
Treatment of Supernatural spaces by Satyajit Ray

Nabanita Das

Representing supernatural beings in fiction has been a method well adopted, utilised and exploited by authors in all languages. In Bengali fiction supernatural beings and spaces have been depicted in different forms and figures by all major authors. This representation can be traced back to *Thakumar Jhuli* where the ghosts delineated where over proportionate creatures with large limbs or even deformed body parts such as elongated tails, nails, or limbs good enough to arouse terror amongst children only. With time, the presentation of the supernatural underwent a distinctive alteration. Here the authors represented ‘the unknown’, ‘the other’ the ‘outer space’ and the inner conflicting image of man’s own psyche to be the supernatural. Satyajit Ray, the master story teller of modern Bengali fiction, was extremely fascinated by this genre and has gifted Bengali literature his share of supernatural stories. Satyajit Ray’s ghost stories fail to be a part of the juvenilia only and for its psychosomatic content, it is well accepted among the aged also.

Ray’s supernatural stories are about 25 in number; mainly clustered in three sections. The first set of stories are from the collection of *Professor Shanku* and his experiences; the second section includes stories narrated by the adventure freak, Tarini Khuro from *Tarinikhuror Kirtikalap* and the third section includes short stories written in different collections, penned by him such as *Ek Dajan Galpa*, *Aro Ek Dajan* and *Aro Baro*.

Ray’s ghosts are in varied forms. In some stories, the supernatural presences are demonic figures, in some they are thousand year old

unsatisfied souls and in some they are unreal, uncanny presences, appearing through planchette. In Prof. Shanku's stories, the method of planchette has been delineated. In Tarini Khuro's stories, ghosts have appeared in different environments. The ghosts have sometimes appeared on the backdrop of a historical plot, sometimes on the background of a capitalist narrative in a burned down dilapidated house or at times in a narrative on family duel. In Tarini Khuro's stories, an unexpected skeleton figure appears in an artist's studio arousing considerable amount of thrill and horror among the readers. In *Tarinikhuror Kirtikalap*, the supernatural creatures are weird and fascinating. The supernatural beings present in his other collections are also worth mentioning. They include horror tales of ghost figures who are comical and friendly. There are animal ghosts, statue ghosts, vampires, and souls of dead people in Ray's paranormal stories. In *Telephone*, the eerie sound acts as the supernatural presence. According to the convention, the supernatural beings are objects of fear to the living world. The beings inhabiting the living world are supposed to be afraid of the creatures who inhabit the supernatural space. Satyajit Ray breaks this convention by introducing the timid ghost in *Ramdhaner Bashi* who is afraid of a human being.

In *Professor Shanku's* collection of stories, we encounter four supernatural presences. Professor Shanku is a scientist who has dedicated his life for the cause of scientific research and invention. However, his scientific bent of mind is coupled with the urge to solve the unknown mysteries of the world. He believes in ghosts, demons, witches and even clairvoyance. In *Professor Shanku O Bhoot*, the protagonist uses his laboratory as a trap to attract ghosts. In order to do so, Shanku creates an environment conducive for it. However the instruments used to set the artificial environment, run out of control and the soul of the Shanku's forefather descends uninvited in the laboratory, wishing to shake hands with Shanku. Here the presence of

the supernatural does not arouse fear in the mind of the readers but brings a smile on their faces. In *Hipnogen*, the protagonist is a devil possessed scientist who even after his death, does not give up his diabolical behaviour. Similarities may be found with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* with this story. In *Shanku's Paralokcharcha*, Ray has depicted planchette. In the process of planchette, major figures of history have appeared revealing hidden unknown truths of the past. The souls of Shakespeare, Hitler, Sirajuddullah have been called upon. At the end of this fascinating narrative, the calling of the extinct species Pterodactyl horrifies the reader considerably. However, *Shankur Subarnasujog* is a psychological narrative referring to alchemist and on man's eternal love for gold.

Tarini Khuro in *Tarinikhuror Kirtikalap* is an expert story-teller; smart, adventurous, intelligent and a workaholic. In all his narrated stories, he plays a major role. Among the five stories of Tarini Khuro, Lucknow's Duel is most read and celebrated. The story is set in Lucknow where Tarini Khuro happens to buy a pair of antique dueling rifles in an auction. Surprisingly, the next day, an unknown Anglo visitor, narrates a story of a duel, fought 150 years ago with the same kind of a pair of rifles. The duel was fought between Captain Charles Bruss and John Elliworth an English artist, for a beautiful lady Annabella. The visitor informs Tarini that every 16th October the duel is performed and if he wants to watch it, he can accompany him. When Tarini visits the Dilkusha area along with the Anglo visitor, he witnesses the two brave hearts, fighting the duel. Tarini is surprised to see the same rifle in the hands of the English men that he had bought from auction. Captain Charles and artist John are accompanied by their seconds Hue Drummond and Philip Maxon. With the instruction to fire, Captain Charles slays John immediately, while Annabella murders Charles, to be united with Hue Drummond, her lover. In a moment, the Anglo visitor, who had accompanied

Tarini, transforms into an English gentleman, introducing himself as Hue Drummond and vanishes into thin air. When Tarini returns home, trying to reject the whole incident as a figment of imagination, he opens the box containing the dueling rifles, only to smell fresh gunpowder. The narrative is a superb example of English chivalry, reminiscent of the stories heard about the supernatural presences in the castles and palaces on England.

