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Tapan K. Ghosh: A Dream of Old among the Ashes of History

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ABSTRACT

Former Head of the English Department of Kolkata.University, Tapan K. Ghosh has earned a solid reputation, both for his essays in cultural anthropology amd for fiction. His inclusion in British anthologies of short story competitions preceded the publication of his first book of fiction: Kafka in Kolkata and Other Stories (2025). His thought-provoking meditation on sore issues of contemporary civilization, or his insightful interrogation of evil in the history of screen villainy (Bollywood Baddies, 2013) are channelled here into narratives of tense intellectual fibre, informed by extensive readings in absurdist literature, mythology, depth psychology, or political philosophy. The economy of stylistic devices contrasts with the wide range of intertextual echoes and the subtle interplay of myth, reality, and textuality.

KEY WORDS: absurdist literature, magic realism, depth psychology, mythopoetics

”Landscapes of disquiet” is the phrase used in the preface by Tapan K. Ghosh to describe his reecent collection of eleven stories which are as many skilfully crafted cameos in words displaying a mix or erudition and depth of affect that rarely go together. A literature of concern, indeded, but more than that, as the landmark offered to the reader as key to interpretation in the title is the absolute master of absurdist fiction - Franz Kafla. The title, where Kafka collocates with Kolkata, also has an elucidating subtitle: *Kafka in Kolkata and Other Stories. Tales of a broken nation—where absurdity is law and survival, an art.*

Kolkata is a territory whose map is the human condition in the new millennium, since the existential fractures it is afflicted with are global. The reason why Kafka may serve as a narrative device is that we see in him the author of The Metamorphosis, where the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, discovers one morning that he has changed from human to insect. This time it is the author himself who changes into a rat, so as to get access to the whole labyrinthine world of a contemporary bureaucratic metropole, but, although without changing form, it is humans who morally descend to a subhuman species with”no mercy” as foundational principle.

A philosophical or moral interrogation is woven into narratives which are lapidary in style – no word sounds superfluous – yet exploding with meaning like an exemplum. There is audacity and craft in dealing with commonly shared topics and myths in a way which makes them appear in a new light and worth exploring.

Tapan K. Ghosh writes in an age when robots and AI are part of our lives rather than SF paraphernalia. The attitudes we have been accustomed to are either optimistic acceptance, which happened in Isaac Asimov’s time, who placed anthropomorphic machines under laws to make sure they did not hurt humans, or anxious working hypothesis as in Kazuo Ishiguro, where they are humanized and victimized by humans turned machanic in the head, as Carlyle said, and emotionally dead.

The protagonist of ”A Rose from Hana”, the first story in the Tapan K. Ghosh book, is a patient who undergoes a surgical operation at

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the ”hands” of two robots, a doctor and his assistant, and who is shocked, not by their difference from humanity, but by gestures that could suggest belonging to a common chain of being. The same dread of contact with the other claiming familiarity was probably engendered by Darwinism in the nineteenth century. A robot offering a rose together with the breakfast plate, two robots miming intimacy are certainly uncanny, unsettling for humans who start feeling uncertain about their identity. Reading the story as a pro-robotic manifesto would probably be wrong as the touching stone used to probe human status reveals incompatibility between man and robots or clones which are already proposed for a slot in the history of species. It is not the intelligence that is being tested but forms of consciousness dependent upon embodiment. It is true that humans have gone machinic – as suggested by ”the hospital’s human receptionist with a plastic smile” – but there is hope of moral reform, whereas the robots’ show of patience is a matter of database protocol, and memory can only be simulated by them as absence. The pathos of presence in absence which is the effect of past experiences leaving their traces in consciousness is denied to the machinic body. Paraphrasing T.S. Eliot’s disappointment over the decay of the world - "This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper," - the author concludes: ”And I would wonder—not with fear, but with awe— whether the future had already arrived, not with metallic clangs, but with embraces and roses.” (p. 16)

Setting out to simulate a fractured social world, the author uses an iconic style, conveying the idea through ingenious troping. He uses bathos (anticlimax) in a way similar to the baroque conceit (concetto) extensively, which almost becomes a mannerism. Actually, in his stories, this trope is not a matter of rhetoric but an example of what Derrida calls ”dissemination” (*Dissemination*, 1969). The meaning of a word changes according to its position in a chain of signifiers. Associated with selling, the word ”promise”, for instance, loses its moral meaning as act of consciousness: ”Paltan Halder, a man who once sold brinjals on a bamboo basket and now sold promises from a high-backed chair with plastic flowers on his desk and police salutes at his door.” (pp. 17-18) (our emphases). Polysemantics may enrich the effect: ”Ministers arrived in convoys, each vehicle marked by a flag and guarded by men with dark glasses and lighter morals.” (p. 55) (our emphasis). The association of incongruous notions empty ”messiah” of meaning in the following sentence: ”The man on it was Bhudev Chandra Pratap—five-time MLA, two-time CM, full-time messiah.” (p. 59) Introduced as a cheap figure on a banner (”High above the main avenue, a colossal vinyl banner swayed in the gritty wind”), the merciless politician replaces in our reading memory Oscar Wilde’s compassionate prince (”High above the city, on a tall column, stood the statue of the Happy Prince [...] gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold”).

