

ON IDENTITY

The 'Othering' of Women in Nonsense Literature: A Comparative Study of Sukumar Ray and Lewis Carroll

Nima Doma Lama is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at Salesian College, Sonada. Her areas of interests are feminist studies, gender and sexuality and post-colonial writing.

Abstract

The article focuses on nonsense literature, a genre never taken seriously, but, close analysis of the same has led to surfacing of serious issues and in this case, the representation of women, taking two important writers - Sukumar Ray and Lewis Carroll - belonging to the same age into perspective. The absence or presence of women in their works provide a scope for feminist criticism and a critique of gender in the contemporary society. The article ultimately brings out the common theme of "othering" of women in colonial India as well as in Victorian England thereby creating a link between the two writers.

Keywords: Nonsense Literature, Othering, Sukumar Ray, Lewis Carroll

Nonsense poems in India were composed during the colonial period and can be seen in the works of Sukumar Ray, an Indian Bengali writer who is considered to be a very popular writer of children's literature. He is well known for his collection of poems "*Abol Tabol*", novella "*Hajabarala*" and short story collection "*Pagla Dashu*." Lewis Carroll is another important Victorian nonsense writer who is popular for his *Through the Looking Glass* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The term "non" in nonsense literature does not only denote complete whimsy or subversion of existing order or negation but a creation of an alternate world with a deep underlying sense. Therefore, though literary nonsense was considered to lack high seriousness and lay specifically in the genre of children's literature, it now holds an important place as it provides a criticism of contemporary society. Priyadarshini Bhattacharya in her article, "Tracing the 'Sense' behind 'Nonsense': A comparative study of selected texts of Sukumar Ray and Edward Lear" states that, "nonsense literature or literary nonsense intends to project certain socio-political concerns by disrupting and redefining the existing conventions of language, reason and logic."¹ Also a feminist criticism of these texts causes surfacing of several issues regarding the portrayal of women. Therefore, with respect to the English translation of *Abol Tabol*, "The Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray" by Sukanta Chaudhuri and Carroll's "*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*", I seek to bring to light the representation of women in their works.

"*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*" could be considered a feminist text as the adventure begins with Alice's sense of boredom in her colorless life and Alice, as a

¹ Priyadarshini Bhattacharya, "Tracing the 'Sense' behind 'Nonsense': A Comparative Study of Selected Texts of Sukumar Ray and Edward Lear", *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, 2 (10), 2015, pp. 512-524.

feminist hero escapes into a fantasy world, and her curiosity, spirit of questioning in a way breaks the conventions of the patriarchal society. But, upon closer look, Alice is not quite feminist. Nonsense as a genre is dominantly interpreted as completely meaningless, irrational, non-intellectual and therefore 'feminine.' The realm of nonsense as being ruled by women leads to the basic notion of women not being taken seriously. Just like Ray, Carroll is also a product of the British Victorian culture. Though Ray's nonsense verses are ruled by men, they are not absolutely nonsensical or quite idiotic as the women in Carroll's work. Alice is seen to engage in absolute nonsense, for instance, misunderstanding the meaning of "tale" for a "tail", or saying "four times five is twelve, and four times six is thirteen" or "London is the capital of Paris and Paris is the capital of Rome."²

A feminist reading of the text would consider Alice escaping to "Wonderland" as creating a world in which she becomes the protagonist in charge. However one cannot help but ignore the God-like presence or the masculine 'self' of the narrator or the author himself who pulls Alice with an invisible string, reducing her to a mere puppet to be 'Othered' who can be made to bend to his every will. Alice is seen to be suddenly thrown into a foreign land where she constantly struggles to find her identity and connection with the fast changing world around her. The drink labeled "Drink me" or the cake labeled "Eat me" is not a choice or option given to Alice but like an order that Alice simply cannot resist which may hint at the rules and regulations of Victorian society which tries to construct an ideal "Angel in the house". The Victorian "Angel in the house" figure was a concept which was brought to light by the poem "Angel in the House" by Coventry Patmore in which he presents the picture of an ideal woman, his wife being the epitome. By using the Victorian ideology of the "separate spheres" which asserts that a woman should reign over the domestic sphere while men, the public, Patmore presents the so-called ideal woman as one who is a wife and mother who selflessly devotes herself to her family and is submissive to her husband:

"Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; ...
While she, too gentle even to force
His penitence by kind replies...
She loves with love that cannot tire;
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,
Through passionate duty love springs higher,
As grass grows taller around a stone,"³

Though Victorian England witnessed a rise in women education through the Education Acts of 1870 and 1876, the type of curriculum designed for women (keeping

² Lewis Carroll [1865], 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland', 'Through the Looking Glass' and 'The Hunting of the Snark', in *Alice in Wonderland*, ed. Donald J. Grey, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1971.

³ For details, website: <http://en.m.wikipedia.org> (accessed on 23 August 2016).

gender roles in mind), were related to classes in home management, needlework etc; an education which would ultimately give priority to domestic duties. Isabella Beeton's "Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management" led to the coining of the term "The Household General", which compared the mistress of the house to a general of an army by performing domestic duties intelligently. To kill this "angel of the house" became important for women writers such as Virginia Woolf.

Therefore, Alice's experiences in Wonderland depict the problems faced by a girl child in a patriarchal society. Alice cannot help but submit herself to this overpowering authorial voice which aims to mould her and Alice is always found to be engaged in excessive drinking and eating which makes her figure disproportionate (either too big or too small but never the right size). The constant fluctuations in her size leads to a sense of identity crisis which causes Alice to weep miserably every time she fails to get hold of the key of the door which leads to the garden. She responds to the caterpillar's "Who are you?" by saying, "I-I hardly know, Sir, just at present- at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."⁴ This reflects the struggle of a young girl in growing up to conform to the needs of the patriarchal society, as Simone de Beauvoir has rightly stated that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." As the narrative progresses, the Caterpillar's advice enables Alice to get hold of a mushroom which she slowly learns to eat the right amount and the right "side" so as to change her size as and when she pleases to enter certain houses and engage with the mysterious creatures. Alice, however for most of the time remains disoriented as she does not know or care where to go next. She is always forced into events and changing landscapes. She is unable to speak her mind even when she does not want to hear or do something which makes her actions seem compromising.

She is at one point forced by the Gryphon to stand up and repeat "Tis the voice of the sluggard."⁵ Alice hates to be ordered around but "However, she got up, and began to repeat it," and as the Gryphon asks her to start with the next verse, "Alice did not dare to disobey."⁶

The Red Queen, as the ruler of "Wonderland", is obsessed with rules and execution and is always seen crying "off with his head."⁷ Nonsense is always associated with the moon as lunar is with lunacy as the moon is said to affect human behavior by its gravitational pull on fluids. In fact, the menstrual cycle is considered to be more or less the same length as the lunar cycle which also affects women's emotion. The woman is therefore always associated with the moon. Therefore, the Red Queen is portrayed as an illogical, unjust and ill-tempered queen who is feared by all giving out a notion of how a woman in power or a woman's reign in the affairs of men can create a world of

⁴ Lewis Carroll, *op. cit.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

absolute anarchy. In the queen's croquet ground, the croquet balls were hedgehogs, mallets were live flamingoes and the "soldiers had to double themselves up and stand on their hands and feet to make arches" showing exploitation and a state of topsy-turvy or dystopia under the rule of a hysterical and despotic queen.⁸ As the game progresses the Queen is always seen quarrelling and shouting "off with his head" or "off with her head" till everyone except the King, the Queen and Alice were safe from execution. Though the Queen is feared, her orders of execution are most of the time dismissed as "It's all her fancy that: they never executes nobody, you know. Come on!" Her King seems to be far more logical and rational than her when the Queen in absolute fury orders Alice's execution to which the King says, consider, my dear: she is only a child."⁹