Supernatural presences are not always malevolent. This idea has been established by Ray in ‘Maharaj Tarinikhuro’ also. This is a narrative on personality transference. In this story, Tarini replaces an insane ruler and enacts his role during the time of his treatment. During this tenure, an English gentleman, visits the kingdom and wishes to buy precious objects from the ruler. One night, Tarini is visited by the soul of the ruler’s father who tells Tarini about an inauspicious gem that needs to be sold out of the land. Tarini sells that stone to the English gentleman who eventually dies in a plane crash. Here the supernatural presence is benevolent that tries to save the ruler and the kingdom from an inauspicious curse.

In ‘Dhumalagarer Hunting Lodge’ the story revolves around family disputes and thirst for power which instigates the younger brother to kill his elder sibling. When Tarini enters the scenario to investigate, the younger brother tries to manipulate him by impersonating as a ghost. However, the ghost of the dead brother enters the scene, kills his brother and fulfills his revenge.

In his other collection of short stories, the presence of horror can be felt. *Badur O Bibhishika* is a story on vampires. The narrator is an archaeologist who is researching on the works of terracotta on Bengal’s temples. He is scared of bats, but as destiny would have it, a bat makes a nest near his ceiling. Meanwhile, the narrator has befriended a weird man who narrates to him, stories about bloodthirsty vampires. The man is generally found in cemeteries at

night and can see very well in the dark, matching the qualities of bats. The narrator, in his dream sees the man to have transformed into a vampire, sucking blood from the dead human bodies. This horror tale excites the faculties of imagination of the readers and the information, about the man's insanity does not convince the reader completely.

Fritz is a horror tale based on a German doll. Six year-old Jayant is overjoyed to receive a human look alike German doll. He spends hours conversing with the doll and feels that even the doll understands his words. Jayant thinks that if he had known deutsch, he would have been able to talk to him. Unfortunately, when the pet dog destroys the doll completely, Jayant gives a ceremonial burial to it and the emotional attachment between them gets severed. After many years, when Jayant visits his old house, Fritz's ghost appears in front of him. When the burial of the German doll is excavated a human skeleton in the form of a doll is rescued from the burial ground. This narrative poses many questions thereafter. Was Fritz a human being converted to doll through black magic? Did he return to show his love for Jayant? This narrative definitely brings the two spaces very close to each other with the concept of love.

In *Brown Saheber Bari* the ghosts of an English man and his pet cat, Simon project the idea that the bond shared by them was eternal, even after their death and even beyond it.

Ray in *Ratanbabu Ar Sei Lokta* represent man's own psyche to be the supernatural. Mr. Ratan is a lonely man working for Geological Survey. Since he does not mix with people much and loves to lead a solitary life, he travels in short successions. In the story, during the Pujas, Ratan visits Tatanagar and checks in a hotel at Sini Street. Surprisingly he encounters a person, Manimay, who is exactly like him in appearance and behaviour. Manimay's gait, his way of talking, his gestures, his birthday, his life history is similar to him. Ratan, with

the presence of a duplicate, feels insecure and uneasy. According to him, his sole identity is at stake. Therefore he decides to kill Manimay. One evening, both of them walk towards the rail bridge, and when the train is about to arrive, Ratan pushes Manimay from behind and he dies. The society adjudges Manimay's death to be a suicide and Ratan feels relieved. After few days, Ratan visits the same bridge alone and finds a box, stuck at the railing. When the train is about to arrive, someone pushes Ratan, exactly in the same manner he had pushed Manimay, and he too dies. Who had pushed Ratan? Was it the ghost of Manimay? Does a person, named Manimay truly exist, or is it Ratan's alter ego? Ratan was an alienated man, and therefore was he destined to die in the hands of the supernatural? Ray does not mention the presence of ghost anywhere in the story. The narrative revolves around the psychology of Ratan.

In *Telephone*, the use of eerie sounds, silences, creepy music arouse the haunting effect. The ringing telephone, the calling bell tone and the footsteps at stairs are elements used to increase fear. The reference to any supernatural being is not present in the narrative. In *Ramdhaner Bashi* the ghost of Ramdhan is afraid of human beings as he was, when alive. The comic element of the story reaches its peak, when the ghost, when encountered by living human beings, is unable to fathom the reason of his fear.

Satyajit Ray, in his collection of short stories on ghosts, has explored the genre extensively. He has explored different facets of the supernatural and how it has continuously tried to build a relation between the two spaces.

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