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'A Shoe or a Sunshade/ Oh what *can* I be?': Hybridity and Identity in Sukumar Ray's Twentieth Century Colonial Bengali Nonsense Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Sukumar Ray (1887-1923) was one of the pioneering figures in modern Indian, particularly Bengali, children's literature. One of his most widely discussed publications is *Abol Tabol* (1923), a collection of nonsense verse, in the style of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, illustrated by Ray himself. The aim of this paper is to address the depiction of hybridity in *Abol Tabol*, and its function in raising questions of the instability and fluidity of identity. Ray, as well as his audience, belonged to the 20th century Bengali urban middle-class, a socio-economic group that developed around the early 19th century, deriving its identity from the advent of colonial British education. The socio-cultural concerns of this class, particularly regarding their status in the colonial hierarchy, often crystallised around questions of identity and "true" self, divided along a perceived boundary between Western education and Eastern tradition. Such adult concerns and questions inform Ray's children's poetry, and the genre of nonsense allows the articulation of these questions through the bizarre and imaginative figures that the poet populates his world with. A discussion of the depiction of hybrid identities and the "severing of species boundaries," with particular focus on the illustrations and the linguistic strategies used by the poet, may be fruitful in not only re-assessing the importance of nonsense verses in voicing an alternative vision of the crisis in colonial identity, but also enrich discussions of such questions of boundaries and hybridity that continue to be pertinent to a contemporary post-colonial Bengali society.

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Introduction

"Nonsense," argues Kimberley Reynolds, "…sets out to question received wisdom, and in the process it stimulates new ways of thinking. This makes it a highly effective mode both for writers who want to comment on and so affect society, and those who propose new ways of thinking."[2] The genre of nonsense literature developed around the sixteenth century, as a "complex form of writing" which presented, disguised under a seemingly frivolous or meaningless mode, a "self-conscious, insider humour" that depended on imitations and parodies of the highly technical language, rhetoric and logical structures of "highly specialised discourses of high culture", providing a humorous mode "available only to an educated elite."[3] Gradually, however, a mode of nonsense writing developed in close association with children's literature, notably in the hands of Edward Lear (1812-1888) and Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) in England. In providing children with the opportunity to play with the established rational order and explore new possibilities of meaning-making, nonsense literature offered the opportunity for early cognitive and creative development in young readers. As with several other aspects of contemporary culture, the new forms of children's literature in England began to influence similar developments in the literature of the colonies. In India, particularly in Bengal which was the centre of nineteenth century British colonial activity, writers, playwrights, and poets began to popularise European genres in Indian languages for the first time. Urvi Mukhopadhyay notes that "a separate genre of children's literature did not exist in pre-colonial Bengal, and only in the nineteenth century did children's literature appear, a consequence of western Enlightenment traditions handed down by the colonial system."[4] This new Bengali children's

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[2] Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 45.
[3] Ibid., 46.
[4] Urvi Mukhopadhyay, "From Ultimate Punishment to Heroic Sacrifice and After: Representations of Death in Bengali Children's Literature from the Colonial Era", in

literature had developed into a fully separate genre by the early twentieth century, and one of the pioneers of this form was Sukumar Ray (1887-1923), whose poetry for children is widely considered to be the first example of nonsense literature in Bengali, introducing significant "new ways of thinking" which continue to be popular among child as well as adult readers.

Since his youth, Ray demonstrated a deep interest in the mode of nonsense literature, particularly its subversive and satiric potential. He founded "The Nonsense Club" in Presidency University, Calcutta, around 1905, where he wrote and produced two plays which mocked and parodied colonial Bengali discourses about education, religion and tradition, particularly *Lakshmaner Shaktishel,* a burlesque reminiscent of Aristophanes' *The Frogs* in distorting Hindu mythological characters into ridiculous figures of satire. This early interest in the possibility of satire, and often criticism, regarding some of the contemporary socio-political concerns of colonial Bengal remained central to Ray's vision of humour, and characterized his later works for children, including *HaJaBaRaLa,* a long story that closely echoes Carroll's *Alice* stories, as well as collections of poetry reminiscent of Lear's limericks. This article focuses on the poems from Ray's earliest and most famous collection, *Abol Tabol* (1923), and discusses how some of his poetry engages with colonial concerns about identity and hybridity, providing 'new ways of thinking' or alternative visions of the perceived crisis in colonial identity, through the portrayal of fantastic creatures which seem to be defined primarily in terms of their unstable, hybrid nature.