The final court scene where the Knave is accused for a trivial thing as stealing a tart is a chaos as the questions asked and those answered by the witnesses lead nowhere close to the verdict of the King. After an utter state of confusion and desperation, Alice slowly begins to grow back to her normal size. It is then, that she becomes a bit assertive and tries to take control over the situation by her witty remarks and opinions. When the queen orders her to "Hold your tongue", Alice replies, "I won't", to which the queen says "off with her head." Alice who had grown to her full size by this time fires back saying, "Who cares for you, you're nothing but a pack of cards!"¹⁰ Just as Alice begins to find her identity and starts to take control of her actions which causes the god-like voice of the author to slowly disappear, the author again displaces her and brings her out of her fantasy to reality.

If Alice's Adventures in Wonderland shows 'othering' of women by over-emphasis of women characters, Ray's absence of women characters in his poetry also addresses the same issue. Sukumar Ray was born at a time when India was under the British rule and in an era which can be considered the peak of the Bengal Renaissance. Therefore his nonsense works are considered important in understanding various issues in the colonial context and in this case, the woman question. Ray is a critic of the "Baboo" culture or the so-called "gentleman cult" and with an ironical touch he questions the concept of "man" - in a colonized nation, as a colonial subject. He seeks to portray this hybridity of an individual in a colonized nation. The beast in "The Super Beast" is a "very weird creature, of no proper breed that out of "envy and greed" yearns to have the physical qualities of all the animals. But once he attains it, he is left with the feeling of identity crisis. This is exactly what happened in colonized India. The "Baboos" neglected their own customs and traditions, embraced British education and culture, thereby becoming perfect instruments of colonial exploitation.

The Chandidas' Uncle in *The Inventor* is a slave of science, Pelaram Biswas in *Safety First* is a "mister know-all" and yet almost a child and Uncle Nanda in *The Hand of Fate*

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

is a victim of superstition. *The Encyclopedia* is a criticism of the bookish knowledge of the "Baboos", and European system of education lacking practicality while *War and Peace* criticizes the so-called "masculine" men who can only shower verbal abuses but lack the courage to fight each other. Ray's concern with the male psyche is seen in these male characters. However one cannot help but notice the striking absence of serious women characters. His criticism is limited only within the central male characters. His only women characters are Kestodas' aunt, Posto's daughter in "*A Marriage is Announced*", Mrs. Booth in "*A Gift of Tears*". The other characters are just a king's aunt or a king's queen with no important roles or identity of their own.

Is Sukumar Ray, the product of the male dominant colonial India, a victim of the very politics of nationalism? Drawing upon the argument of social theorist Partha Chatterjee, Indian nationalism divided the society into two spheres, the public sphere of which the representative was the "man" and the private sphere which was represented by the "woman". In Ray's poems, the officer in "*The Purloined Moustache*", the doctor in "*Doctor Deadly*", the shadow catcher in "*Shadow Play*", the office-goer in "*Burglar Alarm*" and all the other characters that represent the public sphere are men. "Man" who was considered to be the intellectually correct, physically superior and the masculine (restricted emotion, self-reliant, aggressive) were to rule the public sphere of nationalism. While "women" being physically inferior, the feminine, became objects to be protected (during war). They were restricted to the domestic sphere, the "*zenana*"¹¹ with the task of preserving cultural autonomy of Indian society and to maintain the sanctity of private life. This gave rise to the "*bhadramahilas*" who were not to be like the "white" European female or either the lower class Indian prostitutes but to walk a middle path. Therefore, the nationalists aimed to strive hard to equal with the West in the public sphere but to remain the same in matters of private life. Indian elite nationalists believed that to overcome the power of brutal colonialism Indian men had to excel in scientifically empowered public sphere, while in private sphere Indian culture was much ahead of colonial culture. Therefore there was no need to have colonial intervention in private sphere. It was a domain to remain untouched and unpolluted. The question of women was dealt in this sphere. The voice of women therefore always remained unheard of. Therefore Ray tries to deal with the question of man in a Hindu nationalist world giving out a deep moral message of how an Indian man should do away with the superficialities at a time when the country needs them the most. But women do not have any important role to play in this political sphere and therefore do not form an important part of his criticism.

