alan, 15, 31, 33, 34, 35, 38, 48

N

Naif Al-Mutawa, 7

Naim, C. M., 154, 179

Nandy, Ashis, 119, 120, 123, 124, 137

Ndalianis, Angela, 14

Nealon, Jeffrey T., 165

Negative Dadu, 77

Nehru, Jawaharlal, 110

neo-nationalist, 53

Nevins, Jess, 21, 34

superhero continuum, 21

Newton, Sir Isaac, 110

Nietzsche, Friedrich, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 29, 30, 35, 42, 43, 66, 103

Amor Fati, 16

good and noble, 14

Übermensch, 12, 13, 18, 20, 116

normativity, 171, 179

Northrop Frye, 7

Nye, David E.

technological sublime, 140

P

panoptic techniques, 56

Paperno, Irina, 107, 149

parasite, 82

pastiche, 50

Patkel, Professor Nidhiram, 113

performativity, 38, 40, 42, 99, 103, 159, 165, 166, 181

phronesis, 160

Pickering, Andrew, 122

Pippin, Robert B., 12

Plato, 68, 102

planetary, 145

Plebian, 56

Popper, Karl, 143

positivist, 124, 137, 144

postcolonial agency, 81

privacy, 81, 83

progress, 125, 134, 137, 143, 147

puzzles, 157, 160

R

Rabelais, 178

Rama, Tenali, 161, 176

Ratner-Rosenhagen, Jennifer, 12, 19

Ray, Biswajit, 111, 113, 141

Ray, Prafulla Chandra, 120

Ray, Satyajit, 108, 110, 111, 112, 114, 121, 122, 123, 124, 127, 128, 137, 138, 140, 146, 149
Ray, Sukumar, 72, 112, 113, 114
Raychaudhuri, Tapan, 69, 103
Reynolds, Richard, 9, 43
rishi, 121
Roberts, Adam, 109, 149
Rosaldo, Renato, 70
Roy, Sumana, 54, 61
Rushdie, Salman, 67, 103
chutnification, 112
S
Said, Edward, 116
samasya purti, 162
Samosata, Lucian of
hyperanthropos, 18
Sankar, Himanjali, 26
Sarkar, Jogin, 75
Shonku, 39, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 114, 115, 116, 117, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 136, 137, 138, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 149
Sen, Amartya, 71
Sen, Ramkamal, 70
Sengoopta, Chandak, 143
Shaw, George Bernard, 10
Shuktara, 51
Shulman, David Dean, 157, 159, 161, 171, 172, 176, 178
Simonton, Dean Keith
genius, 123
Sinha, Anupam, 7
Snow, C. P., 117, 118, 119
sophia, 160
specialist, 76, 77, 91, 127
Spivak, Gayatri chakraborty
planetarity, 23
storyteller, 67, 68, 69, 70, 75, 78, 79, 87, 88, 99, 103
Sudraka, 158
superhero, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41,

43, 44, 49, 50, 53, 58, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 75, 79, 80, 81, 83, 87, 88, 90, 99, 102, 156, 159, 163, 170, 179, 181, 182, 183
Batman, 10, 15, 16, 17
Bruce Almighty, 183
Captain America, 51, 54
Chota Bhim, 54
Comedian, 16
Gupi/Bagha, 54
Krish, 183, 185
Hero Alom, 25
Mandrake, 54
Samson, 54
Thor, 54
Shakti, 7
Spiderman, 15, 54
Superman, 4, 9, 12, 15, 25, 35, 38, 54, 61, 62, 65, 95, 116, 138
Malegaon Ka Superman, 25

T

Tagore, Rabindranath, 44, 110, 111, 153, 179
tall tale, 78, 79
Tansen, 156, 167, 170
Taylor, Charles
social imaginary, 45
technology, 117, 125, 126, 131, 132, 139, 145, 147
time and death, 61
trademark, 25, 28, 34
Trigunatit, 73

V

vidūṣaka, 157, 158

W

Wagner, Richard, 19
Wartham, Fredrick, 34
Watkins, Dudley D., 49
white mythology, 134
Wilson, Kenneth, 115
Wonham, Henry B., 78, 79, 102

Y

Yates, Norris W., 79
Young, Katherine
taleworld, 69

Annexure

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Thinking across Time, Genre and Culture: Theorizing the Superhero in a "More than Global" World

Aditya Misra

> You wonder if everyone and everything in the world is intimately related…You pluck a thread and it leads to…everywhere (Mukherjee 231).