My article is divided into two sections. In the first section, I shall discuss some of the creatures from Ray's poetry that provide images of hybridity, and explore how the poetry voices the various concerns and dilemmas perceived as rooted in such hybrid identities. In the second section, I shall assess how such dilemmas articulated by creatures of nonsense poetry parallel and comment on some of the most pertinent questions about the twentieth century urban Bengali colonial identity, underlined by certain tensions and conflicts specific to such a socio-political context. My selection of Ray's Bengali poetry for this

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Global Perspectives on Death in Children's Literature, ed. Lesley D. Clement and Leyli Jamali (New York: Routledge, 2016), 101.

discussion is based on my specific interest in investigating the notions of identity and hybridity, questions that become particularly important in the cultural discourse of a colonial society. Such issues take on an urgency for the English educated urban middle-class, a socio-economic group Ray belongs to and primarily writes for, whose identity was marked by a tension between their western education and their traditional socio-religious value systems. A discussion along these lines would be pertinent not only as a historical study, but also in terms of a contemporary post-colonial identity which, in Bengal as elsewhere, continues to be informed by the colonial experience of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My article, I believe, can provide a re-assessment of nonsense poetry as an effective medium for the recording and expression of certain aspects of colonial (and post-colonial) experience.

Animals, Creatures and Beasts: The Figure of the 'Hybrid' in Ray's Nonsense Poetry

Nonsense literature is frequently populated by imaginary creatures, ranging from the docile to the predatory, the helpful to the harmful, from fantastic versions of familiar flora and fauna to entirely new creations. Such creatures may serve various purposes, from portraying images of the vulnerable "other" (Lear's *Seven Families of Lake Pipple-Popple)* to parodying familiar cultural figures through anthropomorphic representations (the Walrus, the Lion, or the Unicorn in Carroll's *Alice* books). As Zoe Jacques argues, the function of creatures in nonsense literature often goes beyond simple representations of themes and images; engaging, often self-consciously, with their own "creaturely" status, they may approach what she calls the "post-human" question, the complex relationship dynamics and politics between human and animal identities. Carroll's *Alice* books, for instance, are populated by such "creatures that seem to exist solely to sever species boundaries,"[5] from the friendly Mock Turtle to the malevolent Jabberwock. While Jacques' work focuses on the ultimate result of this severing of boundaries in "problematis(ing) the unthinking human use of the

[5] Zoe Jacques, *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 47.

animal kingdom," a process which assists nonsense literature in successfully communicating the issues of post-human ethics to the child reader, I am interested in nonsense poetry that is precisely *about* such severing of species boundaries, and features sentient creatures who explicitly draw attention towards their own hybridity, and voice their concerns about the problems of identity associated with the severing of these boundaries.[6]

The nonsense world of Ray's *Abol Tabol* is populated by a variety of imaginary creatures, from the "Ramgorurer Chhana," perpetually depressed hominids who are terrified of laughter, to the ape-like "Hunkomukho Hyangla," who debates the most efficient way to swat flies away with his two tails. In one of his poems, however, Ray provides us with a catalogue of animals which are defined by their very hybridity. In this poem, called "Hotch-Potch," Ray describes several creatures, each being a hybrid mixture of two familiar animals, constituted through acts of "sever[ing] species boundaries." The poem employs a rich variety of puns and wordplay, and Ray follows Carroll's tradition of creating witty *portmanteau* words to name these animals. The first few creatures listed, at least, seem to be unequivocally happy about their successful coupling.