However, we cannot completely overlook the minor women characters stated above. To some extent Ray also tries to deal with the idea of women subjugation, in a way sympathizing with the latter. "*A Marriage is Announced*" is a social criticism on the theme of marriage where Gangaram the uneducated, penniless, corrupt, angry man, the most ineligible bachelor is to be a perfect match for Posto's daughter because of

¹¹ The term "*zenana*" literally means "of the women" or "pertaining to women"

his social status. While on the other hand, representation of women in the eccentric characters of the yelling and screaming Kestodas' aunt who all day "*warbled with dulcet report 'Mew-Mew', 'Gobble-Gobble', 'Woof-Woof', 'Hee-Haw' and 'Snort'*" and Mrs. Booth who in "The Gift of Tears" has the never ending task of mothering an uncontrollable child can be considered an identical twin of the Duchess in "Wonderland" which shows suppression of women's voice and stereotyping of gender roles.¹²

In post-colonial criticism, Edward Said's *Orientalism* states the concept of the "Self" or Occident and the "Other" or Orient. The Occident was constructed as the masculine West while the Orient as the feminine East. The "self" is the privileged and has the power to reconstruct the "other" who is the passive, silent and the weak. The Occident reconstructs the Orient by a set of recurring images which is used to justify imperialism by considering the East as a child that needs to be fathered. The colonized or the so-called "other" in turn feels a sense of identity crisis. The nation's demand for strong, virile men to fight for its identity leads to a sense of insecurity and threat to masculinity. The fear of effeminacy instilled homophobia among Indian men. A desperate need to preserve their masculinity, while on the other hand being oppressed by the imperialist British rule, caused the figure of the "man" to diminish. The only way to possibly retain his masculinity was by in turn oppressing the "more" inferior, the "woman" as Virginia Woolf has rightly stated, "*Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses in possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size*"¹³.

Alice Walker in her "In Search of our Mother's Gardens", talks about what it meant to be a black-woman in the Post-Reconstruction South. They were not just slaves to their white masters but slaves to their own men and were "creatures so abused and mutilated in body."¹⁴ They had souls of an artist but trapped in a woman's body and that they had to toil in an era where they remained unacknowledged, except as "the mule of the world".¹⁵ I quote a paragraph from Walker's essay:

they lay vacant and fallow as autumn fields with harvest time never in sight: and we saw them enter loveless marriages, without joy; and become prostitutes, without resistance, and become mothers of children without fulfillment.¹⁶

If Virginia Woolf in her essay "A room of one's own" states how important a room and five hundred pounds a year is for a woman in order to write fiction and move a

¹² Sukumar Ray, *Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray*, Translated by Sukanta Chaudhuri, New Delhi, Oxford India Paperback, 2012. (for Bengali version, see website: <http://www.kolkata-online.com/bangla/sukumar/>)

¹³ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, England, Modern Classic Penguin Books, 2000.

¹⁴ For Details, website: <http://pantherfile.uwm.edu>. (accessed on 2 September 2016)

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

step towards liberation, Walker says, what are we to make of a black woman, “who owned not even herself?”¹⁷ Such was the condition of a woman in a post-colonial world.

The role of the oppressor and the oppressed is therefore not fixed. The colonized man becomes the oppressor as well as the oppressed. He becomes the “Self” as well as the “Other”. Therefore an Indian woman was a victim of colonialism as well as patriarchy and religion which was male motivated and not divinely inspired. She was doubly oppressed. Ray’s work sub-consciously betrays this kind of female oppression.

The presence-absence of women characters in Ray’s and Carroll’s work therefore converges to form an idea that both the writers could be seen as victims of the age and society they lived in. Ray may be seen as a victim of the very politics of “othering” and nationalism – a product of the male dominant colonial India, while Carroll, a victim of the politics of ‘othering’ in a patriarchal Victorian society.

¹⁷ Ibid.