> Superheroes are the ultimate amalgams, all-swallowing uber-characters that consume other genres like black holes. They defy conventional definitions because they contain too many conventions. If that non-definition sounds cowardly, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein plays the same game with "game" (what traits do marathons, chess, and solitaire share?) . . . definitions work like erasures. I prefer the pointy end of pencils (Gavaler 4).

> [A] concept also has a becoming that involves its relationship with concepts situated on the same plane. Here concept link up with each other, support one another, coordinate their contours, articulate their respective problems, and belong to the same philosophy, even if they have different histories. In fact, having a finite number of components, every concept will branch off toward other concepts that are differently composed but that constitute other regions of the same plane, answer to problems that can be connected to each other, and participate in a co-creation. A concept requires not only a problem through which it recasts or replaces earlier concepts but a junction of problems where it combines with other coexisting concepts (Deleuze and Guattari 18).

I

"You start dying slowly / If you do not travel," declares the Brazilian poet Martha Medeiros; and in his book *Travel as Metaphor: From Montaigne to Rousseau*, Georges Van Den Abbeele writes, "If travel posits the risk and anxiety of death, it also signals the way to health, wealth, and wisdom" (xvi). Travel is not only shifting from one place to another, it harbours an inner opposition, the lure of profit and the insecurity and risk of being lost. As an act of transgression, travel has the power to transform the traveller, but this transformation cannot move beyond recognition as the economic value of travel is calculated in terms of the traveller's connection with an *oikos*, or home, a limiting point of reference. The home one leaves and the home one returns to are not the same place. Time passes and the world creeps inside the home, and the home moves into the world. To a psychically transformed traveller both the old home and the world start unfolding themselves in unforeseen ways. The movement from one place to another calls into question the narrow ideological frameworks that govern home, and open up new interpretative regimes. Similarly, a concept's travel across temporal, disciplinary, cultural and generic boundaries extends its hermeneutic possibilities. As a particular concept engages in multifocal dialogues with different times,

places and genres, it starts resonating with a polyphonic voice and stands face to face with the otherness of its own being. This act of travel beyond the culture of origin does not mean total dissolution of a concept or genre beyond recognition, but a transfiguration that turns it from passive to active and receptive, and therefore threatening, alien, more meaningful and evocative than itself.

II

In the parochial world of superhero comics a pair of global companies, Marvel and Detective Comics, are the joint owners of the trademark licence for the word "superhero" (a word from the English lexicon) since 1979, and they are eager to establish the superhero as a machinic artefact of the popular culture industry. Dan Taylor, a comic artist, was forced to change the title of his new series from *Super Hero Happy Hour* to *Hero Happy Hour* in 2004; and in a similar instance, Marvel and DC jointly opposed the use of the s-word in the title of *A World without Superheroes*, a comic series created by Ray Felix. What frightened these two giant companies was that, unlike the copyright, descriptive trademark has to be safeguarded as it can be annulled if the term becomes generic. For instance, "cellophane" and "kerosene" were names of products but gradually they became generic names which can be used by everyone. A familiar case of defence of the trademark by a company was the slogan coined by Xerox: "use a Xerox copy machine to make a copy, not make a Xerox" (Cronin).

To preserve the ritual "sacredness" of the "global" superhero, it is crucial for the market to severe its tie from history, pinpoint its origin with a marker, and establish the "fact" that it has the capacity to transmit its meaning unequivocally. This clever strategic alliance between two arch-rival companies in this matter has an unambiguous message – the science of economy should keep the transgressive power of fiction, which subverts the logic of the capital in check by using all possible ways – authority, money and stringent laws of genre itself. The reductive logic of the capitalist marketplace believes in attractive packaging, and circulates the superhero as a narrow and predictable global icon, a naturalised cultural product, which was originated in the comic-book industry. This essay is a critique of this naïvely essentialist originary tale. It endorses a counterbalancing move, which tackles the linear tendency of globalisation by a vertical, or as Ranjan Ghosh would say, a "more than global" view of the superhero. The effective life of the superhero lies, the essay argues, not in its isolated existence, but in its traveling across the world and engagement to a convoluted network of intra-active relationships within a more nuanced and larger literary and philosophical culture.