> A pochard and a porcupine, defying the grammarians,
> Combined to form a porcochard, unmindful of their variance.
> A stork upon a tortoise grew, exclaiming, 'What a hoot!
> A very handsome storkoise, now, we jointly constitute.'[7]

Accompanying these descriptive verses are, as with most of his poetry, colourful and imaginative illustrations by Ray himself. Like Lear, Ray was a trained painter and sketch artist, having gained some popularity among the student circles during his days at Presidency University for his caricatures and cartoons, and as in the case of the former's illustrations of his own poetry in *The Book of Nonsense* (1848), Ray's illustrations of his poems and plays have placed his works within the publication tradition of not only Bengali poetry, but also picture-books. These colourful pictures, depicting a pochard with porcupine quills

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Sukumar Ray, *The Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray,* trans. Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1997), 1.

growing out of its back, and a stork covered entirely by a tortoise shell, bring his imaginary creatures to life quite vividly, and portray them as distinctly shaped visual entities that are communicated to the implied child reader. Discussing the function of illustrations in children's picture-books, Perry Nodelman describes what he believes is the "dynamic [that] is the essence of picture books. The pictures 'illustrate' the texts- that is, they *purport to show us what is meant by the words*, so that we come to understand the objects and actions the words refer to in *terms of the qualities of the images* that accompany them- the world outside the book in terms of the visual images within it."[8] (emphasis mine) Ray's illustrations clearly represent 'what is meant by the words,' and leave little room for speculation. The creatures described are not only conceivable potentials in imagination, but are demonstrated as very specific hybrid combinations, as portrayed through the vibrant visual images (fig.1 and fig,2).

Such specific hybrid identity does not sit well with all the creatures, however, and while the overall tone of the poem is cheerful and humourous, we soon find some of the creatures realising the potential problems of their newly constructed identities, and complaining about the same.

> A parakeet its features lent unto the lowly lizard,
> In puzzle whether flies or fruits would better suit its gizzard…
> And rent by schizophrenia the whalephant we view:
> The open seas, the forest trees are tearing it in two.[9]

The chief dilemma for these two creatures seems to lie in their incapability to reconcile the erstwhile identities and tendencies of their constitutive halves. In case of the parakeet-lizard hybrid, it is a question of diet; it cannot decide whether the insectivorous diet of the lizard or the fruits that the parakeet used to eat "would better suit" the appetite of the new creature it has become. Similarly, the whale-elephant hybrid is in a dilemma about its "natural" habitat, and is torn between the aquatic and the terrestrial. Ray's illustrations further shape such dilemmas; encountering the visual image of a creature, whose head and

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[8] Perry Nodelman, "Decoding the Images: Illustration and Picture Books", in *Understanding Children's Literature*, ed. Peter Hunt (London: Routledge, 1999), 72-73.
[9] Ray, *Select Nonsense*, 1.

forelimbs belong to the elephant, yet whose hindquarters are distinctly cetacean, complete with fins and tail, it is indeed difficult to decide whether the "open seas" or "forest trees" would suit it better. The central conflict, therefore, revolves around a fundamental instability and fragility of the creatures' identity, an incomplete severing (and subsequent merging) of their "species boundaries." Our sense of identity is continually in flux, and is a complex amalgamation of different components, always subject to what Michel Foucault calls "forms of power which make individuals subjects."[10] A sense of self-identity develops, as we mature, through constant negotiation and engagement with several social, political and linguistic apparatuses, which may attempt to determine our subjective, individual identities (scientific and administrative institutions) or ignore notions of individuality in an effort to generalise and categorise us as subjects (legal or economic principles). Within such a complex and constantly shifting notion of identity, contradictory systems or ideologies often complicate our sense of "selfhood." In other words, there is a possibility of fragmentation and internal conflict that frequently threatens the identity we construct for ourselves. In Ray's nonsense poetry, we find an overt, almost literal, representation of such a threat of fragmentation in identity, through the self-contradictory image of the hybrid animal. It cannot fully embrace its "new" identity, because it has not been able to reconcile the "old" components that constitute its sense of selfhood.

