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INSPIRATION AND AMALGAMATION IN CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT OF SATYAJIT RAY'S SPECULATIVE FICTION HERO PROFESSOR SHONKU

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ABSTRACT

Professor Trilokeshwar Shonku, a child prodigy who later on became one of the most sought-after men of science in the fictional world enjoyed a roaring popularity among the readers in the Bengali language. Satyajit Ray's Science Fiction Fantasy hero Professor Shonku appeared in thirty-eight stories spread across the background of various countries upon Earth and beyond it. The readers have enjoyed his tales of inventions, fantastic adventures, and his simple yet alluring style of narration through remarkable entries in the diary between nineteen sixty-five to nineteen ninety. A fascinating synthesis of inspirations, Satyajit Ray's renowned character Professor Shonku is based on the idiosyncratic and intellectually stimulating characters of Professor Edward Challenger, a creation of Arthur Conan Doyle, and Professor Heshoram Hushiyar, the protagonist in Sukumar Ray's work. Despite having diverse origins and tones, both of these forerunners help to define the distinctive qualities of Shonku by fusing scientific inquiry with an imaginative flare. The study aims to reveal the intricate relationship between inspiration and originality in Ray's creative process by contrasting Professor Challenger's spirit of adventure and analytical genius with Professor Heshoram Hushiyar's hilarious and ridiculous oddities. By presenting Professor Shonku as a link between Bengali cultural identity and Western literary archetypes, the paper hopes to illuminate the rich literary fabric that supports his creation.

Key Words: Professor Shonku, Professor Challenger, Heshoram Hushiyar, Indian Speculative Fiction, Bengali Science Fiction

The Name is Satyajit Ray

Satyajit Ray began his professional career as a junior visualizer in one of the British advertising agencies in Calcutta and later on, he started working for Signet Press as a cover illustrator of various books. The job as a cover illustrator changed his life forever. During one of his project which dealt with designing of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Pather Panchali*(1928), he developed a strong passion for the visual media and later on the novel *Pather Panchali* became the subject matter of his first motion picture. During the year 1947, he founded the Calcutta Film Society along with Mr Chidananda Dasgupta. This organisation organised a screening of various foreign films in Calcutta. The exposure to foreign films instigated his passion in filmmaking.

Satyajit Ray belonged to a prominent family of litterateurs, artists and musicians and he showed his brilliance as an artist from a very young age and his visit to London enhanced

the urge to tell stories on the silver screen. In the year 1961, he revived the celebrated magazine *Sandesh* along with his friend Subhash Mukhopadhyay, who was one of the celebrated poets of the era. The revival of this iconic magazine boosted the writing career of Satyajit Ray. Most of his well-known writings were first published in the *Sandesh* magazine.

He comes from a lineage of highly talented authors like his father Mr Sukumar Ray and his grandfather Mr Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury. Satyajit Ray inherited the interest in his writing from his gene pool and very carefully nurtured it to be reckoning star in the vast horizon Bangla Literature.

Characters of Satyajit Ray

Just like his screenplays of his applauded films, his work in fiction has a great plot element and most importantly a grand character build up. This notion of character build up is very important in the realm of Indian Literature, because we have come across highly talented pieces of poetry, novels and dramas and other forms of literature, but haven't come across any great characters. It is there, but very scanty in number. Though the researcher has only limited access to that part of Literature which has been produced either in English or in Bangla. But we don't have a Hercule Poirot, Sherlock Holmes, James Bond, Harry Potter etc.

Mr Satyajit Ray produced an array of short stories, stories and novels around some great characters like Feluda, Professor Shonku and Tarini Khuro. The literary works involving these characters have been incalculably admired in Bengal. Mr. Satyajit Ray has been highly successful in making these characters immortal. He is a worldwide name for his cinematic jewels, however very few Indian (apart from Bangla readers) readers are aware of his artistic capabilities as an author. Thanks to the vast array of translation project by Penguin India, the scenario is changing.

The researcher agrees that language is a barrier, but we live in an age when Translation Studies are gaining a high amount of momentum. Yes, we all know about Rabindranath Thakur

(The researcher prefers it over Tagore), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and Saratchandra Chatterjee. But the author Satyajit Ray's character is still alien to most of the Indian authors. His achievement as the most influential realistic filmmaker of all time overshadowed his capabilities as an author.