Wai Chee Dimock observes the predominance of the rule of the mechanical clock that looks at American literature as a homogenous unit and argues for the necessity of seeing across the arbitrary barriers of nation, language, genre and culture:

> I have in mind a form of indebtedness: what we called "American" literature is quite often a shorthand, a simplified name for a much more complex tangle of relations. Rather than being a discrete entity, it is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures (Dimock, *Through Other Continents* 3).

In spite of the laborious logic of the marketplace, there is a principle of impurity in the heart of the superhero genre, which has the power to confound its "sense, order, and reason" (Derrida and Ronell 57). Without denying the creativity of the comic medium it can be said,

albeit ironically, that the origin of the "American superhero" is not in America but "elsewhere." The superheroic imagination transcends the barrier of national, temporal and generic boundaries, and it is not only confined in the limited sphere of comics. It has many unpredictable origins and capricious manifestations. The superhero is not a commodity, it is a form of desire, an imaginative structure in formation, which defies the commercial claim to restrict it within a closed system. A close look into the genre reveals a crisscross of entangled relationships where it begins dialogue with genres belonging to other time and place, and thereby creates, as Dimock argues, a "fluid continuum" ("Genres" 1378). Originating in the human desire to transcend the limits of being human, the superhero is a transcultural phenomenon, a figuration of a figure, which exists in human imagination irrespective of time, place and culture. To think of the superhero genre is to invoke another inevitably, and Dimock calls this interactive, translingual, transnational and transcultural frame of relationship where disparate genres share a common space, "deep time" (*Through Other Continents* 4).

This movement towards embracing the "planetary time" results in a scale amplification and re-thinking of the superhero genre against its narrow history, philosophy and politics. The ethics of "planetarity" requires, writes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an imaginative flexibility to look into the distant spaces and the future which shocks the idea of belonging (31). And in his essay "More than Global" Ranjan Ghosh writes:

> [I]t is crucial to read each literary work more or less in detachment from its local roots in a specific author or locale, as well as in detachment from its place in so-called world literature. The work's sacredness, that is, its complex relation to an imaginary realm, is what is most important about it, more important than its local and global affiliations (111).

If we follow Ghosh's arguments, the "sacredness" of the superhero should be understood not in terms of its existence as a popular cultural icon in comics and movies, but in relation to an extended "imaginary realm," which is comprised of a complex intertwining between the global superhero, its strange and subversive culturally translated versions and all other pre-capitalist figures of human transcendence. In a critical genealogy, the uncanny intrusions of forgotten loyalties from the archive of history and the unanticipated local adaptations, mimicries and satires have the power to destabilise the globalised idea of the superhero governed by predetermined laws of a conservative industry, and thereby flout the comic book historian's desire for cartographic map-making. For Ghosh, "sacred" is not something godly, fixed and preservable but rather inanely connected and abysmally contaminated which generates shocks and provokes our experiences. Sandeep Banerjee finely summarises Ghosh's notion of the "sacred" as "a literary text's refusal to be reduced to history *despite* its historicity" (8). This challenging and often awkward border crossing reveals, as Dimock writes, an "unexpected web of allegiance" (Dimock, "Planetary Time" 489), and promises, as Ghosh argues, "a "more," the unexpected web of meaning" which he has termed as "more than global" ("More" 113):

> [L]ocal and global have their usual separateness and rupture; but, in what I argue as "more than global," such ruptures often become a kind of provocation to question the promise and latency of a dialogue between the two. … So "more than global" is inscribed in what I call "intra-active transculturality" which is not about going beyond the global or reducing the local to a form of representation or meaning-formation. It is the destruction of an expressive and organic

> "totality" (Rigby 195) but is also a way of providing a sense of a totality, a world-wide-forming totality, whose access is not always in accessibility (Ghosh, "Intra-active" 1199-1200).

Thinking in terms of "more than global" disrupts the teleological logic of the formation of the superhero that is always already deformed in its origin. This promise of the excess or "more" makes the superhero active rather than passive and not confined within space, time and genre as it travels backward to an erased past and forward to a possible future.