A huge gap opens between reality and pretense, between the rhetoric of building a democratic nation and the lies, violence, and inhumanity running rampant in everyday life. The author manages to convey the drama of buried truth under manipulations, simulations, and slogans, which surpasses that of burrying bodies, because at stake it is not just the loss of a human life but the mark of a fallen humanity. The absence of any response to evil, the cowardly pretense of not having heard, of not knowing about human suffering and injustice are as distressing as the invoked crimes against humanity. In a world of deception, of lost illusions, where married life has become habit, routine and endurance, it is mere resurrection, not redemption that may be perceived as victory.

The bureaucracy of the justice system surveyed by the Kafka rat is reminiscent of Dickens’s Chancery (*Bleak House*): ”A man who had once petitioned against the seizure of his home had died in a plastic chair in the waiting hall. His son now pursued the same case, bald and diabetic. The petition had been lost, found, misplaced, and photocopied so many times it resembled scripture.” (p. 52)

At the botton of social tragedy, a homeless man is abandoned by all institutions and left to die as one more piece of garbage because of absent documents for identification, but even Kafka’s world pales when confronted with the anonymous yet ubiquitous power of the digital world. A journalist exposes a crime of caste discrimination in the net, the posting becomes viral, but it is shortly deleted by the invisible and absolutist cyber power in a global prison which not even Michel Foucault could envisage.

Much of the meaning structure of the stories is realised through iconic language – form which is meaningful in itself. ”Let the Horse Run” unveils an exercise in the manipulation of public opinion embedded in an ancient myth of sacrifice. The moment the truth about a corrupted man in power threatens to leak into public space, some scapegoat is found among the amoral garbage that till then had served as an obedient tool of criminal acts, who is so cunningly set up that even he himself does not understand what is actually going on. The story of the perfidious staging of a public show incorporates the language of drama, such as stage directions (”Enter Altaf Rehman”), or the traditional phrase ending movies (”The End”).

Tragical episodes from recent history, such as the drowning of an immigrant two-year-old child in Turkey, international myths (Noah’s Ark that does not show up to save the child) or narratives (Nietzsche’s decree of God’s death) add up to the design of a universal drama.

Myths are recalled to serve as hermeneutic guides to present issues, such as race and gender discrimination. As well as Anand Neelakantan, in *Ravana's Sister*. *Meenakshi* (2018), Tapan K. Ghosh rewrites the goddess’s character advocating her all too human feelings of frustration and desire. The *écart* between naming and being points to gender as being merely a cultural construction. A background semantic energy, from a universal library, lending the stories a universal appeal, sends here a familiar ring from Melville’s ”Call me Ishmail” opening *Moby Dick*, which reveals the American novelist’s awareness of the linguistic nature of the fictional universe. The female protagonist protests her justice: ”They call me Surpanakha, the she-demon, the mutilated temptress, the trigger of war. But once—I was Meenakshi, the fish-eyed girl of Lanka, child of rishis and storm clouds, beloved of Vidyutjihva, moon-touched prince of the Danava race. Before cruelty was stitched into my name, I knew laughter that did not curdle in the throat, a touch that did not burn, a home that did not echo with my brother’s laughter as he ripped my world apart.” (pp. 74-75)

In the last stories of the volume, the compass of vision covers more than the material world. Echoing Eliot’s ”Burnt Norton” (*At the still point of the turning world*), the author goes in search of the ”infinite stillness of truth”, at the crossing of the flesh and the fleshless, in the dialogue of man and divinity. Gods have grown powerless because humans are no longer temples for them to descend into. Myth finds no more bridge into the world, and in vain do the wretched of the earth point to heaven for mercy. Betrayal renders *Manasamangal*—the story of a wife’s love for her snake-bitten husband which moves gods into restoring him to life – ineffective. A woman’s faith would have been enough. There would have been no need for divine

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intervention

Even god Rama had obeyed a boatman, standing in line to receive *Charanamrit*, but the disgraced caste of a boatmen (Kevat) will now pay the tribute of life for falling in love with a girl above him in the social hierarchy.

By reading common stories in light of ancient myths, humanity is reintegrated into a universal scheme of things while in the beginning it had been precariously suspended in posthuman robot intimacy. East and west, God had been declared dead, by Nietzsche or by the devotees for whom divinity had ceased to be the answer to a need and call for transcendence, narrowing down to a dispatcher of material goods on command.

The ferryman or boatman and the ferry ghat take the reader back to the origin of history, to Charon, and, before him, to the Chinvat bridge in the Gathic Avesta Yasna . to *Ramayana*... Even back then would man rise above the contingency of the material world, meditating on the dialectic of transience and permanence. The author shares Gustav Jung's point of view, who, in his study *On the Psychology and Pathology of So-Called Occult Phenomena* (1902), locates the birth of myths in perception. People see the sun journeying in the sky from dawn to evening and that view is tarnsferred to an initiation journey of the hero. The river where human bodies ended their journey on earth might have suggested a journey to afterlife. Probably unaware, and in inspired poetic imagery, the author resumes the Jungian scheme of the birth of myth out of reflective perception of the world:"But Sumon watched them as if they were walking metaphors. Each face a fable. Each crossing, a question.The ferry ghat was not a mere transit point to him. It was a threshold—like those whispered about in stories, where the world bent slightly and revealed something else. Behind the ghat, a little distance away, smoke curled constantly into the sky. That was the burning ghat. There, the journeys ended." (p. 92)

Although a collection of stories, the book casts a wide net, where human condition as search of spiritual enlightenment and self-realisation emerges as a large and redeeming figure in the carpet.

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