His literary career can be subdivided into works related to the characters of Feluda, Professor Shonku, Tarini Khuro, Molla Nasiruddin and Sujana Harbola. Apart from that, he has written many short stories, which were aimed at his target audience i.e. teenagers. However, they received unprecedented readership across all ages owing to its universal appeal.

Satyajit and Shonku

One of the most popular characters of Bengali Literature, the exploits of Professor Trilokeshwar Shonku deals with the nail-biting adventures of a genius scientist from India. There have been almost thirty-eight short stories and stories dealing with the never-ending voyage of a man for the thirst for knowledge. All his speculative fiction appears in the form of a diary, thus all the accounts are the first-hand narrative of the main protagonist. Professor Shonku has been portrayed as a genius and a gentleman in the heart. He is casteless and his

name Trilokeshwar suggests that he is the combination of the Trinity of the Hindu religion namely Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshwar (Shiva). He is one of the greatest scientists from India, residing with his beloved cat Newton and his servant Prahlad in the small sleepy town of Giridih. He is a strict disciplinarian and possesses an undying thirst for a new dimension in the scientific world. He enjoys his morning stroll across the Usri River and whenever he comes across anything interesting regarding his inventions or any far-fetched incidents scientific world, he likes to pen them down in his diary with his all-time favourite Waterman fountain pen. One of the introductions from a popular blog on Professor Shonku reads as follows:

Professor Trilokeshwar Shonku – bald, bespectacled, and bearded, was a great fictional scientist and inventor – the greatest that India and Bengal have ever seen. He worked alone, mostly – almost exclusively – in his laboratory in his residence. However, a few of his inventions were in laboratories in foreign locales, in collaboration with other scientists. He lived in Giridih, went for a morning walk beside the Usri River, and used a Waterman fountain pen to write – which he had owned for more than 50 years.

Inspiration and Amalgamation

Satyajit Ray's Professor Trilokeshwar Shonku has been inspired by the characters of Heshoram Hushiyar and Professor Challenger. Sukumar Ray(1887-1923) created the character Heshoram Hushiyar for his work "Heshoram Hushiyarir Diary" (The Diary of Heshoram Hushiyar) and Professor Challenger is a popular character of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who appears in novels like *The Lost World* (1912), *The Poison Belt*(1913), *The Land of Mist* (1926) and the short stories like "When the World Screamed."(1928) and "The Disintegration Machine"(1929).

Both Heshoram Hushiyar and Professor Shonku appeared in the Bangla magazine *Sandesh*. All three characters have enjoyed their cult status in the realm of speculative fiction.

Professor Challenger is the first one among the all the three appearing in the year 1912 in the novel *The Lost World* followed by Sukumar Ray's "Heshoram Hushiyarir Diary" and Satyajit Ray's "Byomjatrir Diary" ("The Diary of the Space Traveller"). All three of them could protect themselves under any circumstances and they are always ready to take up new challenges during the expedition. Shonku is renowned across the world as an inventor. Heshoram Hushiyar is an expert huntsman while Challenger is known for his adventures.

Mr Sukhen Biswas in his book *Satyajiter Bhabnai Professor Shanku*. points out that Sukumar Ray was inspired to sketch his character Heshoram Hushiyar after going through Conan Doyles' *The Lost World* and Satyajit Ray in one of his interviews in *Sananda Magazine* (published on 15th May,1992,pg-65) as pointed out by Sukhen Biswas ,said that when Ray first composed the character of Professor Shonku, it was humorous but a disciplined yet dazzling version of Professor Challenger. Gopa Majumder, the Sahitya Akademi award winner who is also the author of the English version of most of the Shonku's speculative fiction texts mentions in the introduction of *The Unicorn Expedition and Other Stories* about the influence of Heshoram Hushiyari and Professor Challenger on Ray's Shonku.