III

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari refer to etymology as crazy "philosophical athleticism" (8) which never ceases to amaze and amuse a thinker. Taking cue from their illuminating suggestion let us see how etymological analysis leads to a philosophical understanding of the concept of the superhero. The compound word "superhero" is a curious combination of two cultures—a Latin prefix, "super-," and a Greek root, "hero." In *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre,* Peter Coogan looks at the prefix as a modifier that exaggerates the existing sense of the hero but the assumption that the superhero is nothing but an inflated version of the hero is a clichéd argument and it becomes quite evident if we try to discover the hidden potential of the prefix "super—" (an equivalent to German über, Greek *hyper*, French *sur* and Gothic *ufaro*). Etymologically it came into English from Latin and quite interestingly it refers to "above," "over," 'beyond' and "across."

According to *Etymonline* the word "supersexual" usually meant "transcending sexuality" in 1895 but from 1968 the meaning changed to "very sexual." This clearly visible shift in the meaning of the prefix from "beyond" to "very much" is, in fact, contradictory in nature. Quite interestingly, while the former suggests a break, the latter suggests an excess, a vertical connection and an intimacy with something that already exists. For Ghosh, this verticality is a gesture of reaching out to the other which connects, communicates and introduces an aura of newness and difference: "Being across breeds the pleasure of being "out of place," a toss amid our "heretical geographies"" (Ghosh, "More" 4). This positional advantage adds an excess or surplus which never allows the concept of the superhero to move towards a normative "perfect" but carries a sense of the far away and the limitless, and yet it is closely linked to the world.

If we look at the genesis of the concept of the "hero," we see that it harks back to the poetic sensibility of Hesiod and Homer's Greece (8th century B.C.) where the age old rituals and conventions of hero-worship are archived in the epics– *Works and Days*, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.[1] The burden of the ancient heroic genre is too heavy on superhero comics as it reveals a cross-continental connection not only with the European epic tradition established by Homer but the ancient Indian texts such as *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, Scandinavian *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Persian *The Shahanameh*. Superhero comics not only borrow heavily, but often they are based on the mythologies of different parts of the world. Naif Al-Mutawa's The 99 is a Kuwaiti superhero rooted in Islamic mythology; Marvel's Thor is based on Norse mythology; and Anupam Sinha's Shakti has been modelled on Indian mythology. If we compare the *mahaviras* as depicted in the great Indian epics, we can see that they are not ordinary human beings, and in fact, they often possess strange superpowers. Hanuman can jump across the sea, Bhīma has impossible bodily strength, Karna has an impassable breastplate and Duryodhana has an impenetrable body with the exception of the thighs, his kryptonite. The unease and awkwardness with this infusionism

between hero and superhero is evident in its use in various combinations such as "super-hero," "super hero," "super/hero," and finally "superhero."

Literally, the Greek word "heros" refers to "a dead human invested with special power" (Currie 161). In Greek mythology, the heroes are subordinates to the gods and they embody *arête* which is often translated as "virtue" but can be better explained as "being the best you can be or reaching your highest human potential" (Saraçoğlu 58). If we ignore Thomas Carlyle, Carl Gustav Jung and Joseph Campbell for a while, it is Northrop Frye who in his 1957 book *Anatomy of Criticism*, gives us a working definition of the hero based on the classics:

> If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature (Frye 33-34).

And if this formulation seems to be insufficient, four years later Thomas Greene, in his essay "The Norms of Epic," reveals it all:

> Epic awe, as distinguished from religious or mythical awe, springs from the circumstance that a man can commit an extraordinary act while still remaining limited. It does not matter that, in practice, the poet describes occasionally heroic action which is beyond human powers, if the hero is understood to be subject to ignorance or foolhardiness and above all to death (Greene 198).

The heroes rise from anonymity to grandeur. They achieve name, fame, material prosperity, and above all an invincible warrior status by enacting extraordinary fits and fulfilling promises that are unthinkable or miraculous for common people. Yet a critical scrutiny of the heroic literature of the past reveals that the hero's life "contains the *agon*, the struggle between capacity and limitation" (202). The heroes have their hamartia; they fall in a last battle, and as Greene says, "at the end of the movement there lies, implicitly or explicitly, the sense of limit" (199). Despite their tremendous bodily strength, grandeur of personality as well as power to change the fate of the state, they are mortal beings. They are no gods. Their heroism lies in subduing the fear of death before the final journey beyond Lethe, the river of oblivion. Loaded with the memories of the rise and fall of nations, they are the relics of the past. The hero, says Carlyle, is a "vital element of manhood, the soul of man's history" (Carlyle 26).