While "Hotch-Potch" portrays this crisis in identity through hybrid pairs of animals, Ray's poem "The Super Beast" returns to address the same problem with even greater urgency. The subject of this poem is a single animal, "a very weird creature, of no proper breed."[11] From the very onset, this poem has a less cheerful tone than the previous one, and the creature is characterised as a greedy and envious one. It is perpetually dissatisfied with its physical appearance, and jealously observes the animals around itself:

> He wanted a voice like the cuckoo's refrain;
> So practiced his crooning, but warbled in vain.
> He envied the birds as they soared in the sky,

[10] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Enquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 781.
[11] Ray, *Select Nonsense*, 17.

And wished he had wings, and could learn how to fly.
With trunk and with tusk see the elephant tread;
So why should he settle for less on his head?
He viewed the lithe kangaroo bounding along,
And longed for his legs to be lanky and strong.
For the lion's proud mane he would also make suit,
The long scaly tail of the lizard to boot.[12]

The creature covets what it perceives to be best in the animals of the world, from the bird's wings to the lizard's tail. This desire is unexpectedly fulfilled "on the fifth of July" when the creature is granted all that it ever wished for. His triumphant excitement, however, is short-lived as he begins to realise the inherent problems of having such a bizarre, unwieldy assortment of appendages. Frustrated by the problems he had not foreseen, the creature begins to question his behaviour:

Should elephants prance in such lolloping manner?
Or kangaroos feed off a stalk of banana?
If Squat-Head cried 'Cuckoo', would people be rapt?
Would an elephant's trunk on that torso be apt?[13]

Such confusion regarding suitable behaviour is closely associated with the creature's awareness of its unusual identity. The title of this poem in the original Bengali is "*Kimbhoot*," a word which signifies not only the bestial (as translated in the English title), but also suggests the grotesque. This seems to describe what the creature has become; the many appendages he has adapted into his new body, while apt and functional in their original sources, now come together to form a whole that is unwieldy, asymmetric, and impractical. Instead of partaking in the multiple pleasures he had envisioned for himself, he now finds it impossible to perform any of these functions, because the different constituents of his physical identity constantly get in each other's way. What is worse, he anticipates being shunned and shamed by his companions for his grotesque appearance, quite contrary to the magnificent identity he had originally expected to craft for himself:

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[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

Supposing they jeered at a jumbo that flew,
Or tweaked his poor ears and guffawed and cried 'Boo'?
Supposing they challenged him, right to his face,
'You nameless old boob, you're a proper disgrace.'[14]

Misshapen and dysfunctional, the creature is crippled with doubt and confusion regarding his sense of "self." Like the hybrid animals of "Hotch-Potch," he is constantly threatened by the possible fragmentation of his fragile, unstable identity. For the super beast, the multiple components of his "new" identity refuse reconciliation, rendering him helpless and utterly confused about how he should or should not behave and function. In his case, Ray goes even further than the hybrids of "Hotch-Potch." While the whale-elephant or the parakeet-lizard of the previous poem could not make up their minds as to how they should behave or *what they should do* (regarding, for example, diet or habitat), the super beast's confusion regarding his own behaviour leads him, in the closing lines of the poem, to an even more fundamental question; *who is he?*

I can't be a moth, or a horse, or a snake,
A bee or an elephant, donkey or drake,
A fish, or a frog, or a horse, or a tree,
A shoe or a sunshade- oh what *can* I be?[15]

It is telling that, unlike the many witty names for the hybrid animals of "Hotch-Potch," Ray refuses to name the creature in this poem, referring to him indirectly by the adjective *"kimbhoot;"* grotesque or bestial. A bizarre hybrid of several familiar animals, the creature represents the problems of reconciling many component "identities" within a newly constructed one, and takes the dilemma one step further from "Hotch-Potch;" he is not only uncertain about what behaviour would suit him, but is equally unsure about who he really is anymore. The creature's incapability to adopt a definite identity, despite (and complicated by) the presence of so many familiar components to it, makes it not simply grotesque but "uncanny" in its widest psychological sense. The super beast embodies the presence of the familiar within the grotesque, and

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

its uncanny quality lends to this poem a considerably darker tone than some of Ray's lighter, more cheerful poetry in *Abol Tabol*.