What is interesting is that, at first, Shonku was intended to be a comic character. He was based on the character Heshoram, created by Sukumar Ray in his well-known

spoof of Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*. Sukumar called it Heshoram Hushiarer Diary. In it Professor Challenger became Heshoram, the intrepid traveller who discovered a strange land inhabited by equally strange creatures. Professor Shonku took his cue from him. Ray once described Shonku 'mild-mannered Challenger'. In due course, however, Shonku became serious business, although there are unmistakable touches of humour in virtually every story. (*The Unicorn Expedition and Other Stories*, viii)

Satyajit Ray was a fan speculative fiction and he grew up reading the works of Conan Doyle, H.G Wells and Jules Vernes. But Professor Shonku is not a cheap imitation of the heroes of Wells or Vernes but he was having a unique freshness and it appealed to all the readers. The celebrated author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni of *The Palace of Illusion* (2008) fame sums up the above statement in her introduction to the primary text of the research Satyajit Ray's *The Diary of Space Traveller & Other Stories*:

Professor Shonku is not merely a scientist fashioned after the heroes of Jules Verne or H.G Wells and plunked down in Calcutta. Ray has given his adventures a definite Indian dimension that is at once appealing and unique. (*The Diary of Space Traveller & Other Stories*, viii)

The physical stature of Professor Challenger was one of the important factors of his personality. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in his novel *The Lost World* provides a detailed description of Professor's Challenger's enormous physical appearance. One of the leading character Edward Malone who is a journalist for *The Daily Gazette* visits the Professor for the sake of interview regarding some discoveries in South America and Doyle records the experience of Malone's visual impression of Professor Challenger; a man with a commanding demeanour and exceptional physical presence. Malone was in awe of Challenger's tremendous size and commanding manner as he sat behind a desk piled high with books, maps, and diagrams. An almost legendary appearance is created by his massive head, florid face, spade-shaped black beard, and unusual hair. His enormous body and loud voice solidify his scary initial impression, and his blue-gray eyes radiated dominance and rationality. The following quote from Doyle's Science Fiction novel, *The Lost World* (1912) introduces Edward Challenger as follows :

He sat in a rotating chair behind a broad table, which was covered with books, maps, and diagrams. As I entered, his seat spun round to face me. His appearance made me gasp. I was prepared for something strange, but not for so overpowering a personality as this. It was his size which took one's breath away—his size and his imposing presence. His head was enormous, the largest I have ever seen upon a human being. I am sure that his top-hat, had I ever ventured to don it, would have slipped over me entirely and rested on my shoulders. He had the face and beard which I associate with an Assyrian bull; the former florid, the latter so black as almost to have a suspicion of blue, spade-shaped and rippling down over his chest. The hair was peculiar, plastered down in front in a long, curving wisp over his massive forehead. The eyes were blue-gray under great black tufts, very clear, very critical, and very masterful. A huge spread of shoulders and a chest like a barrel were the other parts of him which appeared above the table, save for two enormous hands covered with long black hair. This and a bellowing, roaring, rumbling voice made up my first impression of the notorious Professor Challenger. (Doyle, 18-19)

While Sukumar Ray's Heshoram Hushiyari was a caricature of the immense frame of Professor Challenger. Mr. Sukhen Biswas in his book *Satyajiter Bhabnai Professor Shonku* says that Heshoram Hushiyari wears a half pant and a full-length shirt along with a rifle on his back. There is a big hunter's cap which was seen clinging freely from the nozzle of his rifle. He wears a spectacle and his head is full of black hairs followed by an unshaven beard across the face.

Likewise, Professor Shonku resembled Heshoram Hushiyar in many aspects. He was always wearing a golden framed spectacle and his face was covered with a thick beard all over his face accompanied by a bald head with minimal hair patch on the back side of the head. He was slim built owing to his regular habit of exercising and his height was approximately five point seven inches.

Arthur Conan Doyle provides a bon voyage for the readers to the age of prehistoric animals in his speculative fiction *The Lost World*, where the prehistoric animals roam free across the vast land. Professor Challenger claimed that prehistoric animals existed on the mother earth. In the same way, Shonku along with his group experience the utopian land in Tibet and experience the existence of mythical creatures like dragons and unicorn in the speculative fiction "The Unicorn Expedition".