The comparatively new expression "superhero," Mike Benton predicts in *Illustrated History*, was originated in pulp fiction as late as in 1917, and it swiftly became a part of contemporary public culture. It was coined to describe "a public figure of great accomplishments" (Coogan 189) which clearly echoes the sense of the hero. Jerry Siegel's account of the origin of Superman reveals that his idea of the superhero was derivative of and modelled on nothing but the mythical heroes: "I am lying in bed counting sheep when all of a sudden it hits me. I conceive a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I have ever heard tell of rolled into one. Only more so" (Reynolds 10). In her introduction to *Super/heroes: From Hercules to Superman*, Angela Ndalianis writes:

> This anthology traverses the boundary between hero and the superhero. Where does the one end and the other begin? The title *Super/heroes*, has deliberately dissected the

> 'superhero' into two in order to highlight the dual focus on these character types – the hero and the superhero – who have much in common (Ndalianis 2).

The official appearance of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Superman, the first comic book superhero in 1938, however, refers to a different socio-political necessity and adds a new layer of meaning to an old idea. It was an era of failure when the epithet "great" seemed to be appropriate for both– a depression and a war. In a society devoid of hope and inspiration, Superman became a ready-made elixir; his magical touch rejuvenated the American "daydream" of growth and prosperity in an otherwise shabby world of a shattered economy. In this age of turmoil, Richard Reynolds writes: "A new kind of popular hero had emerged: the self-reliant individualist who stands aloof from many of the humdrum concerns of society, yet is able to operate according to his own code of honour, to take on the world on his own terms, and win" (18). Umberto Eco's essay "The Myth of Superman" also eloquently portrays the illusion that surrounded the time:

> Clark Kent personifies fairly typically the average reader who is harassed by complexes and despised by his fellow men; through an obvious process of self-identification, any accountant in any American city secretly feeds the hope that one day, from the slough of his actual personality, a superman can spring forth who is capable of redeeming years of mediocre existence (15).

Time and again this background story has been copied and recreated in superhero comics all over the world. In a different time and totally different space, Samit Basu portrays a parallel sense of apathy and disillusionment among the Indian youths in his superhero novel *Turbulence*. In *Turbulence*, reminiscing the origin story of *The Fantastic Four*, a whole host of people acquire superpowers during a flight from London to New Delhi. Their special powers match to their own fantasies of everyday life. All of them are frustrated individuals having a dream of their own but somehow their aspirations are put under yoke by a repressive socio-political culture. Life without potency produces the desire to transcend the human limit. In his emotional exuberance, Aman captures the banality of a life without superpower:

> I don't know how it was for you growing up in the UK, but here, nearly all of us have this huge sense of irrelevance. We'll never change anything. The world will never know us. … we never feel like we're a part of anything. Nothing to believe in or fight for. I don't know if I'm making sense (Basu, *Turbulence* 51).

Not surprisingly, a deep and parallel sense of contemporary political failure can also be found as motivation behind George Bernard Shaw's idea of superman or the rise of literary existentialism. Only the subtle intellectual responses of Shaw or the existentialists seem to be replaced by a populist free play of fantastic imagination. Quite obviously in an existential novel like *The Fall*, Albert Camus cannot refrain himself from alluding to "superman" (23). The disillusioned lawyer in Camus' novel informs the reader about his unbridled desire for power to change the world: "The truth is that every intelligent man, as you know, dreams of being a gangster and of ruling over society by force alone" (Camus 42). The superhero emerges as a cultural ramification of a sense of loss where the dream of heroism transforms itself into a daydream of unlimited power. In Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman helplessly exclaims "the world only makes sense when you force it to" (Miller 40). In his effort to make sense of a disjointed world by force alone, the superhero erects a niche of moral comfort, an illusory home in a homeless world.

The superhero is a product of creative human desire, an expansion of perception to the virtual, what is yet to be. It is not only an idle day dream, but an emotional response that resists the invasion of the human mind by a hostile world and re-establishes politics at the core of human nature. Creative and transcultural, it eludes any definition that is a-historical, narrow and limited in time and space. The superhero has a dual affiliation both to the real and the imaginary. He is real in the sense that he cannot brush off the inevitable shadow of his precursor who has taken such a vital role in shaping the history of mankind, and imaginary in the sense that such powerful beings never walked on earth. In a sense, any living being that produces surprise by exceeding humanly conceivable limit of capability is a super being but the term "hero" adds an ethical dimension to the term. And if morality is, to follow Zygmunt Bauman in *Postmodern Ethics*, "incurably aporetic" (11), the idea travels well beyond the popular notion of the superhero based on the insularity of American values of life. It is a mutated and transformed version, or a *mimeme* (142-43), as Arthur C. Danto would call it, which shares a "zone of neighbourhood" with the hero. This shared space of togetherness is incestuous in nature and not free from the competing claims of friendship and rivalry. The superhero is not a hero and yet he is, the shadow of his mighty predecessor looms large and often eclipses his life.