The fragility of identity in these poems derives from a specific attribute of how these identities are constructed; they are unstable *because of* the contradictory nature of their components. Both the super-beast and the hybrid animals face a crisis in identity because they fail to assimilate their newly structured identity fully, and certain individual components of their ideas of "self" resist and contradict each other in a manner that seems difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile. Such a notion of identity in crisis becomes particularly important to the immediate readership of Ray's early twentieth century poetry; the urban Bengali middle-class. The literature of Sukumar Ray has always enjoyed popularity among children as well as adults, and I would like to argue that his poetry, particularly *Abol Tabol,* owes its popularity and importance to its ability to reflect and represent one of the primary concerns of the colonial Bengali urban society; the hybrid nature of its social identity, and the tension and instability caused by this hybridity.

The Crisis in 'Self': Reading the Fundamental Hybridity of 'Identity' in *Abol Tabol*

Very few places in India experienced the socio-cultural impact of British colonial rule as deeply as Bengal. Historically, the political and military supremacy of the East India Company began with the colonisation of Bengal at the Battle of Plassey (1757), where the 'Nawab' or ruler of Bengal was defeated by Major-General Robert Clive. The city of Calcutta was established near the British stronghold of Fort William around the same time, and from 1772 till 1911, it continued to be the colonial capital. European education had a deep influence on the formation of this new urban society, and the nineteenth century saw the rise of the urban Bengali middle-class; a new socio-economic group comprising professionals and intellectuals trained in the Western education system, who spearheaded secular social reform movements aimed at redressing the institutional violence and injustices rooted in traditional, religion-based hierarchies of Hinduism, to try and define a new Bengali social identity. Leading such reform movements were members of the English-educated Bengali intelligentsia like Raja Ram

Mohan Roy (1775-1833) and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), and this period of rapid reforms in the fields of women's rights, education and legal administration, as well as cultural innovation, that continued well into the 1930s, came to be known as the "Bengal Renaissance."

Associated with such changes there seemed to be a concerted effort to define a new Bengali idea of "self," marked by an active participation in revivalist projects in the fields of literature, history, ethics and theology. On one hand, religious reformers like Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950) and Ramkrishna Paramhansa (1836-1886) were establishing new religious and theological movements to seek new, rejuvenated approaches of spiritual dialogue. On the other hand, historians like Akshay Kumar Dutta (1820-1886) and Ramesh Chandra Dutta (1848-1909) were engaged in the possibility of reconstructing a "genuine" Bengali history, drawing deeply from the newly available Western modes of history and anthropology to create a template for the Bengali "self" to examine its own evolution, and construct an epistemology for itself. Much of the debate that rose around the question of "self" in these different fields, and most of the problems such approaches tried to address, crystallised around a fundamental difficulty; that of assimilating traditional Bengali, Hindu social values with Western education and its accompanying systems of thought and ideology.[16] This debate was particularly relevant for the middle-class who, at least till the turn of the century, admired Western value systems for providing the potential for social reform and improvement, yet grappled with the equally urgent need to revive or reconstruct the traditional Bengali roots of their ancestral identity.

This perceived conflict in identity was further complicated at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Bengal (along with Maharashtra) became a centre for armed resistance and revolutionary anti-colonial movements, characterized most notably by the rise of radical organisations like *Anushilan Samiti* and *Jugantar*, whose modus operandi involved assassinations, bombings and violent protests to

[16] For more on the cultural construction of the modern Bengali identity in nineteenth century colonial India, see David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernisation, 1773-1835* (New York: Berkeley, 1969).