Heshoram also experienced the existence of incredible creatures like Gomrathariyum, Langrathariyum, Chillanosarus across the ranges of Bundakush mountain and Kakarmati rivers. Mr Sukhen Biswas notes that the highly humorous names of the creatures appearing in Heshoram Hushiyarir's exploits the nomenclature of various inventions of Prof Shonku like Botica Indica, Mangorange, Fish Pill etc.

While Challenger was always interested in experimental learning and invented things like transmission of news through the air and few other things, he was an accomplished anthropologist and controversial yet highly acclaimed for his research papers. While Shonku was a world-renowned inventor and regarded one of the best of the era.

In the speculative fiction "Swarnopornee" ("The Golden Leaf") Shonku basks in self-glory and goes into a reflective mode where he thinks about his greatness as an inventor and writes the following line in his diary:

I don't think any Indian Scientists have received so many accolades in the World. My fame lies as an Inventor or as a Discoverer. All the five continents have credited my status as an inventor only next to Thomas Alva Edison. (*Shonku Samagra*, 606 – 607)

The trio was never meant to be inside the homely comfort but to travel all over the world to know the unknown and to see the unseen. All the speculative fictions are filled with a sense of engaging adventures and scientific ethos making them so popular across the generations of readers. The scientific temperament, the thrill of adventure, and the presentation of the plots centering around the protagonist have entertained all the fans of speculative fiction.

Conclusion

The characterization of Professor Shonku draws heavily from the traits of Professor Edward Challenger and Professor Heshoram Hushiyar, however, the characterization evolves into a dynamic being with an innovative personality, postcolonial mindset, and a kind of go-getter attitude. Shonku possesses expertise in his domain like Challenger, however, his

knowledge is not limited to zoology or anthropology, but to other various branches of science, humanities, and metaphysics. He works with the aid of limited infrastructure at his home in Giridih and relies on travel aids and invitations to seek adventures across the world. He is pleased to be the most well-known Inventor of his time, which marks his presence as the non-European supreme man of science in a field dominated by Europeans and Americans purely based on his extraordinary talent, scientific acumen and perseverance. Like Heshoram Hushiyar, he may be easily sidetracked by his thoughts or distracted by abstract concepts, but he stands out for his commitment to his work and his untiring quest for knowledge. He is the epitome of curiosity and adventure, managing to strike a balance between the excitement of discovery and a sincere sense of enjoyment and companionship (Jeremy Saunders, Wilhelm Crole, Avinash Majumder and his pet cat Newton). In contrast to Professor Challenger, who is often portrayed as an intrusive, controlling personality, this figure is still unmarried, and his stories do not show him as conceited or overconfident. Rather, he is always kind, personable, and respectful—qualities that make him an essential part of his team. He consistently shows leadership and bravery in the face of difficulties by stepping up as a leader and a lifesaver. A beloved character in every story he graces, his presence is essential not only for his intellectual contributions but also for his capacity to foster trust and uphold peace within the crew. A disciplined monk who strives to seek knowledge beyond the utmost bounds of human thought.¹

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¹. The phrase 'beyond the utmost bound of human thought' appears in Lord Tennyson's poem, "Ulysses" (1842)



Bio : Debraj Moulick is a Lecturer in English at K.J. Somaiya Polytechnic, Mumbai, India. He completed his M.Phil. dissertation on Indian Science Fiction at the Department of English, University of Mumbai, and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Science Fiction. He is a lifelong member of the Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies (IASFS), Bangalore, India. Debraj has served as an organizing committee member and editor for an International Science Fiction conference in India. He was also the co-editor of the Autumn 2024 edition of Kalpabiswa Magazine, the leading Science Fiction and Fantasy publication in South Asia. He has delivered expert lectures on topics such as "Science Fiction in Bengal," "Thought Experimentation in Bangla Science Fiction," and "The Need to Popularize Indian Vernacular Science Fiction," among others. His articles and official book reviews on Science Fiction have been published in Science India Magazine, Kalpabiswa, and Anonym Magazine. In addition to his academic pursuits, Debraj is a bilingual poet, short story writer, official book reviewer, blogger, and researcher specializing in science fiction literature. He also enjoys conducting workshops on creative writing, poetry, and business communication. His creative works have been featured in various webzines, magazines, and anthologies. You can reach him at: debraj.moulick@gmail.com