IV

If we go back to the philosophical origin of the superhero in Western thought, we see that in ancient Greece Lucian of Samosata (120-192) coined the term *Hyperanthropos*; in Germany, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) used the word *Ubermensch* in *Faust* before Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) hijacked it for his groundbreaking work *Thus Spake Zarathustra*; and in America, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was the propagator of a refined, self-reliant and aristocratic *Over-Soul*. Nietzsche was highly influenced by the ideas of Lucian and Wilhelm Richard Wagner (1813-1883), and in fact, he was rereading Emerson while writing *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. In Eric Bentley's words, Nietzsche finds in Wagner "the highest of higher men, holding the key to a new epoch of art and life… a premonition of superman" (75). In one of his interviews, Stanley Cavell also marvelled at the philosophical proximity between two thinkers from different continents, Emerson and Nietzsche: "No matter how many people tell you the connection exists, you forget it, and you can't believe it, and not until you begin to have both voices in your ears do you recognize what a transfiguration of an Emerson sentence sounds like when Nietzsche rewrites it" (Ratner-Rosenhagen 295). Though Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen deliberately forgets to touch upon the history of Nietzsche's influence on the popular cultural field of superhero comics in her otherwise scholarly study *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas*, she does something useful by tracing out the influence of Emerson on Nietzsche's ideas:

> [I]n late 1881 or early 1882 Nietzsche purchased a black notebook, which he devoted exclusively to excerpting forty passages from Emerson's *Essays*. Some of the passages are transcribed verbatim, while others show minor modifications. However, it is the passages in which Nietzsche turned a quotation from the original third person into first person that reveal his deep absorption in, and identification with, Emerson (Ratner-Rosenhagen 6).

Emerson views of heroism as "an obedience to a secret impulse of an individual's character" ("Heroism" 253); and Nietzsche urges us not to throw away the hero in our soul. Passage after passage from Emerson, for example, the following one from the essay "Uses of Great

Men" establishes the close association between the ideas of a German and an American thinker:

> It is natural to believe in great men...All mythology opens with demigods, and the circumstance is high and poetic; that is, their genius is paramount...Nature seems to exist for the excellent. The world is upheld by the veracity of good men: they make the earth wholesome (Emerson 9).

It tells us the story of a transcontinental travel, an intellectual alliance where an American thinker influences the ideas of a German philosopher, and eventually the rethought, reformulated and defamiliarised idea of Emerson's "great men" travels back to America as Nietzsche's *Ubermensch*. The history behind the concept of the comic-book superhero shows that leaving behind its German affiliation,[2] it soon started to wear an American mask by shedding off the exclusivity and philosophical excess that characterised Nietzsche's thought.

The aversion for the "corrupt" influence of popular culture is so all pervasive that Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin, the translators of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, decided to discard the word "Superman" as a translation of the German *Ubermensch*:

> Overman is preferred to superhuman for two basic reasons; first, it preserves the word play Nietzsche intends with his constant references to going under and going over, and secondly, the comic book associations called to mind by "superman" and super-heroes generally tend to reflect negatively, and frivolously, on the term superhuman (Nietzsche 5).

Arthur C. Danto also dismisses the Nietzschean undertone behind the idea of Superman as so negligible that "readers of philosophical books might be supposed capable of disregarding such incidental connotations" (Danto 178). In order to retain the purity of "scholarship," Pippin also proclaims the necessity to move beyond the diluted version of "Shaw's and Marvel's comic book 'superman'" (xli). They mark a clear line of demarcation by bringing in the question of authenticity and loyalty of superhero comics to the philosophical tradition of Nietzsche. To them, the comic book superhero is a prime example of a concept gone astray, and instead of exploring the nuances, they make an attempt to severe the tie and rescue philosophy from the vandalism of a corrupt popular culture.

