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A MENIPPEAN SATIRE: THE CHILD NARRATOR IN SELECT STORIES OF SATYAJIT RAY

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore the representation of children as narrators in two short stories of Satyajit Ray. This paper endeavors to study the narrative of the child characters to understand their perspectives and complexities and the underlying satire of the society which Ray aims at through his writings. Differentiating between the perspectives of an adult and a child, this paper focuses to see how Ray criticized the ways of the adults through the eyes and words of a child.

Keywords: children, literary childhood, narration, satire, child narrator.

Apart from being one of the greatest notable film-makers, Satyajit Ray (1921-1961) was also a prolific writer who has plenty of short stories, detective novels and fictional works to his credit. As propagated by his cinemas, his humanism and his criticism of the social inadequacies and hypocrisies also find utterance in his fictional works. In many of his works, he broaches upon the subject of social criticism in an allegorical manner. This paper aims to explore his stories, “The Small World of Sadananda” and “Pikoo’s Diary” where a child, specifically a male child, narrates the home and the world in such a way that it not only contrasts the view-point of an adult but also serves as comments upon the society. Ray’s satire can be arguable categorized as Menippean satire. Menippean satire was introduced to Rome in the 1st century BCE by the scholar Varro in and was imitated by Seneca and the Greek satirist Lucian and influenced the development of Latin satire by Horace and Juvenal (Britannica). Ray’s satire seems Menippean for, rather attacking any individual directly, Ray attacks and mocks the mental attitudes and conventions. The stories under analysis in this article are “Pikoo’s Diary” and “The Small World of Sadananda”. “Pikoo’s Diary” was translated by Gopa Majumdar and “The Small World of Sadananda” was translated by Ray himself.

In “Pikoo’s Diary”, the narrator is a school going child named Pikoo who narrates his observations in his ‘bloo notebook’ (blue notebook) (259). In this story, Pikoo is attributed with a poor set of spelling skills and almost no sense of grammar and punctuation but the author/translator does this to give it the impression of being written by a small child, thereby highlighting the innocence of the child. He has seen his ‘Dadu’ or grandfather maintain a diary, so he too decided to write one. Although at first glance, the things which he

writes about in his diary may seem trivial, but they actually are laden with social images. Pikoo writes in his diary that his school was closed because of a strike and he also mentions how he had heard a loud bang and his father had said that it had to be a bomb: 'Last nite a bomb went off it made big bang. Baba sed bomb Ma sed no no may be police gun. Baba sed has to be bomb, thees days I hear bang bang offen thru my window' (259).

The image of strike and bombs and police refer to the Naxalite movement which was raging throughout Bengal when the story was written. This image is further intensified and confirmed when Pikoo's elder brother disappears from home. In "Introduction" to *Indigo: Selected Stories* Gopa Majumdar mentions this point and says that it was not unusual then for a young man to get involved in politics, and disappear from home. Pikoo writes in his diary that his elder brother was adept in shooting and had a good aim which again subtly hints at his involvement in politics of that time. He also hints at the bitter relationship which his elder brother and father share, "Dada does politis it is hopeless Baba sed and also Ma", and the parents' disapproval of his political life which is the cause of further anxiety in the family.

Pikoo unknowingly makes the reader aware of his mother's adultery and the chaos which prevails in the inner family life, which they hide from the outer world, "they did not fite in the party". Ray also attacks the growing materialism with the images of the gifts and commodities, scent, air gun, USHA and GEC fans, electric gramophone replacing the old one, etc. Ray also directs his readers to the cultural colonialism by subtly pointing out the inclination of the family towards Western culture, such as reading 'Grims Fairy Tails', the parents conversing in English and entertaining English guests, food items, etc. Pikoo very innocently narrates how his grandfather, who was actually dead, was staring at the fan, and that it was the only Usha fan at home, which aims at the themes of negligence and isolation. Not only Pikoo's grandfather suffers negligence and isolation but it touches upon all the characters. And by the end, the theme of isolation and negligence gets so intense that when Pikoo's diary finishes, the family seems shattered- his grandfather is no more, mother is not at home, nether is father, or the servants who Pikoo thinks is playing cards. The fly buzzing and disturbing Pikoo and the corpse of his grandfather symbolically represents the disturbances in family life.

The narrator of the story "The Small World of Sadananda" is Sadananda Chakraborty, a thirteen year old boy. It is written like a conventional piece of children's literature where along with a child being the central protagonist, he is attributed the traits which characterize him to be more sensible and righteous than the grown-ups. In popular children's literature also, we find this trait. For instance, in *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice seems to appear more sensible than anyone else around her. Similarly, in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, we have children like Hermione, Harry and Ron and some of their friends who end up doing more sensible things and 'saving the day' than most other adult characters. When compared to Pikoo, Sadananda seems more mature with a mind of his own, he finds his name old-fashioned and he speaks like a wise man when he says, 'There are so many ways of being happy even when one doesn't smile.' (185) Sadananda is shown as a nature lover who observes crows, grasshopper and ants and finds pleasure in it. He then goes on to narrate how once an ant had fallen into some water and to rescue him when he was observing it, it seemed more like a man to him, 'as if the ant was not an ant any more but a man. In fact, it reminded me of Jhontu's brother-in-law...'. After a few lines, he mentions about Hannibal and the comparison of Hannibal to ants is interesting for in Turner's painting *Hannibal Crossing the Alps*, Hannibal with his army is painted so small against a sublime and grandiloquent portrayal of Nature that they seem almost insignificant and ant-like. Ants too are such small creatures that they seem almost negligible. But there are many pieces in literature where one finds people observing ants and deriving meanings and developing philosophical thoughts out of it, as in Thoreau's *Walden*. Thus, one can also make an eco-critical study of the aspect of the ants. It can also be

seen in the lights of an eco-critical approach, and the dying out of nature due to human carelessness and ignorance. It can also be seen as a commentary on the transient nature of life, be it of something as rational as a man or as tiny as an ant. Sadananada then started to think about ants and even fed them. Ray here attacks the narrow mindset of grown up adults who criticize the children in everything. Sadananda's growing interest and love for ants was mocked at and not supported by his mates or family. Sadananda is defensive of ants and he fights in their defense by saying that, "Once in Sahibgunge where cousin Parimal lives, there was a collision between two trains which killed 300 people. Today it took Chhiku only a few seconds to kill so many ants! It seemed so wrong, so very, very wrong." (191). In this way, Sadananda breaks the wall between animals and humans. The ants refer themselves as 'sepoys' and that bring a political touch to the narrative of Sadananda.

Most of children's literature has some traits in common. Apart from featuring a child as the central protagonist, they are mainly written by adults. So a careful reading will show the manipulation of emotions and ideas behind the innocent looking texts. As mentioned by the translator Gopa Majumdar in her "Introduction" to *Indigo: Selected Stories*, 'the apparent simplicity in these stories is often deceptive. Behind it lay complex emotions and a tangled web of events. That was the reason why they appealed to the young and old alike. The young were happy with the simple tale. It was left to the adults to pick up the subtleties.' He advocates his social commentary with seemingly innocent imageries. Thus, Ray's stories not only charm but also chastise. This is what gives his stories a Menippean satire like touch for he doesn't attack any particular individual but rather subtly comments and points out to the mental attitudes and conventions of the 'adults' and thus, of the society.

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