attack British administration in Bengal. Some of these radical revolutionaries, like Khudiram Bose, Surya Sen, and the Binoy-Badal-Dinesh trio, gained considerable popularity both inside and outside Bengal, particularly among the youth communities, as national martyrs and folk-heroes. With the simultaneous rise of the *Swadeshi* Movement, a patriotic fervor was popularised among the educated Bengali youth, urging them to boycott British products to boost domestic, independent economy. The revival of traditional Bengali socio-cultural values thus gained a sharper political significance, and the possible assimilation of Western values into the new Bengali identity was thrown into further ambivalence. The political ideology of *swadeshi* saw the urban middle-class launch an attack on the Western education system, which, as mentioned earlier, had had a crucial part to play in the formation of the new Bengali identity in the first place. "The intelligentsia of the *swadeshi* age was very much a product of western education", writes Sumit Sarkar, "…yet a revulsion against western education was to become a major strand in the movement, taking the two forms of calls for boycott of official schools and colleges, and attempts to build up a parallel and independent system of 'national' education."[17] This 'paradox', as Sarkar addresses it, was a part of the much larger debate surrounding the colonial Bengali identity; a debate that attempted to reconcile seemingly contradictory components of the Bengali "self," and offered multiple perspectives on how to balance and bridge the gaps in the boundaries between the Western and the traditional Bengali ideologies, values and thought-systems that contributed to this new identity.
The literature of colonial Bengal, subsequently, began reflecting and responding to these debates. Early theorists of Bengali culture and nationalism like Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) wrote extensively about the need to reach an equilibrium between such seemingly irreconcilable worldviews. Satire, too, provided a way to approach such debates. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894), the pioneer of the Bengali novel, wrote a short prose piece called *Babu O Bibi Sambad* (1871), which portrays a satirical dialogue between a traditional Bengali housewife and her westernised husband, who fail to understand

[17] Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 1973), 127.

anything about each other's ideologies at the end of a heated and quite vitriolic debate. However, even Chattopadhyay prescribes, like Tagore, a balance between such ideologies through his satire. The primary focus of Ray's nonsense poetry, tapping into the potential of the genre, seems to be on exposing the potential absurdity and ridiculousness of such debates in the first place. As Mukhopadhyay points out, "unlike his predecessors…Sukumar Ray's satirical comments did not spare even the Hindu nationalist or the traditionalist ideas and ideology. In his rhymes and plays for young people…he pokes fun at the ideological debates that often posited traditional Hindu ethics against western metaphysical arguments."[18] In contrast to Tagore's serious critical enquiry, or Chattopadhyay's subtly didactic humour, Ray approaches this crisis in Bengali identity with the central debate itself as his subject of satire. The images of hybridity in his poetry, in their self-conscious understanding of their predicament, seem to comment not on the possibility of reconciliation, but the fundamental (and largely, inevitable) instability of any notion of identity itself.

Within the greater cultural context of the Bengali identity and the many debates and concerns surrounding the stability of its construction, Ray's self-consciously hybrid figures of nonsense provide a particularly relevant perspective in their transfer of focus from the possibilities of reconciliation to the nature of hybridity itself. Hybridity, of course, is a term of some specific technical importance as far as post-colonial scholarship is concerned. Homi K. Bhabha, approaching the concepts of plurality in a colonial identity structured by the confluence of different, often contradictory systems of thought, discusses "hybridity" as referring to a status of existing at the boundary of two (or multiple) cultures, characterised by a sense of "double consciousness" and "in-betweenness" for the subject, thus exposing a fundamental flux or liminality in the very notion of identity. Concerning the displacement and migration of colonised subjects, Bhabha describes the hybrid body as occupying a "third space," where the colonial and traditional identities combine and are simultaneously asserted and

[18] Mukhopadhyay, "From Ultimate Punishment", 111.

subverted.[19] Ania Loomba locates this theory of hybridity further in the context of the post-colonial scholarship of Frantz Fanon. "Bhabha goes back to Fanon," she argues, "to suggest that liminality and hybridity are necessary attributes of the colonial condition. For Fanon…the colonial subject realises that he can never attain the whiteness he has been taught to desire, to shed the blackness that he has learnt to devalue. Bhabha amplifies this to suggest that colonial identities are always a matter of flux."[20] Bhabha's theory of hybridity as a crucial element in the formation of colonial identity, like the Bengali middle-class identity that is the subject of this paper, is important in acknowledging that the perceived "conflict" in identity cannot, and should not, be considered in terms of a simple Western-Traditional binary, since colonial identity is perpetually in a state of flux, and the cultures of neither the coloniser nor the colonised are concrete, monolithic institutions that occupy specific loci. To put it briefly, considering hybridity as a feature of colonial identity is crucial in understanding that this identity is *fundamentally* unstable and fluid in its very construction, and its very structure renders any attempt to reconcile all its components fully an ultimately impossible project. To do away with the instability and the fluidity of identity would, perhaps, be to do away with identity itself.