Over the years a formulaic and easily predictable genre developed around the concept of the superhero where an accidental origin story, a dual identity, a professed mission, bright costume and exaggerated display of power became its constituting elements. In the extended chronology of literatures of the world the superhero genre appears to be very young as it was established in the late 1950s or 1960s. Peter Coogan traces three immediate literary inspirations instrumental behind the making of this genre: the science fiction superman (*Frankenstein*, 1818), the dual-identity avenger vigilante (*Nick of the Woods*, 1837) and the pulp *Ubermensch* (*Tarzan of the Apes*, 1912). He also points out *Adventure Comics* #247 (April 1958) as the clearest example of the word "superhero" being used to identify a comic-book which "features the first appearance of the Legion of Super-Heroes and their name on the cover" (25). The characteristic features of the immediate predecessors reveal that the superhero genre is nothing original, but rather all stylistic and normative principles that "define" the genre—costume, dual identity, superpower and mission—are familiar tropes all derivative of other genres.

The fetishisation of the superhero as a cultural icon and its reification into an apparently pre-given, homogenous and unchangeable identity often emptied it of its active potentialities. Just as the philosophers disregarded the Nietzschean influence on the superhero genre, it was also necessary for the comic book industry to banish the "unruly" Nietzsche, a philosopher who embraces chaos as life. Superhero studies have also remained as typical of "interpretosis," a frantic search for origin and meaning. Key scholars have kept themselves busy in their effort to build a conservative theory of the superhero genre. In *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, Reynolds finally rings the death bell of Nietzsche by showcasing the superhero as an archetypal figure in a modern American mythology that upholds the foundational beliefs and morality of a particular culture: "A key ideological myth of the superhero comic is that the normal and everyday enshrines positive values that must be defended through heroic action—and defended over and over again….The superhero has a mission to preserve society not to re-invent it" (77).

However, scholars have traced the historical extent to which the 1907 translation of Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* hypnotized the American mind and contributed to the development of the superhero genre. "By the time Siegel attached the name Superman to his hero, Superman were everywhere" (7), writes Gavaler, and yet "By the late twenties," Coogan writes, "the superman trope had become commonplace and emptied of philosophical content" (161). The self-reflexive 1980s, however, saw a re-emergence of this connection which culminates in Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and *The killing Joke*, and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*. The "Book VI" of *Watchmen* ends with a famous aphorism from Nietzsche: "Battle not with monsters, lest you become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gaze also into you" (28). The dismal view of the world sipped in horror and darkness, which emanates from *Watchmen* is the mirror image of the chaotic world of Nietzsche:

> Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose. This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces. It is not god who kills the children. Not fate that butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It's us. Only us...The void breathed hard on my heart, turning its illusions to ice, shattering them. Was reborn then, free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world (26).

But for Nietzsche, this nihilism is not purely negative and the realisation of emptiness is not divested of all light. Rejecting the metaphysical comfort, his concept of *Amor Fati* or love of fate brings in the agency of man as the central thing in his universe and encourages "a Dionysian yes to the world as it is" (Danto 15). This devastating frankness is not an easy way for the superhero who tries to impose sense to a world gone crazy. In *Watchmen*, the Comedian treats life as a "joke," and in Alan Moore's *Batman: The Killing Joke*, the Joker ceaselessly teases Batman to come out of his self-protected illusion and messianic role playing. In an insane world where an argument over telegraph poles can start a world war, it is useless as well as impossible for Batman, already enmeshed in a conservative ideology, to set everything "right." In spite of all his superpowers, the comic book superhero remains astonishingly incomplete, narrow and limited in his scope to transform the world.

V

The idea of a "trans-moment' or "trans-now" as propagated by Ranjan Ghosh "is about enacting a communication—difficult and debatable—between apparently incompatible paradigms of thoughts and concepts" ("More" 5). This type of liberal, queer, and even at times unsettling association adds a sudden spark of meaning to a concept randomly used in everyday life. The superhero has often been satirised, and there are other uses of the idea in a variety of aesthetic, social, political, economic and cultural spheres. The easy availability of t-shirts with a superhero face or logo in the third-world countries reveals how the local markets often do not care about the international laws regarding the possession of trademark licence. The superman logo in a t-shirt worn by someone in a remote Haitian village totally devoid of any connection with the world of American superheroes opens a new horizon of meaning stripped off of its usual context.

The word superhero is also frequently used in totally unpredictable contexts; as in the following quotation from an article in the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* dated May 6, 2018 "The police are like superman in villages. They have to take care of everything from a small pin to faraway Alaska" (Biswas 3, translation mine). The amateur Hindi documentary *Malegaon Ka Superman* [*Supermen of Malegaon*] (2012) parodies the superhero movie conventions and depicts the drudgery of the living condition of a small town in India. It portrays a skinny, pencil-thin and sunken cheek superhero fighting a villain whose dream is to set up a tobacco empire and see India filthy: "I want to see all children, youths and old men of India spitting on the road because I love filth very much" (Khan). In its retelling of the origin story, Superman is presented as a young man who works in a factory, addicted to *gutkha* and hardly earns his both ends meet. Far away from its usual locale, this new avatar saves people from the clutch of the tobacco villain, but ironically, Shafique Shaikh, the actor who plays the role of Superman dies of oral cancer, which developed due to his addiction to *gutkha*.

An amateur actor from Bangladesh – Ashraful Alom Saeed– who self-promoted himself as Hero Alom has recently become a social media phenomenon. Alom's caricature of superman wearing a *lungi*, a traditional dress for men worn around the waist, and *gamcha*, a thin cotton towel as cape, is hilarious. An ordinary family dog who has an extraordinary ability to tell time in a world where time has gone missing becomes a superhero in Himanjali Sankar's novel *The Stupendous Timetelling Superdog* (2013). In Saikat Majumdar's novel *The Scent of God* (2019), a segment is titled as "Supermen." In a crucial moment of the protagonist's life an overwhelming squall of emotion makes him forget his well-organized speech and he vehemently outbursts against the ills of a saffronised institution where he has been trained since his childhood. To break away from tradition and its rituals, the novel upholds, one requires superheroic courage and imagination. These liberal uses of an idea in unusual contexts modifies the way of seeing the superhero in straightjacket and is harmful for the dogmatism, prejudice and narrow-mindedness of the comic book universe. The travel of the superhero from comic book to other spheres of literature and life challenges and subverts the assumed "autonomy" of the genre and forces it to face the opposing feelings of delight and uneasiness generated by the out of place otherness of its own being.

The lethal irony behind the concept of the superhero becomes clear when Thomas L. Friedman, a *New York Times* correspondent, coins the term "super-empowered individuals" to describe Osama Bin Laden as someone who wants to destroy America because they are "wild," "crazy" and "revolutionary." In his account, Laden becomes "a super-empowered angry man," the leader of a network of people driven by religious fanaticism not sponsored by any state who takes a vow to preserve the sanctity of his own culture against the aggressive influence of liberal America. The question arises if America is wild, free and

progressive which resists normalization and welcomes change, as Laden sees it, what is there for the superhero to preserve as Reynolds claims in his book? Apparently, it seems that the superheroes are doing the same thing what Bin Laden and others are doing in the name of preserving the sanctity of their culture. Just as Captain America is to the American mind, he is no less a superhero to his own people albeit tagged as a terrorist by another group which is equally eager to protect their own cultural values. In order to normalise the chaotic world, he has to become more than human and the only weapon he can use, in a similar way as a superhero does, is violence.

In Ghosh's "intra-active transcultural" space inside a "more than global" world, the superheroes and its others coexist in the same space without denying the singularity or cultural specificity of each other. This "worlding' of the superhero which brings all these "apocryphal" uses together and connects times, spaces, genres, disciplines and cultures in a single thread do not mean dissolution of everything but an eruption of new sense, a defamiliarized understanding of the superhero. Ghosh elaborates:

> "More than global" is an affection that leads one to experience the other outside oneself and eventually to know oneself better. The local is known better outside itself as much as the global is understood better in "more than global" which is, however, not beyond global…So finding oneself more in others is to become more of oneself ("More" 121).

When normativity becomes a threat, reconfiguration of a genre is necessary in order to broaden its scope. To borrow Dimock's terminology, we can say that we need a "regenreing" (Dimock, "Genre" 1380) of the superhero genre.

Notes

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[1]Archaeologists and philologists, however, are divided in their opinion about the extent of Homeric influence in consolidating the hero-cult.

[2]Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen argues that in Germany, Goethe used the word *Ubermensch* in *Faust* (1808) before Nietzsche but it was barely noticed by contemporary critics and translators.

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