That Ray was often harshly critical in his humour of the Bengali middle-class attempt to 'attain the whiteness he has been taught to desire' is evident from his parody of the figure of the English-educated, urban middle-class Bengali *babu* or "gentleman," immaculately dressed and speaking in the pompous, affected Bengali of the cultural elite, in poems like *Babu, Hishaab* and *Shob Likhechhe Ei Ketaabe*, where the Bengali gentleman's attempts to ape his colonial master invariably end in comically grotesque disasters.[21] Approaching the very question of identity, therefore, Ray demonstrates the presence of the absurd and the impossible at the heart of the very act of constructing the "self." As I have mentioned, the genre of nonsense affords Ray the opportunity for

[19] For a detailed discussion of the theory of hybridity, cultural history and colonial discourse, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture,* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
[20] Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 148.
[21] Sukumar Ray, *Khai Khai* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1926) and Ray, *Select Nonsense.*

such an attempt. Discussing the nonsense literature of Victorian England, which provided a direct template for much of Ray's work (his career spanning the late Victorian and early Edwardian periods), Reynolds marks how nonsense "simultaneously purports to say nothing and points to meanings that may or may not be there. In this way it sets up hermeneutic challenges to readers that forces them to think of unexpected ways in which texts might make meanings…it also offers writers ways of expressing ideas and feelings that might otherwise be prohibited."[22] Although the idea of hybridity and the essentially irreconcilable nature of colonial identity was not expressly "prohibited" to Ray, such an expression in the early twentieth century still ran the risk of occupying a rather uncomfortable position within the official socio-political discourse of the time, so invested in reconciling precisely what Ray suggests is irreconcilable, particularly following the heightened political urgency and importance of the debate about Bengali identity following the *swadeshi* movement. The genre of nonsense poetry, both in its assumed child readership and its generic license to engage in puzzles and language games, became an important mode of subversion and expression of a different perspective of the perceived crisis in identity.[23] Reynolds draws attention to the possibility of nonsense literature to engage in what Barbara Wall calls "double address;" the textual strategy of communicating to a more discerning audience "over the heads" of the implied immediate young readership, thus concealing certain issues under the playful language of children's narratives.[24] It is possible to read Ray's poetry in a similar way, particularly in the light of his scathing satire of the constructed "Westernised" Bengali identity elsewhere in his literature. Such a reading of his poetry affords us not only an opportunity to re-assess the individual merits of his work, but also to look at the genre of nonsense literature as an important record of the colonial experience, particularly in the sphere of socio-political identity formation.

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[22] Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature,* 48.

[23] For a detailed discussion of the structural and linguistic properties of nonsense that allow for such literary expressions, see Wim Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988).

[24] Barbara Wall, *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

Conclusion: Ray's Nonsense Poetry as a Record of the Colonial "Identity Crisis"

As with other post-colonial societies across the world, the modern Bengali geopolitical identity is deeply informed by the colonial experience, particularly following the Bengal Renaissance, traditionally considered as beginning with the work of Ram Mohan Roy around 1820 and ending with the death of Tagore in 1941. Most of the founding experiences of Bengali social, cultural, political and aesthetic expressions have their roots in the colonial experience of this period, and the lingering influence of the nuanced, often turbulent, Bengali relationship with British rule continues to dominate much of the critical, cultural and institutional ideology, particularly among the urban Bengali middle- and upper-classes. Re-examining records of this colonial experience, therefore, is not merely a project of historical recovery and reassessment, but also an important exercise in considering the originary moments of contemporary Bengali post-colonial identity, of analysing the critical perspectives by means of which to assess how Bengalis conceive of their 'selves' in the present world.[25]

Ray's depiction of the hybrid figures of his poetry, and the apparent impossibility of their ever reconciling fully the discordant components of their hybrid, heterogenous "selves," draws attention to a fundamental "hybridity" at the heart of identity itself, which renders any attempt to completely reconcile it, or reduce it to a single, concrete, stable sense of "self," not only impossible but also absurd. The whale-elephant can never solve the conundrum of its natural habitat, nor can the super beast ever provide a satisfactory answer to the question of who he really is. In a period dedicated to determining and solving the problem of the crisis in Bengali colonial identity, Ray's poetry acknowledges the essentially fragmented, fragile and fluid nature of identity, and the genre of nonsense allows him to express his point of

[25] A discussion of how colonial experience continues to inform the contemporary Bengali middle-class identity is provided in Sumanta Banerjee, "Bogey of the Bawdy: Changing Concept of Obscenity in 19th century Bengali Culture", in *Economic and Political Weekly* 22 (1987): 1197-1206.

view through the apparently childish and playful figures of nonsense creatures. His poetry, therefore, records and reveals the presence of an alternative vision of this debate over questions of 'self', and an analysis of his work in this context is crucial in understanding the early Bengali intimations about the hybridity of their colonial identity, much before the formal conceptualisation of these issues by post-colonial thinkers like Bhabha or Loomba.

While much academic work has been undertaken regarding the works of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, including scholarship that focuses on similar notions of identity, boundaries and hybridity, Ray's work has sadly received little scholarly attention in terms of his treatment of colonial cultural experience. I have attempted, in this article, to provide a possible reading of Ray as not simply a writer of poetry to delight children, but as a skillful practitioner of the genre of nonsense to articulate alternative, even subversive, visions of a fundamental political experience; that of hybridity inherent in identity, particularly colonial identity. Further research along these lines, I sincerely believe, can uncover fresh and rejuvenating visions of colonial experience in genres like children's literature, which are still largely overlooked in institutional scholarship as relevant records of socio-political experience.

ILLUSTRATIONS AND LEGENDS FOR FIGURES

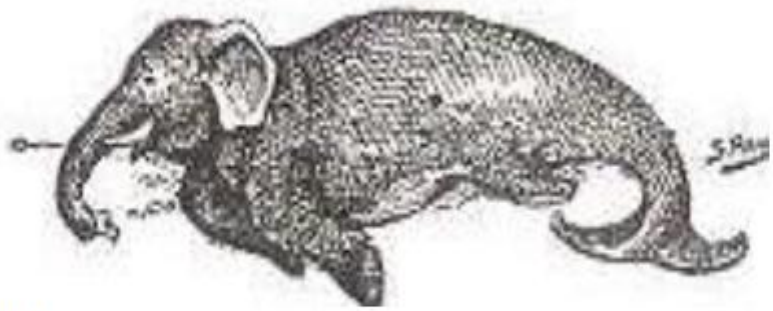

Fig.1
Sukumar Ray, 'Whale-Elephant', in Sukumar Ray, *The Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray,* trans. Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1997), 1.

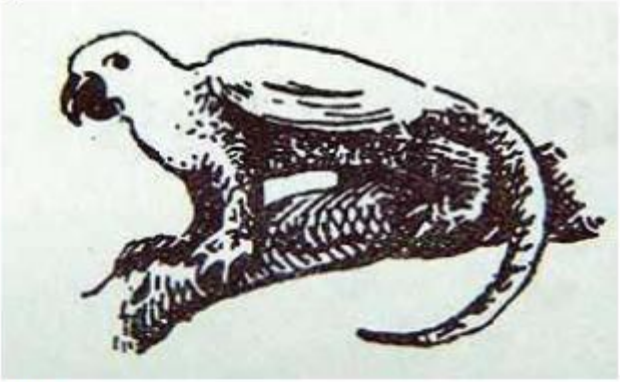

Fig.2
Sukumar Ray, 'Parakeet-Lizard, in Sukumar Ray, The Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray, trans. Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1997), 1.

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